

Nakamura Brace Co., Ltd.

Staying Close to Both People and Town to Support Old Traditional House Restoration Project by Nakamura Brace, Manufacturer of Orthopedic and Rehabilitation Devices

Townscape transcending time: a morning in Omori-cho

Iwami Ginzan-kaido Road runs through the center of Omori-cho, Oda City, Shimane Prefecture. There are old traditional houses standing side by side on both sides of the road. They have reddish-brown tiled roofs and wooden verandas.

Walking along the road with the morning mist hanging over the mountains, you notice the smell of freshly baked bread coming from somewhere. You also see cafés, miscellaneous goods stores, an opera house, a library, and restaurants from the corner of your eye. Lively voices of children can be heard from a nearby nursery school. A Coca-Cola vending machine is covered in a decorative wooden frame that looks like a chest of drawers made in the Edo period. Saying “Good morning,” you exchange greetings with the people you pass.

In this town area that looks like it came out of a film from the 1920s, many of the old houses you have just passed by are houses restored by [Nakamura Brace Co., Ltd.](#), manufacturer of orthopedic and rehabilitation devices.



A street in Omori-cho in the morning

With the history of the "dream age" in mind

Nakamura Brace is a company that [manufactures and sells prosthetic limbs that replace missing body parts, insoles and corsets for treatment and the alleviation of symptoms](#) both domestically and internationally.



Nakamura Brace's company building



Employees producing medical prosthetics

Omori-cho has a population of 400. There is only one regular bus service per hour that connects to a JR line. Why did Toshiro Nakamura, the company's founder, choose to start a company to supply orthopedic and rehabilitation devices in this town? Looking back 51 years ago, he recalls: "It was because there was nothing left."



Toshiro Nakamura, recalling the time when the company was established

Nakamura explains: “I started to work on the production of orthopedic and rehabilitation devices in response to my sister’s encouragement, and as my desire to learn the latest technology gradually became stronger, I determined to go to the United States by myself. However, I was seriously injured in a traffic accident and had to return to Japan. I found my hometown had become completely deserted; it was like a ghost town. But having survived the accident, I returned here. I thought this was the beginning of a drama. I found a passion for reviving myself and the town coming over me.”

From his father, who was born in the Meiji era, Toshiro used to hear about the “dream age” of Omori-cho, the town of Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine.

Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine has a long history, and in the 16th century, since it was one of the leading silver mines in the country, feudal lords such as Haruhisa Amago, Motonari Mori, and Hideyoshi Toyotomi kept fighting over it. In the Edo period, the silver mine came under the direct control of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and silver was exported in large quantities in overseas trading. At the time, Japan's silver production accounted for one-third of the worldwide production, and the name "Hivami" (meaning “Iwami”) was written clearly on a map of Japan made in Portugal. Iwami was a world-renowned city.



A map of Japan created by the Society of Jesus in Portugal in 1595

Although the silver was almost completely depleted by the end of the Edo period, the mine continued to be operated until the Taisho era, and Omori-cho was once the seat of the prefectural capital office. Toshiro had heard about the traces of such prosperity and the sense of pride in the town's international achievement.

He started his job by renovating the barn of his family home into a studio to produce orthopedic and rehabilitation devices. In the first month after starting the business, he received only one order, which was from one of his relatives. He wasn't even sure if he could survive, but he continued to work feverishly.

The business came to a turning point 10 years after the company's founding, when Nakamura Brace developed silicone insoles. At a time when cork and leather insoles were the mainstream, durable, hygienic silicone insoles with moderate elasticity and odor resistance were revolutionary products. He obtained international patents in nine countries, including Japan, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Once again, world-class products were released from the town of Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine.

As a pioneer of orthopedic and rehabilitation devices, and as a torchbearer for regional reconstruction

Silicone insoles, which could be sold on a commission basis rather than as custom-made products, saw a significant increase in sales, getting the business on track. New products featuring the new silicone material were also developed one after another.

