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# sustainable japan

## Azby Brown: Student of Japan's sustainable past

### Roundtable

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Azby Brown is one of those energetic, curious Western intellectuals who come to Japan and become experts about a single aspect of its society. There seems to be one for any subject, from crime (Jake Adelstein) to construction (Alex Kerr); if a reader is interested, there awaits a book, a podcast or a Twitter account ready to "go deep." Often ensconced in a university post or website newsroom, these *gaijin otaku*, or "gotaku" (hey, look — I made up a new term!) vary in quality. Some are huckster Japanologists, promoting only the positive aspects of Japan simply because, well, that is what their employees (and readers) want to hear. Other gotaku are more like gadflies, stinging the sides of a slow-moving society with an informed and cutting pen, advocating for improvement with a mixture of frustration and genuine care for their adopted home.

Brown's lifework here has been on two subjects, which he eloquently explains are one: architectural design and sustainability. He was the latest guest on the Japan Times Roundtable, an eclectic series in which Ross Rowbury cheerfully interviews a list of intellectuals, activists and writers. Rowbury, an informed gotaku himself, has a knack of setting his guests at ease and finding insights in their anecdotes.

This latest interview with Brown was no exception, and it was fascinating to hear his story.

### Craftsmanship, sustainably

Brown's first book, "The Genius of Japanese Carpentry," is a beautiful, large-format book that deserves a spot on any bookshelf in Tokyo. As he related in the Roundtable, he wrote the book two decades ago, after spending three years on a building site with the famous *miya daiku* (temple carpenter) Tsunekazu Nishioka. The master had first offered to make the 28-year-old Brown a formal apprentice. But "I was warned that I'd have to put everything aside for eight years ... eight years of pure obedience! So instead, I humbly asked if I could return and document his building sites, as an observer and student."

The link between craftsmanship and sustainability was there from the beginning. "They have an oral teaching called *kuden*, which are the written sayings of temple carpenters. One of them says: 'Don't buy timber. Buy a mountain.'" Brown explained that this is about selecting the right wood for each part of the building, based on how the source tree lived. Support pillars require trees grown at the tops of mountains, while north-facing exteriors are cut from north-facing trees. "Almost every question I asked him, he would circle back to the environment, how it shapes wood as it is growing, and how it will affect it after it has been



Distinguished author Azby Brown YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

used in a building."

### Teaching lessons of the past

After publishing his seminal work, Brown studied Japan's compact housing, linking the current challenges of urban designers to the sustainable practices of Edo Period Japan. This subject of sustainability brought new relevance to Japan's traditional crafts. "After speaking at a sustainability conference in Sun Valley, I realized

the rest of the world was ready to learn more about how the Japanese had faced having limited resources and how they had developed the circular economy of the Edo Period — the maximizing of resources; the environmental management of forestry, water, agriculture; the urban design; the subjects of waste, energy. These separate aspects link up and work together, and were a great starting point." Rowbury also pointed out that

these historical practices illustrate the traditional Japanese mindset of wasting nothing, an everyday form of sustainability still avidly practiced in most Japanese households (Don't throw away that wrapping paper!).

It is rare that a gotaku author can create seminal works on two subjects; usually a single opus will do. That Brown is also the author of "Just Enough: Lessons in Living Green from Traditional Japan" is quite an achievement. Published in 2013, the book describes the everyday life of Edo Japan through easy-to-read narrative stories. "There were so many great Japanese researchers working on their specialized areas, and I was able to pull this together with my own fieldwork. I wrote the book as a travelogue: If you were there at the time, what would you see? In the book, we visit a farming village, a carpenter living in a row-house tenement and a low-ranking samurai in Edo." As the Amazon reviews never fail to mention, there are also many, many illustrations — highly detailed, almost technical drawings of the homes, tools and water systems that allowed the people of the Edo Period to thrive with extremely limited resources. The book also provides the context for the challenges they faced. "Prior to the Edo Period, there was massive deforestation. Clear-cutting can cause so many problems ... from deforestation all the way to total famine... but (the Edo people) managed to forestall those dominoes falling."

### Circular to digital economies?

Learning from the past is one thing, but how can today's Japan practice sustainability? Rowbury made the point that over 60% of people now consider themselves a "belief-driven buyer," in that they will only purchase goods and services from companies whose values align with their own. "It's as if they've given up on governments and are now voting with their pocket-



The Genjo Sanzoin complex at Yakushiji Temple in Nara was built by Tsunekazu Nishioka and completed in 1991. AZBY BROWN

book." Is this the answer? Brown agreed, and voiced a surprising optimism. "The local food movement is a big part of that! Sustainable clothing. Free-trade coffee. People have alternatives and choice now. And as we as individuals demand more choice, things will get better."

