

Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Settlements of Japan

The ‘Machinami Charter’

Adopted by the Japanese Association for Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration, in October 2000.
Assented to by ICOMOS Japan National Committee, in December 2000.
Revised in July 2020.

Preamble

Those of us who wish to uphold the tradition of historic towns and settlements for future generations hereby proclaim a ‘Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Settlements of Japan’. Herein the term ‘Historic Towns’ refers not only to those towns whose streets are lined with traditional buildings, but includes settlements and surrounding settings where such traditional buildings are found.

To conserve historic towns means to respect, protect and foster the historic and cultural characteristics of a specific area, which also leads to protecting and fostering the history and culture of Japan. Historic towns are the cultural heritage of all Japanese people, and therefore, all Japanese people are responsible for their continuing existence.

The conservation of historic towns in Japan began in local cities with a rich historic background, at a time when the natural and historic environments were being destroyed on a wide scale. This has grown to full-scale in places such as Kyoto and Tsumago, and rapidly expanded into a movement of residents and citizens in several other regions. In 1975 the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was revised, and the system of Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Buildings was established.

The Japanese Association for Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration, was founded in 1974 as a liaison and co-operation organisation for local residents’ movements, in all regions that promote the conservation of historic towns. It has held the National General Meeting for Historic ‘Machinami’ Towns every year since 1978. The Japanese Association for Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration has proposed conservation of historic towns as an effective method and way of thinking for machizukuri ‘community building’, and has encouraged activities led mainly by residents’ and citizens’ movements.

We believe that the right to live in a generous and comfortable environment is included in the fundamental human rights acknowledged by the Japanese Constitution, and that historic towns are an important structural component of such an environment. In respect to working out urban and regional planning, we ask that the value of historic heritage be acknowledged, and that the historic context of the region be given serious consideration.

At the present time, various projects related to the conservation of historic towns are being developed. However, although the value of historic towns is becoming more widely acknowledged than it has in the past, the risk of invaluable towns disappearing still persists in various places. This charter has been written out to encourage the rediscovery of history and culture in areas that contain historic heritage, and to promote machizukuri with pride and attachment. It is our desire that the theory and principles of town conservation presented here will be shared by a wide range of people, and that the charter will become useful in machizukuri that takes into account the individual character of each location.

1. Definition of historic towns

Historic towns specify a group of houses and the surrounding artificial and natural environments, which compose the living space of an area. The term also refers to the complete overview of the life and activities of residents within this space. As much of the contemporary Japanese daily life environment moves towards a

trend of urbanisation and homogenization, historic towns play an increasingly significant role in recounting the history of Japanese life, and furthermore, as bridges linking the past and the future.

Historic towns today have inherited from the distinctive qualities of former times, when the local community was lively and the people living in an area shared a common set of values. These people had pride, and felt responsibility and obligation in keeping their towns. Historic towns can thus be regarded as the expression of a comprehensive system of such values.

2. Elements composing historic towns

Elements such as the house and its surrounding settings, along with the life that develops within it, can be considered as one indivisible whole.

The material elements that compose historic towns are not only restricted to houses, architecture and built structures, but also include agricultural land, forests and vegetation, mountains, landforms such as rivers, lakes, and seaside. These do not only compose the nearby and distant landscape, but were as a whole, the stage for the daily life and activities of the residents. The harmony created between man-made structures including houses, and the natural landscape extending around them, is the source of attraction held by historic towns.

3. Conservation of historic towns

The aim of conserving historic towns is not only to save groups of houses and the surrounding landscape as material objects, but to attempt to reconstruct the relationships between the daily life of the residents, the houses, and the surrounding settings. In contemporary civilisation where everything changes rapidly, it is extremely difficult to keep things looking exactly as they have in the past. By carefully protecting our historic heritage, we reveal the intrinsic system of values specific to a given area, and continue the endeavour to hand these on accurately to following generations.

4. Traditional Japanese houses and characteristics of their organisation

Generally speaking, traditional Japanese houses as material objects and their grouping have the following characteristics.

a. The main structure is composed of timber posts and beams. The concept of the wall as a weight-bearing structure has not been utilised. In order to respond to climatic conditions, large openings that ensure ventilation and keep exposure to sunshine at a minimum have always been required.

b. The house combines working and living spaces. The doma (beaten earth-floored area) which occupies nearly half of the ground floor, parts of the toori-niwa (doma that extends through the house), as well as those rooms facing the street, can be considered as space used for vocation or housekeeping work.

c. The inner living space with boarded or tatami floor, has several successive rooms separated by light partitions. The order of omote (front, or formal) to oku (back, or domestic) is determined by the relationship of the rooms to the entrance, or the presence of simple fittings. This order is bound to an expression of formality and social relationships, more than functionality.

d. These houses are placed under similar environmental conditions, which give their style homogeneity. Houses with the aforementioned characteristics, grouped according to certain rules (e.g. alignment alongside roads) compose historic towns and settlements.

