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## Evoking a shifting sense of place in one museum following the 3/11 tsunami in Japan

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### ABSTRACT

On March 11, 2011, Japan experienced the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in that country. A coastal port and fishing city in Miyagi Prefecture, Kesenuma was one of the hardest hit population centers, the waves having destroyed much of the city's commercial core and nearly all of its low coastal neighborhoods. The wave's destruction highlighted certain elements of the city's sense of place and forever changed others. I explore how the Kesenuma Shark Museum reflects ways in which the 3/11 disaster has simultaneously maintained and altered Kesenuma as a place. I analyze the spatiality of the museum and how its narrative evokes a sense of place in the broader community. The case of the Shark Museum is one example of how scholars can use museums to examine sense of place and how it has been impacted by natural disasters. This work represents a unique contribution to cultural geography inquiry into the spatiality of museums, museum experiences, and how such spaces reflect an interaction between people and place.

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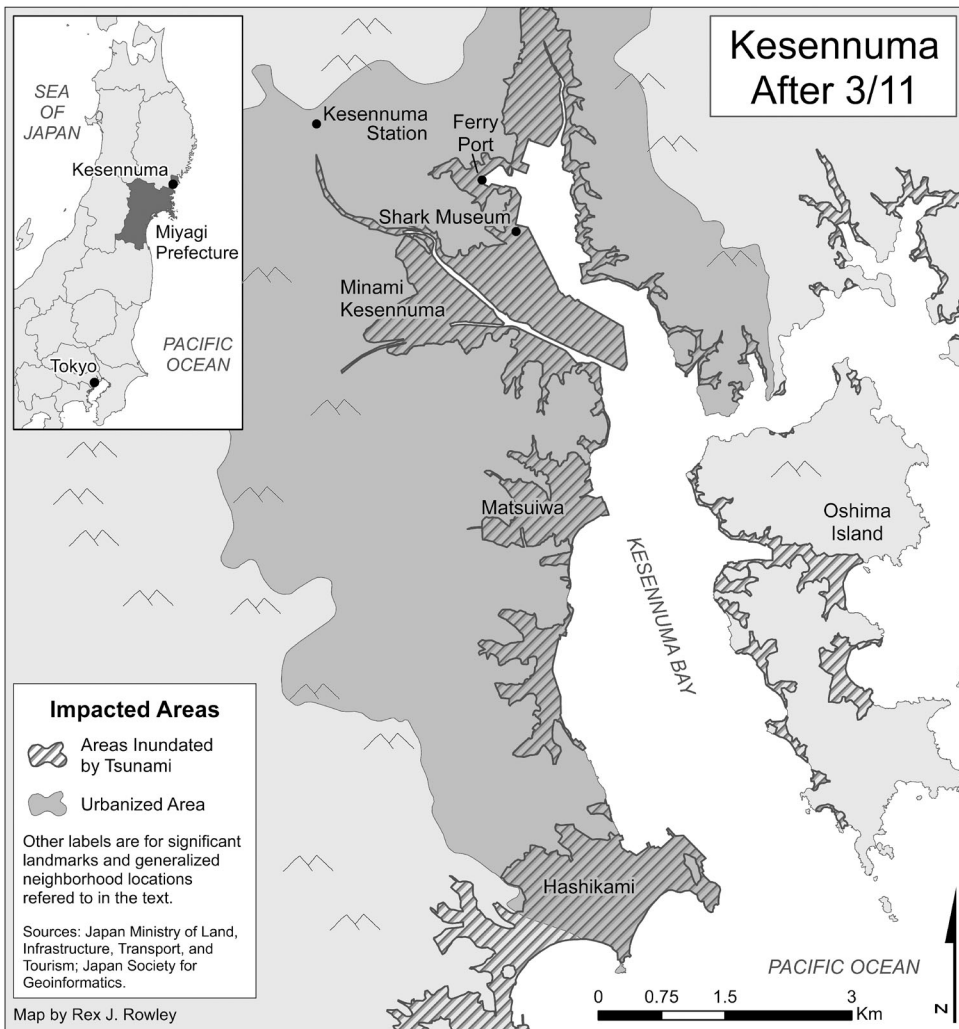
Great East Japan earthquake; Kesenuma; museum geography; place identity; disaster

## Introduction

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011 forever changed that country's northeastern communities. When the powerful 9.0 (Mw) quake struck 70 kilometers offshore in the Pacific Ocean, the land shook, but it was a massive tsunami that lay waste to coastal towns like Kesenuma City in Miyagi Prefecture. The long, narrow and (usually) protective bays of Japan's Sanriku Coast amplified the tsunami waves and exacerbated the destruction of life, property, and industry to catastrophic levels. In Kesenuma, waves rose 10 meters high (from ground level to wave crest) and water pushed inland to locations at 23 meters above sea level (Suppasri et al. 2012). More than 40,000 people lived in this inundation zone (Figure 1; Yalciner et al. 2011). As of April 2018, 1217 Kesenuma residents had died as a result of the disaster, with another 215 still missing (Miyagi Prefecture 2018), accounting for almost 10 percent of the loss of life nationally (NPA 2018). In addition, 25,420 structures in the city were damaged or destroyed (Miyagi Prefecture 2018). Some 85 percent of the city's employment exists in the fishing industry (Biggs, Matsuyama, and Balfour 2011), and Kesenuma is one of the most important

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**Figure 1.** Map showing portions in the urbanized area of Kesennuma inundated by the tsunami on March 11, 2011. Cartography by the author.

fishing hubs in the country (Ueda and Torigoe 2012; Tomita 2014). With much of the city's fishing fleet and port infrastructure lost in the earthquake, tsunami, and resulting fires (Ueda and Torigoe 2012; Yalciner et al. 2011), the economic implications of the disaster were monumental.

The March 2011 disaster reaffirmed a longstanding sense of connection to the sea whilst demonstrating Kesennuma's vulnerability to its forces. The recovery efforts in the intervening years have further emphasized that connection, with city leaders and residents highlighting the city's personality as a coastal town reliant on what the sea gives and takes. Indeed, the memories of and adaptations to the tsunami itself have taken permanent root in the built landscape of Kesennuma's restoration embedding symbols of this complicated relationship into the city's cultural landscape (Rowley 2018). This includes a slew of new construction, a new seawall, and the naming of new, permanent housing

complexes “Kesennuma Recovery Housing” and a coastal national park as “Sanriku Recovery National Park.” Kesennuma is a changed place.

Natural disasters often highlight elements of a locale’s sense of place (Entrikin 2007). An awareness of what residents value in a place is heightened amid the recognition of loss (Milligan 1998; Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr 2009) and a place is changed as a result (Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr 2009; Cox and Perry 2011; Silver and Grek-Martin 2015). I refer to this as a *shifting* sense of place. This is a process, ongoing and likely to never really be complete. It signifies adjusting to a new normal, a reorienting (Cox and Perry 2011), after some traumatic or difficult moment. Like metal emerging from a refining fire, a place maintains certain fundamental traits, but shows distinct evidence of permanent change as a result of the disaster.

In this essay, I will explore how one museum – restored, significantly revised, and reopened three years after 3/11 – represents Kesennuma’s shifting sense of place, post-disaster. Museum geographies is a growing subfield in cultural geography that seeks to understand the implications of public narratives portrayed in museum spaces (Geoghegan 2010). The Kesennuma Shark Museum (KSM) has been one of the city’s core cultural and tourist attractions since its initial opening in 1997 and was one of the earliest rehabilitated buildings during recovery. Museum venues often portray, reflect, and even influence the place identity of a locale (Davis 2007) yet case studies directly interrogating such portrayal are rare. Shark is one of the city’s most important and distinctive aquaculture products and the first iteration of the museum was meant to evoke such uniqueness (Akamine 2015). Following the 3/11 tsunami, however, the presentation in KSM is radically different. Museum operators have now altered the space to include three galleries about the tsunami, recovery, and fishing industry before a fourth one specifically about sharks. The KSM is a good case from which to analyze a particular venue at the micro level – observing the change in the use of space in its rebuilt form, the current museum’s spatial arrangement, and the presentation of a narrative in that space – and then relate that to the broader community. As a result of its post-tsunami reconfiguration, the KSM’s current narrative now more completely reflects a shifting sense of place in the community outside its walls.

