


# DENKEN SYSTEM IN JAPAN: IMPORTANT DISTRICT FOR PRESERVATION OF A GROUP OF TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS

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## ABSTRACT

 In term of architectural and town conservation, Japan unlike other developed nation has developed its own specific system. “Denken system” or “Preserved district system” is directly translated as “Important District for Preservation of a Group of Traditional Buildings”. In this respect law was first enacted by the Agency for cultural affair in 1975, with an aim to conserve groups of traditional buildings and not only any specific single buildings. From then until 2010, 86 areas in the whole country have been announced as the “preserved districts”. The process for designation of a preserved district starts with a fundamental study, a feasibility study, and study for a preservation plan, by the local government body, in collaboration with board of education, local people and academic experts. At this level, selected areas will be announced as a “District for Preservation of a Group of Traditional Buildings”. After the approval by the minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology, it will be announced as an “Important district for Preservation of a Group of Traditional Buildings” or preserved district. Thus local government and people in the selected area can receive the financial support from the central government; such as a support for a restoration project, a support for the acquisition of buildings, a support for fire prevention, a support for the installation of an information board, and tax reduction.

**Keywords:** *Japan / Denken System / Preserved District / Group of traditional buildings*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that Japan is highly recognized as a country with a remarkable cultural strength as clearly evidenced by its ability to preserve old traditions and to hand them down to the younger generations in a continued manner. This is clearly reflected through concrete evidence ranging from the traditional costumes worn during annual festivals to the preservation of traditional way of life. The preservation of traditional buildings could also be considered as the reflection of such spiritual attachment to perpetuate its social and cultural identity.

In Japan, the law on the preservation of traditional buildings was enacted in 1897. It was primarily applicable to a single individual building such as a palace, a temple and a shrine. At that time, this effort is in the purview of the Department of Temple and Shrine, under the Ministry of the Interior. It was gradually developed to involve the registration of constructions considered to be National Cultural Heritage. The distinctive characteristic of the preservation of traditional buildings, in Japan, is that it takes into consideration the value of both tangible factor, including building's features, and intangible factor, including building techniques for building restoration.

What is even more remarkable is the importance given to the conservation of groups of historic buildings in harmony with the overall architectural landscape in a given area along with the prevailing environment with its undeniable impacts. The preservation of buildings came into effect after the declaration of "Preserved District" act in 1975 by virtue of the law on Important District for Preservation of a Group of Traditional Buildings.

In Thailand, the preservation of a group of traditional buildings, in a given district, can be seen over the past years such as the project for the preservation of the whole Waterfront Market and the water-based community in Amphawa district, or the project for the preservation of a group of historical buildings in the Rattanakosin district. However, with the contextual difference from the preservation of a single individual building, the structural guideline for the preservation system of group of traditional building would be naturally different. A study on the law on Important District for Preservation of a Group of Traditional Buildings, or Denken system, should be more beneficial for the development of a guideline for a preservation system of a group of traditional buildings in Thailand.

This paper aims; (1) to clarify the difference between "District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings" "and Important District for Preservation of Group of traditional buildings", and (2) to explain the concept and structure of "Denken system"

## 2. BACKGROUND OF "DENKEN SYSTEM"

According to a publication in English by the Agency for cultural affairs, Denken means "Preserved District". However in Japanese, Denken implies two things: Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku and Juuyou-Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku. Therefore the literal translation are as follows:

Dentou-teki = Traditional

Kenzoubutsu-gun = Group of buildings

Hozon = Preservation

Chiku = District

Juuyou = Important

Based on the above meanings we can propose the translation of the two groups of words as follows:

Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku = District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings  
and  
Juuyou-Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku = Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings.

“Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku” or “District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” refers to an area under sub-article (1) and sub-article (2) of article (143) of the law for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Its provision covers the designation of an area under a specific plan established by local government such as village, sub-district, or municipality, for the preservation of a group of traditional buildings considered to have cultural and historical values. This includes components other than buildings, such as the environment which is an integral part in the preservation of the historical landscape in a given district. This is referred to for short as “DenkenChiku” or Denken-district.

On the other hand, “Juuyou-Dentou-teki-Kenzoubutsu-gun-Hozon-Chiku” or “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” is a “District for the preservation of a group of traditional buildings” approved and designated by the Ministry of Education and Science, under article (144) of the law for the preservation of Cultural Heritage, with the recognition of its specially high value. This is known for short as “JuuDenken” or “Denken” or “JuuDenkenChiku” or Important Denken-District.

