



Author Jillian Yorke

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I've often felt that longer you live in a country, the less you know about it - or rather, the more you realize how much more there still is to learn and how little you really know. My three years of living in a small cottage on the grounds of a 150-year-old traditional Japanese house (kominka) have given me a different, deeper view of Japanese culture than I ever experienced during my previous 29 years of living here.

### **Moving In**

"It would be great if someone could live there," mused my friend Masatoshi Mutoh. We looked at each other and simultaneously said, "How about you?" and "How about me?" He'd just taken me to see the kominka in western Tokyo that had belonged to his uncle Shigeo Sakurai, and has been managed by a family trust since Mr. Sakurai's death a few years earlier.

I was instantly captivated by the grounds - wild, spacious, and full of huge trees! Apart from the dignified main house (omoya), there was an impressive old stone lantern, a bamboo grove, a kura or traditional-style storehouse, a pet dog, an Inari shrine, and a hanare or small cottage - my possible future home.

In spite of the uninspiring appearance of the cottage itself – cold. dark, dilapidated, and with no utilities - I immediately felt a powerful spiritual resonance with the property and was thrilled to have come across such an amazing find in busy, cramped Tokyo.

Several months later, on March 26, 2007, I moved in. The young employees of the moving company couldn't understand why anyone would want to live in an inconvenient old house with no mod cons, and seemed eager to get away as soon as possible. Indeed, there are some drawbacks. Although it's pleasant in summer, my place is freezing cold in winter, and I share it with numerous insects and sometimes quite invasive and noisy mice. But I feel privileged to be living here.

My first meal at my new home, known as "Wa no le Sakurai" ("Sakurai House of Peace"), was some roasted sweet potatoes that my landlady had just cooked on an open fire and kindly shared with me. Looking back, this set the tone of things to come. My life here has been blessed by an ongoing close interaction with nature.

Mr. Mutoh and his relatives had long been considering the possi-



A stone lantern stands by the author's house, dubbed "Wa no le Sakurai, next to the main house.

bilities of what to do with the property, including knocking down all the buildings and constructing an apartment building in their place. which would have made economic sense and, unfortunately, has been the fate of many an old building in Tokyo.

Happily, that didn't happen and my moving in was one factor that helped save this special old home from destruction. At the same time, this "House of Peace" was a "life-saver" that helped me through a difficult personal time in my own life. Having this beautiful, tree-ringed, bird-blessed home as my base has been a profound source of support and comfort.

# **Reconnecting with Japanese Culture**

When I moved in, my cottage was joined to the main house by a corridor. I enjoyed having this physical connection between the two buildings, and would often explore the omoya and its contents, as well as the expansive, tangled grounds and the various outbuildings. Every day was an adventure.

The property's abundant trees (some of which are hozon jumoku or officially protected trees) include plum, walnut, keyaki (zelkova), mikan (mandarin), persimmon, yuzu (a type of citrus), sugi (Japanese cedar), kuwa (mulberry), maple and an enormous, sheltering gingko by my door that feels like my personal guardian spirit or *omamori*. The chance to experience the joys of nature through the seasonal changes in these trees, as well as tasting their fruits, has been inspiring and instructive to me.

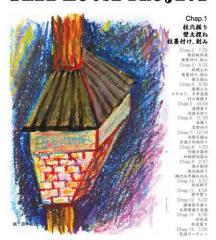
I came across some fascinating books and documents in the main house, which illuminated the history of the area. In addition, I'm frequently mistaken for a resident caretaker, so I've shown around numerous people who wanted to see around or wandered in off the street; the most recent sang some songs for me accompanied by his ukulele. Some have known this place for a long time or were old friends of Mr. Sakurai; they say his truly "free-ranging" chickens were so delicious that people came from miles around to buy them. According to neighbors, raccoons (araiguma), palm civet cats (haukubishin), and snakes were often seen around the property not long ago.

Living here has enabled me to reconnect with Japan's cultural roots. For example, I've re-papered all the shoji (paper doors), regularly hang out the *futon* (Japanese-style bedding) to dry on the roof, and often roast food outdoors on an old shichirin (traditional small cooking stove) I found here. Another new experience was lighting a long-burning Wajima candle inside the massive stone lantern in the grounds - its softly flickering glow through the bamboo seemed



In the house and vicinity, various events take place in the weekend, including a day of care for elderly people and a "terakoya" style of after-school courses for children.