This research lies at the intersection of place, disasters, and museum geography scholarship. In attempting to understand a shifting sense of place following a disaster, and in doing so through the lens of museum geography, this work represents a unique contribution to cultural geography theories about the spatiality of museums, museum experiences, and how such spaces reflect an interaction between people and place. I will review and then highlight the intersections in these three lines of inquiry in order to situate my approach to a study of the KSM. I then provide some context for the changes in the museum by reconstructing the museum’s pre-disaster presentation before turning to a more in-depth description and analysis of its layout and narratives since reopening in 2014. Finally, I will draw a connection between the story presented in the museum space with a macro view of the city in recovery in order to see how the museum’s story is reflective of the city’s recovery efforts in the broader community.

### **Sense of place, disaster, and museum geographies**

Place is a complicated term that is invoked in a variety of ways by scholars across several disciplines (Cresswell 2015). Even within geography, the idea’s intellectual home, it is a

concept that requires defining within the context of a particular study (de Wit 2003). My use of the term follows a phenomenological perspective that place is created and given meaning by humans through lived experience in a particular space (Tuan 1977; Relph 1976). A concomitant term, sense of place, is the feelings of identity, character, familiarity, and attachment that come through experience in a locale (Ryden 1993). A sense of place is, as Jackson (1994) has argued, rooted in shared experience and shared time; it is “a lively awareness of the familiar environment, a ritual repetition, a sense of fellowship based on a shared experience” (157). Sense of place gives a location its recognizable character and personality. Place scholars have a longstanding tradition of analyzing sense of place and people’s attachments to place through a variety of frames including literature (Pocock 1981; Wyckoff 2013), stories and folklore (Basso 1996; Ryden 1993), interviews with local residents (Schnell 2003), and the cultural landscape and material culture (Schein 1997; Wyckoff 2014).

Place is an important component of natural disaster resilience (Cutter et al. 2008) and recovery (Enrikin 2007; Cox and Perry 2011). Observing a place affected by a disaster provides a unique pathway to understand a people-place connection and the importance of place-based identity. Scholars have noted the role of place in a variety of cases, including the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami (Bird et al. 2007; Samuels 2010), Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr 2009; Miller and Rivera 2010; Li et al. 2010), flooding in Sri Lanka (Askman, Nilsson, and Becker 2018) and the United States (Schnell and Haddock 2004), wildfires (Cox and Perry 2011) and tornadoes in North America (Francaviglia 1978; Smith and Cartlidge 2011; Paul and Che 2011; Silver and Grek-Martin 2015), and human-caused disasters like the September 11 terrorist attacks (Svendsen and Campbell 2010) the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Lee and Blanchard 2012). A handful of early studies by Japanese sociologists, civil engineers, and planners have also commented on place amid recovery from the 3/11 disaster (Ueda and Torigoe 2012; Hirano 2013; Miyake 2014).

Much disaster-place scholarship has focused on place attachment and how it affects recovery and resilience moving forward (Bonaiuto et al. 2016). Place attachment is both disrupted by disasters and can increase a community’s ability to bounce back in its aftermath (Scannell et al. 2016). Lee and Blanchard (2012) acknowledged the role of place attachment in strengthening resilience but found, with the BP oil spill, that such a connection can also yield adverse psychological trauma in the affected population. Attachment to place is also a common reason people desire to return after being displaced by a disaster (Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr 2009; Li et al. 2010) and can be more important than economic forces (Ueda and Torigoe 2012). Cox and Perry (2011) noted that place attachment can help people recover more quickly. They recommended that place, as an important “reorienting” object for people affected by wildfires, must be a part of recovery action.

Disasters can also foster a stronger sense of place and place attachment stemming from shared loss (Milligan 1998). Foote (2003) described dozens of spaces where meaning and attachment were created or enhanced as a result of trauma in a particular space. Burley et al. (2007), found that the spectre of coastal land loss in Louisiana simultaneously produced hope that residents could maintain a sense of community amid loss, while also increasing the intensity of their connection to places that have long been a part of their identities. Silver and Grek-Martin (2015) similarly noted how a disaster “reinforces and deepens feelings of belonging and personal identity in the face of shared suffering” (33).

Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr (2009) pointed to a heightened sense of place for Katrina evacuees: “Ninth Ward residents’ sense of place was raised up to the level of consciousness and ... made return desirable since their sense of contentment, well-being, and even self could only be found in New Orleans” (631). Because of loss and displacement, they noted, “sense of place was transformed from a background context into an important cultural resource” (616). Such themes follow the logic presented by Tuan (1977) in his pioneering work on sense of place: “Long residence enables us to know a place intimately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience” (18). A disaster often allows those affected to see their place from the outside, be it through displacement or destruction.

Indeed, disasters have the ability to fundamentally change a place. Understanding what that change looks like can further illuminate the importance of human interaction with place, but can also provide important perspectives to scholars and policy makers who seek to better understand disaster impacts and execute recovery plans (Francaviglia 1978; Silver and Grek-Martin 2015). As Entrikin has put it, a disaster is “an extreme, highly visible case in the otherwise unnoticed ebb and flow of the ongoing process of place making” (2007, 177). And Schnell and Haddock (2004) starkly reminded, “sense of place is a fragile, ever-shifting idea, one that can be destroyed or changed irrevocably by disaster” (106).

Still, only a handful of scholars maintain a particular focus on *how* disaster places change. Miller and Rivera (2010) noted the rebuilding of the cultural landscape “repairs community norms ... and restores a sense of place after Hurricane Katrina” (188) but also emphasized that the restoration is a “new normal” yielding a “new place identity” (179). Chamlee-wright and Henry Storr (2009) similarly found that New Orleans residents returned because of the “unique bundle of characteristics that, when taken together, constitute a sense of place that cannot be found or replicated elsewhere” (621). In a study of one town’s near-complete rebuilding efforts following a tornado, Francaviglia (1978) found that residents of Xenia, Ohio, looked to the personality and the “old ways” in their destroyed community, which yielded planning decisions that changed the shape and character of their newly rebuilt place. Schnell and Haddock (2004) studied Pattonsburg, Missouri, which was completely moved from a site in a vulnerable floodplain to the bluffs above. They found that the rebuilt town kept some elements of the sense of place of the former location, but was by no means a copy of what once existed. The authors considered “New Pattonsburg” a “blank slate,” with new and old elements of both communities combining together to remake a new, altered sense of place. I have found in Kesennuma that, even in the process of recovery, permanent signals of such re-making are obvious on the cultural landscape (Rowley 2018). The KSM is an excellent microcosm of such re-making.

Museums can be a powerful entry point into understanding place. The perspectives of place and space have long been recognized as critical in museum studies (Hetherington 1997; Duclos 1999; Davis 2007). And, in recent years, cultural geographers have increasingly looked to the site of the museum to explore questions of place, space, and identity, contributing to a subfield dubbed “museum geography” (Geoghegan 2010). Geoghegan has highlighted a number of themes and threads in this emerging field and her summarizing work has been extended by Phillips, Woodham, and Hooper-Greenhill (2015) and Smith and Foote (2017).

