



Working to Restore the Scenic View of Onomichi — TOYOTA Masako, Representative Director of the Onomichi Vacant House Restoration Project

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Located between the Seto Inland Sea and the mountains, Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture is a small city with an approximate population of 150,000. It is a city of slopes and boats. It has narrow streets intricately entangled on slanting land. It is a place where ferry boats sail to and from nearby islands. Its unique taste has grabbed the hearts of remarkable novelists and movie directors and the city has provided the setting for many literary and cinematographic works.

This scenic city of Onomichi is now at risk. TOYOTA Masako noticed the change in her hometown when she returned to live there after eight years of working in Osaka.

“I worked as an overseas tour conductor. As I visited Europe many times, I was fascinated by the views of European towns. All these towns take advantage of local buildings that have survived hundreds of years to blend well with nature and sustain themselves while preserving their respective traditions. In contrast, in Japan, old



“Many people help me. I have no skills but I am good at involving people around me,” says Toyota with a smile.

Photo: YOSHIDA Akihito



things are all demolished and similar looking houses and buildings mushroom. I felt a sense of crisis and even an anger at the fact that local features, culture and history were so readily torn down and vanished.”

That was true of Onomichi. The area near the railway station was redeveloped on a large scale. On the plains, a number of high-rise buildings and condominiums were erected. In contrast, narrow roads unsuited to vehicular traffic and old houses on sloping roads became deserted one after another. Without new occupants, houses simply aged. It was said that the number of empty houses had reached 500 within a two-kilometer radius of Onomichi railway station.

Toyota had returned to live in Onomichi after a long interval because of her mother’s illness. She strongly felt that the city of her youth would be gone if no action was taken. She contemplated what to do to regain the unique local cityscape, and she reached a conclusion. She was convinced that the only solution was to revive empty houses before they became completely decrepit.

However, when she approached the local authorities to take action, they showed no sign of movement. She realized the reality of a consumption-based society that gives priority to convenience and economic efficiency. So she changed course and decided to actually purchase an empty house and to repair it herself. After that, on top of her work and everyday life, she walked around the city continuously searching for vacant houses. When she discovered a property that looked perfect, she decided to purchase it. It was an eighty-year-old, two-story wooden house. Standing on a small slanted land it had been unoccupied for twenty-five years. It had such a unique look that locals called it the Gaudi House. It really was an Onomichi landmark.

Toyota was at that time a homemaker busy raising two-year-old twin sons. In her limited spare time, she and her husband, a carpenter, repaired the house little by little and posted renovation records on a blog. The reaction they received was unexpected.

“Many people sent messages to us. One person did not want the city’s past look to vanish. Another looked for a vacant house. And yet another wished to move to Onomichi. We learned for the first time that vacant houses were in such high demand and that many people had the same feeling as ours. A great many people have values that are different from those of pursuing convenience and novelty alone. As we learned that, we thought we could unite them and start a movement.”

This is how the Onomichi Vacant House Restoration Project was launched in 2007.

I realize that there are a large number of people across the country who regard a trend that is different from so-called economic development as important.

– TOYOTA Masako



Together with project members sharing the same aspiration, they slowly but steadily worked to repair empty houses at their own expense. An approximate total of thirteen vacant houses were restored during a period of six years after the project launch. Residential buildings, artists' workshops, cafés, shops and other unique and attractive spaces were successively created in the city of Onomichi.

However, if the project members alone did the work, the number of houses that could be restored would be limited, even if they worked their entire lives. In 2009, they started the vacant house bank program under contract with the municipal government. The program helps those seeking vacant houses to live in to find good properties. Capitalizing on Toyota's own difficult experience in finding a vacant house, the project introduced different ideas to facilitate the discovery of good properties. As a consequence, empty houses began to attract new occupants. When the project undertook the program for the municipal government, fifty-six vacant houses were registered. Now, the number of such houses exceeds 100 and contracts have been signed for seventy of them.

"The area around the building called Komyoji Kaikan, which was renovated and turned into an art gallery with a café, has changed markedly in the past couple of years. In this area with a maze of tiny alleys, around twenty empty houses now have occupants. A bakery and a pottery studio have opened. Six or seven babies have been born in the district. Young migrants are assimilating into the community to create a new town together with locals."

In fall 2012, a guest house called *Anago no Nedoko* (eel bed) was launched. It was also originally a vacant house. The guest house employs as staff local university graduates and young people wishing to migrate to Onomichi.

"I thought that the success of the Anago guest house would be a turning point. Our activities cannot be independently sustained without a mechanism for making money. At the beginning, we had to borrow 5 million yen and we felt great pressure, but we believed that it would be successful. Recently, the guest house managed to get on track, so now we can think of a specific future plan."

Today, Toyota is invited to deliver lectures at different places across the country. While the vacant house problem is a nationwide issue, her efforts to do something about it have drawn attention.

"I found that there are a large number of people across the country who see a trend that is different from so-called economic development as important. That encourages me and makes me happy."

She originally had no background in architecture or urban development, but with her ideas and energy, she moves other people.

"I myself have no special skills, but I think I am capable of conceiving how we can make good use of the advantages that any house or person definitely has. Since I am a non-professional, my ideas may be audacious. Vacant houses looked like a gold mine to me. If I could go back in time and choose my job again, I would surely move towards something like this. Just recently, my eight-year-old son asked me if I would repair empty houses until I died. I had no idea how to respond and just said, 'Ah, yes.'"

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