

# Creation Myths for the Preservation of Tsumago Post-town

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Looking at one historic preservation site as a microcosm of Japan at large, this study investigates the homogeneity and implied conflict expressed in tourist brochures presenting the history of the local preservation movement. In the post-town of Tsumago in Nagano Prefecture, known for Japan's first citizens' movement to promote local historic preservation, three versions of the preservation movement's history—based on *furusato* romanticism, professionalism, and idealism—each mark the publication of three separate institutional sources. These variations suggest differing interpretations of the influence of successful preservation and present lessons for the better understanding of historic preservation nationwide.

Although the recent importing of gender-bending anime and erotic *manga* comics, the Iron Chef and fashionable “cuteness” has eroded the image to some extent, it may still be said that the popular view of Japan in the West remains one of a homogenized whole, a buttoned-down factory where for the past four or five decades all efforts—social, political, and economic—have been directed at the same clearly defined goals of economic development at home and political neutrality abroad. Such a perspective has been, in fact, a cornerstone of the dominant rhetoric shaping Japanese views in the postwar era. Foreign scholars have often commented on the pervasiveness of this Japanese self-image. At the beginning of her recent book on controversial memorial rites for aborted fetuses, Hardacre (1997, 9) notes a “deeply entrenched” view that over the course of the postwar period Japanese society has been “exceptionally harmonious.” Discussing the legacies of Japan’s colonial past and present-day relations with its Asian neighbors, Yoneyama (1999, 4-5) writes of the effects of “political exigencies” that have “rendered the nation’s multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural constituencies invisible.” The received narrative, she finds, has been one of “totality, stability, confidence, and universal truthfulness.” In contrast, a large body of research on Japan seeks to pursue what Dower terms the “heretical” endeavor of “challeng[ing] the popular emphasis...on harmony, consensus, [and] the ‘group model’ as the central axis of Japanese thought and practice” (Dower 1993, 4). Overcoming a common reading of postwar Japanese society as orderly, undifferentiated, and without division is one of the first tasks for anyone seeking to look closely at Japan’s social and cultural history in the postwar period.<sup>1</sup>

By their nature, preserved heritage sites—most often framed as representations of a single, strongly asserted national identity (Winks 1976)—are particularly susceptible to easy integration into a view of the recent past that emphasizes harmony between the actors involved in their preservation. In the context of the political exigencies of postwar Japan, consensus and cooperation are commonly assumed to be the dominant models for Japanese heritage preservation (Ehrentraut 1995). This paper strives to investigate such assumptions. Using a selection of materials readily available in Japanese at the site, it attempts to open up the discussion of what was at stake as Tsumago, a historic town in the foothills of the Southern Japan Alps, was defined as important, evaluated for its suitability for preservation, and ultimately restored in the 1960s and early 1970s. Present in the historical record are varying explanations of the origins of Tsumago’s preservation. Through an exploration of the historiography of the Tsumago preservation movement, we can see the possibilities, both missed and realized, that historic preservation presented to the people involved at the time and in the years since.

Although the title of this article refers to “myths,” its concern is not with the refutation of untruths. Rather, what is discussed here are three widely distributed accounts produced by the central institutions involved in the town’s contemporary presentation as a tourist site—that is, accounts current in the informational materials available just a year or two ago—that describe the process by which the initial preservation of the town was begun in the mid-1960s. Like any myth, each of these versions in its own way transcends its own truthfulness, realigning what common sense tells us about the past. Each is a construction assembled using materials drawn from the historical record, but in their emphases they highlight quite different aspects of past events. Each is a piece of historical writing in itself, with its own implications for our understanding of conditions in the present day.

### **Tsumago’s Setting and History**

Tsumago post-town is administratively a part of Nagiso-machi, a town in Nagano Prefecture in the Southern Japan Alps.<sup>2</sup> For more than two centuries, Tsumago was one of

eleven post-towns on the Kiso Valley section of the Nakasendô, the “mid-mountains highway” established at the opening of the Tokugawa era (1603–1868) and running between the nominal capital of Kyoto and the political power center of Edo (now Tokyo) (Figure 1). Tsumago itself was established in the early seventeenth century by the gathering together of local residents drawn by the promise of economic benefits of the newly rebuilt highway. Until the Tokugawa highway system was eclipsed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by competition from new modes of transportation (chiefly rail and truck), Tsumago stood as a collection of inns, restaurants, and shops catering to the Nakasendô’s travelers.