One such theme is that museums play an important role in “the production and legitimisation of ... place-based identities” (Geoghegan 2010, 1467). Museums engage with the experience of the society in which they exist, prompting any number of discourses, one of which is place (Hetherington 2006). National museums have long been a vehicle for portraying and promoting a country’s (or empire’s) identity (Davis 2007; McLean 2005). Duclos argued that the objects of a museum can foster “a notion of place and how place is, in turn, integral in creating a sense of identity” (1999, 50). Waterton and Dittmer (2014) found that it wasn’t objects, but affect in more-than-representational assemblages at the Australian War Memorial that contributed to an emotional sense of connection to a national identity. McEachern (1998) noted that the District Six Museum in Cape Town similarly represented a national identity, reflecting the struggle and hope of post-apartheid South Africa.

Museums also evoke a sense of place at larger scales. Davis argued that local museums are more community oriented and as such “can most easily capture the identity of place” (2007, 61). Smith (2019) explored regional identities in his comparative analysis of the narratives and counter-narratives presented at several museums in the American West. McEachern’s (1998) work at District Six showed how visitors placed themselves – literally on a large map in the museum space and emotionally through their place-based recollections – in that Cape Town district and felt a connection to the places and spaces they remembered from the days before the black population was forced out. Rowe, Wertsch, and Kosyaeva (2002) found that an exhibit at the Missouri History Museum helped to portray a St. Louis sense of place. Further, Micieli-Voutsinas (2017) has made an excellent study of “affective heritage” at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. Although her focus was on a more-than-representational experience for visitors to the site, she did find that the spatial flow of the museum not only contributed to an emotional connection to the event but also provided a “feeling” for the site, for the place.

Importantly, the work of many of these scholars was in museums that are born from and memorialize human-caused tragedy in terrorism, racial oppression, and war. Museums are also built in response to natural disasters (Hayashi 2016), yet only a few scholars have made a study of disaster museums, particularly in how they reflect place. Hayashi’s (2016) work focused on public involvement in development and management of the Chuetsu Earthquake Memorial Corridor museums, but implicitly showed how direct connection between visitors and locals at the site and the topics presented in museum spaces work together to represent identity and sense of place for affected populations. Similarly, Margottini and Di Buduo (2017) profile The Geological and Landslides Museum of Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, with a focus on its earth science education mission, whilst still providing a glimpse into the character of a place whose personality is defined by its geological history.

With an explicit focus on understanding sense of place through the lens of a museum and its spatiality within the context of disaster recovery, my work represents a contribution to theories and practices at the confluence of these three sets of literature.

## Methodological approach

My goal is to illustrate how the changes in the KSM evoke a sense of place in this city that is shifting as a result of the tsunami. By observing place during recovery, place scholars

may, in actuality, be seeing the place-making process as it happens (Smith and Cartlidge 2011). As Entrikin (2007) noted (and echoed by other scholars cited earlier), “it is during extreme and traumatic moments that [the] contingent nature [of place] becomes evident” (167). At the same time, Entrikin warned that observation of place re-making must be taken within the context of the “obvious shortcomings in any analysis of its interpretation since it [place] is still forming” (Entrikin 2007, 168). In order for conclusions of a place study in a disaster space to have salience, then, a methodological approach should be grounded the spatial and temporal context of the material evidence of place change.

As spaces that so often represent a sense of place, museums can offer such a context. The Urbis museum in Manchester, England, was built in response to a terrorist bombing in the city’s center. As Hetherington (2007) argued, the museum’s location and the spatial narratives told within its space, although not explicitly about Manchester or the bombing, worked to reflect a shifting sense of place for Manchester following the violence. At the KSM, the story is not about a new museum, but a restructured museum that, in its new form, has become a reflection of a place impacted by a disaster. Here is where (a changed) use of space becomes a crucial key to understanding the meaning portrayed by the museum. After all, as museum “space is changed, new readings are made possible and new spaces [and places] are encountered” (Hetherington 1997, 216).

I have chosen an approach that illustrates the KSM’s reflection of place by grounding my analysis in time (taking into account its evolution from before 3/11 to now) and space (situating the museum’s spatiality literally and symbolically within the city). Underlying this methodology is the notion that museum narratives and their meanings are inherently spatial (Hetherington 1997; Schorch 2013; Carter, Butler, and Alderman 2014; Smith and Foote 2017). Specifically, I combine several interpretive methods suggested by museum geographers (see Smith and Foote 2017, 134). First, I look to an overview of how the KSM has changed, post-3/11, to provide insight into how museum officials remade the space and what that remaking says about sense of place outside. I also situate the museum on the map to understand where it sits in the city, both spatially and symbolically. The majority of my analysis revolves around a description of the museum space and its galleries to understand the thematic messages portrayed to patrons in imagery, text and interactive exhibits.

In order to further ground the museum analysis, I explore the implications of the KSM’s narrative and its spatiality alongside parallel narratives found in the everyday experience outside. I have visited Kesennuma seven times, and at least once every year, since 2014. I have found in such visits a number of patterns that indicate a shifting sense of place and place attachment amid recovery (Rowley 2018). By grounding my analysis of the KSM within the context of the broader community, I hope to not only provide some evidence that the place-based meanings portrayed in the museum have some foundation in reality, but to also show how museums can be a good entrée to understanding a shifting sense of place in locations indelibly impacted by a natural disaster.

### **Kesennuma and the Rias shark museum**

The sea is part of life in Kesennuma. The city’s protected, deep-water bay near productive fishing grounds off of Japan’s northeastern coast, makes it one of the most important



fishing ports in the country (Akamine 2015). As noted earlier, a huge portion of the city's employment is in the fishing industry. Kesennuma is well known for products such as seaweed, oysters, scallops, clams, tuna, bonito, abalone, Pacific saury, sea pineapple, shark fin, and sea urchin eggs (Ueda and Torigoe 2012; Yalciner et al. 2011; Nguyen et al. 2007). The city has also historically drawn tourists from around the region for beaches at Ooshima Island and Oisehama and a cape at Iwaisaki that features a famous blowhole and dragon-shaped tree. Everyday life in Kesennuma is never far from the ocean: surfing and recreational fishing are popular and fresh seafood is part of the local cuisine. The bulk of Kesennuma's approximately 65,000 residents live in an urbanized area on the narrow coastal plain between the shoreline of the deep harbor of Kesennuma Bay and the surrounding mountains. As such, most of the city's neighborhoods have clear views of the water.

The KSM was a part of the community long before the earthquake and tsunami of 2011. Originally established in 1997 as the Rias Shark Museum, it was the only museum in Japan dedicated to sharks. Its intent was to help visitors understand shark ecology and industry, but also to help promote the shark as a symbol of Kesennuma. It was (and remains) an important tourist attraction that was visited by over one million people in 2010 (Akamine 2015). The museum occupied one portion of the second floor of a large shopping and tourist complex called *Umi no Ichi*, or Market of the Sea, where residents and visitors could purchase local aquaculture products or dine at seafood restaurants. The market sat on a parcel of land directly adjacent to Kesennuma's primary port and fish market, central to other businesses supporting the fishing industry. The *Umi no Ichi* also contained an "Ice Aquarium," where patrons could view aquatic creatures preserved in frozen stillness. The *Umi no Ichi's* striking blue/grey, trapezoid-shaped facade included prominent signage for the market, the museum, and the Ice Aquarium. One can see the *Umi no Ichi* in its former state in a number of internet videos that recorded the moment of the tsunami.

Although I had not visited Kesennuma before 2011, Google Maps maintains a "Street View" documentation of the museum a year following the tsunami. Through these 360-degree images, uploaded by Google Street View contributor Junpei Kameda, viewers can see the damaged remnants of what visitors would have experienced (the tsunami flooded approximately two feet of the second floor of *Umi no Ichi*, so the damage was bad but not complete). A handful of photos in the current museum exhibits provide further evidence of its former life.

