A Small Village, A Great Transformation ”The Townscape Preservation Movement of Tsumago-juku"

Nagiso Town, Japan
Nagiso Tourism Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Tsumago-juku, a former Edo-era post town in Nagano Prefecture, Japan, was left a near-ghost village after the Meiji-era abolition of the post-station system and new railways bypassed it, while nearby Magome commercialised its own heritage for tourism. Rather than envying Magome's boom, town official Toshihiko Kobayashi and Mayor Ryoki Katayama chose "revitalisation through preservation": completing 1967 planning documents, restoring the historic Nakasendo trail and townscape as part of a 1968 prefectural project, and — as visitor numbers surged past 400,000 by 1971 — adopting the Tsumago Residents' Charter's three founding principles: do not sell, do not rent, do not destroy. In 1976, Tsumago became one of Japan's first Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings, protecting 1,245.4 hectares and helping revise national cultural property law to protect entire districts, not just single buildings. The enduring lesson: genuine tourism revitalisation starts with residents recognising the value already present in their community, and preservation must serve residents' wellbeing first, with tourism as the means, not the goal.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Tsumago-juku, a former post town in Nagiso Town, lies deep in the mountains in the southwestern Nagano Prefecture. Small settlements sit along the terraces of the Araragi River, and at the center stretches a one kilometer historic townscape.

When the Edo shogunate established the Nakasendo in 1601, Tsumago became the 42nd of 69 post towns. For 270 years, travelers, merchants, and feudal lords passed through, bringing Edo and Kyoto culture. Shortly before the end of the war, scholars evacuated from Tokyo and built ties with local youth, fostering a culture of dialogue that later supported cooperation in preservation efforts. In 1968, national commemorative projects led Nagano Prefecture to select Tsumago for townscape preservation and began full-scale restoration. Although the area faced rapid depopulation and lacked major attractions, this lack of development helped keep its historic landscape intact.

Preservation became possible thanks to long post-town history, a culture of dialogue, strong community bonds, and a landscape where nature and history remain intertwined. These factors nurtured a belief that “preserving the townscape is how we create our future,” sparking a community-driven preservation movement that continues to define Tsumago today.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

After the Meiji Restoration, the abolition of the post station system stripped Tsumago of its rights to handle passengers and goods. Soon after, new national roads and railways were built along the Kiso River, bypassing the old post town entirely. These transportation reforms hit Tsumago hard. Houses decayed, and the once bustling town soon resembled a ghost village. Young people left, and both the economy and community neared collapse.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Magome, the birthplace of novelist Shimazaki Tōson, a memorial museum opened and drew large crowds. Magome was booming with tourists, and many in Tsumago looked on with envy. Yet visitors seeking the quiet, mountain world evoked in Tōson’s Before the Dawn, captured in the line “The Entire Kisoji is in the Mountains,” felt Magome had become overly commercialized. Disappointed, they turned instead toward Tsumago, where they found overgrown mountain paths, cypress forests, and weathered houses, actual remnants of an Edo period post town. Many said the scenery evoked Tōson’s work and left with a plea: “Please keep Tsumago just as it is.”

At the time, people in Tsumago saw Magome’s tourist boom as success, while their own decaying townscape seemed merely a sign of poverty. Yet outside voices gradually shifted local awareness: what locals saw as old, others saw as valuable. This realization became a turning point, leading Tsumago to choose an unprecedented path, revitalization through preservation rather than modernization.

The Vision: What you set out to do

Tsumago’s townscape preservation movement began with a bold goal: to revitalize the local economy and break free from severe depopulation through “preservation-based tourism development.” As a historic post town on the Nakasendo and a place connected to Shimazaki

Tōson, Tsumago sought to protect its cultural heritage and landscape while developing tourism as a local industry, and above all, to safeguard residents' daily lives. This vision became the community's hope and a crucial challenge for its future.
Tsumago sought long term, sustainable tourism rooted in townscape preservation to pass on the town as a living post town where history and everyday life coexist.
In 1964, as anxiety and distrust in local government grew, Ryoki Katayama became mayor and set a new course for Tsumago's revitalization. The task of realizing this vision was entrusted to town hall official Toshihiko Kobayashi.
With confidence shaken and the future uncertain, Mayor Katayama's leadership and Kobayashi's resolve became the movement's driving force. Their determination to save the declining town gradually grew into a preservation effort that would eventually involve every household in Tsumago.

