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The Geography of Rest: Rethinking Street Flexibility for the Aging Peripheries of Tokyo

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Perspective

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Abstract

Suburbs in aging societies worldwide are experiencing demographic decline, leaving older residents isolated from spaces that support daily community life. Japan is no exception, and in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, population aging is especially concentrated in car-dependent peripheral neighborhoods. Policy responses have focused primarily on service provision rather than strengthening livable street life. This Perspective argues that Japan has the legal mechanisms to create more flexible streets, but it implements them mainly near stations and commercial districts rather than in aging residential areas. It analyzes the scarcity of benches on Japanese streets and evaluates three approaches to increasing their flexibility: regulatory exceptions within the road system, temporal flexibility, and off-street spaces and alternative land uses. Mapping pedestrian convenience roads in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area shows that 67% are located in central areas, which house 11.4% of the population. In the suburbs, temporary adaptations usually occur only near stations during specific events, and street-adjacent spaces rely on unstable arrangements. This Perspective recommends four adjustments to adapt the existing instruments to aging suburbs: provisions for resting elements, a bench network outside barrier-free areas, strengthening agreements to use private land, and giving communities an official role, which can ultimately improve street livability and help planners and decision-makers preserve accessible community spaces for residents in aging metropolitan regions.

1 Introduction

The decline of many communities on metropolitan peripheries is a widely observed trend in developed countries. As populations age and redistribute within metropolitan areas worldwide, suburban shrinkage has emerged as "the next urban crisis" [1–5]. The physical form of metropolitan peripheries worsens these effects. Urban sprawl, the low-density expansion of residential areas dominated by private vehicles, creates a patchy, discontinuous fabric with few community spaces, making daily life dependent on private vehicles [6–8]. As residents age and can no longer drive, places that sustain everyday community life become inaccessible. Japan, one of the world's most aged societies, illustrates this problem. On September 15, 2026, 36.24 million people in Japan were aged 65 or over, 29.6% of the country's total population [9]. In 2020, 9.04 million of them, a quarter of the older population, had difficulty obtaining food because they lived more than 500 m from a store and could not use a private vehicle [10].

The problem has grown fastest in the metropolis. Nationally, the number of people aged 75 or over who have difficulty accessing food increased by 42.1% between 2005 and 2015, but in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area (TMA)—which includes the prefectures of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba—the rise was 89.2% [11, 12]. Within the TMA, aging is uneven across regions. Almost 88.6% of the area's population lives in the inner and outer periphery. Although aging was fairly evenly distributed throughout the region in 2010, by 2020 the proportion of older people increased the farther one got from the center. In some outer districts, older people living alone made up more than one in every five households [13–15]. The result is spatial segregation of vulnerability: those who will no longer be able to drive in the coming decades live in areas where car use is essential. Japanese policymakers have acknowledged this problem, and a law on loneliness and isolation came into force in April 2024 [16]. Nevertheless, measures to address older people's isolation have mostly consisted of services such as community buses, demand-responsive taxis, and organized gatherings in community facilities. By contrast, the street, the most basic public space, has attracted far less attention, and seating areas, essential features that make the street usable for older people, are largely absent. Can Japan's current policy tools make its streets more adaptable to reach aging populations in the suburbs?

This Perspective examines how Japanese regulations, policies, and real-life examples shape street use and maps where the TMA has applied the most recent of these tools. The question is particularly relevant in suburbs such as Minamiashigara, a small city on the TMA's western edge. When the city asked residents what would help them stay active, the most frequent response—from both older people and those aged 40 to 64—was that the town should be easier to go out in. The city linked this need to the stage of life when people can no longer drive because of age or health [17]. The Perspective contends that Japan already has the legal means to make streets more flexible, but these tools are mainly applied near stations and shopping areas, not where the population is aging. By examining this issue, it contributes to debates on social infrastructure, age-friendly cities, and informal public spaces in Japan [18–20].

After the introduction, the Perspective reviews the literature on everyday community spaces and the street, drawing on fieldwork in two Tokyo suburbs. It then examines why Japanese streets lack benches, considers three approaches to a more flexible street, and assesses where the most recent has been applied in the TMA. Finally, it discusses how these measures could reach aging suburbs, considers objections and limitations, and suggests adjustments for urban planners and policymakers.

