

## **Machiya Preservation Project U.S.-Japan Innovators Network**

### **Introduction**

In November 2008, American and Japanese preservationists met at Japan Society to share ideas on how to support historic preservation in Japan and how to build a Japanese and perhaps global movement to save Kyoto's machiya, modest wooden townhouses in the center city whose ranks are shrinking year by year.

As U.S. voters went to the polls in a historic presidential election on November 4, Japan Society's **Daniel Rosenblum** welcomed the group to an afternoon workshop on preservation philosophies led by **Ruth Abram**, founder of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan.

The next morning, Ruth led a second workshop to share ideas on fundraising. That evening, the Society held an invitation-only symposium to discuss the plight of the machiya and what can be done to deepen and broaden Kyoto's historic preservation efforts.

These events grew out of meetings in Kyoto the year before, when Ruth, Daniel, and Innovators Network member **Limbon** got together in Kyoto with several other urban planning and community revitalization specialists.

"Kyoto's unique in the sense that it has some of the same challenges that American cities face," Daniel explained: depressed central business districts and large minority populations living in poverty or near-poverty, not only Japanese-Koreans but also so-called burakurim, who in the Edo period ranked lowest in the caste system that came to Japan from India by way of China.

Kyoto, the seat of culture in Japan since olden times, escaped the fire-bombing that devastated most other major Japanese cities during World War II, he noted. The city thus has a lot of older neighborhoods that remain, albeit suffering from neglect and the pressures of development.

## November 4 Afternoon Workshop: Evolution and Philosophy of Historic Preservation in the United States

### Panelists:

**Lisa Ackerman**, World Monuments Fund  
**Michael Alderstein**, Capital Master Plan, UN  
**Adele Chatfield-Taylor**, The American Academy in Rome  
**Kazumori Kaneshiro**, Zero Corporation Co., Ltd.  
**Fusae Kojima**, Kyomachiya Revitalization Study Group  
**Limbon**, Ritsumeikan University  
**Hiroshi Mimura**, Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration  
**Hiroshi Okubo**, Nihon Tokei Jim-Center Co., Ltd.  
**Takahiko Otani**, Kyomachiya Revitalization Study Group  
**Daniel Rosenblum**, Japan Society  
**Frank Sanchis**, The Municipal Art Society of New York  
**Susumu Satomi**, Kyoto City  
**Kenzo Teramoto**, Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration

### Presider:

**Ruth Abram**, Founder, Lower East Side Tenement Museum

As the workshop began, Ruth read from Alex Kerr's *Lost Japan*, published in 1994 and winner of Japan's Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize:

For Japan as a nation, the old world has become irrelevant. Although the Japanese may admire the ancient cities of Kyoto and Nara and consider them beautiful, deep in their hearts they know these places have no connection to their own modern lives. These places have become the cities of illusion, historical theme parks.

Mr. Kerr, an American writer and collector of East Asian art who has lived in Japan and Thailand for many years, continued:

In Kyoto, the destruction was deliberate. People coming to the city for the first time are shocked by the sight of the needle-shaped Kyoto Tower standing by Kyoto Station. Built in 1964 at the urging of the city government expressly to break the line of the old tiled roofs, which were thought to look old fashioned, it tells visitors we are modern, we have nothing to do with all this old stuff around us. Though thousands of people petitioned against it, that needle was pushed through. . . . It was the symbolic stake in the heart. The construction of Kyoto Tower was followed by a rapid destruction of most of the old town, leaving only temples and shrines untouched.

Machiya are wooden row houses with workspace in front and living quarters to the rear, so narrow that they are often called eels' bedrooms. The machiya neighborhoods are in central Kyoto and for economic reasons, the high cost of upkeep among them, many have been torn down and replaced with high-rise construction.

Paper and drawing materials were passed around, and Ruth asked the participants to draw a picture showing their answer to the following question:

### **What do we lose if we allow the wholesale destruction of the machiya?**

**Ruth Abram** drew a tree. "I did a tree because I'm very impressed with the idea that the machiya help to connect people to nature through all seasons," she said, with interior garden spaces that are open to light from skylights above and light bamboo screens that are put up in

place of heavier ones during the summer months to cope with Kyoto's hot and humid summer weather.

