

## A Brief Walk Through Kamagasaki - 2024/04/27

Our group started the day by venturing down what seemed like an ordinary Osaka road between Dobutsu-en-mae Metro and Shin-imamiya JR station; the usual convoluted overhead cabling, numerous pachinko parlors and the odd cramped takoyaki restaurant or tachi-nomi bar, nothing new. This was until our guide directed our gaze to the unfamiliar price tags of otherwise familiar things: lodging for one night, including aircon, wifi and shower: 1400 yen; a can of near-expired coffee from a vending machine: 50 yen. Suddenly, the street fell into place and we now saw everything through a new lens. Shops selling construction gear and uniforms appear, people walking along with daypacks stroll past and a large red sign on the sign corner is pointed out: *o-tsutome kyou mo ichinichi, go-kurousan*, “Thank you again for your day's service”. These things go unnoticed by the tourist droves, unaware, without guidance. Unbeknownst, we had entered Kamagasaki, Airin Chiku.



Figure 1: A post at the end of Kishu-suji road bearing a sign that reads “Thank you again for your day's service”, erected in support of creating a welcoming environment to day labourers

Whilst Kamagasaki has existed since the Edo period, we are taught that it was only when the Osaka city governors forced the movement of day-labourers from their *doya* (lodgings) in central Osaka in the early 20th century that the day-labourer town of today came to exist. Indeed, the

lodgings of the workers have been the backbone of this community and have evolved with it. Starting with *kichin-yado*, *doya* made of wood, this main form of lodging developed into *kani-shukuhakujo*, lit., simple lodging, a non-wooden but nonetheless 'traditional'. However, this style is slowly disappearing for the more preferable 'guesthouse' and 'business hotel' style, essentially indistinguishable from regular cheap accommodation found elsewhere, aside from their room size, quality and price. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the area is slowly becoming gentrified by more fashionable tourism focused hotels and resorts but, when questioned, our guide claims that this is having little influence on the lifestyles and wellbeing of local residents and workers. In fact, the growth of foreign investment fueling this supposedly only validates the potential that this area has.

We continue towards the towering concrete mass that is the bridge holding the tracks into Shin-Imamiya station. The pavement opens up but is immediately swallowed by the river of rubbish, washing machines, carpets and bicycles. This is the Airin Labour Welfare Centre; closed in 2019 by Osaka City, former residents and onlookers continue to this day to occupy and barricade its perimeter in order to prevent its demolition. For some, it is heritage and memory and one can see scribbled signs blaming the project for being *omotenashi*, "wasteful". Some have even set up makeshift tents to occupy during their free time to ensure the site remains untouched. Legal trials are being conducted but this will undoubtedly be a long and complex process involving many stakeholders.

The temporary replacement for this once packed historical building sits directly below the aforementioned Shin-Imamiya Station bridge. Inside one can see an array of support facilities: a general help desk including mail collection services, a reception for national health insurance assistance, billboards for jobs and free training, lists for missing people, free accommodation options for those in need, and even a machine for measuring blood pressure. The list goes on and on. A noticeable feature is that, weaving between the charity workers donning "jesus loves you" hi-vis jackets, the workers themselves are all elderly. Indeed, our guide goes on to say how the place became saturated by the 'baby-boomer' generation in the wake of the 1990s bubble burst in Japan, and once again following the 2008 Lehman's crisis. Furthermore, the lack of the young generation's presence can be attributed to the arrival of the internet; it is much easier for young people to find employment online and perhaps also find it preferable to remain 'hidden' and free of stigmatism.