2 Everyday informal places and the street

Community life is based on both places and people. A well-established distinction differentiates formal community spaces supplied by institutions, such as community centers, libraries, and schools, from informal ones that develop through everyday use, such as cafés, shops, corners, and benches where people meet spontaneously [21–23]. More recent studies have broadened Oldenburg's concept of "third places"

to include public spaces that foster informal social interaction, known as "fourth places" by Aelbrecht [24], and the simple "bumping and gathering places" of the local neighborhood [25]. In Tokyo's shrinking outskirts, these informal spaces matter even more: because formal facilities are few or closing down, they provide much of the community activity that remains. Previous research in Chōfu and Minamiashigara, following Hiss [26] and Toulouse and Ewell [27], referred to them as the "sweet spots" of the suburb [28]. Klinenberg's [19] idea of social infrastructure—that is, the physical locations which influence the way people interact—encompasses not only libraries and schools but also sidewalks and parks. As Whyte [29] noted, people choose to sit where seating is available. For older adults, this is a practical matter: the World Health Organization's guide to age-friendly cities, developed through consultations with older residents in 33 cities including Tokyo, identifies outdoor seating at regular intervals, in parks, at transit stops, and in public spaces as an essential feature of an age-friendly city [18].

Japanese urban research has created a specialized vocabulary for this type of space. The idea of *kaiwai* (□□) interprets urban space through concentrations of activity rather than fixed physical forms. It emerged in the 1960s as an alternative to the European notion of the public square [30–32]. The term *hiroba-ka* (□□□, "plaza-fication") refers to the process by which areas around shrines and temples, riverbanks, bridges, and street corners function as plazas even though they have not been deliberately designed as such [20, 32, 33]. Because Japan built relatively few Western-style, formal public squares, owing to the priority given to traffic, the opposition from landowners after 1923, and the restrictions placed on public gatherings following the protests of the 1960s [20, 32, 34], urban life generally congregates in the spaces between buildings, and the *matsuri* (□□, "local festival") transforms the street into a temporary plaza. Recent scholarly work has once again focused on these interstitial spaces, including back alleys and covered waterways [20, 32, 35, 36].

Research in two Tokyo suburbs shows how much everyday life occurs along streets. In Minamiashigara, streets and open spaces made up 16% of the places residents said were part of their community life, and four out of five respondents mentioned at least one such place, second only to green spaces [37]. In the same city, people check in to bus stops on social media, and in its Tsukahara district, storefronts surrounded by flowerpots and small open areas with benches form community nodes [38]. In Chōfu, people viewed benches and street furniture positively, while foreign visitors most often photographed broken benches as a negative feature [39]. The same research also identified several everyday places that are only reachable by car or are dangerous to access on foot because of a lack of sidewalks, crossings, or lighting [28]. Japanese policy recognizes this issue, but responses have been limited. The primary way to encourage sociability among older people is to promote "community gathering places" (*kayoi no ba*, □□□□), local venues within walking distance where older people meet for activities that help prevent the need for long-term care. In fiscal 2024, there were almost 163,000 such places, attended by 6.9% of people aged 65 or over, and more than four in five were in community halls or meeting rooms, compared with 3% in parks [40]. As a result, this policy excludes informal, everyday places in the suburbs and the streets that link them. Section 3 explains why streets in particular have so little room for such places.

3 Institutional and spatial constraints on street furniture

In the suburban areas of Tokyo, benches are rare even on neighborhood shopping streets (Fig. 1a) and in covered pedestrian arcades (Fig. 1b). Yet no law in Japan prohibits placing benches on roads. Their absence instead reflects a way of regulating the street that treats it primarily as a conduit for traffic. Although the regulation has historical roots, its practical aspects are administrative and operate at three levels: what may occupy a road, exceptions to that rule, and the physical width that determines where those exceptions apply. The first of these is known as *muyochisei* (□□□□, "no alternative space"). Under Article 33 of the Road Act, anyone other than the road administrator must apply for a permit to place an object on a road, and the road administrator can grant such a permit only if the object cannot be placed off the road [41]. Each object on the street therefore constitutes an exception and must be properly justified. For example, one regional office of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) lists benches and flower pots among the items for which private applicants may not obtain a permit, except in cases of public interest or short-term use [42]. Legally, a bench placed by a shopkeeper or a neighbor is regarded as an encroachment.

The second level is where the regulation makes exceptions. In 2013, the MLIT amended its instructions on benches and shelters on roads, citing the rapid increase in mobility needs among older people who cannot use a private vehicle [43]. However, the proposed solution was a list of eligible locations with public transit waiting spots—namely bus stops and taxi stands—first, followed by the surroundings of facilities frequently used by older people, shopping malls, community roads, promenades, and roadside stations (*michi-no-eki*, □□□); ordinary residential streets are not included. The barrier-free policy works on the same principle. Its road standards require benches and shelters at bus stops on designated roads (*tokutei dōro*, □□□□) connecting stations and other major facilities, but this applies only to newly built or reconstructed designated roads; in other cases, it is a duty of effort [44, 45]. Although current national guidelines call for benches and shelters at appropriate intervals along sidewalks wherever older and disabled pedestrians need to rest, citing research by which a bench every 100 m would suit 60–80% of older people [46], this remains guidance, not an obligation.

