

Ogimachi Historic District

The historic village of Ogimachi occupies a flat, crescent-shaped terrace on the east bank of the Sho River, which flows north toward the Sea of Japan through a long, narrow valley surrounded by mountains. The largest settlement in the Shirakawa-go area, the village is home to more than 100 families, many of whom live in traditional thatched farmhouses built in the gassho or “praying hands” style. The word refers to how the shape of the steeply slanted triangular roofs resembles two hands pressed together in prayer.

This type of house is distinctive to the Sho river valley and was developed during the mid-Edo period (1603–1867) in response to the area’s environment, climate, and industries. The slant of the roof prevents the heavy snowfall that covers Shirakawa-go every winter from accumulating and damaging the house. The walls on the gable ends have large windows to let sunlight and air into the multi-level attic, which was traditionally used mainly for raising silk worms.

The historical value of the gassho-style buildings began to be recognized in the 1970s, when local residents concerned about industrialization and hydroelectric dam construction along the Sho River initiated efforts to preserve the houses for posterity. Ogimachi was designated a Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings in 1976, and a World Heritage Site in 1995, when its townscape and traditional construction practices were added to the UNESCO catalogue as part of the “Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama – Traditional Houses in the Gassho Style” designation.