

## Managing “Buffer”

### *A Special Focus on the Itsukushima Shinto Shrine World Heritage Site, Japan*

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**Abstract:** Itsukushima Shinto Shrine is the supreme example that represents the legacy of Japanese tradition as well as the beauty and harmony of nature, humankind and the gods. This oldest shrine, believed to be established in the 6th century, has maintained authentic religious practices by the Shinto masters and community over the centuries. The shrine was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1996. The shrine is observed floating above the sea during high tide and visitors have been fascinated by its beauty since the Japanese Edo period, when the Samurai rulers were allowed to issue travel permission to the population to travel to selected destinations, including Itsukushima. It was the beginning of a legacy of a prime tourist destination. Arguably, the circumstances of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine are encroached on by residential and commercial districts which accommodate over 3.5 million annual visitors, and the authorities and industrial sector giving more encouragement to the tourism industry after the site's World Heritage listing. Furthermore, the geographical setting and cosmology of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine is not limited to the island territory. There is a holy axis from the shrine that crosses the channel and reaches to the mainland where most of the hilly areas are occupied by residential, commercial and industrial land uses. Itsukushima Shinto Shrine exists peacefully, it is even said that holiness and contemporary needs have co-existed within this particular enclave. However, due to recent global warming, the sensitive geographical setting of the shrine is facing greater threats. In recent years, Itsukushima has suffered ever more serious damage by natural disasters never observed before. This paper intends to provide a broader perspective, connecting both protected property and surrounding geographical territory for future heritage site management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Preserving historic properties in contemporary society and managing the surrounding environment is one of the prime issues to enhancing historic significance as well as to meet the requirements of sustainable development. Recent arguments, especially regarding the site management of World Heritage sites, the way to maintain the surrounding buffer-zone territory is highlighted to mitigate development pressure, adjust land use, as well as create continuity within a holistic interpretation of history.

Japanese society experienced rapid economic development in the wake of WWII, yet managed to establish ways of preserving her heritage. On the

other hand, looking at the experience of these long years more closely, sometimes historic sites are considered to represent invisible socio-cultural conflicts under the social development process; tradition and modernity, conservation and development, holiness and worldliness - especially these phenomena are significant in heritage areas with spiritual or religious representation. These phenomena widely invite academic attention, for example, authors on "Historic Cities and Sacred Sites" discuss the ways to strengthen the local preservation capacity, including spiritual and material dimensions of historic sites as well as different social sectors ([Serageldin, et al., 2001](#)) Preserving "Sacred Place" as such in Itsukushima Shrine, is substantially different between historic sites and surrounding contemporary society, sometimes showing us that they stand across two different worlds. Yet it has been expected that they meld together and function as a whole, as valuable sustainable development resources to contribute to a worldly local society which consists of various business sectors, social classes, or political backgrounds. Additionally, people amongst more democratized societies have substantially increased public involvement, determining more pragmatic outcomes, for example regarding tourism development ([McGregor and Thompson-Fawcett, 2011](#)). Further integrated management and planning approaches beyond both physical and social boundaries are essential issues to ensure future sustainability of holistic, historical environments.

This paper intends to provide a perspective to connect both protected property and surrounding geographical territory, foreseeing future possible heritage site management scenarios. The intention of this paper is to provide and analyse future sustainable conservation and spatial management through the case of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine in Japan. The objective of this study is to describe the reality of site management issues in Itsukushima, including the following aspects:

- (1) Describe historic connections and transformation of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine and surroundings;
- (2) Analyse sustainable planning issues of surrounding environment of Itsukushima Shinto Shrine; and
- (3) Discuss future sustainable planning of surrounding environment of historical environment.

In recent years, spatial management issues with respect to historic sites and their surroundings have been the focus of various fields - heritage preservation, planning, tourism, and local governance. In fact, some World Heritage sites have been observed to be threatened by development taking place in the surrounding areas. In 2006, these issues were discussed at the international symposium in Hiroshima, Japan, entitled "World Heritage Convention and the Buffer Zone," organized by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites). During this symposium, participants discussed ways to go beyond existing academic disciplinary barriers and administrative authorities, which are sometimes observed to be disconnected from these issues, to create better historical environments.

Nishimura ([1997](#)) discussed and analysed the current situation of Japanese historic cities, and pointed out that there was a lack of preservation efforts for such historic spatial environments due to the legal planning frameworks. He proposed integrating various legal systems of planning, preservation, and urban design. Additionally, he remarked that this integration is enhanced by increased public participation.

Larkham (1996) explores the current heritage conservation issues mainly in the United Kingdom and the development process of heritage conservation discourse, as well as perceptions of the public in general. During the process of heritage conservation, he pointed out the necessity of integrating the local community into the overall process—in particular, the decision-making process and governing bodies—which are keys to the quality of conserved historic properties and the surrounding landscape.

Among the World Heritage cities, site management teams own the difficult task of making adjustments to various stakeholders and the spatial management around the historic sites. These adjustments entail various types of actors, including those only temporarily related to heritage; for one, the visitors' interpretation is always a central issue for determining the nature of the spatial management of historic sites.

