

Scrap and build

Alternatives to the corporate redevelopment of Tokyo

By Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Jorge Almazán

Tokyo has resisted urban planning and intervention for a long time. But that time is over. Now bureaucrats have unleashed the forces of corporate capital through privatization and deregulation. These big corporations are transforming Tokyo into a generic skyscraper city. More than ever, architects must face these forces to propose ways of preserving and enhancing the personality and identity of Tokyo.

A city that denied planning

In Tokyo it is difficult to find buildings that are even one century old. The city was reduced to ashes and rebuilt twice, once after the earthquake of 1923, and once again after the Pacific war. Before those two massive reconstructions, the modernization process begun in the Meiji Period (1868-1912) led to a progressive replacement of old buildings by new western style construction. However, the basic urban framework, the lot configuration and the street patterns of a significant part of the city have basically maintained their ancient organization until now. This basic framework –different from the regular grid of Kyoto or Nara, which were drawn according to Chinese principles– was based on the accommodation of the city to natural elements. (1)

This characteristic of Tokyo's environment prevented modernist Japanese architects from realizing their ideas of efficiency and functionality. For them, imbued with Western modernist doctrines, it was obvious that Tokyo had to be transformed. The devastating American air raids offered tabula rasa after the war, a chance for rational reconstruction. However, unlike other Japanese cities, the authorities failed to control the reconstruction that was being carried out by the desperate citizens. The city emerged again repeating the original patterns. Another chance appeared in the 60's with the rapid economic development of the country, but the main interventions were aimed either at infrastructure –like the Shinkansen bullet train or the Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway– or iconic buildings –like Kenzo Tange's Olympic Stadium. The metabolist movement was the last modernist attempt to transform the city, this time by means of architectural megastructures. In spite of some realized projects, such as the Skyscraper development in Shinjuku planned

by the bureaucracy, the overwhelming reality of Tokyo remained untouched.

The development of Western cities was quite different. There, the excesses of the modernist doctrine created a contra-movement claiming a 'post-modern' city that preserved and appreciated community life, history and human scale. In the late 80's the Western postmodern mentality combined with an economic bubble created a change of attitude in Tokyo: architectural frustration became enthusiasm. With an optimism supported by a skyrocketing economy, Tokyo urban landscape was affirmed, its lack of order seen as a positive quality. In the Japanese architectural debate 'Chaos' became the ultimate paradigm of the postmodern city and Tokyo, its prototype.

But in the early 90's the bubble burst, leading to a long period of economic recession. Japanese architectural discourse entered a reflexive attitude, trying to go beyond the mere aesthetic contemplation of chaos and reveal the laws and processes that shaped the city. This period of calm reflection that continues even now needs to rouse itself into an active architectural critic of the new forces that are transforming the city and menacing Tokyo's urban character, as never before.

Tokyo transformed: the unleashed power of the corporate capital

In spite of Tokyo's perdurable footprint and its related land property system, the city is currently being transformed. These days the bureaucrats are no longer alone. They have joined forces with the biggest development companies in Japan. Whoever visits present day Tokyo will be surprised by the number of high-rise buildings being constructed. The metropolis is in the midst of a huge redevelopment boom based on a single typology: the skyscraper. It represents the largest investment in city renewal since 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Major projects can be seen in Marunouchi, Shiodome, Roppongi and Shinagawa.

What is the cause of this overwhelming development? A confluence of factors may explain the phenomenon: land prices and construction costs have fallen sharply due to the prolonged recession; railway and other nationally owned land, centrally located, was sold after the privatization of the national railway system in 1987,



Daily life in Okusawa, Setagaya ward



Construction site in Shiodome, the new cluster of office and residential towers in Chuo ward.

and now, the new buildings on these sites are nearing completion; also, there is a population shift back towards urban centers, which follows an earlier trend toward spreading out to the suburbs; finally, there is a shift in the stance of the government, a shift in support of urban redevelopment by the private sector. This governmental shift is expressed in the 'Law on Special Measures for Urban Renaissance', that took effect in June 2002.

