



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: *Embracing our vanishing homes.* Concocting community participative processes in Ozu.

Destination, Country: Ozu, Ehime Prefecture, Japan

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Local residents, local performing troupes (musketeers, kagura), Kita Management staff, local shop owners & Ozu NIPPONIA Castle Town Hotel operator staff reunite to give a warm welcome to Ozu Castle Stay guests.



Summary:

In late 2010's, Ozu embarked in the revitalization of its (physically) vanishing city centre. Preservation of crumbling centennial abodes was the absolute priority. Before long, shops or accommodation facilities brought new life into formerly abandoned houses. But, by way of audit and objections, officials realized that local residents had been carelessly sidestepped. In the lines that follow, attempts to rectify and give locals a participative voice in Ozu's regeneration efforts are described. Ultimately, ensuing 'environmental-conscious' initiatives are introduced.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

The old castle town of Ozu boasts a rich cultural heritage in an unspoiled natural setting. Layers of history intertwine under the close watch of the Hiji River, the backbone of the region. Water is intrinsically connected to the city and its culture.

Ozu became the fief of a small medieval domain controlled from a castle erected overhanging the river. Despite its geographical seclusion, it achieved significant economic and cultural development during the turn of the 20th century, when local Japanese paper, vegetable wax and silk threads, found their way to the world on river barges. Newly gained wealth resulted in cultural refinement and the construction of delicate pieces of architecture. Nonetheless, subsequent economic expansion bypassed the city.

As a consequence, layers of Edo (17th-19th centuries), Meiji (late 19th) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods were left intact for decades, but their preservation is being threaten nowadays by the ageing and decaying of local population.

In Ozu, thus, Japanese history can be experienced physically, and in a nutshell, wandering the compact old city centre. All of it, surrounded by unscathed natural surroundings (two National Parks lie on its fringes), and with the sense of authenticity that an absence of significant tourist undertakings entails.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

From 2018, Kita Management (Ozu's local DMO) reunited varied stakeholders and engaged in a wholeheartedly plan, with the aim of renovating crumbling houses in the city centre. The salvaging of centennial houses and reconversion into shops or accommodation has been since acclaimed, resulting in national or international recognitions. Nevertheless, with the exception of the project's initiators, local resident's contributions into Ozu's revitalization venture were originally overlooked. Truth to be told, immediate action was needed in order to prevent many of the houses from vanishing. Decisions had to be taken expeditiously.

Yet, one day, residents woke up and found out that scaffolding and construction sites were permeating Ozu's old district. And many of them were left wondering what was really happening...

No matter how much goodwill was stirring Kita Management actions, unease among neighbours was spreading. A lack of information was engendering reticence, which, in turn, led to proposals being hindered.

Upon reflection, it was deemed necessary to integrate Ozu's old district community into revitalization discussions, if a truly healthy outcome of Kita Management's assignment (urban revitalization) was to be expected.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Initial discussions dwelled on effective ways to 'recruit participants'... Will it be possible to find locals genuinely interested in nursing an ailing town? Organizing short lectures, revolving around topics related to Ozu's revitalization project (water & city, marketing digitalization initiatives or local environmental history) was judged adequate to establish a first contact with prospective collaborators (early 2021).

In the span of several months, and after some deliberation, those irregular lectures merged into two different micro-exchange platforms, animated by local DMO staff.

They have become two seedbeds for ideas that complement Kita Management endeavours:

-KAWA+MACHI (from late 2021) revolves around public space, **based on the idea that the city needs to be reconnected with the river**

-MACHITSUKURI Daigaku (from mid-2022) brings together merchants operating locally, **with the purpose of advancing sustainable practices in the city centre**

A third vector is being progressively set up, amalgamating voices of local schoolkids into a new platform. Covering a wide spectrum, these platforms aim to weave Ozu tourist needs with residents' yearnings.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

By dint of such community-enhancement activities, Ozu City Council, via the local DMO, has been able to correct its initial failure to disclose to local residents its intentions on rejuvenating the old city centre.

With attendances averaging 8-10 (KAWA+MACHI) or 15-18 (MATSUKURI Daigaku), monthly workshops are being organized.

A sense of proximity to participants became, arguably, a critical element to gain their trust. Kita Management emanated from local citizens, was masterminded in conjunction with city council officials and interacts regularly with locals (be it abandoned houses' landlords or volunteers taking part in the Castle Stay welcoming reception). Albeit workshop coordinators, care was taken so that Kita Management staff is not perceived as superintendents. The intention is to form a single team with participants in amicable, affectionate terms. A relaxed atmosphere incites trust and active engagement from all sides.