Parry (2006) discussed the case of Liverpool as a World Heritage City and suggested ways for future integration of destination management. The argument is the degree to which the difference between “true heritage” and history is understood, because a poor understanding sometimes produces a disappointment for visitors. Parry analysed different factors besides those influencing historic sites, in terms of both physical and intangible aspects, and how the interplay of these different elements defines the experiences of both locals and visitors.

Buhalis, et al. (2006) considered future approaches to site management for World Heritage sites. These are an application of new spatial management approaches. Buhalis pointed out that ICT (Information and Communication Technology) will be useful for obtaining historic significance for visitors as well as for sustaining the legacy of the sites for the next generation. These holistic ICT approaches provide information to visitors before, during, and after visiting the sites. It is believed that ICT will provide more integrated information to facilitate an understanding of historic sites.

To a great extent, historic sites and their surroundings function to interpret history for people from different historic backgrounds, beliefs, social classes, ethnic groups and political stances. However, the spatial setting has been sometimes formulated by the attribution of the so-called authorized history.

Logan, et al. (2009) explore the realities of preserving history with difficult memories of the past. Not all historic sites in the world represent social glory and successful memories. Not an insignificant number of heritage sites represent pain and the shame of the past; these experiences are dealt with in different ways by diverse ethnic groups, genders, and classes. The spatial arrangement of historic sites arguably appears to represent a holistic history that often reflects the political correctness formulated by social majority groups.

Utaka (2009) examines the reality of another World Heritage site in Hiroshima, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. Utaka traces the transformation of the spatial planning and site management aspects around Hiroshima, and points out that the historic site in Hiroshima represents past legacies of war and peace.

These memories of both local and global community are met and condensed within the small historic place, and these spatial representations raise questions about conventional preservation methodologies attributed to scientific proof of materials and age.

Tokoro (2000) pointed out that any kind of heritage conservation needs to refer to the local cultural settings, especially sacred sites that reflect

intangible value systems. Tokoro uses an example of the Ise Shrine in Japan, which regularly experiences “removal and renewal.” These heritage buildings are not given higher priority as historic sites according to conventional ways of gauging historic significance that require understanding of intangible aspects of space.

## **2. THE LEGACY OF ITSUKUSHIMA: FROM HOLY PLACE TO THE TOURIST DESTINATION**

### **2.1 Early Days Itsukushima: Making Holy Land**

The legacy of Itsukushima has been represented in Japanese history since ancient times. The island is situated in the central location of the Seto Inland Sea, it is recognized as an important holy place. Long discussed among historians, it is widely accepted that the Shrine was founded as early as 600AD. Immediately after the foundation period of Itsukushima, the built form that appeared at the present location was much primitive than present. A priest recorded the first constructions of the shrine pavilions in 1168. After the major construction commenced, shrine pavilions were expanded and completed by the most prominent warrior cum political leader Taira no Kiyomori. He dedicated great efforts to build the Shrine and prayed for his Taira Clan's glory until his fall in the great battle against his competitor the Minamoto Clan. The Minamoto continued their support for prayers at Itsukushima, and no ensuing leader destroyed the Shrine until today, even though a large number of prominent places of worship in the world have been destroyed by political or religious regime changes. Itsukushima has survived socio-political changes since its foundation period; unfortunately, the Shrine is continuously destroyed by natural disasters and fires. Shrine priests and rulers made utmost efforts to reconstruct, even if at times this imposed a heavy burden, for example when the Shrine had suffered complete destruction. The Shrine continuously seeks wider support from rulers for faster recovery, and these supports provided extensions of new pavilions.

Since early history, Itsukushima Island and Mt. Misen were considered holy places - no visitor was allowed to land, even priests resided on the mainland and traveled to the Shrine only for ritual occasions. In the following years, due to the increasing necessity for regular management works, Itsukushima gradually accepted a small number of priests and carpenters. In fact, an old document remarked that a group of craftsmen stayed temporally to carry out reconstruction works for the damaged shrine in early 1700. In addition, according to the record of donators for pagodas and shrine pavilions, Itsukushima gained wider support from merchants and traders. Gradually, Itsukushima allowed selected people to reside on the island territory and, in later years, opened doors for the general public to visit.

### **2.2 Expansion and early tourism development in Edo period**

Until the middle of the Edo Period (1603-1868), people were not allowed to travel freely or migrate. Travel was controlled, unless travel pass (*Tegata*) were obtained from relevant authorities. Along major old highways (*Kaidou*), traffic checkpoints (*Sekisho*) were built to conduct strict immigration and goods checks by authorities. The strictest checks were

carried out for ladies from, and weapons to, the capital city Edo. These controls were slowly de-regulated from the middle of the Edo period when the Japanese enjoyed their first experience of a warless age. In fact, travelers obtained their travel permission easier than previously if they declared that their destinations were shrines or temples for religious pilgrimage. Among the religious worship sites in Japan, Itsukushima has been recognized as one of the most prominent destinations for pilgrimage.

For most of the visitors, the main reason for traveling was a pilgrimage to Itsukushima. But more than that, they had another intention; pleasure and entertainment. For Japanese then, traveling abroad was usually a lifetime dream, because at that time Japan's population had difficulty even securing their daily diets. During the Edo period, Itsukushima grew as the most established pleasure town – plays, music, festivals, lotteries - it was widely observed as similar to a big city. Additionally, new migrants to the island were those involved with trade, transportation, construction, or entertainment. These growths multiplied the appeal of the site as a tourist destination, the shrine itself became a more renowned destination among Japanese which was epitomized by the recognition of the site as one of “Japan's Three Most Beautiful Sceneries (*Nihon San Kei*)” since the middle of the 1600s, when Japanese philosophers praised the beauty of Itsukushima in their written works.