**Lisa Ackerman** of the World Monuments Fund sketched a graphic with the words continuity - sense of place - unique ambience circled and crossed out in red with the universal "no" sign. "Cities are interesting because of the layers of history," she explained. Generic glass and steel towers in American cities like Pittsburgh and Houston represent wealth come lately, the fruits of the long boom that took place between 1950 and 2000. It's not good to be there: Houston "is one of the least livable cities in the U.S."

**Why do uniqueness and continuity matter?** Ruth pressed.

"I drew a tree also, the roots," said UN assistant secretary-general **Michael Adlerstein**. Roots are important because identity is politically and psychologically important. Belonging is a very important aspect of social stability. When children can know their roots, they are less likely to be alienated from the society at large.

Indeed, Michael said, the American preservation movement began in the 1840s when George Washington's home, Mount Vernon, was in danger of being torn down, and the women of Virginia wanted to make sure that young people of the time didn't forget the roots of American independence and the early years of the republic. But private groups do die off, and in his view, "it needs to be a public-private partnership."

The U.S., unlike many countries in the world is a nation of immigrants, and immigrants likewise respond to the stories of the founding of their adopted country, Lisa indicated. The sea change in preservation in the past 25 years, however, is moving away from a focus on great moments in our history and great leaders, and towards an interest in the everyday.

**Frank Sanchis** of New York's Municipal Arts Society was next to show his drawing. He held up a cartoon of a person with a question mark--"happy, but clueless, perhaps," he said. "Life is much richer if you understand."

In turn, Frank posed two further questions:

**Does saving the machiya mean saving every one of them? Does it mean Kyoto cannot change?**

Frank's own answer to both questions was no. "The public, and the real estate community, often feel that any preservation is a bad thing because it's going to prevent progress somehow, and progress is always good," he observed. But here in the U.S. "we're finding that you can have both." The issue is how many do you need to save, and can you change some aspects of the machiya to make them more livable in contemporary conditions.

**Hiroshi Mimura** of Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration showed his drawing, which was of a stream in Kyoto. The oldest machiya go back 500 years, but machiya that still exist in Kyoto were built only a hundred or two hundred years ago, and the style has changed since the earliest ones were built. Trying to stop the natural flow of history is not a good thing, he said. "A hundred years from now, what will happen to the machiya we are trying to preserve now?"

The prototypical houses represent perhaps only 5 or 6 percent of the old machiya. Close to half of the remaining houses will be saved, "but maybe half of them, we have to let go."

"The most important thing is that the flow will continue," with the machiya that remain being shored up with modern fire-resistant and earthquake-resistant technology.

**Fusae Kojima** lives year-round in a 109-year-old machiya house, and directs the Kyomachiya Revitalization Study Group.

If the physical buildings are lost, "everything that is sort of contained in the space in the buildings gets lost--that's what I'm fearful of," she said. "For all the memories, collective memories, to be lost, is like losing minds."

"You have to save some of them if people really want to live in these buildings," commented **[Kazumori Kaneshiro]** of real estate firm Zero, who like Fusae lives in a machiya house though not year-round]. "But if people lose interest in living in these buildings, I think the spirit of machiya would be lost." He concluded: "As long as people are willing to live in them, I think we should try to preserve them."

**Adele Chatfield-Taylor**, president of the American Academy in Rome and a preservationist and arts administrator for many years, drew a picture of a family.

"What I love about picturing a family is the confidence that you have, if you're a small member of the family, that there are things that will be unfolded to you in life that you will learn from the elders, and you will know them when *you* are older," she said. Those secrets are embodied in the machiya.

"There's so much we don't know that can't be risked by just leaving a few samples as though they were butterflies on a pin. The nature of human life and human settlements is much more about the interaction and the interconnections between these buildings and all of the built environment with the natural environment."

"There was something about the 20th century, at least in the West, where we believed that we were the last word," Adele said. "We believed utterly" that when we tore down a building, "we were doing it for good reasons," to clean up slums and make conditions better for people moving into the new buildings. "No one understood what they were actually doing."

