



Blog #2 – Hyperlinked Environments: A Peek into Japan's Public Libraries

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ようこそみなさん！日本の図書館について学んでみましょう。

Hello everyone! Let's learn about libraries in Japan.

The United States library system is deeply embedded throughout the country. Approximately 97% of Americans live within 5 miles of a public library (IMLS, 2019). I was interested to know how Japan's library system compared to ours. While there are some similarities in general practice and traditions of librarianship, I discovered that more than 20% of Japan's towns and municipalities have no access to a library (Omori & Ueda, 2024). What could be the reason for the gap in library access in Japan?

Challenges and Changing Times

After World War II, Japan notably did not have a robust library system, and in fact instead had many "home libraries" (known as bunko) scattered about the country and intended for use within their respective neighborhoods (Kanna, 2003). These were some of the early roots that spawned immense growth in the 1970s, particularly with a focus on children's literacy (Kanna, 2003; see also Omori & Ueda, 2024). However, there were still lingering challenges within the library profession that may have contributed to slower growth and spread of Japan's public library system.

In his study, Alix (2021) identified three categorical challenges in Japanese libraries today: recognition of librarians as professionals, inadequate quality of LIS education, and disconnects in community engagement.

Further, with Japan's significant and increasing aging

population (29.4% in 2025), programs were not always sufficient or otherwise patrons were not able to access library services (see Donkai & Mizoue, 2014). included—repositioning libraries as critical entities in building “a more equitable, humane, and sustainable society” (Aoyagi, 2026). Worthy of note, a cohort study of Japanese adults found an association between the environmental factor of public libraries (having libraries available, size of collection, availability of digital books, the community aspect, etc.) and a reduction in functional disability (Otani et al., 2025). It is clear that another wave of library “growth” is occurring in Japan, echoing its previous boom in the 1970s, but with the benefits of today’s technology, modernization, and changing views in librarianship (see Aoyagi, 2026; Kanna, 2003; Omori & Ueda, 2024).

Exploring New Library Approaches

Let’s take a tour of some of Japan’s modernized libraries that have adopted more strategic and user-centered approaches than in the past. You will notice a common thread of large, open, airy spaces that encourage people to not only visit, but to stay and use the library however they wish. These library environments, augmented by awe-inspiring (but also functional) architectural design, bring not only community members through their doors, but welcome both local and foreign visitors, as well.

Just for Kids – Nakanoshima Children's Book Forest (Osaka, Japan)



Children reading inside Nakanoshima (Web Japan, n.d.)

Designed and funded by famed architect Tadao Ando and opening in July 2020, this library contains books and materials geared specifically towards children. Every wall is a bookcase containing approximately 20,000 books not strictly organized into sections: the intent is to encourage children and their caregivers to explore freely (Creative Island Nakanoshima, n.d.; Time Out, 2025; Web Japan, n.d.). However, books cannot be checked out; rather,

patrons are encouraged to read anywhere within the library or out on the grounds, which is the public Nakanoshima Park (Time Out, 2025).

Library + Community Center = Musashino Place

(Musashino, Tokyo, Japan)



Musashino Place interior (Mineta, 2013)

Musashino Place is actually a combination of a library and a community center, emphasizing a place of social connection for all ages. Programming includes opportunities for individuals to come together to peruse hobbies and take classes. This is of particular importance for the elder

Japanese population to have welcoming institutions such as Musashino Place to stay connected with their community while also participating in lifelong learning endeavors (Mineta, 2013; Web Japan, n.d.).

A Community's Heart "Above the Clouds" – Yusuhara Community Library (Yusuhara, Takaoki District, Kochi, Japan)



Exterior, Yusuhara Community Library

(Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2018)

Yusuhara has been dubbed as a “town above the clouds”. The library has become an important part of this rural town, promoting community, social connections, and exchange of information between and among the generations of those living there. Further, the Yusuhara Library follows

Japanese tradition of removing shoes upon entering a home: patrons are encouraged to do the same here (Kengo Kuma & Associates, 2018). The image at the top of this blog post shows the architecturally-striking, open interior of the library, which encourages a welcoming third space in this close knit community.

