

The people: Inhabitants and Visitors

The number of visitors has increased immensely since 1970, the year of the Osaka World Exhibition. Around that time, Japan started to become aware of the fact that in big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya there were few quarters left in which people lived in a quiet atmosphere of whole neighbourhoods of Machiya or traditional townhouses, such as still existed in Kyoto. This led a group of citizens living in Higashiyama to establish an “union to protect the paths of Higashiyama”, to solicit ideas for the protection of their area. This will stay a good example of a preservation initiative taken by the community members themselves - admittedly, also to promote their income. At other times, this preliminary action was taken by local or the central government agencies who often imposed their ‘romantic’ preservation ideals on unwilling local residents, or by rich individual owners trying to protect their own traditional family property and history.

In 1972 the Planning Department of the City of Kyoto published a detailed, illustrated report that comprised a physical, historic and demographic survey of the district, as well as proposals for the future protection and visual restoration of a future Higashiyama-Yasaka preservation district.

It contained an opinion poll on the urban quality of the area as perceived by the people living there, as well as those just visiting. 90 percent of the visitors referred to the unique ‘Kyotoishness’ (kyōtorashisa) of the quiet streetscape there, and thought it worth preserving. An equal proportion expressed a deep appreciation for the plentiful green maintained in the area, and found it even more important than the traditional faces of the buildings. At that time the area counted 3000 visitors on weekdays, and 10,000 on Sundays. When asked for the reasons of their visits, they mentioned the temples and shrines located there, the teahouses and shops selling local specialities, and the desire to talk in person with local shopkeepers. In the same survey, over 30 percent of the people living there said that they thought they would respond to this new influx of tourists by repairing or even rebuilding their shops. They also felt that an official preservation plan would have to be established by the authorities to prevent rapid deterioration of the area due to increased commercial use.