A visitor entered the museum through sliding-glass doors below the arch of a giant model of a shark jaw. Passing aquarium-like photos and an information desk, she entered an exhibit showing instructive panels about shark ecology and habitat, human interaction with sharks (e.g. shark attacks), and misconceptions about the species, all in a half-circle panorama surrounding a full-sized model of a great white shark, jaw gaping, at the room's center. Off to the left of this room, the visitor could watch a film in a "mini-theater." The wall behind the Great White display showcased additional educational panels (the one visible in existing imagery about shark physiology) and display cases flanking an active fish tank. A larger "Dive Talk Theater" was housed in the next room as one progressed through the museum. Here, she learned about different shark types and their genetic relations and could see a tanned shark skin, a dive cage and diver equipment, shark jaws and eggs, and other related artifacts in display cases.

Further along, she could touch sharks in a small pool, and then pass by another large model, this one of a whale shark. As she departed the museum, the visitor learned about how sharks are harvested for fins and meat. She exited through another set of sliding doors surrounded by a huge mural of sharks swimming in the ocean.

From its beginnings, the Shark Museum was intended to be a reflection of a distinct piece of the broader fishing industry that is crucial to the city's survival (Akamine 2015; McCurry 2011). It was one element of a campaign to highlight this community's focus on marketing itself as a "shark town" (Akamine 2015). This occurred as industry leaders sought to increase revenues beyond reliance on just a harvest of shark fins (which was banned in Japan in 2008) to a harvest of the whole shark. Such a push included publication of cookbooks, and processing and promotion of various meats and other byproducts of sharks, beyond just the fin.<sup>1</sup> The changes made economic sense but also fit into the city's desire to highlight its unique sense of place. Between 80 and 90 percent of sharks caught by Japanese fishing vessels are processed in Kesenuma (Akamine 2015). Cities, towns and prefectures in Japan often brand and promote their own unique senses of place for tourism purposes. Such symbols may take the form of marketing imagery, a mascot, and, most often, in souvenirs, which, in Japan, are often food-based. In both purpose and geographic context, the Rias Shark Museum was a symbol of one unique and important part of Kesenuma.

### The place of the Kesenuma shark museum today

The KSM's current presentation captures a broader view of the city's sense of place after 3/11. It tells the story of how the city is a place connected to the sea, but goes beyond the role of sharks or the fishing industry to include a portrayal of a place changing in the wake of the waves.

The renovated museum reopened in April 2014 inside the *Umi no Ichi* and was renamed the Kesenuma Shark Museum. The *Umi no Ichi* was one of the first establishments in the central city to be restored after the 3/11 tsunami. I first visited it in August of that year. It is still located adjacent to the restored and expanded Kesenuma Fish Market and remains embedded within a landscape indicative of fish processing/shipping centers, hotels, restaurants and shops, and other infrastructure that supports fishermen, tourists, and businesspeople involved in the community's primary industry. A number of shops and restaurants similar to those before 3/11 occupy the rebuilt *Umi no Ichi*, once again selling foodstuffs harvested locally. Several of the shops also sell Kesenuma *omiyage* (souvenirs). These include the typical tourist souvenirs (key chains, magnets, etc.) common in the North America or Europe, but also the traditional Japanese *omiyage*, which consist mostly of food items reflective of local culture. A visit to the Ice Aquarium (purchased individually or in a combination ticket with the KSM) again gives a frigid tour of dozens of species of fish frozen in the act of swimming. The *Umi no Ichi* and museum continue to be an important focal point for both industry and tourism in the city. Kesenuma remains a place connected to the fishing industry.

Updates to the *Umi no Ichi* highlight some of the changes in the place after 3/11. The current building maintains a similar look to the original, a burgundy and beige motif replacing the blue/grey from before (Figure 2). A significant addition to the *Umi no Ichi* exterior can be found affixed to its back wall, next to the parking lot entrance.



**Figure 2.** Exterior of the Umi no Ichi and Kesenuma Shark Museum. Photo by author.

Approximately 14 feet above ground is a large blue sign with a bold white line along its base. A reminder of what happened in 2011, it states: “The waters from the tsunami from the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster came to this point.” A duplicate of this sign is also found inside the building, adjacent to the main stairway a few feet above the floor of its second level.

Another reflective change in the building housing the KSM: a prominent new tenant. A new souvenir shop across from the Ice Aquarium is dedicated to Hoya Boya, a mascot that Kesenuma community leaders adopted in 2008 to represent its city in tourism and public relations (Kesenuma City 2016). Hoya Boya – like hundreds of other similar mascots used by Japanese cities, prefectures, and regions for promotional purposes – was designed to directly represent place. *Hoya* has reference to a sea pineapple (an edible sea squirt) and *Boya* is boy or child. Hoya Boya, thus, also takes on the nickname *umi no ko*, or “child of the sea,” in various signage and promotional materials for the city. Furthermore, Hoya Boya’s appearance quite literally represents the aquaculture of the region: His head is a sea pineapple, his belt-buckle a scallop, his sword a Pacific saury fish, and he is often featured riding or alongside a shark.

The popularity of this Kesenuma mascot has exploded following the tsunami as local leaders have invoked his image in recovery promotion and encouragement. He has also become a symbol of the recovery and optimism with which city officials and residents face a new, post-tsunami normal. The prominent place of the Hoya Boya Shop, and the adjacent Child of the Sea Shrine (a functioning shrine containing all of the primary forms and features of thousands of Shinto shrines throughout the country but dedicated to Hoya Boya) in the *Umi no Ichi* reflect how much Hoya Boya has become both a physical and spiritual part of this community and its efforts toward recovery.

## Entering the museum

Even more compelling evidence of change in Kesennuma is found when one enters the reconstructed museum, which takes up around one-half of the *Umi no Ichi's* second floor. The museum today includes a forceful focus on how the 3/11 disaster has simultaneously maintained and altered the city's sense of place. I will describe and analyze the content, narrative, and spatial layout of the museum by following the steps a typical museum visitor might take.

At the entrance to the KSM visitors get a preview of the museum's story from a marketing poster. With prominent descriptions and images of sharks from the museum's Shark Zone, the poster also includes small inset images of the other "zones" of the museum about the Kesennuma and the tsunami. Patrons purchase their ticket at an electronic vending machine and approach the entrance in a wall painted with silhouettes of sharks (Figure 3). The poster, the wall, and, of course, the name of the museum itself, all clearly presents an image of what to expect: A museum about sharks.

