

***Uchigura*: Masuda's Hidden Storehouses**

Tucked away in the long, narrow houses of Masuda's Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings are relics of the town's once-booming merchant economy. These interior "storehouses," called *uchigura*, are unusual. It is common for merchant houses in many areas of Japan to include one or more storehouses separate from the storefront and residence, but in the case of certain merchant residences in Masuda, the storehouse has been incorporated directly into the living space. The interior storehouse is connected to the main house via an exterior roof (*saya*), creating a large covered indoor area. Rather than being used for storage, the *uchigura* function as everyday living spaces, and they are often lavishly decorated. In modern terms, the *uchigura* can be thought of as an attached garage that has been converted into a den or home office.

The Development of Masuda's Characteristic Architecture

As Masuda's economy flourished during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its wealthy merchant families began to expand their estates. However, shop taxes during the Edo period (1603–1867) were levied based on the width of the storefront, so the shops in Masuda were built in tight rows. This left only one direction in which to expand: backward, away from the street. As their businesses thrived, merchants lengthened their existing residences, creating rows of long, straight structures.

The use of a gabled roof that runs perpendicular to the entrance, preventing accumulated snow from falling and blocking the storefront, also became a defining architectural feature of the town. A long, earthen-floored hallway (*tōridoma*) connects the space at the front of the home with the interior storehouse in the back and allows for easy movement between the different sections of the storefront and residence. The protection from the elements offered by the roofing structure encouraged residents to treat their *uchigura* as extensions of the living space and furnish them accordingly.

Development of the *Uchigura*

The doors and molding on the interior storehouses were covered with black plaster that was polished to a shine, and some families even added decorative lattices to the outer walls. Many *uchigura* from the mid-1800s onward were built as two-story structures called *zashiki-gura*. The space near the entrance had wooden flooring, while the interior was floored with tatami mats, allowing it to function as living space. The second floor was used to store furniture, family memorabilia, and important documents. Typically,

the floors were plain wooden boards, and the thick ceiling beams of the *uchigura* were left exposed.

The oldest interior storehouse in Masuda dates to 1847, and the newest was completed in 1935. As these structures are not visible from the outside, residents from that era did not necessarily know who did or did not have one. Historians believe that as many as 50 *uchigura* were constructed during the 90-year period of their development, but even now, the total number of *uchigura* that existed in Masuda is still uncertain. Of the several structures that remain, most are open to the public, and some have been incorporated into modern businesses. Due to the compact scale of Masuda's historic district, it is possible to tour many of the *uchigura* in a single afternoon. Each *uchigura* is a unique expression of the family that built it, and it is generally a member of that family who welcomes visitors in and introduces the story behind their own piece of Masuda's history.