Looking at the pictures portraying the scenery of a street of Itsukushima, there were already established streets fully occupied by shops and stalls. Visitors were rushing to their favorite shops and street vendors were seeking their customers – there is a lively dynamism on the high streets, representative of the growing early days of Japanese urbanism. These lifestyles were spread over from Itsukushima to more remote areas through sea routes or old highways that extended during the period of the feudal Edo government.

### 2.3 Rising modernist Meiji and Japanese historic sites

Eventually the Edo government ended in 1868; the succession from feudal Edo to the modern Meiji Period is one of the most significant Japanese regime changes to this day. The new Meiji government targeted carrying out national modernization, believing this to be the only way to resist the colonialist expansion, especially of her counterparts from the West. In fact, the greatest efforts of the new Meiji government were to build modern industrial facilities as well as military forces. At times, traditional faces were disregarded in the new age or even considered as obstacles to social modernization. A significant number of shrines and temples were abandoned and the surrounding towns lost their attractiveness. Interestingly enough, the Meiji government and the newly established modern administrative body of Prefectural governments enacted new legislation which designated particular locations as “parks”. Fortunately, Itsukushima was selected as the “Itsukushima Park”. It was observed that this had an important impact on Itsukushima's social modernization later ([Sunamoto, 2007](#)).

Subsequently, the Meiji Government enacted the “Act for the Preservation of Shrines and Temples” in 1897 and Itsukushima shrine was designated within the first batch. Under this enactment, the government carried out preservation projects at Itsukushima. Arguably, the implementation of government-led heritage conservation also contributed to encouraging and enlightening people to develop more nationalistic fervor. At that time, Japan expressed her hostility towards her Western counterparts,

especially those nations that were aggressively pursuing expansionism in the Far East. On the other hand, the government had an eye on these protected properties as resources towards further tourism development.

### 3. PRESERVING THE SHRINE: FROM SACRED PLACE TO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

#### 3.1 Preservation in Itsukushima

Itsukushima has been treated as a heritage property since the early Meiji Period. After the enactment of the “*Act for the Preservation of Shrines and Temples*”, historical artifacts in the shrine had been added as “National Treasures” and buildings were designated as preservation properties. In the following years, the shrine carefully carried out major preservation projects. In 1923, the island territory was designated as one “Place of Scenic Beauty” (*Meishou*) which might be understood to mean the expansion of heritage property in Itsukushima. Interestingly, these new applications of protection policies were expanded to surrounding natural heritages which were treated as sacred places, such as Mt. Misen.

These nomination and preservation projects were never interrupted during post-war periods, except for frequent natural disasters which continue to attack Itsukushima to this day. In order to carry out reconstruction projects during war periods in Japan when the society struggled with social disorder, governmental preservation policies were the essential force to conserve these historic properties which had a destiny of vulnerability. In the years after World War II, in 1952, Itsukushima Island was designated as one of the “Special Historic Sites” (*Tokubetsu shiseki*). These preservation policies were multiplied, especially for the surrounding area of the Shrine, and understood as one of the most advanced and substantial policies implemented among historic sites in Japan.

On the other hand, not only were these preservation efforts provided by governmental commitment, but also substantial efforts were paid by the Shrine’s community consisting of residents, donors, management officials and carpenters engaged since establishment of the shrine. Itsukushima Shrine has its shrine carpenters - those with specially trained fine skills and respected by the public in general. This is fortunate, as the Shrine does need its own carpenters to deal with the frequent natural disasters to this day.

According to the statistics provided by authority, there were a few floods observed during the 1990s. However, since 2001 the number of floods has been rising - in 2001: 12 times, in 2002: 10, in 2003: 11, in 2004: 17 ([the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2004](#)). During high tide, sea water sometimes rises above the height of the Shrine platforms and floods practically all the Shrine pavilions which were built on the northern shoals of Itsukushima Island. One of the worst recent cases was during Typhoon No.18 in 2004, when the water level rose to 50 cm above the platform and many pavilions were seriously damaged by storm, included the famous Noh stage and pavilion. Against the typhoon attacks, Shrine priests and staff urged fixing the floors and pavilions which are sometimes drawn into the sea. Despite this, damage is becoming increasingly more serious and frequent, yet it is almost unfeasible to alter the architectural setting of the Shrine – for example, to increase the floor height - so as to keep intact the original architectural beauty of the Shrine that was designated the “Important Cultural Property.” However, it is said that these floods will be worsening in



the future.

The shrine carpenters are not only trained with authentic restoration techniques, but also carry responsibilities for meeting contemporary needs for site management; adapting barrier-free needs, installation of latest fire monitoring and prevention equipment, selecting restoration materials including imported timbers, et cetera.

A researcher in Hiroshima, Nobuyuki Uemura, has analyzed barrier-free needs for visitors through intensive questioner surveys, and urges the need to carry out further barrier-free maintenance ([Uemura, et al., 2005](#)).

