

# Analyzing the Bison Gallery Art Community

An Interactive Qualifying Project Proposal

by

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**WPI**

# Analyzing The Bison Gallery Art Community

An Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) submitted to the faculty of  
**WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE**  
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## Abstract

The Bison village is an experimental community that offers a space for artists and craftsmen to find creative freedom. Throughout our time at Bison we took pictures, recorded our experience and collected the stories of the residents to compile them into a scrapbook to present to them. Through the use of interviews, engaged conversations and working alongside people we were able to learn about their backgrounds and motivation. Throughout our time in the community we picked up on four key discoveries, those being freedom, creativity, sustainability and community. We found that these four act as pillars within not just the current members of the community but also for those who wish to get involved.

## Executive Summary



Figure E.1: The Bison Village, View of the Teahouse

### Background

The influence of capitalism has been felt worldwide. The capitalist economic system encourages growth by means of financial gain, and capitalist countries view this growth as progress. However, capitalism has negatively impacted local economies by driving out small businesses, encouraging price gouging, and moving capital out of communities and into the possession of large corporations.

The Bison community represents an answer that lies at the intersection of the myriad of problems caused by growth-based capitalism. Our job, then, isn't to provide a solution to these problems. Rather, it's to document the ways that the members of the Bison community, and the employees at Nishimura-gumi, have approached executing such a unique project. In doing so, we hope to share their stories with the world, and inspire people that it's possible to make the lives they want to live, even if the social, cultural, and economic context around them makes that intimidating

Nishimura Shuji, a Kobe native and experienced architect, has become a driving force for remodeling akiya in the Kobe area. For nearly three decades, Nishimura-san has turned abandoned houses into inexpensive and livable homes to provide housing, honor traditional Japanese architecture, and fight back against gentrification in the Kobe area. Over time, the connections he made through his work developed into Nishimura-gumi, an architecture company which has continued this mission. To fund this endeavor, Nishimura-san collaborated with other like-minded locals, who had backgrounds in real estate and management, to create Haioku Group. These groups operate out of Kobe, taking on houses that are an hour or less from their headquarters in Kobe. This group has renovated around 50 buildings and houses, though they continue to work on many more. Many of these renovated buildings serve as homes, though others are used as stores, air-bnbs, and even a tea shop.

## Methods

The overall goal of our project was to develop an understanding of the Bison community as a whole. While we primarily focused on the development of the Bison village, and the formation of its community, we also wanted to investigate how Nishimura-san and his employees at Nishimura-gumi have conducted their renovation projects. This resulted in us investigating properties not just within the Bison village area, but around the Kobe area as a whole. In gathering data about these renovation projects and their community integration, we wanted to be able to retell the diverse stories of the Bison community, as well as what we experienced as we grew to become a part of it. Over time, we decided that a sort of “digital scrapbook” containing pictures, videos, and written reflections of our time at Bison would be the best way to share this information. As such, we created a website to host these details, in addition to developing a pamphlet for Nishimura-gumi and the Bison community to share with visitors.

1. Understanding the backgrounds and current lived experiences of the members of the Bison community.
2. Understanding the structure of Nishimura-gumi and the process of renovating previously-abandoned houses.
3. Understanding the role of creativity in the Bison community

4. Cross-referencing our individual experiences to learn more about the diverse stories of the Bison community.

## Results

We collected data in the categories of interviews, worksite, and outreach primarily as well as additional background information. In order to display what we learned at our time in Bison, we decided to make a digital scrapbook. We chose this medium as our experience focused less on data and numbers and more on documenting and telling the stories of our experiences at Bison.

The digital scrapbook consisted of a few main parts, including an explanation of why we were in Bison, a recapping of our experiences, and a look into the figures we met. The opening page begins with a brief project overview, information on Bison, and a summary of the program that brought us to Bison. Due to the uniqueness of WPI and its programs, many people are not familiar with this type of work. As most schools do not conduct research to this scale, it was imperative to explain this to anyone visiting the site

## Analysis

When we initially came to Kyoto, we intended to approach our project from the four different interest categories that were the foundation of our methods. These being logistics and architecture, social, cultural, and art. However, as we continued to become more and more integrated into the Bison community, it became more obvious that restricting ourselves to these four categories was preventing us from authentically sharing its narrative. What became more apparent were the key aspects of Bison that have made it what it is



Figure E2: Bison, Center Street

today. These being freedom, creativity, sustainability, and community. With these four takeaways in mind, we hope to more accurately retell some of the vast and varied stories present in the Bison community.

The residents of Bison have freedom to create what they want. Their canvas is community, the brushes are their reused materials, and each resident acts as a painter, continually changing and breathing new life into the village. Just as a piece of artwork can't be perfectly copied by another, this community cannot be mimicked perfectly. Rather, other creators can be influenced by this community, taking the parts that inspire them and applying them to their own projects. As for Bison, it will continue to be worked on by those who inhabit it. Likely, it will never be complete, but it is not a work that is purely made to be displayed. They are not working towards an end goal or a finished community. Rather, they are enjoying the art of the process.

## **Roadblocks**

Over the course of our project, we faced a series of roadblocks, each of which provided a unique challenge that we had to overcome. Though they didn't prevent us from being able to complete our project, or its objectives, they did necessitate being able to work fluidly, adapt to new situations, and find solutions to problems that we hadn't anticipated in our limitations section. In addition to this, we've drafted a series of recommendations for future projects at the Bison village. These recommendations are designed to prevent students from future IQP teams from being hindered by these same roadblocks, and encourage them that, even in the face of project-altering circumstances, it is possible to find a solution and have a fulfilling experience at the Kyoto, Japan project center.

Our time in the Bison village served as an investigation that yielded valuable results which allow us to analyze the community as a whole. During our visits, we found that each member of our team was drawn to different aspects of the Bison community, primarily based on our own interests outside of the project. Despite our limited time in Kobe, these diverse interests allowed our group to collect a unique well of data about each element of the community. This included information about both the logistical side of Nishimura-gumi and the Haioku group's operations as well as the social, cultural, and artistic aspects of Bison.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The influence of capitalism has been felt worldwide. The capitalist economic system encourages growth by means of financial gain, and capitalist countries view this growth as progress. However, capitalism has negatively impacted local economies by driving out small businesses, encouraging price gouging, and moving capital out of communities and into the possession of large corporations. In addition, by framing financial gain as growth, corporations are encouraged to not grow consciously by need, but unconsciously by a desire for profit. This thought process necessitates scaling up product manufacturing and distribution, which results in corporations, both large and small, pulling as many environmental resources as they can without surpassing government restriction. More workers are needed to be able to process these resources efficiently. In order to ensure growth remains as consistent as possible, its also important for companies to establish distribution centers in and around major metropolitan areas. This provides a steady supply of consumers, which justifies the decision for further growth. More growth garners more consumers, garnering more growth, which promotes a positive feedback loop of satisfying the requirements to create it.

In Japan, this phenomenon has contributed to a host of key problems that the country has been struggling with for well over a decade. The country's most populous regions, Tokyo, Osaka, and Aichi (Wikipedia 2009) also have the highest shared portion of headquarters for publicly-listed companies (Statista 2021). This results in these prefectures having a much higher availability of both entry-level and expert-level jobs in a variety of industries. In order to pursue careers that are portrayed to the Japanese youth as traditional cultural aspirations (Sugimoto 2014), many young people leave their homes in less-densely populated prefectures. When the youth leave their homes, their elderly parents are left to take care of their properties until they die. Without prestigious job opportunities, or lively communities, rural areas are left without an influx of young people seeking to live there. This trend has created the long-documented process of rural depopulation (Semuels 2017), which leaves small towns decaying and growing abandoned.

The growing number of abandoned houses has been recognized by the Japanese government as a problem not on a prefecture-by-prefecture basis, but on a national scale. Now, millions of homes around Japan, in both rural and urban prefectures, have been left standing

empty for years (The Asahi Shimbun 2023). Oftentimes, when these houses are inherited by their owners' children, their children can't afford to renovate them. Or, they simply don't see why they should. Both because of a lack of need for the property, and because of the longstanding Japanese belief that houses only last between 20-30 years before they're unlivable (Spalding 2023).

However, there is a new wave of Japanese youth who have become disillusioned with the capitalist system they live in. More and more Japanese people are adopting ideals contrary to the norm that they've been presented with. Some of these ideals include the concept of *Ikigai* (Teuxdeux 2021): The idea of doing something that not just provides money, or value to society, but also something an individual is passionate about and good at, and using that to define a fulfilling and purposeful career. Other popular movements have centered around the concept of "degrowth" (Dooly & Ueno 2023), a philosophy which encourages growth based on community needs instead of financial gain, and only doing so if that growth doesn't exceed local environmental limitations. With these new mindsets, many Japanese people have set out to pursue alternative lifestyles outside of the social norms of Japan, without having to leave their home country.

One such example of this is the Bison community, located in Kobe, in Japan's Hyogo Prefecture. Previously, the area that the Bison community now exists in was an empty street, lined with nine abandoned houses, also known as *akiya*. Architect Nishimura Shuji, our sponsor's, Wakabayashi Noriyoshi, employer, saw these abandoned houses and recognized the opportunity that they presented. Now, after years of construction, Nishimura-san and his employees have successfully restored seven of these nine houses, and are continuing to work on the remaining two. Its residents, primarily, are artisans: Artists, craftsmen, and tradesmen, who have chosen to move to the Bison community to practice their work outside of a modern capitalist way of life.

The Bison community represents an answer that lies at the intersection of the myriad of problems caused by growth-based capitalism. Our job, then, isn't to provide a solution to these problems. Rather, it's to document the ways that the members of the Bison community, and the employees at Nishimura-gumi, have approached executing such a unique project. In doing so, we hope to share their stories with the world, and inspire people that it's possible to make the lives

they want to live, even if the social, cultural, and economic context around them makes that intimidating.

## Chapter 2: Background

### 2.1 A Global Issue

Capitalism is a socioeconomic system driven by a mindset of relentless growth. It is characterized by constant innovation, development, and the pursuit of profit. The system delivers advantages such as a plethora of consumer goods, increased employment opportunities, and significant technological advancements. However, in spite of its benefits, capitalism has also consistently been the source of numerous ongoing challenges. It is the root cause of several pressing global issues including overproduction, overconsumption, and environmental destruction.

Because of globalization efforts, capitalist ideologies have spread to every part of our world. It has become the main economic framework for most countries, bringing numerous benefits for those nations, and, through processes of colonization, resulted in the exploitation of the global South by the global North. While these Northern countries have observed consistent economic development (from a financial perspective), most tangible wealth is held in the hands of the upper-class. For example, in America, as of 2023, approximately 69% of the country's total wealth is owned by the top 10% of people (Statista 2023). However, despite this, it's continued to be further ingrained as modern society's way of life because it promotes financial growth, a concept that has only become valued because of mercantilism and capitalism in the first place.

If we maintain current common practice, we can expect to see further environmental and societal deterioration. Thus, it is imperative that the system adopts more sustainable practices. Recently, the degrowth movement has gained traction in response to societal problems exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Degrowth as a concept advocates that society should be redirecting its "growth" by prioritizing sociological and ecological well-being, rather than monetary gain and national strength (Paulson 2022). Societally, we should be adopting more sustainable practices, trying to reduce the material size of the economy, and generally shifting our values towards care for the life and longevity of our planet and species (Chiengkul 2018). Across the globe, the degrowth movement is rising in popularity, and is

inspiring many communities to implement change. This growing global awareness of the need for sustainable living and reduced consumption has led to inspiring examples of individuals and groups taking action.

One such case can be found in Barcelona, a city overflowing with people eager to tackle the complex problems of their communities. Two Spanish architects, María García and Gonzalo Navarrete, stand as a prime example of this collective spirit of change. Their innovative project, known as “Recooperation,” received the UN-Habitat Revitalization of Mass Housing International Competition award. “Recooperation” sought to apply sustainable solutions to the urban housing epidemic. Garcia said that “generating economic activities that finance projects within the community” (Pablo Linde, 2014) is one of the core ways they could revitalize these

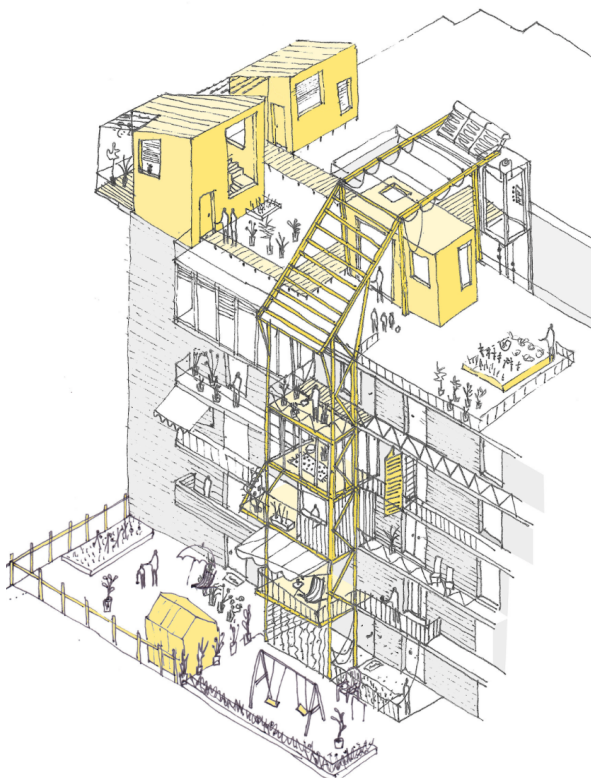


Figure 1: Rory Stott. "UN-Habitat Announces Winners of Mass Housing Competition" 24 Apr 2014. ArchDaily.

communities. Much of this proposal was based around progressive architecture, where instead of “buying a property of a fixed size, residents can add or remove rooms according to their needs and resources (Pablo Linde, 2014)” reducing waste and making living more affordable for people. Coupled with this concept was plans to utilize renewable energy and water recycling to shift towards a tight-knit and more self sustainable community. This community was planned to contain multiple shared spaces to promote economic activities and stimulate its economy. Within this Spanish community there was already a small group around the age of 60 raising awareness to show that in these small communities, there will always

be those willing to put in the work and save both the buildings and the stories within. By raising awareness, these locals are fostering a sense of community: An integral part of driving community restoration projects and bringing hope to members of the younger generation.

