

Living in Grass Houses

By Maggie Kinser Saiki

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About 5,000 people live in my little town of Miyama, along the narrow Yura River in the mountains north of Kyoto. Bordering Fukui Prefecture, Miyama once lay along the Saba Kaidô fish-trading route between the capital and the Japan Sea port of Obama. Today's maps, made for motorized traffic, have redefined it as an isolated village at the end of the road from Kyoto. At its northernmost end is the Ashiu virgin beech forest and clean, clear water filled with *ayu*. These historical circumstances have given Miyama's settled foothills a landscape that recalls the Edo age; my village is the location of more thatched-roof homes per capita than any other in Japan, and bills itself as *kayabuki no sato* (hometown of thatched roofs).

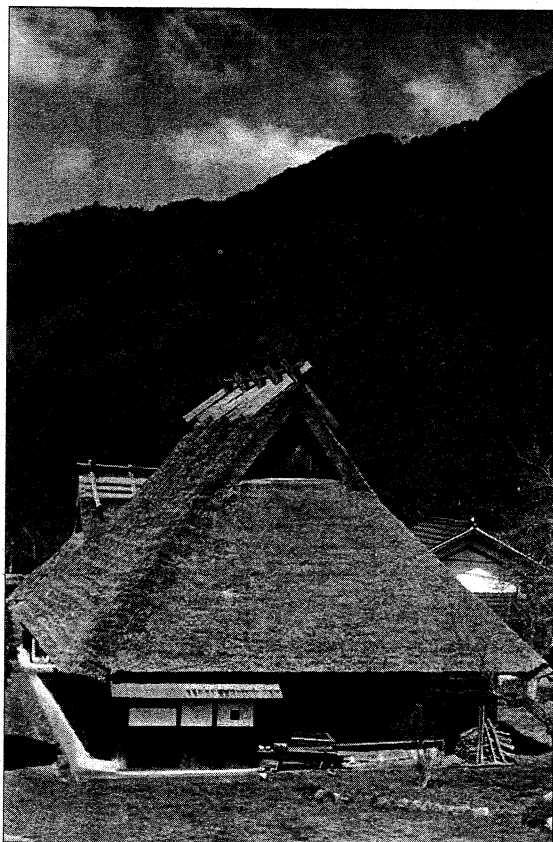
I am among the small number of people in Japan who believe that one of these wooden structures, tied together with straw rope and thatched with grass or reed, is the ideal dwelling for the 21st century. The thatched house has been gaining popularity in Europe for several decades and drawing converts among both occupants and craftsmen-to-be. In Japan, however, the thatched roof is in a dreadful predicament; it is determined by an agricultural lifestyle that no longer exists, but is too individualized and localized to warrant public expenditures for its revival.

Two years ago, while coaching a young Japanese thatcher in English before he left to study in Britain, I discovered that Japanese thatchers have been left behind as well, while Europe's thatchers have gone on to develop thatching techniques consistent with today's non-agrarian lifestyles. This has attracted the attention of Japanese thatchers and researchers, of whom 24 made a 10-day study tour of England and Germany in December 1998 to learn something of the secret to the revival of European thatch and thatching. But there has been no opportunity to test these methods in the Japanese climate.

In September 1999, Japan's first cross-cultural thatching project will take place on our 200-year-old farmhouse, where a British master thatcher and instructor at England's Countryside Agency's thatching course will teach Japanese thatchers how thatch is fixed in Europe: with steel sways and hooks, nailed into the rafters. This method is said to be almost three times faster than the Japanese method, once common in Europe as well, of "sewing" the thatch on with straw rope, between two sways made of bamboo (in Europe, hazel). In turn, the Japanese thatchers will help maintain the elements vital in this climate: deep eaves and a sturdy ridge. The project is supported by the Housing and Community Foundation, the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation and the Japan Foundation. Its aim is to help provide ways to preserve Japan's *kayabuki minka*, or thatched traditional homes.