The next level to consider is width. Occupancy regulations usually require a bench to leave at least 2 m of clear space on the sidewalk, increasing to 3 m on shared bicycle–pedestrian paths and 3.5 m in areas with heavy pedestrian traffic [47]. This assumes a sidewalk is present, though most residential streets lack one. In March 2024, only 9.5% of municipal roads in Japan—which include most residential streets—had a sidewalk, compared with 60.1% of national highways and 15.0% of all roads [48]. The central prefectures of the TMA have slightly higher figures: 19.2% of municipal roads in Tokyo have a sidewalk, 15.6% in Kanagawa, 10.5% in Chiba, and 9.5% in Saitama [48]. These statistics include only sidewalks separated from the roadway by a curb or barrier, excluding painted shoulders (*rosokutai*, 路側帯) found on many residential streets, which cannot accommodate a bench under the 2 m rule. Yet the rules do not prevent cities from installing benches: since they manage the roads, they can add them as road appurtenances (*dōro fuzokubutsu*, 道路附属物) without applying for an occupancy permit, as Setagaya Ward does under its 2021 guidelines [49]. While residents, shopkeepers, and neighborhood associations must obtain the necessary permits, local municipalities face limitations in budget and available width rather than regulation. The three levels thus define a clear spatial pattern: bench placement is not prohibited but is a privilege reserved for areas with wide sidewalks near public transit.

4 Three routes to a flexible street

When benches are treated as a privilege on broad sidewalks near public transit, the question arises: where has Japanese planning loosened the rules governing the street and why? Table 1 shows three ways to achieve a more flexible street. The first is to introduce exceptions to road-system regulations. The second is temporal flexibility, suspending the road's normal function for hours or days. The third is to change land use by removing it from the road system. Each approach tackles a different issue: whether something can stand in the street, when, and on whose land. As the following subsections show, each route reaches the aging suburbs only partly, if at all.

Table 1
Three routes to a flexible street

Route	What changes	Who initiates and manages	Where it applies	Duration	Logic
Regulatory exceptions	The rule: the *muyochisei* criterion is lifted	Road administrator with a local council or businesses	Station-front and central commercial streets	Occupancy of up to 5 years, or 20 through public tender	Commercial: terraces and cafés
Temporal flexibility	The time	Police (traffic), merchants, and organizers	Central districts; occasionally neighborhood shopping streets	Hours or days	Events
Off-street spaces and alternative land uses	The legal status of the land	Municipality (green space), landowners, and religious bodies	Residential districts and suburbs	Permanent but precarious	Communal or incidental

4.1 Regulatory exceptions

Japanese regulations offer several ways to relax road-occupation rules. These measures were introduced piecemeal, each for a particular kind of place, mostly the city center: road cooperation organizations, special provisions under the Urban Renaissance Act and the National Strategic Special Zones, and occupancy exceptions under the Act on the Revitalization of City Centers [50]. The most general of their outcomes is the pedestrian convenience road (*hokōsha ribenzōshin dōro*, 歩行者利便増進道路, known as *hokomichi*), which was introduced by the 2020 amendment to the Road Act. In designated areas, the *muyochisei* criterion is removed; occupancy may be granted for up to five years or, through a public tender, for twenty years; and the occupancy fee is reduced to one-tenth [51]. The first designations, made in February 2021, were Midōsuji in Osaka, Sannomiya Chūō-dōri in Kobe, and Ōtemae-dōri in Himeji [52]; by March 2026, the national list included 201 routes in 75 municipalities, 27 of them in the TMA [53] (Fig. 2a). The emergency measure that permitted restaurants to use the road for terraces during the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a link between the two systems: by September 2022, about 50 of the cases under that measure had been transferred to *hokomichi* [54]. Sannomiya Chūō-dōri exemplifies this approach. This 500 m shopping street in central Kobe had open-café trials in 2004 and 2005, and held seasonal open cafés every spring and autumn from 2006 before it was designated in 2021, with the local community development council as the occupant [55] (Fig. 3a). At the other end of the scale, Chiba City's first designation, in Tsuga, is 17.5 m long, and its promotion zone is 9 m², sufficient for one restaurant terrace [56].

