

The inner garden at  
Kyoto Living Craft House  
Mumeisha (Yoshida  
Family Residence)



## The Tiny Inner Gardens of Kyo-machiya

All photos: Courtesy of Inoue Shigeya



The inner garden in the Yoshida Family Residence

**The Kyo-machiya is a type of traditional wooden house that still exists in some parts of Kyoto. Kyo-machiya usually have a *tsuboniwa*, an inner garden that, while small, imbues residents' daily life with extra charm.**

---

**SASAKI TAKASHI**

---

A large number of old merchant houses and other traditional wooden houses can still be found in Kyoto City. These houses (*machiya*) are known as “Kyo-machiya<sup>i</sup>.” A prominent feature of the Kyo-machiya is their so-called “eel’s bed” structure where the front facing the road is narrow but the building expands far back. Moreover, although the layout of each house differs, a tiny garden called a “*tsuboniwa*” is built inside each structure.

For example, there is the Kyoto Living Craft House Mumeisha (Yoshida Family Residence), which was built in 1909 and is designated a national registered tangible cultural property. It was owned by a merchant family dealing in undyed kimono fabric, an establishment known as a “*shirokiji tonya*” (white fabric wholesaler). It is a typical Kyo-machiya structure: a two-story building with a front of about 10 meters and a depth of about 40 meters. It has two *tsuboniwa*, one large and one small.

Yoshida Kojiro, who works to revive Kyo-machiya among other activities, says, “The gardens of the Kyo-machiya were not built simply to look nice. Having a *tsuboniwa* allowed residents to live comfortable lives, and we can see the worldview of Kyotoites.”

The Kyo-machiya, lined up on their long and narrow plots, have only a small space between each house. With buildings packed together in this way, a function of *tsuboniwa* was to create passages for air to flow and ensure light and ventilation.

One of the *tsuboniwa* of the Yoshida Family Residence is a small “inner garden” measuring 4.6 meters x 3.3 meters right behind the store. Further back, beyond the tatami room, lies the “interior garden” that is twice as large as the inner garden. The *tsuboniwa* are skillfully decorated with various rocks and stone lanterns as well as trees and plants, such as lady palms, Japanese maple and wabisuke camellia, allowing the residents—and visitors today—to appreciate the changing seasons. This is an expression of Kyotoites’ time-honored desire to live always with nature even in the middle of the city. Kyo-machiya are referred to as “retreats within the city,” which expresses the air of a thatched hut in a mountain village, even while in the city. Through the *tsuboniwa*, residents or visitors can sense the shifting seasons in the changing greenery and subtle movements of air, and their thoughts may turn to the simple elegance of the mountain village. The garden offers a glimpse of a traditional Japanese worldview of living with nature and the aesthetics of Kyoto life. **7**

<sup>i</sup> A wooden building of no more than three stories built in 1950 or earlier by traditional wooden shaft assembly method.