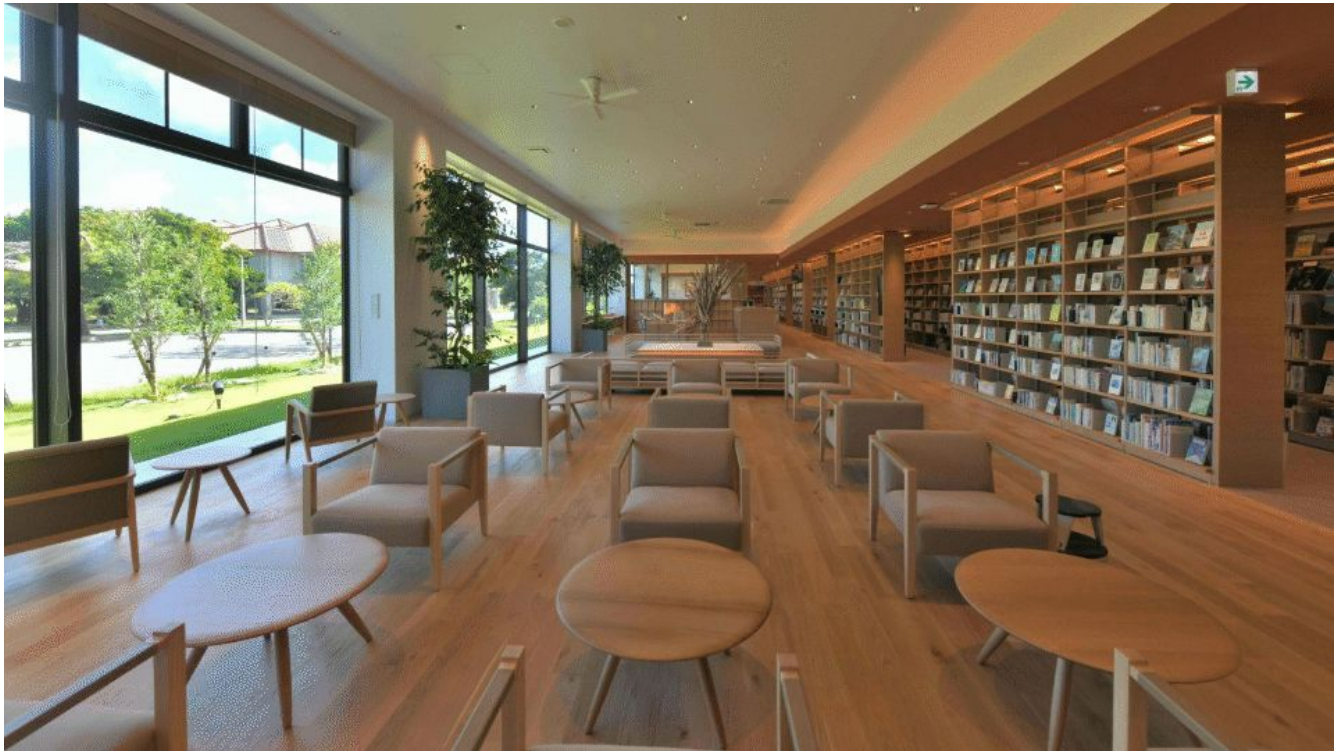
Consumerism Lends a Hand – Takeo City Library (Takeo City, Saga, Japan)

The Takeo City Library is an interesting example of a newer model that has been adopted in several Japanese public libraries: combining the traditional library structure with a bookstore. Here, the library teamed up with Tsutaya (a large bookstore chain) and Starbucks to encourage additional revenue and increased foot traffic. Patrons can read any books within the institution, but taking anything home requires checking it out (as with a typical library) or buying it. Apparently, this model has worked quite well for its users and community. However, the flip



side is that the focus remains on books and less on other traditional library services (Coffman, 2017).

A Multicultural Event Center – Yomitan Village Library (Yomitan, Nakagami District, Okinawa, Japan)



Interior, Yomitan Village Library

(Culture Convenience Club, Co, Ltd., 2025)

Similar to the Takeo City Library, the Yomitan Village Library has adopted the dual-model of library and retail store, with a Starbucks as well as a bookstore that also sells regional Yomitan crafts and goods. However, it has also positioned itself as a multicultural center and event space, holding 150 events per year that bring people from

around the region. These events range from business and professional seminars to craft-related events and workshops to showcases for students (Culture Convenience Club, Co, Ltd., 2025). Not only does this approach provide continued learning opportunities, it encourages people from all over the region to visit and take part.

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