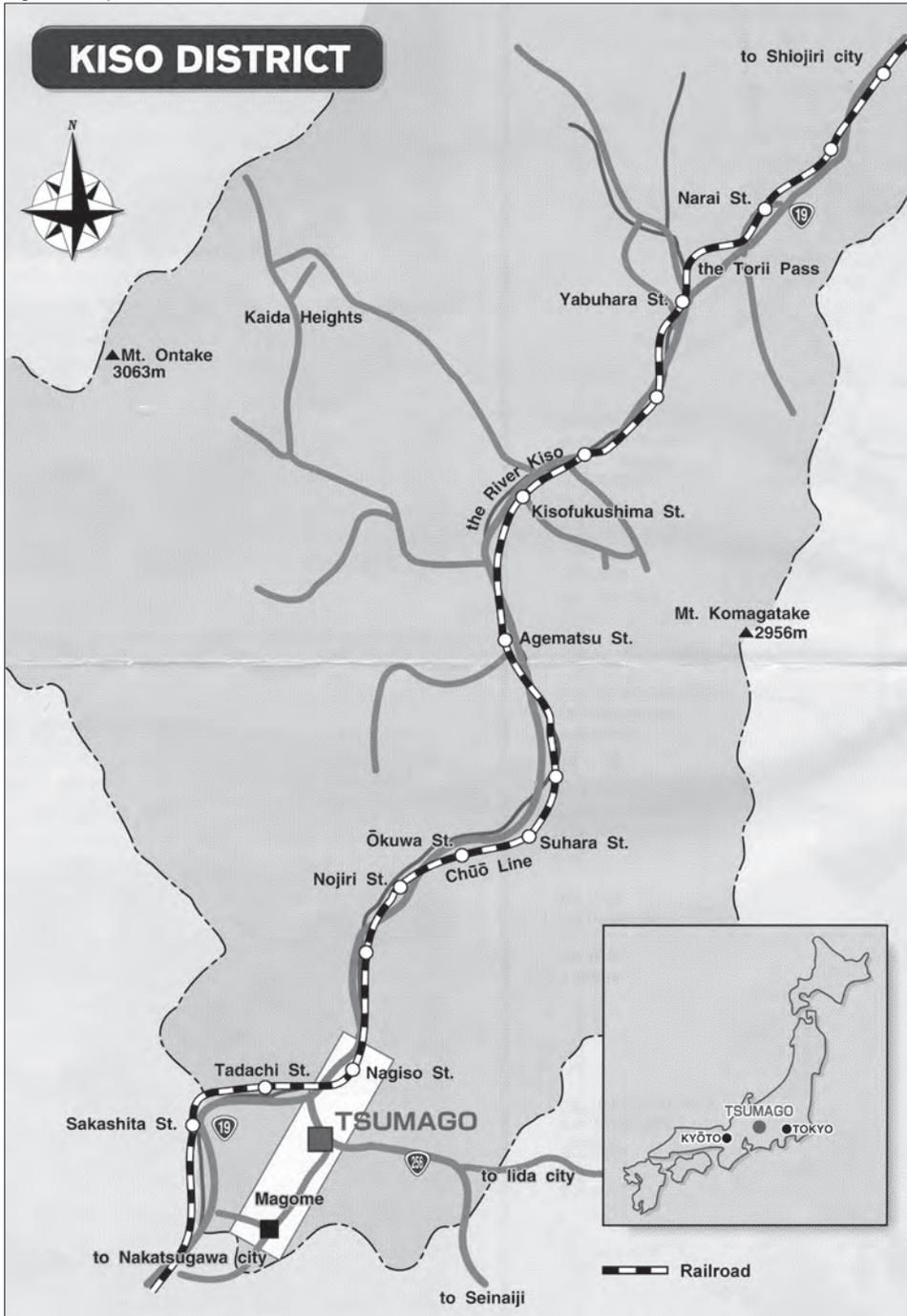
The Tokugawa-era highway system, with five main roads, numerous secondary roads, and well over one hundred official post-towns, served the heart of the main islands with transport and communication. Messengers from the central government were frequent travelers, as were other officials, pilgrims, merchants, and local nobles (*daimyô*). The system of alternate attendance (*sankin kôtai*) instituted early in the Tokugawa era required the *daimyô* to reside part-time in the capital and part-time in their home region, prompting much of the heaviest use of the roads. The post-towns were generally organized around two main inns, the *honjin* and the *waki-honjin*. Transport was closely controlled, and the *daimyô* and their many retainers (often numbering between 150 and 300 people) were required to travel via the five major highways, staying at registered post-towns at every stop.

With the abolition of the system of alternate attendance in 1862, the 1868 Meiji Restoration, which returned the imperial house to the center of power, and the construction in the later nineteenth century of rail lines that bypassed the valley, Tsumago like many former post-towns fell into decline. The entire mountain region suffered economically and, as was common in all of Japan’s wooden cities and towns, fires in 1825, 1868, 1921, and 1933 each destroyed between sixteen and thirty-eight buildings in Tsumago. Ironically, some measure of relief came during the Pacific War (1931–45), when rural areas offered relief from dire urban conditions and rural towns sheltered many people fleeing the cities. As the economy improved nationally in the 1950s, however, those same rural areas began losing population at a remarkable rate. Between 1955 and 1985, the population of Nagiso-machi as a whole declined from a wartime and postwar high of about 11,000 residents to barely 6,100.

