

# Are the Building Plans Up in Heaven? Japan's DIY Apartment with Over 100 Residents - IGNITION

(This article was previously published in [Huffington Post Japan](#). It has been modified from the original.)

Amateurs ignore the law, designing and constructing a 5-story DIY apartment building that currently houses over 100 happy residents in with the unwritten consent of the local government. The apartment building is in Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture. On the fourth floor is a pond, on the roof a vegetable plot, and throughout the building a total of 70 rooms! Likened to Hong Kong's "Kowloon Walled City" slum, the building is known as the "Sawada Mansion" ("Sawaman" for short).

## A man named Kano Sawada

Sawaman's plot covers roughly 867square meters—but no one knows the true size or height of the building. This is because the plans that always provide the basis for any construction project are nowhere to be found. It's not that they've gone missing; it's that they were never there in the first place.



A bird's-eye view of the Sawada Mansion (Image courtesy of the Sawada Mansion Youth Group)

The total number of rooms is between 65 and 67. "It's always changing, so no one knows," says landlady Hiroe Sawada, laughing. The current number of residents exceeds 100, forming a population that ranges from people living alone to families of seven. The average monthly rent is between 20,000 yen (approx. 170 USD) and 55,000 yen (approx. 424 USD), which sits around 20 to 30% cheaper than the regular market price.

Sawaman was designed by Hiroe's husband, Kano Sawada. Sawada was born in 1927 and, after graduating primary school, devoted himself to sawing lumber (the manufacture and processing of timber) in hopes of following in his grandfather's footsteps. When he was still in primary school, he found himself captivated by a picture of an "apartment" building in a magazine and decided that he would have to have one in the future. In 1971, when he was in his mid-40s, Sawada started construction on the "Sawaman" building—a project that would take more than 10 years to complete.



Kano and Hiroe at the time of starting construction on Sawaman (Provided by the Sawaman youthgroup)

Building construction projects normally require a “confirmed planning application.” Sawaman, however, was built on the spur of the moment without any drawn up plans. Because Sawada didn’t obtain building certification, Sawaman isn’t considered to be within the scope of the law. It’s an illegal structure.

“The plans were inside my husband’s head,” Hiroe laughs, her face beaming a smile. Though his time in the lumber industry may not have given him any experience in carpentry, Kano had expertise in the techniques that go into building a house and thorough knowledge of the strength of wood. Hiroe’s father was also a skilled carpenter; according to Hiroe, Kano begged her father to teach him. Hiroe, too, pitched in wherever help was needed, from sawing, digging wells, and cutting firewood to working on the farm and even operating the diggers herself—all while keeping up with the housework and raising three daughters.

