

Traditional Japanese Architecture In Modern Society: Case Study Kurashiki Bikan Chiku

現代社会における伝統的の建築：倉敷美観地区

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要旨: 私の EPOK プロジェクトは現代社会における伝統的な建築についてです。私の研究は倉敷美観地区に焦点を当てています。なぜなら、この場所はたくさん伝統的な建築様式があるからです。倉敷美観地区は岡山大学の近くです。近代社会は、倉敷美観地区で保全活動、観光産業、そして伝統的建造物の再利用という3つの方法で相互作用していることがわかりました。これらの発見は、記事の調査、倉敷美観地区で行われた現地調査、そして NPO 法人倉敷町家トラストとの個人インタビューを通して発見されました。



My topic of interest and focus is on how modern society interacts and uses traditional architecture in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku. What drove me to choose such a topic was my belief that modern society has a unique role when it comes to traditions and culture. Society decides what role and influence these aspects have in their life and country. They are what keeps traditions alive and prevalent in society. Because of this, I believe society should be knowledgeable and aware of their traditions and cultures, so that they have a deeper understanding and appreciation. The reason for choosing Kurashiki Bikan Chiku as a case study was because the more I looked into the historical quarter, the more it seemed to hold the answers for my questions. Kurashiki Bikan Chiku has also earned the recognition as an “Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.” The town is preserved to look as it did in the Edo Period, which means that this is a perfect place of traditional architecture where modern society has a chance to interact with it. This historical quarter is also near Okayama University and would allow for easy access to do field research so that I may go beyond merely researching articles. Upon further investigation, I discovered that modern society in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku interacts through three main methods: repurposing of traditional buildings, tourism industry, and preservation efforts. I discovered these findings through article research, fieldwork performed in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku, and a personal interview with the NPO Corporation, Kurashiki Machiya Trust.

To begin, some history is needed as it has influenced the town, society, and current use of Kurashiki Bikan Chiku. Historically, Kurashiki was a town for merchants to store their wares before sending them off to the capital and other large cities. In order to do this, canals were made to transport those goods from the bay to the warehouses. The canals and warehouses were both maintained throughout their history and now have very different uses. Because of this unique important history in Kurashiki, the Japanese government and city of Kurashiki have made Kurashiki Bikan Chiku a historical preservation district. The warehouses are now repurposed as store fronts, restaurants, and museums. For example, the Museum of Folkcraft where visitors can learn more about traditional Japanese folkcrafts, and the Archeological Museum where visitors can learn about the preservation of art and other information are some of the few repurposed buildings. Even tourist information centers and a local bank make use of the historic buildings in order to prevent the destruction of these cultural places.

During one of my field research trips, I found the canals are currently used in the tourism industry as a place to take historical boat rides. This is a popular event that is well advertised in the town and online on many tourism websites. Kurashiki Bikan Chiku's main attraction to tourists is its unique appearance and traditional atmosphere. Many visitors will notice that there are no visible powerlines. In keeping with the preservation and appeal of the merchant town to look as it once did in the Edo period, modern technology is hidden from sight to maintain this image. The buildings in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku all maintain the same historical look with black rooftop tiles, white plaster walls, bottom storefronts, wooden bars over small windows, and narrow alleys connecting to other streets. The canal has also maintained its original look of large stones and only a small portion was opened for the previously mentioned boat rides.

Modern society has also made a point of renovating buildings in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku. While there, I noticed a few buildings that were under construction. On closer inspection I discovered that on the outside of these buildings there were notifications in both English and Japanese. These notifications explained what was happening to the buildings and why they needed renovations. There were also signs in both languages that informed visitors about Kurashiki Bikan Chiku being a part of "Japan Heritage" and why the town is important in preserving traditional culture, architecture, and history. The reason there were signs in both languages is also because Kurashiki Bikan Chiku has become a popular place for international tourists to visit.

During my research I came upon a group called Kurashiki Machiya Trust, an NPO corporation, who also works hard on preserving architecture in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku. They work for "the purpose of inheriting, cultivating and maintaining local lifestyles, and preserving the landscape through the revitalization and utilization of town houses." The activities of the Kurashiki Machiya Trust are very diverse. The main activity is to repurpose and utilize townhouses, which are called machiya. These buildings are no longer used, which is why the corporation uses them for town house life experiences, lodging, and community activities. Their goal in creating the machiya is to create a place in Kurashiki where people will want to gather and live. In the future, their goal is to also increase the number of reclaimed properties and spread their community works.