The Tsumago preservation district stretches along a short section of the Tokugawa-era highway and is comprised of 184 buildings, as well as “surroundings of historical scenic beauty” (Nagiso-machi Board of Education 1993, 14–15). The town’s buildings date for the most part from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The current preservation district is the nation’s largest in area, measuring 1,245.4 hectares (more than 3,000 acres) and stretching at its longest 5.5 kilometers north to south and 3.8 kilometers east to west (Figure 2). Much of that area, however, is comprised of the hillsides that provide scenic backdrops for the heritage buildings; the settlement itself is relatively compact and self-contained.

Of the 184 buildings within the district, more than 100 have been substantially repaired since restoration and conservation work began in the mid-1960s (Figure 3). The first to be restored was the *waki-honjin*, named “Okuya,” which was built in 1877 of the local *hinoki* cypress. It was opened as the village history museum in 1967. The *honjin*, lost to fire about 1900, was rebuilt in 1995 using original plans and drawings and is intended now to recreate closely the building’s state as of the early 1830s. In the view of the tourism industry, the restoration of Tsumago has been an unquestioned success: according to figures provided by the municipal government, about 18,000 tourists visited the town in 1967, and in 1972 well over a half-million made visits there. By the early 1990s, the number of tourist visitors was nearing one million per year, a high that has diminished only slightly with the economic recession that has plagued Japan since early in that decade.

Figure 1. Map of the Kiso District in Central Honshū



Source: Adapted from Nagiso-machi Tourism Section, n.d., *A Short Guide to Tsumago*.

Figure 2. In this photo, looking south from the Tsumago castle ruins toward the town, nearly the entire viewshed of the valley and hillsides are within the historic district. The large building in the center foreground is the historical museum associated with the *waki-honjin*.



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Figure 3. The November Bunka Bunsei festival brings many visitors to Tsumago to enjoy a parade along the Nakasendō against the backdrop of the town's heritage architecture.



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Japanese government programs for the preservation of architectural heritage began as a counter force that sought to correct some of the early excesses of first a revolutionary, then a modernizing zeal. Including an initial period dominated by the forced separation of Buddhism from Shinto (Ketelaar 1990), in the first decades after the 1868 Meiji Restoration the ruling oligarchs rejected many of the established anchors of Japanese society in favor of a program of “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) based on the adoption of social, economic, and political structures drawn from Western models. The resulting combination of governmental persecution and neglect weakened Buddhist organizations in particular and resulted in the destruction of uncounted numbers of Buddhist artifacts, the dismantling of more than forty thousand Buddhist temples nationwide, and the widespread export of antiquities. After more than three decades of losses sustained by the nation’s cultural fabric, legislation was passed in 1897 to protect Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and the artworks contained within them. In the twentieth century, a series of cultural properties laws and amendments have steadily expanded protection: to a wider range of significant buildings and works of fine and applied arts, to vernacular architecture, crafts and craft techniques, the borrowed scenery surrounding Kyoto and other former capitals, and, most recently, to significant works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture not covered by the earlier laws (Henrichsen 1998; Siegenthaler 1999b; Yamasaki 1994; Liebs 1998).

