

Why aren't Japan's long-abandoned hotels dismantled, even after recent corpse discovery?

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MIYAZAKI -- An abandoned hotel in southwest Japan where young people found a dead body upon entering the desolated ruins for a dare remains standing more than a year after the corpse's discovery. This reporter was able to gradually uncover why large buildings with no known owner are left untouched and neglected.

It all began in the ruins of a hotel in the city of Ebino, Miyazaki Prefecture. Around 12:50 p.m. on April 15, 2020, two men in their 20s who came to the site from outside the prefecture called police from the hotel ruins saying that there was a dead body there.

The nine-story hotel is located along National Route 268 that connects the neighboring cities of Ebino and Kobayashi. It's far from urban areas, and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Ebino is nearby. Believed to have been closed down in 1997 at the latest, the hotel has been abandoned since. The ruins have been featured as a "haunted spot" online.

According to Miyazaki Prefectural Police's Ebino Police Station, the two young men entered the abandoned hotel grounds without permission, and found the dead body of a man, who was lying facing upwards on a bed in a sixth-floor guest room. The gray-haired man was about 170-180 centimeters tall, and was wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt and pants. The body was later identified as an Ebino resident in his 50s. Police believe about one year had passed since his death, and as there was no suicide note or other clues, the man's movements prior to his arrival at the hotel are apparently unknown.

In August 2021, when over a year had passed since the corpse's discovery, this reporter visited the abandoned site to find the entrance's glass doors shattered and the color of the whole building turned yellowy-green. When peeking inside the hotel through broken windows at the back of the building, empty cans and relatively new masks and other items were scattered inside the room, suggesting that someone had trespassed on the place. The emergency stairs had deteriorated and parts were on the verge of collapsing.

Setsuko Iriki, a 72-year-old woman who lives nearby, said for several years, during the nighttime, she had seen beams from flashlights seeping out from the windows of the hotel's upper floors, and had heard the voices of young people. The woman said she felt scared and put up a security light outside her home. "I want them to tear the building down soon, and if that's difficult, I'd like the area to be blocked off so that people can't go inside the building," she said.

According to prefectural police, individuals who enter abandoned ruins without permission could be charged with crimes including trespassing. However, there were no entry ban tapes in the hotel's surrounding area. The property management section of the Ebino Municipal Government said the corporate body that owns the hotel building has already dissolved, and that if the city sets up barricade tape or fences, the city may be held responsible for managing the establishment. This is why the municipal government cannot become involved so easily.

Dismantling the hotel would present even greater obstacles. The special measures law on vacant houses, which went into effect in 2015, has enabled municipalities to forcibly dismantle and remove vacant homes that have the risk of collapsing or greatly spoil the surrounding aesthetic.

However, it is difficult to actually carry this out. Inquiries to local governments across Japan found that in cases where the owner is unknown, expenses for removing buildings cannot be collected, and municipalities therefore naturally tend to hesitate on going ahead with dismantling work which would require taxpayers' money. Furthermore, the dismantling of large-scale buildings like hotels may end up requiring hundreds of millions of yen, or about several million dollars, and some parties are concerned that if the false understanding that administrative bodies will ultimately dispose of the buildings spreads, this will cause moral hazards where owners casually abandon homes.

Was there anything that could have been done before the establishment was abandoned? The corporate body that owned the hotel has already dissolved, but the names of several executives were listed on the commercial register. After consulting a telephone directory, I was able to meet a man in his 70s who was the company's director. According to this man, the company's then president has already passed away. Regarding his name's inclusion under the title of director, the man said, "I merely lent my name after being asked by the president, and I myself don't know any details."

The hotel industry has suffered great damage as people have been confined to their homes amid the coronavirus pandemic. It is feared that the issue of large buildings whose owners have vanished will be aggravated even further.

Chie Nozawa, professor of urban policy at Meiji University's School of Political Science and Economics, said, "Japan had only thought about building establishments and had not envisioned closing them. As similar problems may occur for condos in the future, it is necessary to arrange a system to set aside expenses for dismantling buildings. We're in an age where disasters occur more frequently, and the issue of abandoned homes have entered into a new phase."

Nozawa also raised the necessity of creating national guidelines so that administrative bodies can determine without hesitation which properties should be dealt with urgently. She went on to say, "Local governments should mutually share their knowledge and wisdom with local residents in order to prepare for utilizing abandoned ruins. It's important to be aware of the owners of abandoned homes in normal times and be able to contact them in case of a disaster."