“District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” came into existence as a result of the awareness by the people of the loss of the traditional buildings which, in turn, affected negatively the overall landscape or townscape of a rural villages and historical towns, resulting from radical land development after the WW II.

However, during the 1960s, the movement by local people concerning the value of traditional buildings had pushed local government to issue specific regulations for the preservation of landscape and townscape of their villages and towns. The concrete example of this pressure is the action taken by the Mayor of Nichinan-city to define and thus create a “District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” intended to restore the townscape and Obi-castle in Obi-district Nichinan-city Miyazaki Prefecture in the early 1970s. This movement was even strengthened by the amended law for the preservation of cultural heritage in 1975, which aimed to preserve village and townscape; thus applicable to Castle towns, Post towns, City-gate town and Port town. As a result, Obi-district was named the “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” on May 18, 1977.

The system for designation of the “District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” marked a shift in the idea of preservation which used to concern only an individual building. This introduced an overall approach, emphasizing the residents of traditional buildings, who also participate in the process of the preservation. In addition, the whole process requires cooperation between local residents and the local government to designate an “Important District for the Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings”.

### **3. HOW TO APPLY FOR DENKEN DESIGNATION**

There are two bodies involved in this application process. At a local government level, Boards of Education in a town, a district or a sub district are respectively responsible for the designation of the “District for the Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings”. This will be conducted, in parallel, at the central government level, by the Provincial Board of Education and the Agency for cultural affairs, who in the final stage will announce the result of “Important District for the Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” designation.

*On the local government level, the task undertaken is as follows:*

**1) Conducting a study in order to establish measures for preservation**

A survey and a historical study have to be conducted by a study committee with a representative from the local government, representatives of the local people, and experts, for clarifying the history background and the present state of traditional buildings, covering all elements of a village, a town and also a townscape. The result from this study will be referred to in order to assess its cultural values. A survey is also carried out of local people, on problem management concerning any future projects for community revitalization, using basic data from above survey. Finally, a committee will make a first stage conclusion for the overall preservation measures.

**2) Issue a guideline for preservation**

This is a process to issue a guideline and any possible implementation plan in the “District for the Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings”. It includes; Documentation of the preservation master plan, Decision for the area to be designated as the preserved district, Examination for the building regulation and any possibility of permission for building adapting, Financial assistance, and Appointment with other related committees.

**3) Appointment of the committee for preservation guideline speculation**

The process of Appointment the committee for preservation guideline speculation is provided in the preservation law. The committee has a role in speculation and making decisions on the detail of preservation guidelines and area to be designated as the preserved district. This will serve as a reference for the process of designation of “Important District for the Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings. Moreover, the committee also has a role in examining any feasibility problems and significant issues, concerning the preservation action to be taken in the preserved district. And, it will occasionally hold joint meetings with the board of Education.

**4) Framing the Specific area as a preserved district**

This process of framing the specific area as preserved district, for specific plan, is conducted separately relying on its administered zone. This assignment will be authorized by the local government agency, if to-be-preserved district is located within the purview of the municipality. On the other hand, this assignment will be authorized by the board of education, if it is located outside the municipality.

**5) Formulating a preservation plan**

The process includes determining outlines of the basic preservation plan, specifying the buildings to be preserved, framing an environmental and preservation management plan (for example, the installation of the information board, the measurement for any possible disasters, the construction of public buildings, etc.), Determining the levels of financial support allocated to the owners of preserved buildings. Basically, a preservation plan must contain a building permission standard, building restoration standard, and townscape adaptation standard. The whole process will be undertaken by the Board of Education, who will make public announcement in this regard.

**6) Issue of a decree for exemption from the building standard law of Japan**

In so doing, the local government has to forward an exemption request to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism for special dispensation for traditional buildings to be preserved, which are not in conformity with the building standard law of Japan, concerning building structure law, fire prevention law, lighting and ventilation law, building setback law and building height law, etc.

### **7) Submission for consideration**

The final step in the consideration process to grant the status of “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” is the submission of reports and relevant documents by the local government to the minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology for consideration. In case the proposed submission is not supported by the majority of the local residents or disapproved by a local government agency, the local government may decide not to proceed with the submission as was the case with Tomonoura in Hiroshima.

