

# Living in Japan's past in traditional townhouses



## Charms of the 'machiya' rediscovered, but renovation can be tricky

By Miki Tanikawa

### KYOTO, Japan

Living in machiya, or traditional Japanese townhouses, can be very cold during winter. They are dark inside and fusty and may include a host of problems, like a sliding fusuma door that sticks.

But more and more Japanese — and some internationals — are discovering the charm of living in the unique brand of urban townhouses known as Kyo-machiya, which date from as much as 150 years ago.

More than 20,000 of the houses are in Kyoto's central districts, like Kamigyo-ku and Nakagyo-ku, and they mingle gracefully with the city's more modern features like shops and restaurants.

There has been a resurgence of interest in machiya, mostly from the city dwellers of Tokyo and Nagoya, just as the pace of demolition has quickened. By some accounts, machiya are disappearing by the hundreds each year so preservationists, who have fought for

years to protect the houses, have been delighted that they are once again in demand as homes and for business uses.

"There are people who got tired of living in Tokyo," said Kaoru Matsui, general secretary of Kyo-Machiya Joho Center, a not-for-profit organization that helps renters and buyers find a Kyo-machiya.

"They want to live where there is an abundance of nature, but they can't live in the countryside. Kyoto comes to their mind as a place with cultured living that is still surrounded by a good amount of nature."

There are no statistics on how many people are renting or buying Kyo-machiya but brokers, local government agencies and housing specialists say there is a noticeable increase and they include people of all ages, male and female and some foreigners.

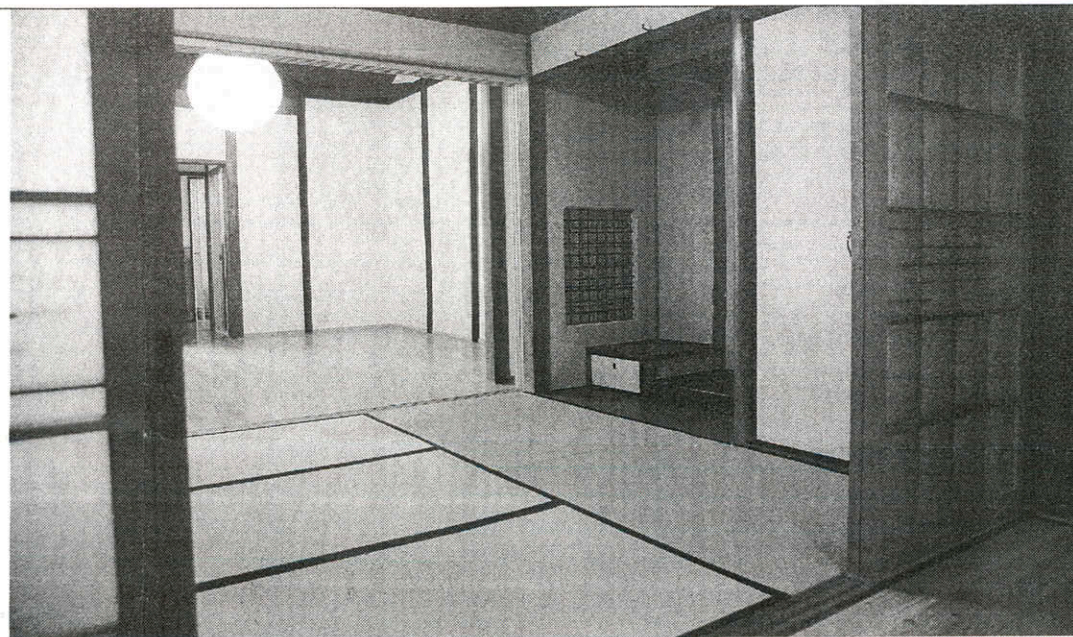
For Steve Miller, the U.S. head of an international software company's Tokyo unit, buying a machiya was, in part, an emotional response to the familiar landscape of bland Japanese neighborhoods.

"Machiya is something that is attractive esthetically, something that appeals emotionally," he said. "There is a romantic aspect to it. It doesn't look like every other prefabricated house in suburban Japan."