This Perspective determined the positions of these designations by geocoding the 27 designations within the TMA using the official list and then superimposing them onto its metropolitan typologies [13]. Eighteen of them (67%) are situated in central areas, which contain 11.4% of the population, whereas five are located in the inner peripheral areas (41.5% of the population) and four in the outer peripheral areas (47.1%) (Fig. 2a). On a per-capita basis, central areas have about 15 times as many designations as the peripheral areas. The discrepancy is even

more pronounced among older residents: the outer peripheral areas, which have four designations, accommodate 53% of the TMA's population aged 65 or over [13] (Fig. 2b). Convenience roads are present in the suburbs, but mostly in the central nodes close to public transit: 11 of the 18 central-area designations are located in local cores outside central Tokyo, near stations such as Kasukabe, Chōfu, Komae, and Narita, or in the centers of Yokohama and Yokosuka. The most recent addition in Tokyo, designated in October 2025, is the pedestrian deck at Toranomon Hills, which aims to bring activity to the area around a new station [57].

The bench policy also includes its own exceptions. For instance, Chiba City plans to install benches at the bus stops of all 33 station plazas and every 100 to 300 meters along barrier-free routes where the sidewalk is wide enough, and it accepts donated benches [58]. In 2018, Setagaya Ward introduced guidelines concerning places to sit and, in 2021, produced a technical guideline for benches installed as road appurtenances in collaboration with its care-prevention service; it also provides subsidies for benches that are located on private land and can be seen from the road [49, 59, 60]. In Mishuku, a neighborhood shopping association used an occupancy permit to place benches on the sidewalk to help older people go out [61]. These examples illustrate what this Perspective advocates. However, they are confined to barrier-free areas around stations or concentrated in central Tokyo, and even there they remain the exception. By January 2025, only seven of the 23 special wards had put benches along their streets, led by Shinagawa, which began placing stone rest seats (*oyasumi-ishi*, □□□□) along its sidewalks in 1996 and now has 285 of them; the other sixteen wards had none [62]. Outside Tokyo's 23 wards, the situation is even sparser.

4.2 Temporal flexibility

The earliest and best-known way to make a Japanese street more flexible is to change its timetable. Governor Minobe introduced the *hokōsha tengoku* (□□□□□, "pedestrian paradise") on August 2, 1970, on the main streets of Ginza, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, and Asakusa [63, 64]. It is a traffic restriction, not a change in the road's status: for a few hours, the roadway closes to motor vehicles, and rules still ban performances, trading, and cycling [64]. The seating is also temporary. Each weekend and holiday afternoon, the merchants' association sets out parasols and benches for visitors [65], a practice shown in a 1971 photograph [66] and still carried out in December 2025 (Fig. 3c).

Japan introduced the parklet similarly, as a time-limited experiment. The KOBE Parklet was situated in a parking lane on Sannomiya Chūō-dōri and served as a social experiment (*shakai jikken*, □□□□) from October 2016 to March 2017 before it became a permanent feature [67, 68], representing a rare instance of temporal flexibility being incorporated into the road system as described in Section 4.1. By contrast, most Japanese parklets have remained experimental. A 2021 survey found about a dozen [69], and the best-documented one, on Kōsei-dōri in Okazaki, was considered a social experiment aimed at reorganizing the road [70]. In Mishuku, a neighborhood shopping association converted parked slow-mobility vehicles into a "mobile parklet" for two days in 2022 and again in 2023 [61, 71], while Chiba University is running a parklet on Chiba-ekimae-dōri for two years, until March 2027 [72].

Temporal flexibility extends to the neighborhood, but only on a calendar basis. In Sangenjaya, Chazawa-dōri closes to traffic every Sunday and on public holidays from 1 to 5 p.m. [73], a weekly pattern at the level of a local shopping street, even though it is in inner Tokyo. In the suburb, the pattern slows and centers on the station. In Sagami-Ōno, Sagamihara, shopping associations around the station have run an art-and-craft market with local residents since 2005. Twice a year they close a street that carries cars on alternate days and fill it, along with the pedestrian area and a shopping mall, with more than 300 stalls [74] (Fig. 3d). Even this routine is fragile: the shopping street south of Odakyū-Sagamihara Station shown in Fig. 1a used to host a festival every November and is now seeking a replacement [75]. Temporal flexibility is the form of street life that Japanese planning accommodates most easily, yet for an older resident who needs a place to rest while going to shops on a normal weekday, it provides very little: at most a few hours each week and, in the suburb, only a few days each year.