# TREE HOUSE PROJECT



A sketch of a tree-house under construction

magical! These activities have given me a whole new insight into how Japanese people used to live, even in Tokyo.

#### A Time of Transition

Since then, there have been many changes. Some of the land was sold, resulting in the loss of the entire bamboo grove and some magnificent old trees. The connecting corridor has been knocked down, and the main house considerably modernized. Part of the grounds has been rented out to local people to grow vegetables.

According to Mr. Mutoh, the plan to preserve the property envisioned three pillars, with the goal of meeting three basic needs of modern-day Japan: providing a facility for the old and the young, transmitting traditional Japanese skills, and discovering a reconnection with nature.

Tetsuya Yamada was commissioned to transform the kominka. which now functions as a daycare center for the elderly, a naturebased terakoya type of "after-school school" for children, and a venue for local community and group activities. Opening the property to such a range of age groups (including employees' babies) has enabled the young and the old to closely relate to each other on a daily basis, a rare opportunity in Tokyo today. A wide range of cultural and seasonal events are held, including regular activities such as flea markets and the weekly irori banashi ("stove stories"), where a talented professional recites old and often familiar Japanese stories, and workshops on a wide range of traditional Japanese skills, as well as "healing fairs," jazz concerts, and Thai massage festivals. I have enjoyed participating in some of these events, such as one during the autumn moon-viewing festival last year when a knowledgeable speaker expounded on the significance of the moon in Japanese culture. The workshops on shikkui (a type of traditional environmentfriendly Japanese plaster wall) and yaki-sugi-ita (a traditional way of burning wood to make fences, etc.) were also fascinating.

One regular user of the facilities is the Slow Business School, whose members want to do a little work, but in a relaxed sort of way, while enjoying their lives. Through my own connections, meetings and exhibitions of many groups, including my haiku club, the New Zealand Japan Society, and the Society of Writers, Editors and Translators (SWET), have been held here as well. The kura has been renovated and recently opened as an art gallery.

Believing that "happiness brings happiness," Mr. Yamada is eager to share Japan's traditional architecture and artisan skills and to gather all

kinds of people together to learn from each other. He says: "I hope that showcasing the customs and traditional culture of the 'good old days' of Japan in a 150-year-old minka, now a multifunctional facility, will contribute to resolving care-giving and education issues in today's Japan. 'Wa no le Sakurai' is also an example of a sustainable economy, transmitting traditional Japanese architecture and skills to future generations." The word is spreading steadily; it's gratifying to see the growing number of visitors, and their frequent delight at experiencing this Tokyo gem.

## A Tokyo Tree-House

In May 2010, work began on a tree-house in a keyaki tree in the garden, to be constructed over 18 months by volunteers under the guidance of master carpenters, using time-honed techniques and closely reflecting the seasons. The plan was selected as a Tokyo Metropolitan Local SME Support Fund Project. Yamada hopes that building a treehouse together will enable the many people involved to deepen their ties with Japanese artisan traditions, nature, and each other.

The diverse groups and individuals hosting events at this "House of Peace" embody a renaissance and revival of things quintessentially Japanese, while simultaneously developing highly creative, inventive innovations. This combination results in interesting cross-cultural fusions, such as traditional Japanese fundoshi loincloths made from old kimono sold as trendy, eco-friendly underwear, a computer graphics art display in the kura, and both shiatsu acupressure and British-style reflexology massage on offer. These visitors are keenly interested in their own culture; for example, some volunteer to help rebuild the roofs of old country houses. But they also have a powerful nature/environment focus, and often reject the fixed old Japanese ways of doing things to find their own, more free-flowing style.

I will always feel a soul-connection with this "House of Peace," which has given me a much deeper and more broad-ranging insight into Japanese culture. I am very grateful to Mr. Mutoh and his family for providing me with this unique living experience, and feel a responsibility to maintain and protect the original spirit of this special place, as best I can.

For more details on "Wa no le Sakurai," or to volunteer your services, see <a href="http://yamada-ya.net">http://yamada-ya.net</a>>.

Jillian Yorke is a freelance translator, writer and editor who has lived in Japan for more than 30 years. She is currently planning the establishment of a Japan Library in New Zealand.