However, the new law didn't affect most of the high-rise buildings springing up in and around downtown Tokyo, including the Shiodome, Shinagawa, Marunouchi and Roppongi areas, since those buildings have been completed under former regulatory frameworks. Roppongi Hills, for example –a massive project on a 11-hectare site with 724000m² of total floor-space– was designated a redevelopment inducement area by the Metropolis of Tokyo in 1986, and in fact it took a full 17 years to bring it to completion. It seems that the new law just consolidates a process that was already going on.

How does this new law enhance 'urban renaissance'? According to Shoji Sasaki (2), director of the secretariat of the government's Urban Renaissance Headquarters, up to now when private businesses tried to undertake urban renewal, they ran into three major difficulties, which the new law seeks to remove. First was the time consuming process of securing official approval, which commonly took several years. Now, with the new law, the period has been shortened to six months from the date of submission. Second was the rigidity of regulations concerning development, which prevented developers from planning projects freely. The regulatory framework has been drastically modified with the introduction of "special zones for urban renaissance", which can be designated within the "priority urban redevelopment areas" (3). Within these special zones, all the existing regulations are lifted and a new set of rules is imposed, taking private-sector opinions into account. And thirdly there was a lag in public-sector infrastructure construction, meaning that the building of roads, parks, and so forth failed to keep up with the private sector's schedule. Now private businesses are allowed to build roads and parks, with local governments paying for them after they are completed.

Consequently, the new law gives the private sector a greater role in society, following faithfully the two basic principles neoliberalism: privatization and deregulation. Privatization by subsidizing the private sector and deregulation by eliminating constraints and control on the private sector.

The corporate urban paradigm

Are these redevelopments responding to the needs of Tokyo citizens? The promoters behind this 'renaissance' drive share an agenda, not hidden but overtly expressed by some of them, like

Minoru Mori, CEO of the company Mori Building, who plans to make Tokyo a "vertical garden city" (4). A noted collector of Le Corbusier's paintings and drawings, Mori resurrects the 'Radiant City' proposing to eliminate the existing small plots and combine them into megasites with skyscrapers. This, Mori argues, will create more green surface, allow more people living in the center closer to their work, and also it will turn Tokyo into a more attractive place in today's global competition among the cities. Roppongi Hills is the materialization of his vision.

The goal of improving the attractiveness of Tokyo among the capitals of the world is specially emphasized by the Urban Renaissance Headquarters, an organ within the Cabinet of Prime Minister Koizumi, created "in order to enhance the attraction, appeal and international competitiveness of Japanese cities, as well as realize the Urban Renaissance" as written in the first sentence of its "basic policies" statement (5).

There is obviously a popular consensus on the goals of reducing commuting time in Tokyo and increasing green public space, but the average Tokyo citizen might be surprised about such an imperative need to strengthen Tokyo for international competition, a mantra repeated ad nauseam by developers and authorities. The fact is that, according to surveys, Tokyo is losing its "competitive" edge, especially against increasing foreign business in neighboring cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai or Singapore. A survey by Tokyo Municipal Planning Council (6) compares Tokyo with Western cities –New York, London and Berlin– and Asian cities –Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul– and concludes that Tokyo has the worst living environment. The survey reflects the point of view of foreign workers who criticize "the inability to get good housing at a reasonable price", the "high costs of living", the "crowded commuting" and the fact that "home and work are too far apart". These studies do not show the opinion of the average Japanese or even foreign dweller but the judgment of a minority of foreign workers belonging to a very precise type: employees of international corporations maintaining high standard of living. Their negative opinion contrasts with that of the local dwellers and the foreigners who understand and enjoy living in Tokyo, who see Tokyo as a thriving 24 hour city, highly convenient and a pleasurable place that allows a unique lifestyle. Corporations take for granted that the model of residential and business skyscrapers connected by shopping facilities is the ideal living environment for overseas well-to-do employees. This assumption could be discussed, but if accepted, the right solution is to establish specific and limited developments to cater for the corporate elite, and not to extend the mega scale to the rest of the city as the ultimate paradigm of 'urban renaissance'.