In the situations where almost nothing has been done and the problem is left to fester, the damage becomes almost irreversible. Similar to Japan, many parts of Europe are figuring out ways to work against their aging population, another impact of late-stage capitalism. A sad example of this is the country of Portugal whose average age is 45.8 years old (Khalip, 2016). As years pass the average age grows leaving many families, houses, and villages to deteriorate. In these villages, rapid emigration has exacerbated the issue, and many people fear that they're beyond recovery. The younger generations tend to be the ones that emigrate and leave for better opportunities outside the country. Due to these generations leaving the country there are fewer births within the villages subsequently creating a positive feedback loop of emigration.

There are cases of villages with a mere twelve people still living there today, with one birth in the last ten years; proving that even in some of the bleakest situations, people can still enact change and repair the issues that global capitalism creates. However, creating those solutions requires actions, and actions require the instillation of a desire to change. With Japan in the early stages of this phenomenon, it is imperative that they make changes before they follow down the same path.

## **2.2 Capitalism's Impacts on Japan**

The impacts of global capitalism on Japan, from an empirical standpoint, mimic its impacts on other countries. This being that government and economic decisions are made with the goal of promoting financial growth at all costs, often at the expense of the environment and other stakeholders. However, the social context of Japan has created unique factors which change the way Japanese citizens live under growth-based capitalism. That is to say, the preexisting social factors in Japan, combined with the introduction of growth-based capitalism, have shaped the way that Japanese citizens view a stereotypical life.

Most media covering Japan, both from within the country and outside of it, portrays the average Japanese citizen as the quintessential salaryman; a 30-to-40-year-old professional who works an office job for a large corporation. They work extensive hours for low pay, and maintain the same job for the rest of their lives, prioritizing loyalty to the corporation above their quality of life. Rather than enjoying work, the salaryman recognizes that fulfillment is less important than supporting his family. However, he isn't able to spend much time with them due to not just his working hours, but the professional commitments he's expected



The media attention that the Japanese salaryman is given is then reinforced by local and international sociologists who attempt to define the principles of *Nihonjinron*, or “Japaneseness”: These mainly center around uniformity and social standing over an individual’s own needs. Or, in some more extreme cases, a complete lack of a psychological need for having any individuality at all (Sugimoto 2014, p. 17). When applied to class-based analyses of the Japanese public, some observers of Japanese society insist that Japan is absent of classes whatsoever (Sugimoto 2014, p. 50).

In reality, many segments of the Japanese public fall outside of the general idea of what a Japanese person is. Sugimoto, a Japanese sociologist and author of *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, provided a breakdown of what the average Japanese person would actually look like, based on key statistics from 2014. At that time, the most average Japanese person, based on majority groups of the population, would actually be a woman who’s employed at a small business, not guaranteed lifetime employment, without a union membership or university education (Sugimoto 2014, p. 15).

A similar breakdown can be witnessed in Japan today. The female population of Japan in 2021 exceeds the male population by approximately 3.46 million people (Statista 2023). Additionally, the largest shares of jobs include manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, and medical, healthcare, and welfare. While office workers are still necessary in these industries, they inherently have a much higher demand for low-wage service workers to successfully conduct

business (Statista 2023).

On top of this, it’s impossible to ignore the notable level of income inequality present in modern-day Japan. However, using data from as recent as 2018, researchers evaluated that approximately 15.4% of Japanese households could be considered poor, while an additional 16.1% could be considered lower-class (Shinozaki & Takahashi 2023). Although the study considers a majority of Japanese

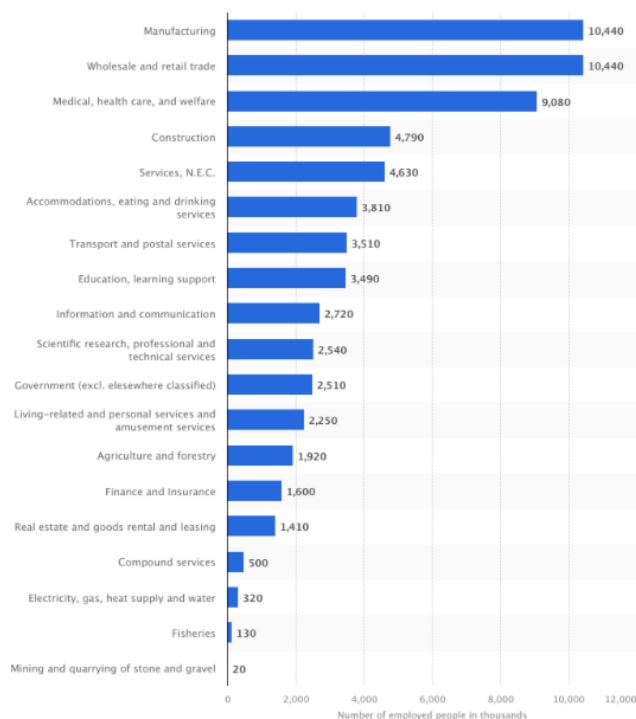


Figure 2: Published by Statista Research Department, & 27, F. (2023, February 27). Japan: Yearly average number of people employed by industry 2022. Statista.

households middle-class, the 10.3% of households who make up the upper-class of Japan have, on average, over twice the disposable income of middle-class households.

Table 1. Change in the middle class (1985-2018)

	1985	1988	1991	1994	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015	2018
Unit: %												
Proportion of population												
Poor	11.9	13.1	13.4	13.8	14.6	15.3	14.9	15.7	16.0	16.1	15.7	15.4
Lower	16.7	17.2	17.3	16.7	16.5	16.6	16.6	16.3	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.1
Middle	63.9	60.9	60.8	60.6	60.1	57.9	59.3	58.1	57.3	58.4	57.5	58.1
Upper	7.4	8.8	8.5	8.9	8.8	10.2	9.3	9.9	10.5	9.7	10.6	10.3
Unit: Ten thousand yen												
Equivalized household disposable income												
50% of the median income	108	114	135	144	149	137	130	127	125	122	122	127
75% of the median income	162	171	203	217	223	206	195	190	187	183	183	190
The median income	216	228	270	289	297	274	260	254	249	244	244	253
200% of the median income	431	455	540	578	595	548	519	508	499	488	489	507

Source: Authors' calculations with microdata from the CSLC, MHLW.

Notes: 1. The middle class is defined based on equivalized household disposable income.

2. The range for each income group is as follows:

Poor: less than 50% of the median income

Lower: between 50% and 75% of the median income

Middle: between 75% and 200% of the median income

Upper: 200% or more of the median income

Figure 3: The Population in the Middle Class over Time

These societal conditions have had a unique impact on modern-day Japan. This being that most Japanese citizens are less aware of the types of lives they live, or can live. While the majority of people are considered middle-class, a disproportionate amount of the Japanese public identifies with that class stratification. The number breaks down to about 90% (Kuchikomi 2021) of people identifying as middle-class, while the aforementioned study only considers about 58.1% of middle-class households based on disposable income. At the same time, the availability of careers in degree-requiring fields, in addition to the expectation for the youth to fill those careers, is greatly exaggerated.

The expectation to fill a specific type of career has contributed to Japan's consistent problem with rural depopulation. Young people, in 2023, have very little reason to remain in more rural settings. These areas often lack not just plentiful employment opportunities, in addition to recreational opportunities, that have become commonplace in major metropolitan areas. So, Japan's youth move to its key city centers in Kobe, Kyoto, Osaka, and, most populous,

Tokyo. Today, approximately half of Japan’s municipal areas have been labeled as depopulated areas by the internal affairs ministry (Hiroki 2022).

However, Japan’s rural depopulation problem has causes that extend further beyond conditions created by its modern-day job market. Rather, its roots reach as far back as the mid-20th century, just after the end of World War II. While many think of the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as some of the most destructive ways that Japan was damaged during WWII, it’s important to acknowledge the extent of less-publicized bombing that impacted other areas of Japan. Tokyo especially suffered during the United States’ “Operation Meetinghouse”, which stands as just one example of the air raids that Americans conducted during the war. These bombings leveled buildings across the country, which necessitated a Japanese reconstruction in the immediate years post-WWII.

As a result of this emergent need for new housing, the Japanese government incentivized construction companies to build cheap, affordable houses as quickly as possible (Spalding 2023). Even today, because it has since become common practice to churn out houses quickly to satisfy market demand, many houses are still pre-fabricated in factories using low-quality materials. This has shaped a long-standing, country-wide paradigm that houses only have a lifespan of approximately 20 to 30 years. After which, houses become much more vulnerable to



Figure 4: Cost of Damage to Houses per Year

near-guaranteed damage from earthquakes and tsunamis, which caused 414.48 billion yen in damage in 2021 alone (Statista 2023).

In Japan’s current real estate market, houses depreciate, rather than appreciate, over time (Berg 2020). This is primarily due to the inevitable 20-30 year expiration date that forces a family to move into new housing. As of 2017, it’s become more common to try to perform

renovations to extend the lifespan of a prefabricated house. (Berg 2020). But the high cost of extensive renovations to preserve a house is a difficult investment for home-owners, in Japan, who are expecting that they may need to buy multiple houses over the course of their lifetime. As such, the renovation segment of the housing market is considered to be an “evolving niche” (Berg 2020) as opposed to the standard, likely because people still consider houses unlivable after 20 to 30 years.

The Japanese housing market, and the well-documented migration of Japanese people from the countryside to major metropolitan areas (Semuels 2017) has created a steadily-increasing supply of abandoned houses, known as *akiya*. Based on statistics collected in 2018 by the Japanese Statistics Bureau, “more than 13 percent of Japanese homes are currently unoccupied or abandoned”, and “(only) about half of those buildings are for rent or for sale... leaving a large percentage that have reached a level of dilapidation unsuited for use.” (Buchholz 2019). It should be noted that while this problem is most prevalent among rural communities, even buildings in populated regions like Tokyo are becoming unlivable due to high renovation costs, and an inability to pay for them (Berg 2020).

Japan’s rapidly-aging population has also impacted the state of abandoned housing in their country. In an analysis of the factors behind unfavorable or unwanted inheritances, authors Kimihiro Hino et. al. report that the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure,

Transport, and Tourism found “49.0% of vacant houses in the suburbs of metropolitan areas were inherited by the owners’ children, and only 16.0% were looking for buyers or renters.” (Hino et. al 2021). Most of these inheritors feel some level of dissatisfaction with inheriting these properties, especially in cases where “(the house’s) market value is low and neither sale nor rent is possible” (Hino et. al 2021). However, the reluctance that inheritors have towards renovating



Figure 3: Japanese Statistics Bureau  
<https://www.statista.com/chart/17995/vacant-houses-in-japan-by-prefecture/#text=That%20means%208.5%20million%20houses.of%20dilapidation%20unsuited%20for%20use.>

Figure 5: Number of Abandoned houses in Japan

these homes is the result of more than just the Japanese paradigm surrounding old and especially dilapidated houses.

As a whole, being a young adult in Japan has gotten progressively more difficult. In May of 2023, approximately 97.3% of Japanese college graduates were employed by Japanese companies (Young-Hee 2023). But being employed by a company in Japan has vastly different implications than it does in the United States. Because of the specific work culture that Japanese companies have created, “to get a good job, (graduates) have one shot after university, and once (they) are hired, (they) stick with that company for the rest of their career. If (they) fail to do that, (they) are left out in the cold, and the doors of most companies will remain closed to (them) forever” (Douglas 2023). Included in that group are Japanese millennials, who were hit the hardest by what the New York Times labeled “a second ‘ice age’ in the job market.” During this time, “just 56.7% (of university seniors received) job offers before graduation as of October 2010 - an all-time low” (Fackler 2011). This has resulted in the perpetuation of an impossible barrier to hiring that qualified Japanese citizens face, leaving them entirely reliant on their parents, even at the ages of 30 and 40 years old.

This rigid and high-pressure work culture has pressured younger Japanese citizens (ranging from 20-40 years old) to seek opportunities outside of Japan entirely. Ryu, for example, is a 43-year-old information technology engineer who emigrated from Japan because he thinks that “Japan, with its lack of diversity, does not seem to be a country that holds much hope for his children” (Klien 2021). He also shared that “Back in Tokyo, when he was working long hours as a salaried employee, he hardly spent any time at home, and had no energy left to help with domestic duties.” Those who choose to remain in Japan typically do so by moving to more remote areas of the countryside (Klien 2021), a decision that often brings them more joy.

However, the alternative of moving to a more rural area isn’t always a possibility for Japanese citizens. Major metropolitan areas have much higher access to not only modern conveniences, like robust public transportation, but also to certain necessary services like healthcare. Fortunately, there are currently communities which have been developed in highly-urban areas like Tokyo, Kyoto, and Kobe, which provide people with the alternative lifestyles they’re looking for. Our project sponsor, Wakabayashi Noriyoshi, lives part-time in one such community, located in Kobe, Japan.

### 2.3 Kobe and the Bison Community

Kobe, the capital of the Hyogo prefecture of Japan, is located in the Kansai region of Japan. It’s about 22 miles west of Osaka, and 43 miles southwest of Kyoto. This city has a total of nine wards, totaling about 650 thousand households and an estimated population of around 1.5 million (City Population 2022). Kobe’s population density is about 2,7700 people per square kilometer. Its age distribution heavily skews towards the older end of the spectrum, with

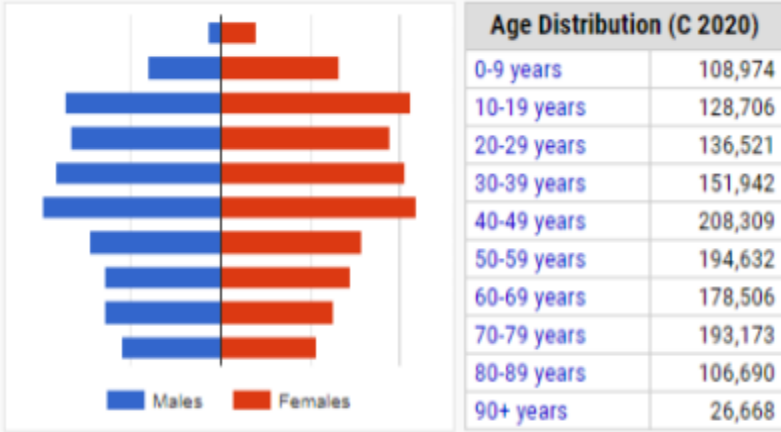


Figure 6: Gender breakdown in Japan

approximately 63.3% of Kobe’s citizens being over the age of 40 (City Population 2022). Kobe’s status as a port city has made imports and exports a major part of Kobe’s economy. However, they also has a thriving internally-driven economy, with 78.1% of workers being employed in the service sector (Wikipedia 2023).

