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This picture taken on October 12, 2021 shows Japanese artist Masakazu Rokuhara, who is also an architect and a member of the Taiyoshi Hyakuban restoration project.



This picture shows light switches (L) next to ageing decorations on a wall of Taiyoshi Hyakuban.



Picture shows Japanese artist Masakazu Rokuhara, who is also an architect and a member of the Taiyoshi Hyakuban restoration project, pointing to ageing designs during an interview with AFP at Taiyoshi Hyakuban. — AFP photos

'UGLY HISTORY': BATTLE TO RESTORE JAPAN'S ICONIC BUILDING

At the corner of a red-light district in the Japanese city of Osaka stands an unlikely architectural gem: a century-old former brothel at the centre of a restoration campaign. Taiyoshi Hyakuban hasn't functioned as a brothel for decades, and now operates as a restaurant, but it is seen as a symbol of the surrounding neighbourhood, which is still associated with the sex industry.

Experts say the wooden two-storey structure is a rare original example of architecture from the Taisho era of 1912-1926. "Most Japanese architecture dating from a century or more burned down in wartime air raids or big fires," Shinya Hashizume, a professor of architectural history at Osaka Prefecture University, told AFP.

"Old brothel buildings, in particular, have rarely survived," he said on a visit to the site. Taiyoshi Hyakuban has dozens of Japanese and Western-style party rooms, some featuring delicately painted sliding doors and ceilings with ornate inlays.

Murals of festivals, goddesses playing

traditional instruments and Dutch merchants in old-fashioned clothes adorn the suites, which surround a garden where towering "yin and yang" rocks represent men and women. "Here, the art is part of the building... that's what is so wonderful about it," said Masakazu Rokuhara, an architect involved in the restoration project.

At night, swinging red lanterns strung along the outside of the building's second floor lend the structure a nostalgic charm, gently illuminating its red wooden siding. But daylight reveals the desperate need for restoration, including cracks to a large wooden plaque over the front door and fading paint.

The building is designated a "registered tangible cultural property" in recognition of its historical significance, but that hasn't resulted in any public funds to protect it. And while its owner had long planned to give the building a makeover, the pandemic downturn left funds scarce.

Salacious vibe

So a group of local real estate agents



Part of the interior of Taiyoshi Hyakuban.

and town developers decided to launch a crowdfunding project to raise 15 million yen (\$133,000) to save the struggling structure. "We were concerned the restoration might not even be possible if we waited and let the building continue to deteriorate for another 10 years," said Keisuke Yotsui, a member of the campaign.

Taiyoshi Hyakuban is also something of

attempting to lure customers. "Hey, mister! Why don't you stop by?" shouts a tout, as a young woman bathed in a pink spotlight locks eyes with passers-by.

And while Taiyoshi Hyakuban has been an upscale Japanese restaurant for decades, its history meant fundraising for its restoration was sometimes tricky. "We heard from women who told us there was no way they would give money for it," because of the association with the sex industry, Yotsui told AFP.

Despite the obstacles, by August, the campaign had raised nearly 19 million yen and restoration has now begun. Hashizume said there was no disguising Taiyoshi Hyakuban's past, but the building was still worthy of saving.

"This district lives with an ugly history," he acknowledged. "But it's also a history of how a neighbourhood has survived despite that legacy," he added. "This piece of architecture is the only original part of the neighbourhood that speaks to that." — AFP

an emblem for the historic Tobita-Shinchi red-light district, which housed hundreds of brothels a century ago. Many reinvented themselves when prostitution was outlawed in 1957, with customers paying for a room rather than a companion, to skirt legal restrictions.

But the neighbourhood retains a salacious vibe, with women sitting at entrances



Supporters of the FreeBritney movement celebrate following a court decision ending her conservatorship outside the Stanley Mosk courthouse in Los Angeles.

Judge dissolves Britney Spears guardianship

Los Angeles judge Friday terminated the controversial guardianship that has controlled pop star Britney Spears' life for the past 13 years, handing back her freedom along with control of a multi-million-dollar estate.

The ruling, greeted with raucous cheers and showers of pink confetti by Spears' fans outside the downtown courthouse, ends a conservatorship long overseen by her father, and which the "Toxic" singer has described as abusive. "Best day ever... praise the Lord... can I get an Amen," wrote Spears on Instagram, using the hashtag "#FreedBritney."

"I can't freaking believe it!" she added. The formal end to the guardianship comes after the pop princess's father Jamie Spears was removed from his position in charge of her finances and estate at a hearing in September.

Both sides reiterated their support for swiftly ending the guardianship at the start of Friday's brief hearing. "Effective today... the conservatorship of the person and estate of Britney Jean Spears is hereby terminated. And that is the order of the court," said Judge Brenda Penny. Friday's hearing capped a long campaign by

Spears and her legion of global fans to end a conservatorship that began after her highly public 2007 breakdown, when the star attacked a paparazzo's car at a gas station.

