

Bubble or Not, Tokyo Keeps Changing

Bénédicte Barroux

I first visited Japan in 1985 when I was just 17. I came from Rennes, a French town in Brittany with about 1% (350,000 inhabitants) of the Greater Tokyo population. The discovery of this gigantic metropolis that never seemed to sleep was a big shock. Going from one place to another could easily take more than 1 hour and simply walking from a subway station to a friend's house sometimes looked like a long journey. The fact that most roads had (and still have) no name made it really hard to navigate the labyrinth of small streets that all looked the same. Walking through kilometers of underground shopping malls linking subway stations and various department stores was quite a new experience. And the overhead expressways made Tokyo look like a futuristic city that had grown too fast—much too fast!

What surprised me most was that unlike most French cities, Tokyo is a huge city without a real centre. The Imperial Palace is a (generally) closed space that occupies the heart of a megalopolis with many regional centres like Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro and Ueno, each of which is individually larger and more crowded than my home town. And next to them is an incredible diversity of smaller 'towns' each specializing in certain products like electronics (Akihabara), books and sporting goods (Jimbocho and Ogawamachi in Kanda), night-life (Kabukicho, Roppongi), etc. Between all these busy and noisy places I also discovered another face of the city—the quiet residential areas of small houses reminded me more of the countryside (minus trees and gardens) than a capital. Returning to Tokyo last year, I was eager to rediscover this multifaceted city but I have been surprised to see how much the city has changed. The economic bubble of the late 1980s totally transformed the cityscape. I remember a Tokyo of few high-rise buildings except the skyscrapers in Shinjuku and the Prince Hotel in

Akasaka-mitsuke. In the mid-1980s, the 20-story Aoyama Twin Towers looked tall and stood out from the Tokyo skyline. Most buildings in Ginza or Marunouchi were rather low because of strictly enforced height zoning around the Imperial Palace—Tokyo was a very big but not a very tall city.

Some 17 years on, I guess very few foreigners know how impressive the Aoyama Twin Towers seemed in the 1980s because they are dwarfed by much more impressive buildings like the Tokyo Metropolitan Government complex in Shinjuku. Where there were just a few tall buildings, now there is a multitude of little Mannhattans and the whole city seems to have grown vertically. Otemachi, Tameike-sanno, and Shibuya are starting to look more like the downtowns of big American cities.

Tokyo has been transformed but the pace of change does not seem to be slowing down. Although the bubble has burst and the economy is in recession, real-estate development projects still seem to be flourishing all around Tokyo. In fact, the city still looks like a big construction site; the office building, parking lot, small house and petrol station can be torn down and rebuilt almost overnight. Red flashing lights on huge construction cranes dot the nights of a city in permanent evolution.

For me, the biggest change is that families driven into the remote suburbs by rocketing land prices in the 1980s now have a chance to move back in to the city (inside the Yamanote Line) due to the huge fall in the price of real estate. In some places, food stores and supermarkets are too small for the local population—the traditional *shotengai* of family-owned shops is changing into video rental clubs, ¥100 shops (where nearly every item costs ¥100) or fast-food outlets. And I wonder what will happen in a few years if this trend goes on. It is already nearly impossible to park a

bicycle in front of most subway stations and what will happen if new high-rise housing continues being built? The narrow streets that used to be wide enough when just a few people lived in a neighbourhood are now too small; more-and-more cars are driving through the small streets that for the most part have no real pedestrian sidewalk.

These small changes all around town are only part of the story. Foreigners like me who come to Japan every 10 or 20 years have witnessed huge changes but I think that the pace of change is accelerating and that even Tokyo residents will be amazed by the urban revolution taking place. Huge operations that reshape the equivalent of a small town at one shot occur in other cities but it is difficult to keep track of all the projects now happening in Tokyo. Paris has also huge urban developments like the ZAC Rive Gauche (a mixed development zone on a former brownfield site) or the renovation of the old Halles aux vins (behind Lyon Railway Station) where the rejuvenation combines erection of new offices and housing with renovation of old historic warehouses and creation of public spaces. But Tokyo seems to have dozens of such projects—from relatively small ones like the reconstruction of Akebonobashi (in Shinjuku Ward) where Fuji Television was located before it moved to Odaiba, to gigantic ones like Ark Hills in Roppongi (Minato Ward).

Until the late 1980s, it seemed that most big projects were launched on reclaimed land like Odaiba in the Tokyo waterfront area. Tokyo was changing, but the most radical changes were happening on the periphery. But now, the big projects are transforming downtown Tokyo too. The 1987 privatization and division of JNR into the JRs freed up some huge tracts of old railway land like Shiodome Freight Terminal (31 ha) near Shimbashi Station, and the former Shinjuku Station freight yard where the new Times Square



Former Shiodome Freight Terminal awaiting redevelopment (1996) (JNR Settlement Corporation)

development has just been completed. But in Shinjuku, the most spectacular change has been the building of the city-scale Tokyo Metropolitan Government complex on the site of the former Tokyo Waterworks. The enormous scale suggests that there is no limit to how Japanese architects and engineers can master their environment.

In addition to the big plots of former railway land, urban developers like Mori Buildings have created big parcels of land by piecing together smaller plots to create new districts like Ark Hills (5.6 ha) and Roppongi Hills (11.6 ha), giving real meaning to the expression 'table rase', which means to erase everything and to make the table empty like a white sheet of paper. (The word comes from the Latin *tabula rasa!*)

Today's changes are of such magnitude that I have to wonder if it is time to abandon the Japanese tradition of building structures to last only 30 or 40 years based on the concept that the real value is in the land and not the structure. But this might be about to change, especially because families who buy a central high-rise apartment might not be happy to see their home demolished after just 40 years. If buildings lasted longer, the 'new building tango' might slow to a more sedate 'waltz' and the Japanese might hold their architectural heritage in greater respect. ■



High-rise office and residential buildings under construction on the former site of Shiodome Freight Terminal. Restoration of the old Shimbashi Station at the north end of the site is scheduled to be completed in spring 2003 to commemorate the birthplace of railways in Japan. (Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.)



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