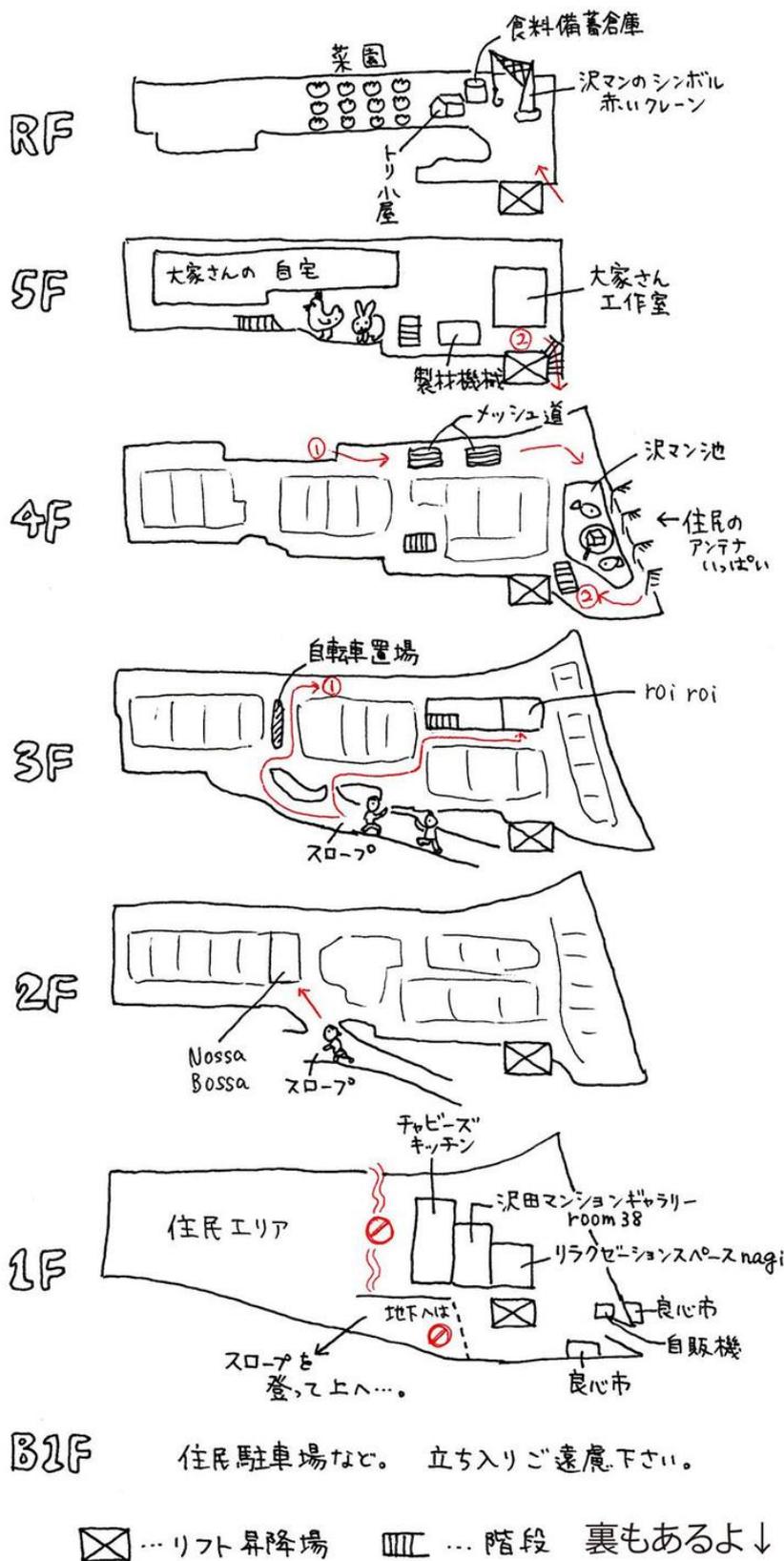


Sawaman had a red fence during the first stages of construction (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

## Twenty different types of flowers

On the first floor of the Sawaman building is “Sawada mansion gallery room 38,” a room that anyone can enter at no charge. The original room number was 38, so Sawada simply appropriated the number for the name of the gallery. The room hosts art displays of paintings, stained glass, and photographs, many of which are by Sawaman residents.

# 案内マップは各店舗に置いてあります。



## 沢マンお店情報



roiroi ハンドメイド雑貨とアンティーク着物のお店  
11:00~18:30(火曜休)

3F



エシカルショップ Nossa Bossa  
10:00~17:00(水・土曜休)  
TEL 080-4031-3306

2F



チャビーズキッチン  
11:00-15:00 18:00-22:00 (L.O.21:00) 水曜休

1F



沢田マンションギャラリーroom38  
13:00~19:00(水曜休) 入場無料

1F



リラクゼーションスペースnagi  
10:00~19:00(不定休)  
TEL 080-5665-5563

1F

A hand-drawn map of Sawaman made by residents (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

With a handwritten "Sawada Mansion model exploration course map" in hand, I set off to explore the inside of the building.



Sawaman's distinctive lifts and slope (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

Two of Sawaman's most prominent features are the white lifts and large slope at the front of the building. There are numerous small staircases at the back of the building, but people often use the large slope for access to the first, second, and third floors.

Wherever you go inside the building, abundant greenery and blooming flowers in every color are always there to greet you. The flowers are just the beginning, though: there are also plum trees bending under the weight of fruit and raspberry bushes with ripe red fruit. I try to take pictures of all the plants I see and end up with 20 photographs.