Once common throughout Japan, *kayabuki minka* have dwindled rapidly since the 1960s. There are not even any firm figures on how many remain, but, based

on surveys conducted by local governments in Shiga and Gunma prefectures, an estimate of between 200,000 and 300,000 seems reasonable. However, among these, well over 90 percent are under various kinds of metal coverings, leaving only an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 in natural, exposed condition. This compares with 65,000 recorded in Britain, and 90,000 in Germany. Only about 240 *minka* are designated as *bunkazai*—important cultural properties—by the national government. Hundreds more—there are no firm figures—are protected by local governments. In most areas, the burden of preservation is on the owner, except for *bunkazai*. This burden, whether physical or financial, has led to the decline of thatched homes.



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The rustic simplicity of thatched houses, such as this in Miyama, Kyoto Prefecture, belies the tremendous amount of labor needed to maintain them.

In April 1999, along with about 150 other thatched property owners, researchers, students and architects, I attended the two-day Symposium to Consider Rural Vistas—How to Maintain Thatched Properties, sponsored by the Japan National Trust for Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation and the Japan Tourist Association. It was held in the town of Shimogō, in Fukushima Prefecture, four and a half hours by train from Tokyo. Those staying overnight were treated to accommodations in the Edo-era post town of Ōuchi-juku, where most of the 37 houses along the 500 meter-long street are thatched. Shimogō's Ōuchi-juku, along with the Kitamura area in Kyoto's Miyama, is among the five communities with traditional thatched houses designated by the national government for protection.

The symposium began with the founding of the Kayabuki Network, a nationwide organization for the preservation and use of thatched houses. It offered presentations by government officials from towns like my own where thatched homes are part of the tourist draw; included a tour of Ōuchi-juku on the morning of the second day; and closed with a panel discussion. Only at the very end of the symposium, however, was the question raised: What's so great about thatched homes? Why should we bother to halt their decline?

Many rational answers to this question have been offered. In the now-classic *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (1885), U.S.-born botanist and Japanophile Edward S. Morse wrote, "The thatched roof is picturesque and warm, and makes a good rain-shed. In Japan an ordinary thatched roof will remain in good

condition from fifteen to twenty years...the best kinds...will endure for fifty years..." (*ibid.*, Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972. 105–106).

In his three-volume treatise *Horobiyuku Minka* (Vanishing Minka, 1973–1976, translated into English and published in 1986 as *Minka: Traditional Houses of Rural Japan*), Japanese architect and folk architecture expert Kawashima Chûji wrote that among the advantages of thatch are its light weight and insulation value. Thatch has a thermal resistance, or "R value" rating of 80—twice that of conventional roof-and-ceiling building materials. He also noted that thatch "muffles the sound of rain," hardly an insignificant point, since Japan gets between 1,000 and 2,500 millimeters of rain annually.

In today's environmentally oriented context, thatch is recognized as ecological, recyclable, renewable and non-polluting. This appeals to those who are aware of Sick House Syndrome, in which modern houses, slapped together, end up not nurturing their occupants, but instead afflicting them with ailments traceable to glues and other man-made materials.

The Appeal of Natural Materials

For those who attended the symposium, who had come this far into the countryside just to discuss the few choices available for maintaining *kayabuki minka*, there was no question of their merits. In our hearts, we each knew which aspect of these traditional, if humble, structures made it worth the trip. For me, it is the underside of the eaves: smoke-blackened cedar-log rafters tied with straw rope, and laid upon them just for decoration, a straight-stalked layer of hemp. This is the view that greets me when I wake up each morning.

For Satô Toshiichi, of Shimogô's Board of Education, it is the bamboo poles, smoked black above the open hearth. "My wife thinks I'm nuts, but I collect them," he said. Tsushima Eiji, an architect, has for many years struggled with a half-and-half lifestyle with a modern home in Tokyo and a *kayabuki minka* near Nikkô. For him the appeal is an esoteric experience that holds within it all the toil inherent in a thatched roof. He explained, "After a roof has been newly thatched, the end of each stalk is a single element. The entire roof is a beautiful beige. In the first heavy rain after the rethatching, the drops seem to fall one at a time from these stalks. Spectacular. It's not a pretty simile, but it brings to mind a hundred thousand pachinko balls spilling from the chute."

