



# The *Danchi* Renaissance

Sections of the exterior walls on this *danchi* housing complex in front of Yokodai Station have been painted with stripes evocative of trees. In another soft touch by designer Kengo Kuma, the air conditioning vents have been concealed by wooden-looking aluminum panels.



All photos: Courtesy of Urban Renaissance Agency

**In the Yokodai district of Yokohama City, a project to renovate *danchi* housing complexes is revitalizing the whole community.**

## HIROSHI SAKURAI

**D**URING the period of high economic growth that began near the end of 1954, workers, mainly the young, moved from rural areas to urban areas, and housing shortages became a serious problem. In 1955, to solve this problem, the Japanese government founded a special corporation, Japan Housing Corporation (now the Urban Renaissance Agency [UR]), and UR built *danchi* one after another in large metropolitan areas, including Tokyo and Osaka. This period came to a close toward the end of 1973. Most *danchi* have now been standing for more than forty years and face many problems, such as structural deterioration as children have left after reaching adulthood and the remaining residents have aged. Increasingly, the residents are inconvenienced as the stores in the *danchi* have closed.

UR, which currently manages about 1,700 rental *danchi* (about 740,000 households), is currently



CC Lab is the venue for a variety of Yokodai Danchi residents' activities.



Yokodai's Halloween event attracts some 3,000 young people.

working on a renovation project to address these problems. Yokodai Danchi in Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture, is one example.

The recruiting of residents for Yokodai Danchi began in 1970. It was centered on a JR Line station that connects the Keihin Industrial Area, which supported the high economic growth, to neighboring Kawasaki City and Tokyo. About 25,000 residents of 11,000 households live on almost 200 hectares of land, including rental danchi comprised of 83 buildings with about 3,300 households, managed by UR, as well as private apartment complexes and individual houses. The population aging rate (rate of people aged 65 years and older) is greater than 30%.

“Naturally, the vitality of the city is being lost. The Future of Housing Complex Project was initiated in 2011 to invigorate the entire area with danchi as the core. We aim to improve the attractiveness of the area and increase the number of young residents,” says Mitsunori Ogami, danchi manager, East Japan Rental Housing Office, UR.

In December 2011, UR launched an adviser meeting with experts, including Kengo Kuma, a world famous architect, and Kashiwa Sato, a creative director who has worked on branding strategies for a wide variety of companies, as well as an area meeting with representatives of the residents, experts on the development of local communities, and employees from Kanagawa prefectural government and Yokohama City government in May 2012. In these discussions, policies were established, including the creation of a base for the activities of local residents,

improvement of local streetscapes, and promotion of intergenerational exchange.

In line with these policies, specific efforts were initiated in 2014. One example is CC (Community Challenge) Lab. A vacant store space in the danchi in front of the station is available for a limited period as a base for the CC Lab challenge, where groups or individuals can perform activities for regional revitalization. A wide variety of activities are offered, including exercise classes for the elderly, cafés, concerts, and art exhibitions, as well as many events with the cooperation of local groups. More than 3,000 young people from within and outside the area began to participate in the annual Halloween event held in October.

In addition, the monotonous view of the danchi was softened by Kuma's design, in which external walls were repainted with stripes evocative of trees and the air conditioning vents were concealed by wooden-looking aluminum panels. Furthermore, renovation work is under way for a large eaves at the station square, the gateway of Yokodai.

“Abundant human resources and a lot of space still remain in Yokodai. It is still possible that the town's value will improve without new large investments. We want to utilize the project in Yokodai to expand renovations to other danchi,” says Ogami.

With a declining birthrate, a growing proportion of elderly people and a decrease in residents, danchi are said to epitomize the issues faced by Japanese society today. The renovation project in Yokodai suggests one possible solution for such issues. **U**