In 1995, the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck Kobe, and has since been considered one of the worst in Japan’s history of geological disasters (National Geographic Society 2023). During the 6.9 magnitude earthquake, which caused \$100 billion in damage, over 6,000 people were killed, while another 45,000 people were displaced from their homes due to the destruction. Following the earthquake, 50,000 people left Kobe in search of new homes (National Geographic Society 2023).

As a result of the damage caused by the Great Hanshin Earthquake, as well as the subsequent rapid emigration from the city, Kobe has been striving to reinvent itself. While Kobe citizens mourned the devastation, they also acknowledged it as an opportunity to rebuild their society from the ground up (Encycopedia Britannica, 1998b). Kobe’s new plan, entitled “Kobe 2025”, envisioned the city as a capital of art and culture, where both local and foreign people could come to learn from its citizens.

Today, in 2023, Kobe has fulfilled this goal of reinventing itself. Alongside adhering to its plan for redevelopment, Kobe has recognized that the caring and close-knit communities

within it played a key role in lifting the city out of its post-earthquake devastation. As such, they continued to nurture the ideas of unity and mutual assistance, with many villages appearing where lone houses once stood. Finally, the destruction of both businesses and homes throughout the area induced a desire for stronger, more sustainable buildings (Sando, 1995b). The culmination of this new approach to urban development has since shaped Kobe into an artist centric society striving for both community permanence and economic change.

Over time, Kobe has become an epicenter of art and culture, burgeoning with museums and artist-in-residency programs. This emphasis on art is funded by government support through grants. Because of the top-down support of artists in Kobe, artist communities have emerged throughout the city. In addition to this, Kobe provides its artists with unique opportunities in the form of city-wide art competitions, which encourage the creation of new artworks and buildings. More importantly, it drives consistent urban revitalization by creating an environment which people are excited to live in and contribute to.

The Kobe government has also prioritized reinvigorating industry through art, and creating long lasting products rather than the mass-produced ones that were common before the earthquake (Stocker, 2013). This focus on art also allows locals to express their ideas in unique and easily understandable ways, quickly bringing focus to issues of crime-prevention, education, and the environment. By basing the city around art, Kobe actively encourages a space of community and volunteering that is supported both locally by the circular economy and internationally by tourism.

However, this new approach does not keep Kobe from suffering from the same issues as its neighbors. While continual development and growth are, on paper, good for a city, the constant production of new houses, combined with their 20-30 year expiration date (Berg, 2020b) has only exacerbated the presence of abandoned ones. The graying population, which leaves additional empty households in its wake, has also contributed to this problem. Over time, the growing presence of abandoned



Figure 7: View of Kobe from Bison

houses has undervalued the Kobe area as a whole. These long-term problems have undervalued the area.

But, simultaneously, the consequences of these problems have provided a space for architects to explore their creativity. With a total of 203 architecture firms, companies and individuals alike build sustainable houses on these abandoned plots, which has decelerated the issue. One such architect is Shigeru Ban, who began his career making short-term refugee houses in Kobe after the 1995 earthquake. With sustainability and ease of construction being key parts of his work, he consistently uses sustainable materials such as wood and cardboard tubes as the main structural components of these refugee houses (Shiberu Ban Architects, 2023). Today, he's built these houses for locations around the world including Syria, Turkey, Hawaii, and even Ukraine (Budgen 2023).

Many are doing more than just making houses out of re-used or local materials. A plethora of architects are looking towards the future, building houses that will stand longer or have parts that are easily replaceable (Bolt, 2022b). In addition to being environmentally sustainable, many Japanese architects are looking further into what they refer to as “spiritual sustainability” (Japan Times, 2022c). Japanese architecture has long held principles that focus on building relationships with nature and ringing the outside world into the home. This concept focuses on creating a feeling of sustainability where the residents of the building feel connected to both the environment and to those around them. This often includes the use of single-story buildings and reclaimed wood, which helps people feel grounded and at peace. However, while this generates feelings of sustainability, this version of building is often less sustainable than its counterparts. For example, while the wood is locally sourced, the mass-use of local wood can lead to deforestation, and “harmonious” paper walls produce much higher heating costs in the winter (Kengo, 2022c). Therefore, there is a large debate in modern Japan over which type of sustainability is better, as well as possible ways to combine the two. Either way, it is evident that Kobe is searching for methods to bring its art-centric mindset in to solve sustainability issues.

Nishimura Shuji, a Kobe native and experienced architect, has become a driving force for remodeling akiya in the Kobe area. For nearly three decades, Nishimura-san has turned abandoned houses into inexpensive and livable homes to provide housing, honor traditional Japanese architecture, and fight back against gentrification in the Kobe area. Over time, the connections he made through his work developed into Nishimura-gumi, an architecture



company which has continued this mission. To fund this endeavor, Nishimura-san collaborated with other like-minded locals, who had backgrounds in real estate and management, to create Haioku Group. These groups operate out of Kobe, taking on houses that are an hour or less from their headquarters in Kobe. This group has renovated around 50 buildings and houses, though they continue to work on many more. Many of these renovated buildings serve as homes, though others are used as stores, air-bnbs, and even a tea shop.

With Haioku-Group managing Nishimura-gumi, as well as other related contracting companies, Nishimura-san was able to create (or recreate) the Bison Village: A collection of nine previously-abandoned houses, which has since become his home and base of operations. From the Bison Village, Haioku-Group employees travel to various abandoned properties that Nishimura-san has acquired, and undertake long-term projects to transform them into workshops and living areas for Kobe residents.

In addition to renovating buildings, the Bison community also offers an AIR (artist-in residency) program. This program allows artists to stay in the community while they conceptualize, create, and exhibit their artwork. The AIR-program also serves as an exchange, allowing artists from the Kobe area to visit other residency locations around the world. By enabling artists to work internationally, the AIR program allows an exchange of both culture and artistic perspective, allowing inspiration to continually flow through the community.

Nishimura-san's work at the Bison community has since come to represent a solution to modern-day Japan's akiya problem. Rather than sourcing new materials or creating new properties, the employees at Nishimura-gumi and Haioku-Group see the value in sourcing perfectly usable homes or parts that someone decided held none. Not only that, but their approach to construction encompasses Kobe's ideals for urban development: Integrating an emphasis on not just sustainability, but also art, and prioritizing its presence in a community.

"This whole community has a very go-with-the-flow attitude," says Wakabayashi Noriyoshi, an architect and current resident of the Bison community. He notes that, even when the projects are based around construction, it still "feels like an art project." Not only that, but for him, the community feels extremely close. Simon Phan, an artist from Vietnam who was visiting as part of the AIR program, commented that "for people who are in (art), they try really hard to find their own voice." However, while he was there, he found it much easier to "Enjoy

the process” and “be experimental.” From this, it is clear to see how Bison affects both the people in it and the area around it in a positive way. With the Japanese economy slowly declining, while the average age and number of abandoned houses is on the rise, Bison and Nishimura-san’s work could serve as a blueprint for revitalizing dying communities in Japan and around the world.

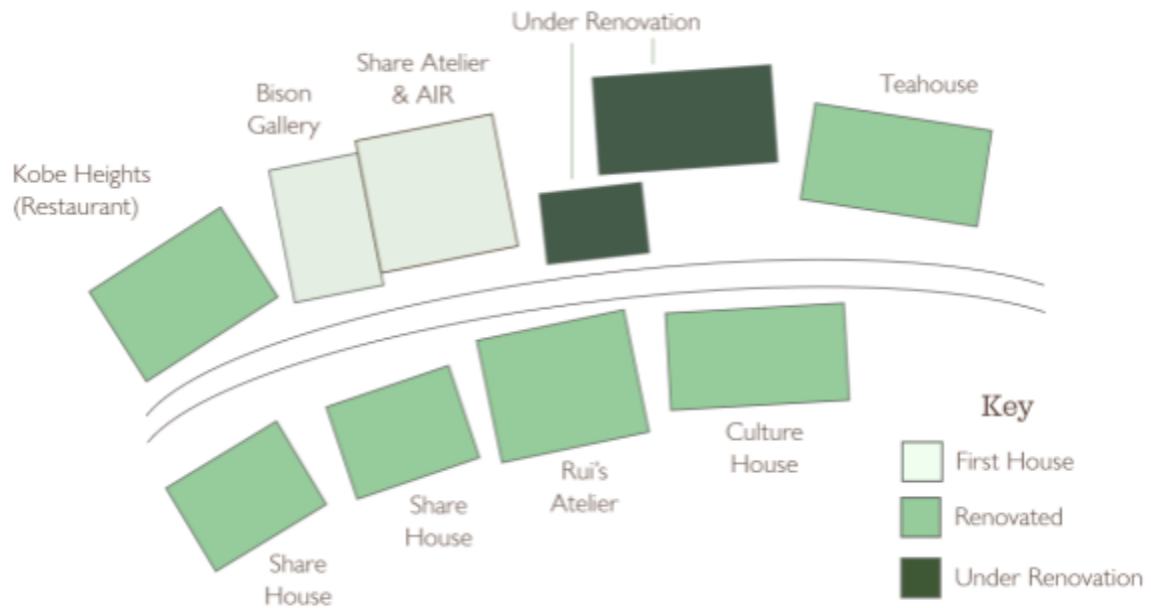


Figure 8: Map of Bison

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Project Objectives

The overall goal of our project was to develop an understanding of the Bison community as a whole. While we primarily focused on the development of the Bison village, and the formation of its community, we also wanted to investigate how Nishimura-san and his employees at Nishimura-gumi have conducted their renovation projects. This resulted in us investigating properties not just within the Bison village area, but around the Kobe area as a whole. In gathering data about these renovation projects and their community integration, we wanted to be able to retell the diverse stories of the Bison community, as well as what we experienced as we grew to become a part of it. Over time, we decided that a sort of “digital scrapbook” containing pictures, videos, and written reflections of our time at Bison would be the best way to share this information. As such, we created a website to host these details, in addition to developing a pamphlet for Nishimura-gumi and the Bison community to share with visitors. The following objectives guided us in achieving our goal.

5. Understanding the backgrounds and current lived experiences of the members of the Bison community.
6. Understanding the structure of Nishimura-gumi and the process of renovating previously-abandoned houses.
7. Understanding the role of creativity in the Bison community.
8. Cross-referencing our individual experiences to learn more about the diverse stories of the Bison community.

The scope of the project was limited to the city of Kobe and the sites within it that Nishimura-gumi is involved in. We talked to these members and residents of the community. We analyzed how Bison was shaped and the roles that community, culture, art and logistics played in it. We explored the stories and motivations of community members through these different lenses and saw how each one affected people similarly or differently. We did not impose our own stories and biases but instead simply acted as a means of sharing the stories of these people. The purpose of this was to create a means for people who want to learn more about the community to

be able to and to provide a basis for future IQPs to decide what direction they wish to pursue their project in.

### 3.2 Objective 1

In order to learn about the story of the Bison community, we first needed to understand the diverse lived experiences of its members. This included their background (where they came from, how they were raised, etc.), their beliefs and principles, and the details of their involvement in Bison. Additionally, in the same way that individuals in the community have impacted Bison, we wanted to understand how Bison has impacted them too. By analyzing these factors, we were able to better see the bigger picture of the Bison community, alongside the unique stories of the individuals involved in it. Finally, we wanted to understand how some of the social factors we researched in our background impacted the individuals of the Bison community, or Nishimura-gumi's work as a whole.

#### 3.2.1 Method 1: Cultural Immersion via Engaged Observation

In order to make accurate observations about the lived experiences of people in the Bison community, we first needed to immerse ourselves in Bison itself. If we began by immediately asking interview questions to local workers and residents, our Western cultural lens would too heavily impact our interpretations of their answers. Not only that, but we wouldn't know what questions are valuable to ask, or who we should ask about them, in addition to lacking important context for some of our subjects' responses. Engaged observation via walking tours provided the general, big-picture information that was necessary for making sense of the specific stories that we were later told.

On October 30th, 2023, Wakabayashi-san and Nishimura-san led us on a tour of the Bison community to introduce us to the area. During this tour, Nishimura-san shared the stories behind how he acquired the buildings in the Bison village area, while Wakabayashi-san translated our conversation between English and Japanese.



Figure 9: Our Group Eating Lunch with Bison Residents

Nishimura-san also provided an explanation of his approach to aspects of the renovation and reconstruction of these buildings, in addition to the way that he sources materials for his projects. Later that week, on November 2nd, 2023, Wakabayashi-san and his coworker Ueno-san, who handles grant applications for Nishimura-gumi, led us on another series of tours. These tours focused on five properties located deeper within Kobe, which are separate from the Bison village, but were still acquired and renovated by Nishimura-gumi. Similarly to Nishimura-san in our previous tour, Ueno-san gave us valuable context to understand how Nishimura-san came to possess these properties, how they were worked on, who worked on them, as well as the intentions with these projects. During these tours, Wakabayashi-san continued to translate between English and Japanese.

Throughout all of our tours, we took extensive notes to ensure that we understood the context surrounding these buildings to the best of our ability. These notes detailed the materials being used, the people working on the projects, and what certain spaces were already being used for. We also kept a visual record of these tours by taking both pictures and videos of the renovated buildings and the surrounding area.