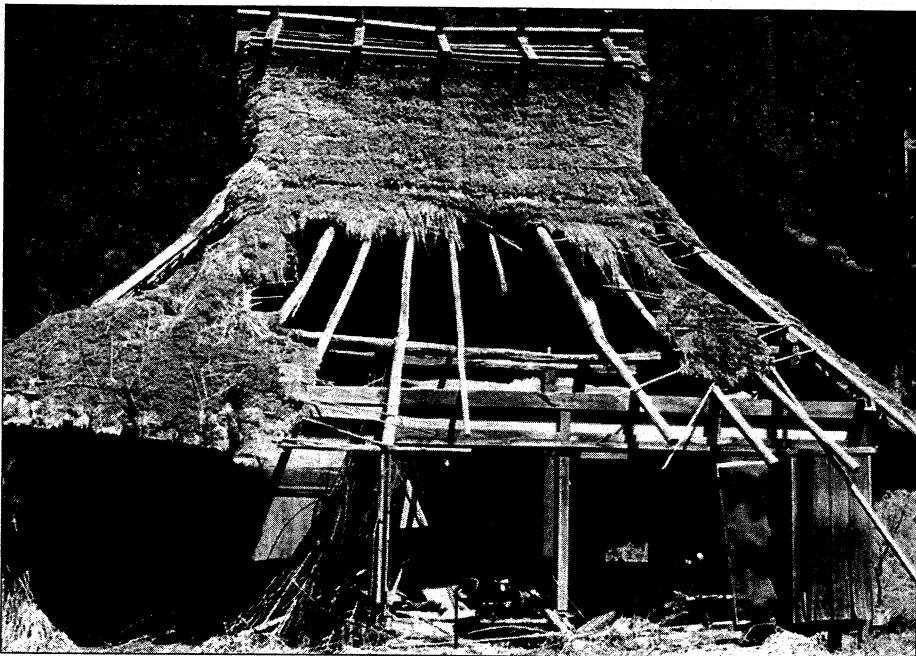
In general, those who love *kayabuki minka*, whether for the inner or outer elements, are enamored with themselves as *homo sapiens*; we love thatched homes because they represent everything that sets us apart from the other animals, and yet they do not set us too far outside the natural cycle. *Kayabuki minka* use mostly plant products, and thus reaffirm our place in the greater ecosystem. And, having been handmade for a specific family in a specific era long ago, they remind us of our place in human history. Thatch represents an ecosystem in which humans play a part, and verifies a collective wisdom about our natural surroundings.

The thatched roof in Japan is made of either grass, such as *susuki* (miscanthus); *yoshi* (water reed); or, rarely, *mugiwara* (barley straw). There are variations among these plants, but generally these three materials have covered the heads of the Japanese since the Jōmon era, thousands of years ago. Grasses grow naturally in mountainous areas, and reeds in wetlands and riverbeds. Barley, never a widely used thatching material, is grown on farmland that is difficult to irrigate for rice.

Thatch and thatching were once part of a community-based barter *yui* system. Homeowners would both lend and borrow thatch and time, and roofs were repaired in turn as needed, with only a master thatcher to lead the rest of the neighborhood in the work and to finish the most difficult sections, such as the ridge. Nitto Kazuhiko, of the Japanese Association for Conservation of Architectural Monuments, said that "thatching has always been one of the many miscellaneous tasks performed in farming." Today, many thatchers are subcontracted by construction or reed-growing companies. But Nitto noted, "The thatching craft does not easily lend itself to the modern company system."

For those who feel an affinity for thatch, the fundamental problem is that the natural cycle on which it depends has been severed. Reed and grasses still grow naturally, but the human element has withdrawn its commitment. When Japan went into overdrive in a race to "catch up" with the West following World War II, sustenance farming was replaced by factory and salaried work as the predominant labor pattern. In the new, artificially scheduled lifestyle, nature is no longer accorded the right to determine the timing of tasks like harvesting reed or thatching one's home. The *yui* was lost, as was thatching as a commonly practiced task. The communal *kayaba*, where grasses or reed were left to grow and be harvested, have been buried in new development, fallen into disuse or been claimed by the same construction companies that hire the once-independent thatchers; so in many cases, materials are purchased as well. Labor costs have also risen progressively, and one thatcher's estimate for thatching our small, four-room house was ¥5 million.