The flowers of Sawaman

On the fourth floor, there is a large, concrete-ringed pond full of swimming fish. Hiroe informs me that the pond is somewhere between 30 and 33 square meters in size. Although there used to be many birds around the pond, a resident tells me that the “landlady ate them.” A brown tabby cat yawns on the banks of the pond but eventually notices me and comes over to roll around at my feet.



The pond on the fourth floor and the rollingcat

About one-third of the fifth floor consists of carpentry workshops, sawing machines, and wood. The remaining two-thirds are the space where Hiroe’s third-oldest daughter Kazuko and her family live.



The landlord's family home (Left: Courtesy of theSawaman Youth Group), Hiroe (center), and third-oldest daughter Kazuko

The family also has two chickens and two rabbits. As I get closer to the cage, the animals approach in a friendly manner. The eggs the chickens lay are small, the family tells me, but they taste extraordinary.



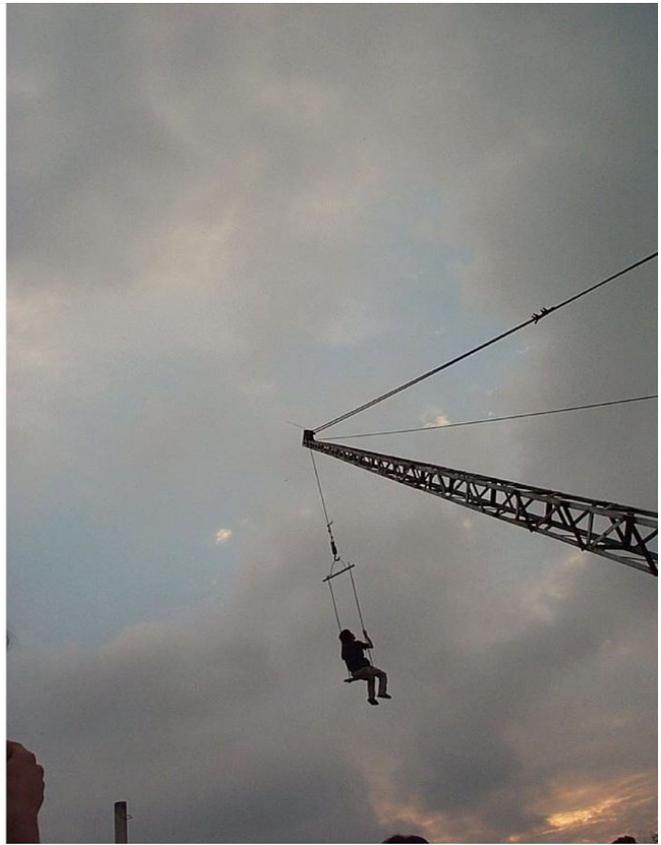
Chickens and rabbits; to the right is an authenticcarpentry workshop (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

I climb some small, white stairs and arrive on the roof, where a vegetable patch soaks up the sunlight and pure white pillars five meters tall stand at evenly spaced intervals. There's also a storehouse with enough food to feed the residents for three days. A bright red crane, probably over 15 meters tall, towers over the surroundings.



The crane towering over the roof

When I ask how they got such a massive crane up on the roof, Kazuko tells me that they didn't: "My father built it," she says. "Filled those drums with cement, see?" The machine is mostly made of iron; for the crane portion, Hiroe cut the angle steel material and Kano welded it. "We kind of designed it as we were building it, so it took a month to finish," Kazuko says.



The crane wows residents, too (Right: Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

Tokyo has seen a rise in the number of “mansion” apartments for “greener living,” places with plants dotting the premises. The greenery that Sawaman overflows with, though, is completely different from that brand of artificial greenery. I have to stop and ask myself: can this place I’m in really be considered an apartment building?



The vegetable patch spreads out over the rooftop

## **Calm and composed even when faced with a fire: “This is a free, village-like society”**

“People who want to do lots of stuff can, and people who want to stay secluded in their rooms can do that, too. We have a free society, like a village,” says Meisai Okamoto, a resident of Sawaman for over 10 years.