### **3.2.2 Method 2: Interviewing Members of the Bison Community**

With the vast amounts of unique people within the Bison community a diverse set of stories and motivations are bound to appear. After gaining an understanding of the community through the tours and our initial impressions we were able to formulate which questions to ask and how to go about it. By using both sit-down, semi-scripted interviews and off-hand conversations, we were able to collect these stories and draw conclusions from each of them. After conducting interviews in this manner, we also made connections between the stories of people from different backgrounds. A list of the data points that we wanted to gather, as well as some specific questions that we asked, is available in Appendix A and B. Each interview subject was also provided with a discussion on the intended use for their interview data, as well as a consent form, which is located in Appendix D.

On November 17th, 2023 we conducted an interview with Nishimura-san alongside a translator named Daniel Miller which went for about an hour in length. Some of the topics covered consisted of his motivations, logistics of Nishimura-gumi and Haioku Group alongside general perception of the Bison community. This interview helped establish the groundwork for

understanding those within the community as well as set up future questioning for other members. This interview was both recorded and timestamped for the important topics for retention and future accessibility.

Later that same day, two members of the group held an interview with Simon Phan, a Vietnamese artist-in-residence being hosted at Bison by Haioku-group. The interview was brief, lasting around 10 minutes, and was held in an informal manner without an extensive list of questions. The topics consisted of how he views art, where his art fits in, and if his art has any messages or meaning behind it. This interview was recorded and transcribed for our own analysis.

### 3.2.3 Method 3: Hands-on Worksite Experience

During our first prolonged stay in Kobe, from November 13th to November 17th, 2023, we spent much of our time at Nishimura-gumi's various worksites around the city. Our first worksite experience was a part of a larger workshop, which was hosted by Haioku-group. During this workshop, we learned how to use repurposed wood and old containers, along with a few nails and a saw, to build a functional fence out of recycled material. We also helped move a group of small boulders to a more accessible location for a local stonemason to create a walled raised driveway out of. While assisting with these projects, we took notes on the key figures involved in leading the workshop, and had the opportunity to meet and talk to a variety of people from both in- and outside of Kobe. We also documented these worksites via pictures and videos.

Following this workshop, we made subsequent visits to worksites both in the Bison



Figure 10: Presentation during a Workshop Seminar

community and in the wider Kobe area. Our work at these worksites consisted of a variety of different activities, including everything from demolition, to painting, to plastering walls with a traditional, dirt-based insulating material. As much as observation of Nishimura-gumi helped show us what they experience, and interviews with employees told us how they experienced it, actually doing the work that they do meant that we could truly feel the process of renovating an

abandoned house. From the physical sensation of mixing plaster, or breaking down a wall, to the emotional satisfaction of seeing your hard day's work completed, physically participating in the labor that Nishimura-gumi employees conduct gave us an additional depth of information that we otherwise wouldn't be able to access. After our days were complete, we wrote about these experiences in our personal journals to record how our interactions with Nishimura-gumi's work made us feel, in addition to continuing to take general notes of the ongoing conditions of the worksites.

### 3.2.4 Method 4: Auto-Ethnography

While the bulk of our project was focused on taking in the culture of the Bison community, understanding it required actively connecting our experiences and observations to the characteristics of the Bison village. Beyond that, we also needed to connect our experiences with the wider cultural context of Japan as a whole. To that end, the auto-ethnography process became a central practice of our project, particularly throughout our extended stays in the Kobe area.

Auto-ethnography is a sociological research practice that involves using an individual's own experiences within a culture to conduct research about it. However, as opposed to a traditional autobiography, auto-ethnography involves reflecting on your individual experiences

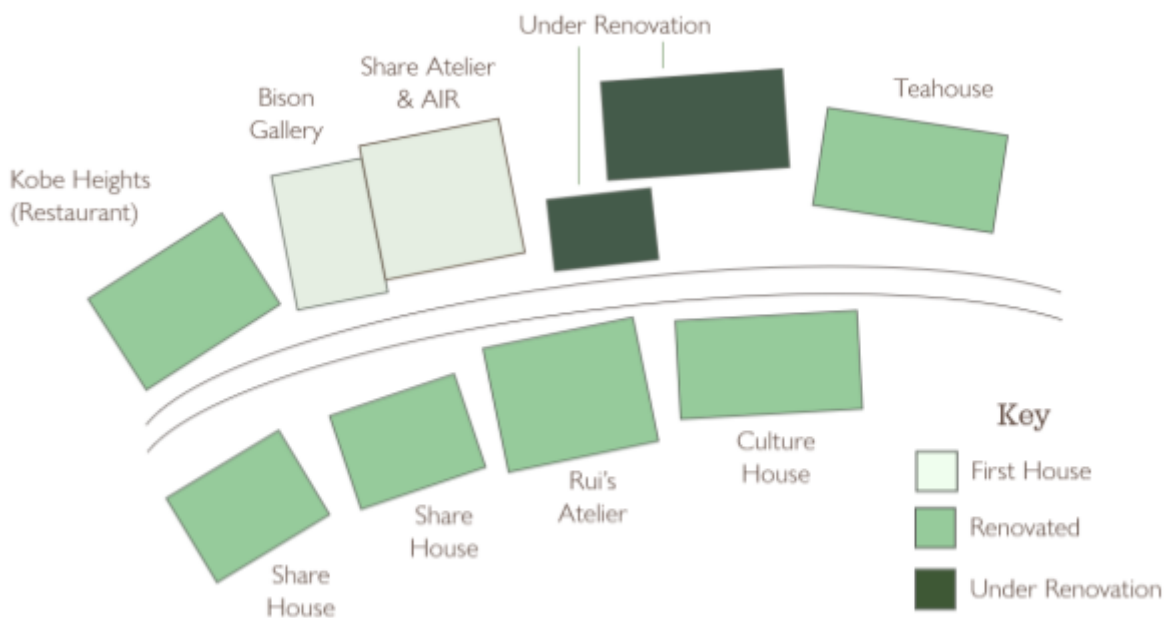


Figure 11: Layout of Bison

within the cultural context they take place in. Some of these connections between individual experience and the surrounding culture might include any ongoing political circumstances, longstanding cultural traditions, or why some groups have deviated from traditional practices based on their needs.

In order to accurately utilize auto-ethnography as a method for our research, we each regularly wrote about our experiences at Bison in personal journals. These journals were provided by our advisors at the beginning of IQP. Towards the end of our trip to Kyoto, we went through our notebooks individually, and analyzed our experiences at Bison using our newfound, deeper understanding of the cultural context in the village. A few examples of specific things that we journaled and analyzed include our workshop experiences with Nishimura-gumi and Haioku-group, our daily lunches with members of the Bison community.

### **3.3 Objective 2**

Another key aspect of our project was understanding the logistics of how Nishimura-gumi renovates their abandoned properties. We began by researching revitalization projects both in Japan, and around the world. However, because each project takes a slightly different approach, it was imperative we understood Nishimura-gumi's specific process. Through surveying Nishimura-san's worksites, we were able to gain a thorough understanding of each step of the revitalization process. In addition, we learned about the materials, time, and manpower that is required for each project, and how Nishimura-gumi, specifically, fulfills these conditions.

#### **3.3.1 Method 1: Logistical and Architectural Analysis via Engaged Observation**

During our aforementioned walking tours, as well as any subsequent ones, we also collected data specifically oriented around the logistic process of renovating abandoned properties. Some of these data points include when a property was acquired, how much it was acquired for, and the work needed to make a building usable. We also asked questions about the top-level conditions of the projects, including their limitations, management, and any goals or ambitions that Nishimura-gumi employees have for a specific building. We cataloged our walking tours through means of both video and photo documentation, recorded audio of Nori and Ueno-san, and detailed written notes.



### 3.3.2 Method 2: Interviewing Employees of Nishimura-gumi

In addition to interviewing the members of the Bison community about their stories and experiences, we made sure to interview Nishimura-gumi members, specifically, about the more logistical aspects of revitalizing an akiya. These questions included topics like cost of building, materials needed, the reconstruction process itself, and the amount of time it takes to do it. We also discussed the legal intricacies of getting an abandoned house up to code, especially when re-using old material.

To put it simply, there are things that the architects building these houses see that the residents living in them don't. On the logistical side of their work, they have a deeper understanding of the costs and effort needed to undertake such a large project. They also have a better understanding of the empirical side of sustainability, and what defines the qualifications for a sustainable building. We also discussed how they intentionally design these spaces to be not just empirically sustainable, but spiritually sustainable, and make people feel more connected to their environment.

To do this, we made use of the same interview process detailed above, but with added questions to discuss these topics. Examples of these questions can be found in APPENDIX B. We also created similar outputs to the ones we mentioned before in the forms of audio and video clips used in our final documentary. We provided subjects with the same discussion on consent, as well as the same consent form found in Appendix D.

### 3.3.3 Method 3: Participating at Active Project Sites

During our visits to the Bison village, our team will plan to participate in the renovations at multiple active project sites of Nishimura-gumi. By participating, we hope to expand our understanding of the renovation process. By spending our time doing physical work with Nishimura-gumi, we were able to gain a firsthand understanding of the materials, labor, and time that's needed to finish even one small phase of these projects. Additionally, it enabled us to observe how Nishimura-gumi



Figure 12: Our Team Working at a Project Site

employees interacted at the worksites and provide us their perspective on their work.

From these perspectives and stories we plan to find commonalities among them to be able to use in further interviews and understanding of the community. By understanding their stories we will create deeper connections with them and hopefully intertwine ourselves with the community and possibly meet new people along the way.

### **3.4 Objective 3**

The Bison community acts as a hub for artists to come, learn, and create different types of art in one shared location. This allows people to learn from one another and share their ideas, while also having a supportive space to create their own works. With this in mind, it was important to explore how creativity affects the Bison community, and the role that art plays in the village. Kyoto, considered the art and cultural capital of Japan, and Kobe, a UNESCO city design, are both wrought with inspiration, and are pivotal in Japan's current artistic movements. Therefore, we used this opportunity to take in and appreciate the art from visiting artists, as well as seeing how creativity expanded past artistry and into the overall construction process.

#### **3.4.1 Method 1: Interviewing Artists at the Bison Community**

A large portion of understanding why artists create is learning about their lives and ideals. While we initially planned on finding this information through formal interviews, there were multiple instances where many of our interactions with artists were unprompted, and were more casual in nature. This created a much more relaxed feel for the discussion, and allowed us to gear personal questions towards understanding each individual's personal mindset. As such, many of these more informal interviews became highly personalized, and focused mostly on delving deeper into their personal experiences.

Prior to more formal interviews, each research subject was provided with a verbal overview of our consent form, in addition to an explanation on our intentions with the information they provided. This consent form, which is the same as the previously-mentioned one, can be found in Appendix D. Because it wasn't possible to take notes during more conversational interviews, we recorded key data points in our own journals, as well as a Google Sheets document, as soon as we could after the interactions. Even though these interviews weren't prepared for, we still made sure to ask for permission to publish their responses. While

they had their limitations, these informal, conversational-style interviews proved to still provide significant information about the artists' lives, and allowed for a deeper quality of conversation due to their personal nature.

### 3.4.2 Method 2: Analyzing the Creative Factors of the Bison Community

A large reason this project was made feasible in the first place was the process-oriented mindset demonstrated by the members of the Bison community. In order to better understand this mentality, we cross-referenced the notable data points that we found in the artists' interviews with the information we gathered during our interviews with Nishimura-gumi employees. These shared data points were then used to find common themes between the experiences of two groups of people, who are often categorized as distinctly separate from each other, and develop an informed narrative about the conditions that have shaped the Bison community. Cross-referencing our data from different types of interview subjects also allowed us to authentically portray the story of the Bison community, as well as connecting our findings to our literature review prior to coming to Japan.

### 3.4.3 Method 3: Understanding the Creative Aspects of Structural Processes

Though much of our time at worksites was spent interacting with and learning from the employees of Nishimura-gumi, we also sought to analyze their construction methods from a more creative lens. While Japanese architects and craftsmen often distinguish themselves from artists, it's inarguable that certain building methods, especially ones that prioritize sustainability, utilize creativity in their planning and execution. Additionally, as it applies to Nishimura-gumi's work, many of their building methods draw inspiration from traditional Japanese architecture



Figure 13: Floor of the Bison Teahouse

going back centuries, creating a unique convergence of both old and new building methods.

As such, we made sure, on and off worksites, to ask employees at Nishimura-gumi about the importance of creativity in their work. Whether that comes in the form of finding innovative solutions to

ongoing problems, or being conscious of the appearance of a building, and the type of feeling they want people to experience when they occupy it. We also recorded some of these connections that we personally observed, in addition to our own thoughts and feelings about how specific projects emotionally impacted us as individuals. After returning from each worksite, we documented both of these pieces of information in our journals for later analysis and contextualization of our time at Nishimura-gumi's worksites.

### **3.5 Objective 4**

In order to bring together each aspect of Bison, its culture, stories, logistics, and art, we wanted to provide the Bison community with a scrapbook that could be used to share the story of Bison to people outside of the area. Another key request from our sponsor was understanding how people outside of the Bison view their community. Because of this, we also wanted this scrapbook to be presented from our own perspectives as American college students, who came to Japan specifically to learn about the Bison community.

In order to accurately share their stories, we made sure to draw heavily from the information shared to us during interviews and casual interactions with members of the Bison community. Additionally, we provided personal stories, told from our individual perspectives, which connected our experiences at Bison with some of the existing conditions of the village and its development. Using these in combination, we developed a digital scrapbook, hosted on a Google Sites website, that encapsulated all individual aspects of our project in a narrative form that re-tells the diverse stories of the Bison community and our time spent at it.

#### **3.5.1 Method 1: Personal Journaling**

Throughout the duration of our project, we made sure to actively learn about the Bison community by journaling our personal experiences and connecting them back to the larger picture of the village. In order to document them accurately, we journaled as often as we could, particularly during our long-term stays in Kobe. These entries included what we did, how we felt about it, and what we learned from these experiences. We also discussed our impressions of the Bison community verbally, as a group, and shared our personal thoughts and feelings to actively process what we took away from our time there. By combining these two practices, we were able

to not only archive our thoughts for later analysis, but also become more connected to the social, cultural, and artistic environment we became a part of.

