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# sustainable japan

Community ownership central to sustainable design for Mali expert

## Kyoto Seika head Sacko flexes architecture for all

**Name: Ousouby Sacko**  
**Title:** President of Kyoto Seika University  
**URL:** [www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/](http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/)  
**Hometown:** Bamako, Mali  
**Years in Japan:** 30

### Leaders & Readers

**JOE MUNTAL**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Architecture significantly shapes our perception of society. The various elements that comprise a piece of architecture — materials, size, aesthetic design — reflect cultural values and economic development. For instance, skyscrapers indicate wealth and commercial activity, while renovated shrines reflect a collective respect for social traditions.

There is one element of architecture, however, that is often overlooked: social utility. When we come across an impressive building, how often do we raise the question of whether the structure benefits its surround-



Ousouby Sacko is surrounded by students at Kyoto Seika University. KYOTO SEIKA UNIVERSITY

ings or reflects the values of the community? This relationship between architecture and community is a central theme in the work of architect, researcher and educator Ousouby Sacko, the current president of Kyoto Seika University.

Sacko grew up in Bamako, the capital and largest city in the Republic of Mali, where he developed an interest in architecture at a young age. After graduating from high school, he received a government scholarship to study in China, first at the Beijing Language and Culture University and subsequently at the Southeast University in Nanjing, where he advanced to a master's degree in architecture.

His first exposure to Japan was through Japanese classmates, and interactions with them impelled him to visit in the summer of 1990. During his stay, he was charmed by the politeness and hospitality of Japanese people and sensed a potential for greater academic freedom than was afforded to him in China at that time. Before completing his master's studies, Sacko moved to Osaka to attend a Japanese-language school for six months and thereafter relocated to Kyoto, where he embarked on the next chapter of his academic career. In Kyoto, Sacko enrolled in a new master program and then continue to a Ph.D. in architecture program at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Engineering.

It was during his master's studies that Sacko developed an interest in sustainable architecture. "The direction of my research shifted towards sustainable spaces," Sacko said during an interview with The Japan Times. "That is, sustainable spaces that take into account people's behavior and their way of thinking."

In Japan, Sacko's philosophy regarding sustainable architecture crystallized. The notion of community ownership — something lacking in typical modern architectural design, according to him — became a central aspect of his understanding of sustainable design. "In modern architecture, which I also study, we think about projects for urban areas without really thinking about their surroundings; this can include the environment, human behavior or culture," he said. "I travel a lot, and sometimes I notice the same building in several different countries, which tells me that the architects weren't considering regional specificity when they decided to build them there. This led me to think about how we can achieve a more sustainable form of architecture that instills a sense of psychological ownership in locals. For me, this element is a key aspect of sustainable architecture."

Sacko's observations in his native country influenced his understanding of sustainable design. He described how in Mali there can be up to 70 people living in the same house, circumstances that have given form to unique ways of sharing space. "In this space, efficiency is impossible," he said, "but when we surveyed 200 families, we found that they had developed an unusual way of cohabitation. Depending on the time of day, a space may be used as a living room, a kitchen or something else entirely. However, despite this situation, the residents don't build physical barriers between each other."

These findings have inspired Sacko and other Mali architects to develop architectural solutions that complement the culture of cohabitation in Mali households, rather than simply import notions of typical living



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arrangements from developed nations. "At first, people might be excited to be in a fashionably designed building, but if they don't feel a sense of psychological ownership, this excitement will quickly fade away if the new building doesn't accommodate their culture and actually improve their living environment," he explained.

Sacko's emphasis on integrated cohabitation and psychological ownership extends to the initiatives he has promoted as president of Kyoto Seika University, a position he assumed in 2018 after nearly two decades of work as a lecturer and professor. In Japan,

there is a tendency among universities to make clear distinctions between Japanese students and international students via separate degree tracks or separate support offices specifically catered to international students. As president of Kyoto Seika University, Sacko has promoted initiatives to remove these distinctions and fully integrate the university so that Japanese and international students feel they have equal ownership of their learning environment.

"For instance, in Japan, universities generally have separate exams for foreign nationals," Sacko said. "So, what we did was open

### Preserving heritage in Africa, Japan

Ousouby Sacko is president of Kyoto Seika University.

Sacko grew up in Bamako, the capital of the Republic of Mali. After graduating from high school, he went to China to study at Beijing Language and Culture University. He subsequently attended the Southeast University in Nanjing, where he majored in architecture.