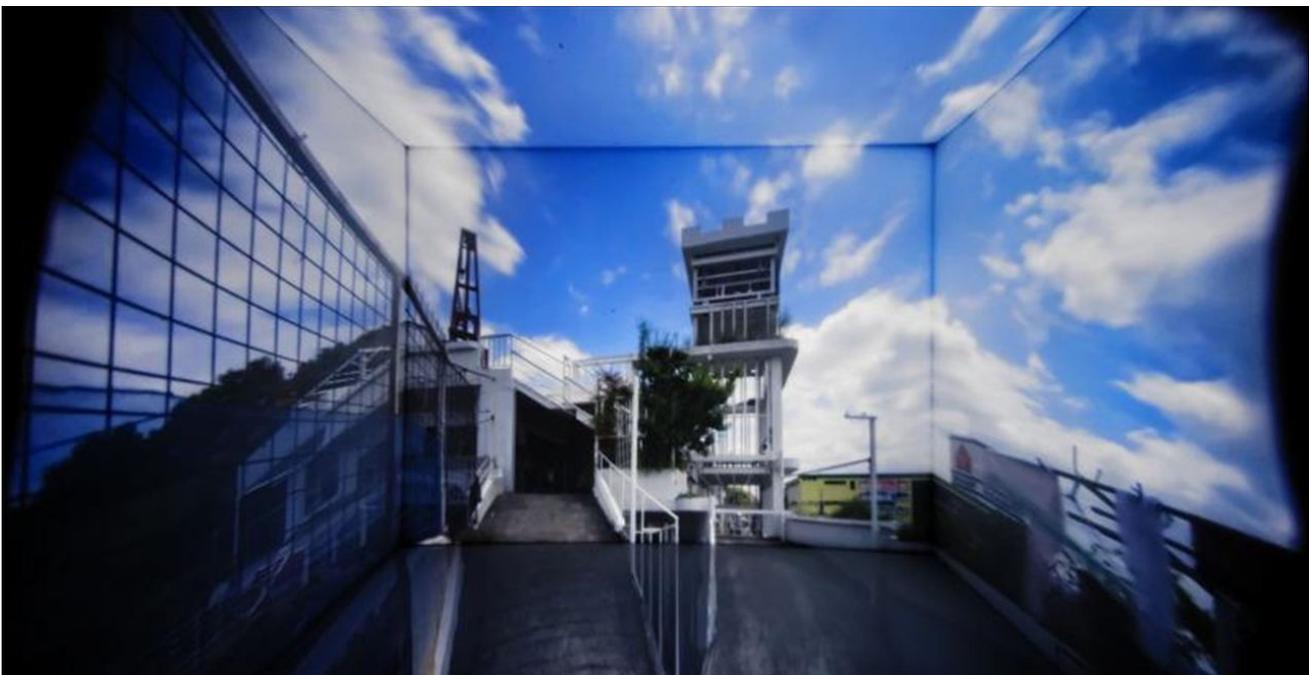
Communication flows through smooth channels at Sawaman, which takes steps to make sure that things and activities are never imposed on residents. For example, people who don’t participate in Hiroe’s annual spring-cleaning effort contribute 500 yen to sit the project out. Those contributions are then used to buy bento lunchboxes for those who take part. “Some people are just too busy with work. The system here takes the pressure off those people,” explains Okamoto.



Meisai Okamoto and his homemade pinhole camera

There have been eight fires in Sawaman's history. In Tokyo's built-up residences, the best possible scenario in the event of a fire is a short-term evacuation and nothing else. But in worse cases, there can be extensive damage. Hiroe just deals with fire calmly, telling displaced people that there are other vacant rooms: "just move into there."