Judge Penny agreed with Spears' request for the arrangement to end without need for a mental evaluation — on the basis that "this was a voluntary conservatorship" and that "all parties agree." "The court finds and determines that the conservatorship of the person and estate of Britney Jean Spears is no longer required," she ruled.

'Perfectly capable'

Fans outside the courthouse who had been campaigning for the conservatorship to end for years could hardly contain their joy and relief. "She thought nobody would believe her... she's just a perfectly capable human being," said Danielle Kushner, 30. "We all feel like she's our friend, we wanted to talk to her but couldn't talk to her!"

Spears, who publicly spoke out via phone to the court this summer, had said through her lawyers that her father was "never fit to serve." She cited in one petition allegations of his "reported alcoholism" and "trauma he caused his daughter since her childhood." As momentum mounted, Spears said in a September filing that she wanted to end the guardianship as soon as possible so that she can marry her fiancé Sam Asghari with a prenuptial agreement. — AFP



Supporters of the FreeBritney movement celebrate following a court decision ending her conservatorship outside the Stanley Mosk courthouse in Los Angeles.

Cheetahs fast running to extinction as cub trade thrives

Tiny, weeks-old cheetah cubs suckled from baby bottles and purred weakly, their condition still dangerously precarious after their rescue from the Horn of Africa's illegal wildlife trade. Around half the cubs saved from traffickers do not survive the trauma and there are real concerns for the smallest of this lot, a frail infant nicknamed "Green" weighing just 700 grams (25 ounces).

"It was very touch and go with Green," said Laurie Marker, founder of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), inspecting the mewling cub at the non-profit organisation's rescue centre in Somaliland. They are the lucky ones—every year an estimated 300 cheetah cubs are trafficked through Somaliland to wealthy buyers in the Middle East seeking exotic pets.

Snatched from their mothers, shipped out of Africa to war-torn Yemen and onward to the Gulf, cubs that survive the ordeal can fetch up to \$15,000 on the black market. It is a busy trade, one less familiar than criminal markets for elephant ivory or rhino horn, but equally devastating for Africa's most endangered big cat.

Loved to death

A century ago, there were an estimated 100,000 cheetahs worldwide. Today barely 7,000 remain, their numbers slashed by human encroachment and habitat destruction. The steady plunder of cubs from the wild to satisfy the pet trade only compounds this decline.

More than 3,600 live cheetahs were illegally traded worldwide in the decade to December 2019, according to research published this year that documented hundreds of advertisements for cubs on social media platforms including YouTube and Instagram.

"If this keeps going... that kind of off-take causes the population to go extinct in a very short time," said Marker, a leading authority on cheetahs. Cheetahs have been prized as pets and hunting companions since the Roman Empire and breeding them in captivity is notoriously difficult, making wild-caught cubs the only option.

Part of the campaign to stop the modern-day trade has focused on changing attitudes in prosperous Gulf states, the main buyer market where cheetahs are still coveted status symbols. Marker said wealthy owners liked to show off their cheetahs in selfies as much as their cars and cash. "There's kind of a one-upmanship on it, and there's bragging power. One of our messages is do not 'like' this kind of thing on social media," Marker said.

Cruel trade

Combating this criminal trade is particularly challenging because it revolves around Somaliland, a self-declared republic



A volunteer of the Cheetah Conservation Fund plays with cheetahs in their cage in one of the facilities of the organisation in the city of Hargeisa, Somaliland.

without international recognition, and one of the world's poorest regions. Roughly the size of Syria, with 850 kilometres (530 miles) of coastline facing Yemen, the breakaway region between Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia is stretched thin policing its porous borders.

Somaliland's interior minister Mohamed Kahin Ahmed told AFP that a small coast-guard unit was doing its best but apart from patrolling for cheetahs they had human traffickers and gun runners to contend with. The cubs that slip through the net suffer terrible mistreatment along the

Future generations

Through a UK government-funded programme, Somaliland is expanding intelligence sharing with neighbouring countries and Yemen to fight the criminals robbing Africa of the iconic species. But the government is also working with impoverished rural communities, whose conflict with cheetahs is another driver in the trade.

Of the 13 cubs confiscated between September and November, at least four were taken by farmers hoping to sell them and recoup losses after claiming their livestock were killed by cheetahs. "The next



Members of the Cheetah Conservation Fund feed baby cheetahs.

generation may never see a cheetah if this illicit trade continues," Edna Adan Ismail, Somaliland's former foreign minister, told an anti-poaching conference in September.

Local veterinarian Ahmed Yusuuf Ibrahim is determined this grim prophecy does not pass. The 27-year-old has been learning how to nurse sickly cubs back to health and has developed a close fondness for the cheetahs under his care.

They cannot fend for themselves, and eventually will be relocated to a larger natural enclosure outside Hargeisa. But for now, Ibrahim is their doting custodian-right down to making sure cheetahs young and old get their fair share of camel meat. "I care for them. I feed them, I clean them. They are my babies," he said. — AFP