



The wooden town hall of Shirataka, Yamagata Prefecture, built using local lumber. The municipality's commerce, industry and tourism section and the agriculture and forestry section are seen on the first floor, while the board of education is seen on the second floor.

Town hall turns to timber in bid to save forestry

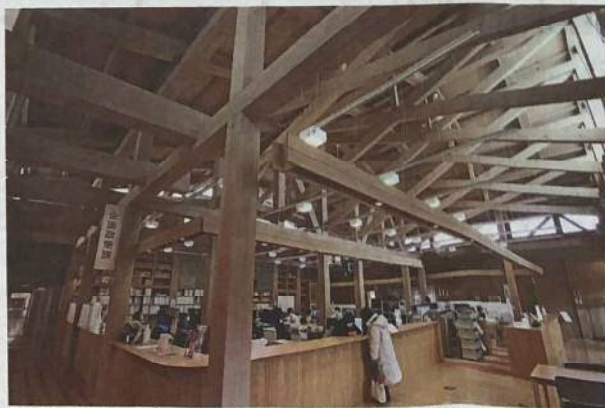
By Ryuzo Suzuki
Yomiuri Shimbun Senior Photographer

A new 2-story town hall has sprung up in Shirataka, a town with a population of about 13,000 nestled in the center of Yamagata Prefecture. Completed last year, the building was constructed almost entirely out of wood, in an effort to revive the once-thriving lumber industry in a town that is 65% forests.

Apart from a sprinkling of structural rebar and concrete, the town hall, which has a total floor space of 4,500 square meters, was made solely of wood, down to the structural columns and support beams. Of the 1,700 cubic meters of lumber used in the building, 75% was cedar that was felled, dried and sawed in town. The construction was also carried out by a local contractor.

Latticed load-bearing walls and double beams were enlisted throughout the structure, ensuring earthquake resistance despite being made of wood. To prevent the spread of fire, each section of the facility is separated by fireproof plasterboards.

Conceived as a catalyst for public engagement and urban development, the new town hall houses a community center and a library, in addition to the offices for each section of the municipal gov-



The planning and coordination section and the general affairs section of the wooden town hall



The council chamber of the wooden town hall is also used as a medium-sized conference room.

ernment, conference rooms and assembly halls, perfumed by the faint smell of cedar.

The mixed-use facility replaces a 1960s municipal building that had been the subject of

concerns over earthquake resistance. Although officials had begun to draft plans for the new building in earnest after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, it was flooding caused by heavy rains that spurred the town to reconsider its relationship with wood and prompted the decision on the all-wooden architecture.

The floods washed through the town's eroded forests in 2013 and 2014, carrying tons of upended trees into town and causing extensive damage. "[I realized that] if we didn't resuscitate our forestry sector, the disasters were sure to be repeated," said Mayor Seishichi Sato. "We needed a system to appropriately log, use, plant and cultivate our forests in a sustainable, cyclical way."

In the interest of raising public understanding of the plan, the town invited local residents to sit in on design meetings and logging tests.

A 67-year-old Shirataka native who visited the

new town hall to pick up some paperwork said: "There's something special about wood. It has an incredible warmth. Very gentle and comfortable."

The building received the Prime Minister's Award, the highest honor, at a 2020 contest to recognize excellent wooden structures sponsored by the Japan Council for Advancement of Timber Utilization.

The town plans to gradually shift other public facilities to wooden buildings going forward. As a town official explained: "Wooden buildings last a long time, and all repair work and other upkeep can be handled by our capable contractors in town. The forestry industry should take the lead in revitalizing the town."

(Old & New is a series exclusive to The Japan News.)



The wooden town hall in Shirataka, Yamagata Prefecture



Two-tiered beams in the library