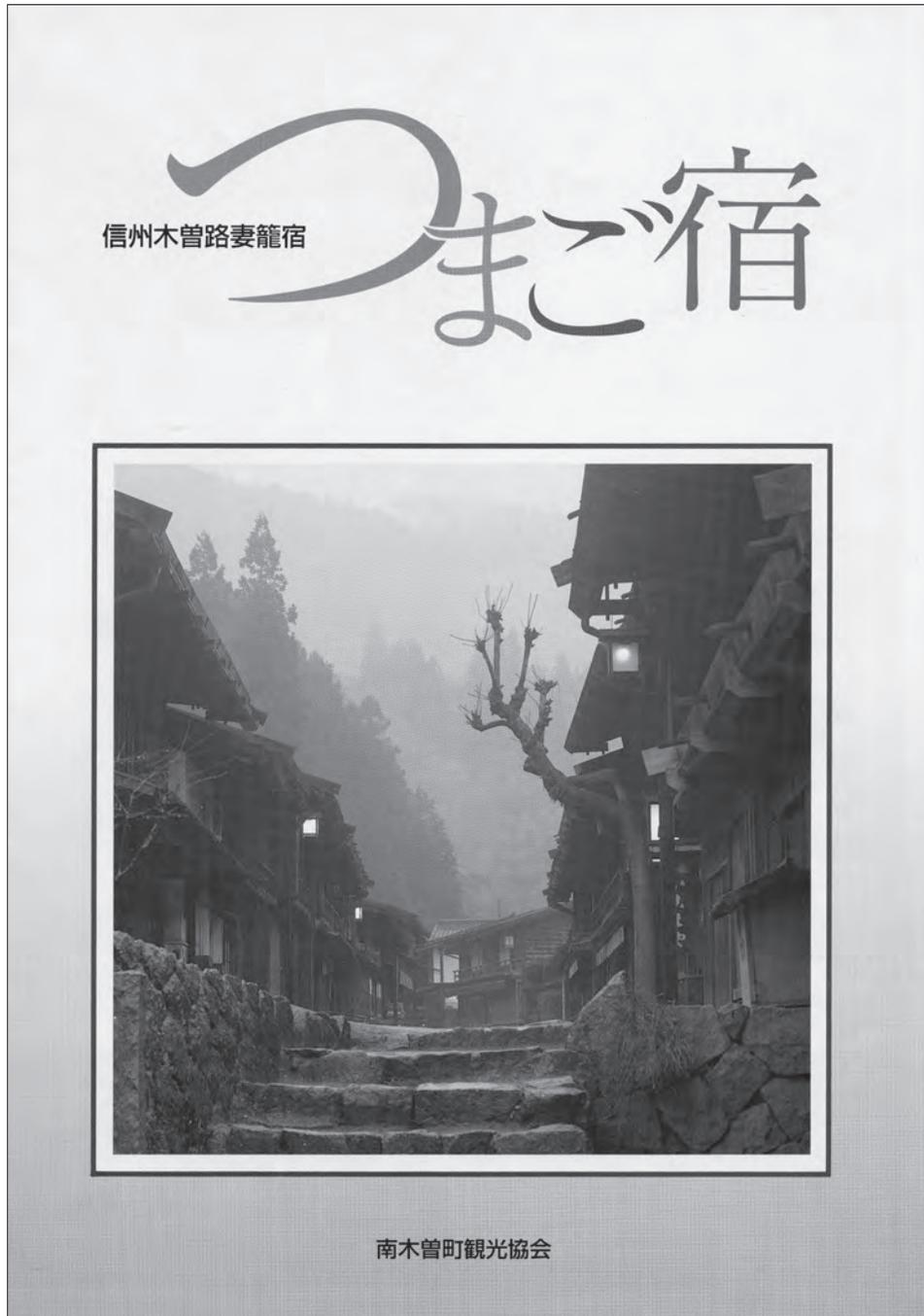
In the late 1960s Japan experienced the advent of nationwide citizens’ movements (manifested, among other ways, in antipollution lawsuits, protests against the construction of industrial plants and airports, and resistance to the Japanese role in the war in Vietnam) that at their core questioned the government’s emphasis on economic progress over citizens’ health and lifestyle. By the early 1970s, the government responded with strong antipollution and consumer rights legislation (McKean 1981; Maclachlan 2002), and policies for the preservation of open space, historical sites, and cultural assets were expanded as well. Groups of heritage buildings were brought into the legal sphere in 1975, with an amendment to the 1950 cultural properties law that outlined procedures for the establishment of a Preservation District for a Group of Historic Buildings (*Dentô-teki Kenzôbutsu-gun Hozon Chiku*) (Hohn 1997). Building on local organizing that had begun a decade or more earlier, Tsumago was among the first national-level preservation districts established under the 1975 amendment.

### **Myth #1: Tsumago as Dreamland**

The first expression of the historiography of Tsumago rests on the sentimentalized and romanticized concept of the *furusato*. The *furusato* has been a ubiquitous part of Japanese cultural life for more than three decades. A central trope in postwar Japan’s nostalgic search for its national identity, *furusato* literally means “old village,” but it is more properly translated as “home” or “native place” (Robertson 1988). Rich with resonance, the term has associations with the nation’s premodern past, rurality, craftsmanship, and tradition (Siegenthaler 1999a, 1999b). For nearly two decades beginning in the 1970s, it was among “the most popular symbols used by Japanese politicians, city planners, and advertisers” (Robertson 1988, 494), selling everything from government policies to bath soap. As Ivy (1995) demonstrates, however, while *furusato* is one of the first terms that comes to mind when rural tourism is mentioned, the marketing of heritage sites in big cities and small towns alike has drawn on many of the same characteristics encapsulated in the trope of the *furusato* in order to attract visitors to the sites.

Not surprisingly, the municipal tourism authorities in Nagiso-machi have exploited the allure of the *furusato* in selling Tsumago as a tourist destination. The recent publications of

Figure 4. The cover of the tourist association's guide map from the late 1990s markets the town based on a romantic vision of its history.



Source: Nagiso-machi Tourism Association, c. 1998

the municipal tourism association draw on many of the now-standard elements involved in presentations of rural Japan. Without using the term *furusato* itself in the pamphlets under study here, the tourist office publications are almost a textbook case for how to trade on the attraction of *furusato* imagery. To take one example, the front cover of the map handed out recently at the shops and sites of Tsumago (Nagiso-machi Tourism Association c. 1998) features a nostalgic and romantic view of Old Japan (Figure 4). The architecture stands for a world apart from the everyday, and while the stone steps look treacherous in the mist, the lights of the inns promise security and an old-style hospitality.