The Journey: How change happened
By the 1960s, Tsumago was rapidly depopulating, and its appearance as a post town was fading. Mayor Katayama entrusted Toshihiko Kobayashi with revitalizing the local economy through community involvement, but with no major tourist attractions, he felt isolated and overwhelmed. He later recalled how the pressure had nearly driven him to a breakdown.
A turning point came when he realized that even a village with few resources still possessed value, not 1.0, but even 0.1 or 0.01 matters if we choose to see it. If residents united, he believed, they could achieve what seemed impossible. And because Tsumago lacked large-scale attractions that would attract big capital, its landscape had remained intact. This insight became the seed of the idea of preserving the townscape.
Around the same time, the new elementary school principal, Mr. Shiokawa, was troubled to see everyday tools and folk materials from the post town era being thrown away. Telling a group of young fathers in the PTA, "These are treasures. We must keep them," he inspired them to form the Tsumago Historical Preservation Society, which Kobayashi supported as early partners in preservation.
In 1965, during a tourism assessment by university professors and the Railway Bureau, Kobayashi proposed a preservation-based tourism development and received strong encouragement.
By 1967, two major planning documents had been completed: the Nagiso Town Tourism Development Guidelines and the Old Nakasendo Preservation and Improvement Plan. Together, they outlined a vision that was revolutionary for the time: preserving the literary and historical atmosphere of the old highway, protecting nature and cultural assets, shielding residents from external capital, developing tourism as a comprehensive local industry, and ensuring that residents remained the central actors. Yet in an era when tourism development meant building hotels, roads, and resort areas, the idea of tourism through preservation was widely dismissed as unrealistic. Still, Kobayashi avoided conflict, organized a new tourism association of younger residents, and worked to balance economic needs with cultural values.

As a symbolic first step, the town opened the historic Hayashi residence as a local history museum, though almost no visitors came and some residents doubted its value.
In 1968, preservation work began as part of Nagano Prefecture's Meiji Centennial Project. However, many residents were anxiously saying, "What are they doing to our town?" Questions such as "Will this make our lives inconvenient?" and "Will this really bring tourism?" were also raised, and there were even some residents who strongly opposed the project. Nevertheless, under the guidance of a university professor, the work proceeded, at times with a firm hand.
By 1970, the Edo-period townscape began to reappear, visitor numbers surged, and residents realized they could make a living through preservation. That same year, restoration of the Nakasendo trail advanced, with bridges and stone walls rebuilt from historical records and facilities added, shaping the appeal of walking tourism.
Media attention grew, and by 1971 visitors exceeded 400,000. Tsumago quickly became a nationally known destination. Yet the more popular it became, the more real the threats of commercialization and outside capital grew. To protect the restored townscape, residents established the Tsumago Residents' Charter, built on three principles: do not sell, do not rent, do not destroy. Guided by the motto, "Never forget our original intentions," the community committed itself to preserving the town's character. They removed signs, unified building colors, and established a system to share tourism profits fairly, embracing the principle of "protect together, share together."
In 1976, Tsumago was designated as one of Japan's first Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings, formally recognizing its townscape and landscape as cultural properties.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The townscape preservation initiative transformed Tsumago's future. Once facing severe depopulation and decline, the town has been reborn as a cherished destination visited by people from all over the world. Today, under the stewardship of the Tsumago Preservation Foundation Tsumago wo ai suru kai, its townscape and surrounding landscape are protected, allowing the historic scenery to endure.
By overturning the conventional belief that tourism requires development, Tsumago established a new value: tourism that prioritizes preservation. The community chose to recognize and protect the value already present, and has continued to uphold this approach.
The preservation movement's impact reached far beyond the town. Tsumago became a national model for townscape conservation, inspiring communities across Japan. Its achievements also helped revise the Cultural Properties Protection Law, establishing the idea that entire districts—and not just individual buildings should be preserved.
In 1976, a total of 1,245.4 hectares was protected when Tsumago was designated as one of Japan's first Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings. Decades of careful stewardship have safeguarded its buildings, mountains, and even individual trees. As a result, Tsumago is recognized internationally as a place where visitors can experience authentic