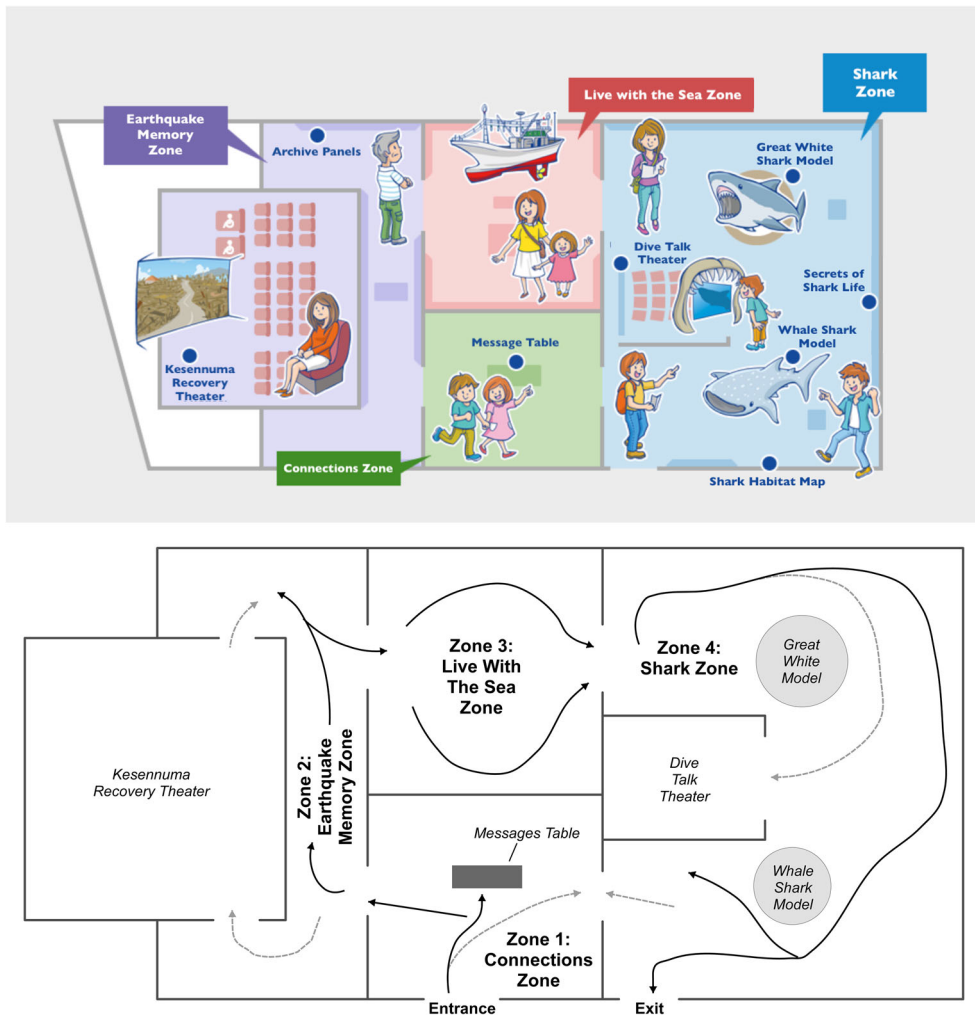
Visitors find that less than half of the KSM space is dedicated to sharks (Figure 4). The recommended route meanders through a series of three "zones" – only briefly mentioned on marketing posters – before encountering the exhibit that gives the museum its name. Zones 1, 2, and 3 are curated with a focus on Kesennuma in recovery following a major disaster. This realignment of museum space, post-3/11, shocked me when I first visited; I had expectations to tour a "shark" museum as a break from research outside. Instead I saw a reflection and extension of what I had been studying.

The change is, of course, an intentional one. The management and staff of the Kesennuma Industry Corporation, which owns the *Umi no Ichi* and its museum, explained in a letter posted in Zone 1 welcoming visitors to the museum:

In a fresh start, the museum was reborn, this time as an institution with two faces. One of those is that of the shark museum as it had existed up to this point ... The other face ... is intended to communicate a remembrance of the disaster for the future and to make a



**Figure 3.** Umi no Ichi's 2nd floor lobby and entrance to the KSM. Note the Hoya Boya characters in the center of the image (as photo cutouts). Photo by author.



**Figure 4.** Maps of the KSM layout. Top: Adapted and translated from map provided in visitor pamphlet. Bottom: Schematic of the KSM layout and recommended flow through the museum galleries.

‘museum of the recovery.’ The reality of that disaster can only be truly told by those who actually experienced it here in Kesennuma. It is our obligation to tell that story and preserve it for posterity.

As one of Kesennuma’s most popular tourist attractions, past and present, the “reborn” KSM thus became even more broad in the story it tells, a story that is a more significant reflection of place beyond simply the unique shark harvest.

### Zone 1, The Connections Zone

From the main entrance, visitors move through automatic sliding glass doors to enter Zone 1, “The Connections Zone.” A visitor enters this dimly lit, rectangular space and immediately sees a table in the room’s center and, behind it, a digital projector’s illumination of an otherwise blank white wall (Figure 5). The dynamically changing set of projected

images show the city before and after the disaster: neighborhoods left in ruin; a huge fishing boat on land, hundreds of meters from its watery home; fishermen at work at sea or mending their nets ashore; picturesque photographs of Kesenuma and its bay (before the earthquake) gleaming at night or dusted by low clouds in the morning; and fishing boats at port illuminated by noon-day sun.

On the “Messages Table” are two backlit placards, one presenting a letter from the museum operators (quoted earlier) and the other acknowledgement of individuals who contributed to its reopening. The focus of the table, and of the Zone 1 space, however, is a computer workstation attached to the Messages Table where visitors are invited to type out a personalized message of hope, connection, and encouragement to the people of Kesenuma. The message entered is then, along with other visitor messages, superimposed on the projected images of the city. Here, I noted religious expressions (“God is faithful”), words of motivation (“Fight, Fight, Fight, Kesenuma!” and “Stay strong in the recovery, Kesenuma!”), expressions of admiration for the place (“I love being in nature in Kesenuma”), and other sentiments of camaraderie (“One for all, All for One” and “I’ll be coming back to Kesenuma”). Entries came from individuals from across the country, from city organizations in places like Kobe, Sendai, Hokkaido, Niigata, Osaka, and Oozaki, and from a few non-Japanese visitors. The ability to leave personal messages is a common technique to foster ties between visitors and a disaster site (Micieli-Voutsinas 2017; Paliewicz 2017) and is commonly found in other disaster museums I have visited in Japan.

Zone 1’s other three walls include static panels illuminated by ceiling lights. Two of these depict other Kesenuma attractions – the Rias Ark Museum and Iwaisaki – and



**Figure 5.** Zone 1 of the KSM. This view shows the messages table and the projected result of visitor’s contributions, one of the descriptive panels and the entryway to Zone 2. Photo by author.

how they were affected by the tsunami. A panel to the left of the doorway to Zone 2 shows aerial photographs of the city center, before and after the tsunami, along with statistics to provide a sort of damage report. To the right of that doorway, another display is dedicated to the story of the *Umi no Ichi* and its Shark Museum directly following the disaster, including an image of the devastation caused to the building and its surrounding neighborhood. On the opposite wall a multi-image mosaic depicts recent news in the community (in April 2014): the opening of a new fish market, the most recent coming of age ceremony (for those turning 20 years old), and a memorial service for those lost in the disaster.

Zone 1 is a space that introduces museum visitors to Kesennuma and its prominent landmarks, landscapes, and institutions. The dim lighting in the space not only allows visibility of the projected images/messages, but also gives way to a quiet and contemplative ambiance. The images provide a glimpse into places and moments significant in this city. And, the ability for visitors to write and read messages to the people of this place provides a direct method of making and feeling a connection to the current experience in a place in the throes of recovery.

### **Zone 2, The Earthquake Memory Zone**

In Zone 2, the “Earthquake Memory Zone,” visitors learn more directly of the disaster’s impacts on Kesennuma. Upon entering the zone, visitors see a set of panels that describe major events from March 2011 to April 2014 and how neighborhoods throughout the city were impacted by the disaster. Each panel is illustrated with photographs of destruction comparable to those from a warzone. These panels are accompanied by a tall, tapestry-like wall hanging showing three images of some of the worst impacts from the waves: a fire fueled by leaked petroleum from boats and storage tanks that lasted for four days, flooding in the low-lying Katahama neighborhood, and the damage to the ferry terminal.

A long hallway presents a number of stories of individuals who were affected by the disaster or were instrumental in the recovery (Figure 6). These include a sake shop owner, a local Zen Buddhist priest, fire department officials, a boat captain, and residents who lost their homes in the flooding. Chairs and headphones are provided with touchscreen tablets where visitors can watch video testimonials of the people profiled in the static panel displays. Opposite these interactive features, additional stories of temporary shop owners, artists, and community activists are told in three more similar static panels, minus the interactive tablets.