Sacko moved to Japan in 1991 and earned his Ph.D. in architecture at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Engineering, Department of Architecture. A common theme throughout his work as a researcher, educator and architect is the relationship between architecture and community ownership. He is involved in numerous projects, including the preservation of *machiya* (traditional wooden townhouses) in Kyoto and the preservation and renovation of world cultural heritage sites in Western Africa.

In his free time, Sacko enjoys socializing and meeting new people. He also takes pleasure in reading novels and watching television shows that provide glimpses into different cultures.

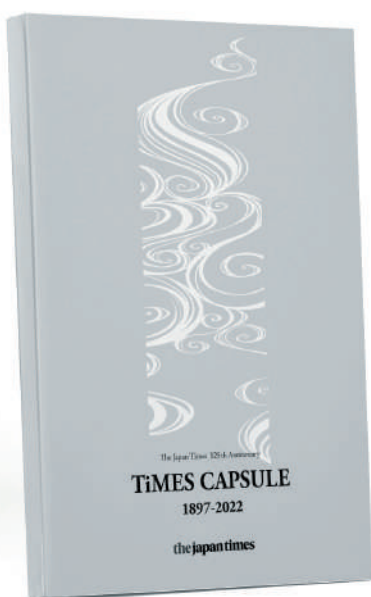
all the exams to foreign nationals. The results were interesting because, for the first time, prospective international students were able to compete with Japanese students on a level playing field, whereas before they were only able to compete among themselves. We found that some foreign nationals surpassed Japanese students in terms of Japanese-language ability and in other fields such as manga or mathematics. Japan had never given international students that chance before."

Sacko will finish his first term as president of Kyoto Seika University this academic year. It is not yet decided whether he will be appointed to a second term, but looking toward the future, he hopes to utilize his experiences in Japan to help improve the educational environments of universities in the developing world.

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## Nihonryori Takamura

Edo-style dining in Akita on the Sea of Japan coast



**ROBBIE SWINNERTON**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Hidden away in the residential backstreets of Akita, Nihonryori Takamura sets itself well apart from the brash dining and drinking establishments in the center of the city. This is intentional: Here you find a very different style of cuisine from the hearty regional specialties on the menus of other local restaurants.

Chef Hiroki Takamura learned his craft in Tokyo at the legendary Takohachi, one of the last remaining high-end restaurants in the capital devoted to *Edo ryōri*, the subtle but sophisticated cuisine that developed in the capital during the days of the shoguns. Since returning to his hometown some 22 years ago, Takamura has kept that tradition alive while keeping abreast of contemporary tastes.

Instead of individual private dining chambers, he serves his meals in *kappō* style, overlooking his open kitchen. The multi-course menu comprises a series of dishes artfully plated and carefully calibrated to the season. One of the "new Edo ryōri" dishes Takamura has developed is *kabura mochi*, turnip that is pureed, set into a cube, then grilled and topped with caviar and gold leaf. Another signature dish features *hina*



*jidori*, Akita's renowned local breed of chicken. Takamura starts the cooking process at the back of the kitchen, then finishes it over a *mizu konro* charcoal grill that he wheels right up to the counter, allowing guests to observe and savor the aromas from close up.

**NORIHISA SATAKE**  
AKITA GOVERNOR



We are very pleased that Nihonryori Takamura has been selected for the "Japanese restaurant list for people from around the world, chosen by Japanese people."

Akita has an abundance of seasonal wild vegetables and fish, livestock products such as the renowned *hina* *jidori* chicken breed raised in a rich natural environment, and a long history of fermented foods and sake produced by famous breweries.

We hope that through chef Hiroki Takamura, the last inheritor of Edo cuisine, such marvelous sake and food can be enjoyed by people from all over the world.



日本料理  
たかむら

**Address**  
Nihonryori Takamura  
1-7-31 Omachi, Akita, Akita Pref.  
010-0921, Japan  
<https://www.akita-takamura.jp/>

From the delicate ceramics and lacquerware and premium local sake pairings to the visceral pleasure of watching your meal being prepared in front of you, it is this blend of refinement and personal attention that makes Takamura's eight-seat counter the most coveted reservation in the city.

**MOTOMU HOZUMI**  
AKITA MAYOR



We are very happy that Nihonryori Takamura in the city of Akita has been included in the "Japanese restaurant list for people from around the world, chosen by Japanese people." This is great news for our food and beverage industry, which is facing a difficult situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The city of Akita, blessed with rich nature, is a treasure trove of delicious food throughout the four seasons. We hope people from all over the world will take this opportunity to visit Akita and enjoy the cuisine of chef Hiroki Takamura, who is called the last inheritor of Edo cuisine.

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