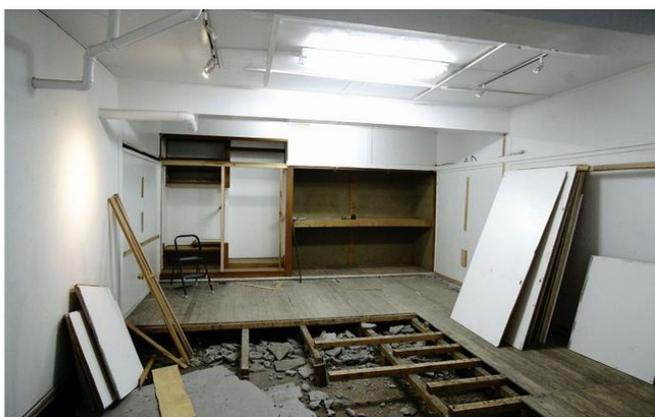
Years ago, there was a fire on the floor above Okamoto's room. The efforts to control the blaze triggered flooding that claimed virtually all of Okamoto's possessions. What he remembers from that time more than anything, though, is the old, essentially bedridden lady who lived next door. Although she wasn't wealthy at all, she offered to give him her rented futon—the futon Okamoto continues to use to this very day. At Sawaman, residents talk when they see each other and help fellow residents when the need arises.



A picture taken with a pinhole camera (Photo courtesy of Meisai Okamoto)

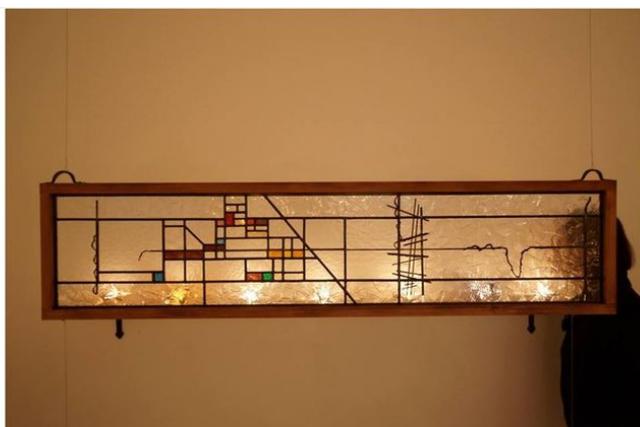
Okamoto's life changed after he moved into Sawaman. This was where he started his photography. He puts wheels on his handmade, lens-less pinhole camera and takes it around town to shoot pictures. The outer wall of the camera is made from cardboard. At first glance, it looks somewhat like a simple bike trailer. Looks can be deceiving, however: Okamoto held his very own exhibition in New York last year.

"I couldn't find a camera that could take the pictures I wanted to take. So I ended up making my own," Okamoto explains. "When you're faced with a problem, don't complain—it's much better to make changes yourself. That's the kind of mindset I learned from the landlady."



Gallery Room 38 and the remodeling project (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

Gallery Room 38, which opened in 2009, was originally Okamoto's room before it was remodeled. Most galleries normally put restrictions on display model weight or display method—but in Room 38, artists are almost completely free to use the space as they see fit. The one rule is that they have to be able to return the room to its original condition afterward. Since its opening, the gallery has honored some rather unusual artist requests: "Cover the floor with 2,000 liters of water," for example, or "Hang a 50-kg piece of stained glass from the ceiling."