### **3.5.2 Method 2: Compiling Our Personal Stories**

Because each member of our project had vastly different experiences and takeaways from the Bison community, we wanted to give each of us a space to share these thoughts freely. During the creation of our website, we created our own individual webpages that were geared specifically towards our experiences in the Bison community. Using our journal entries, as well as any additional thoughts, we populated our individual pages with summaries of the different things we did during our time at Bison. Not only that, but we highlighted the impacts that Bison left on us, and how we perceived the community after spending multiple weeks studying it.

### **3.6 Limitations**

Before arriving in Japan, there were several limitations we anticipated encountering during our project. The biggest of which revolved around time and location constraints, and language barriers. Each of these areas, we expected, would provide unique barriers to our project, and require well-thought solutions to overcome and still gather valuable data.

Similar to any IQP, we expected that time would be a large constraint for our project. Most research projects, outside of a college setting, take place over a period of months, if not years, so we expected that fitting everything into just 8 weeks would limit the work we were able to do. In order to overcome the general time constraint on our project, we needed to proactively develop a plan for what we would do at the Bison village, especially during our extended stays in Kobe.

We also expected that the location of our project site, and especially its distance from our housing in Kyoto, would make traveling to our project site to gather data difficult. The Bison village is over an hour and a half from where we were staying during our time in Japan. Additionally, the round trip cost to and from the Bison village was approximately ¥2600 (approximately \$17) for trains alone, with an additional ¥420 (approximately \$2.84) for bus transportation within Kobe. This price added up quickly, and led to concerns that we would almost inevitably go over the \$150 budget that WPI allocates for travel while on IQP. To keep

our costs low, our group tried to limit our trips to Kobe to once per week, twice at most, which further limited our time in Bison.

The general time and distance constraints, we anticipated, would make it more difficult to conduct our project work. Most of our methods, including interviews, photo and video documentation, and even just observing the Bison village and Nishimura-gumi's other projects, required being at Bison. While we were in Kyoto, we wouldn't be able to gather any of this information, unless we conducted Zoom calls accompanied by a translator. When possible, we made sure to try and do this. However, to ensure we wouldn't have to cram for information, we further developed our plans to make sure we gathered relevant and helpful data.

Like many other groups at the Kyoto, Japan project site, we anticipated that the language barrier would be troublesome. While there were instances where we knew we would have a translator available for us, there were just as many, if not more, where we would be on our own and reliant on translation software. Thus, we prepared ourselves to plan around using a translator whenever we weren't accompanied by Nori and did our best to ensure that certain words or intended meanings didn't get lost in translation.

We also encountered a few different problems with our interview process while we were at Bison. Due to the inherently personal nature of interviews, and especially some of the questions that we were asking, we were aware that we might experience difficulty with people even being agreed to interview in the first place. Therefore, we prepared ourselves to encounter moments where we simply wouldn't be able to get some information. Or, where we might have to explore different avenues to gathering information, like friendly conversations. We also made sure to provide interview subjects with consent forms (available in appendix D) via PDF. Additionally, verbal explanations of these consent forms, translated to the best of our abilities, were provided to each subject.

Similar to interviews, we expected to encounter privacy-related conflicts during the filming and photographing process. In the initial stages of our project, we were planning on doing a significant amount of filming and photographing, enough to create multiple pieces of short-form content geared around the Bison community. With that comes the understanding that it would be impossible to avoid filming people, especially during large, group-oriented events like workshops or art exhibitions. In anticipation of these, we designed an additional consent form related to filming, available in appendix D, and a verbal explanation of this form, as well as

our intended uses with the footage. If people expressed displeasure or discomfort with being filmed, we planned to delete any footage related to them, and exclude these pieces of footage or pictures from any final products of our project.

Prior to arriving in Bison, our group also had concerns about how we would integrate into Nishimura-gumi's ongoing work projects. This was in part because of aforementioned limitations, especially relating to the language barrier between us and the community. However, another aspect of that was because we, as a whole, had very little experience with construction and renovation. We understood that the combination of these two factors, in addition to how much filming and documentation we planned on doing, could have easily made us an inconvenience to deal with at the worksite. In preparation for this, we planned to try to communicate with worksite personnel as much as possible, and ensure that they were okay with whatever they had planned for us to do that day.

## Chapter 4: Results

Our time in the Bison village served as an investigation that yielded valuable results which allow us to analyze the community as a whole. During our visits, we found that each member of our team was drawn to different aspects of the Bison community, primarily based on our own interests outside of the project. Despite our limited time in Kobe, these diverse interests allowed our group to collect a unique well of data about each element of the community. This included information about both the logistical side of Nishimura-gumi and Haioku group's operations as well as the social, cultural, and artistic aspects of Bison.

### 1. Additional Background

A large portion of the interview and research data we collected at Bison was utilized to gain a better understanding of the various companies and organizations present in the village. This section serves as a breakdown of each of these different groups, their influence on the area, and how they tie in with the rest of Bison.

#### 1.1 Haioku Group

While Nishimura-san has been working on abandoned houses for most of his life, Nishimura-gumi was only founded in 2018. Two years later, Haioku LLC was established to both manage and fund Nishimura-gumi's growing operation. This company serves as a real-estate company to advertise and sell properties renovated by Nishimura-gumi. Haioku Group also manages other subsidiaries such as Half-Daiku, Hotel New, Cafe Flower, and Barracklin, as well as the Bison Village. More information about these other subsidiaries can be found on Haioku Group's Instagram page (Haioku Group, n.d.)

#### 1.2 Artist-in-Residency

Artist-in-Residency programs (also known as AIR programs) are exchange programs that allow artists to stay and work overseas for a period of time, stimulating the trade of culture and ideas. Recently Bison implemented one of these programs in their village, entitled the "Haioku Artist in Residency." This hybrid on-site and online artist-in-studio program is sponsored by a grant from the Japan Tourism Agency, which pays for selected artists to stay for free in the



village (Haioku Artist in Residency, 2023). By allowing the artists to work in Bison, this program encourages them to draw inspiration from both the community and the wider Kobe for their exhibitions.

“For Cities,” an online collection of urbanists and artists, teamed up with the Haioku AIR to host five designers from Vietnam for the month of November. This arrangement was the first exchange the Haioku AIR hosted artists, with its outcome determining the future of the program. Fortunately, our time in Bison lined up with these artist’s visits, allowing us to meet Simon Phan, Cécile Ngọc Strong Perdu, and Dương Gia Hiểu, the three artists from Vietnam who came to stay in-person. In addition, architect Ngô Đức Bảo Lâm and artist Jo Ngo participated in this project from their homes in Vietnam, sending over their designs and blueprints for the exhibition.

Our team was able to attend this exhibition in-person, viewing the culmination of each artist’s hard work. Their art pieces were displayed in various places around Bison, with each artist getting the chance to introduce, explain, and answer questions about their works. While the artists left a few days later, their art pieces continued to stay up until the next exhibition, allowing people to stop by and see it whenever. While their time in Bison was shortened than expected due to Visa restrictions, these artists still hail their experience as a success, and will be hosting artists from Kobe next year.

## 2. Interview Information

A large block of the information we gathered was through both formal and informal interviews. The formal interviews were conducted as one-time sit-down events with recordings and note taking, while the informal interviews were conversations had with various people while working or spending time around the village. These interviews serve as sources for both qualitative data and personal experiences.

### 2.1 Nishimura Shuji

Nishimura Shuji is the head of the Bison village, founder of Nishimura-gumi and co-founder of the Hiaoku group. His work is motivated by passion rather than profit, with his employees sharing a similar mindset. Nishimura-san himself began working on abandoned houses early in life, fixing up akiyas with his father (Nishimura-san



Figure 14: Nishimura-san  
(中島 真美, Marzel)

Interview, 11:36). This sparked his interest in construction, and led him to later pursue a college degree in architecture (Nishimura-san Interview, 10:38). After college and prior to founding Nishimura-gumi, he worked as a real estate agent; flipping houses on the side to both turn a profit and have a space to live. One specific example of these flipped properties was a garage that he converted into a living space, stayed in for a while, then later sold to a community member (Nishimura-san Interview 7:07).

As he completed more of these DIY projects, Nishimura-san discovered that renovating houses was something thoroughly enjoyed. He loved having the opportunity to work with like-minded friends who also found rebuilding abandoned houses fun. These friends then brought in other friends who were looking for work, allowing Nishimura-san's team to grow. At the same time, many of his coworkers could not speak Japanese, so Nishimura-san learned how to communicate beyond written language; instead, he used drawn pictures or sketches to provide instructions to his teams (Nishimura-san Interview, 1:34).

In addition to the teamwork aspect, Nishimura-san was able to connect heavily with the more philosophical concepts that DIY culture aligns with. He found that DIY connected him with nature and the idea of being able to live with the environment rather than defeating it (Nishimura-san Interview, 14:30 R2). For example, in our interview Nishimura-san stated that, if overgrowth and insects overtook a property, they are just as much tenants of it as any human would be (Nishimura-san Interview, 16:55 R2). If it were a competition, Nishimura-san said that he would prefer to lose to nature and allow it to take back what is rightfully its own. (Bison Village [Brochure], 2022).

Nishimura-san regularly incorporates his beliefs about sustainability into his work, making it a core aspect of Nishimura-gumi. The company often sources castoff materials from other projects, whether from a house they are demolishing or a model room created to advertise apartments. These materials include wood, glass, and even insulation panels (Nishimura-san Interview, 28:31 R2).

However, while Nishimura-san highly values sustainability, he understands that it isn't always possible to source a material sustainably. Certain materials, such as concrete, insulation, and metal, either cannot be easily re-used or are difficult to obtain second-hand. However, the incorporation of these components leads to more sustainable houses over time. For example, while they may have to purchase insulation, it keeps electricity costs down by allowing people to

use less heating and air conditioning. There are also times when he uses materials that are not required in favor of looks or creative freedom, which is the current environment for sustainability in Japan. Occasionally, sustainability can be overlooked in favor of design and artistic license, which allows a larger space for imagination in his projects.

In conjunction with that, Nishimura-san appreciates the degree of freedom he has found by doing DIY. Instead of being told what to do, Nishimura-san is able to decide what he deems important to work on and set his own time-frame for its completion. Most importantly, Nishimura-san values the experience of being able to learn by doing. In our interview, he said that people “don’t actually need knowledge or skills, (they) can just build stuff. If you go out and start hammering nails, you’ll learn how to hammer a nail.” (Nishimura-san Interview 12:20).

However, Nishimura-san acknowledged that his approach is not common amongst Japanese people. Rather, he feels that Japanese people have an obsession with perfection, which has impacted the housing and renovation markets (Nishimura-san Interview 13:56). According to Nishimura-san, the number of tradesmen (carpenters, plumbers, etc.) has steadily declined since the 1950’s and 1960’s (Nishimura-san Interview 14:40). In his opinion, this trend correlated with the increase in demand for prefabricated houses and apartments. Now, most trades-oriented jobs are offered by factories that mass-produce houses. Nishimura-san stated that he views this as “shitty work” (Nishimura-san Interview 17:45), lacking passion.

Not only do these jobs stifle creativity, they are also fairly low-paying. Nishimura-san recalled an example in the form of his friend, who travels to the United States for half the year to participate in higher-paying projects. His friend then returns to Japan for the rest of the year, using the money he made in America to support himself while he takes on passion projects (Nishimura-san Interview 15:56). Nishimura-san said that he believes this level of passion is something that sets working at Nishimura-gumi apart from other trades careers. He noted that most of his workers are younger and genuinely enthusiastic about the work that they do. While he suggested we ask each of them personally, he speculates that most of them have fun doing work on the jobs sites. In addition, Nishimura-san remarked that, while the gender breakdown in Bison is still male dominated, he employs far more women than the average construction company in Japan (Nishimura-san Interview 20:00).

## 2.2 Miyako-san

Miyako-san is another head Bison, and is the co-founder and current leader of the Hiaoku group. Just like Nishimura-san, she believes in creativity and sustainability, holding many of the same thoughts and principles when it comes to abandoned houses. Both their works are motivated by a desire to give people a space where they can be free and express themselves (Miyako-san Interview, Appendix A). They strive to make these spaces outside of the stereotypical Japanese work life so that people can feel comfortable with the decisions they made



Figure 15: Miyako-san

that lead them to the community. However, the two diverge when it comes to the types of wellbeing they focalize around. While Nishimura-san concentrates on freedom, Mikiyako-san focuses more on making people feel safe and happy. She noted that one of the key reasons she does this type of work is that she likes to see people happy and will thus continue to support them (Miyako-san Interview, Appendix A).

Even before she teamed up with Nishimura-san, she ran her own sharehouse for the aforementioned reasons. Once she met Nishimura-san, she realized she could take her ideas and principles to a larger scale. As Bison and its outreach and community grew, she was able to help more people, with some even being able to call the village their home. In 2022, she decided to officially close down her share house in order to put all her focus into Nishimura-gumi.

## 2.3 Artist Interviews

During our visit, we were fortunate enough to talk to and interview the three artists visiting Bison from Vietnam: Simon Phan, Cécile Ngọc Sương Perdu, and Dương Gia Hiểu. While each interview went in different directions, many of the questions were the same. As such their responses have been compiled in the chart below.

	Simon Phan	Cécile Ngọc Sương Perdu	Dương Gia Hiểu
Introduction	He is a graphic designer and entrepreneur in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He has been in this line of work for 5 years. He studied in the UK and come back in 2013, then worked in the magazine industry for 2 years	She is a multidisciplinary artist & Architectural Designer from Cần Thơ, Vietnam.	He is a photographer and structural artist from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
How did you start?	There was no print studio in Ho Chi Minh so he decided to create one. His most popular item is a notebook with a metal door design so he started deriving inspiration from cities.	She was interested in engineering, went into architecture, and fell in love with the art side and began doing it more and more. Eventually she started her own print company	He wanted to go into fashion but didn't due to his family disliking it, so instead he chose photography.
What are your inspirations?	He plays around with patterns, but most come from street designs and architecture. He then deconstructs the objects into shapes	She likes to make art that tells a story, often being inspired by stories herself.	Nature and creativity. He likes using things in ways other than their obvious uses.
What drives you to be creative?	He finds art fun. Even though the journey to finding one's voice is tough, he enjoys the trial and error process. He practices with a brush pen a lot, testing different means to determine his "weapon." Even if he fails, the process can be learned from, so failure is a success.	Everything is art. It's just about doing something over and over, whether you want or need to do it, and finding patterns in that thing. Putting your own spin on something makes it art.	Seeing things through different perspectives and being open to all the senses. He also likes spreading joy through his artwork.
Are you saying something through your work? If so, what?	He states he's not trying to say anything—art is just fun. He isn't trying to push ideas or get into politics. He simply creates for his own joy.	Yes and no. She is often just having fun and conveying emotion. However, she is inspired by stories she's read and likes telling stories through her art, too.	Everything has more than one use. Even after you've used it for its initial use, it can still be used in other ways.

