

# Art Projects and Improvement of house in Mukojima

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## 1. Introduction; Foundation of SONATA

I have been involved in activities in the Mukojima area since 1998, when the Mukojima International Design Workshop was held. After the workshop, an expert group, SONOTA was formed by the architects and town planners who had participated in the workshop as advisers, in order to examine future visions of Mukojima in 1999. The activities of SONOTA vary from promoting local revitalization to offering habitation support and proposing suitable housing plans for the Mukojima area.

For professionals of architecture and town planning, Mukojima is a challenging area with many problems and difficulties. However, activities of town planning combined with art projects have attained some positive results and have been improving local conditions little by little.

## 2. Mukojima Expo 2000

In the 1990s Japan suffered from the prolonged recession caused by bursting of the economic bubble. Many problems in day-to-day life became evident and people could not anticipate a bright future.

The conventional town planning which focused on infrastructure, for example, had its limitation and could not solve those problems. People began to notice the importance of local resources, revalue various the resources in the region, and consider their positive practical uses.

In order to get rid of people's cooped-up feeling and elicit the charm of Mukojima, the civic group "Kawanote Club" and SONOTA took the lead and held Mukojima Expo in 2000. The entire town served as an exhibition site, and during the ten days of this expo, as many as fifty events were held at various spots in the Mukojima area.

Artists and architects gathered not only from around Japan but also abroad. It triggered a review of regional resources and new approaches to the problems of the community.



**Art exhibition held in a vacant lot**



**Experiment of utilizing empty house as SOHO**

The art projects and various social experiments in the expo shed light on the values and possibilities of unused resources, such as vacant lots and empty houses. People began to consider the practical use of those resources.

There was a good outcome: after the expo, young artists started moving into those old empty houses. Mukojima Expo finished successfully, receiving good reviews. The unique way of community building and the international exchange at citizen's level were highly evaluated.

The following year, Mukojima Expo 2000 received two awards; “Small International City Award” given by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, and “Chairman’s Award” from Council for Promotion of Town Planning in Japan.

### 3. The Platform for urban renewal: the Association of Mukojima Studies

In 2002 the Association of Mukojima Studies was formed, developed from the Mokojima Expo committee.

It is a platform for grass-roots town renewal. The association consists of the stakeholders (residents, land owners and leaseholders, and commerce and industry people), and specialists and students of architecture, economics, and sociology. All of them take part in the town planning of Mukojima.

The Association of Mukojima Studies plays roles in making various programs and plans to revitalize the town, carrying out PR activities, and supporting people who want to do creative activities or academic research in Mukojima.

It became incorporated as an NPO in 2004.

### 4. Various art projects and the meaning

Since the launch of the Association of Mukojima Studies, various art projects have been carried out with help of subsidies from the private sector, and local and national governments.

Most of those projects confront the issues the community faces, and try to figure out effective use of idle resources in the region, for example; ①use of empty houses and vacant lots, ②invigoration of shopping streets, ③utilization of rain water, ④measures against abandoned bicycles, ⑤prevention of graffiti, ⑥ making maps of Mukojima.

Let’s take a close look at one of those examples.



Community café renovated from an old rice shop



“Art & Net project”: utilization of abandoned bicycles

As for the shopping street project, it was aimed at revitalizing the sleepy street where almost half of the shops were shuttered. In 2004 an idea competition was held to invite proposals for reusing vacant shop spaces and a management solution that could contribute to the whole shopping street. The plans were gathered from all over Japan.



Idea competition for utilizing vacant shops

After this event, some artists actually moved into this shopping street, and changed long-shuttered

shops into a cafe and ateliers.

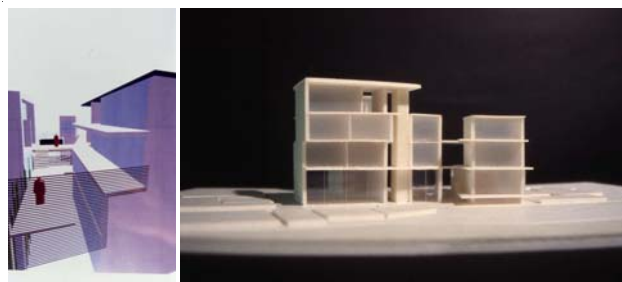
Another project began in 2008. The association promoting this shopping street rented an entire apartment building and offered each room at a discounted price for people who were willing to launch a new business. The Association of Mukojima Studies also settled on the second floor of this apartment.

Art activities that have gone on so far in Mukojima have played a great part in town planning projects. The power of art is enormous for regional promotion. These art projects create new perspectives in the region. They involve local residents as well as attract new people. These activities function as a meeting place for people and that leads to the creation of new activities.