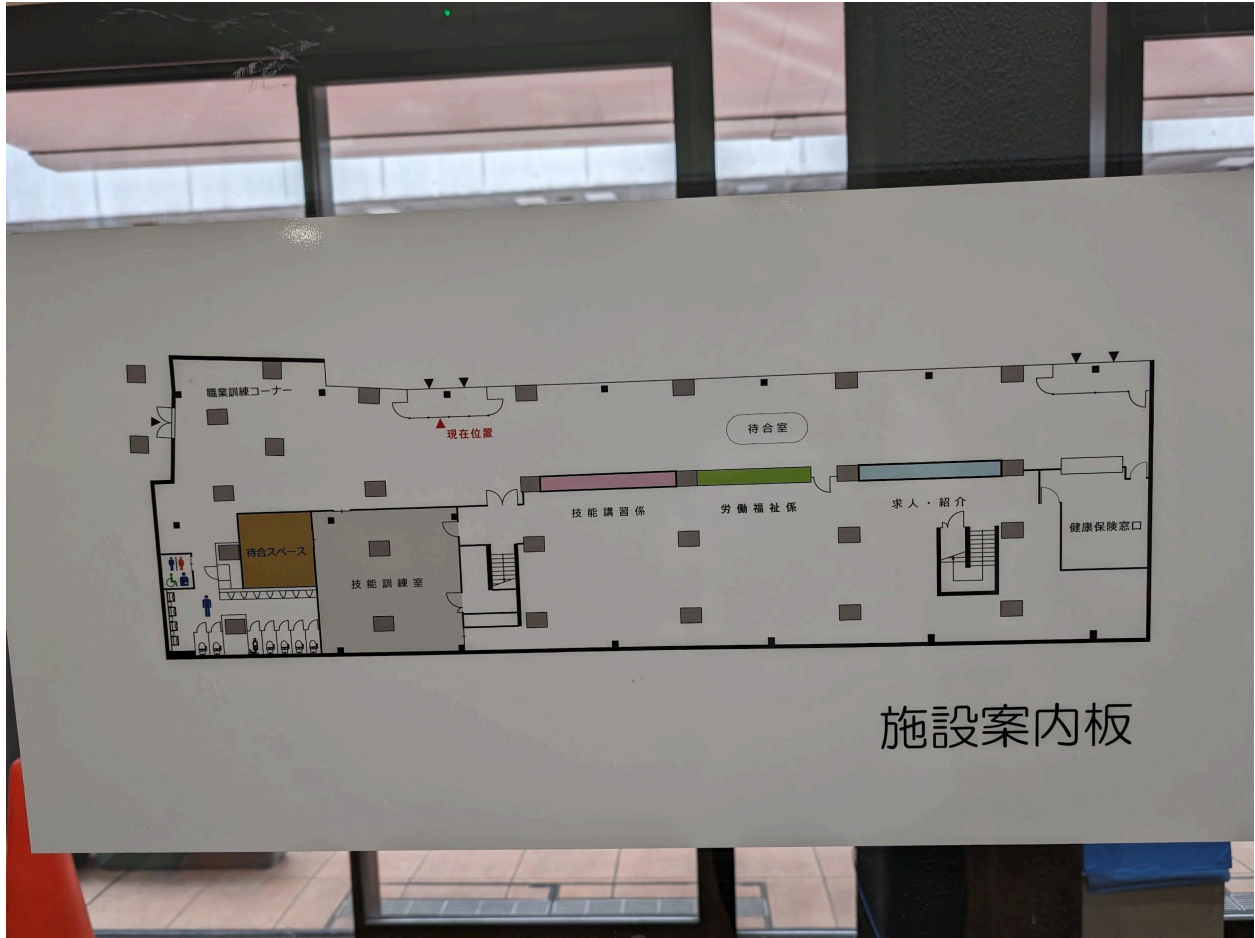


Figure 1: A map of the replacement welfare centre detailing the various facilities available



Figure 2: A board displaying the various type of technical training offered by the centre

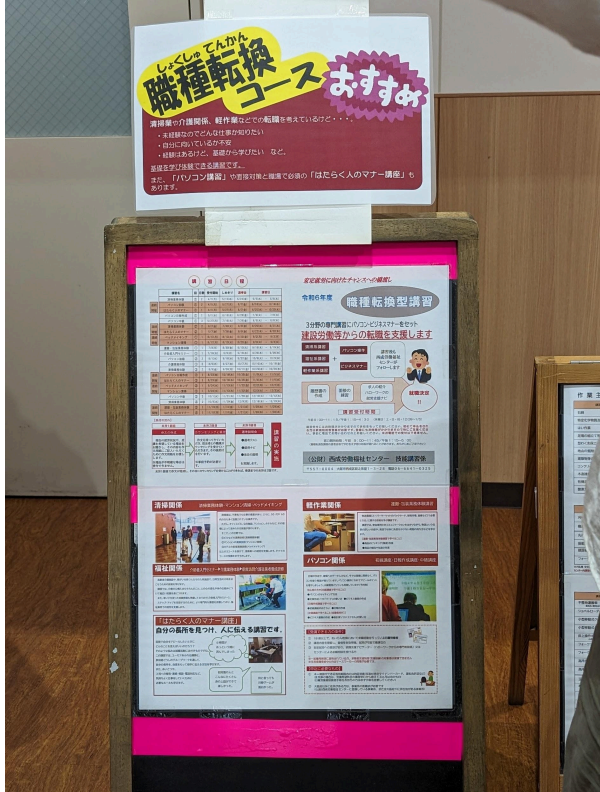


Figure 3: A board offering courses to change one's profession. Bed-makers/hotel cleaners are of particular high demand due to the aforementioned growth of the hotel industry in the area

