

Community planning rooted in history Heritage-led regeneration in Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture

Section 1

This case study demonstrates good governance in managing heritage cities through grassroots revitalisation efforts in Kawagoe, 20 miles northwest of Tokyo, where a citizen movement to preserve historic buildings has developed into a town management team. Now famous for its traditional Japanese commercial streets that retain the architectural culture of Edo (pre-modern Tokyo), these districts were abandoned in the 1950s when businesses moved south to connect with the new roads and railways being built.

Kawagoe's revitalisation took place in phases over several decades through three distinct phases: consciousness; conflict and co-operation. Beginning with a civic 'national trust' movement in the 1970s which recognised the value of historic structures and worked to convince governments to protect traditional buildings, there followed a period of uncertainty whilst the authorities tried to persuade shopkeepers that economic recovery and historic preservation were compatible. Finally in the mid 1980s citizens, scholars, city authorities and businesses came together in a Public-Private Partnership as a town management group called *Kura-no Kai*¹ incorporated as a non-profit organisation in 2002, which became a hub to connect people with different interests and encourage dialogue and collaboration. Following a similar model to the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program in the US, *Kura-no Kai* has three main principles: to take community responsibility for activities; to proactively preserve historic assets; and to have a self-sustaining economy. It is therefore a local/regional PPP, but with resonances to similar programmes in other Japanese cities and internationally.

Through the support it gives to other community groups and individual citizens, *Kura-no Kai* builds capacity by providing design advice, researching historic buildings and arranging events, such as lectures and exhibitions. *Kura-no Kai* thus acts as a 'consultant' but it also undertakes practical conservation projects such as the Central Government's Area Revitalisation Model Project, focusing on artisans and traditional Japanese craftsmanship.

Section 2

Kura-no Kai was created by citizens, merchants, officials and scholars to address issues of both historic preservation and economic regeneration with three main aims. From the beginning, the group believed that town management should be undertaken by residents and merchants, and that they should be responsible for the town's future, working together with government, rather than being dependent on – or protesting against – the authorities. Secondly, they seek to preserve traditional streetscapes by giving value to every day activities like shopping and meeting people (rather than creating tourist destinations) and by providing design guidelines. Finally, financial sustainability is vital. The *Kura-no Kai* explored the idea of establishing a funding group or investment trust fund but this has not yet been implemented as it has not been possible to generate sufficient revenue from their small economic activities. Thus, projects such as the façade and street improvements, events and research are financed by government subsidies.

Section 3:

The strategy employed at Kawagoe was to bring together different players concerned about their shared community asset, the abandoned downtown district, into a non-profit society with distinct aims and objectives. Initially, city officials and scholars of urban design took it in turns to manage the group. Now there is a *Kura-no Kai* manager responsible for running

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the organisation, and helping plan and implement projects, with the assistance of a part-time secretary.

The Partnership brought together the following actors:

- Property-owning merchants and residents
- National Trust, scholars and other NGOs providing heritage conservation guidance
- Saitama Prefecture and the Kawagoe City with financial and institutional support
- Central Government funding larger projects such as the Area Revitalisation Model

The initiative began with the designation of the first *Kura-tsukuri*² building in downtown Kawagoe, which triggered public interest and led the city to purchase a similar structure when it was put on the market subsequently. The Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ) also held a competition around this time for architects and urban planners encouraging thinking about preservation and economic regeneration. Local store holders were still sceptical however and felt that designation of the historic district would lead to strict regulations with negative impacts on their businesses. Working with the aforementioned scholars, the city commissioned a report on design codes which suggested that the creation of a townscape should not be done only by a regulation, but that the community should define and solve problems amongst themselves – “by collaboration between residents, the city, and scholars.”

The final stage was catalysed by city officials who used funds from a documentary film about *Kura-Tsukuri* architecture to establish *Kura-no Kai*, bringing together younger store owners keen to regenerate struggling stores; ex-members of the Kawagoe Junior Chamber now the backbone of business society; architects and scholars from the AIJ competition; city officials and other residents.