Since the mid-1950s, owners who have withdrawn from the natural labor cycle have rejected the toil and trouble of thatching by simply having the whole roof, thatch and all, covered in corrugated tin. On a house like ours, the covering process would take a week, compared to one or two months of work to rethatch it.



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Without the regular motion of its occupants, a thatched house ceases to breathe, and rots from the top down.

When the service is purchased in its entirety, it runs between one-third and two-thirds the cost of rethatching, and the most expensive covering, copper panels, is said to last 150 years, compared with 35 years, the highest estimate for a thatched roof.

Eventually, the broken covenant with nature, through the development of metal coverings, has led to the loss of the original proportions of the roof, its ability to breathe and its aesthetic appeal against a mountainous background of similar textures: in other words, its beauty. In this cash-based age, with few changes in thatching techniques to accompany the changing predominant lifestyle, kayabuki minka are an anomaly. Kobe has a registration and subsidy program that covers ¥2.5 million of a rethatching job. Miyama covers 50 to 90 percent of rethatching costs; Shirakawa, in Gifu Prefecture, 70 to 90 percent; and Gokayama, in Toyama Prefecture, 20 percent. In most areas, however, owners bent on maintaining their thatched properties have had to take up the slack left by the loss of the yui. Architect Tsushima points out that, "If you cut your own thatch for years and store it up, you only pay for the labor, and can get a whole house thatched for under ¥1 million." However, he also admits that last year he did not get around to harvesting kaya for his house.

Of all the individual speakers at the symposium, Murakami Kazuko, 68, won the most intense audience reaction with her grueling tale of pure determination. Over 18 years, Murakami transformed herself from a housewife without an income into the sole angel of maintenance for a magnificent complex of thatched buildings in Iwate Prefecture that had been in her husband's family for 200 years. Once a grand residence, the home was a derelict shed, with holes in the thatched roof, grass mats swaying in the wind where the walls had been and floorless rooms. But, as she recalled, "As I sat at the *irori* trying to figure out what to do, I heard voices, crying out, 'help me! help me!' I stood and made a promise to the pillars, whose cries they were. 'I will spend my life saving yours.'" The only carpenter who considered the job said the house would last another 200 years if it were repaired.

Murakami recalled her thoughts at the time: "The life of this house is worth more than mine." She went on to find the owners of disused kayaba, she cut her own kaya; in freezing conditions, she was reborn a manual laborer for this house. For cash, she bought and sold women's apparel. With this income, one fraction at a time, she paid for the entire refurbishing and rethatching. After 18 years, she could finally stand up proudly and say that she had kept her promise. The audience responded to Murakami with awe.

Umesao Mayao and his wife Mii live in a soaring kayabuki minka in Miyama built for the local landlord. They have found an alternative solution to Murakami's that utilizes the attraction kayabuki minka hold for visitors from out of town. Along with friends like Kondô Toshikazu, a correspondent for the community paper *Asahi Family News*, in 1994 the Umesaos founded a group called the Miyama to Kôryû Suru Kai (Miyama Friendship Association), and set up the Kayabuki Kikin (Fund), endowed with the profits of monthly cultural events held in Miyama, often at the Umesao home. In addition to ¥10 million donated by the town at its founding, the group has raised ¥4 million, designated for the maintenance of kayabuki minka. As Umesao pointed out, "Without a fund like this, there was no way we could preserve kayabuki minka. Individuals can't do it alone."