This was when Toshiro embarked on the [Old Traditional House Restoration Project in Omori-cho](#). Rather than consider profit, he simply felt that he was “duty-bound” to embark on this project. Excluding the Nakamura Brace company building, since 1988, the company has renovated several old traditional houses each year, turning these buildings into company housing, stores, restaurants, and a music hall.



An old traditional house restored as Opera House “Omoriza”



An old house restored as the “Yuzuriha” lodging facility

When the owner of a house approaches them saying, “I want to sell this house,” they take it over as a company. In time, someone who has heard about it via word of mouth appears and inquires about moving into the premises. [Bäckerei Konditorei Hidaka](#), a popular shop featuring German bread and sweets, and the Chinese restaurant Doraku now operate in old traditional houses restored by Nakamura Brace, attracting customers even from outside the prefecture. The number of restored old houses has reached 64 as of February 2024.

A new spirit inherited at Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine

Tetsuro Nakamura, Toshiro's second son currently serving as the managing director in charge of the Old Traditional House Restoration Project, kindly gave the author a tour of the [Library That Makes Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine Town More Fun](#).

After taking over the house of Junichi Matsubara, the former president of the Bank of Chosun, and renovating it, Nakamura Brace exchanged ideas with the University of Shimane and made it into this satellite campus. It is equipped with a library, a café, co-working space, and a meeting space, allowing students, local residents, and tourists to interact with each other while talking about books. It is entrusted to students studying regional politics as a facility where they can seriously engage in town development.



Andon Bookshelves, lamp-shaped floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, are lined with books recommended by celebrities.

Tetsuro said that no public subsidies had been used for the renovation of these old houses.

He adds: "At Nakamura Brace, we have proceeded with our restoration project little by little within the boundaries of what is possible. We are a small company after all. Still, we are grateful that with more and more people moving to Omori-cho recently, we have come to receive requests from people who want to live here with their families. We are working on the renovation of one of their houses right now."



Tetsuro Nakamura in the library courtyard

Job seekers who have obtained Japan's national certificate for prosthetists came to gather from all over the country, and now 35 employees from 10 households live in company housing and employee dormitories that have been renovated from old houses. This accounts for about 10% of Omori-cho's population. At one point, the number of children in the kindergarten had dropped to just one, making its survival difficult, but it has since increased to as many as 25.

"To be honest, there were times when I wondered 'Why are we doing this?'" says Noburo Nakamura, Toshiro's eldest son and current president of Nakamura Brace, with a smile.

He continues: "But every time we renovate an old house, we get new people in town, and the population gradually increases. On both sides of the street people take to get to work every morning, a new bakery and a café have opened, making the town more and more lively and putting smiles back on the faces of people passing by. The voices of children really brighten up the town's atmosphere. I'm sure that people at an ordinary company wouldn't be able to experience this feeling of 'reviving a town'."



Current president Noburo Nakamura at World Heritage Iwami Ginzan inn "Yuzuriha"

Since 1991, Nakamura Brace has also been manufacturing and selling [medical art products](#) to replicate missing parts of the human body, such as breasts, ears, and fingers. In an effort to alleviate the painful sense of loss, each product is carefully painted by a craftsman to match the skin tone of the person who will use it. Through such efforts, they are gently lending a helping hand both to people and the town.



Completely custom-made products replicating even the colors of skin and blood vessels

Of course, the word "brace" can mean "to support" but it also means "to take heart," having originated from the word "arm" or "something that firmly connects two or more things." The spirit that Toshiro Nakamura puts into the company has been and will continue to be passed down to the next generation and nurtured over time to make new dreams come true.

After the interview

Nakamura Toshiro laughs as he calls the Old Traditional House Restoration Project in Omori-cho, the town of Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine, a "hobby." I hope that the CEOs of startups currently setting off on their journey into the world are just as fun-loving hobbyists as he is.

[Mecenat writer: Yoshiaki Seto](#)

Nakamura Brace Co., Ltd.

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