The rest of the map's illustrations and text further refine this image of the town. The quarter-folded brochure opens out to a sketch showing the locations of Nagiso's major sights for tourists. Around its borders are photos of some of those attractions; among them, the photograph of Tsumago stands out for being misty where the others are bright and clear, for displaying a place of cultured solitude—a nearly empty streetscape—where the others more often show either majestic nature or groups of families enjoying the outdoors. Tsumago's primary importance to the town's tourism industry is shown by the space given to it in the publication. A layout with fourteen photographs features the various attractions of the preservation district, while a tagline, inviting the visitor to a “return trip to the time of first love,” highlights the romance to be found in the old town. Despite rather prosaic illustrations of the sights to be found in the town, the accompanying text retains a focus on the romance that waits to be discovered there.

A similar treatment of the town's sites is contained in an earlier but more extensive pamphlet, “Nagiso no Tabi” (Nagiso Journey), also published by the tourism association (Nagiso-machi Tourism Association 1990). In this thirty-six-page introduction to the town's tourist sites, Tsumago's place as the leading attraction of Nagiso-machi is broadcast by its dominance of the cover and its prominence as the first site presented inside the booklet. Again the theme is sentimental escape: Tsumago is presented as “a town that gives dreams and romance to the traveler.”

Noteworthy for this discussion, the process by which the post-town was preserved is only cursorily mentioned in these two tourism association publications. The later annotated map offers no information about the town's recent history. In the earlier brochure, the preservation process is first presented in the passive voice—that is, as an event without agency—while a further mention of the preservation movement reassures the reader that a hallmark of Tsumago's restoration is that the residents' life and lifestyle have continued unchanged during the course of the work. In this, the most widely circulated reading of the process by which the site was defined and preserved, social unity prevails: everyone wins, because their interests are complementary and not in conflict. That is, the visitor is treated to a unique experience in a place apart from the pedestrian concerns of the everyday, the nation's identity is affirmed through the maintenance of important symbols of its history, and local residents receive income from tourists without suffering an interruption in the natural passage of their community's life.

## **Myth #2: Tsumago and Figures of Authority**

Another view of the town and its preservation is given in the materials of the Tsumago *Wo Ai Suru kai*, the Tsumago Protectors' Association or Friends of Tsumago. The preservation movement in Tsumago was formally institutionalized in this citizens' group with its incorporation in 1968. At about this time, as well, a basic set of rules for the maintenance during preservation activities and beyond of the former post-town's visual appearance was written and enacted into law (Nagiso-machi Board of Education 1993). This association

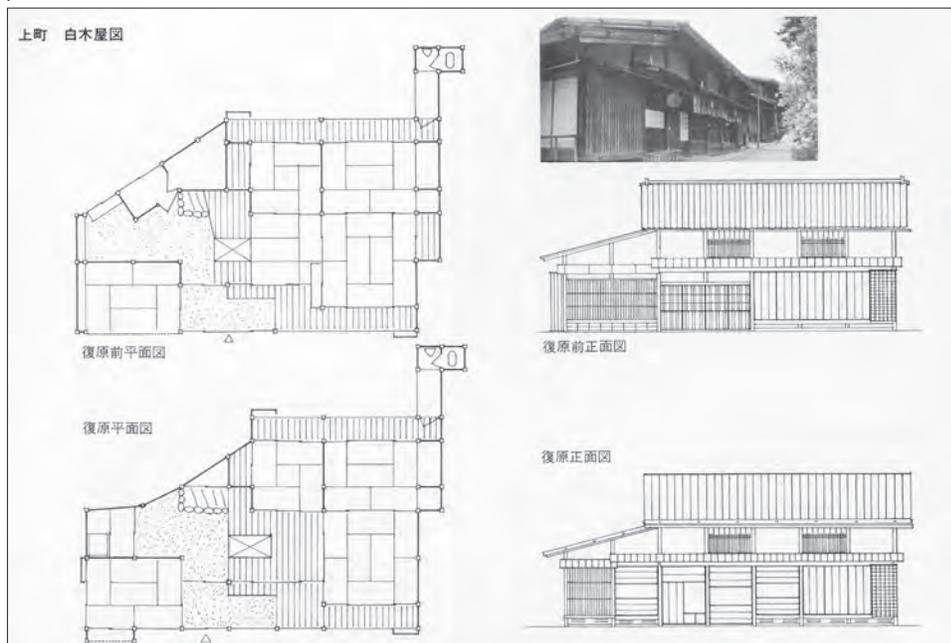
remains the principal organization overseeing the preservation district. Membership today is mandatory: all property owners are automatically members of the association.

The Friends of Tsumago pamphlet (Nagiso-machi Municipal Preservation Response Board 1997) is also readily available to the visitor and gives considerable attention to the history of the preservation process itself (Figure 5). Its overview of the history of the town draws a straight line from the area's past in prehistory, through its long-standing role in regional and national transport and communication, to its more recent place in postwar Japanese cultural politics as a "leader" and "living example of practice" in a nationwide movement to preserve townscapes (13).

