

# Reviving Traditional Japanese *Kominka* to Revitalise Fading Urban Areas

## Utazu Town



### Background

The Utazu town government opted to be alone when many municipal governments across Japan merged with neighbours in a series of so-called "big mergers in the Heisei era." In fiscal 2003, the Utazu town government started looking at regional resources and considering ways to promote regional development in an effort to help the town survive as a small municipality.

There is an old urban area in Utazu that has temples, shrines and old residential houses, including Goshoji Temple, the 78th temple in the 88-temple Shikoku "henro" pilgrimage, and the "henro-michi" pilgrimage trail. But the area had lost the kind of streetscape that can be designated as a cultural asset because of abandoned residential houses being demolished and rebuilt. It is likely these houses were abandoned because of residents dying of old age and others moving away from the town.

### Purpose of Project

In the old urban area, many residential houses had been demolished after they became empty due to the aging of population and an outflow of residents to other areas. Reviving old houses and offering them as a model for utilisation can preserve regional resources for the next generation and encourage the involvement of a wide range of personnel in the effort. The project was also intended to deepen residents' affection for their hometown and expand people-to-people ex-

change including tourists.

### Outline of Project

To enhance awareness among residents of preserving the old urban area's streetscape, the area was named *co-machi* (old town). In 2005, the town government started redeveloping roads in the area into streetscape-friendly ones.

The town government acquired historic buildings--a former agriculture cooperative warehouse and two old empty residential houses--and redeveloped them as a model project for the preservation of historic buildings. The government recognised that imposing restrictions to preserve them could prompt a backlash from residents. The town government also expected a spill over effect from promoting the private-sector utilisation of old houses.

#### ◆Road development

The town government named the old urban area *co-machi*. It started redeveloping old roads in the area in 2005. Smoked bricks are used in *co-machi* area roads to make them harmonious with streetscapes.

#### ◆Revival of old residential houses.

1. In 1997, a Japanese-style building built in the early Showa era was revived as *Kura no Yakata Sankakutei* and is being used by local residents as a public venue for cultural activities, such as *go* and tea ceremonies.
2. In 2008, a former agricultural cooperative

warehouse was revived and named *Co-messe Utazu* and is now being used as a public facility for events, concerts and exhibitions by local and other groups.

3. In 2014, the town government acquired two empty residential houses in the central part of the *co-machi* area and rebuilt them as *co-machi-no-ie* lodgings. The project was supervised by Alex Kerr, an American writer who is working on renovating old residential houses in Japan into lodgings in Iya, Tokushima Prefecture, and Ojika, Nagasaki Prefecture. The *co-machi-no-ie* houses are being used as venues for contact between guests and the local community.

The town government plans to promote exchanges between local people and visitors, encourage people to relocate to the *co-machi* area, and promote utilisation of empty houses.

### Features and Advanced Aspects



*Kura no Yakata Sankakutei*



*Co-messe Utazu*

Rebuilding characteristic structures (a Japanese-style building, a warehouse and



*Utazu Co-machi-no-ie*

residential houses) in the one-square-kilometer *co-machi* area is helping encourage people-to-people exchanges.

### Effects of Project

The name *co-machi* has taken root and is now being used in events organised by local residents.

-In 2003 when the name of *co-machi* was adopted, local residents began an exchange event in which each home displays traditional "hina" dolls. The event is joined by about 100 homes, which open their doors and windows on a weekend in early March every year to allow visitors to look inside the homes. The event draws about 6,000 visitors every year and marks its 13th year in 2016.

-An open market started being held as a twice-a-year event in 2015 after the opening of the *Co-machi-no-ie* houses. The market is joined by about 60 shops and draws about 3,000 visitors per day.

The redevelopment of roads with smoked bricks designed to make them aesthetically harmonious with streetscapes and *kominka* old residential houses encouraged local residents to refrain from on-road parking.

The openings of the *Co-machi-no-ie* houses and *Co-messe Utazu* in addition to *Kura no Yakata Sankakutei* have led to increased visitors to the *co-machi* area, helping to expand people-to-people exchanges.

## Problems and Responses

### ◆Before Project Implementation

- Gaining the understanding of local residents in the acquisition and development of *kominka* as a model project
- Selecting somebody to administer the property after redevelopment.

Before the redevelopment, *kominka* houses were undervalued. There were questions about why such houses needed to be redeveloped and why only some houses were subject to redevelopment. The town government held several meetings with residents to explain that Kagawa Prefecture has only a few areas where many *kominka* houses exist, that *kominka* houses are an important part of the landscape and that the selection of houses subject to redevelopment was made after consideration of where they are located in the *co-machi* area. To meet the need to redevelop *kominka* houses into ones suitable for present lifestyles and raise their value, the town government searched for somebody to administer the properties after redevelopment was complete. They asked Alex Kerr, who works on reviving *kominka* houses as lodgings in Tokushima's Iya and other areas, to administer the project. The town government won residents' understanding by explaining that the project is designed not only to preserve old houses, but also to leave them for use by local and other people. The effort was joined by Kerr as well as town government officials.

### ◆After Start of Project

The number of users of *Co-messe Utazu* has increased after the town government presented examples of how it can be used as part of their publicity efforts (concerts and exhibitions etc.) The town government also promoted the *Co-machi-no-ie* houses to publishers of national

magazines. As a result, the amount of media coverage of the houses increased. In fiscal 2015, articles about the houses were carried by four magazine publishers. The town government has been holding events to increase local supporters of the houses while encouraging people who were born in Utazu or elsewhere in Kagawa Prefecture and now live elsewhere to use the houses as accommodations during their homecoming visits. In collaboration with the Kagawa prefectural government, the Utazu town government is promoting the *Co-machi-no-ie* houses as places of exchange among those relocating to the prefecture, by using magazines and tours for those willing to relocate from urban areas. This is part of an effort to promote the *co-machi* area and Kagawa Prefecture as desirable places to live.

### Outlook

The town government plans to review the way in which *Kura no Yakata Sankakutei* is utilised, while further strengthening the attractions of the *Co-messe Utazu* event facility, the *Co-machi-no-ie* lodgings, and *Kura no Yakata Sankakutei*. The town government plans to carry out events and tour programmes using all 3 buildings in an effort to increase the number of visitors to the *co-machi* area. The *Co-machi-no-ie* lodgings are expected to draw visitors from foreign countries in the future as they were introduced in the popular overseas travel guidebook series Lonely Planet. The town government needs to train guides, develop stay programmes and make services available in multiple languages in order to promote the *co-machi* brand. It is preparing measures to address an expected increase in the number of empty houses in the *co-machi* area, including subsidies to encourage businesses such as sole proprietors to repair and utilise such houses.

**Reference URL**

<http://co-machi-no-ie.jp> \*Japanese

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