"The trick is to formulate legislation that gives you a fighting chance for some sort of balance, so that you can designate enough of the sections of the city," she said. "And at the moment, given your problem, I would go for all of it, not just a little of it, because it sounds like you've lost a great deal. And the fabric of it is just as important as the single structure."

Under New York landmarks law, designation as a landmark wouldn't protect the traditions of how to live in an old house, Frank Sanchis pointed out. "It only protects the exterior, unless the interior is specifically and separately designated. So if you go to any of our historic districts here in New York, to Greenwich Village, to Brooklyn Heights, to the Upper East Side, which are all major residential districts, people who live in the houses that are protected have the freedom essentially to do what they want inside."

Zoning to impose a height limit, "it seems to me that's the first step," Adele continued. "Perhaps designate some zones where you could have tall buildings."

"And have some interesting experiments with new buildings within the old districts, because to me, that's something we in this country are also thinking about, which is how to have some structures that are half and half, perhaps based on the old architecture but built out of new materials, or vice versa, using the old materials in a new design."

Even if you don't designate the interior, "you're way ahead of the game if you can designate the exterior as having value."

"The scary thing for me is the breaking of the continuity. And our historic houses in this country are always more interesting if they were somehow saved with the furniture and the eyeglasses on the desk, and the books. . . . We've only recently learned that. And we have a habit of thinking it's all fine, you clean it out, make it look brand new, paint it up, and then furnish it in some crazy way that has nothing to do--as you can see, I could go on and on."

**How many of these buildings are involved in Kyoto? What are the mechanisms that are currently in place that can help support a preservation movement?**

So far we have identified 25,000, some large but most small, replied **Takahiko Otani**, an architect who teaches at Mukogawa Women's University and is president of the Kyomachiya Revitalization Study Group.

"It's not a question of whether I designate how many we need or the government decides how many we need to preserve. It's really up to the people who actually live in the building," he said. "We cannot decide that okay, we're going to preserve the top 10,000 houses. We really have to make machiya of the people's spirit, the people who live there."

As chairman of a revitalization fund at the Kyoto Center, Takahiko works on landmark designation:

We talk to the people who are actually living in or using the building. We want to make sure that people value the historical nature of the buildings, whether they are willing to make the remodeling while respecting the historical nature of the building. And if we feel that they are willing to go by the spirit of machiya, we designate the building. The exterior might be really good, but if the people really do not care about preserving, then we don't designate the building as of historical importance.

"We can't freeze them in stone," he emphasized. There must be some changes "to accommodate modern-day living--for example, we can modernize the kitchen a little bit so people have more comfortable lives."

Takahiko's drawing was of the Kyoto skyline. "One symbol of Kyoto is the mountains that surround the city, but in this picture, the mountain is almost hidden away by buildings, so you can't really see the mountains. It becomes something very senseless."

"I am not involved in the preserving of machiya," [architect and urban planning professor **Limbon**] noted. "But to preserve machiya, as was mentioned earlier, with the issue of spirit, whether that person would like to preserve machiya houses, what I drew here is just a kind of landscape.

"It is the landscape of Kyoto. That represents a kind of nostalgic feeling or attachment to Kyoto, and then it sort of symbolizes the adherence to the history of Kyoto."

"To not preserve the physical houses that represent the history of Kyoto is the synonym to we don't care about maintaining the culture. I think that's an issue. Tangible things also represent something intangible. That's what I'm saying here."

Ruth asked:

**From a legal point of view, can you designate machiya for preservation in Kyoto, in Japan generally, if the owner doesn't want you to?**

Essentially no, replied **Susumu Satomi**, director general of Kyoto's City Planning Bureau. Though the government has the power to mandate that an owner to accept the designation of his or her property as a heritage asset, "in reality, we are not forcing them" except in the case of a handful of national treasures designated as such against the owner's will.

Susumu's drawing showed a forest, a wooden house, birds, the chemical symbol for carbon dioxide, and hands joined together.

"To lose machiya means that the wooden houses will go, but I'm not looking at that. But you grow a tree, and you cut down the tree and build a wooden house. And the ecological cycle will be stopped"; as the wood decays, its carbon will combine with oxygen and escape into the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>, harming the environment.