### Positive change and outlook

Here in Japan I have found that a gotaku's optimism is often correlated with their age. The young 25-year-olds breathlessly covering subjects like music, medical research or economics are often stark contrasts with the more cynical 50-year-olds who have written about the same thing for years but have seen only stagnation in their field.

Brown does not suffer from this bitterness. Instead he sees the lessons of the past becoming the practices of today. His books are instructive, his optimism is inspiring and his message is clear: Take action. Learn more. Demand sustainable options. Like the master craftsman he once learned from, or the people of Edo, together we can all live a little more thrifty.

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>





**the japan times**  
*Destination Restaurants*  
**2021**

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The restaurant scene in Japan has entered a new era, with diners seeking unique experiences and cuisine that cannot be found elsewhere. At the forefront of this trend are restaurateurs linked closely to the sources of their ingredients, turning the natural blessings of their surroundings into innovative, delectable fare. Each year, the members of our expert panel recommend 10 establishments, with the aim of introducing readers to authentic cuisine prepared with great care and imagination. The Japan Times Destination Restaurant of the Year 2021 is Cuisine régionale L'évo.

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## Art triennial revitalizes rural Echigo-Tsumari region

### Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

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The 16th Satoyama Cafe, a talk session organized by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium and moderated by its secretariat chief, Yuto Yoshida, was conducted online on May 8 featuring two women involved in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, a unique art event and a major trigger for regional revitalization that started in the rural Echigo-Tsumari region of Niigata Prefecture in 2000.

The regional festival showcases artworks inspired by the local landscape and culture, created by both Japanese and international artists scattered across 200 locales in the area. Yukiko Tamaki, director of NPO Echigo-Tsumari Satoyama Collaborative Organization, has been part of the event since 2003. According to Tamaki, Echigo-Tsumari, a wide area covering the city of Tokachi and the town of Tsumari, is one of the snowiest regions on Earth, with rich beech forests and terraced rice fields, and faces the issue of depopulation and aging.

"The purpose of the event was to solve the existing issue and promote regional revitalization," Tamaki said. However, she explained that the plan initially received nothing but objections from council members and local people who wanted hospitals and roads instead of modern art. "But the former mayor of Tsumari said: 'We have tried many things, but nothing solved our problem. Why not try this one, when we won't lose anything more?' and with this, things started to roll,"

Tamaki said.

Haruka Kuwabara, the current mayor of Tsumari and the youngest town mayor in the history of Japan, is one of the residents whose lives were changed by the triennial. She was a second-year high school student when she felt greatly inspired by the event, especially a speech by Sadako Ogata, the first female United Nations high commissioner for refugees, who had been invited. The experience made her proud of her hometown.

The local people also started to change as they engaged with artists, organizers and other people who run the event. The unique part of this art triennial is that some of the works involve the participation of local residents during the process of creation or performance, such as installing works with artists on their own premises, telling stories about old times to inspire an artist to write a poem, or performing as actresses at a theater restaurant.

Tamaki noted that *yukimi gozen* (snow-viewing meal), a special lunch served at a village house by wives from the area during the triennial, symbolizes the action of connecting with the outside world through one's own creation. "Actually, many of them originally come from other towns and they blended into the community, bringing some unique tastes from their own hometowns," she explained. Yoshida, the moderator, said, "It means that those women had the power to cross boundaries," stressing that this is exactly what is needed to open up a region.

Kuwabara said the local people had lost confidence in their town before the triennial started. "They thought, 'There is nothing



Participants in the 2018 Echigo-Tsumari art festival get together in the closing ceremony. YANAGI AYUMI

here.' They were afraid of outsiders, and they didn't want anyone to mess with their lives. They thought that they had nothing to do with the event, and the event would not change anything or bring young people," she said. But it did bring their pride back. The communication and collaboration with outsiders helped them realize the quality of life they are endowed with.

The last triennial, in 2018, attracted more than 540,000 visitors. Kuwabara said many people got to know about Echigo-Tsumari through the event and started to visit the area repeatedly to enjoy exchanges with the local people or help work in the rice fields. "There are also people who support the region by becoming owners of terraced rice fields. Many companies and celebrities are also supporting the event, and the national government also recognizes this event as a successful example of regional development," Kuwabara said. There are also foreign facilities such as Hong Kong House or Australia House that showcase artworks by their artists and serve as venues for cultural exchange programs. "We also have new residents playing active roles in preserving the communities. We have new shops, too. These are visible changes in the area," Kuwabara said.

Tamaki said the key for success in revitalizing a region through interactions with people from outside is to maintain a weak and open connection that allows anyone to join in.

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