What have you learned from your time in Kobe?	Differences in work style– here, things become more about the process. Through this, he has picked up a go-with-the-flow mentality and made his art process-oriented rather than product-oriented.	Things are about the process. She didn't have time to make things perfect, so she worked on finding joy in the creation itself.	There's a lot of trash in Japan, just like in Vietnam. There are a lot of similarities. In addition, he noted enjoying the process is important
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### 3. Outreach

In order to promote knowledge and counteract people's desire for perfection, Haioku Group uses their subsidiary "Half-Daiku" to teach people the fundamental DIY skills necessary to tackle their own projects. They achieve this by hosting a variety of learning programs, from free one-day workshops to paid long-term seminars.

We were able to attend one of the free workshops, which featured notable figures in the Japanese DIY scene, including Tomohisa Ito & Jun Kato. The experience began with a two-hour presentation hosted at the Bison village tea house. During this presentation, Ito-san and Kato-san discussed their previous DIY experiences through talks and a series of slideshows. After a brief intermission, Nishimura-san joined them to hold an open-question panel where they welcomed attendees by asking them to share their experiences in DIY, then opened the floor to answer any questions. We then had a quick lunch before traveling to an active worksite about 25 minutes from Bison.

The workshop displayed how to build a fence by allowing people to perform each step of the process, from digging holes in the ground to cutting the posts to stabilizing them and nailing them together. Each part of this process was taught by a different DIY expert, giving one-on-one training and advice to those who expressed interest. Aside from the hands-on learning, people also mingled to get to know one another, even coming up to us to discuss the workshop and learn about who we were. These



Figure 16: Wall-Building Workshop

people came from Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, and many other places in Japan. The workshop then culminated in each person discussing their takeaways and what they learned.

## 4. Worksite Observations

Our time in Bison gave us the opportunity to participate in a multitude of different project sites. There, we learned several of the skills that Nishimura-gumi teaches and promotes to people interested in participating in DIY. This included plastering, woodworking, concrete mixing, conscious demolition, and painting. Alongside these skills, we were able to meet a plethora of people who stemmed from different countries, professions, and experiences. For instance, one person (who wishes to remain anonymous but consents to having their story told) was a first-timer in the community when we met, but quickly transitioned into one of the main project workers. They even taught us how to properly plaster walls based on the experience they had gained over the past few weeks.

### 4.1 Mud-Plastering

Our first project site was an abandoned building that was slowly being converted into a store front. At this location, they wanted to employ the traditional Japanese practice of plastering walls with mud made up of dirt, gravel, water, and adhesive. In addition to keeping up tradition, Nori noted that this method was far more sustainable than concrete. Not only was this mud naturally sourced and easily replaceable, but the substance also serves as a sort of insulation. Alongside these reasons, the team also liked the practice for its artistic merit. They encouraged those working on the walls to add their own mark to the walls, expressed through smooth patterns and rough textures. Each member of our group would go on to complete individual walls, developing distinct styles over the course of one or two sessions.



Figure 17: Our Group Mud-Plastering

### 4.2 Demolition

We did two workshops on demolition, both with very different approaches. The first time, the house was not being used afterwards, so most things could be taken down. The second time, they planned to demolish the walls and floor to replace them, so we were more cautious. Both times, we got to spend time with Bison residents as they showed us how to conduct the demolition.

The first site consisted of mostly concrete and ceramic, meaning there was little material that could be salvaged. However, the second site was primarily made of natural material and could be salvaged, thus there was a heavy focus on reclaiming the wood and leaving the house as intact as possible. The team took precautions to avoid load-bearing beams, going slowly so as not to destroy the wood. In addition, we removed all the nails from the wood, allowing for both the beams to be re-used and the nails to be sold to a local scrap yard. Both of these approaches were valid ways of doing demolition, with the techniques employed chosen based on the needs of the site.

### 4.3 Painting

One of the worksites we visited, a combined store and Airbnb, was almost complete. The bottom floor, a bike shop and bar, was open and operating. The 3 floors above were a single Airbnb where 4 to 6 people could stay. As there was a slight issue with water leakage, Nishimura-gumi needed the outside of the building to be covered over with sealant. We worked with Jarrod Zenjiro, an American architect who was living in Japan, to paint the building. This experience allowed our group to see a completed building that would be used by those outside of Nishimura-gumi. In addition, it gave us some idea of the finalization and maintenance that goes into these more professional properties.

During this project, we were taught how to properly paint the side of a building while learning about the purpose of the sealant. In addition, we were able to talk to Jarrod about his experiences with Nishimura-gumi and his plans for the future. Just like many people in the community, he was working with the company while he searched for an akiya of his own to renovate.

Finally, we toured the building, which had several artistic touches. Most notably, a

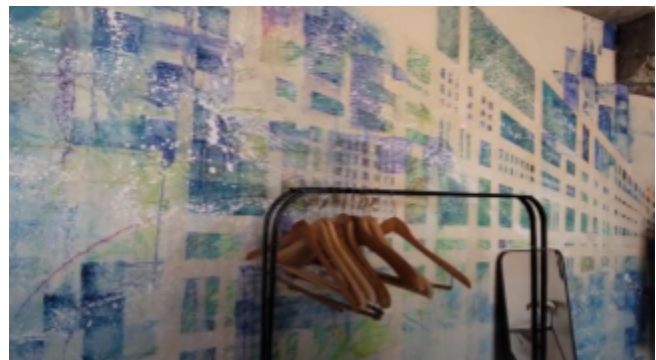


Figure 18: Plaster art in Airbnb



plaster artist has created a piece of art on the bedroom wall, which can be seen in figure 18. In addition, a neon sign that had been salvaged from a previous work was placed on the terrace, serving as a unique decoration. This allowed us to see the artistic side of Nishimura-gumi in action.

#### 4.4 Concrete Mixing

The first thing we were introduced to when we got into Bison was “The Hole.” Someone on instagram had requested that Nishimura-san host a hole-digging seminar, and he obliged. At the time, they did not know what they wanted to do with this hole, rather opting to figure that out



Figure 19: Concrete mixer and The Hole

at a later date. Eventually, the Bison team decided to make the hole into a gazebo, inviting us to help with the concrete. This helped us gain an understanding of the styles of construction art projects the Bison team created in the village.

This process began by picking up bags of cement, sand, and gravel from a local construction warehouse. While Bison tries to re-use as much material as possible, it was determined that concrete would be the best material for this project, and thus they needed to purchase it. As the car transporting the materials could not fit in the Bison roads, they drove as close as possible, dropping off the bags and transporting them in wheelbarrows. pouring concrete on the sides of the hole.

After transporting the material, they used an old concrete mixer to combine the materials. We were walked through the steps of making concrete, including the correct ratios of the component, how to use the mixer, and how to transport the mix afterwards. The first time, the person working with us demonstrated, the second time allowing us to help and then the third time supervising while we did it on our own. After that third

While Bison



Figure 20: Imprints in The Hole, Finalized

time, the person teaching us left, allowing us to make the concrete on our own.

Once the concrete was mixed, it was shoveled into the molds for the walls. Rather than using regular molds, they opted to pour the concrete against old roofing panels, which gave the walls different textures. In addition, they placed old, unused objects against the concrete, such as a teapot and a mask, to make indents in the substance. These objects were mostly scavenged from abandoned houses, and the Bison team was more than excited to give them new life.

One of our team members, Angie, participated in the indentation process. She created a design of a tree from sticks, then staple-gunned the design onto a pair of wooden boards. Then, these boards were propped up with the rest of the walls, with the design facing in. When the concrete was poured over the design, it left an indentation of a tree in the wall, which can be seen in figure 8.

## 5. Exhibition

Our team attended the an exhibition put on by Simon Phan, Cécile Ngọc Suong Perdu, and Dương Gia Hiểu, the 3 Vietnamese artists that we met. The theme of the exhibition was “Nest”, and how, over time, a person’s home and social group take on aspects of that person. Each had their own unique exhibit displaying the art they created at Bison. Simon and Cécile had their pieces shown in the art gallery, while Hiểu set up his sculptures in a room across from the AIR.

### 5.1 Simon Phan

Simon’s piece was made up of multiple digital designs based around Bison and the wider Kobe area. First, he made individual prints based off of designs he saw in the city, such as signs, trellises, and sewer grates. Then, he took small portions and aspects from these designs, making

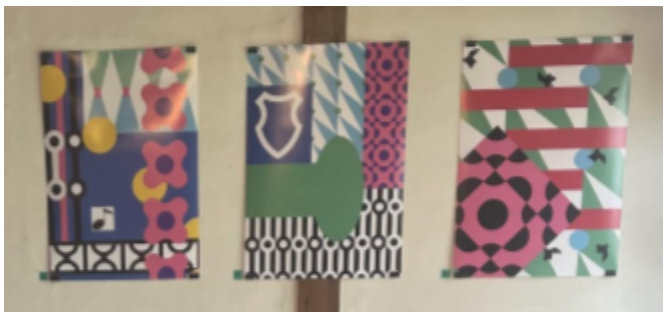


Figure 21: Simon Phan’s Exhibition, *Nest*

them into icons. He used these icons in a series of 3 works that each represented a different aspect of Bison. The first showed Bison and its environment, the second told the story of the main office and those who visit it, and the third reflected the process of renovating an abandoned house. In addition,

he cut up small versions of these icons, allowing people to come to ebay and add them to a large piece of paper he had set on the floor.

## 5.2 Cécile Ngọc Strong Perdu

Cecile's exhibition was a reading nook she installed into a part of the gallery. Her exhibition was inspired by the idea of ads and posters being placed over one another in large cities. Over time, these walls grow fatter, growing with the history of the area. However, if one stripped back these walls, they would find a story. She covered a wall of the nook with pictures and posters, including several areas for people to write about what makes something a "nest" for people, among other prompts. In addition, she encouraged people to add their own art pieces, over time allowing the area to become more personal.

In addition, she made personalized curtains for her nook out of paper. She started by



Figure 22: Cecil in Her Exhibition, "The Nest"

making prints of the floor of the tea house with pink and orange markers, then cut them up into strips. Afterwards, she hung these strips up in a square around the seating area, allowing it to be slightly closed off from the rest of the room. As this corner of the gallery was not being used, she opted to make this a permanent installation, giving the Bison community a cozy reading nook.

## 5.3 Dương Gia Hiểu

Hiểu's exhibition was a series of usable sculptures in the form of seats and lamps. He made these sculptures out of discarded materials he found around Kobe, cutting, nailing, and roping them together into new forms. When he was presenting, he noted that there is a lot of waste in Japan, just like in Vietnam. By giving these pieces of trash new life, he is demonstrating how everything has more than one use. He also encouraged people to sit on the art pieces, emphasizing that they were both aesthetic and usable.

## 6. Website Development

In order to display what we learned at our time in Bison, we decided to make a digital scrapbook. We chose this medium as our experience focused less on data and numbers and more on documenting and telling the stories of our experiences at Bison.

The website consisted of a few main parts, including an explanation of why we were in Bison, a recapping of our experiences, and a look into the figures we met. The opening page begins with a brief project overview, information on Bison, and a summary of the program that brought us to Bison. Due to the uniqueness of WPI and its programs, many people are not familiar with this type of work. As most schools do not conduct research to this scale, it was imperative to explain this to anyone visiting the site.

Following this explanation was a recounting of our experiences that delved into our takeaways from the experience. The sections are split up into one per group member, each with their own unique aspects. One contains a coded game, others contain articles, but each is personalized to reflect the impact Bison had on us. Since each of us chose to focus on a different aspect of the community, each section remains unique and offers not just the experience themselves but our impressions and takeaways. We each picked out multiple experiences that resonated with us on a deeper level, then discussed how they did so.

Our group was not only impacted by the events we experienced at Bison, but also the people we met. The people who we felt the most influenced by are highlighted in the “People” section of our website. Among those highlighted are village residents, collaborators and even fellow international residents who were also visiting for a short time. Each of them contributed in different ways whether that be helping us understand the logistics of Bison to just being friendly to us. We included a brief story overview of each of them next to their pictures as well.

The final section of the website is a gallery of pictures. These pictures were taken throughout our time in Bison and display the views, the work processes, and the community. The goal was to allow the viewer to see the village through our experiences. We hoped to create a website that would allow the viewer, if they hadn’t been to the village, to feel connected to Bison.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

When we initially came to Kyoto, we intended to approach our project from the four different interest categories that were the foundation of our methods. These being logistics and architecture, social, cultural, and art. However, as we continued to become more and more integrated into the Bison community, it became more obvious that restricting ourselves to these four categories was preventing us from authentically sharing its narrative. What became more apparent were the key aspects of Bison that have made it what it is today. These being freedom, creativity, sustainability, and community. With these four takeaways in mind, we hope to more accurately retell some of the vast and varied stories present in the Bison community.

### 5.2 Freedom

Freedom in the Bison community differs from how we, as Americans, would typically view it. Americans see freedom as being a very individualist concept, and use it as a means to distinguish a person from the community around them. This leads to a much more self-centered perspective on freedom, and a lack of care and awareness of their impact on others. The combination of these factors creates an implicit understanding that it's okay for an individual to prioritize their success or gain over other people's, occasionally putting others down in the process of achieving that measurable gain.

The Bison community, however, practices a kind of freedom that's much more collectivist in nature. According to our sponsor, Nori, most people see their peers in the community as family, as opposed to just coworkers or neighbors. While each individual member of this family is encouraged to seek their own personal fulfillment, that individual has an understanding that their actions will impact the other people around them, and that they should try to do so positively as opposed to negatively. There's an implicit, preexisting desire to benefit not just one person, but lift up the others around them.

