

The Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings

Rhine House serves as an information center for the history of the Kitano Ijinkan-gai district and the preservation efforts underway on the many historical buildings there. For more than 200 years during the Edo period (1603–1867), Japan maintained a policy of national seclusion under which trade, travel, and contact with most foreign countries were prohibited. This policy ended in 1858 with the signing of the Ansei Treaties, and in 1868 Kobe became one of several ports opened to foreign trade. However, the completion of the agreed-upon foreign settlement was delayed, and many Western-style residences (*ijinkan*) for foreigners were built in the surrounding neighborhoods of the city. The Yamate area, where the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district was eventually located, was an attractive rural hillside to the north of the foreign settlement with views of the port and the sea. It developed into a unique foreign residential area in the 1880s, and by the mid-twentieth century it contained more than 200 Western- and Japanese-style buildings.

Many of these Western-style buildings have been lost over the years due to damage from World War II, postwar development, and age, but over 30 such buildings constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain standing today. Most of these are former residences for foreign consuls or trading company officials. In December 1979, the city of Kobe declared the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district a Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings, in accordance with the Kobe City Urban Landscape Ordinance. This regulation is designed to preserve culturally significant buildings as groups rather than individually, including streetscape aspects such as gates and walls and environmental features such as gardens, hedges, and trees.

The Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori Preservation District contains 34 Western-style buildings and seven Japanese-style buildings designated for protection, and preservation activities are ongoing. The district extends some 750 meters from east to west and 400 meters from north to south.

Although most of the Western-style houses were severely damaged in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of January 1995, all have been restored and reopened to the public. These successful preservation efforts are the result of close mutual cooperation between the Kobe municipal government and local residents, businesspeople, and architectural

historians.