Various forms of recognition helped to increase the awareness on Kita Management activities. Regular media attention or international accolades ignited a sense of local pride, enhancing the will of being part of the on-going revitalization efforts. They constituted a siren call to new participants or contributed to the inception of new platforms (local schoolkids).

A third noticeable factor is the workshop's flexible format. Participants are encouraged to submit proposals that respond, not only to set discussion topics, but also to the workshop's management. A preference of practical, real-life scenarios vs. theoretical debates changed the nature of interactions at KAWA+MACHI workshop. Likewise, interest among participants at MACHITSUKURI Daigaku in uncovering good practices, compelled organizers to create a window through which renown practitioners/community enhancers could be invited to the workshop.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

By no means an easy task, but we learned that keeping participants motivated is essential to entertain lively discussions and produce innovative ideas. Consecrating precious private time to debates on urban regeneration or tourism enhancement might not always be enticing. Attendances suffered at specific times of the year. In order to surmount this, an increase in conviviality was attempted. Meaning, making workshop reunions more like meeting acquaintances than ticking a box on the calendar sheet: friendly outings to nature on the fringes of workshops, or nonchalant screening of films with family members helped to tighten up the group.

Regardless of how brilliant they may be, finding ways to consummate ideas has proven a huge hurdle. Lack of funds or manpower has shelved many interesting propositions. In that sense, a more practical approach has characterized subsequent debates. Instead of looking for paramount solutions at early stages, participants are promptly provided with detailed practicalities: budgetary caps, timeline constraints, etc. These elements conform now a non-negligible part of the exchanges. As a result, more ideas are becoming reality.

Finally, the nature of workshops' venues has proven surprisingly influential in the outcome of debates. Ozu does not lack available spaces (all those abandoned houses...) and different settings have been put to use. But certain surroundings have proven much more productive than others. A suitable environment (casual spatial arrangements enhancing exchanges and team work, adequate size, drinks and snacks breaks etc) is something that is carefully reflected on now, when preparing workshops.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Arguably, the enactment of two active platforms through which residents and stakeholders engage in discussions on tourist and urban regeneration ideas represents Ozu's most remarkable achievement. Namely, to have been able to include Ozu's community into the revitalization process.

More specifically, conclusions of the first set of debates on KAWA+MACHI instigated the reenacting of ferryboats along the Hiji River, with a tourist twist (from August 2022). Part of local life for centuries but gone since the 1930's, these bridging services have been transformed into a pleasurable way of enjoying Ozu's cityscape / environment. ([Ozu-joukamachi no Ofune Meguri](#))-

Apart from the implementation of a CRM system where an '[Ozu Passport](#)' delivers visitors' data and encourages further visits, deliberations on MACHITSUKURI Daigaku have allowed to launch two projects in which city centre merchants (hotel operators & shop owners) will be collaborating hand-in-hand with Kita Management: 1) installation of a network of free water refill stations throughout Ozu's old district, including merchant shops or tourist landmarks, 2) a new organic-waste recollection system destined to reduce food waste among participating merchants through composting (in course of implementation, FY2023).

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

Once implementation of Kita Management's project commenced, the novelty and complexity of the task put a veil over obvious assumptions. No one will be able to deny that working hand in hand with local residents is indispensable to the success of any urban regeneration venture. More so in a small community.

Nonetheless, the reality of things is that, in Ozu, the thrust and push of events, absorbed in their own dynamics, disengaged proceedings away from residents. It was only thanks to a respite in that frantic stream that it was realized that locals had not been given tickets for Ozu's journey into revitalization. A revitalization of their community!

It is always good to confront what it is being done with a specific individual of the community. Someone unrelated to the making of the project: how these local old ladies or that young kid one can see from one's office window on their way home are grasping your own endeavours? Are they benefitting from them? Are they being part of them?



Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

Awards:

- 2023 Green Destinations, Top 100 Best Practice Stories 1stprize. Culture & Tradition Category.
- 2022 14th Commendation of the Secretary of Japan Tourism Agency ([第 14 回観光庁長官表彰](#)) For bringing together local shop-owners and the implementation of CRM and 'Ozu Passport' systems.
- 2021 Good Design Award (Japan Institute of Design Promotion): ['Ozu Castle Town: Tourism Urban regeneration through the use of heritage and historical assets'](#)
- March 2021, Registration as a Japanese Regional DMO
- 2020, *Furusato Meibutsu** of the Year "Local Culture, Local Products Creation. Award Winner"