Four other displays along Zone 2’s far wall express deeper insights into particular locations within Kesennuma. At one, patrons can use a tablet computer to explore a Google StreetView project to preserve “Memories for the Future,” which documented the streets of Kesennuma (and other cities affected by the disaster) for future generations. And, asserting an optimistic outlook, another panel also includes an artist rendering of the “Kesennuma Dream Recovery Map.” The map shows a lively and thriving future vision of the city, completed new bridges, highways, and newly rebuilt industrial areas with no readily apparent signs of lasting effects from the tsunami. Another wall hanging here presents three views of the same location in the Shishiori neighborhood: one before 3/11, one directly after debris from the tsunami had been moved from the road and piled up in adjacent parcels, and one from a year later after that same debris had been cleared away and



**Figure 6.** Long hallway in Zone 2, looking toward the entryway to Zone 3. The blue sign on the photo's far left points to the Kesennuma Recovery Theater entrance on the opposite side of this wall. Photo by author.

temporary construction started. And in a display case, visitors can explore a model of the ship *Kyotoku-maru* Number 18 in its prime. The fishing vessel, beached in the Minato neighborhood to the north of Kesennuma Bay, became the subject of wide international news coverage and served as a symbol of the destruction in Kesennuma before it was removed for scrap in 2013.

The center of Zone 2 is the Recovery Theater. I have seen two films here. The first, from 2014, was a sad yet hopeful recounting of the three years since the disaster. It showed interviews with residents (including some profiled elsewhere in Zone 2) alongside images to document the disaster and subsequent efforts of recovery. The film provided viewers with a sense of a city motivated for a comeback. A firefighter tells of wanting to help people, a fisherman discusses a common local sentiment that it is the sea that brings life, and other residents talk about their belief in a recovery and a desire to continue to live here. As the credits rolled, one particular image struck an emotional chord for me: two boys in their school backpacks, together as friends walk away from the camera. It seemed to me a symbolic vision of life moving forward in this city, a portent of a bright future despite a terrible disaster. In one corner of the display is written, "We will never forget that day."

A new film plays today, this one focused on the theme of humanity as powerless against nature but resilient in its response. It again shows interviews with locals who share impressions and memories. It includes more about the response and rescue, including data from 2016 of deaths and injuries and still-missing people. Local voices speak to the human loss and how residents realized how important human ties are through such



difficulties. The film shows the 2016 celebration of launching a new fishing boat to sea, a hopeful sign that the city's industry has recovered. An industry spokesman shares how important it was for the fishing industry to get up and running within months after the disaster since so many people work in that industry. As the film closes a montage of images of the sea, mountains, recovery, and festivals that match the lyrics of song about the sea and humanity's connection to it.

The other name museum operators gave Zone 2 is the "Disaster Recovery Archive." Memory preservation is an important part of recovery from any tragedy or disaster (Hayashi 2016; Scannell et al. 2016). By giving this archive such presence in the museum (this zone occupies around 1/3 of the museum's space) curators underscore their intent to preserve the tsunami's impacts on everyday lives. Images of recognizable local places and details about residents' everyday lives inscribe that memory in the space of Zone 2, but also in the minds of all visitors. It affirms how consequential the tsunami was (and is) in the community. The focus on local voices involved in issues of local importance further roots this museum within its broader community context. The overall message in this zone is that the land and the people bear witness to the ineradicable changes to Kesennuma brought about by the 3/11 tsunami.

### **Zone 3, *The Live with the Sea Zone***

Zone 3 is titled the "Live with the Sea Zone." The name and theme of this zone is a catchphrase (*Umi to Ikiru*) selected in September of 2011 by a local citizen's committee as the subtitle for its recovery plan. The slogan emerged as a clear favorite after a city-wide crowd-sourcing campaign (Kesennuma City 2016). It encapsulates the optimism with which city leaders and residents have approached the recovery, is evocative of a local sense of place inseparable from the sea, and is an apt theme for this area of the museum that shows how Kesennuma exists in tandem with the ocean via the fishing industry. Zone 3's forward-looking presentation addresses, with Zone 1 and 2, the goals of this revised KSM as noted in the closing statements of the museum's welcome letter: "Kesennuma will continue, from now on, to live in connection to the sea. For 10, 50, 100 years into the future, we will not cease to be a city "living with the sea." We therefore include a record and memory of the disaster here."

The other name museum operators give Zone 3 is "The Kesennuma Fishing Industry." As such, visitors encounter a number of wall hangings and panels similar in form to those in Zone 2 but with a focus on Kesennuma's economic engine (Figure 7). As a visitor turns to her left upon entering the square room, the first panel bears witness to how the tsunami affected the fishing industry. It shows an image of several large boats on land after the tsunami and includes text, tables, pie charts, and bar graphs that present a "damage report." With that acknowledgment, the remainder of the displays present an optimistic view of an industry in recovery mode. A ceiling-to-floor wall hanging shows three scenic images of Kesennuma Port, including large sea-faring ships preparing for departure. Another shows images of various products at the city's fish market. Mosaic wall panels tell the story of the current state of the fishing industry and a number of efforts in a "creative recovery" amid such difficulty. One includes a tablet computer where visitors can watch the testimonials of three industry officials. Images on these panels show an active industry, including ocean-going vessels unloading their haul, smaller boats tending to clam or



**Figure 7.** Several panels and display case in the Life with the Sea Zone. The entryway to the Shark Zone is also visible. Photo by author.

seaweed crops in the bay, or fish prepared for sale at the market. Similar images also cycle through a digital projection on the wall above the panels, alternating with other pictures of colorful Kesennuma food products prepared for consumption.

On the opposite wall, two panels celebrate early successes in the recovery. Stories of launching new tuna and Pacific saury boats and opening a new abalone fishing season after a ban following the disaster are centered around the hopeful symbol of the *tairyoubata*, a flag that fishermen fly when they are bringing in a rich haul to port. Adjacent panels show cartoon-like informational displays about individual species caught at Kesennuma and the methods used by fishermen. Another is dedicated to how the full shark is used – an apparent response to international criticisms of shark harvesting in Japan (and Kesennuma) that historically involved only the fin, the highest culinary prize of the species (Akamine 2015). Three wall hangings on this side of Zone 3 show large, high-resolution photographs of the end products that come from Kesennuma, including several brightly colored pieces of sushi and sashimi, three different shark-fin dishes, grilled saury, oysters, clams, and sea urchin.

The room's centerpiece is a plexiglass case containing a set of three scale models of seafaring fishing vessels common here. The tuna, bonito, and Pacific saury boats featured here represent three of the most important catches for Kesennuma. These are the objects by which the city survives; they are a symbol of the industry that drives this town. Text included in this display case points to that driving force, but also highlights an important recognition among the local population following the 3/11 disaster. The words are taken from the citizen's committee for disaster recovery's planning document and describe the

theme of Zone 3, the tenuous relationship between a coastal community and the sea, and the optimism with which city leaders and residents approach the recovery:

