

Machiya Preservation Project

November 5 Evening Symposium: A City Under Siege: Saving Kyoto's Machiya from Destruction

Speakers:

Fusae Kojima, machiya owner, President and Executive Director of Kyomachiya Revitalization Study Group

Kengo Kuma, Architect

Limbon, Professor, Ritsumeikan University

Hiroshi Mimura, President, Kyoto City Center for Community Collaboration

Presider:

Ruth Abram, Founder, Lower Eastside Tenement Museum

On the evening of November 5, 2008, Japan Society hosted an invitation-only symposium on the plight of Kyoto's machiya, wooden, earthen-walled townhouses built for artisans and merchants that represent a rare physical link to the past in urban Japan.

"Kyoto, Japan's capital of traditional culture, is one of the few Japanese cities, as many of you know, that was spared from the fire bombing of World War II," said **Daniel Rosenblum** of Japan Society in his opening remarks. "Yet every year, scores of machiya are destroyed and replaced by high-rises and parking lots, rapidly erasing the traditional fabric of Kyoto.

"Why is this happening? It's a complicated question. There are many reasons. Japan, while it has a tradition of preserving temples, and shrines, and palaces, lacks a tradition of preserving a vernacular architecture of everyday life. And, if that were not enough, Japan also lacks the tax incentives of giving that we enjoy here in the U.S.

"Tonight a group of preservationists from Kyoto will explain these, and other challenges, that they face in their fight to preserve machiya." They've been meeting over the past three days with American experts in historic preservation and preservation funding, their purpose not only to learn from the American experience, but also to establish strong ties with Americans who share their passion for preservation and to help build a movement to save the machiya and recognize more fully the value of these modest yet elegant designs.

"'Deprive me of my historical consciousness,' said the American historian Arthur Bestor, 'and in the most literal sense I do not know who I am, I do not know where I am going and I don't know what steps I need to take to get there,'" began **Ruth Abram**, founder of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. "During the last several days, 20 Japanese leaders have joined leaders of our historic preservation movement to map a strategy" to save the machiya and to establish a historic preservation movement in Japan.

Some 140 years ago, Japan's governing Tokugawa clan sent a delegate to America, putting an end to Japan's isolation from the outside world and opening the door to the modern age," reflected **Hiroshi Mimura**, President of the Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration. "This time I came here as a missionary from Kyoto, using machiya as a medium of common interest."

The Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration was established a dozen years ago and is neither public nor private, Mr. Mimura said, but a hybrid blending the efforts of Kyoto's city government, its trades, industries, entrepreneurs, nonprofits, universities and groups of volunteers.

"Kyoto used to be the main center of trade as well as religion," in some sense the Vatican of Japan, he said. Pilgrims came to its shrines and temples, and ceramics and textiles were prominent in its economic life. Spared by World War II fire bombings, Kyoto to this day "not only has world-level cultural heritage, but also a daily experience of a lifestyle where people still breathe and live." Some 25,000 or 30,000 townhouses, the machiya, remain, but their

survival is at risk. The survival of the townscape, the intangible way of life of the city, is also threatened.

"For the next 20 years we will have to establish this structure on which we can preserve this cultural heritage. In order to do that, we will have to convince the people of the value of this machiya and establish the structure to communicate the beauty of machiya," Mr. Mimura said.

"In the past two days, here in New York, we have received a lot of comments, proposals and suggestions, which are all very interesting. We would like to go back to Kyoto and reflect our learning so that we can have a solid program. I hope that all of you in the audience would agree with us and join us in this effort."

Fusae Kojima lives with her two daughters in a machiya that her maternal grandfather bought from the man who built the house over 100 years ago. It's considered to be a sad thing in Japan to sell your own house, she said. So at the time, her grandfather told the man who sold him the house that he would hold the house in trust for him, living in the house as if custodians for the real owner. "And that's how we live in our daily life," Ms. Kojima said. Her family doesn't modify it and renovate it hastily and without thought, the way many people tend to do.

Ms. Kojima was born after the war and as "new things came to Japan, my parents' generation started to think that new things are better," she said. "They felt ashamed that the older houses were not really up to the modern times." People changed their houses "to make the house look better and newer, just like the set for a movie," more modern and more western in style.

