

The Declining Capital

Research >
Japan

From its origins as a small castle town until the end of the Edo era, Tokyo's urbanization followed an orthogenetic process. In the mid-seventeenth century Tokyo's population numbered one million, in a league with London and Paris. By the eve of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 Tokyo resembled a huge urban village. Twice destroyed in the twentieth century – by earthquake in 1923 and aerial bombardment in 1945 – Tokyo emerged as a speculator and builders' paradise, a true global city, in the 1980s. Today Tokyo proper counts over 12 million inhabitants while one-fourth of the Japanese population lives in the greater metropolitan area. The mega-city, warns the author, is awaiting another catastrophe.

By Shuji Funo

The politically powerful construction industry was one of the motors of rapid post-war economic growth. Relying heavily on the 'scrap and build' method, concrete and steel transformed the Japanese landscape. In the late 1960s, construction accounted for over 20 per cent of GDP. High growth gave way to a period of stable but lower growth in the wake of the 1973 energy crisis; heavy industries lost ground to light industries based on advanced science and technology. The focus of urban development shifted from outward expansion to the full development of already urbanized areas. Money generated by the speculative bubble of the 1980s transformed Tokyo into a global city, wired to the dynamic movements of the world capitalist economy.

The postmodern city: Tokyo at its zenith

The urban issues Tokyo faced in the mid-1980s were quite different from those it had faced in the past. The city had reached its limits for horizontal expansion. The 'Tokyo Problem' and 'Tokyo Reform' became pressing issues for debate: scholars and critics discussed the negative effects of Tokyo's political, economic, and cultural dominance, as well as possibilities for relocating the Japanese capital.

In the 1980s Tokyo's status as one of the world's financial centres attracted an unprecedented influx of foreign businessmen and workers. The resulting demand for centrally located office space and 24-hour facilities sparked a speculative building rush that dramatically transformed the cityscape. Western architects with postmodern designs were invited to give Tokyo a fashionable facelift, befitting its status as a global city.



Tokyo's bullet train's punctuality allows for commuters to set their personal alarms to the scheduled arrival times.

Further urban development necessitated the search for new frontiers. The first frontier was unused public land in the city centre. Investors snapped up properties in the city centre, while large real estate companies launched re-development projects. Many of these destroyed the fabric of existing central city communities. The second frontier was the sky: Tokyo still had more space in the air than New York. The Manhattan Project, revived after a long hiatus, is currently renewing the central business district around Tokyo Station. The third frontier was under the ground, the so-called geo front. A project to create an underground city of 500,000 inhabitants was seriously proposed. The fourth and final frontier was the Tokyo waterfront, hitherto the home to dockyards and factories. Under the title 'Urban frontier', the World City Exposition Tokyo '96' directed expansion towards Tokyo Bay.

New technologies, production systems, and building materials shaped Tokyo's urban transformation. Since the 1960s air-sealing aluminium sashes have been *de rigueur*, meaning that all dwelling units are now air-conditioned. So-called intelligent office buildings came into fashion in the 1980s.

Domed, climate-controlled stadiums allow football games to be played in the midst of storms. The daily lives of Tokyo's citizens have become completely divorced from nature; most space in Tokyo is artificially, i.e. computer, controlled. Electronic conglomerates enjoying symbiotic relations with government are prominent players in this development process. So are the large construction companies, still wielding considerable political power. Tokyo is a temporary metropolis that is constantly changing; in this repeated process of scrap and build, the city is losing its historical memory.

'The 2003 Problem'

Nobody controls a global city like Tokyo; nobody knows who is behind the constant change. Something invisible, which we might call the World Capitalist System, guides the transformation of the Japanese capital.

With the glory days of the bubble economy long gone and Tokyo suffering from economic stagnation and post-bubble debt, a curious phenomenon can be observed. Along the Tokyo waterfront many new office buildings and flats are under construction. The number of high-rise flats newly built in 2002 is said to be unprecedented. Now as before, this construction is driven by the speculative activities of real estate agents and investors. While rumour of 'The 2003 Problem' is spreading – companies will move to the waterfront leaving old inner city office buildings unoccupied – predictable oversupply is the result of individual realtors and developers pursuing their own short-term interests, even as they know they will later suffer.

Central government has tried to influence the fluctuating annual number of dwelling units built by reforming tax incentives. Its current key phrases are 'restructuring' and 'urban rebirth'. What is actually happening, however, is the hollowing out of the inner city. Ishihara Shintaro, governor of Tokyo Metropolitan Municipality, has declared 16 policy goals, the first of which is to 'create an urban city that facilitates a balance of jobs and residences'. It consists of two strategies: 'Promotion of inner city residence' and 'fundamental reform of the metropolitan housing system'. The former includes bringing workplaces and residential areas together in the suburban Tama area. The results have thus far been disappointing: the only change for most people has been their place of work. The remaining hope is that old inner city office buildings will be converted into homes.

The central government has established a special board called 'Urban Rebirth' and has opted to deregulate building codes and urban planning laws to stimulate building activity. Local governments can now rezone areas and make decisions on the restructuring of districts. Most local governments, however, are suffering from financial pressures and lack funds to realize new projects. And while policymakers believe promoting building activity through deregulation is the only way to economic recovery, the idea seems far-fetched.

Tokyo has its natural limits; the city cannot grow indefinitely. Obviously, the city needs powerful leadership and the participation of citizens to implement new ideas. Unfortunately, while formal procedures for citizen involvement have been proposed, they do not function effectively: people seem reluctant to participate when their private circumstances are not affected. Without citizen input, 'The 2003 Problem' seems here to stay. Though blackouts and drought already threaten the metropolitan area each summer, the current system of the production and consumption of spaces, however, is controlled by the profit motive, not social or ecological responsibility. Tokyo, on its current course, is awaiting catastrophe. ◀

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The rush of building activities on the Tokyo waterfront, 2003

Courtesy of Shuji Funo