Much of this emphasis on a collective form of freedom comes from the intersection of Japan's collectivist culture and Nishimura-san's own personal philosophy on life. Even on an ideological level, Nishimura-san himself doesn't want to pin himself down to one specific idea of what's important or right because he believes that it will limit his options and restrict his own

growth (Appendix A). Instead, he chooses to emphasize freedom because he values having options, and approaching things from a non-linear, fluid perspective. This is a large part of why he's made DIY renovation his career: It provides him the freedom to not just choose how to conduct a project but also what to create from it. DIY enables him to learn through the process of doing, something that, to him, is a much more rewarding experience than a traditional approach to construction.

Nishimura-san has consistently applied this process throughout all of his projects, including the formation of Bison itself. At first, Bison wasn't intended to be the village it's become today. While Nishimura-san had been looking into some of the abandoned properties in the area, his original intention with the first house he purchased was to convert it into a space for him to live. However, during the renovation of the property, the owners of nearby abandoned and untouched houses noticed his love for renovation and restoring old buildings. Over time, Nishimura-san was able to buy these houses, until he had eventually acquired the 9 that make up the Bison village today. This sort of "just do it" attitude was so cemented into the Bison village that it's still a prevalent aspect of the community now. Nishimura-san wants people to be able to find the same fulfillment in life as he did in their work.

Because of Nishimura-san's process-based approach, working at Nishimura-gumi, and living at Bison, looks different with each day. Our sponsor, Nori, discussed how he wakes up feeling excited at the possibility of meeting new people, or being assigned to new projects. Even if he's working at the same worksites as the previous day, he understands that he'll probably learn something new. Because renovation is such a complex process, it's likely that he'll be able to try a new practice, or learn a new skill. And on top of that, he gets to see how this learning tangibly contributes to a project by watching these renovations unfold.

More importantly, due to Nishimura-san's belief in finding personal fulfillment, many of the policies at Bison have been designed to give people freedom and space to find their own satisfaction outside of work. Nishimura-san understands that many tradesmen in modern Japan work low-wage, passionless jobs in prefabricated housing factories. At the same time, Nishimura-san wants people to live without the added financial stress of money restricting their personal lives. In response to both of these factors, he's deliberately chosen to make certain things, like rent, extremely cheap. Rather than having to work full-time, 40-hour-a-week shifts,

residents of the Bison village are able to pay their monthly rent by working just 5 days with Nishimura-gumi.

Without the added pressure of financial obligations, individuals at the Bison village are provided a level of flexibility that most jobs can't offer. In turn, residents of the village get extra time to be able to pursue their own sources of fulfillment. Nori shared with us that he splits his work weeks roughly in half. He spends the first half conducting work with Nishimura-gumi, while the second half he spends renovating his own abandoned house in Himeji. He also shared that it wasn't uncommon for him to work a significant amount one month, and take more time off than normal the next month, entirely depending on his own personal interests during that time.

### 5.3 Creativity

Bison is a village of people who have decided to be guided by their passions. In a country where artistry and craftsmanship are no longer valued at the same level they once were, this community has banded together to serve as a place of freedom for creative, driven individuals. Despite many people's lack of prior experience in construction, the team is still happy to educate the workers while not expecting perfection.

Of course, while they aren't professionals, the members of Nishimura-gumi are still trying their best. "Everyone who is here is trying to get better," says Nori. This improvement mindset is from the idea of "perfection" prevalent in modern Japanese culture. While the people in Bison work hard, they get their satisfaction from the process rather than worrying about perfection.

This idea of enjoying the process is especially prevalent in the buildings created for Nishimura-gumi specifically. While the houses they are revitalizing for profit have a certain standard ascribed to them, people still find ways to enjoy their work and learn as they go. When it comes to the buildings in Bison, there are fewer restrictions, allowing the residents to build with creativity and fun in mind. "It kinda does feel like a big art project each time," says Nori when describing various building constructions. If someone on the team has an intriguing idea, they can pitch it and implement it into the project.

This creative freedom is a large part of Nishimura-gumi as a whole. Many people who come out to this area have a background in artistry or craftsmanship, which requires an open

mindset different from a salary worker's. Rather than accepting and sticking to rigid structures, they branch out, allowing themselves to try new things and make mistakes. This gives room for people to implement creativity even in construction projects.

The choice to actualize people's ideas with little planning beforehand is a large part of the Bison village. This idea is perfectly reflected when reviewing the conceptualization of "The Hole." Within the past few weeks, Nishimura-San had decided to dig a hole in the front of Bison without having a plan in mind for it (Results Section 4.4). By making a hole in the ground, they gave themselves a creative base to go off of, like an artist drawing from a simple shape or a writer using a prompt.

Once the idea of making a gazebo had been finalized, they went ahead with pouring the concrete walls. They saw an opportunity to make this area more interesting by imprinting objects into the concrete walls. When they were doing this, people were instructed to put items in places they thought "looked good." There was no oversight, no one asking for perfection. They simply thought it would be cool to have imprints on their walls, and were open to however people decided to implement that idea. The "just do it" mentality has served Bison well, allowing them to immerse themselves in creativity.

This idea is also prevalent in the rest of Bison. While we were there, the Bison village was preparing to host a new artist in one of the sharehouses. They did not have enough room, so they put up a new wall to section off space for a room. Being open to change allows their spaces to continually shift, letting the buildings become whatever they need at the moment. In addition, not defining the house to one singular shape allows creativity to flow constantly through the area.

This "just do it" mentality expands beyond those living there. Haiko's Artist in Residency (AIR) program brings people from around the world to stay in this community and implement this mindset into their artistic processes. This particular AIR program is unique in that it not only allows people to work in different areas of the world but also introduces these artists to an experimental project village. The artists who stay in Bison are welcomed into the community, spending their time working and exploring the wider Kobe area. They also gain inspiration from the community itself, both from its many artistic aspects and its unique environment. In addition, the residents can see the processes and art pieces of those visiting the village, influencing and



encouraging them in their own artwork. Through this cultural exchange, inspiration is generated for both the artists and the residents.

During our stay, Simon Phan and Cécile Ngoc Suong Perdu, two design artists from Vietnam, came to this community to experience their process. Simon quickly took to the “just do it” mindset. He noted that, for years now, he’s wanted to make a story with patterns. When he got to Bison, he just decided to do it. This allowed him to realize a creative passion he had long held, no longer restricted by over-thinking or worrying about the final product. In the end, he showed the story of Bison through 3 designs, displaying the community, the abandoned houses, and the wider Kobe area.

Our interaction with Cécile also sticks out as a critical point in our experience. While we intended to only talk with her, she eventually invited us to help with her exhibition. Even though we knew nothing about printmaking, she was happy to teach us. As we worked, we discussed her life and quickly got to know her. This interaction reflects how Bison takes in passionate people and helps them learn as they go. There is no expectation that what they make will be perfect or that they know what they are doing, just so long as they are ready to try their best.

Both of these artists struck out on their own at some point, taking the risk to work on their art and later develop private businesses. This is similar to how Nishimura-gumi went out on his own to forge a company of people developing and selling houses. These people did not go into art for profit; they followed their passions to develop something they loved. In the end, they were able to thrive, even growing their companies large enough that they were able to hire others to come and embrace their creativity as well. None of that would have been possible if these people followed “regular” paths.

Another thing these artists had in common was their desire to bring people joy through their artwork, which could be seen through their pieces. Cécile made her exhibition piece double as a cozy reading nook for people staying in Bison, utilizing a small space, personalized signs, and warm colors (Results Section 5.2). These components worked together specifically to generate joy and feelings of comfort in those using the space. In addition, by allowing people to leave their art and stories on the walls, she encouraged them to personalize it, making the space even more welcoming.

When thinking about it further, this exhibit reflects the community as a whole. It is a small area that welcomes everyone, encouraging them to come and leave their creative mark.

This village also makes people feel comfortable and inspires them to follow their passions and emotions. Simon speaks more on the emotional aspects of art. “I create just to create,” he said in our interview (Results Section 2.3). He then continued, discussing art as something he does for joy. Without being able to enjoy the act of creation, there’s little point in doing it. Instead, people should focus on what brings them joy, whether that pleases others or not. “At the end of the day, you need to reflect,” he said. “Which process gives you the most joy? I think then you have all the information you need to design.”

The idea of enjoying yourself in the project leads to the other thing we saw constantly popping up in our interviews: the process-based mindset. This means that, rather than focusing on the end goal, people can focus on their experiences and find meaning through them. Life is not about the end goals and items attributed to someone’s name. It is about living. This does not mean you do nothing but rather encourages people to appreciate the experience of creating. Not only does this enrich life, but it can also enhance a person’s work by inspiring them and keeping them from burning out.

Each artist saw this first-hand with their time in Bison. Because they had little time to work, they realized the creative process was more important than the pieces they created. When talking to Simon, he said Bison taught him to “go with the flow” and that he “will keep practicing the way (he) work(s) here to bring it back to Ho Chi Minh.”

Cécile had a slightly different take on this idea. She heavily agreed with the process-based mindset because, in her opinion, the process is what makes something “art.” In her definition, she noted that art is simply something a person loves that, over time, they develop their own process for. This description fits in perfectly with Bison, as its residents not only make traditional artwork but have made construction its own form of art. Whether it be plastering, painting, or concrete pouring, they have formed them into expressions of creativity. Thus, it would make perfect sense why everything in Bison is about the process: it allows a space for creativity.

## 5.4 Sustainability

Sustainability is another key characteristic of the Bison community. Throughout our time at Bison, there was a common theme of a deep reverence for nature. They believe that we coexist with nature and should embrace this coexistence. During one of our first visits to Bison, we found a pamphlet which provided an artistic map of the Bison community, in addition to an overview of Nishimura-san's beliefs on nature. He stressed that he didn't want people to view the relationship between humans and nature as a competition, but as a form of coexistence.

Nishimura-san later compounded this perspective in our interview, when he expressed that our home is as much ours as its nature's. Termites burrowing into wood, or a bird making a nest, is just like humans building a home. However, if it came down to it, Nishimura-san believes that in a competition with nature, he wants to lose. By putting this concept into practice, Nishimura-san has created a community which values sustainability, as well as a sustainable approach to construction.

The practice of rebuilding abandoned homes is inherently sustainable. Rather than contributing to the growing housing problem in Japan, Nishimura-san and his company view these akiya as materials, just like wood, or stone. By viewing the growing supply of abandoned houses as materials, Nishimura-san shifts the perspective on the issue. With this newly-adopted mentality, the abandoned houses provide a solution to themselves; one that encourages redevelopment instead of outright demolition. In turn, by breathing new life into these abandoned properties, Nishimura-gumi's employees directly counteract the problem, in addition to providing someone with an affordable house to live in.

Nishimura-gumi's commitment to sustainability is extended into the actual process of renovating these abandoned houses. In today's modern, capitalist society, the overconsumption of materials, as well as the overproduction of goods, have become commonplace. Rather than contributing to this issue, Nishimura-gumi often conducts renovations using materials salvaged from either that house, or his other projects. Another common location for sourcing material are model apartment buildings. These rooms contain insulation and glass which are often thrown away. By making consistent use of reclaimed wood and glass, Nishimura-gumi makes the process of renovating an abandoned house not only sustainable, but also cost-effective.

Other times, Nishimura-gumi draws from traditional Japanese construction practices because they are both more sustainable and aesthetically-pleasing. During our time in Kobe, we

worked with Nishimura-gumi on a series of their ongoing construction projects. One of the things we did on these worksites involved plastering walls with materials made of dirt, water, straw, and a small amount of adhesive. When overlaid onto plaster panels, which are commonly-used in the construction of modern, prefabricated houses, this dirt-based plaster provides additional insulative properties to a space. By increasing temperature regulation, energy costs are kept low during periods of extreme heat or cold. At the same time, Nori told us that this sort of down-to-earth aesthetic is something that Nishimura-san and his employees enjoy.

The use of materials with a natural aesthetic is a core aspect of spiritual sustainability, an idea which embraces connecting human structures with the environment around them. In the Bison village, for example, there are multiple buildings which feature recycled-glass walls and roofs, allowing in natural light, in addition to a view of the outside world. In some cases, construction has been used to literally support the ecosystem in Bison, such as the below example of an archway outside of the Bison gallery. The design of the archway not only serves as a decoration for a key area in the community, but also as a way to connect the human process of construction with the natural world.

Bison's approach to sustainability is a reminder that there is more than one way to approach environmental consciousness. In America, we see sustainability as a measure of water efficiency, energy consumption, overall carbon footprint, and a plethora of other numerical measurements. At Bison, however, Nishimura-san integrates a uniquely human aspect to it. Each material that goes into a renovated akiya has its own unique origin, purpose, and story associated with it. At the same time, building spaces with features that emphasize spiritual sustainability reminds their occupants to coexist with nature throughout their daily lives.

## 5.5 Community

As freedom, creativity and sustainability come together they create one of the strongest foundations for the community of Bison. This community becomes so strong that many would consider it a family. As people with common goals and motivations come together they are able to foster improvements not only for themselves but for others too. As this sentiment gains traction, it grows exponentially gathering people from all over to join.

Internally Bison does both small- and large-scale events to facilitate connections between people. One of the most powerful and easiest examples of this is simply holding free lunches everyday for the workers. Not only does this take away the stress of paying for a meal, it also provides a sense of bonding. Sharing a meal with others, especially across cultures, is one of the most powerful and useful ways to connect them. Passing food to each other, complimenting the chef, and asking questions almost always initiate meaningful conversation. In that lies the beauty of this community. Just like the houses, which each have stories they want to keep intact, traditions like these ensure the people who have stories of their own have a place where they can share them and be themselves.

Here people can begin to pursue their passions while having the support of the people they were forming connections with. Bison has become the home for many different passions from carpentry to cooking. This was possible because they felt like they could achieve it there. The spaces of Bison are meant to be able to adapt to the needs of its residents, whatever those needs may be, enforcing the “just do it” mentality with community backing. People could come to Bison for a plethora of reasons from finding a place where their philosophy can thrive to simply looking for a fun part time job. They will always find a way to support and incorporate them regardless of the frame of mind they walk in with.