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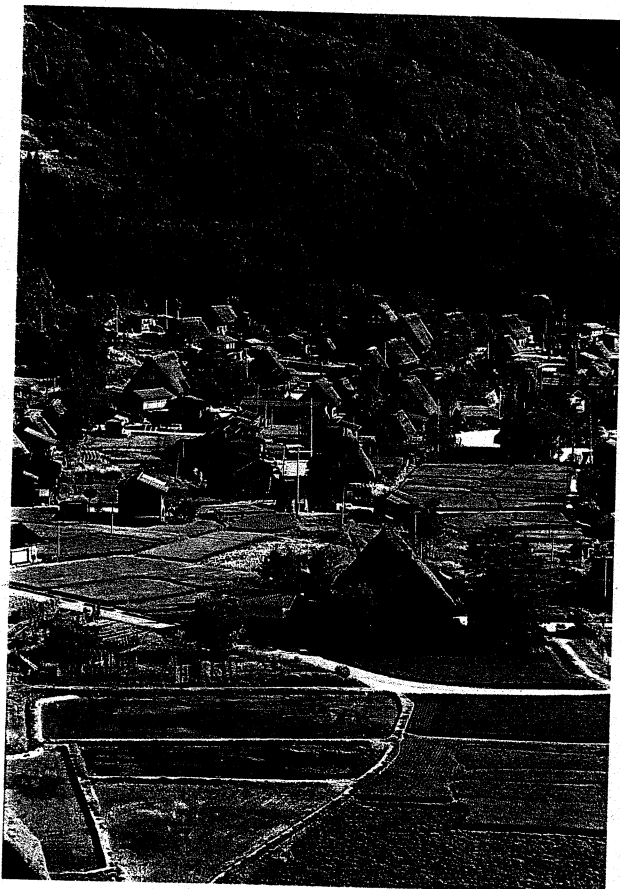
Raising the Roof—Communities Preserve a Bit of Their Past



Volunteers and villagers make rethatching a community project on a roof in the Gifu Prefecture community of Shirakawa.

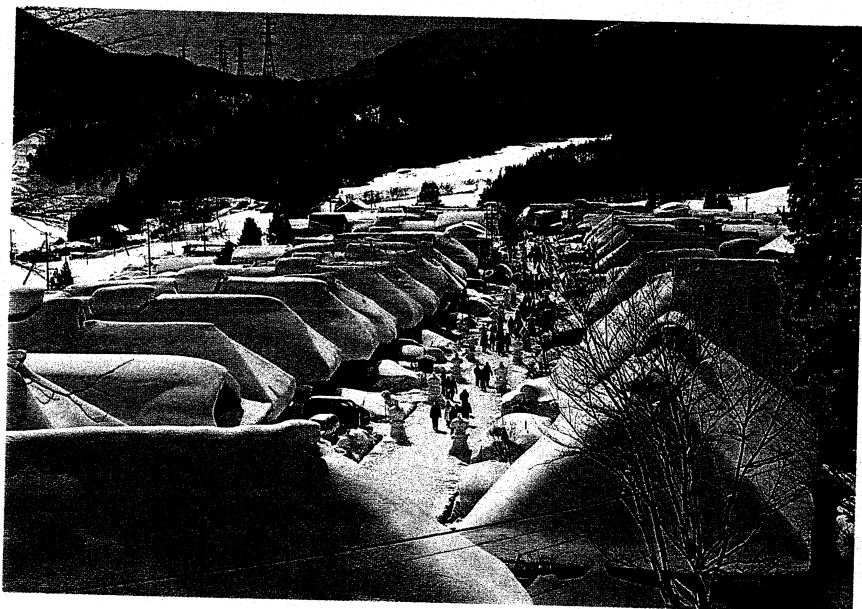
Asahi Shimbun

The Ogimachi area of the village of Shirakawa, in Gifu Prefecture, has 59 thatched houses registered as a World Heritage preservation site.



Shirakawa Village

Houses in Shimogô's Ôuchi-juku in Fukushima Prefecture roofed with thatch are also covered with mantles of snow.