Recently, some experts looked into the traditional practices of Itsukushima Shrine. For example, a researcher Takuji Hamamoto pointed out that Itsukushima Shrine has traditional anti-disaster measures and practical know-how; site selection, architectural form and building details with enough attractiveness for the disaster prone Japanese society ([Hamamoto, 2011](#)).

### 3.2 World Heritage Listing

As mentioned above, Itsukushima is carefully treated among domestic society and is almost a representative of the “national culture” for the international community. It is argued in this paper that Itsukushima’s internationalization is epitomized by the prestigious World Heritage listing in 1996, following the first batch of Japanese World Heritage listings of Himeji Castle and Religious Heritages in Kyoto and Nara in 1993. The World Heritage Committee in 1996 clearly stated the historic significance of Itsukushima and its Shrine:

*Itsukushima Shinto Shrine 776 Japan C (i) (ii) (iv) (vi); The Committee decided to inscribe the nominated property on the basis of cultural criteria (i), (ii), (iv) and (vi) as the supreme example of this form of religious centre, setting traditional architecture of great artistic and technical merit against a dramatic natural background and thereby creating a work of art of incomparable physical beauty. The Delegate of Germany suggested that the authorities may consider cultural landscape criteria for a possible extension.*

The criteria for the adoption of Itsukushima Shrine as a World Heritage site were provided in Operational Guidelines as follows: (i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history; (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

These stated criteria expressing the significance of the Shrine, not only within the domestic society, adopted the so-called “Outstanding Universal Value” shared internationally. Itsukushima Island and the territory obtained another emblem towards its accomplishment of being a “holy island” representing Japanese social and cultural heritage.

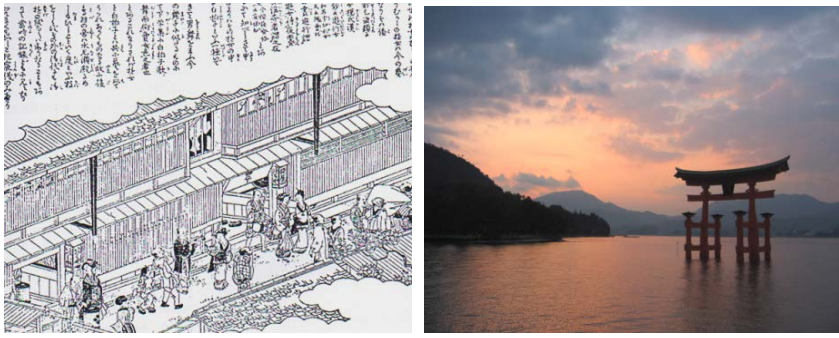


Figure 1. Images of Itsukushima Shrine

Picture right: Grand Gate of Itsukushima Shrine (Nobuyuki Uemura, 2007)

Picture left: Itsukushima during Edo Period (*Geishu Itsukushima Zue*, 1842)

## 4. SHRINE TOWN: FROM MARGINAL AREA TO THE SURROUNDINGS OF HISTORY

### 4.1 Challenges towards designation of preservation district

Previously, the surrounding shrine town had not been recognized with much significance for heritage conservation, as compared to the Shrine. The area has been designated a “*Special Historic Site*” (*tokubetsu shiseki*) for many years, which is effective for only development control without incentives for stakeholders, despite the shrine town having close relations in establishing the shrines history many years ago.

Recently, national and local authorities have carried out a series of feasibility studies towards future enactment of the preservation of districts under the legal heritage conservation system - “*Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings*.” Among domestic heritage conservation experts, they discussed that Itsukushima can be almost the final masterpiece of the preservation district system which was enacted in the 1970s. Government selected nearly 100 districts throughout the nation. In fact, the feasibility report later revealed that there were more important historic built heritage sites than expected initially, and concluded that the area was suitable to be included among Japanese preservation districts. “*Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings*” applied to traditional settlements consisting mainly of private properties. Once a proposed area meets with governmental “*selection*”, stakeholders are required to maintain traditional housing under the regulation and obtain restoration subsidies from authority.

According to the research report “*Research Report of the Future Preservation District of Groups of Historic Buildings*” there are nearly 300 pre-war architecture units; 100 units were built before the Meiji Period, nearly another 200 units were from the Meiji to end of the war period ([Hatsukaichi City Government, 2007](#)). Generally, these architectures are given higher priority for preservation projects, and the shrine town is recognized as an important element in the historic enclave of Itsukushima. The surrounding historic enclave exists as a background to enhance the beauty of the Shrine; conversely, future insensitive development might cause problems upon the landscape.



## 4.2 Social diversity among shrine town community

Throughout the conduct of the intensive research project on Itsukushima, diverse architecture built forms was confirmed; town houses for a variety of social classes and businesses, and with differing construction methods. The high street in Itsukushima is occupied by relatively larger two story shop-cum-residential town houses, while smaller tenant houses are located along alleys. Social classes were clearly distinguished by differing house sizes, quality of building materials, and decorations. Additionally, recycled timber from other buildings was widely observed, especially for tenant or commercial use, as generally these buildings are required to be affordable.