The community has built a work culture that has grown to be larger than just their job. As these people spend so much time as friends outside of work the lines of what is work begins to blur. It begins to feel as if they are working with close friends, making work more enjoyable, easier, and faster for everyone involved. Coupled with the lack of money, working only a few days a week they could even begin to feel like they are simply doing someone else a favor. Our sponsor Nori said that he doesn't feel like it is a real job anymore just because of how close everyone has become to one another. Compared to American work culture, which focuses on the company and finishing goals, they emphasize the person and project at hand. American workers typically aren't able to form such deep connections with each other, leading to isolation and the term “company family” being viewed as a negative. However, with Bison there is no bad connotation, the sentiment is genuine.

As word of the community and how the residents live spreads, more and more people are drawn to the community. People from all over the prefecture have been drawn to the community so they can learn and find a space where they are free to do it. Even though Bison is inherently

unique when compared to the rest of Japan, they always welcome those who wish to join them. The events that they hold in and around the village are open to anyone who has the drive to learn, and people from across Kobe, Himeji, Osaka and more take advantage of this. Regardless of your background and prior experience all that they ask is that people try their best. Even if you fail they are there to help you try again until you get it. If anything, failure is encouraged because most of the participants of these workshops are there for their first time. This means that everyone is in the same boat, with the same set of skills, so failure is completely ok. When someone does, there are people there to pick them back up and try again with them.

On a larger scale, Bison invites artists through the AIR program to facilitate cultural exchange so both parties can learn from each other. They present them with the mentality of doing whatever feels right to you and to embrace the flow of the village which everyone inevitably does. From Vietnamese artists to our group, they bring people together from around the globe to share perspectives. The Bison community is the culmination of years upon years of progress. Over time, Nishimura-sans's original home has become the home for many people each with their own stories. As more people come to join, they adopt and spread this mentality. The hope is that the Bison's mentality passes on through those who visit and into the rest of Japan.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The residents of Bison have freedom to create what they want. Their canvas is community, the brushes are their reused materials, and each resident acts as a painter, continually changing and breathing new life into the village. Just as a piece of artwork can't be perfectly copied by another, this community cannot be mimicked perfectly. Rather, other creators can be influenced by this community, taking the parts that inspire them and applying them to their own projects. As for Bison, it will continue to be worked on by those who inhabit it. Likely, it will never be complete, but it is not a work that is purely made to be displayed. They are not working towards an end goal or a finished community. Rather, they are enjoying the art of the process.

## Chapter 6: Roadblocks and Recommendations

### 6.1 Introduction

Over the course of our project, we faced a series of roadblocks, each of which provided a unique challenge that we had to overcome. Though they didn't prevent us from being able to complete our project, or its objectives, they did necessitate being able to work fluidly, adapt to new situations, and find solutions to problems that we hadn't anticipated in our limitations section. In addition to this, we've drafted a series of recommendations for future projects at the Bison village. These recommendations are designed to prevent students from future IQP teams from being hindered by these same roadblocks, and encourage them that, even in the face of project-altering circumstances, it is possible to find a solution and have a fulfilling experience at the Kyoto, Japan project center.

### 6.2 Roadblocks

Upon arriving at the Bison Village, we learned that our work style and theirs were completely at odds. The WPI work process is a goal-oriented style focusing on creating a finish line with goals and a hard-set final product. On the other hand, there was a very process-oriented approach within the village so they wanted us to not focus on the deliverable and go with the flow. This mentality led our group to be uncertain about what avenue we should pursue and caused us to follow several different avenues. Subsequently, this delayed our final product since it took longer to formulate an image of what we should pursue. To have a clearer picture of an end goal that would align with the IQP style, we would have required two extra weeks to work on our website and other deliverables.

Alongside this, the members of the village were unaware of the purpose of our visit, which was not something we knew until near the end of the project. If the residents were more aware of our reason for being there, we could have adjusted ourselves better and more easily made progress. The village's manager only realized precisely why we were there on our final day in the area. If she had known sooner, she would have been able to help us facilitate discussion more easily. We believe this confusion was due to the go-with-the-flow attitude they implement, as no one had been briefed on our presence. To this end, there was much time wasted as we looked for things to do and projects to participate in. Given more planning, we could have had

more discussions with people, been able to schedule more interviews, and likely would have had a richer paper.

A final roadblock that we felt we encountered was the price of transportation. At times our group felt stressed about the amount we would have to spend on travel to our project sites. The train tickets to and from Kobe along with the bus fare required to arrive at the different sites added up quickly. However, we feel like we would miss out if we did not make it to these sites. Ultimately, we all decided the workshops were too important to miss, and while it was worth the price, it still added unexpected stress and expense to our visit.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Our biggest disclaimer is that this project is not possible if time is not spent in the village. While we initially thought that there would be work that could be done remotely we quickly found it is not possible. There needs to be a personal connection with people and this is not achievable over constant video calls.

Alongside this, even if it does go against the ideas of Bison, there needs to be structure and understanding of our goals. We needed to create a clear path of intent and reason for us being there as soon we got there. We assumed that everyone knew about our purpose for being there but we only found out this was not the case within the last few weeks. So we recommend having a sit down talk with the leads of this project in the future on the group's focus and thoughts. All of the current leads of the project were more than willing to help us in any way that they could so if it was established earlier we likely would have had a richer and more targeted project experience.

Finally picking one of the four main analysis topics is likely the best option for another team to be able to work optimally. If each member of the group is focusing on the same thing they will be able to narrow scope, do more focused things and ultimately have an easier time writing. We chose these four aspects not just because we had interest in them but also because they hold the most promise for full projects.



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Collectively, we agree that our IQP was an overall success. But, that success didn't come in the way that we had originally envisioned it. Prior to arriving in the Bison village, we had a very different approach to our work. In true WPI fashion, we were very focused on having a clear end goal, creating progress-oriented checkpoints, and developing rigid, well-planned methods to achieve them. However, after our first meeting with our sponsor, and our first visit to the Bison village, we became aware of the fact that this wasn't going to work. Because of the Bison community's very fluid approach to work, laying out a highly-structured and clearly-defined plan would have limited our ability to experience it to the fullest extent. In addition to this, when we arrived in the Bison community, it became clear that the "problems", and some philosophical overtones that we were expecting to encounter, simply were not there.

The combination of these two factors necessitated shifting our focus to being able to adopt this fluid work process in our own project. Instead, we were able to explore our own individual areas of interest, important factors in our personal backgrounds that attracted us to our project in the first place. As a result, we began to integrate with the Bison community, adopting its values into our own lives, and learning how to see things from the perspective of the people we had set out to learn from in the first place.

Much like Bison, our project went from a traditional assignment to a blank canvas, similar to the Bison village itself. While this was initially intimidating, especially for students who haven't undertaken a social sciences research project, let alone traveled to Japan, our project grew to become even more valuable than it would've been had we stuck to practices from our limited world view. And much like the artists and craftsmen, who have each imprinted their own highly personal contributions onto the village, we did the same to our IQP. Our methods and our analysis became extensions of ourselves, which deepened our connection to the work we were doing. More importantly, Bison became a home to us as much as it was to its current residents. And though we may not occupy space there physically, it will forever be present in our minds as one of our most unique and significant experiences that we've had.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Interview Information

#### Nishimura Interview

##### Logistics

1. Approximate cost of Bison Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The whole village was approximately \$133,000</li> </ul>
2. Acquiring Properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Akiya are just given to Nishimura by people who know him or have heard of him. He gets about 2 properties a month this way.</li> <li>● After acquiring the first property within Bison the other nearby homeowners offered to sell their houses to him</li> </ul>
3. Reusing Trash Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● He gets used trash insulation from other buildings</li> <li>● Used materials from model rooms made for apartment complexes. Lots of glass and insulation</li> </ul>
4. Losing to Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Works in deference to nature             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Termites building a home in wood is similar to people building a home                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ It's not a matter of kill termites and remove them, it's "let's build together"</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● If humans aren't using it, and nature is using it, that's okay</li> <li>● Most materials in Japanese architecture (traditional) break down quicker and promote the cycle of nature</li> </ul>
5. Haioku Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Haioku Group is used to feed money to Nishimura-gumi</li> <li>● Was established out of financial need by Nishimura-san</li> <li>● Also manages hotels like Port Bicycle, as well as other properties in Shin-Kob and Awayi Island</li> </ul>

**Art**

1. What is art?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Isn't 100% sure what art is, but he wants to make spaces that excite people, and likes when people find interest in his spaces</li> <li>● If people see something and react to it and make it interesting that's cool. He wants to make spaces that excite people</li> </ul>
2. Gallery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A gallery for Nishimura-san is a place for nothing</li> <li>● Rui arrived before the gallery was built, and suggested building one, so they decided it was a gallery!</li> </ul>

**Social**

1. Nishimura Realization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● During his first project, he saw the environment of the project, including the DIY project and working with nature, and he fell in love with it</li> </ul>
2. Nishimura Past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nishimura-san studied architecture in art school</li> <li>● As a kid, he helped his father remodel abandoned houses he bought</li> <li>● When he was a kid he saw that you have the freedom to do whatever the hell you want.</li> <li>●</li> </ul>
3. Drive for DIY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Most people don't like DIY. It is easier to buy completed goods or hire someone else to do it.</li> <li>● Nishimura-Gumi is the opposite of interest in Japan. He's found lots of carpenters that have come to him</li> </ul>



## Culture

1. Craftsman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Back in the 50's and 60's, there was a large amount of craftsmen</li> <li>● Craftsmen and specialists used to be more respected</li> <li>● Now, many houses are pre-fabricated             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Modular home building is shitty. There's no passion behind it.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
2. Japanese Traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Old Japanese architecture all eventually goes back to nature. Wood, sand, bamboo, dirt. It deteriorates. The return to nature is much quicker.</li> </ul>
3. Perfectionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● This could either be due to people's obsession with perfection or the fact they simply don't want to do it.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In reference to DIY</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Miyako Interview

### Social

1. Before Nishimura-gumi/Haioku	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Originally from Okayama Prefecture</li> <li>● Previously worked managing fine art and theater</li> <li>● Rented her house personally as a sharehouse, and realized she could make it a bigger project when she met Nishimura-san</li> </ul>
2. Bison's Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bison and Haioku-group are here for people who are frustrated with society and want a space for themselves</li> </ul>
3. Her Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Enjoys working with people, and making them happy, and so she wants to keep supporting people in that and helping them</li> </ul>

**Culture**

1. Limitations of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thinks there are a lot of people who want to work in a group environment, but can't, or can't do what they want because of societal limitations</li></ul>
2. Ikigai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• However, in coming to Bison to practice their work and rest, they found a home that they want to be a part of and give back to<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ A continuum of not sacrificing one aspect of life for another</li></ul></li></ul>

## Appendix B: Example Interview Guide for Locals in the Bison Community

Question Topics	Example Questions
Art/Traditional Craft	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) What kind of art do you make/do?</li> <li>2) Why did you decide to move here?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What events in your life led you here?</li> </ol> </li> <li>3) How has living here aided your artistic projects?</li> <li>4) What does day-to-day life look like for you?</li> <li>5) What were you doing before this?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Why did you decide to change?</li> </ol> </li> <li>6) What attracted you to the Bison community?</li> </ol>
Social	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Why did you choose the career path you are in?</li> <li>2) How does life here compare to your life prior to living here?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Was it a difficult transition?</li> <li>b) What aspects made things difficult? (i.e. monetary, social, etc)</li> </ol> </li> <li>3) Is there unfairness in the normal work force?</li> <li>4) What does your ideal lifestyle look like?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Are you doing anything to move towards it?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Architecture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) How many revitalization projects are you currently working on?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) How many have you completed?</li> <li>b) How long does the typical project take to complete?</li> </ol> </li> <li>2) Are projects expenses?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Are grants available</li> </ol> </li> <li>3) What point does this project have for you other than profit?</li> <li>4) How are materials sourced for these projects?</li> <li>5) Is much labor required to construct these sites?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What labor is available</li> </ol> </li> <li>6) How did you come to decide to work on this community as a whole?</li> </ol>

## Appendix C: Website Link

Website Link: <https://sites.google.com/view/wpi-bisonscrapbook/home>



**Bison Scrapbook** Home What's IQP? Experiences People Gallery

# WPI @ Bison



## Project Overview

We are a team of four students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), a STEM university in Worcester, MA, United States of America. In late October, 2023, as a part of our school's [Interdisciplinary Qualifying Project \(IQP\)](#), we traveled to Japan. Our primary goal for our project was investigating and understanding a multitude of factors about the Bison village in Kobe, Hyogo Ward, Japan.

Each of the 4 members of our team has a unique specialization related to our fields of study, as well as our own individual

## Appendix D: Example Consent Form for Bison Locals

Consent agreement for participation in a Research Study

### Researchers and Contact Information:

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Ethan Gomes: Email: [epgomes@wpi.edu](mailto:epgomes@wpi.edu) | Phone +1 (508) 542-6199

Kolby Robertson: Email: [karobertson@wpi.edu](mailto:karobertson@wpi.edu) | Phone +1 (908) 268 5732

**Purpose:** The purpose of this interview is to understand the stories of community members in the Bison community

**Procedures:** This interview will ask you to reflect on your craft, experience in the Bison community, and experiences leading up to that point, up to your discretion. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes and will be audio-recorded. This interview is voluntary and may be stopped at any time. You may choose to skip or not answer any of the questions up to your discretion. Please feel free to ask any questions you have about the interview before we begin

**Usage and Record Keeping:** This research will be published both in the form of a research paper and a documentary. This information will be shared with the researchers listed at the top of the document. The presentation of the data obtained from this interview will not identify you unless you agree.

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read the information above and wish to participate in this interview.

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Researcher's name & signature Date

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Interviewee's name & signature Date

**Video Taping Subsection:** By signing below, you agree for your interview to be videotaped and consent to portions of that video to appear in a documentary. You can request that video to be deleted at any time, including up to two weeks after the video has been taken by contacting the researchers listed on this form.