

Ibasha's Sustainable Communities Help Seniors Redefine Old Age

Based in Washington, DC, but reaching communities around the world, the non-profit organization Ibasha—Japanese for “a place where you can be yourself”—is helping redefine older adults’ roles in their communities by developing socially integrated and sustainable spaces. Founded in 2010 by Dr. Emi Kiyota, Ibasha partners with local organizations to design and create options for people to live a later life full of meaning, be a part of the community, and be useful to others. The program takes a holistic approach to building culturally appropriate communities that value older adults by integrating innovative housing and building design with support programs and a multi-generational approach to community living.

“Oftentimes, older people are their own worst enemy,” says Dr. Kiyota. “They have spent their entire lives believing that getting old means you should be looked after, and so they don’t believe in themselves.” Breaking through such deeply ingrained ageism is a challenge, but by developing options for older people to become more engaged in their communities, Ibasha is helping to illustrate their value.

Part of Ibasha’s mission is to change the narrative around old age by creating a stepping stone between living at home and living in a long-term care facility. Ibasha envisions an option where people can also still serve others, even if they can’t live independently. One of Ibasha’s most recent projects, the Ibasha Café in Ofunato, Japan, is a step toward developing this model for how older adults can once again become an integral part of their communities. The café is designed, built, and operated by older adults and is a place where they are respected as assets to the community and a vital source of wisdom. The older workers at the café provide and participate in activities alongside community members of all ages. This approach is building a unique community of mutual support.

Dr. Kiyota describes a 92-year-old woman who would go to Ibasha Café every day just to watch the daily activities. The woman didn’t appear for 2 days and her absence troubled the Ibasha community so much that they went to her house to check on her. They discovered that she had broken her arm walking home from Ibasha one day, but didn’t want to trouble anyone about it. Community members offered to walk her to and from her house in the future.

The Ibasha Café has also influenced the way older people are perceived by other generations. When Dr. Kiyota asked a younger person how the “old people” were doing, they responded by saying, “They’re not really older people, they’re just people.”

Aside from empowering older people, Ibasha’s model for communities also offers several other practical advantages. The world population is aging, and the current systems in place are not prepared for the numbers of people who will need support. However, many older people are capable of caring for others, and taking advantage of their abilities and wisdom could be more sustainable in the long run. Ibasha also aspires to benefit younger generations by easing fears about aging. “Getting older is inevitable, but people still act like if they don’t think about it, it won’t happen,” says Dr. Kiyota, “We hope younger people will take advantage of the wealth of wisdom available from the older generations to plan ahead to ensure a better quality of life for themselves in old age.”

Through Ibasha’s innovative techniques, opportunities are being created for meaningful inclusion of older adults, especially those living with cognitive disabilities.

www.ibasha.org

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Ibasho Principles

1. Older people are a valuable asset to the community (wisdom comes with maturity)
2. All residents participate in normal community life (de-marginalization)
3. All generations are involved in the community (multigenerational)
4. Community members drive development and implementation (community ownership)
5. Local culture and traditions are respected (culturally appropriate)
6. Informal gathering places are created (normalcy)
7. Communities are environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable (resilience)
8. Growth of the community is organic and embraces imperfection gracefully (embracing imperfection)



- 1 Elders teaching the traditional cooking skills to younger generations.
- 2 Elders preparing local snacks for the farmer's market held at the Ibasho cafe.
- 3 Dinner hosted by temporary housing community members.