*On the central government level, the task undertaken is as follows:*

#### **1) Financial support**

The central government will allocate financial support for a study to establish preservation measures before the designation process. It also allocates financial support for necessary work in line with the preservation plan after the declaration of a given area as the “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings”.

#### **2) Consultation**

The central government can provide advice in every step of the process undertaken by the local government. The director of the Agency for cultural affairs shall receive an executive report, or additional report relating to any changes to the amendments of preservation regulations, area of preserved district, and a preservation plan.

#### **3) Consideration for an official designation of a preserved district**

The agency for cultural affairs shall appoint the committee to deliberate on areas that should be declared an “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” after studying reports and making its own detailed enquiries. Subsequently, the central government shall officially announce the result of the deliberation and inform the relevant local government agencies of the announcement.

## **4. BUDGETARY ALLOCATION OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

The allocation of financial support for preservation projects in the “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” includes:

- The restoration of building, restoration of townscape, and provision of facilities for fire prevention, directly authorized by the local government.
- The restoration of building, restoration of townscape, and provision of facilities for fire prevention, by the occupants of the buildings who receive financial support from the local government
- The acquisition of buildings in the preserved district and the installation of information boards by the local government
- Tax exemption program for the occupants of the buildings, offered by the central government or the local government.

*Details of Budgetary allocation of financial support are as follows:*

**1) Financial support for restoration projects**

This support focuses on two parts: the restoration of building and the restoration of townscape. The restoration of building aims to preserve the original state of the building with the first priority restoration given to the worst damaged building, and seismic reinforcement of the building. The restoration of townscape focuses on the adjustment or reconstruction of external appearance of non preserved building or new building in the surrounding area, in order to preserve the harmony of the whole preserved district.

**2) Financial support for acquisition of buildings**

In case of urgent need to preserve a piece of land or buildings in the preserved district, the local government agency can, within the framework of a preservation plan, proceed to acquire a building and turn it into a public facility, a PR or a conference venue etc.

**3) Financial support for fire prevention**

The installation of fire prevention equipment and construction of fire station in the preserved district are highly required, for prevention of high risk fire disaster, due to the fundamental features of buildings in the preserved district, which are made of wood. Measures taken in this regard must be taken together with fight against termites, repair work and the strengthening of the structure of the stone walls.

**4) Financial support for the installation of information board**

The local government is responsible for preparing information boards and information on them and signs providing knowledge in the preserved district. This includes information of the location and exact area of a preserved district, and knowledge about the preserved buildings.

**5) Financial support to help relieve the burden of the occupants of the buildings**

This allocation can compensate for tax reduction for the occupants of the building. This is applicable to (1) the tax collected by the central government in which case the occupants are exempted from land tax if they reside in the preserved district, and they are required to pay only three tenths of inheritance taxes based on the assessment value of the land and building, and (2) taxes collected by the local government in which case they shall be exempted from fixed asset tax, as far as exemption or reduction in fixed asset tax for a plot of land with buildings other than those preserved ones are concerned.

## **5. CLASSIFICATION OF THE “IMPORTANT DISTRICT FOR THE PRESERVATION OF A GROUP OF TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS”**

In 1975 the Ministry of Education in its declaration established standards in the selection of a district for preservation of a group of traditional buildings as follows:

The so-called important district for preservation of a group of traditional buildings fall into the following types:

Type I: District of which the overall construction techniques are excellent

Type II: District which has a land layout and original conditions in perfect conditions

Type III: District with the environment clearly typical of the locality

The present list of “Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings contains 86 such districts as follows:

Type I: 23 districts

Type II: 28 districts

Type III: 35 districts

## **6. CONCLUSION**

1) Unlike “the districts for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings”, “the important districts for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings” are recognized as such by the central government. All local governments are allowed to set up their board consisting of key people as such the local board of education to conduct a study, and establish a preserved district. In case the study was not completed in time and no report and application form were processed, the said district cannot be declared as a preserved district; and thus cannot receive any financial support from the central government.

2) The law on the important district for preservation of a group of traditional buildings has developed from the law on the preservation of cultural heritage under the responsibility of the Ministry of education, culture, sports, science and technology and not governed by the law on town planning under the responsibility of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. However, in order to reach the preservation objective; certain measures are necessary in terms of collaboration as evidenced by special dispensation as far as the building standard supervised by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is concerned.