Kurashiki Machiya Trust utilizes the help of donors, local residents, and volunteers. For their first project of Misaki House, completed in November 2007, the Trust and volunteers repaired and revitalized this home into a machiya. This home is currently used as a short-term rental house for the use of tourists and locals. Misaki House was renovated in the traditional Japanese style, and is away for tourists to experience first-hand the architecture and lifestyle of traditional Japanese life. The Trust's wish for revitalizing the building is "for people to stay in the house, turn on the lights, talk, and to enjoy the town life." Once I learned about Kurashiki Machiya Trust, I knew I had to interview them. They are a perfect example of modern society interacting with traditional Japanese architecture through preservation and renovation efforts. I set up an interview with Mr. Nakamura, a member of Kurashiki Machiya Trust, to learn about their reasoning behind creating the NPO corporation and their revitalization efforts.



Interview:

なぜ倉敷町家トラストを作りましたか。 Why did you create Kurashiki Machiya Trust?

- “We created Machiya Trust to keep and maintain the traditional buildings. There have become an increased number of empty houses in Kurashiki due to the aging society and we wish to renew these places.”

トラストの家にはどのような方が泊まりにきますか。 Who stays at the Trust houses?

- “We have tourists from all countries stay in our machiya. Friends of residents in Kurashiki also have stayed in our houses. We have also had people who used to live in this area come back to visit the nearby grave site. Because they do not live here any longer they need a place to stay while taking care of the grave site, they have chosen to stay at our machiya.”

次のプロジェクトは何ですか。 What is your next project?

- “Our next project is another machiya house. We are currently debating if we should try a more modern aspect inside the house or continue the more traditional interior. Keeping it more traditional will cost more money.”

倉敷美観地区の店主はトラストでボランティアをしますか。 Do shop owners of Kurashiki Bikan Chiku volunteer at the Trust?

- “No, most shop owners currently in Kurashiki Bikan Chiku come from other areas such as Osaka. They usually don't involve themselves in the community. The members of Kurashiki Machiya Trust volunteer, and those members are people who have grown up here and currently live in the surrounding area. The Trust also receives a little government funding through subsidies to help fund our projects.”

トラストは倉敷美観地区の外の建物で活動しているのですか。 Does the Trust work on buildings outside of Kurashiki Historical District?

- “No, we only work on buildings in the Kurashiki Bikan Chiku area.”

観光は倉敷美観地区を守るのに役立ちますか。 Does tourism help preserve the Kurashiki Historical District?

- “I believe tourism both helps and harms Kurashiki Bikan Chiku. Tourism is helpful in the way of bringing in money to the area but it also changes the historical district. The tourists do not come to look at the architecture of the area but only to shop. Most tourists want a more modern style. Because of this the inside of buildings have changed to accommodate the tourists and make it more comfortable for them. This has changed the building's interior from that of traditional architecture and will continue to change the lifestyle of Japanese traditions. I wish for people to come here and experience what it was like during this period. I want them to personally touch, smell, hear, and see what it was like, instead of learning about it in history books.”

During the interview, Mr. Nakamura also discussed the materials used when renovating as well as their goal of sustainability when creating their machiya houses.

- “When building and renovating buildings, in the past we only used exclusively Okayama materials. Now we try to use materials that are from all over Japan and if Japan does not have the materials we need, only then do we use products from other countries. When building we also keep in mind sustainability and renewable energy. The traditional style and architecture of Japanese machiya is very sustainable. Through the use of tatami and windows, we make use of natural wind and air flow to cool the home. This allows us to not use air conditioning. Most homes are also made of renewable materials and energy. When tearing down these buildings we can easily reuse the materials. Many of these old traditional homes have been used to create new things.”

Kurashiki Bikan Chiku is a hub of traditional Japanese architecture that has been recognized by the people as a historical district. Since its recognition, society and especially the locals, have made it a priority to maintain and preserve its history. The government and small corporations such as Kurashiki Machiya Trust, work hard to revitalize these cultural buildings and aspects of Japanese traditions. Kurashiki Bikan Chiku has allowed many generations and even international visitors to experience firsthand the unique tradition of Japanese architecture. Through these various means, traditional Japanese architecture still maintains to play an important part in modern society.

Reference:

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