### 5. Experiment for improvement of living environment utilizing vacant lots

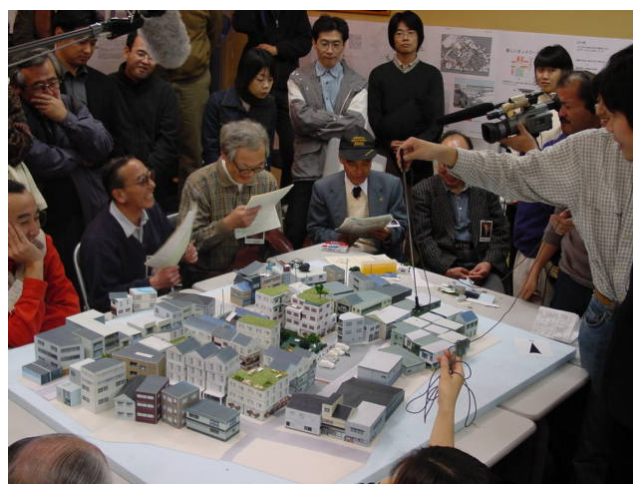
After the Mukojima expo, local residents asked the local government, which owned most of the vacant lots, to find more effective use for them. For this, residents, the local government and specialists joined forces and started working together to examine and seek ways for local revitalization in self-help and mutual-aid.

SONOTA suggested a “Group-Collective Residence” for people of all ages, aiming at effective utilization of the lands. It is equipped with medical treatment and nursing facilities on the ground floor. In preparation for an aging society, the needs of the elderly were kept in mind. It is worthy to note that this residence could be a substitute for the old wooden dwellings surrounding the planned sites. Those old dwellings are so tightly packed that they are unable to be rebuilt. Therefore, the rebuilding plan in this area must go forward cooperatively, with the mutual agreement. It needs to proceed like a chain reaction.



Model of “Group-Collective Residence”

In 2001, a "Rebuilding Design Game" was held. It was a workshop in the form of a game, in collaboration with a laboratory from the department of architecture of Waseda University. Landowners and inhabitants in Mukojima played with a 1/100 scale model.



Workshop “Remodeling Design Game”

### 6. Rebuilding plan featuring alleyways

Due to the crowding of wooden dwellings, alleyways are indispensable for people’s day-to-day lives in Mukojima. It is not too much to say that the community of Mukojima has been built up by the alleyways shared by the residents. The unique atmosphere of this old town was created through them. However, in recent years many houses disregarding this context have come to be built in housing developments of commercial builders. Under these circumstances, SONOTA held a series of workshops in 2004, in order to figure out a future vision of the area which was desirable to residents, landowners and leaseholders.

It turned out that small detached houses would be

ideal, considering the relation with alleyways. Based on the opinions from the workshops, computer generated images and animations were created to give a more concrete image of the townscape and they were examined in detail.



**Models of proposed houses**



**Image after rule of district**

The frontages of the houses (a private area) and surfaces of the alleyways (public space) created a synergy that brings comfort to the alley space.

The local government does road maintenance, such as pavement work, in districts where the rebuilding norm has been concluded. This enables us to promote rebuilding and road maintenance at the same time. In Japan citizens can submit outlines of district plans to the municipality, on the condition that it gains approval from two-thirds of the landowners and leaseholders in the district. The Association of Mukojima Studies has been examining the district plan through various investigations while obtaining subsidies directly from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.

## **7. Circulating area renovation based on a rehousing**

### **support system.**

So far, rebuilding has not yet been realized, except for some repair work while the Association of Mukojima Studies have been consulted on some concrete proposals for the utilization of vacant lots and empty houses.

The situation for old wooden dwellings that have no connection to legal roads is still difficult. It remains impossible to rebuild them.

The existence of vacant lots, empty houses, and old wooden dwellings scattered throughout the entire district is a matter to be discussed. To solve this problem, renovation of the surrounding, including a gradual rebuilding of old wooden dwellings is proposed. At the same time, lawful maintenance of the rebuilding and sites is ensured by a rehousing support system.

This year, SONOTA launched a support service, or the "Laboratory of how-to-live" inside the Association of Mukojima Studies. It provides consultations for rehusings and rebuildings while trying to extend and strengthen the support network and partnerships. These approaches are linked with the business of local administration for more concrete and effective results.

## **8. Future vision: Continuation of activities with flexibility**

We will continue these activities to enhance the vitality and charm of the town for the future, while cooperating with various people and organizations, and using regional resources.

It might be important to have some flexibility that suitably modifies plans for the time and social conditions. The aim and methods for local revitalization cannot be defined uniformly. A feasible aim is considered from various viewpoints and we approach it step by step.

We hope we build on each small success by creating challenges through art projects and town planning, while cooperating with various people and organizations for local revitalization.