Most striking about this history of Tsumago's preservation is its emphasis on relatively technical aspects of preservation and architectural history and its casting of town leaders and outside experts as the driving force behind the preservation movement. The publication asserts Tsumago's leadership in Japanese preservation: the post-town's unique place in the movement is said to consist of redefining what should be preserved and how best to preserve those elements. As they envision the town's restoration, the leaders of Tsumago's preservation expanded the view of "existing cultural assets and objects for protection" from "details" to "facades," finally including as well the town's scenic environment (Nagiso-machi Municipal Preservation Response Board 1997, 11).

Figures of authority, in this narrative, are juxtaposed against a reluctant local populace. In preparing for the town's restoration, Nagiso-machi's leaders solicited the opinions of "experienced scholars" and "experts." The first organization mentioned in relation to local residents is not the Friends of Tsumago itself, nor a precursor organization to express local concern for the protection of the town, but what is called a "village preservation explanation

Figure 5. A representative page from the Friends of Tsumago pamphlet emphasizes technical aspects of preservation over the romance of the visit.



Source: Nagiso-machi Municipal Preservation Response Board, 1997.

association,” designed explicitly to coordinate efforts to convince the residents of the benefits of the plan. Despite this body’s work, the pamphlet suggests, opposition was tenacious. Coordinated repair work and large-scale efforts to eliminate striking visual reminders of the present day (such as relocating utility services) were begun in early 1969, but it was not until the residents could be won over by concrete examples of the preservation process that opposition was overcome (Nagiso-machi Municipal Preservation Response Board 1997, 12).

### Myth #3: Tsumago and the Citizens’ Movement

Finally, a third view of Tsumago’s preservation is offered by the local history museum, housed in a recently built building squeezed in next to the most substantial surviving structure in town, the *waki-honjin* Okuya. The displays of the museum present the history of the region from prehistory to the present day and, like the Friends of Tsumago pamphlet just discussed, emphasize its historic role as a center of transport and communication over a number of centuries.

While the discussion of the town’s postwar history in the Friends of Tsumago publication gives all of its attention to the process by which its buildings were restored and preserved, the history museum adds a significant element to the explanation of how the preservation movement came into being. The history museum’s exhibitions, comprehensively reproduced in a catalog available at the museum (Nagiso-machi Museum 1996), trace the birth of the movement to preserve Tsumago’s buildings back to the first months and years after the end of the war in 1945. In the museum’s presentation, the leading role of Tsumago in establishing one of the first examples in the postwar period of what are called “citizen’s halls” or “citizen’s public halls,” the now-common *kōminkan*, is said forthrightly to be the precursor from which the townscape preservation movement grew (72–73).

This connection between the preservation movement and the early postwar *kōminkan* casts the origins of Tsumago’s preservation in a new light. The *kōminkan* is a widespread presence in contemporary Japan, numbering about 17,500, more than the total number of the country’s junior high schools (Kawamoto 1994, 15). The *kōminkan* of today, however, is a generation or two removed from the institution cited by the Nagiso museum as providing the spiritual roots of Tsumago’s preservation movement. Increasingly integrated into the national system of adult education (referred to in Japan as “social education,” *shakai kyōiku*) (Moro-oka 1976, 45–48; Thomas 1985, 85),<sup>3</sup> the *kōminkan* has become “the centrepiece” of that system, with its “ultimate purpose... to provide educational programmes” (Thomas 1985, 82, 85). In this current incarnation, within the *kōminkan* “almost all” of the programs take the form of “a ‘class’ or ‘lecture’ centered around a leader” (Kawamoto 1994, 19).

In contrast, the original, early-postwar formation of the *kōminkan* was as “a multi-purpose cultural center, simultaneously functioning as civic school, library, museum, town hall, assembly house, and depot” (Moro-oka 1976, 46). Often using theater pieces, lectures, or other educational entertainments to communicate information toward the reform of village life, the early postwar *kōminkan* program, without a doubt, was in keeping with the liberal values espoused by Occupation authorities in the first phase of the seven-year American postwar occupation (Figure 6). Instituted as it was during this time, uncertainty over the origins of the *kōminkan* program—whether an Occupation imposition or a recovered legacy of earlier Japanese social and political movements—persists into the present day.<sup>4</sup> In its encyclopedic survey of the Shōwa era (1926–89), *Kōdansha* (1989, 7:276) without qualification traces the origins of the postwar *kōminkan* to prewar roots. Stating in a headline that the new scheme for the citizens’ halls was “identical to prewar *kōminkan* plans,” the editors of the volume go on to list nine attributes of the planned-for *kōminkan* that were similar to

Figure 6. Still photos from the Nagiso museum displays show the varieties of theatrical and other activities sponsored by the Tsumago *kōminkan* in the early postwar period.



Source: Nagiso-machi Museum, 1996.

aspects of the “community halls” (*rimpo-kan*) set up in the 1920s in various communities nationwide by rural social service agencies. A number of examples of such community halls, beginning as early as 1928 in Yamanashi Prefecture, are then featured.