4.3 Off-street spaces and alternative land uses

The third option involves changing the land use. Once the area is no longer a road, the rules of road occupancy no longer apply, so benches, planters, and play equipment can be installed without a permit. A clear example is *ankyo* (□□, "dark channels"), rivers and irrigation channels covered over and turned into pathways [20, 28]. The Kuhonbutsu-gawa green path in Jiyūgaoka shows how this process works (Fig. 3e). It was established in 1974 when the river was covered, even though legally it remains a class 2 river and now runs as a sewer underneath the promenade, with its management being shared between the Meguro and Setagaya wards, whose boundary the path follows [76, 77]. The local shopping street association originally installed the benches to prevent bicycles from being parked on the path, and later donated them to the two wards, which took over responsibility for their maintenance [78]. The path also attracted attention outside the local area: in 2010, The Japan Times highlighted it as a rare exception in an article about the lack of public seating in Japan, a complaint frequently made by foreign residents and tourists [78, 79], and in 2014 Radović and Boontharm [80] recorded the daily public life of the path in a hundred maps. Yet the benches are numerous only in the section near the station that is commercial in character and become scarce or vanish when the path reaches residential streets [81].

The same principle applies to all other ways of diverting off the street. Nerima opened land already acquired for future roads and uses it as a children's play area until construction starts, and neighborhood committees manage vacant private plots provided free of charge [82]. Bunkyō has likewise set up seven temporary play areas on public or private land, two of which have been on shrine grounds since 1991 [83]. The simplest example is private land adjacent to the street, such as the bench at a supermarket entrance (Fig. 3f), a type of route for which Setagaya now provides financial assistance. This kind of location plays a relevant role in the suburb's everyday informal community life. The places that residents of Chōfu and Minamiashigara identified as the focal points of their community life were, in legal terms, mainly off the street—namely riverbanks, temple grounds, farmland, and converted shops [28, 37]. Where the street itself appears, it is only through spillover, as in the flowerpot-lined storefronts of Tsukahara in Minamiashigara [38] or the bar alleys in Chōfu, which are tolerated rather than allowed [28]. Flexibility therefore appears where the land ceases to be street, which is also where suburban life has already improvised. At the same time, this flexibility is uncertain, since it relies on a reclassification decided once, an interim use that ends when construction starts, a landowner's goodwill, or a donation. The road system provides no protection for such arrangements and does not extend them to the streets that connect these places.

5 Discussion: Toward flexible streets for aging suburbs

This Perspective has examined how and where Japanese planning loosens street rules. Table 1 shows that each route is tailored to a particular place and logic. Three findings stand out. The first two concern where flexibility goes, while the third has practical implications. First, exceptions within the road system follow stations and commercial activity, even when they extend into the suburbs. Second, the off-street route, the only one that reaches residential areas, relies on arrangements that no one is obliged to sustain. Third, bringing flexibility to the aging suburb requires no new measures, only a different objective.

As for the first finding, the concentration of flexibility around stations and commercial centers is not simply the result of poor planning but reflects the regime's logic. The state acknowledged the problem in 2013 but decided to address it by providing benches for waiting at stops rather than for resting along the route. The *hokomichi* has adopted the same strategy: two-thirds of its designations within the TMA are situated in central areas, while those in the peripheries cluster around their own stations. The gap is most noticeable in the outer peripheral areas. An examination of available documentary sources showed no street bench program had been introduced in the outer peripheral municipalities under investigation. Instead, these areas have relied on transportation measures to address isolation, such as community buses (in one case now restricted to weekdays) and door-to-door services [84, 85]. For example, Minamiashigara has been a member of the World Health Organization's network of age-friendly cities since 2017; the organization's guidelines recommend providing outdoor seating at regular intervals [18, 86]. The city's action plans, prepared by its municipal elderly care department based on its welfare and long-term care strategies, promise universal design in public facilities (2019) and the creation of an elderly-friendly town (2024), yet neither includes any reference to seating [17, 87]. The city's own survey indicates that going out is residents' top priority, and its proposed measures include public transit, shared taxis, sidewalks, ramps, and toilets with handrails, but not benches [17].

Regarding the second finding, the off-street spaces and alternative land uses route confirms what earlier studies of the informal everyday spaces in the suburbs of Tokyo had shown—that community life tends to develop in those areas where the land is no longer part of the street, a situation long recognized in Japanese urban research [20, 28, 33, 37]. However, the fragility of these arrangements makes them insufficient to sustain an aging population. Places that depend on a reclassification, an interim use, a landowner's goodwill, or a donation can support community life, but they cannot be planned as a network, as the sudden cessation of benches at the end of the commercial section of the Kuhonbutsu-gawa green path illustrates.