Incorporated as a non-profit organisation in 2002, *Kura-no Kai* has an administrative board with an honorary director, two deputy directors, four divisional chiefs (projects, promotion, design, and accounting), and an assistant chief of one division, three counsellors, and two officers. All these positions are voluntary.

Section 4:

Kura-no Kai has not measured its impact on sales, the number of visitors, rent levels, or the number of vacant buildings. However, according to the city, the number of tourists visiting Kawagoe City dramatically increased from 2.6 million in the 1980s to 6 million today.³ The positive economic impact is obvious and the old commercial streets have younger shopkeepers who, inspired by *Kura-no Kai*, have self-organised into an additional supporting NGO. A former director of the *Kura-no Kai* commented that one of the keys to success is to pass the torch to younger generations before you get too old.⁴ The *Guidelines for Town Development* developed by *Kura-no Kai* is viewed by many as a benchmark in best practice. “This proactive autonomous agreement made it possible to control local design elements in a long-term, integrated manner. As a result, they have succeeded in developing economically in a way that still preserves their traditional architecture and the appearance of the town. This facility was praised for design methods that allowed for the autonomy of the residents and utilised regional culture and the local inhabitants’ feelings to the best advantage.”⁵ In Ichiban-gai shopping street, every building requires the approval of the Townscape Committee and this unique voluntary process (the design code is not legally enforced) allows *Kura-no Kai* to control the traditional atmosphere of townscape indirectly

but practically.⁶ In 2010 *Kura-no Kai* received a Regional Development Award from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.⁷

Section 5

As far as lessons learned are concerned, the following can be drawn from this case study:

- Staffing – Kawagoe’s experience suggests some communities may be able to achieve success without a full-time manager when talented local leaders can play this role. However the group still hopes to find funding for a full-time, trained manager.
- Economic data – It is vital to assess the impact of revitalisation efforts so measuring tools need to be developed and communities trained to implement them.⁸
- Branding – *Kura-no Kai* is built on a strong sense of community pride that has been central to the revitalisation.
- Incremental approach – PPPs are generally of long duration and the revitalisation efforts in Kawagoe appear to have required 10 to 15 years to take hold. Adequate consideration needs to be made by the PPP.

The main recommendation is for a developing a systematic approach for grassroots revitalisation efforts, making it possible to increase the number of communities involved, maximising efficiency, reducing the feeling of isolation as well as mitigating the burden on successful communities. It is suggested therefore that consideration be given to developing a national framework of managers and coordinators, measurement tools, and an understandable approach to enable this.

Section 6

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¹ Ai Yamamoto, *Is the US Main Street Model Likely To Be an Effective Approach to Revitalizing Japanese City Centers?* Department of Urban Studies and Planning in May 24 2007 in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

² Yamamoto; p115 “Kura-tsukuri’ is a style of fire proof architecture invented in Edo, and prevailed in Kanto region. Until Meiji era (1868-1912), the style was the important component of streetscape in Tokyo. However, in Tokyo, the style had disappeared through the Kanto Great Fire in 1923, the Second World War II, and rapid economic growth from 1950 to 1970.”

³ *Initiatives and Achievements of Local Governments in Japan* Article by Ichie Tsunoda, published by Japan for Sustainability <http://www.japanfs.org/en/>

⁴ Yamamoto; p127

⁵ *Urban Design Prize (Good Design Award) 1999*, awarded by the Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP) http://www.japanfs.org/en/public/gov_11.html

⁶ Email to author from Yoshinori Nomoto, Head of Secretariat, Kawagoe Kura-no Kai, 12 June 2012 p114. "Kura' is a type of architecture. 'Kai' refers to a group and 'no' is 'of'."

⁷ 10 December 2010 Press release entitled "Regional Development Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Award FY 2010", Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC)

⁸ Yamamoto; p 134: "The Main Street model uses the number of vacant buildings, average rent per square foot, the number of businesses that were started and closed, and photographed images of before and after of building facades."