5. Composition and characteristics of historic towns

In the case of historic towns, at the time when a town or settlement was founded, the topography and natural conditions were skilfully read so that the boundaries could be fixed, and the road network, waterways and distribution of the site could be set. A hierarchical relationship between buildings and roads, as well as the distribution of large or small sites and buildings were determined. This position of roads and site allotments remain even today. In many cases, even though there might have been changes in the style or appearance, ditches and waterways have kept their former position and function. In other words, historic towns, because they retain the important elements that make up the frame of a town, transmit the layout of the town. These traditional architectural groups or structures, together with the regional heritage, are the artefacts that show the layout and history of the town and the settlement. These then become the main core of machizukuri.

6. The importance of conservation

The topography and the nature of ground, a climate with high temperature and high humidity, and the fact that architectural structures are built of mainly vegetal material, can all be the cause of severe disasters. Due to such conditions, the typical life span of traditional Japanese housing is short. In spite of this, what has formed historic towns rich in local character, is a continuous practice of conservation, which includes the transmission of techniques to replace decayed material with new material, and is the result of a cycle that has been repeated many times over the course of centuries. Moreover, techniques, customs, and a set of values locally held in common, are integrated into daily life and the traditional events of the year. The role that these have fulfilled in maintaining historic towns is not small. In terms of historic towns' conservation, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of maintenance of the buildings and their surroundings.

7. Towns to keep living in

Conservation of historic towns differs from the conservation of historic monuments, mainly because it is impossible to restrict the object of conservation to the material elements within given limits, as it would be for historic monuments. The continued use of traditional techniques linked to architecture, and daily living within certain standards, are also considered important actions leading directly to conservation. In other words, conservation of traditional houses or structures -as material objects- is an important element in the conservation of historic towns, but not its final purpose. That people should remain living there, that a vibrant life should develop, and that traditions be given new life and revive, is the aim of the conservation of historic towns.

8. Adapting to changes

Conservation of historic towns is compatible with the respect of authenticity (composed of factors such as design, material, techniques, setting, tradition, function, etc.) that has become the international standard in cultural heritage conservation. To keep living in historic towns is to keep questioning the meaning and contents of authenticity within life, and is even a necessary condition to bring dynamism into tradition.

As long as life and vocational occupations continue, changes are impossible to avoid. Accepting changes while respecting the authenticity of historic towns is a challenge that the local district should address collectively. These changes come in such forms as inevitable exchange of material, addition of new functions, reuse of design or space from the past, and influence of overwhelming foreign culture. For such changes not to have a destructive impact on traditions it is

necessary to be prepared to constantly rediscover and confirm historic values.

9. Residents-led machizukuri

The main constituents of the conservation of historic towns are the residents of that district and the local community. This is because historic towns are the record of how the ancestors of the residents have lived, and the fruit of their labours. That residents become conscious of local history and cultural uniqueness -including intangible performing arts, religions, and festivals, transmit them orally, inherit and emphasize them is the basis of future local development.

Every local charter for the conservation of historic towns has so far played a great role in forming mutual agreement among the local community. Local residents should make express provision of theories, rules, and aims for historic towns' conservation that reflect cultural uniqueness in charters or norms, and make the most of them in their daily conservation action. This practice, in conjunction with the process of harmonious teamwork, is effective in machizukuri conducted by local residents. It is expected that this charter will henceforth be useful in every region as a common reference for this aim.

In conservation plans made on the basis of long-term perspectives, issues such as: characteristics that the area should enforce and take over, acceptable limits of alterations, their concrete guiding principles, functionality of houses or fire prevention, must be defined after thorough independent discussion of residents.

10. Residents' movements and education

The movement for the conservation of historic towns was initially aimed at conservation of cultural properties, but progressively deepened and expanded as a movement by which residents themselves reassess culture, and even characterise local features. In present times this movement can be expected to have numerous faces, as one of many environmental movements of the 21st century.

In order to encourage understanding and pride towards conservation among residents, sustained environmental education is necessary. More specifically, one should be aware of the risks present in periods of change from one generation to the next. The main tenets of conservation of historic towns have not yet been established. Within the environmental problems that have expanded into planetary scale, conservation of historic towns is one of the key issues that must be asserted, and repositioned continually. It is also necessary to make the effort to include the problem of historic towns' conservation as a part of environmental education programs for children.