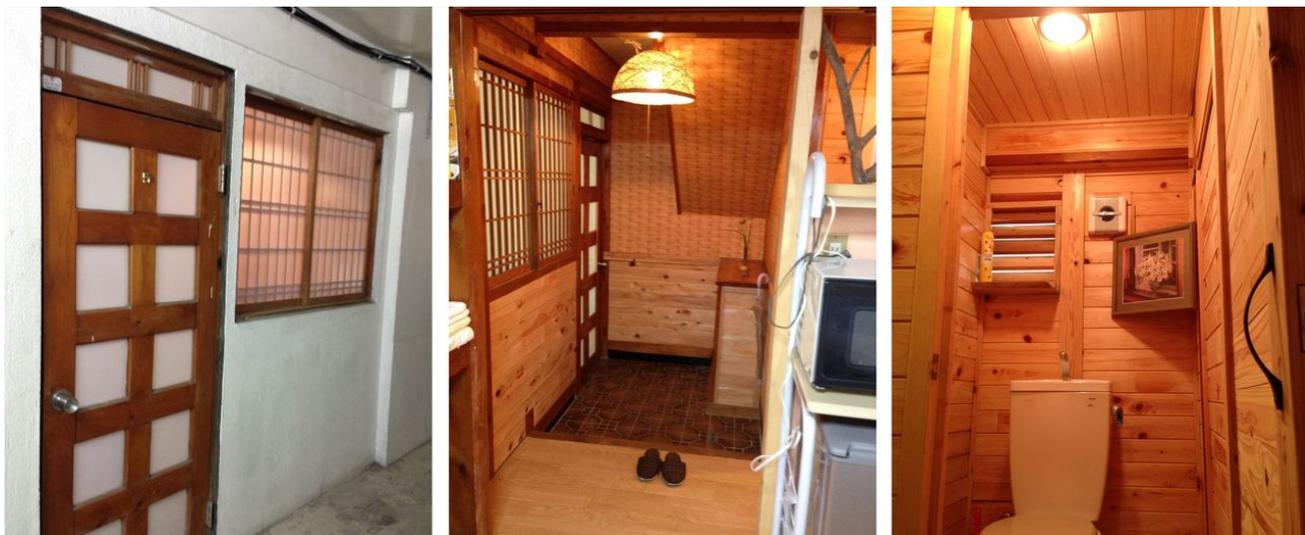
Left: The 2,000-liter white water pond exhibition; Right: The 50-kg stained glass exhibition (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

The fee to exhibit for a two-week period is 42,000 yen (approx. 356 USD), and the exhibition schedule is usually booked year-round. The yearly income from Room 38 is around 1,000,000 yen (approx. 8,475 USD). Half of the goes toward the room rent, while the other half pays for gallery running costs like pamphlet expenses and event announcements.

**I stayed the night in one of Sawaman's 3500-yen (approx. 30 USD)-**

## per night rooms

Sawaman even has rooms where guests can stay for just 3,500 yen (approx. 30 USD) a night. I pounce on the opportunity and decided to make mine a two-night stay.



Left: The exterior of the room I stayed in at Sawaman; Middle: The entrance; Right: The bathroom

I am given a room key by Kazuko and guided to room number 5 on the second floor. On opening the wood-frame door, I see a Western-style, eight-tatami-mat room with a bath, toilet, and mini-kitchen all included. Kazuko took care of most of the decorating, which featured tree branches and felt unique and contemporary. Of the more than 60 rooms in the building, none has the same layout or interior. That was another part of Kano's vision.

The room is stocked with shampoo, conditioner, towels, disposable toothbrushes, and all the everyday essentials. There's even an umbrella in the entrance, ready to use. The room also has a mini gas stove, kettle, fridge, and microwave, and the cooking utensils, including knives and pots, are free to use. People who stay here can do their laundry in the coin-operated washers on the second floor. It's by no means a luxurious room, but it's a comfortable space brimming with a sense of thoughtfulness and consideration.



Left: The living room; Middle: The attached mini kitchen; Right: The unique interior

It's an apartment building like none other—but there are some drawbacks.



(Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

## Leaky roofs and centipede attacks

Ryota Wada, who moved to Sawaman two years ago, can hear the sounds of small legs scurrying over his futon—and it isn't the first or even the second time he's been horrified by such a thing.

"The centipedes can be up to 20 cm long. When I lived on the first floor, there were more than 10 one summer!" Wada recalls.

"When I had kids, I moved up to the second floor and the centipedes stopped appearing," he says. "After they've lived in Sawaman, I guess they just can't live anywhere else," he says without the faintest sign of concern.

I can't even count the number of conversations I've had like this at Sawaman. A leaking roof cut off power to the entire building once. "After returning from a long business trip," one resident told me, "I opened the door and saw that green mold had pretty much taken over the room." If you're a clean freak, these are the sorts of stories that are enough to make you scream.