And finally, people will lose a sense of connection with each other. "People have a sense of isolation. If you are living in a machiya house--some people think it is a nuisance to have to maintain the house, but you are not isolated, because you are part of the houses" and part of the neighborhood.

Because the machiya are made not of brick, stone or concrete but of wood, it's more difficult to preserve them intact, Susumu acknowledged. Contemporary building codes, especially those on earthquake resistance, may be a problem for some less sturdy specimens. Having the government what individuals do with the interior of their homes could also be difficult.

Japan Society's **Daniel Rosenblum** disclaimed expertise in historical preservation, except to say that as the owner of a 120-year-old Victorian house he knows first-hand the expense of keeping up an older house.

However, he said, "Japan's a small country. America has lots of land to build on. Japan has very little land. America can waste and destroy vast stretches of its environment, creating the mall-ing of America, and we can still have plenty left to preserve. We haven't had wars, we don't for the most part have earthquakes. We haven't had the same history nature has given Japan.

"And I think part of the problem is that there's so little left in Japan that represents the past in a vernacular sense. And so Japan also needs to use every square inch of buildable land."

Earlier on, there wasn't "the luxury or the space, the geographical serendipity, to really think about a preservation movement. So when you think about should we be preserving all of the machiya or just some of the machiya, realistically we're probably only going to be able to preserve some machiya. But we should act as if we want to try to preserve all of it, in my opinion, because there aren't many left."

It's important to note that of the roughly one million buildings in New York, only 25,000 are protected by landmark designations, Frank Sanchis said. "It's not a wonderful thing or horrible thing, it's just a fact. Very, very few of the buildings in New York are actually protected and designated."

In the 1960s, people living in brownstones, row houses clad in brown sandstone, "got together and started circulating newsletters and information about why it was wonderful to live in a brownstone. And they convinced a lot of other people that it was." This grassroots history is something Japan may find helpful, he indicated. Also of interest is recent research on adobe buildings in western states. These buildings "actually had endured lots of earthquakes, but were seen as somehow dangerous. And so there were various studies done on how to retrofit adobe buildings to make them seismically more resistant to earthquakes."

"I don't think these types of movements are ever successful until you're at the edge of the cliff," Michael Adlerstein commented.

American preservation efforts started some 150 years ago, but "it wasn't until terrible destruction in the 1960s that it really became more than a few projects and became a movement. It had multiple layers of protections that were absorbed federally, statewide, local groups, nonprofit organizations, private donors, and money. I think we're all talking real estate, and real estate can't be accomplished without funding sources."

In similar manner, Save the Whales wasn't very powerful, but climate change is now being taken more seriously, and "the environmental movement, when it incorporated the entire globe, it became a very successful movement."

Frank Sanchis agreed. "The American preservation movement, which seemed to come out of the 60s in many ways, was based upon a failure. The loss of Penn Station generated the outrage that led to federal legislation and a whole other series of steps."

"There needs to be a way to provide both incentives for real estate industry to take a smaller-scale resource and keep it, as well as disincentives to avoid having people try to build larger. Larger is always more financially successful," he said.

In the U.S., Michael Adlerstein said, "We have these wonderful tax incentives that allow the preservation movement to tap into enormous funds: by preserving or rehabilitating a historic building, you get a tax break. That tax break is very democratic. It's across the board. If you meet certain criteria, you are entitled to that tax break for certain properties, and it's been very successful; it's led to tens of thousands of properties being saved."

"I know that in Europe, Paris looks like old Paris not because of any financial incentives--they just zoned the entire downtown and said you will not build. In other European cities, very successful just by using the stick rather than the carrot," he concluded. "In America we have not been successful in imposing the disciplined zoning as much as we've been successful in finding alternative ways for the real estate industry to be successful living with preservation."

Ruth Abram asked:

**Does it end with the machiya, or is this the first leg of a larger program to establish a preservation movement in Japan?**

Limbon showed his drawing of the symbols for *symmetria*, the Greek word meaning symmetry. He said that if the machiya are lost, what will be lost is "the symbol of harmony." The proportions of the machiya façade are not exact symmetry, but they are "ultimate harmony." Everyday life is very low key; there's a bond with the community, represented in the architecture of the building by the public space and semi-private space, and yet a certain distance that's kept away from the community in the private spaces at the back of the house and on the upper floor. And finally, there's a harmony with nature, a re-creation of nature in an urban space.