history and a glimpse of the real Japan. Tourism has become a core industry and a stable pillar of the local economy.
A town once at risk of disappearing now has a clear identity as a place where nature and cultural heritage coexist, becoming a source of local pride. Tourism is seen not as consumption but as a shared effort to protect culture and nature, fostering a relationship of mutual respect between residents and visitors.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Through the townscape preservation movement, we learned the importance of deeply understanding our own community before trying to create something new. The goal was never to chase a temporary tourism boom or to copy the success of other regions. Real change begins when residents themselves recognize the value of their hometown and take pride in it.
We also came to understand, over many years, how essential it is for government, residents, and the private sector to work together. Townscape preservation must be approached not as isolated points, but as a connected whole, protecting not only buildings, but also the landscape, daily life, and local culture. This requires time, effort, and continuous dialogue, but these steady steps are what shape the future of a community.
Above all, Tsumago remains a “living museum” where people continue to live their everyday lives. A town cannot exist on buildings alone; the people who live there are its most important asset. Tourism is not the goal—it is a means to protect the community. And the happiness and well being of residents must always come first.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
Tsumago’s townscape preservation efforts grew into a movement that reshaped values across Japan. At a time when tourism meant development, Tsumago’s choice to prioritize preservation surprised municipalities and researchers nationwide, prompting many regions to reexamine their own history and culture. The movement also influenced national policy, helping establish the idea that entire districts, not just individual buildings, should be preserved.
Tsumago’s work also renewed appreciation for the Nakasendo, inspiring the style of “walking the Nakasendo.” The Kiso region has since collaborated to protect and promote its cultural and natural heritage. In 2016, the story “The Entire Kisoji is in the Mountains” became Nagano Prefecture’s first Japan Heritage designation.
Efforts to protect the Nakasendo’s nature, history, and culture continue today, ensuring it is passed to future generations. Visitors share this philosophy, fostering a relationship of mutual learning and support with the community.
More than fifty years of preservation have given Tsumago a lasting conviction: protecting authenticity creates the future. The town continues to learn from its past, care for its present, and pass its story on to the next generation.

Awards or Certifications
• Architectural Institute of Japan Award (1972)

• Special Award, Japan Sign Design Association (1972)
• Governor of Nagano Prefecture Award (1973)
• Nagano Prefecture Distinguished Service Award (1979)
• Yamamoto Yūzō Memorial Local Culture Award (1980)
• Japan Firefighters Association Award (1982)
• Nagano Prefectural Board of Education Merit Award (1988)
• Minister of Education Award (1989)
• Nagano Prefectural Police Chief's Award (1989)
• Nagano Environmental Purification Promotion Association Award (1991)
• Kiso Landscape Award (1991)
• Nagano Cultural Property Protection Association Award (1993)
• Kiso Construction Office Director's Award (1995)
• Japan Sakura Association Award (1995)
• Minister of Home Affairs Award (1997)

• Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings (1976)
• Constituent Cultural Property of the Japan Heritage "Kisoji" (2016)
• Japan Scenic Byways (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism)

Web Articles

- Smithsonian Magazine, "A Walk Through Old Japan"
- Time Out London, 2010
- The Nikkei "The STYLE"

Other Relevant Links

- NHK Shin Nihon Kiko (New Japan Travelogue), 1969
https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009010176_00000

- Kiso Tsumago by Shigezaburō Kikuchi (1972)
- The World of Toshihiko Kobayashi, Tsumago-juku (Fushincho Kenkyukai, 1987)
- Survey Report on the Former Honjin Hayashi Residence, Tsumago-juku (Nagiso Town Board of Education, 1999)
- The Preservation and Restoration of Tsumago-juku — official preservation records
- 50th Anniversary Commemorative Project for the Preservation of Tsumago-juku – the Tsumago Preservation Foundation Tsumago wo ai suru kai
- History of Tsumago (Nagiso Town Museum, 2018)
- Patricia Schultz, "1,000 Places to See Before You Die"

Quotes or Testimonials

"I am proud that Tsumago has remained uncommercialized and preserved its simple, authentic character." — Resident of Tsumago

“This townscape exists thanks to the decades of effort by those who came before us. We must continue to protect it.” — Resident of Tsumago

“I was moved to see that the scenery has not changed since I first visited 40 or 50 years ago.” — Japanese visitor

“Here, I can feel the ‘real Japan’ and a place untouched by commercial tourism.” — International visitor

“Successful townscape preservation requires the collective will of all residents. Their initiative must come first, supported by government and technical experts. Without this three part structure, preservation cannot succeed. In this respect, Tsumago is an ideal example.” — Professor Hirotaro Ota, University of Tokyo

“What Tsumago pioneered in Japan was a new concept of community development through preservation, a form of resident self governance through its Preservation Committee, and a deep tradition of fair and equitable town planning. The fact that Tsumago began addressing issues such as depopulation and community revitalization more than fifty years ago shows how truly forward thinking a ‘frontline region’ can be.” — Professor Yukio Nishimura, University of Tokyo

“Tsumago is a small settlement that preserves the atmosphere of the Edo period along the Nakasendo. Even if tourism is utilized, this is not a tourist resort—it is a cultural heritage site. We want visitors to enjoy the quiet, unhurried ambience of Edo Japan without disturbing the everyday life of local residents.” — Director, Tsumago Preservation Organization

“We want visitors to feel that the townscape remains unchanged no matter how many times they return.” — Staff member, Tsumago Preservation Organization

“Let us shift our perspective, rethink our values, and rediscover our hometown. Through dialogue and learning, we can identify what makes our community unique—and make it truly our own.” — Toshihiko Kobayashi