Interestingly, this diversity of housing classes was observed and mixed within neighbourhoods that had never been segregated. These smaller spaces are organically connected with Itsukushima's overall history. A historic background of a tourist destination in Itsukushima was also reflected, for example, there were brothels. Hiroshi Nunokawa revealed this historic background in his study ([Nunokawa, 2001](#)). These brothels have particular decorations on the façade and plan. Generally, the grand-floor was reserved for management and guest relations. Up-stair, there were small tatami-mat guest rooms, and the floor was connected by a wide staircase with grand-floor. These brothels were closed down in later years, but their particular architecture style has remained, and some are used as residential and retail buildings. These remains are part of the holistic history of Itsukushima; however, sometimes these heritages are given lower priority for preservation and can even be neglected because they are considered as holding negative memories of the past.

## 4.3 Policy implementation and the challenges

Despite the detailed research results of the historical significance of these buildings demonstrated by the researchers involved in the feasibility study, a significant number of houses were torn down or abandoned. It is urged to implement a preservation policy and carry out preservation projects. However, this implementation of a preservation district is not readily possible; under the current deficit and the financial situation among local authorities, the local community withholds their towards heritage conservation.

Adding to the problem for conservationists in the Shrine town is the new enactment of a landslide prevention act. In Japan, the "*Act on Sediment Disaster Countermeasures for Sediment Disaster Prone Areas*" (2000) was enacted after people requested for many years for protection measures from the tragedy of landslide disasters. Hiroshima Prefecture had the unforgettable experience of a huge landslide in 1999 and the loss of livestock and infrastructure, including on Itsukushima Island. The 1999 downpour caused landslides on mountains in Miyajima, and streets and rivers were miserably covered by mud and drowned timbers, uncountable number of houses were destroyed. As a result, since the landslide prevention act has been enacted, most of the shrine town area was designated a "*landslide warning area*", a so-called Yellow Zone. Some higher hillside areas were included in the so-called Red Zone or "*landslide special warning area*" under the new enactment. Authorities take adequate measures for these areas. If property owners plan to build or alter their property, they are

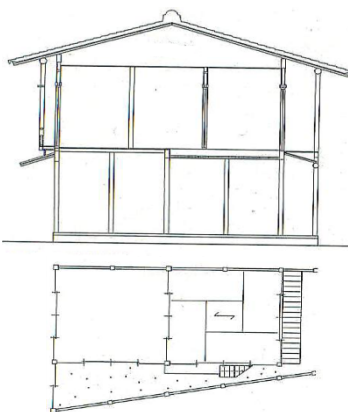
required to pass through a more strict development submission process that must pay more attention to structural resistance against landslides.

Despite these unresolved issues raised, there are other theoretical questions that have been raised. Needless to say, Itsukushima is providing a most attractive case to conduct research activities for academics; basically they are focusing on particular periods of time and phenomena.

Physical evidence revealed by architecture experts is, however, predominantly from the Edo period. There is fewer evidence from previous historic periods. This tendency is widely observed in Japanese preserved historic properties - arguably enhanced and focused on Edo's culture and history. A historian questioned why Itsukushima's shrine town's history and culture were presented from Edo perspectives through conventional heritage conservation, even though there are some physical exhibits from the pre-Edo period, and less attention is paid to younger heritage. Arguably, these queries are questioning the way to represent Itsukushima's long history within historical evidence remaining to this day.

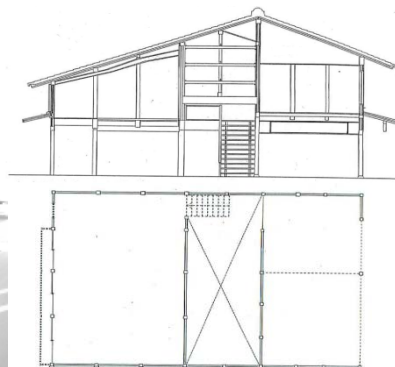
**Case 1: House A** (Left: façade / Right: Examined original cross section and plan)

A middle size town house in the north part of the shrine town, consisting of two floors of unique trapezoid plan to follow land shape. Decorated and carefully selected materials and walls are painted a bright blue colour that is generally found in guest rooms for entertainment. In the grand floor, there is an earth floor for the entrance and domestic use and two tatami rooms. The 1<sup>st</sup> floor has two tatami rooms with narrow veranda. Two floors are connected by steep and narrow stairs which have only a 350mm width.



**Case 2: House B** (Left: façade / Right: Examined original cross section and plan)

A large size town house in the centre of the shrine town consisting of two floors with a large void space and earth floor on the grand floor. There are recycled timber and remains which indicate major alternation of structures. This town house is connected to the neighbouring house, and has renovated interiors. It is now used as a popular cafe and gallery.



**Case 3: House C** (Left: façade / Right: Examined original cross section and plan)

A small link house is in an alley of the central shrine town. It has two tatami rooms with a small earth floor. Connected units have the same plan, altered remarkably to

accommodate more family members. Windows and doors are changed to contemporary materials, but include some remains of old recycled materials. This is a typical example existing of an old link house in the shrine town.