Adele, who is a trustee at the National Trust for Historical Preservation, remarked that one of the Trust's great successes "was that it gave people a place to go, if this was an interest of theirs, so they could become members for a small amount of money." Memberships can be given as gifts to family members --it's a "way to have everyone follow along, but also show their values."

The Trust owns some properties, but education and advocacy are its biggest goals, Adele said. Actress Diane Keaton is now on the board and has written eloquent pieces on historic preservation. First Ladies in the U.S., starting with Jackie Kennedy and including Laura Bush, welcome the invitation to take on a role at the Trust. Because they're involved with the leadership of the country, they understand what's at stake; "often from that position you can see the peril if you let it go, and the chaos that can ensue."

A fund set up by a corporation or through a gift of Japan's royal family would speak volumes, Adele added. Such a fund would enable small grants to people who want to live in a traditional way, replacing roof tiles with the right kind of tiles and so forth, as a follow-up to zoning which would take the pressure off the real estate.

Like Lisa Ackerman's, Kazumori Kaneshiro's drawing was made up of words: historical assets, genes for Kyoto, the shape of the town. Kazumori first traveled to Kyoto at age 16, and at 25 moved to the city that so captivates him. He lives in a machiya house in spring and fall. "If we lose machiya in the city of Kyoto, personally it would be very painful."

He loves the city because there's a history behind it, he said. "If I stand before a building that's 350 years old, I can visualize people walking back and forth in front of it on the street," and "I get really excited to look back 300 years ago, 400 years ago."

"As a person involved in the real estate business I guess I am responsible for destroying some of them," Kazumori admitted. However, "if the value of these machiya buildings becomes very

high, and if we can make sure that they can be refurbished, and if it becomes a viable business to sell these refurbished machiya buildings, I'll be very happy."

**Will it be possible to find someone of great standing in Japan who becomes the symbol, the public face, of the historic preservation movement? Could it be a member of the royal family?**

It may take some time in Japan for something like this to happen, Fusae Kojima said. Her group has been working on publicity for the machiya for 15 years, but it's pretty much limited to Kyoto. "In Japan also there's a sense of humbleness, that's very much like a virtue. It's very difficult for Japanese people to say hey, look, this is great, what I'm doing is great!" Fusae laughed. "I am not sure whether we can sort of lift up this self-imposed restriction."

Brad Pitt got involved with New Orleans' recovery after Hurricane Katrina and was "able to cut through the red tape that was slowing everything down in New Orleans and put his own money behind it," Adele Chatfield-Taylor pointed out. "So my advice would be to find a Japanese-American movie star who could associate with the loss that you're suffering, and make it a special interest. That's how Diane Keaton got involved, because a hotel where her father used to take her when she was a little girl, the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, was destroyed, and she wrote beautifully about this. In other words it affected her very personally."

"The one thing we've learned from the economic turmoil of the last months is that we truly are linked in every respect," Adele said. "I think it would be considered very exciting" for westerners to stay in machiya houses, including students in junior year abroad programs and the like, "finding a part of the world where they can have an experience they can have nowhere else."

She also recommended making a couple of the machiya buildings into very tiny but very special hotels like the Taraway Inn, where Marlon Brando arrived intending a short stay and spent three luxurious months. "Have the New York Times write it up in the travel section and you'd be swamped with people who want to come and visit. . . . Get some very nice press coverage so that you don't get busloads of people but you get visitors who are from other parts of the world who are thinking about this the way you're thinking about it and loving the place the way you're loving it."

**"Nobody talked about politics,"** observed Frank Sanchis.

in the U.S., the greatest strength in preservation law is local, at the municipal level, he went on. "The City of New York has more power to protect than the United States of America does. The national levels of preservation are more honorific, the recognition, but the actual authority is local." So if this is the model you want to follow, talking to the most sympathetic Kyoto authorities is the thing to do.

