



Logo & design for “koban” near large railway stations/main roads and in sightseeing areas/crowd-drawing facilities (from Metropolitan Police Department’s website)



Logo & design for “koban” in residential/shopping areas and near kindergartens/schools (from Metropolitan Police Department’s website)

Koban

Symbol of Japan’s Forces of Order

By Masako WATANABE

When I went to pick up my 5-year-old son recently from kindergarten, the teacher told me how he had behaved that day. “He was such a good boy! In the afternoon when we went for a walk in the park, he found a ¥5 coin there. With his friend, your little boy went straight to the *koban* (police box) next to the park and reported his finding!”

This brought back memories of how I, as a child, would immediately rush to the nearest *koban* whenever I found someone’s lost belongings in a park or on the street. My parents would often tell me that if I ever picked up something, I should always report it to *koban*.

A child who reports a ¥5 coin to *koban* will probably be thanked by the police and also praised for doing something good. The policeman would also probably gently ask, “Where did you find it? What’s your name? How old are you?” It is easy for Japanese to imagine a policeman responding to a child in such a friendly manner. Children know that policemen arrest bad people, and I believe that when children become friends with the police, it offers them an opportunity to cultivate their conscience.

Koban: What Makes It Unique

This little episode involving my son made me turn my attention to *koban*, and I came to learn that the *koban* system, which the Japanese take for granted, is a unique system that originated in this country. A keen interest as well as a sense of pride was stirred in me as I began to understand that *koban* has drawn attention from foreign countries and that this is a system we can boast of to the world.

I remember some foreign friends who had just arrived in Japan remarked with surprise that Japanese policemen ride bicycles. Their remarks seemed to me to be of a somewhat mocking tone, as if they were wondering how on earth policemen could catch suspects while riding bicycles. But their words actually sum up the characteristics of *koban* because the major function of the Japanese system lies in preventing crime, and not in rushing about on bicycles after a crime has occurred.

It is well known that in an effort to restore safety in New York City, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani commissioned desk policemen to patrol the streets, and implemented extensive crackdowns on small offenses such as graffiti, ignoring traffic signals, throwing empty cans, and drinking in public. At the same time, efforts were made for the police to communicate more often with people. As a result, the number of crimes in New York fell, and security was greatly enhanced. The former mayor must have felt that not much could be achieved by simply responding to crime after it had been committed. He must have realized that it is far more important and more effective to put crime-preventing measures into place.

A child reporting a coin he has found to *omawari-san* (as policemen are fondly called in Japan) is not only a heartwarming sight, but

it also speaks of the vital role that the police play in the prevention of crime. By foot, bicycle or car, police patrol the streets, and *koban* has the function of closely connecting the neighborhood with police as it is a place where people can casually drop by. *Koban* is a place where communication is valued, and which provides residents with a strong feeling of security. The example of restored safety in New York serves to remind us of the role the police play in preventing crime.

With the *koban* system placing importance on close communication with local people, the architectural designs of *koban* boxes differ according to location and region. One example is a unique *koban* near the east exit of Ikebukuro station in Tokyo, which is designed like an owl, the mascot of Ikebukuro. When the *koban* was relocated to its current position, local residents expressed a strong desire for the box to become a symbol of a “safe and secure town” and for the design of the box to “have a cheerful look that would encourage people to come for casual purposes such as asking which way to go,” according to the public relations section of the Metropolitan Police Department.

Responding to such requests, the Toshima City Office that has the area under its jurisdiction held a design contest for local elementary and high school students, and the designs of four finalists were incorporated in building the box. Police duties at the *koban* started on April 1, 2005. The police box stands out among the surrounding shops and buildings in the area. I feel that by adopting the owl design symbolic of the region, the *koban* is playing an important role of sending out a silent but reassuring message to passers-by that they are being protected day and night.

Koban System “Exported”

I was personally surprised to know that in recent years, foreign countries have come to adopt the *koban* system, recognizing its effectiveness in keeping order. It may be difficult for Japanese people to imagine life without *koban*, but until a little while ago, the *koban* system, set up in Japan in 1874, did not exist in any other country.

Seeking more information on *koban*, I approached the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which assists the police and criminal justice affairs of foreign countries, and was shown a variety of materials. A survey report on JICA’s governance assistance showed that between 1995 and 2007, JICA has given support in the area of police and criminal justice in Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Brazil and South Africa. JICA also holds training sessions in Japan. In the following paragraphs I would like to introduce what I learned through this report and other papers.



“Koban” near east exit of Ikebukuro station

Indonesia

In August 2008, Indonesia’s police force, which had been part of the country’s armed forces for more than 30 years, was spun off into an independent organization in line with democratization. One of the many reforms eyed in the democratization process was to create civilian police, and Indonesia decided to model its police after the Japanese police system. Later, through JICA, the Japanese government launched a program on assistance for the reform of the Indonesian National Police to help train police personnel. Other forms of assistance include the training of young police officers and the dispatch of experts to deal with specific areas such as drug control. The help extended by Japan’s National Policy Agency for reforming the Indonesian National Police is the first attempt to assist a foreign country’s entire police system. The high-profile assistance has won recognition in Indonesia itself for the various projects implemented such as “partnership centers for police and citizens.” Aiming to make the most of the past experience and achievements, the second phase of the assistance program started in August 2007 and will continue until July 2012.

Indonesia

Brazil

In San Paulo, located almost on the opposite side of the globe from Japan, keeping law and order is a pressing issue. The San Paulo State Military Police looked to the Japanese *koban* system and introduced their own system in 1997. However, local police activities stopped short of being full-fledged and a request was made for Japan’s assistance in strengthening the *koban* system. In response,

Brazil

in San Paulo, and for community policing based on the system to be spread to the rest of the country.

Photo: author

JICA sent experts on a short-term basis from fiscal 2000. In fiscal 2001, JICA started special training on a country-by-country basis, and extended help in restoring civil order in San Paulo. As a result, policing systems modeled after Japan’s community-based police activities revolving around *koban* and one-man police substations have begun to be established in some parts of San Paulo. The second phase of Japan’s assistance project in Brazil is currently in place, and will last till 2011. The goal is the proliferation of the *koban* system

Responsibility as Citizens

In recent years, many aspects of Japanese culture have been exported overseas, such as *manga* and *anime*, music, food and *sake*. Yet, more than 20 years ago, export of the Japanese *koban* had already begun as other countries saw that it worked to maintain order. There are many things in our daily lives taken for granted by ourselves but given high remarks by foreigners, and the *koban* system is surely one of them.

Learning that there are foreign researchers who come to Japan to study the *koban* system, I recently read a book written by one such researcher, David Bayley, professor at the State University of New York. His book, “*Forces of Order: Policing Modern Japan*,” is based on study reports, including field research, that Bayley conducted over a period of 20 years. In the introduction, the professor notes that by looking closely at the Japanese police system, the book aims to search for the problems inherent in the American police force. This book helped me learn about the Japanese police and drove home to me the extent to which the police are involving themselves with the daily lives of citizens.

It is a sad fact that recently, crimes committed by minors have become serious, and that the crime rate among the young is surging. But I would like to emphasize that active cooperation of citizens is essential in preventing crime. For example, if a minor is wandering around an entertainment district or drinking and smoking, there is the possibility that such activities could lead to large crime in the future. I believe therefore that such activities need to be prevented by discipline and education in the household, and by the awareness of individual minors. Instead of lamenting that the legendary safety of Japan has been lost, we should realize that each of us, through our awareness and action, holds the key to safety.

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