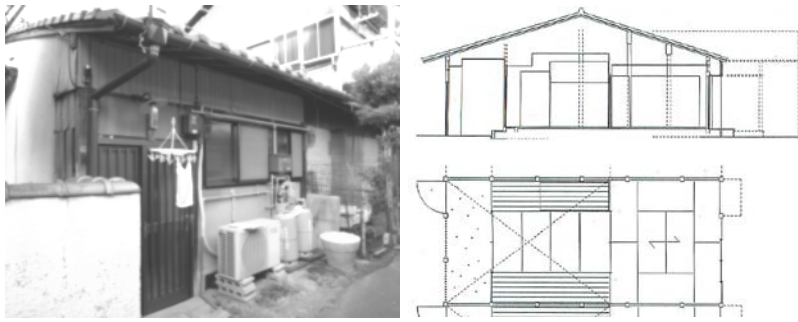


Figure 2. Varieties of House in the Shrine Town

(Survey conducted by Uemura, and Utaka, in 2004, included with the study report; National Trust Japan (2005) *Research Report of the Shrine Town of Itsukushima Shrine*, p.8, p.12, p.13.)

## 5. LANDSCAPE: CROSSING THE CHANNEL

### 5.1 Landscape beyond “core” and “buffer”

The beauty of Itsukushima is not concluded within the Shrine territory only. In fact, the surrounding scenery of the Shrine is an important background to enhance the existence of the shrine, which represents the beauty and harmony of nature, humankind and the gods.

In fact, during the nomination process of the prestigious World Heritage Listing of Itsukushima Shrine in 1996, authorities officially designated all islands and some portions of the marine water surface as the World Heritage “Buffer Zone” also designated as “Special Historic Sites” (*tokubetsu shiseki*). Additionally, the most important “Core Zone” includes, of course, the shrine pavilions and surrounding historic properties, and some portions of mountain, Mt. Misen, which has also been defined as a place of worship since the establishment of Itsukushima. On the other hand, the shrine town area which was predominantly occupied by commercial and residential buildings is excluded from the “Core Zone” even though, as discussed in the previous chapter, not a substantial number of buildings and houses are believed to have been built during Edo period.

### 5.2 Perspective beyond holy land

The most expressive scenery of the Shrine is the platform to the mainland through the Grand Gate. Most visitors are fascinated and take pictures, but some express their incongruity when they find an over developed landscape in the mainland, especially housing estates scratched on hills, high-rise buildings on costal lines and massive commercial buildings nearby. These points of views have been argued continuously since the Japanese high economic growth of the 1970s when Japan experienced rapid economic development. Generally, the Hiroshima metropolitan province has a relatively small plain of land for industrial and housing development required to accommodate a population of over 1.8 million. Housing estates on the mainland, opposite Itsukushima Island, are some of the most established locations developed since the late 1970s, and these hillside estates are attractive for house seekers. They enjoy superb views of the peaceful Seto Inland Sea, Itsukushima Island and the Shrine. In the

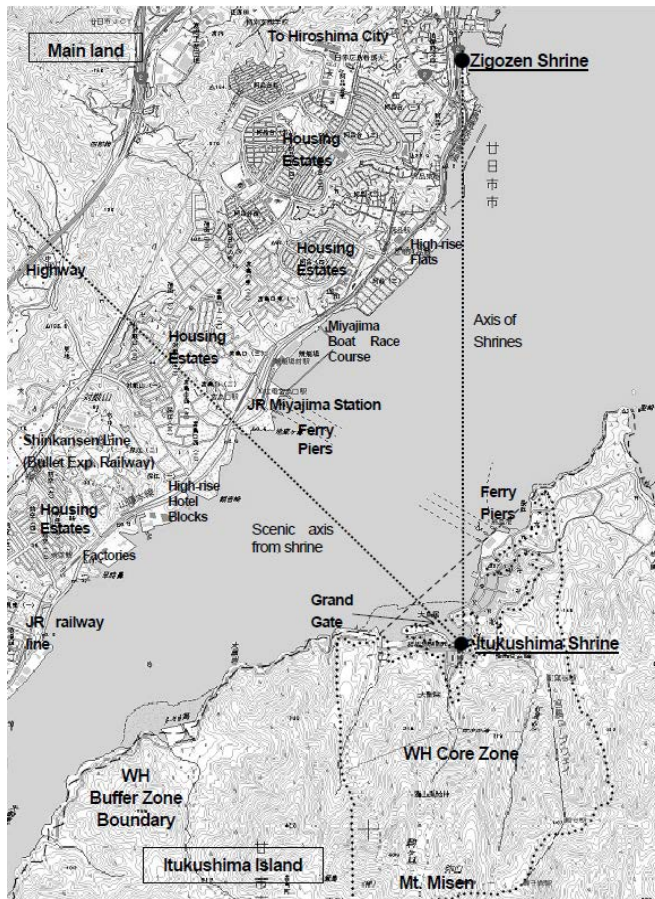
following years, a number of companies built company-resorts for their employees along the coastal line on the mainland; at that time most Japanese companies were enjoying good business conditions. On the other hand, from time to time, these developed landscapes on the mainland were criticized by citizen interest groups who paid more sensitive attention to development in general, and said that authorities needed to implement more strict landscape controls and mitigate existing developments.

Arguably, these appeals have been slowly penetrating into the public in general since the late 1990s when Japanese society experienced the collapse of the “Bubble Economy”, and has now been enduring a never-ending economic slump. Recently, “landscape” has been gradually considered as essential among populations in Japan, in fact a recent landscape versus development court case showed that judgments accorded greater importance for conserving traditional landscape than continued conventional development proposals.