She married and lived with her husband in an old house, and her feelings began to change. Then her father died, and her mother worried that she would have to sell the house to pay the huge inheritance tax that was due. But when she talked to her relatives, "everybody said please keep the house," and so they did.

"One house represents not only just one generation of family, but it represents the intergenerational multiple families, and they look at the house in the same way," Ms. Kojima said. "I think that is very important. I recognized the same sentiment yesterday when I went to the Tenement Museum" in lower Manhattan.

"Through this machiya revitalization study group I have been doing many different activities. I decided to renovate to maintain this house. During the renovation many visitors came, and then they asked us about our lifestyle or how this house was built. I think this newly renovated house is a kind of result of my sentiment in the various activities," she explained.

Inside, the house is quite bright, with two gardens that bring the breeze right through the house, and light from the skylight shining off wood that has been polished for 100 years. Visitors often think they have to take their shoes off immediately on coming into the house, but that's not the case, Ms. Kojima said, though everyone takes off their shoes when they actually go into the tatami room. Screens can be removed to make one large living room, or used to decorate and create a stage for traditional dance performances and other events that she conducts in May and June each year. "By changing just a piece of fabric, you can change the expression of the house substantially."

"New York has plenty of wonderful old buildings, and it's wonderful to see how people are keeping these buildings up and cherish them and live in them. So, when I go back to Kyoto I would like to work harder to pass on wonderful machiya to the next generation."

Architect **Kengo Kuma** paid tribute to the sustainability of machiya design. The houses front right onto the street, but the slatted screens in front are narrow, and together with the passage gardens, they bring in light and air. Even in Kyoto's harsh climate and in the absence of air conditioning, these features make the houses comfortable to live in.

Kyomachiya, the machiya of Kyoto, are modular in design, Mr. Kuma explained. "For machiyas outside of Kyoto usually the length between the middle of pillars—between the two pillars is three by six feet. But in the case of Kyoto it's the size of tatami. . . If you have to move to another machiya house, you can bring your tatami and you know that they fit." Similarly, if you're moving you can bring your screen doors to the new house; you don't have to waste your resources redoing your new rooms.

Machiya are made of wood, and that's another eco-friendly feature. If you own a machiya house and keep it intact for a longtime, "you contain CO2 inside the wood and prevent the CO2 from releasing into the atmosphere." It's easy to make minor repairs in wooden structures. The machiya design makes room for both work life and family life in a single, compact space. "This is really the materialization of a compact city, where multiple functions are consolidated in a small space."

Lattice walls and doors protect the residents' privacy, with each layer of the design, from the store front or work space just off the street to the passage garden and living quarters marked off by screens that allow air to move through, Mr. Kuma said. "Frank Lloyd Wright was very much influenced by this kind of architecture," and particularly the sense of depth of Japanese architecture and the layering of lattice screens of different widths and with different spaces between the pieces of lattice to allow for different degrees of privacy. Wright "says himself that if he did not encounter the Japanese architecture, he would not be able to create his own style. That's how much he was influenced."

Limbon remarked on the level of interest concerning the machiya among people in many different walks of life in New York. "We had the pre-symposium today, which we didn't advertise, because it was a rehearsal, but unlike our plan of 70 participants, more than 100 people came. That included people from the business world, and doctors showed up, which we never expected. The machiya in New York combined together actually generated enormous interest from unexpected people from different walks of life. I suppose it's a kind of chemical reaction."

Ruth Abram asked, "Why, Limbon, has it been hard when you have had such an incredible reception in New York? Everywhere you've gone, everywhere, people have said this should happen. Right? And it's obvious it should happen. So, why are you having trouble in Kyoto?"

"There are a lot of machiya units in Kyoto. If you had access to pictures from 100 years ago in Kyoto, there were so many machiya that I would have thought that it was boring," Limbon responded. And after the war, economic recovery "was the aim and means to an end." That choice can't really be criticized, in his view; "it was a natural process and a flow of history."

He contrasted the American and Japanese attitudes, which in the first postwar years were very similar, with those of Europe. "Italy has a constitution that stipulates that people cannot destroy or alter the cultural, physical assets, and that's very different" from both Japan and the U.S.