"One of the reasons New York law has been so successful is that it's actually a rather flexible, and at the same time it's a very strong law," Lisa commented. Historic districts in New York maintain overall context and character, but almost every such district has nonconforming buildings as well. "There's nothing in the New York law that says your lintel must be a certain color, or you can only have a door that's a certain size, or made of a certain material." In her view, "this is an important distinction, particularly when you're trying to save buildings as sensitive as this, because it isn't about freezing them at some moment in time, it's about making them viable for the continuing life of Kyoto."

"I know that Japan is far more aggressively fighting climate change and being energy conservative than in many parts of the world," Michael added. "The preservation movement is a movement to recycle old buildings, in its essence," and this argument "should be part of your platform."

There's tremendous embodied energy already invested in every building in a neighborhood. "The buildings are built, trees have been taken down," sand trucked from a beach and put in a kiln to make glass, every element trucked in and fabricated and installed. All this "represents 15 or 20 or 25 percent of all the energy that that building will ever use."

"So the recycling of that building, of that neighborhood, is a tremendously green, sustainable thing for all of us to be doing."

**Kenzo Teramoto** of the Kyoto Center for Community Collaboration drew a kimono decorated with images of a crane, rhododendron, a peony is the flower. "The empty space is what's formed by *kyomachiya*, and this is the space that's being deteriorated. And if we lose this, the kimono gets shredded. So in fact the fabric of Kyoto will be lost."

"If you sense that there is a sense of belonging in the *machiya*, I believe that most of the purpose of our visit this time has been fulfilled."

"The old houses I think gave a sense of belonging for families living in these buildings, and we want Kyoto to be a city where all the Japanese people feel the sense of belonging. And we talk about Kyoto being the place that you grew up in. And I hope Japanese people start to feel this sense about Kyoto."

In terms of activities already undertaken, he noted that there are several hundred national treasures designated as national treasures and those *machiya* buildings will be preserved. But they can't be so designated if the residents do not consent, so this remains a serious issue.

Strides have been made with zoning regulations in Kyoto, with new rules adopted in September 2007 to protect cityscapes, Kenzo said. In the center of Kyoto there's now a height restriction of 15 meters, representing five stories, "and there are detailed design restrictions of these buildings to make sure that they are in line with their surroundings."

There aren't yet specific city regulations to protect *machiya*, but this year and next the city will survey 50,000 buildings and come up with a list of *machiya* it believes are important, "and we'd like to convince the dwellers of these buildings so we can designate them as preservation buildings."

There's a simple website that's been translated into English, though it needs to be improved and publicized, Kenzo noted. A Tokyo philanthropist has donated money to start retrofitting 20 buildings, and the city hopes to expand this fund on a global basis. This visit to New York "is the first step to do so."

**To our Japanese colleagues, is there anything that came out of today's discussion that you would particularly like to emphasize when you go back to Japan?**

Modern wooden structures built to comply with modern building codes are safe, \_\_\_\_\_ responded.

People who want to preserve the *machiya* are working to improve fire and earthquake resistance. They're working to find buyers for *machiya* whose owners die without heirs, for without buyers, such houses are often torn down. They're working to preserve the techniques of carpenters and other technicians who made these wooden structures, craftspeople who are becoming scarce.

Government legal protection for *machiya* is critical, he concluded, "but we also think it's very important to have bottom-up activities and we are working very hard through these networks to gain momentum."

"The mayor of Kyoto is very much interested in this topic," Susumu Satomi said. Japan's debt as a percentage of GNP is high, twice that of European countries, so it's difficult for the national government and cities to spend money on these projects. "You talked about

incentives and tax incentives, so maybe we haven't studied this area enough. So we should try to create the type of incentives that's working in the United States for fundraising."

Ruth said, to general laughter from those present: "I think if you have the mayor, you don't need the empress of Japan. That's better. Because it's local."

Michael Adlerstein concluded, "Coming from the UN, Japan is the second-largest economy in the world, out of our 192 nations. So there is a significant capability. I know it's a tremendous virtue in Japan to be very modest in your expressions, I appreciate that tremendously, but you are a very powerful country, and if preservation is a priority to the people, I think the means are there. It's a question of whether the people of Japan are willing to make it a priority."