It is argued in this paper that this rising awareness towards traditional landscape in Japan can be explained as people’s reaction, uneasiness and crisis of confidence following the long years of economic downturn. Conversely, Japan’s long-term dreams of national development since her post-war reconstruction; for example, epitomizing a post-war reconstruction experience in neighbouring Hiroshima City - have almost materialized and never been destructed.

Recently, the landscape debate about Itsukushima has been epitomized by a high-rise apartment development along the coastal area of the mainland. A developer proposed a multi-storey apartment development on the site of an abandoned amusement park. This development proposal was fully adopted and approved by authorities, however, conservationists and supporting planning experts showed their objection because of effects on the landscape (Nishi Hiroshima Times, 1998). A research group revealed the results of their own exercise for the future of the landscape. It included an idea for the establishment of a new “Secondary Buffer Zone” which has a 5 km radius from the Shrine with more strict development controls (Yomiuri News Paper, 1999). Another expert group paid attention to the connection with Zigozen Shrine which played an important role as an outer shrine accepting prayers from those previously prohibited entering the island. Conservationists are questioning the over-development of the area; there are reclaimed lands and building blocks on the “holy axis” between Zigozen and Itukushima Shrine, even though they have been almost invisible from one another for many years. Generally, their perspective was of a quality landscape extending horizontally, as existed previously. However, recently, another perspective has been included; a vertical extent - a peace group questioning the noise of jetfighters from neighbouring Iwakuni Japanese Self Defense Force and US Marine Corps airbase; questioning why these military powers are “invading” the sky of the island of holiness.





**Figure 3.** Lines of sight from Itsukushima Shrine.  
(Base map: Geo-spatial Information Authority of Japan)

## 6. REAL ESTATE ASPECT ON ITSUKUSHIMA

### 6.1 Holy land as a living place

As a matter of fact, despite its highly evaluated historical significance, Itsukushima has been experiencing drastic circumstance changes by external development pressures. Conversely, there are internal issues too; Itsukushima is continuously decreasing in population. The population in Itsukushima peaked during in the 1970s when Japan experienced high economic growth and higher demand for the tourism industry. However, Itsukushima's population is now continuously decreasing, and the demographic pattern has also shifted to an aging society; statistics showed an elder population of over 30%.

This tendency - depopulation and aging - is not observed only in Itsukushima and the province; it is commonly observed nationwide. However, Itsukushima's demographic pattern always indicates higher and faster trends compare to the national average and most towns of her counterparts in the province. Currently, Itsukushima's population is below 2000 and has never stopped decreasing ([Hatukaichi City Government, 2010](#)). This silent change of Itsukushima's community is affecting the nature of this historical shrine town. Many "Machiya" townhouses are abandoned, or occupied by single elders. These phenomena might be observed as a substantial backlash of cultural heritage conservation in sustaining a traditional community within its physical setting.

However, the majority of landlords in the island are not positive toward selling or renting to house seekers from other towns. Among this relatively conservative community, it is said that people are always worried about negative reputations from neighbours if the buyer or occupier makes noise within the old neighbourhoods - these trends are widely observed in historic quarters in Japan.

Sue Millar investigated the nature of community on heritage sites, and pointed out that heritage management plans are required to focus the diversity of community, including layers and levels of community participation ([Millar, 2006](#)).

## 6.2 Utilizing historic house: reality and challenge

Furthermore, Itsukushima's real estate evaluations are still high, despite a recent Japanese real-estate down-turn. According to the local real-estate agents this reflects the nature of the island - limited land resources, relatively strict development controls, and high demand for commercial use that generally demands higher prices. In Japan, generally, real-estate is evaluated separately for lands and buildings. Commonly, only land is evaluated as a property with economic value, even though the building may be confirmed as heritage. On the contrary, historical buildings are sometimes regarded as no-value "deserted houses", even then, they are given negative evaluations due to the required demolition work cost or hidden expenditure.

Of course, there are exceptions; especially properties with potential for commercial use or advanced locations where some booming "Machiya towns", similar to renowned tourist destinations in Kyoto, are widely observed. Unfortunately, the majority of the real-estate evaluation methods for architecture do not add positive value from historic significance, due to the Japanese population's preference to occupy "new" property. According to the statistics of the Japanese housing census, Japanese houses including old houses or estate housing are demolished after 30 years on average.

Local authorities and community groups have taken action to mitigate these trends. In fact, some have directed their eyes toward heritage properties with potential. There are some renovated Machiya cases which are converted into retail or short-stay accommodation operated by private sectors. These renovation projects require an amount of investment however, and owners need to be prepared for unavoidable additional costs that generally cause the projects to adopt a wooden ramshackle traditional house feel with contemporary Japanese structural adjustments as required by the "*Building Standards Act*" and other required legal permissions. These projects operated by relatively young entrepreneurs are regarded as successful by the local community in general. It is said that further cooperation and understandings by the wider local community is essential to determine the success of their projects.

Chua Rhan See seeks a possible scenario of adequate "adaptive reuse" in historic cities in Asia. She pointed out the use and nature of heritage buildings are far more varied based on the activity in the buildings, especially buildings located in historic tourist destinations ([Chua, 2011](#)).