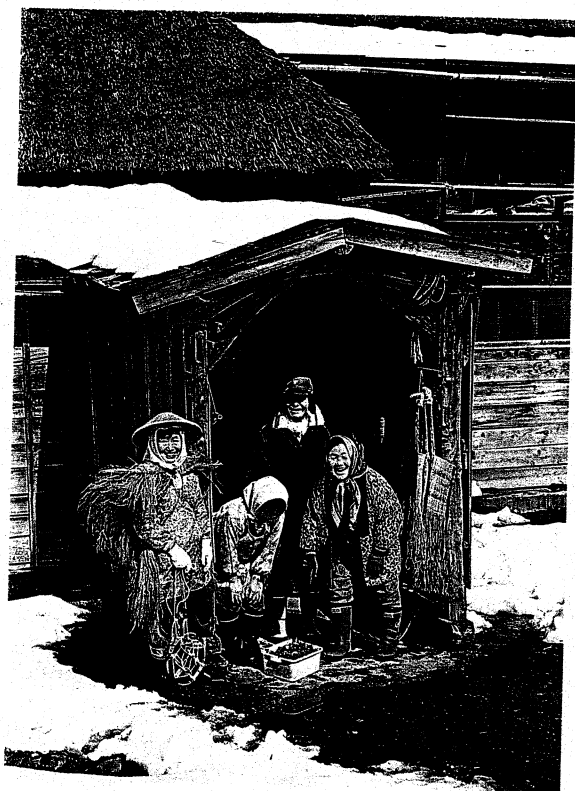


Shimogô Town Office



In winter, the thatched roofs of houses in Oginoshima, in the town of Takayanagi, Niigata Prefecture, shelter residents who work at traditional straw crafts at hearthside.

Takayanagi Town



Townsppeople in Takayanagi are proud of their thatched-roof lifestyle. Some still prefer homemade straw snowshoes and capes in winter.

Takayanagi Town

Given Murakami's story, this is a point of contention. Some owners are determined to prove the effects of hard work, and others are anxious to win outside support. Thatchers, concerned for their futures, have their own ideas. One young thatcher, Nishio Haruo, made a presentation at the first thatcher's conference outlining an ideal nationwide fund with the participation of 10,000 kayabuki minka owners, who over a period of 20 years would donate ¥250,000 annually, building up a total of ¥2.5 billion. From this total, 500 houses a year could be thatched, at ¥5 million a piece. Mathematically, this is a sound thesis. The problem is that by their very nature, the kayabuki minka of Japan are located in isolated pockets throughout a mountainous country and are in the hands of a wide variety of people from landed farmers to, increasingly, recent converts to the country lifestyle. Such an organization is likely to remain an ideal.

Thatching is a traditional, regional craft whose parameters have been determined by Japan's climatic variety, and by the variety in people's sensibilities. Nitto's research among 1,300 thatchers indicates there are 73 distinct styles throughout the country, and 90 percent of those surveyed agreed this regional distinction should be maintained in the name of tradition and appropriateness to the locale.

At the first national conference of thatchers, sponsored in 1998 by the National Association for the Preservation of Shrine and Temple Roofing Techniques, Nitto presented research showing that in 1997, of 500 thatchers surveyed, 89 percent were over 60 years old. Although Nitto speculates that there are now about 20 active thatchers in their 20s and 30s, at the same conference an elderly thatcher named Sumita Takazô pointed out that "there's not enough work to guarantee a livelihood."

With so few thatchers (3,000 nationwide), and so few kayabuki minka left, this insistence on maintaining regional variations threatens to stump the only concerted effort to train young thatchers on a national basis. Tanaka Keiji, vice chairman of the National Association for the Preservation of Shrine and Temple Roofing Techniques, said the association is considering a thatching training course like the one run by Britain's Countryside Agency. This course, aiming to help young thatchers become familiar with techniques around Britain, and introduce some standardization to the industry, has been a key factor in the comeback of British thatching over the past 20 years.

Growing Chorus for Preservation

Ever since minka started disappearing in the 1960s and 1970s, architects and researchers have appealed for their preservation. Andô Kunihiro, a professor of architecture at Tsukuba University, is among them. He has been instrumental in the National Trust's recent activities in kayabuki preservation. At the Symposium to Consider Rural Vistas, Andô was present at the formal establishment of the Kayabuki Network, a consortium of university professors, preservation agency officials and government officials in towns that boast kayabuki minka. Yamamoto Akiko, of the National Trust, explained the strategy: "Local governments can win the trust of the national government. An owner-led group would be too closely related to individual profit. And even researchers are too partisan."

Certainly the authorities have a capacity for long-term planning and financing not available to individuals and grass-roots organizations, but the world, especially the business world, does not always fit into these plans. Since the 1970s, when

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Yamasaki
Toranosuke trims a
roof thatched with
miscanthus grass.



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pioneer architects such as Furihata Hironobu and Kinoshita Ryôichi began refurbishing minka to bring the interiors up to date, rather than simply tearing down the old to build the new, which is the more common solution in Japan, *minka saisei*, or minka refurbishing, has grown steadily as a sideline for architects and carpenters.

