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The day that I returned to New Orleans from Japan, I came across a run-down house on a remote corner of Freret Street, near Central City. It was bigger than a shotgun house, having two stories, and even more plain. It was beige with white trim, clad with stucco on the ground floor and clapboard on the top, both identical in color. The only remarkable thing about this house was that it had been unceremoniously ripped from the ground, porch and all, and propped up about 8 feet on a series of stacked wooden piers. The back door hung gaping open with no ground beneath it, swinging back and forth slightly. It was an ugly sight, but pure New Orleans in its way. Upon further research, it appeared that the home had actually been purchased and rehabilitated by a local New Orleans realtor in recent years. But here it was in present state, hefted up in the air, a jagged edge of broken stucco where it once met the ground. In New Orleans, in order to preserve a way of life, people sometimes take extraordinary measures to protect extremely ordinary things. Although I never witnessed a single structure in Japan as neglected as some in New Orleans—not even close—my mind immediately went to Kyoto.

My first thought, a somewhat ironic comparison, was of the Kiyomizu-dera temple. This is an ancient building perched on the side of a steep incline with the help of a 40 foot tall wooden support structure, painstakingly constructed from notched wood pillars and beams. Each beam around the perimeter of the structure had its own narrow strip of gabled roof to protect it from water damage. This temple is an extreme example of a raised condition that happens almost ubiquitously in Japanese structures, since, as in New Orleans, the threat of flooding is relatively high. I also recalled the wide, smooth, unpolished floorboards characteristic of Kyoto's many temples (made so by thousands of stockinged feet), and multiple instances of old, worn wooden structures, from columns to railings, replaced one small section at a time with a tightly fitted piece of bright new wood.

From a material and tactile standpoint, the Japanese traditional house, the Machi-ya, does not vary significantly from the temple. Being able to spend some time living in Kyoto's vernacular housing type, the Kyo Machi-ya, was a particularly effective way for us to experience the palette of materials specific to Japanese traditional architecture. As a vernacular form, the Kyo Machi-ya struck me as not being particularly "durable" in the way we think about homes in the United States. It is, essentially, a house built of wood, mud and paper, with delicate details and very strict rituals. These rituals, the standards for behavior inside the house which themselves seem to stem from an intelligence about material properties, protect the house from damage. The removal of shoes, the use of removable tatami mats, and the lack of large, intrusive furniture pieces are the most conspicuous of these protective conventions.

Inside one particular example, a restored Kamzamachi Machi-ya in Kyoto, this became very clear. The house is entered at ground level, the front entry space large enough to potentially double as a small storefront. Along the left side of the space runs a ground-level, double-height hallway with a concrete floor leading out to the back courtyard, that also contains the kitchen. This is an interstitial space in every way—moving from public to private, from inside to outside, but always covered—which I immediately came to think of as the "permanent" space of the house. Raised a foot or so along the right side of the floor are two rooms back to back: the dining room and the tea room. It was immediately apparent that these rooms were significantly more precious, and more private, as they were set higher and separated, framed up in light wood and paper sliding panels. The tatami mat

floors of these rooms are protected from dirt and shoes by simple custom. The exterior is made of unfinished clay mud, vulnerable and not to be touched. The paper screens are delicate, but replaceable—in fact, this quality seemed to define most of the simple raw materials that made up the house.

Living in a house like this for a few days caused me to realize that as a child, I had no idea what the walls of my home were made of. Our walls are thick, not easily breakable, and generically smooth and white. Sometimes our walls will peel or dent, and when that happens they don't necessarily get fixed because they are still functional as walls. New Orleanians seem to value their local vernacular more consciously than most cities in the United States, but that value tends to hold very little intrinsic respect for the elements of that design. In fact, material decay becomes a part of that aesthetic, a romantic ideal that is simultaneously antithetical to the city's preservationist instinct. The shoring up of a house in New Orleans is a common sight, and something of a poignant sight as well. When we shore up a house or put it up on stilts, it is a tacit acknowledgement that this house, and all the houses around it, were built in unsustainable conditions. Sometimes the purpose of this action is to raise the house permanently, sometimes to replace flood or insect damaged foundations (as is probably the case in this example). And while it is relatively normal in this city, from an outside perspective it seems drastic to haul up from the ground such a mundane and poorly maintained structure, to protect it in that way even as its shingles are falling and its siding is cracked. From an outside perspective, this practice is symptomatic of a larger callousness.

In a climate such as this one, shared between Kyoto and New Orleans, rotting and damage are guaranteed in wooden structures, be they 100 or 1000 years old—and there are many factors, cultural and economic, that determine why one city is altogether more carefully "maintained" than the other. The Kyo Machi-ya itself is a rarity, carefully preserved and guarded by a concerned few. But perhaps it is the legacy of that vernacular that has led the culture itself to be more active and deliberate inhabitants of its surroundings, more accustomed to the texture and quality of raw materials, and more sensitive to material limitations.



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Support structure under Kiyomizu-dera temple, Kyoto, Japan.