As for the third finding, four adjustments would be necessary in order to adapt the existing instruments to aging suburbs. First, include provisions for resting elements. The *hokomichi* already lifts the muyochisei criterion and includes, within its promotion areas, not only restaurants and shops but also benches, streetlights, and similar features [88]. This provision would therefore require no change to the law, only a change of objective: for residential streets, introduce a non-commercial version in which permitted objects would be a bench, a tree, or a patch of shade rather than a café table. The second adjustment would be setting up a network of benches outside barrier-free areas. The spacing of 100 to 300 m used in Chiba and the 100 to 200 m spacing mentioned in the national guidelines on the basis of research into older pedestrians [46, 58] could become a standard for the routes which connect homes with supermarkets, clinics, and bus stops in the suburbs, with solutions for narrow sidewalks to be agreed with the police, as Setagaya's guideline currently provides [59].

The third adjustment is to strengthen agreements to use private land. As Setagaya already subsidizes benches on private land that are visible from the road [60], agreements with supermarkets, pharmacies, temples, and shrines—whose entrances and forecourts are already used as resting places (Fig. 3f)—could be arranged to apply this scheme to the suburbs with only a small public investment. The fourth adjustment is to give communities an official role. In places like Mishuku, shopping and neighborhood associations have already put up benches where the law allows them to [61]. In Sannomiya, a 2004 agreement with the city made the local community development council

responsible for cleaning the sidewalk and maintaining the planting and parklet, in exchange for permission to install benches and other resting facilities [55, 67]. Furthermore, road cooperation organizations provide a legal way of entering into such partnerships: since 2016, road administrators, including municipal authorities, have been able to designate local groups whose use of space for benches, streetlights, and similar elements is approved once an agreement has been reached with the administrator, on the condition that the group also contributes to the maintenance of the road (Road Act, arts. 48 – 46 and 48–64) [89, 90]. Beyond these adjustments, municipal plans should recognize the off-street areas on which suburban community life already depends, and age-friendly action plans could include the seating required by their adopted guides.

These suggestions involve costs, since benches must be maintained and budgets become more constrained as municipal areas shrink. The proposals also raise liability concerns and can lead to neighbor complaints. On Sannomiya Chūō-dōri, only 21% of the shops interviewed were prepared to have a parklet in front of their businesses, citing the need for daily maintenance, smoking, and littering [67]. There is also controversy over their design, as seen in discussions of exclusionary street furniture (*haijo āto*, □□□□□) [91]. Simply copying the *hokomichi* model could turn relaxation into consumption, as it would require older residents to buy something in order to sit. Even in Sannomiya, the first area to receive this designation, membership fees and contributions from open cafés bring the local council about ¥800,000 each year, still not enough to cover cleaning and event expenses. In 2023, the council installed a rentable container for about ¥15 million, which was funded by municipal subsidies and sponsorship, to finance its activities [55].

Despite these findings, this Perspective has limitations. The typology of three routes to a flexible street is based on a desk study of regulations, policies, and specific cases. It shows where legal flexibility is available, not how streets are actually used. The search for bench programs was based on documentary evidence. Future research needs to address three questions: how older residents currently use and would use seating along suburban routes; what *hokomichi* designations produce, and for whom, as their number increases; and how the Japanese case compares with similar residential street programs in other countries, such as play streets, school streets, and bench programs for older people.

6 Conclusion

Although Japan has introduced legal measures to make its streets more flexible, these have not targeted areas with aging populations. Strategies to address isolation in aging suburbs focus on services, while the street remains a passage, and benches appear only on wide sidewalks near transit facilities. Two-thirds of the *hokomichi* designations within the TMA are in central areas; temporal flexibility reaches the suburbs only at stations and a few days a year; and in off-street locations where suburban life has already found its own solutions, reliance is placed on goodwill and remains uncertain. This Perspective is not intended to be comprehensive, and its interpretation of the regulations and cases is limited. Nonetheless, it shows that the tools required to change this situation already exist. Urban planners and policymakers in metropolitan areas facing aging populations should implement these suggestions. In the suburbs, community spaces become unavailable when people can no longer access them. Placing a bench every few hundred meters is one of the most cost-effective ways to keep these spaces accessible.

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Data availability: The geocoded layer of pedestrian convenience road designations used in Fig. 2, with the typology assigned to each designation, is available on Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23203469. All other data come from the public sources cited in the text.