3) The law on the important district for preservation a group of traditional buildings takes into consideration the overall preservation measures and the enhancement of the potential preservation, rather than the preservation of a single building. Thus this enables the preservation effort to cover a group of buildings by delineating a preserved district which in this case, contains not only traditional buildings but also other constructions. This law allows for necessary internal changes, which will inevitably affect the overall picture of the district.

4) This Denken system is supposed to serve as an incentive for preservation effort by granting a budgetary allocation to support preservation in various forms, for both the local government and every occupant of the buildings in the said district usually in the form of budgetary allocation and tax relief.

5) Since the enforcement of the law on the preserved district in 1975 there are altogether 86 such districts of which 24 are under local governments in 38 provinces.





Figure 1: Ine-ura; a fishery port town in Kyoto, registered as Denken District in 2005



Figure 2: Izushi; a castle town in Hyogo, registered as Denken District in 2007





Figure 3: Obama; a merchant town in Fukui, registered as Denken District in 2008



Figure 4: Tomono-ura; a port town in Hiroshima, pending the conflict settlement

No.	Designated date	Prefecture	District name	Type	standard	Area (Ha)
1	Sep04,1976	Akita	Semboku	Samurai residence	2	6.9
2	Sep04,1976	Nagano	Nakiso	Post town	3	1245.4
3	Sep04,1976	Gifu	Shirakawa	Village	3	45.6
4	Sep04,1976	Kyoto	Sanneizaka	Temple-Shrine town	3	8.2
5	Sep04,1976	Kyoto	Gion-Shinbashi	Tea-houses	1	1.4
6	Sep04,1976	Yamaguchi	Horiuchi	Samurai residence	2	77.4
7	Sep04,1976	Yamaguchi	Hiyako	Samurai residence	2	4
8	May18,1977	Okayama	Fukiya	Industrial town	3	6.4
9	May18,1977	Miyazaki	Nibi	Samurai residence	2	19.8
10	May31,1978	Aomori	Nakacho	Samurai residence	2	10.6
11	May31,1978	Nagano	Narai	Post town	3	17.6
12	Feb03,1979	Gifu	Sanmachi	Merchant town	1	4.4
13	May21,1979	Kyoto	Saga-torimoto	Temple-Shrine town	3	2.6
14	May21,1979	Okayama	Kurashiki-kawahan	Merchant town	1	15
15	Apr10,1980	Hyogo	Kitanocho	Port town	1	9.3
16	Apr18,1981	Fukushima	Ouuchi-juku	Post town	3	11.3
17	Nov30,1981	Kagoshima	Chiran	Samurai residence	2	18.6
18	Apr17,1982	Ehime	Yakaichi-gokoku	Industrial town	3	3.5

19	Dec16,1982	Hiroshima	Takehara	Industrial town	1	5
20	Dec16,1984	Mie	Seki-juku	Post town	3	25
21	Dec16,1984	Yamaguchi	Furuichi-kanaya	Merchant town	1	1.7
22	Apr13,1985	Kagawa	Kasashima	Port town	1	13.1
23	Dec08,1986	Miyazaki	Mimitsu	Port town	2	7.2
24	Apr28,1987	Nagano	Unno-juku	Post town	1	13.2
25	Apr28,1987	Okinawa	Tonaki-jima	Village	3	38.3
26	Dec05,1987	Shimane	Oumori-ginzan	Industrial town	3	32.8
27	Dec16,1988	Kyoto	Kamigamo	Temple-Shrine town	3	2.7
28	Dec16,1988	Tokushima	Wakimachi	Merchant town	1	5.3
29	Apr21,1989	Hokkaido	Motomachi-Suehirocho	Port town	3	14.5
30	Apr30,1991	Niigata	Shukunegi	Port town	3	28.5
31	Apr30,1991	Shiga	Omihachiman	Merchant town	1	13.1
32	Apr30,1991	Saga	Arita-uchiyama	Industrial town	3	15.9
33	Apr30,1991	Nagasaki	Higashi-yamate	Port town	2	7.5
34	Apr30,1991	Nagasaki	Minami-yamate	Port town	2	12.7
35	Jul14,1993	Yamanashi	Akasawa	Post town	3	25.6
36	Dec08,1993	Kyoto	Miyama-cho	Village	3	127.5
37	Dec08,1993	Nara	Imai-cho	Temple-Shrine town	1	17.4
38	Dec21,1994	Toyama	Ainokura	Village	3	18
39	Dec21,1994	Toyama	Suganuma	Village	3	4.4
40	Dec26,1995	Kagoshima	Izumi-fumoto	Samurai residence	2	43.8