11. Duties and co-operation of administration, scholars and experts

We acknowledge that measures and assistance by the central government and regional municipalities in the conservation of historic towns, apart from those in the system of Protection of Cultural Properties are gradually becoming more numerous. Regional municipalities are expected to provide both administrative and financial support to machizukuri based on the conservation of historic towns led by residents. This machizukuri having a comprehensive character, support that goes beyond the frame of vertically divided administration and free from established practice is necessary.

Scholars and experts are expected to provide their point of view, and consult the residents through survey and evaluation of historic towns. It is important that residents, public administration, scholars and experts, while appreciating each other's fields, specialities and positions, cooperate in the comprehensive and continuous activity that is the conservation of historic towns.

When promoting the conservation of historic towns, it is not possible to do so without the

support and co-operation of various professional associations or organisations whose aim is historic heritage conservation. Support from organisations having an international scope is especially sought after.

12. Disaster prevention

Historic towns are very often areas with a high density of wooden buildings that are susceptible to fire. Damage also occurs from rising rivers, landslides, typhoons, earthquakes and other natural disasters. A vast amount of wisdom has been passed down from the ancient times, such as how to set up buffer zones for protection from fires, improvement of fire resistance of houses, or the selection of place of residence to prevent water damage. Against any disaster or danger, a strategy should be established in order to limit damages to the historical heritage to a minimum. Likewise, it is expected that techniques to reinforce structural weak points inherent to wooden buildings be established and propagated. On these occasions, it is important to learn from the wisdom of our ancestors.

Municipalities and specialists must be concerned that methods for solving the problems of buildings are not comprehensive, and are asked to quickly prepare an effective plan for fire and disaster prevention, that respects the characteristics to be inherited by historic towns.

13. Tourism and activation of local economy

To be in contact with historic heritage, to learn from it and to be moved by it, is a pleasure shared in common by a great number of people. There are an increasing number of cases where tourism is undertaken based upon traditional industries, and encourages the activation of the area. Tourists and local residents discovering and letting traditional culture grow in mutual communication are to be the new form of tourism in historic towns.

To accept a more than adequate number of tourists prompts historic towns into becoming places ‘excessively dominated by tourists’, be it only locally. Due to a lack of organisation in external investments and too much emphasis placed on tourists’ demands, the phenomenon by which places become ‘excessively dominated by tourists’ continues. This may, in many cases, cause the loss of characteristics of historic towns. Furthermore, it can also turn tourism into ‘pollution’, threatening residential life. We seek to realise harmony between historic towns and tourism, and aspire to an ideal cultural tourism.

14. Securing traditional techniques and material

Historic towns are composed of buildings and structures constructed with traditional techniques and materials, that are prone to damage and changes. The techniques accumulated so far in the repair of cultural property, and trained craftsmen, are equally indispensable to conservation of historic towns and cultural heritage in Japan. Securing materials and techniques that indicate the specificity of the area is becoming an urgent task for the conservation of traditional buildings. We support training courses for craftsmen, mastering of techniques, and so forth.

No effort will be spared in order to secure materials or promote talents that compose elements of traditional Japanese architecture.

15. Cooperation and requests to architects involved in town conservation, and other related associations

In Japan, it has been pointed out that architects have been building without consideration for

the surrounding environment. Architects require a deep insight into the surroundings of the place where the construction of the building is planned. In recent years, examples of buildings that evaluate and use the characteristics of traditional buildings, and give consideration to the characteristics of towns have increased. We welcome such activities of architects rooted in local culture, and show solidarity with them.

It is the duty of urban planners to make plans such that the history of the area is not interrupted.

Respect for the specific character of historic towns is also required on the part of housing developers.

We ask each related association and organisation for co-operation in the search relating to the design of buildings, urban planning, and regional planning worthy of historic towns' conservation.

16. Respect of international standards and international communication

Conservation of historic towns in one country simultaneously attracts other countries' attention. As indicated by the 'World Heritage', a large number of cultural properties have characteristics that transcend one country, as heritage common to humankind. Representing international general principles concerning conservation of cultural heritage are documents such as the Venice Charter, and the Nara Document. Concerning conservation of historic towns, are the Washington Charter, the Tlaxcala Declaration, etc. We have great respect for these international principles.