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Figures



Figure 1

The ordinary street. **a**ACT Minamiguchi Ichibangai, a neighborhood shopping street south of Odakyū-Sagamihara Station, Sagamihara: a shared space with no sidewalk and no seating (June 2024). **b** Kōenji PAL shopping street, Tokyo: a covered arcade dominated by pedestrians that offers no seating either (January 2026). Faces have been blurred. Photographs by the author

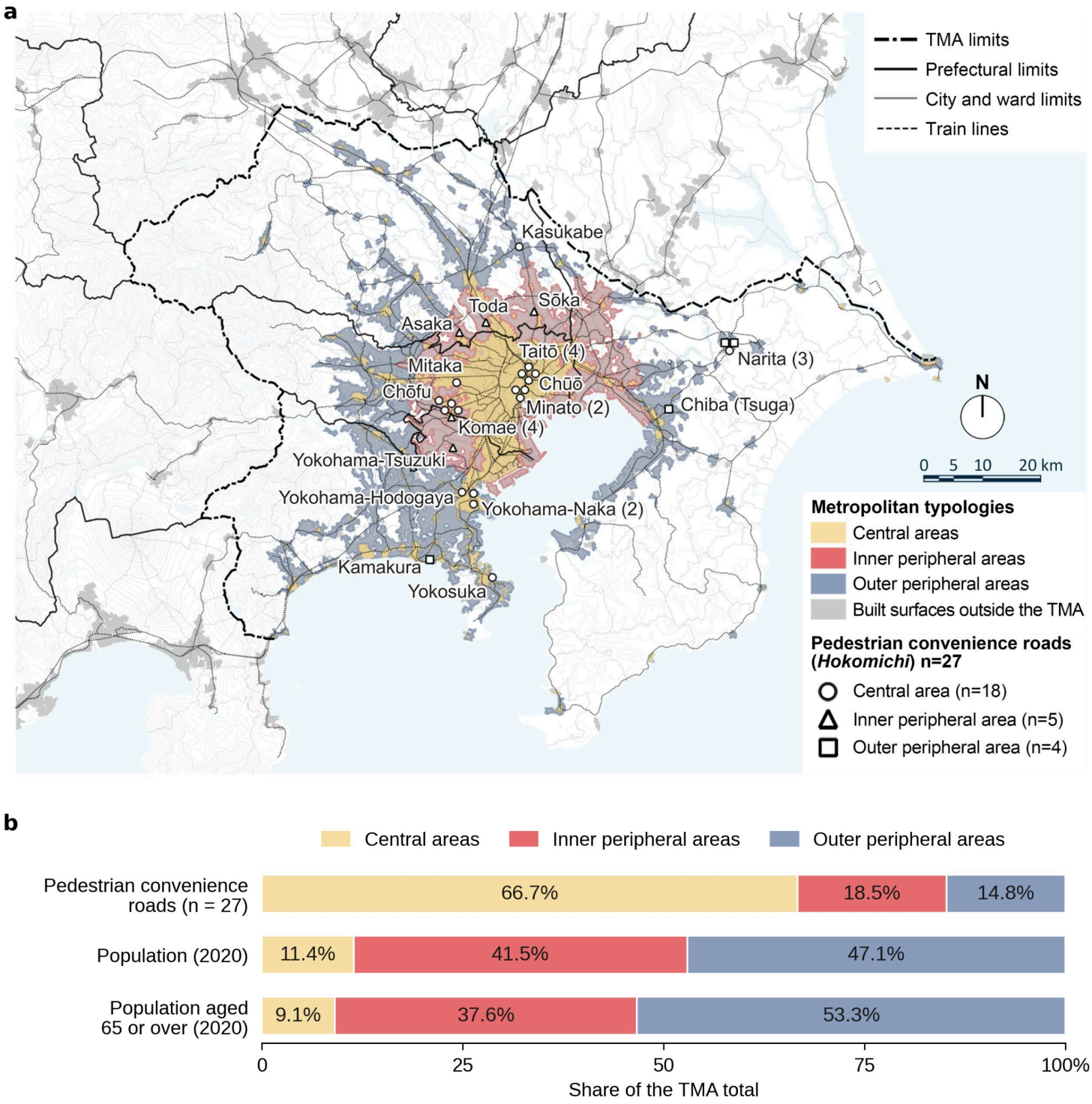


Figure 2

Pedestrian convenience roads (*hokomichi*) and the metropolitan typologies of the TMA. **a** Designations as of March 31, 2026 (n = 27); each symbol marks the midpoint of a designated section, and its shape gives the typology of the district in which it falls. **b** Shares of designations, population, and population aged 65 or over by typology (population data for 2020). Sources: MLIT [53]; geocoding with the CSIS Address Matching Service; typologies and population shares by the author [13]