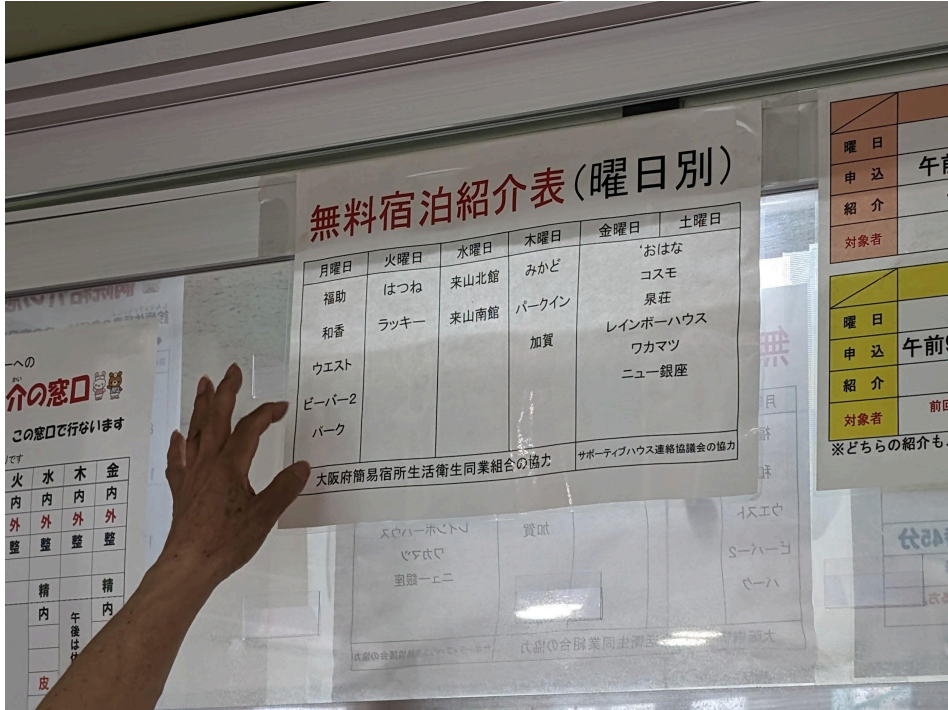


Figure 4: Details for which hotels offer free accomodation on which days of the week for those in need

Next, we proceed around the corner, equip masks, sanitise hands and enter the lodging for the homeless. We are encountered by tens of spotless beds and tens more faces buried into cup-ramen bowls. The cleanliness and hygiene of the place is outstanding; far greater than even your average hostel. The toilets are pristine and are located next to free washing machines and soap-included showers. Our guide outlines the importance of clean facilities and the freedom to wash one's clothes and body: "dignity" he says this leads to. This gives the worker and homeless individual the positive, *mae-muki*, attitude to force their way out of precarity. We question whether or not this element is quintessentially 'Japanese'. But, nonetheless, I have not seen and nor would expect such optimal conditions in my home country of the UK. During the COVID-19 pandemic, only 28 cases of COVID-19 infections were recorded in the shelter, an infection to population rate lower than almost anywhere else in Osaka. Did social separation and isolation lead to this? Or was it the population's typically spacious outdoor working environment?



Figure 5: Bedding in the shelter for homeless individuals



Figure 6: Free washing machines and showers in the shelter, complete with detergent and soaps



Figure 7: Toilet facilities in the shelter, a demonstration for the attention to cleanliness

After viewing some box-basic two by three meter (three tatami) hotel *doya* rooms in a separate building, we had the opportunity to converse with some previously homeless Kamagasaki residents. They express their hardest times- being homeless with ceaseless hunger- and their best time- now. Their jovial spirit carries the room into smiles, forcing me to ponder if hardship translates to a metered and liberated lifeview. One speaks of alcohol and gambling addiction and another, rejection from their family due to association with the stigmatised neighbourhood. It is not surprising that this place is shunned by the masses. A man walking whilst peeing on the street, others unkempt or bare foot or both, people shouting, argueing, heckling. Though benign, many gave me, a white British man, intense glares. Was I really welcome?

Those who simply come to stare, or those who make judgements from internet articles and hearsay fail to see the efforts of the institutions, the difficulties and their achievements; they fail to see the inhabitants for what they are: individuals within whom artistic expression and community driven selflessness abound. Haiku, murals, street-performing and fashion are one with the Kamagasaki lifestyle; the place becomes synonymous with self-discovery, -exploration and thus -respect. Bravery is ubiquitous here, in a world beneath stigmatic tarring where people instinctively collectivise around welfare institutions for the prospects of freedom and dignity. How can and why do we disparage victims of economic workings beyond their control?