This identification of Tsumago’s preservation with the history of the *kōminkan* program brings to the surface two conflicting understandings of both the possibilities and the hazards of democracy in the “New Japan” of the postwar era. The 1971 plan for the re-formation of the *kōminkan* system resulted in the *kōminkan* becoming simply “the cornerstones of liberal social education” in Japan (Thomas 1985, 62), and today’s *kōminkan* are integrated fully into the national educational establishment. Advocates of the earliest image of the postwar *kōminkan*—that is, a perspective akin to what the Occupation authorities termed a “fountainhead of local progress and development... born of the people’s wishes and cooperation” (Van Staaveren 1994, 126)—cite the 1949 passage of the Social Education Law as a significant step in a steady process that brought the *kōminkan* increasingly under the supervision and control of central authority within the educational and cultural ministry, the Monbushō.

The result of Monbushō interest in the *kōminkan*, these critics argue, is an “insidious intervention” which, rather than serving to foster local activities instead restricts them by giving the national government administrative and financial “leverage” over the local halls (Thomas 1985, 50). In fact, they continue, prewar community centers, such as the *rimpo-kan* mentioned above but including as well various forms of local meeting halls found in premodern Japan, served the localities quite well. In defining the *kōminkan*'s shape and mission in its 1946 statement and formalizing the *kōminkan* system by means of the 1949 law, the central government, via its agent the Monbushō, “was not establishing a novel form of adult education designed to increase local democratic participation,” but was instead attempting “to assert its authority over a traditional cornerstone of communal life, with the intention of replacing its potential for disruption by anodyne cultural activity” (Thomas 1985, 51).

Such a reading of the dynamics of postwar Japanese society is far from rare.<sup>5</sup> The “reverse course” in the Occupation's policies began in the period 1946–7 and turned the object of its work from the “remarkable display of arrogant idealism” summed up in the phrase “demilitarization and democratization” to the establishment of Japan as a “subordinate Cold War partner” (Dower 1999, 23). The Occupation's reverse course was experienced domestically by the return to power of a leadership tainted—or, even, darkly stained—by association with the wartime regime. As a result, to many Japanese the Occupation began quickly to seem “a failure and a betrayal” (Gluck 1983, 173); a failure to root out elements in the political leadership who retained wartime values, and a betrayal of the possibilities of postwar democracy.

If the Occupation itself is seen as, at best, a missed opportunity, the early postwar period is remembered by many Japanese as a period of “cultural and political optimism” (Koschmann 1996, 231), the “golden age of postwar democracy” (Gluck 1983, 195). With the revival of the fortunes of Japan's conservatives, the initial sense of the possibility of overcoming anti-democratic tendencies was replaced with an extended period of stasis. In relation to the issues raised by the telling of history through the preservation of architecture, the demise of the initial “surge of optimism” was experienced as the beginning of a “long tug of war” that continues to this day between Monbushō officials and progressive historians over the presentation of national history (Gluck 1993, 68). More broadly, this reading of the early years after the war's end has prompted a summation of the postwar period as reflecting the competition between two understandings of the meaning of democracy: one sees democracy as embodied in “a system of government,” while the other looks to “processes, diffused throughout private as well as public spaces, by which relations of subordination are challenged” (Koschmann 1996, 244). If one looks at the *kōminkan* as an indicator of the result of that competition, it is clear that the former, democracy limited to the formal sphere of a system of government, was the victor in this protracted struggle. The possibilities of the *kōminkan* as the site for unstructured, non-hierarchical association between informed citizens were eclipsed as the institution was brought under the control of the central authorities.

To associate the preservation of Tsumago with the spirit of the *kōminkan*, however, is to draw a rhetorical connection between the work done on the ground by local citizens toward the preservation and revitalization of their town and the institutionalization in the Friends of Tsumago of the moment in postwar Japanese history at which the possibility of citizen involvement in public life appeared at its greatest. The histories offered by the Friends of Tsumago and the history museum are not directly at odds. In fact, the historical record supports a reading that offers central responsibility for the success of the preservation program to the town leaders and outside experts who oversaw it, while assigning a vital role to the *kōminkan* as the institutional and ideological origin-point of the preservation movement.

The assertion, however, that the spirit of the *kōminkan* remains in the activities of the citizens' group that oversees Tsumago's ongoing restoration and conservation pushes that institution toward an increased accountability to local residents.

In fact, it appears that such accountability—despite the image of the “reluctant townspeople” presented in their pamphlet—is today more fully a part of the activities of the Friends of Tsumago than of comparable historic preservation organizations elsewhere in the Japanese countryside. In other sites in which the *kōminkan* played a central role in establishing the ideological foundations of the preservation movement—most notably the World Heritage site of Ogimachi, in the village of Shirakawa-gō in Gifu Prefecture—it appears that the results have been less clearly successful from the point of view of the residents. In Tsumago in recent years, for example, a road was built that offers easier access to the

village; hidden behind a screen of trees, it is designed almost exclusively to bring residents and shopkeepers to the center of the historic district and is not for the use of tourists. In contrast, currently under construction on a hill overlooking Ogimachi's historic district is an expansive parking lot fed by a road that leads to the edge of the district. The new facilities are designed entirely for tourist traffic; while intended to decrease traffic congestion in the center of the preservation district, it appears that it will also allow increased numbers of tourists to access the village, already a destination for nearly one million visitors per year (Figure 7).