Machiya is most broadly defined as a wooden house built between the late 1860s and the end of World War II.

Most of Kyoto's residences were destroyed during the 1864 conflict between factions loyal to the emperor and those favoring the shogunate government of Edo. Their replacements, machiya, reflected the traditional architectural techniques that flourished until postwar construction methods, with their emphasis on modern earthquake protection and fire prevention, were introduced.

Most machiya are simple homes for common people. On the ground floor is a long rectangular room with "the shop" or a work space toward the street, a living room space in the middle and a kitchen to one side.



Ko Sasaki for the International Herald Tribune

A room with tatami flooring and wood paneling, above, in a Kyo-machiya used as a model house in Kyoto. Machiya are usually set directly on the street with no front yard or gate but there is a kind of porch and small yard in the back of the house.

The engawa, a kind of veranda or porch, is partly inside the room, with sliding doors to keep out the rain, and partly in the small backyard area. The bathroom is there, detached from the house.

The second floor usually contains a room or two and sometimes there also is an attic, meant for sleeping.

Larger machiya, called omoya, may have several more rooms.

A style that originated in the late Heian period of the 10th to the 11th century, machiya usually stand directly on the street, with no

front yard or gate in-between. "That is a defining characteristic of machiya. They face the streets directly and form a straight line," said Matsui.

The construction technique of the machiya is a modern wonder. They require few nails and the verticals and the horizontals of the beams and posts are simply joined by dovetailing.

"The large vertical posts are simply placed on the ground. They are not attached. They just sit on the earth," Matsui said. "The whole idea is based on building a structure that is flexible enough so that they won't collapse in an earthquake."

Modern construction is designed to resist earthquakes by fastening the beams and the posts together and drilling the main posts to the ground, he said. But "machiya does not resist it. Rather, it shakes with the earthquake to avoid collapsing. We are awed by the

wisdom of the ancient people."

"So, you would be making a mistake to reinforce parts of the house by placing panels or plastering them," he continued. "If you reinforce parts of it, then you make the house even more fragile since they will break immediately and take the whole house down with it."

A good machiya of an average size — 50 to 80 square meters, or about 540 to 860 square feet — in central Kyoto would rent for about ¥100,000, or a little more than \$935, a month. But prices vary, so tilting walls and other problems could reduce the rent to as little as ¥40,000 to ¥50,000. "The quality spans a whole range," said Koichi Yoshida, president of Flat Agency in Kyoto's Kita-ward.

For buyers, an average-size machiya in poor condition might sell for about ¥10 million. But, "you then end up spending an additional ¥10 million to ¥20 million to just remodel it," Yoshida said.

Miller, the American owner, paid ¥7 million in January for what he described as a "heavy-duty" renovation. His machiya is near Karasuma station and a tourist hotspot area known as Shijo.

"The place had not been touched for 30 to 40 years, so we renovated all the floors, all the walls, put in a new bathroom, new electricity, new piping and so on. The structure of the house stayed the same, as the beams and the roof were in good condition," he said.

He also extended the house to incorporate the backyard toilet.

While recognizing that some purists

would prefer to keep their machiya intact, Miller wanted the house to fit today's lifestyle. "Refurbishing the inside so that it has modern conveniences is probably one of the kinder things you can do. I don't want to live in a museum," he said.

Miller uses the machiya as a second home, particularly in early July when he and his wife like to attend the Gion festival, and rents it out by the month during other times of year.

Renovating machiya can be a legal minefield.

"Most machiya were built before the existing building regulations, which are based on the modern architecture," Matsui said. Any work must match current regulations and, in some cases, would require city approval.

Another issue is the size of the plot. If the frontage is not longer than 2 meters and the street is less than 4 meters wide, the house cannot be rebuilt — although there are some exceptions to the requirement. So if the house burns or collapses in an earthquake, the owner is left with the land but cannot rebuild the house.

A house that could not be rebuilt probably would sell for ¥10 million to ¥20 million less than its rebuildable equivalent, local real estate agents said.

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