

Takara House

Microcosm of the traditional way of life

Built to survive extreme weather

Old houses in the Keramas were built with one core purpose: to remain standing through the worst typhoons. The combination of techniques used to maximize their wind resistance can be observed at the Takara House. First, houses were shielded by a high wall of coral limestone several feet thick. Here, the coral blocks of the wall have been carved to fit together perfectly, a far more expensive technique than the more common style of simply heaping up rough-hewn lumps of coral. (These walls were sometimes supplemented with a row of garcinia trees to act as a natural windbreak.) Second, the housing plots were dug to a few feet below ground level with the houses built at this lower level to keep out of the path of the wind. Third, the roof was of massive and heavy construction, pressing the house into the ground. The roof of the Takara House is made of four layers: bamboo laths, then earth, then heavy red tiles, all topped off with a generous slathering of limestone plaster to keep everything in place. All four sides are of the same size which, together with the low-angled roof, results in a far more streamlined shape than the hip-and-gable roofs (two large sloping roofs front and back and smaller sections at the sides) seen elsewhere in Japan.

Sun- and rain-proof

Squatting down and taking a peek under the *engawa* (veranda) just to the left of the front door, one can actually see straight through to the back of the house. This hollow space was designed to keep air circulating so that the house would dry out after typhoons and squalls. (The sandy ground also helps absorb large quantities of rainwater.) The eaves of the house are deep, to keep out the rain and the sun. They are supported by thin pillars of plum pine (*podocarpus*), a very hard wood. In places, the columns of the Takara House have been patched to avoid having to replace the whole pillar with what was a very precious resource.

Southern exposure and Buddhist altars

The Takara House was built facing south to get exposure to warm summer breezes. The massive standalone wall at the entrance, or *himpun*, plays a dual role: protecting the family's privacy while also warding off evil spirits. Men would typically enter the house around the right side of the *himpun* and go to the official front of the house, while women and servants would enter via the left, leading to the back.

To understand how the rooms inside the Takara House are arranged, imagine the house as containing a human figure on its side with knees pulled up to the chest. The head is at the

entrance of the house, the belly in the middle, and the buttocks at the back. The rooms follow this hierarchy. Important visitors enter by the main door and are entertained in one of the front rooms. The Buddhist altar sits in the belly, right at the house's core. Meanwhile, the places where any sort of unclean activity takes place—the kitchen, latrines, and pigsties—are situated at the back of the house, coinciding with the backside and feet of our imaginary figure.

In the Takara House, plum pine is used for the Buddhist altar. The importance of the Buddhist altar in houses in the Keramas cannot be overstated. On a purely practical level, it plays a key structural role in supporting the entire house. It is also the metaphorical heart of the house, where the souls of deceased family members are enshrined.

As you explore the Keramas, it is worth taking a second look (without going in or taking photographs, of course) whenever you come across what seems to be an empty plot of land enclosed by tumbledown coral walls. More often than not there will be a small shed-like structure in the middle. This modest-looking structure contains the Buddhist altar from the house that previously stood on the site and is scrupulously maintained by the surviving descendants.

Keeping the fire god happy

By law, the old houses in the Keramas had to follow the same floor layout. It is likely that the *ichibanza* (the first room past the entrance to the house) was where the parents received guests and spent their time; the *nibanza* (No. 2 room) was for the women and children; and the *sanbanza* (No. 3 room) was for the grandparents. The space at the back left of the house was known as the *uraza* (backroom) and was used as a storeroom. It is no coincidence that older people lived near the sunken hearth. Being made of banana fiber, traditional Okinawan clothing was not as warm as cotton or wool, so older people needed a source of heat in the cooler months. Stones known as “god stones” were placed in the corner of the hearth. Since fire is both warm (good) and destructive (bad), it makes sense to stay on the right side of the fire god (*Hinukan* in Okinawan) and the stones are a kind of placatory offering. In the kitchen, the ideogram for water is scratched into the stone blocks of the cooking area to “prevent” fire. Even today, many families in Okinawa put out a glass of water for *Hinukan* in the kitchen, because he is seen as protecting the family not just from fire, but from disasters of all sorts while also keeping them in good health.

Circle of life

Immediately behind the Takara House is a row of outbuildings. The two stone enclosures to the left are pigsties, but they also have a secondary function. A stone canal sticking out of the

front wall of each sty at just the right height to squat over identifies these as outdoor latrines. The house's human occupants excreted directly into the pigsties; their feces were eaten by the pigs; and the pigs were then eaten by the human occupants. (The pigs also ate sago palm and other feed.)

SUGGESTED PHOTO(S)

1. External view of house (Hero image)
2. Collage showing: Wall; Roof; View under house; Deep Eaves; Pillars
3. Drawing of sleeping figures superimposed on house layout
4. Buddhist altar
5. Irori hearth and stones
6. Kitchen and "Mizu" carving
7. Pig sty and toilet