We make efforts so that all people from the world can enjoy prosperous and attractive Japanese historic towns. At the same time, we pay respect to residents, citizens and experts who make efforts to conserve historic heritage in all countries, and wish to have fruitful communication with these people. It is also our wish that within the international community where diverse sets of values intermingle, people from every country appreciate each other's conservation of historic towns, and sympathise.

17. Hope for the 21st century

The 21st century is a century within which we may overcome the 20th century's hardships such as wars, poverty, and racial discrimination. It is a century of hope in which to build a generous society where humankind is equal.

Conservation of historic towns necessitates peace, and is incompatible with thinking that denies the diversity of countries' and peoples' values. The very action of conserving historic towns and handing them on to the next generations is a means of communication that does not require the use of media such as words or images. We are confident that this is an accurate transmission of our message. We promote the conservation of historic towns not only within Japan, but also through international activities and communication in conservation of historic towns, by supporting and learning from one another.

We believe that conservation of historic towns becomes a continuous, worthy and pleasant activity for local residents, where they themselves are the leading figures of machizukuri. It is with hope that we welcome the 21st century, and promote the conservation of historic towns.

18. Entering the 21st century

Historic conservation of Japan, which began in earnest in Kyoto and Tsumago in 1968, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018. During this time, many achievements have been made, such as an increase in conservation areas. However, what has become clear at the same time is that, for

example, even if it is selected a National Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Buildings, the challenges will not stop. For example, overuse by tourism, community decline due to population decline, and the preservation of the historical environment outside the district will be neglected. In other words, the philosophies and principles listed in 1-17 of this Charter still need to be constantly pursued today in the 21st century.

The 21st century does not automatically overcome the negative legacy of the 20th century and become a hopeful century. Based on this Charter, we will continue our constant efforts with the conviction that the continuous development of various activities that promote historical conservation will contribute to the realization of the 21st century with hope.

The secretarial board of the Japanese Association for Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration, which is its highest legislative body, has held its autumn secretarial board meeting on 6th October, 2000 in Nichinan City (Miyazaki Prefecture), and has approved this ‘Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Settlements of Japan’. The Charter was then adopted at the 23rd General Meeting of ‘Machinami’ Towns held on the 8th of the same month.

Hereby undersigning, on behalf of all people who love Japanese historic towns,

President of the Japanese Association for
Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration
Daisuke IGARASHI (signature)

The Japan ICOMOS National Committee, in its General Assembly held 16th December 2000, has decided to show deference to the Japanese Association for Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration for having completed and adopted this Charter as a result of long years of thorough debate. The Committee has also decided to assent to the intent of this Charter. And as a testimony to this, the President of the Committee here by undersigns:

Japan ICOMOS National Committee,
the President of the Committee
Akira ISHII (signature)

As a result of examining the update of the “Historic Townscape / Village Conservation Charter” entrusted by the General Assembly, the National Street Preservation Federation Board of Directors has not yet faded the principles and principles listed in 1-17 of this Charter. Recognizing that it should continue to be pursued in the future, it was decided to add “18. Entering the 21st century” to that effect, and the final decision was made at the General Meeting on the day of July 6, 2020.

President of the Japanese Association for
Machi-nami Conservation and Regeneration
Yuichi FUKUKAWA (signature)

Note about the English translation

The aim of this English translation of the Machinami Charter is to bring to light the way Japanese people approach and feel about the conservation of their historic living environment, and to help promote exchange and dialogue among people of all countries who are concerned about similar issues. Therefore, it is the intent of this translation to stay as close as possible to the original Japanese text. While at times the English may appear to be somewhat awkward, the translator believes that keeping to the substance and nuance of the original Japanese text, is the best way for the Charter to raise questions and become the basis of fruitful discussion, dialogue and exchange.

Glossary of some key terms of this Charter:

Machinami Shuuraku 町並み・集落－ Historic towns and Settlements

Machinami, usually translated as ‘Historic Town’, is a Japanese word that includes a nuance of the historic core, in both its tangible and intangible factors, its physical and spiritual aspects, that would be created by a ‘bond of spirits’. It also contains the tone of making a line, hand-in-hand, that applies both to buildings and to people. Shuuraku, the Japanese word for ‘settlement’, is often translated as village. In this Charter it also contains an idea of a community’s surrounding natural and cultural environment.

Machizukuri まちづくり－ Community building

Machizukuri translated ‘Community Building’ in this Charter, is a Japanese word that contains a range of concepts that can lead to a variety of actions related to economical, spiritual, and physical community planning and building. These could also be articulated by different expressions according to the particular context, such as community revitalisation, neighbourhood preservation, or planning with community involvement.

Translation from Japanese to English:

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