This English-language text was created by the Japan Tourism Agency.

History of Kobe Kitano Ijinkan-gai

Japan maintained a policy of national seclusion during the Edo period (1603–1867), with strict prohibitions on trade, travel, and contact with most foreign countries. This policy remained in effect for over 200 years, ending in 1858 with the signing of the Ansei Treaties between Japan and five Western powers. In 1868, Kobe became one of several ports to be opened to foreign trade.

Plans at the time called for the establishment on the Kobe coast of a foreign settlement where non-Japanese were expected to live and work. Due to the turmoil at the end of the Edo period, however, the settlement was not completed by the agreed deadline. The government then decided to allow foreigners to live alongside Japanese citizens in the surrounding neighborhoods between the Ikuta and Uji rivers. Many foreigners were drawn to the Yamate area, where Kobe's Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori district was eventually located. It was an appealing rural hillside to the north of the foreign settlement, with a gentle slope that provided a view of the port and the sea. Beginning in the 1880s, the district developed into a unique foreign residential area that became known as Kitano Ijinkan-gai. *Ijin* is a word for "foreigner," *kan* means "house," and *gai* means "district."

By the mid-twentieth century, Kitano Ijinkan-gai had grown to contain more than 200 Western-style and Japanese-style buildings. The district became known as a place where Japanese and foreigners could live together harmoniously. The foreign influence also brought technological advances and lifestyle changes: Kobe's Ijinkan-gai was the first place in Japan to be influenced by meat-based cuisine, Western-style clothing, and golf.

The homes of foreigners were called *ijinkan* ("foreigner houses"). Thanks to the presence of skilled non-Japanese architects such as the German Georg de Lalande and the Englishman A. N. Hansell, the designs of many Western-style houses and other buildings in Kobe were of a very high quality. At the same time, there was great hybridization as Japanese design and construction techniques were combined with Western ones. The carpenters, plasterers, stonemasons, and roofers were usually Japanese, but they developed a progressive "internationalized" skill set. A "Kobe Ijinkan Style" soon emerged, with common features such as verandas, bay windows,

brick chimneys, and painted clapboard or plaster exterior walls. The buildings were often connected to a Japanese-style wing that was more comfortable for Japanese employees.

Many of these Western-style buildings have disappeared due to damage caused by World War II, postwar development, and the ravages of time. But thanks to successful preservation efforts that began around 1960, approximately 30 such buildings constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain standing today. This is in marked contrast to other former treaty ports in Japan such as Yokohama or Nagasaki, where little remains of formerly vibrant foreign settlements. For these and other reasons, the numerous Western-style houses of Kitano Ijinkan-gai are precious physical documents of an important era in Japanese and international history and culture.

Weathercock House

Weathercock House (a.k.a. the Former Thomas Residence) is an iconic Kobe building, and its namesake weathercock is a beloved symbol of the city's Ijinkan-gai district. The elegant and imposing structure was built around 1909 for the successful German trader Gottfried Thomas. The house is made of wood but is unique among Kobe *ijinkan* houses in having exterior walls clad in brick and a half-basement clad in granite. It was designed by the German architect Georg de Lalande (1872–1914), who worked on many important public and private buildings in Japan, China, and Korea during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The interior of Weathercock House shows a sophisticated sensibility that is dignified but also playful. It incorporates traditional German design features such as heavy beams and dark woodwork. Stained glass, brass doorknobs, light fixtures, and cabinet hinges and hardware incorporate decorative elements characteristic of the *Jugendstil* (German Art Nouveau) movement. The house is surrounded by an elaborate wooden fence with a tall trellised gateway bearing the name "Rhenania"—the Latinized name for the Rhineland—in Germanic script, a reference to Thomas's home region of Koblenz, on the Rhine River. The house itself appears raised on a stone base formed by the walls of the half-basement. In addition to brick, some exterior walls are clad in painted wood

with decorative details, as well as half-timbering on plaster. The striking three-story tower at the front corner of the house has a painted iron weathercock at its pinnacle that can be seen from a distance. The complex hipped roof is covered with slate in a diamond pattern.

The dramatic granite porch opens into a vestibule, and then to a high-ceilinged central hall with a large wooden staircase. The spacious living and dining rooms are connected by a wide opening with wooden sliding doors, giving the ground floor a feeling of great openness. One corner of the living room has a more private raised nook with a railing. The dining room features a built-in wooden sideboard with *Jugendstil* ornamental brass hinges. The sideboard, wooden wall paneling, and doorframes are all topped by a crenellated motif intended to evoke Stolzenfels Castle in Koblenz**.** A study with a sunny octagonal bay is tucked next to the entry porch. This allowed the owner to see who was approaching. The floor here is raised as well, and it has a railing with *Jugendstil*-derived painted panels. The ground floor also contains an elegantly appointed drawing room and a spacious veranda.

The second floor was devoted to private family space and is more subdued in decoration. It contains a large main bedroom and a children's room, a guest room, and a breakfast nook, as well as a glassed-in veranda. All of these rooms open onto the second-floor hall, which was originally used as a billiard room and retains the dual hanging light fixtures installed for that purpose. A small observation room only accessible from the attic occupies the top level of the tower.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the Thomas family was in Germany on vacation and was unable to return to Kobe. The house was sold, and in later years it became a laboratory and then a Chinese school. In January 1978, Weathercock House was designated an Important Cultural Property and was purchased by the city of Kobe. Though damaged by the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, it was subsequently restored. Seismic reinforcement work on the house began in 2023.

How a TV Drama Saved Weathercock House

The television drama *Kazamidori* (“Weathercock”), set in Kobe’s Kitano Ijinkan-gai district in the early twentieth century, sparked a revival of interest in the area when it aired in the late 1970s. *Kazamidori* was inspired by the former Thomas Residence, built around 1909 and popularly known as “Weathercock House” because of the unique weathercock atop its tower. The story begins in the Taisho era (1912–1926), and centers on a heroine whose German husband operated a bakery in Kobe. Although neither the actual Thomas Residence nor the Thomas family is depicted in the drama, it vividly captured the atmosphere of life in Kobe’s international district.

The popular show was produced by the national TV network NHK and ran in the morning six days a week from October 1977 until April 1978, with over 150 15-minute episodes. It quickly captured the public’s imagination, prompting people to learn more about Kobe’s *ijinkan* (“foreigner houses”) in general and to visit them in person. This noticeable upsurge in interest and tourism was a major impetus for the city of Kobe’s decision, in 1979, to create the Kitano-cho/Yamamoto-dori Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings, and for the subsequent restoration and opening of historical structures there.

In a surprising twist of fate, Else Karbeau (formerly Thomas), who was then living in Germany but had lived in Weathercock House as a child, heard about *Kazamidori* and the interest in the house and was inspired to help with its preservation. She visited Kobe in 1979, bringing with her many photos and documents of the house in its original condition. These served as invaluable records for the experts overseeing its restoration. Thanks to *Kazamidori*, the weathercock itself soon became a symbol of Kobe’s unique culture and history, appearing on everything from municipal signage to fire hydrants.

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