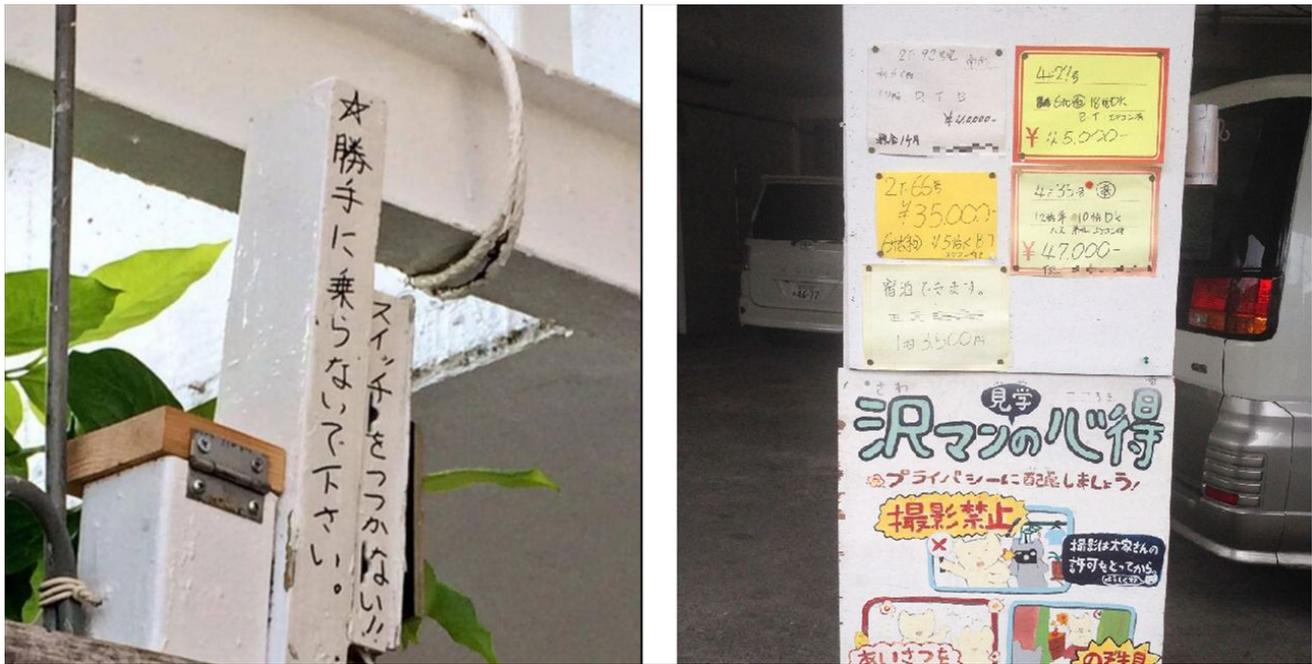
In Japan, earthquakes are a major concern. As a "DIY building," Sawaman hasn't been tested to see whether it meets the government's earthquake resistance standards.

The residents all reply with an unconcerned air. "Sawaman doesn't shake at all," they tell me. On March 14, 2014, a magnitude-6.1 earthquake hit the neighboring prefecture, causing an emergency warning message to be sent simultaneously to all cell phones. Even then, Wada says, "Sawaman didn't shake at all."

Through the creation of its own Facebook page and free tours led by residents, Sawaman has been proactive in gathering fans. The "Sawada Mansion" Facebook page currently has nearly 4,000 likes. On their days off,

Okamoto and other residents take turns conducting tours for visitors, sometimes hosting up to 50 groups a day.

As the popularity of Sawaman has increased, however, so has the number of visitors who don't mind their manners. They ride the lift until it breaks and then selfishly run off, leaving it broken. They take pictures of residents without permission. A magazine even featured Sawaman in a special edition on "abandoned buildings" without the owner's consent. However, the reason why Sawaman is working hard to develop a fan base isn't simply to become famous.



Visitors broke the lift and then ran off and left it out of order

## Attracting fans to prevent demolition

Everyone knows that Sawaman is illegal. Kochi City, which has jurisdiction over the area, hasn't been sitting on its hands, either. Takuo Kitaoka, a member of the city government, revealed that "since construction began, for over 40 years, the government office has been attempting to give corrective guidance through an innumerable number of letters and visits to Sawaman. There's no way we're going to force the residents to leave, though. But if an earthquake knocks the building off its foundations, the people in the community are going to suffer," he says.