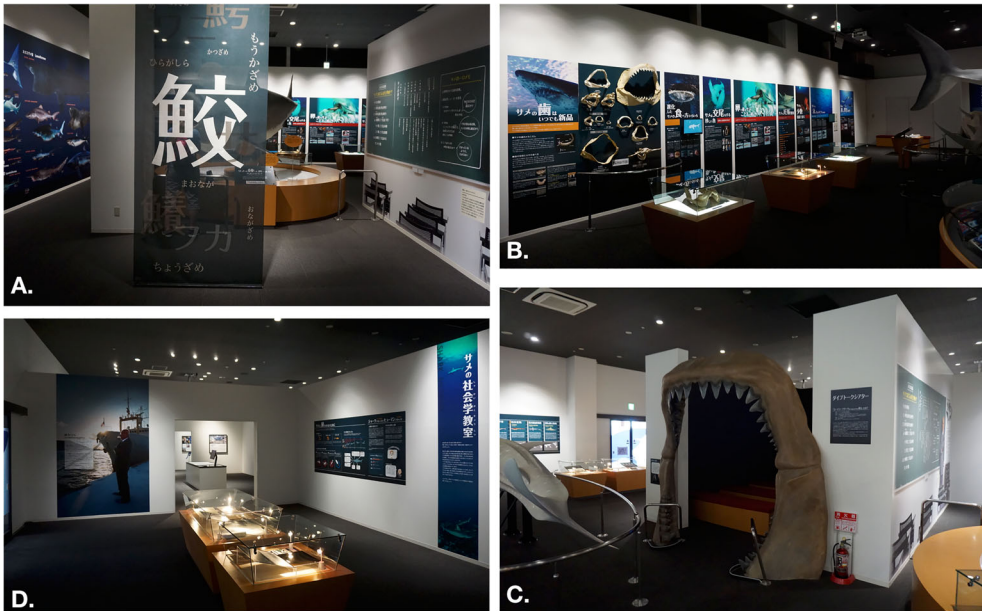
Even though our ancestors were often struck by tsunamis in the past,  
they overcame, believing in the potential of the sea.  
And, realizing its power is beyond comprehension,  
they did not see the ocean as enemy,  
but optimistically lived on even amid the struggle.  
That is not to say that they simply lived “beholden to the sea,”  
but humanity has realized, through long experience,  
that we are a part of nature,  
can build on a relationship of equality,  
and, therefore, can say that we live “with the sea.”  
Such realization was not simply the view of fate or nature,  
but more a matter of life and death.  
The idea of Kesennuma inheres within the sea.  
The present generation once again believes in the potential of the sea;  
this work of recovery is a memorial to the victims  
and will serve as a hope to the next generation.  
A slogan that transcends ideology and expresses the fundamental ideas here is,  
“Live with the Sea.”

### **Zone 4, The Shark Zone**

In Zone 4 visitors finally experience an exhibit dedicated to sharks. “The Shark Zone” displays are a marked shift from those in Zones 1–3. The subject of course has changed; visitors leave behind the realm of tsunami recovery as they enter Zone 4. The way museum curators present material has also changed. Gone are the formulaic, prosaic framed panels. Instead, visitors see a number of display cases, full-sized models, a mini-theater, all surrounded by posters affixed directly to the walls (some the size of walls) that teach about different aspects of sharks. The space has connection to Kesennuma as it speaks to the importance of sharks to the local fishing industry, but is more broadly about the animal itself and is global in its descriptive reach. Education is the goal in Zone 4.

That tone is set immediately as the visitor enters the Shark Zone. A huge banner hanging from the ceiling displaying the names (in Japanese script) for the word “shark” and shark species (Figure 8). To the right, visitors are introduced to the presentational theme and goals of the space. Here a wall-sized image of shark expert and professor Kazuhiro Nakatani next to a chalkboard welcomes visitors to learn about sharks in his “laboratory.”

In other parts of Zone 4 visitors will be introduced to a number of “classrooms” within the laboratory that present aspects of sharks and their existence today. Opposite the welcome banner, visitors can get lost wandering along a 10-meter long pictorial catalog of shark species. In the “Shark Ecology Classroom” nine posters illustrate information about shark mouths, jaws, and teeth, their evolution and reproduction, and the various methods of movement among the species. Actual jaws mounted on the wall and in display cases along with shark eggs, skin, and a series of short videos on wall-mounted screens support the poster’s descriptions. In the “Shark Geography Classroom” visitors learn about the geographic distribution of a sampling of six species of shark living at different ocean depths.



**Figure 8.** Four views of Zone 4, The Shark Zone. Photos by author.

Along the wall leading to the exit, the “Shark-Human Interaction Classroom” attempts to resolve some of the misconceptions of sharks as dangerous creatures. The poster includes an intriguing graph about the number of deaths over 10 years in Japan from various accidents: zero from sharks, 30 from lightning, over 8000 from drowning, and more than 58,000 from car accidents. It notes how sharks don’t specifically target humans to attack, but do so as they go about their instinctual activities of survival. The poster also describes how humans, as the stronger species, are more dangerous to sharks and describes sharks as more than just scary beasts: they are an important potential food source for humans as the planet changes and population grows. “Even though sharks are weak creatures compared to humans,” as Professor Nakatani instructs, the display also provides some instruction for how to avoid a shark attack.

In the center of Zone 4 are exhibits that have been restored from the pre-tsunami Shark Museum. Taking up the majority of space in the Zone are the full-size models of a great white shark gaping at passers-by, and a whale shark shown as if gliding through the water. Surrounding the models are descriptive placards and an interactive tablet sharing details about each species, along with a handful of historical photos of the museum. A massive model of a shark jawbone, once the entrance to the museum, is now the gateway to the “Dive Talk Theater,” where visitors can watch a documentary-style video.

As one leaves Zone 4 and the museum, one final poster provides a farewell from Professor Nakatani. An image shows him standing on the docks at Kesennuma, next to a fishing boat at sunrise. He encourages visitors to learn more: “Kesennuma has a rich and beautiful sea and you can encounter a variety of fish and sharks in this place. However, there remain many mysteries in the sea and many things we still do not understand about sharks ... I look forward to working alongside everyone to someday more fully understand the marvels and mysteries of sharks, fish, and the sea.”

Professor Nakatani's message reaffirms Zone 4's focus on that topic and Kesenuma's connection to it, but the conspicuous absence of any mention of the tsunami or recovery contributes to Zone 4 as a gallery that stands apart from the rest of the KSM, in content, tone, and presentation.

### Discussion: A macroscopic spatial perspective

What can we make of the spatial patterns of the KSM and what do those patterns say about a sense of place in this city? First, the location of a museum within the city matters (Hetherington 2007). Sited (before and after the tsunami) in the center of the city, embedded within the fishing industry landscape, and housed within the *Umi no Ichi* (Market of the Sea), the KSM is a part of the lifeblood force of Kesenuma. At the same time, observing the changes in a rehabilitated *Umi no Ichi* that was flooded and now exists alongside a renovated and expanded wholesale market and dozens of new buildings for processing and support of that industry, we see that the museum's geographic situation is not a simple repeat of its pre-tsunami existence. The museum in its surrounding context, like the city itself, is changed by the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami.

Additionally, the collection of objects within the KSM space help to "construct a sense of place" (Duclos 1999, 50) for Kesenuma. In particular, there exists a direct tie between the themes of the museum's first three zones and the cultural landscape beyond its walls. As in Zone 1, messages of encouragement and connection are everywhere in the city. Several bumper stickers, including some with Hoya Boya or shark caricatures, proclaim "Never Give Up! Kesenuma" or "Little by little, one step at a time, you'll make it" often written in a unique dialect for this region. I also saw some version of "We can do it Kesenuma" message affixed to buildings, bridges, cars, and light poles throughout the city. I also have noticed in my travels throughout Japan that other regions find connections to northeastern Japan. I have seen a number of marketing pushes inviting Tokyoites to visit this region so that tourism spending might help support the recovery. Residents in Kumamoto, a city in the country's far south that was hit by a major earthquake in 2016, have also found sympathetic connection with the Tohoku people (e.g. Kyodo 2016).

Memory preservation, reflective of Zone 2's narrative, can be found on Kesenuma's ever-changing cultural landscape. When I first started visiting the city, detritus washed away from someone's life (a calculator, cassette tape, or kitchen ladle) could be found in any number of vacant lots. Most of the debris has been cleaned up now, but vacant parcels are empty reminders that are still ubiquitous in the city's low-lying elevations. Permanent memorials can also be found in neighborhoods throughout the city, in temples and shrines or on prominent hills. Markers (like the one outside the *Umi no Ichi*) affixed to dozens of buildings in the flood zone show the level to which the tsunami rose serve as permanent and place-specific monuments to that day's destruction. And, new housing types (high-rise apartments heretofore not a part of the Kesenuma housing landscape), infrastructure changes (new highways, bridges, seawalls and raised building foundations), and the use of the word "recovery" in many toponyms serve as everyday indicators of the tsunami's impact.