There are numerous individual practitioners as well of minka “removal,” in which an entire minka, whose owner wants to clear the land for a new house, will be disassembled and moved to another area, sometimes on the other side of the world. When all else fails, there is “minka recycling,” a term that covers anything from reusing the doors and other freestanding elements of old minka to selling off the individual roof beams. The inclusion of these beams in new architecture has become common eye candy in architectural magazines. Andô worries that this general tendency toward wholesale dismantling, with no historical reference, will soon affect kayabuki minka as well. “It’s only a matter of time,” he laments.

The symposium in Ôuchi-juku was the third in three years supported by the National Trust to concern itself with thatched properties. It was the first to focus on tourism, which will have to be considered as one possible solution to the destruction of kayabuki minka.

The attraction kayabuki minka hold for domestic tourists has nothing to do with its advantages as a roofing material. Photographer Yagishita Seishi put out a photo book in 1994 featuring kayabuki minka all over Ibaraki Prefecture, many of which are no longer standing. At the symposium, he likened the kayabuki minka to a mother figure: “These are the homes that the Japanese who created the modern, urban Japan of today walked out of when they left their rural roots,” he said. “These minka sent them off into the world they have now.” This poignant historical situation gives kayabuki minka a particular beauty that could be called *borobi no bigaku*, or “the beauty of the perishing.” The loneliness in the longing that urban Japanese feel for these rural homes has them rushing to small towns around

the country to capture their memories on paper, canvas and film.

What do urban Japanese carry with them into the cities when they leave their home towns? Along with their accents and dialects, they take the visual memories of their local landscapes. The incredible variety among kayabuki minka styles mirror those landscapes. Each style is appropriate to the climate and culture; the pitch of the roof most often is exactly that of the surrounding mountains. The roofs of each region appeal instinctively to its people. The beauty of design that is born of necessity, rather than a passing vanity, calms the spirit.

Finally, the "once upon a time" when the rethatching of a roof was akin to a festival of group labor is a time that is still alive in the memories of tourists as young as 40. A personal understanding of the intense investment of labor represented by kayabuki minka may heighten the nostalgia unearthed in the Japanese psyche by these village scenes.

While the Kayabuki Network waits for national support, towns with kayabuki minka are experiencing an indiscriminate expansion of what is loosely termed "green tourism." More and more local governments and agricultural associations are catering to domestic tourists who yearn to experience the tranquillity of life in a small town in a natural setting, without actually living there. Common are tours that offer as paying events participation in local tasks such as rice planting and harvesting. Unchecked, tours that bring busloads of visitors over newly widened roads into these living communities threaten to destroy them.

Shirakawa, whose giant, thatched A-frame houses were built to shelter in their attics not only extended families of up to 50 people but also the vast platforms necessary for culturing silkworms, was named Japan's first National Important Traditional Building Preservation Area in 1976. Until its anointment as a World Heritage site in 1995, the village received about 700,000 tourists annually. That number quickly jumped to more than 1 million. Shirakawa has a resident population of 1,900. Some visitors looking for a lost Japan are bitterly disappointed by the transformation of so many homes in Shirakawa into lodges or gift shops. And Shirakawa's open-arms policy has raised the question of how much outside stress can be tolerated by an isolated community before it is transformed into a dead museum, and a tool of the tourism industry.

Yamagishi Toshio, of the Public Grant Department of the Japan Tourist Association, suggested that, "Unless there is some degree of regulation, these places will be ruined. Areas like this were created by communities, and if a few individuals decide to try to make money on it, they will become the focus of the tourism industry. We need something much stronger than we've had so far, something like a citizens' charter."

German-born architect Karl Bengs, who lives half of every year in a kayabuki minka he refurbished in Niigata Prefecture, is involved daily in the tricky cultural balancing act of laying hands on regionally distinctive architecture. In an interview with *Minka*, a magazine put out by the Japan Minka Reuse & Recycle Association, Bengs cautioned that the most common mistake made by architects is "destroying the integrity of the materials, and the balance, by trying to make something interesting. Like a child, an old building must be looked after, cared for, nurtured." (*Minka*, Fall 1998, 17. Translation is by the author.)

And like the mother who bore us, she must be respected—not buried alive in a tin casket—nor left alone to die.

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