The tourism industry in Itsukushima town is, of course, regarded as the most vital industrial sector for future revitalization. According to the report "*Regional Tourism Development Plan Hiroshima, Miyajima, Iwakuni*" which was prepared by authorities in 2008, the number of visitors to Itsukushima is constantly increasing and indicated 3 million per year, especially foreign visitors of which there has been a sharp increase of 0.1



million, almost double the national increase, and it is believed that Itsukushima is featured prolifically by internationally renowned visitors' guides ([Japan Tourism Agency, 2008](#)).

Janet Cochrane and Richard Tapper focused on future heritage conservation which requires closer ties with tourism sectors as well as adequate revenue from them, and site managers are required to commit more to the tourism sector ([Cochrane and Tapper, 2006](#)).

However, the tourism industry in Itsukushima contains issues which are shared by authorities and experts. It is said that tourists visiting Itsukushima spend only a short period of time, due to the lack of attractiveness for contemporary consumers. In fact, visitors staying at accommodation in Itsukushima are gradually decreasing year by year ([Nishihiroshima Times, 2003](#)). Business sectors in Itsukushima show diverse reactions, especially those which have already depreciated their business properties, showing less effort to attract visitors. On the other hand, contemporary Japanese tourists to the historic cities have changed their consuming behaviour; for example, they have not paid much attention to consume conventionally sold souvenirs.

Recently, some newcomers and entrepreneurs have opened their own retail outlets occupying traditional houses on the island. This has been accepted as a positive reaction to attract contemporary consumers. However, these new trials are not shared widely among the relatively conservative local community. Additionally, some experts pointed out that these "renovations" sometimes does not meet "conservation" methodologies; have a lack of sensitivity to historic properties, and are naturally inclined towards a commercially profitable approach.

## 7. FUTURE ITSUKUSHIMA

In recent years, Itsukushima has accepted more foreign visitors since the Japanese government has encouraged international inbound tourists to respective destinations that represent Japanese tradition and modernity. Itsukushima is recognized as one of the most attractive destinations for them. Itsukushima has always been treated as a treasure of this world, among dauntless warriors, calmly technocrats, sensitive conservationists, residents and tourists. It is almost of miracle that the shrine has stood over a thousand years, even though many sites of precious heritage have been destructed by political disorder, natural disaster, or people's negligence of their history.

Frequent floods on Itsukushima shrine have never declined. It is said that this damage will be worse in the near future due to global warming. Local government and experts urge the establishment of practical measures, however it is still a long way to solving the problems posed by nature. Recent changes and frequent floods observed on the shrine have been silent, but are a valuable reminder for people living in the contemporary world in places of holiness. As discussed in this paper, Itsukushima is experiencing drastic or silent changes; the transforming landscape, implementation of new regulations, shrinking population, aging community, changing tourism industry, and our expectation of holiness in a contemporary sacred place. Itsukushima has been experiencing continuous changes and transition since the establishment of the shrine, however, the degree of change occurring in the near future will be beyond previously experienced.

It is argued in this paper that Itsukushima is situated on a threshold of different time and space, between holiness and worldliness, connecting different worlds. It might be accepted that Itsukushima has been conveying

to the people, through uncountable invisible or visible changes, to foresee the future. Future sustainable conservation and spatial management on Itsukushima and in the province an unavoidable necessity, sought through mitigation and a re-direction toward sustainable ways. In this case, it will be essential to enhance more invisible elements, as these are sometimes given lower priority or even neglected when compared to conventional development forces. The following are unavoidable aspects of the future of Itsukushima's sustainable development.

#### Integrated Policy and Control of Surroundings

- Establish landscape control and land use regulations for visible territory around Itsukushima Shrine.
- Combine existing natural and cultural conservation policies, especially of the surrounding sea surface and forest.

#### Quality of Preservation of Shrine Town

- Provide more effective and feasible preservation guidelines to upgrade the quality of the townscape of the shrine town.
- Create more examples of quality conversions of traditional houses meeting contemporary needs.

#### Interpretation and Tourism Development

- Preserve artefacts of wider social classes.
- Provide more holistic historic information for visitors, include negative memories of the past.
- Re-examine current mass tourism based development, and develop and diversify the tourist activities.

#### Community Involvement and Revitalization

- Encourage more inclusive approach to preservation process beyond social classes and business sectors.
- More tax deductions and financial incentives for preservation projects to invite a larger population.
- Establish a "traditional house bank" to reduce the number of unoccupied traditional houses.
- Provide stronger public facilities with disaster resistant capabilities and evacuation site, in case of emergency.

#### **Remarks**

This paper is based on the author's research activities and an official conservation research project under the auspicious of Hatsukaichi City Government and the National Trust of Japan from 2004 to 2009. However, the findings, interpretations, and conclusion expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and should not be attributed in any manner to related bodies, organizations and projects which the author joined or was involved with prior.

This paper is the extension of the ideas and frames expressed following previous occasions; Yushi Utaka, 2010, *Conserving Japan: Challenges on the World Heritage Sites in Hiroshima*, Series on the Management and Conservation of World Heritage Sites, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), Hiroshima. (Oral Presentation)

Yushi Utaka, 2011, *Itsukushima Shinto Shrine World Heritage Site: Holiness and Contemporary Japan*, International Conference 2011 on Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development, 29-31 July, 2011, Kanazawa (Conference CD)

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