41	Jul04,1996	Hiroshima	Mitarai	Port town	2	6.9
42	Jul09,1996	Fukui	Kumagawa-juku	Post town	3	10.8
43	Dec10,1996	Chiba	Sawara	Merchant town	3	7.1
44	Dec10,1996	Fukuoka	Chikugo-shoshii	Merchant town	3	20.7
45	Oct31,1997	Shiga	Sakamoto	Temple-Shrine town	3	28.7
46	Oct31,1997	Osaka	Tondabayashi	Temple-Shrine town	1	11.2
47	Oct31,1997	Kochi	Kiragawa-cho	Merchant town	1	18.3
48	Apr17,1998	Gifu	Iwamura-cho	Merchant town	3	14.6
49	Apr17,1998	Fukuoka	Akizuki	Samurai residence	2	58.6
50	Dec25,1998	Shiga	Gokasho-kondo	Village	3	32.2
51	Dec25,1998	Tottori	Utsubuki-tamagawa	Merchant town	1	4.7
52	Dec25,1998	Miyazaki	Shiiba-son	Village	3	39.9
53	May13,1999	Gifu	Mino-cho	Merchant town	1	9.3
54	May25,1999	Saitama	Kawagoe	Merchant town	1	7.8
55	May25,2000	Okinawa	Tonakijima	Village	3	21.4
56	Jul07,2000	Toyama	Yamachosuji	Merchant town	1	5.5
57	Dec04,2000	Nagano	Hakuba-mura	Village	3	59.7
58	Sep19,2001	Iwate	Jonai-suwakoji	Samurai residence	3	34.8
59	Nov14,2001	Ishikawa	Higashiyama-higashi	Tea-houses	1	1.8

60	Nov14,2001	Yamaguchi	Hamasaki	Port town	2	10.3
61	May23,2002	Fukuoka	Yame-fukushima	Merchant town	2	19.8
62	Dec25,2003	Kagoshima	Iriki-fumoto	Samurai residence	2	19.2
63	Jul06,2004	Gifu	Shimoninomachi-Ojinmachi	Merchant town	1	6.6
64	Jul06,2004	Shimane	Yunotsu	Port town	3	33.7
65	Dec10,2004	Hyogo	Sasayama	Samurai residence	2	40.2
66	Dec10,2004	Oita	Mameda-machi	Merchant town	2	10.7
67	Jul22,2005	Aomori	Kuroishi-shi Nakacho	Merchant town	1	3.1
68	Jul22,2005	Nagasaki	Kojirokuji	Samurai residence	2	9.8
69	Jul22,2005	Kyoto	Inemura	Village	3	310.2
70	Dec27,2005	Ishikawa	Kaga-hashidate	Village	2	11
71	Dec27,2005	Kyoto	Yosano-cho kaya	Industrial town	2	12
72	Dec27,2005	Tokushima	Higashiyayamason Ochiai	Village	3	32.3
73	Dec27,2005	Saga	Shiotatsu	Merchant town	2	12.8
74	Jul05,2006	Gunma	Kuni-mura akaiwa	Village	3	63
75	Jul05,2006	Nagano	Kiso-hirasawa	Industrial town	2	12.5
76	Jul05,2006	Nara	Uda-shi Matsuyama	Merchant town	1	17
77	Jul05,2006	Saga	Hamakanaya-machi	Port town	2	2
78	Jul05,2006	Saga	Hachihongi-shuku	Industrial town	1	6.7



79	Dec19,2006	Wakayama	Yuasa	Industrial town	2	6.3
80	Dec04,2007	Hyogo	Izushi	Samurai residence	2	23.1
81	Jun09,2008	Ishikawa	Kazue-machi	Tea-houses	1	0.6
82	Jun09,2008	Nagasaki	Hirado	Port town	2	21.2
83	Jun10,2008	Fukui	Obama-nishigumi	Merchant town	3	19.1
84	Jun30,2009	Fukuoka	Kurigi	Merchant town	2	18.4
85	Jun30,2009	Ishikawa	Wajima-shi kurojima	Port town	2	20.5
86	Dec08,2009	Ehime	Uno-machi uwacho	Merchant town	3	4.9

Figure 5: List of Important District for Preservation of a Group of traditional buildings

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