Living in a tiny temporary house isn’t all bad.

“I always wanted to see what it felt like to live in a little apartment, like one of those newlywed couples,” says Itsuko Suzuki, 63.

“Cleaning house is a snap,” says Keiko Sugahara, 60.

“You want to turn on the TV? Reach over here. Want a cup of coffee? Reach over there. Everything is within reach!” adds Sumiko Toyoguchi, in her 70s.
It’s a late February afternoon, and the three women are sitting with several of their friends around a folding table in the community center at the East Sasaya temporary housing development in the city of Fukushima.

Everyone at the table used to live in the town of Namie, just north of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. They were all forced to leave when three reactors at that plant operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco) went into meltdown following the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, heavily contaminating parts of the town with radioactive fallout.

Suzuki, Sugahara and Toyoguchi are good at making light of the strange twist their lives have taken. But jokes aside, they say, the real reason they’re still living in one- or two-room gray boxes two years after the meltdowns occurred is that they have no idea where else to go.

“If I had a job somewhere, I’d go there, but I’m not working. If I were a student, I’d go away to college. If I were still back home I’d stay there till I died. But I’m here. Should I go to (the city of) Aizu Wakamatsu (in central Fukushima Prefecture)? Should I stay here? I don’t have any sense of progress or goal. I’m just living day to day,” says Suzuki.

The nine men and women gathered around the table murmur in sympathy. Some of them live in the temporary houses because they can’t afford to move. Others stay because the community provides an important support network. All, however, seem to understand Suzuki’s sense of floating unhinged in a once-solid world.

At least 157,000 people fled their homes in Fukushima because of the 2011 nuclear disaster, tsunami, and earthquake. Some 32,000 of them now live in temporary housing developments in the prefecture. Around 59,000 more live in subsidized apartments there. Rent is free but utilities are not.

This arrangement was originally supposed to last for two years. But more than two years have passed and final compensation settlements from Tepco have not been decided; permanent housing for displaced people has not been built; and much of the evacuation zone — which includes eleven towns and extends up to 45 km from the plant — remains uninhabitable. The government now plans to extend the amount of time residents can stay in the temporary houses to four years.

At Sasaya, the gray boxes sit in long rows, each with a miniature porch of wood and corrugated plastic and a small patch of gravel out front. The largest is about 25 sq. meters, the smallest about 8 sq. meters. They are located in a quiet residential neighborhood whose main drag is lined with car dealerships, convenience stores and chain restaurants. The houses and large asphalt parking lot are as tidy and colorless as military barracks.
“The situation is regrettable, but you get used to it,” says Sugahara.

Chizu Matsumoto, a housewife in her 30s, lives at Sasaya with her 8- and 14-year-old sons, while her husband works and lives several hours away. Her former house lies within a part of Namie so contaminated the government has not set a timeline for cleaning it up. She says the boys are fine, and don’t show signs of stress. She finds support among the other mothers in the development who gather at a moment’s notice to confer and console.

Toyoguchi says she does, too.

“We’re forming a new community. It’s different from before. In Namie, the connections went back generations. It was like family. Now it’s like, let’s all get together and overcome this,” she says.

Whatever community exists at Sasaya, Toyoguchi — a musician and social worker — is at least partly responsible for creating it. Like the indomitable engine at the back of a train, she constantly pushes her fellow evacuees toward political action. She circulates petitions, organizes demonstrations — and reminds her neighbors that corporate and government wrongdoing is behind their current plight.

Last year, when Tepco threatened to cut in half the monthly emotional hardship compensation payments of ¥100,000 that every Namie evacuee is eligible for, she helped organize a successful campaign opposing the change. She says many elderly evacuees living alone couldn’t survive without the money. (About 40 percent of Sasaya’s residents are over age 60.)

Toyoguchi’s level of activism is rare. Much more common, Toyoguchi and others say, is a growing irritation with Japanese society’s habitual themes of endurance and nostalgia.

“Recently there was a community event and someone played a song that went, ‘Let’s keep up the fight and go back to our old hometown.’ Half the people got up and left the hall. We’re still supposed to be enduring?” says Suzuki.

Of the 10 people gathered that afternoon, none say they want to return to Namie.

“The land is overgrown and the houses are full of mice and spider webs. They smell awful,” says Matsumoto.

“I’ll go back if they take back the radiation,” says Suzuki.

“I don’t want to live in fear. I don’t want to go back,” says Toyoguchi.
The women agree the mood among their neighbors has changed: A year ago many people at Sasaya still held on to hopes of going back home. Now, they claim, most feel that is unrealistic.

But the policies being pushed by the central and prefectural governments have not changed. They remain centered on decontamination and return — rather than on encouraging evacuees to put down roots elsewhere.

“Policies that encourage people to move back home are being promoted as a set with those that reduce support for evacuees,” writes Hiroyuki Okada, a reporter for the Tokyo-based weekly magazine Toyo Keizai, in a recent article published in a newsletter for evacuees. As an example, he cites the fact that evacuees who moved out of Fukushima Prefecture after Dec. 28, 2012, are not eligible for rent subsidies.

About two hours southwest of the city of Fukushima, in the snowy mountain city of Aizu Wakamatsu, a group of evacuees from coastal Minamisoma say they resent those policies.

“We want choices. People who want to go back should be able to. Those who don’t should get help to move forward toward a new life,” says Sachiko Inamura, 42, who now lives in the historic city with her 5-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter. Her husband, a high school teacher, lives two hours away because he was not able to find a job close to his family. He visits on weekends.

Before the disaster, the four lived in a house less than 20 km from the nuclear plant. After evacuation orders were issued they moved several times, leaving most of their possessions behind. They now live in a small apartment. (More than three-fourths of Minamisoma’s evacuees live in widely scattered apartments and houses, rather than in temporary housing developments.)

“Sometimes my son says, ‘I wonder if that toy (he played with in Minamisoma) is doing okay.’ My daughter says she wants to go see her old room,” Inamura says.

Her old neighborhood is now designated an “evacuation order cancellation preparation” zone. But even though visits are allowed, Inamura has not taken the children back, for fear of exposing them to radiation.

She says the house has become a trap constricting the family’s future.

“We bought it about 10 years ago, and more than half of the mortgage is left,” she says.

The family must still make a payment every month.
“We worry it will be financially difficult to buy another house while the loan remains. I don’t want to go back, but I might have to,” she says. She and her husband are working through a lawyer to get adequate compensation from Tepco to start over somewhere new.

Tomio Kokubun, 68, another Minamisoma evacuee living in Aizu Wakamatsu with his family, is involved in a group lawsuit against the company.

“Houses are the big thing,” he says. “Some houses are 100 years old, and (we believe) Tepco will say their value is zero. We’re saying, everyone needs the same amount when it comes to rebuilding.”

Tepco has not yet compensated homeowners like Kokubun for property inside the evacuation zone. However, a company representative confirmed that payments will depend on the value of houses and land. The policy could cause problems since many evacuees fled rural areas, where land values are relatively low, but want to buy in or near cities.

Kokubun’s son Nobushi, 37, rented rather than owned in Minamisoma, so he has no mortgage to pay off. He now lives with his wife and 2-year-old son in Aizu Wakamatsu. He has found a new job as an elementary school teacher nearby.

Nevertheless, Nobushi says, the experiences of the past two years weigh on him.

“I just want to get our life back to how it was before. We were 20 minutes from both (my wife’s and my) parents. We’d have barbeques on the weekends,” he said.

“The hardest thing is that we can no longer do the things that seemed so natural before.”

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