At the moment, the city government is being understanding. A few decades back, however, it wasn't unusual for boards to be put up in front of the apartment building reading "forceful demolition."

It was at that point that someone began the movement to enhance Sawaman's profile by creating a homepage and getting it featured on television. The person behind the idea was a man in his early thirties, a mysterious figure known only as "Number 27."



The resident-organized festival was a big hit (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

Okamoto claims that Number 27's idea was that if Sawaman had more fans, they would be able to create a formidable opposition if the city ever decided to demolish the building.

## A residential home for senior citizens

It's easy to focus on the quirky side of Sawaman, but the oddities aren't everything. Hiroe doesn't know the exact ages of her residents, but she does know that around 80% of them are senior citizens. Some don't have any relatives to speak of, and some rely on welfare.

"Sawaman is everyone's hopes and dreams." Hiroe even accepts people who would otherwise have difficulty getting a lease on a property.

One resident says that she heard "staff at the welfare office recommending Sawaman to senior citizens who couldn't get a lease."



All types of people living together (Image courtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

There are also people who've chosen Sawaman as their final homes. There was one old man in his 70s or 80s that everyone affectionately called "Grandpa." He had always lived at Sawaman. Even as his dementia progressed and people suggested that he enter a specialist facility, he obstinately refused, insisting that "Here is best." Hiroe often made him a bento lunchbox and took it up to check on him. When he was nearing the end of his life, the residents took shifts watching over him. Finally, one day, a resident went to check on him and found him dead, looking almost as if he was sleeping.

## **The plans for Sawaman were only ever in my husband's head**



Hiroe responds to interview questions

While cutting the leaves off some garlic from the rooftop garden, Hiroe talks about her husband. It's been 11 years since Kano passed away in 2003.

It's twilight after a clear day. Hiroe and I sit on the veranda, with the brown tabby cat, "Kuro," going back and forth between us. Sometimes she looks up at Hiroe and meows.



Kuro never leaves Hiroe's side

When it was under construction, Sawaman stood alone, surrounded by rice fields. From the roof, you could see the ships at port clearly. As time passed, though, commercial buildings along the road obscured the view of the port. Starbucks, supermarkets, sushi-go-round restaurants, convenience stores: more convenient, you might say.



Sawaman 19 years ago, still surrounded by rice fields (Imagecourtesy of the Sawaman Youth Group)

Hiroe begins speaking about her memories of Kano.

“He was a man of courage. Today’s young people wouldn’t understand,” she says, “but back then he would take on every challenge, even when the officials came knocking.”

Hiroe was born in 1946. There was a 19-year age difference between her and Kano; the two wed when she was just 13. Originally, Hiroe's family lived in a different apartment that Kano built in front of Sawaman. When Hiroe's father fell ill, however, the entire family fell into poverty. Hiroe's mother left her behind and returned to her parents' home. Married life for the deserted Hiroe was a fresh start, but she says that the two had their share of brushes with law.

But Hiroe always worked hard—sometimes as a wife, sometimes as a landlady, and sometimes even as a construction worker. “There was no real chance for an adolescence; I just resigned myself to it. But it never seemed like hard work building the houses. I liked doing it.”



Kano a few days before his death and the pillars standing on the roof

Sawaman is still unfinished. The facility, which has undergone repeated additions over the years, reached its current scale around 1985. What Kano was ultimately aiming for, though, was a 10-story mansion with 100 rooms.

After Sawaman was complete, the plans were drawn up again from the start, and a building certification application was submitted to the city in Hiroe's name. On July 3, 1996, Sawaman received its building confirmation certificate. Still, the plans don't actually match the current Sawaman building; legally, the certification is for a different structure. Kano fell ill just before achieving his ambition of making Sawaman a legal building. Up until his death, Kano kept fretting about the pillars on the roof. The five white pillars were meant to be the foundation for the seventh floor.



The vista of Kochi City from the rooftop of Sawaman

“Since Kano passed away, city officials have only visited Sawaman once,” Hiroe says. “They came to check the building plans.”

“But the plans for Sawaman were only ever in my husband’s head. So I told them to ask my husband in heaven.”

(Associated editor : Takaaki Yorimitsu)