## Conclusions

To a degree greater than with other townscape preservation sites in Japan, the story of Tsumago post-town as a place is closely connected to the story of when, how, and by whom the movement to preserve the site was promoted. From academic studies of the role of local citizens in preservation activities (Henrichsen 1998; Goto and Alanen 1987), to the statements of preservation societies themselves (Association of National Trusts in Japan 1997), to descriptions of Japan's historic architecture written for a more general audience (Masuda 1998), to presentations in the popular press of the town as a tourist destination (Willis 2002), most treatments of Tsumago allude to the importance of the town as the location of Japan's first townscape preservation movement.

Figure 7. The historic district of Ogimachi, in northern Gifu prefecture's Shirakawa-gō, is comprised of *gasshō-zukuri* houses, one of the most widely recognized styles of Japanese domestic architecture.



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## CREATION MYTHS

The sources investigated here, however, indicate that there is little agreement concerning a single interpretation of the political, social, and cultural meaning of the Tsumago preservation movement. The presentations of Tsumago's preservation offered in the brochures investigated here are neither homogenous nor lacking in controversy. The stories told by each organization of how the town was protected, restored, and preserved raise issues that concern the constellation of citizen activism in the postwar period in all its forms. That is, while the tourism association's publications assert a form of social homogeneity often hypothesized in postwar Japanese public life, avoiding all discussion of the gains and losses involved in the town's preservation, the other two sources offer contrasting images of how preservation came about. In the preservation society's publication, by relating the successful overcoming of opposition to the sustained and enlightened leadership of experts, the narrative bolsters the importance of the organization itself. In contrast, the history museum's retelling of the preservation process undercuts both the romantic image of the town promoted by the tourism association and the pragmatic and hierarchical model for preservation activities fostered by the Friends of Tsumago.

To an outsider looking to better understand the Tsumago experience, these variations in the presentation of the town's recent history offer useful lessons. Within the context of the economic and social development of postwar Japan, in which urbanization, migration to the cities, and the economic stagnation of rural areas are all problems that have stubbornly resisted generations of solutions by planners and politicians, Tsumago presents a vision of relative success. Economically, the preservation district has brought sustained income to broad numbers of residents. For urbanites, the town serves as a destination that brings relief from the stressful lifestyles of the larger cities. And, while Tsumago and Nagiso-machi continue to lose population, they retain residents more successfully than do other comparable towns in the region.

What one sees in these three versions of Tsumago's history, then, are outlines of three pillars of the town's continued success. Clearly, while preservation leaders have worked diligently to present an articulate and truthful version of local history through the historic preservation scheme, affective pleasures of the site (both in nature and in romance) are also important in bringing visitors to the shops and inns. The town, however, survives on more than economic success. Responsive leadership of the preservation organization combines with the nurturing of a local spirit—a sense that Tsumago represents something special—in maintaining a living community while fostering the sense of local identity that strengthens residents' emotional ties to the place. Among the histories presented in these sources, no one version alone offers a “true” account of the origins of Tsumago's preservation; rather, each of the three appears to have some basis in fact. The differences offered by these materials, however, introducing to the public one of Japan's most prominent heritage sites, suggest that a salutary variation remains at the heart of the Japanese national identity. They remind us, moreover, that success in historic preservation must be measured not solely in the numbers of visitors drawn to the site, but in the continued success of the community as a living entity, continuing to change as necessary but retaining a sense of place that rests on a foundation of shared ideals and experiences.

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later versions of the paper by Christoph Brumann and by the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Planning Forum*.

### About the Author



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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Kelly 1993 and Yoshino 1992 for influential examples of such research.
- <sup>2</sup> Except where otherwise credited, this statement of Tsumago’s history and overall composition is taken from Nagiso-machi Municipal Preservation Response Board (1997), Masuda (1998), Nagiso-machi Museum (1996), and my interview in Tsumago in July 1999 with Suzumura Kuniya, then Executive Director of the Tsumago wo Ai Suru Kai (Suzumura 1999). Translations from Japanese-language sources are my own unless otherwise credited. Information about the Heian and Tokugawa highway systems is drawn from Wigen (1995) and a website devoted to the Nakasendô and maintained at the University of Hong Kong (Stanley and Irving 1998).
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between “social” and “adult” education, see Garon 1997, 157–158.
- <sup>4</sup> For an Occupation view of the *kôminkan* program, see Van Staaveren 1994, 126-7.
- <sup>5</sup> For a deft summation of Japanese academics’ views of the postwar period, see Gordon 1993.

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