The "Live with the Sea" theme of Zone 3 too is visible throughout the city. There are few places in the city where the ocean is not visible and even if one can't see it directly,

evidence of its presence is never far away. Kesennuma Station, the hub of public transportation for the city, is replete with ocean imagery: the roof is decorated with fish products common here; a lighthouse and sculptures of a swordfish and a shark decorate the median of the station's passenger drop-off area; and Hoya Boya's symbolic character is never far from view at the station (or anywhere in Kesennuma). In the center city, the fishing industry and its products are omnipresent at the wholesale market, the port, and at fish processing and retail outlets. Local fishermen are often seen in the bay tending to the aquaculture crops (seaweed, abalone, oysters, etc.) growing inside the bay. When not on the water, their boats are moored in a line in protected inlets in coastal neighborhoods, the implements of their trade (e.g. floats and ropes) strewn over vacant lots nearby. Additionally, much of the infrastructure changes noted earlier, particularly the new seawall and raised foundations, are highly visible additions to the Kesennuma landscape that indicate how residents will continue to live, not just beholden to the sea, but alongside it.

The arrangement of the narrative experienced by a visitor moving through the museum space (Figure 4; Smith and Foote 2017) also plays a role in the meaning constructed by the KSM and its connection to a broader Kesennuma sense of place. The museum is not structured to allow people to simply start a tour at the Shark Zone. Some visitors certainly jump directly to the sharks by bypassing Zones 1–3 or through a side passage out of Zone 1. But, a direct path to the Shark Zone is clearly not the intent of curators. The doors leading from the lobby directly into the Shark Zone are clearly marked “exit only” and signs within the museum space, the explicit numbering of zones (as opposed to simply naming them) and the map provided to patrons all “lead” visitors through the space, from connections, to memory, to the fishing industry, and, finally, to sharks. In short, the messages, evidence, and desire to recover from the disaster are the initiatory, and predominant messages the patrons are intended to experience before the “fun” of the sharks.

Such a view of the KSM's spatial layout reflects a post-tsunami Kesennuma. The city has always been known for unique coastal features (beaches and a sea spout), for its shark harvest, and for seafood cuisine. Today, however, Kesennuma is also known the world over as one of those cities shown in YouTube videos chronicling the devastating power of the 3/11 tsunami. Visitors to the town are now likely to remember that fact before the sharks, as they are likely to see more messages, memorials, and new roads, new public transportation, new housing before eating shark fin soup or visiting the beaches at Oshima. Indicators of tsunami impact – reflective of Zones 1, 2, and 3 – are much more evident on the landscape than imagery of sharks. Just as the message of the KSM leads visitors through the disaster and recovery before getting to the main attraction, so too do visitors and residents see evidence of that disaster and recovery before they see the city as it might have existed before the waves changed everything.

Another analysis of the spatiality of the museum further illuminates a shifting sense of place. As noted by Akamine (2015), the former Rias Shark Museum was intended to help grow the market for shark and shark products. This is what the city was known (and notorious) for prior to 3/11 (Akamine 2015; McCurry 2011). However, changes within a museum space can give way to new and different meanings portrayed therein (Hetherington 1997). Museum owners could have simply chosen to rebuild the original museum as one dedicated wholly to sharks, or even one dedicated to the fishing industry and the shark as a unique and prominent part of that industry in this city. They kept the “Shark” in the museum's name likely to maintain temporal consistency but also to

attract visitors that may not come otherwise. Within the museum space, however, operators made a clear choice (as written in the welcome letter in Zone 1) to “record what we did, what we were thinking, and what choices we made following the disaster.” As visitors enter and then move through the museum, however, transitions to and from these additions are abrupt and even unsettling. Expectations for a shark museum as a visitor buys a ticket and moves through the entryway are unmet in the first gallery. Whereas future research could explore more directly visitor expectation and experience, simply by way of the design and layout of the KSM today visitors are instantly and somewhat unexpectedly confronted with a city impacted by a disaster. Once in the museum, spatial flow from Zones 1 to 2 to 3 is fairly seamless, but the transition between Zones 3 and 4 presents another sudden jump. The visitor’s experience through the first three zones is focused on disaster and recovery. Zone 4 is meant to be fun, educational, and almost completely devoid of a disaster or recovery narrative. The doorway between Zones 3 and 4 seems to indicate this major shift in tone. The entry to Zone 4 (visible in [Figures 7 and 8\(a\)](#)) is not as open as the others; a long wall hanging blocks a full view of the gallery space. Both abrupt transitions may be jarring to the visitor but may also be (unintentionally) indicative of the suddenness of the changes to the community brought about by a natural disaster. In other words, the result of adding new and disparate narratives in the updated KSM space reflects a jarring reorientation (Cox and Perry 2011) of the collective space and place within the community in the wake of destruction. Such a reorientation is now a part of the museum experience *and* the human experience in this place.

## Conclusion

The extreme difficulties following a major natural disaster are often faced by victims with resilience and determination to recover and rebuild. The connection people have with their place is one factor that strengthens such resilience and resolve (Scannell et al. 2016). In its spatial arrangement, exhibit content, and narrative presentation, the Kesennuma Shark Museum’s microcosmic messages emblemize a human connection to place but also the shifting nature of sense of place after a natural disaster.

Indeed, the recovery from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami has not only highlighted these facts, but has modified and molded the Kesennuma community into something that is forever and inseparably connected with that disaster. The KSM could very well change its exhibits in the future to focus more on the sharks themselves. Similarly, analyzing this place in the middle of a recovery is, admittedly, an analysis of a place in the process of its re-making, which presents its own difficulties (Entrikin 2007). Still, eight years after the waves subsided, the KSM remains a forum for locals and tourists to see a reflection of a community changed by a natural disaster. The earthquake, tsunami, and recovery has remade Kesennuma into what it is today. Such an altered sense of place is part of a recovery from a major disaster (Cox and Perry 2011).

Many other museums in Japan, Asia, and around the world are dedicated to disasters and tragedies. In the majority of cases, each was established after the fact in order to narrate and preserve the memory and stories of those difficult and impactful events. The Earthquake Memorial Museum in Kobe, Japan, the Beichuan Earthquake Museum in Mianyang, China, and a handful of Hurricane Katrina museums in New Orleans, Louisiana, each approach this goal for natural disasters in their respective locales. And,

the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum, the Yad Vashem (World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel), the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Museum do the same for human-inflicted tragedies. Such venues present fruitful ground for geographical studies of place amid disaster and tragedy.

What is different, and possibly unique about Kesennuma's Shark Museum, however, is that it was established prior to the 3/11 disaster, and for a purpose not unlike local art, history, or special interest museums in cities and towns around the world that represent their respective communities. In its rebirth, it took on aspects of a museum dedicated to the disaster, while maintaining its original *raison d'être*. Perhaps such a change is one reason it is a good representation of a broader sense of local identity, this one rooted in both historical foundation and the disaster's influence on place. Whether in museums dedicated wholly to telling the stories of disaster and tragedy, or those whose focus is reframed after a disaster, there exists ample opportunity for scholars to examine sites that can illuminate the impact tragic events have on sense of place.

## Note

1. The fact that sharks are harvested at all in Kesennuma (and in Japan more broadly) is a common criticism aimed at this place. Whereas sustainable fishing of sharks (or any other animal) is an important goal for Kesennuma people, it is important to understand that criticism of the shark harvest is often from a western perspective, is sensationalized by western media, and fails to understand the Asian cultural context of this product of the sea. See McCurry (2011) for that western perspective and Akamine (2015) for the Japanese view.

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