"Starting in the 1960s, at the height of economic activity, America started seeing how important those cultural heritages were, and Japan was steps behind. Twenty years have passed before we noticed it. Ten years ago we finally started moving. This awareness probably would become more popular in the future, and the physical landscape will probably change too."

I am wondering why the Japanese designation of living treasure, which is something that the rest of the world became aware of as something quite marvelous, has not been applied to these kinds of structures. Clearly they are living treasures.

Vernacular architecture "didn't represent something important" in a social or academic sense. Everyday Japanese were regarded as leading essentially hollow, ordinary lives.

"I think Japanese people have a hard time being proud of their own culture, particularly their own houses," Ms. Kojima said.

What are the prospects of instituting tax incentives or tax relief, for example for inheritance tax issues?

"If there is a meaning as an asset from a cultural perspective for the landscape or the townscape, if that contributes to the public interest, and if it is designated as such, then the tax abatement or tax deduction could be possible," Mr. Mimura said. "But because the designation you cannot change, and it is public in nature, periodically you have to open up your own house for the inspections by the officers, or to use it as a place for some kind of an event. Some of the owners of the houses do not like these kinds of activities."

Ms. Kojima and her family made a deliberate choice to accept the burdens of having to open their house periodically, for inspections and for events, because they wanted to create a legacy for the next generation and the generation after that, she said. "I think it is very important for us to change the mindset of the machiya owners."

Ms. Abram asked, "I'm wondering if we could turn this back to you," to the audience, "and ask what ideas would you have for changing perceptions? I'm an owner of a machiya; I think it's an ordinary house. I can't imagine that you think I'm living in a jewel of anything. I can't imagine why I should be a partner in preserving this house. I can't imagine that I am part of a larger movement of Japanese culture. How do you go about changing a perception of an entire community? Who has got some ideas out there?"

"One thought is to have more films or books or anything written by non-Japanese, by foreigners, through their eyes about your beautiful machiya," said an audience member who is an art lawyer and has worked in Japan. A client of his at one point "did exactly that. They hired a foreign architect and a foreign filmmaker to come in and in English do a whole presentation about the extraordinary beauty" of the district, intended not for foreign audiences but for a Japanese audience.

What impact did it have? asked Ms. Abram.

"It was very good. That foreigners had come in and valued it so greatly, even though it wasn't in Japanese, I think that gave it a kind of extra power."

I recently traveled to Kyoto as a tourist and got the privilege of seeing a couple of machiya, but without guidance from someone local I wouldn't have known what they signified. My guidebook said nothing about them. There was no special map telling me where to go and where to look. These things would have made this a focus for me even if I hadn't been so lucky.

"So, just letting people know that there exists a body of machiya and where they are and have a look at them," Ms. Abram responded.

There seems to be a very, very strong appreciation of the machiya history among the younger generation. Is there hope that they will be able to mount a movement to influence government policy?

"In Kyoto now the people who are in their 20s have a very strong desire to live in a machiya house," Limbon replied. Sometimes students choose to stay in an inexpensive machiya rather than staying in a concrete hotel.

"When I asked students about what do you think about machiya and why do you like machiya, I was shocked to hear their answer. They think they are new--it is very contemporary."

Limbon expressed some wariness about developing interest about machiya in Japan. "I think it is impossible for people who live in Kyoto, and also people who live in Japan across the board,

to have a very strong interest in machiya. It is very, very possible that some other people do not even [have an opinion] about machiya, or they may even hate machiya," he said.

For preservation specialists, the understanding is immediate, because they know the language even if they aren't schooled in the particular history and culture of machiya. It's like math, or music: you know what the symbols mean, he suggested. But "if they don't have the right mindset, no matter how long you spend in persuading them, they will not understand."

"So, I think we can hope to create the network not only in Japan, but globally. I think there are many people interested in the same cause."

Guidebooks for Kyoto "do not really talk about machiya," Limbon acknowledged, but recently a new three-hour tour has been developed and there are efforts to help tour guides learn more in depth about machiya. Some tour guides and bookstores are eager to help. "If you stay at a machiya I think we will begin to see machiya written up in guidebooks."