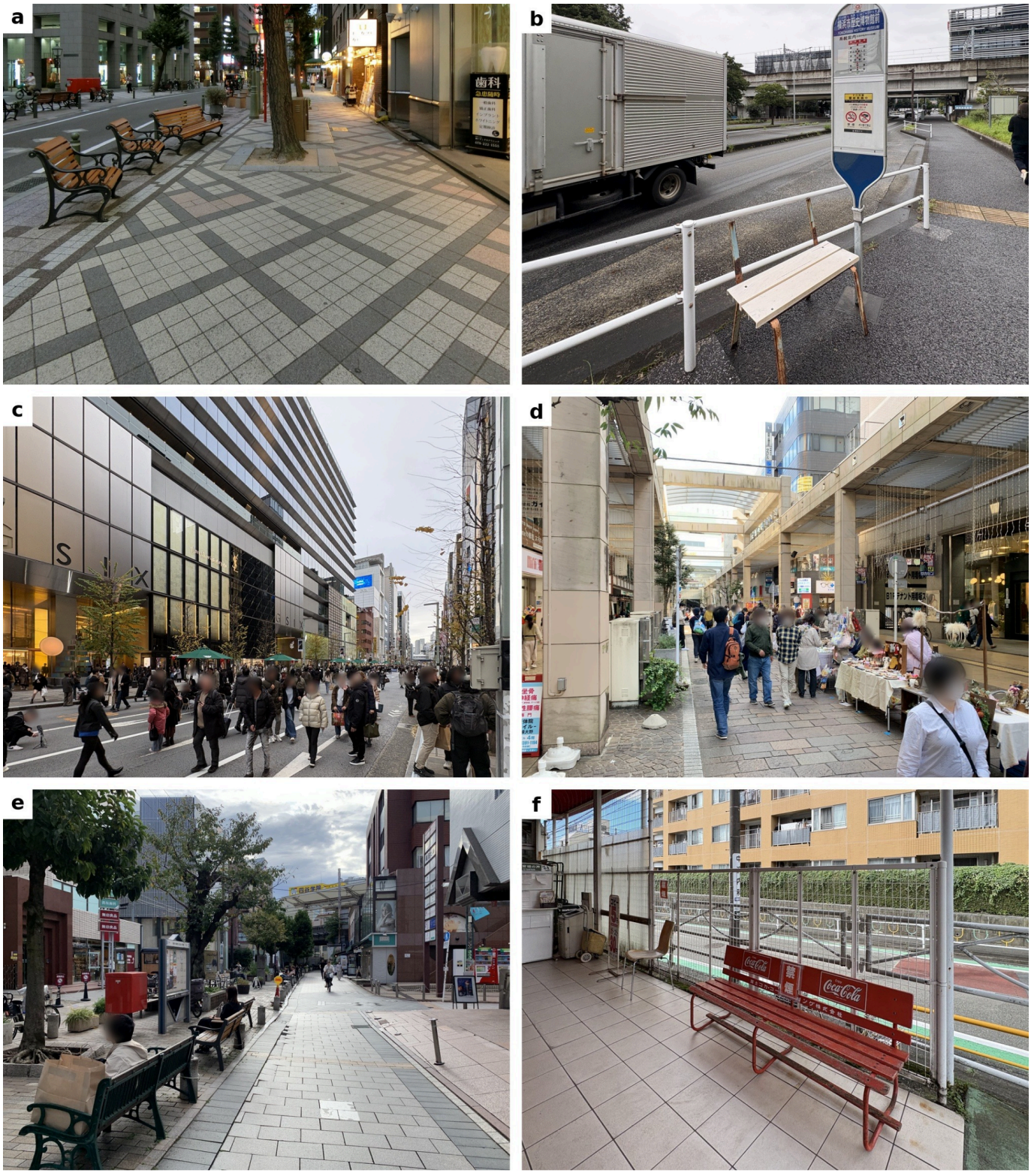


Figure 3

Three routes to a flexible street (Table 1), each shown in a reference case (left) and in the case closest to the neighborhood (right). Regulatory exceptions: **a**Sannomiya Chūō-dōri, Kobe (July 2024); **b** bus stop bench in Kōhoku New Town, a young and growing planned suburb in Tsuzuki-ku, Yokohama (September 2026). Temporal flexibility: **c** pedestrian paradise in Ginza, Tokyo (December 2025); **d** Sagami-Ōno Art and Craft Market, Sagamihara (November 2022).

Off-street spaces and alternative land uses: **e** Kuhonbutsu-gawa green path, Jiyūgaoka, Tokyo (October 2024); **f** bench at a supermarket entrance, Sagamihara (October 2026). Faces have been blurred. Photographs by the author