More and more voices are rising up to protest against a process that is affecting large areas of the city and razing environments that



Crossing in a residential area of Okusawa, Setagaya ward



View from the Metropolitan Government Tower in Shinjuku to the west. The small scale behind the wide avenues appears clearly

people appreciate. A new city model is being pursued, presenting itself as the only model to achieve the goals of economic and urban revitalization that sweeps Japanese politics. Can independent architects offer an alternative city model to provoke a debate? Any alternative paradigm can only be developed by understanding the characteristic urban structure of Tokyo and the spontaneous spatial practice of its citizens.

Scrap and build

Like the big Western capitals, London or Paris, Rome or New York, the new mega redevelopments are made as stable monumental objects to last centuries. They are conceived in effort to overcome the common Tokyo mentality of 'scrap and build', the name given to the phenomenon of often replacing buildings with new ones, in a city where buildings of 25 years are considered old. Much of the quality, character and dynamism of this city are based on the continuous renovation of its building stock.

The 'scrap and build' practice has been criticized for breaking up the dialogue with the past and for not being sustainable. Nevertheless, the practice offers a continuous chance to rebuild according to the latest ecological regulations and alternative energy supply systems. By enhancing recyclable materials and lighter construction procedures, the 'scrap and build' practice can be an effective way to control the environmental impact of the urban stock. As for the value of historical preservation, isn't 'scrap and build' a Japanese traditional practice? Japan has a tradition of accepting change, demolition and construction, due to its own construction resources and natural conditions. This construction practice has existed for centuries. Before Nara (710-784) and then Kyoto (794-1868) became permanent capitals, the entire capital of the country was dismantled and rebuilt in a different location, following the enthronement of a new Emperor, or certain events, either good or bad. Shinto shrines, according to religious rituals, were rebuilt periodically, in the same form and location as before. Today this unique custom (shikinen sengu) continues at the largest and most revered Ise Shrine, which is rebuilt every 20 years.

Moreover, Tokyo represents a paradigm of urban conservation different from that of the Western city, which keeps its building stock as a museum. As renown urban historian Hidenobu Jinnai states "For a Westerner, the loss of an old building or monument means a total loss, but in Tokyo when something is lost, it seems to have the power to leave us a message from the past, in lifestyle and spatial structure" (7) Tokyo has the capacity of renewing its building stock, allowing dynamic changes, but keeping the conditions, the scale and the vernacular spatial practices.

Mixed low-rise residential areas

Today people are leaving suburbia to live closer to the city center. Corporations allied with the bureaucrats provide the skyscrapers to welcome the new metropolitan dwellers. What is the alternative to those two models of residential areas, the decaying suburbia and the generic vertical city? Between both scales Tokyo offers a balanced residential pattern that still dominates a significant part of the city. It can be found not only at the fringe of the central areas but even infilling the super scale of high-rise buildings, between highways, department stores and central stations. While the front spaces of the inner city are dominated by wide avenues, modern buildings and large stations, some steps away, behind the wide avenues, this urban pattern appears stubbornly. The image of Tokyo transmitted by Western publications only shows the super scale, Tokyo as a crowded hyper technological megalopolis, ignoring that the greatest part of this city is made of these low-rise delicate neighborhoods with little gardens and calm pedestrian streets.

These residential areas are composed of a dense pattern of single-family houses, small apartment blocks and gardens, integrated in a fine network of services that tend to concentrate around a commercial street (shotengai) with small businesses, eateries, artisans and services to the community. Unlike the magnificent urban compositions of the West, the spatial character of these neighborhoods is fragile, based on delicate spaces, adapted to the human scale and perception. Outer spaces are cozy and comfortable, and show fine details and care. There is no radical separation between the inner (private) and outer (public) spheres. The level of intimacy and coziness is progressive, as the scale decreases from the main street to the secondary streets to the entrance of the house. The ambiguity of public and private spaces is also manifested in the social sphere, so that everyone is aware of sharing the same environment as a common living space. As a consequence these neighborhoods are surprisingly quiet and safe. Car traffic is slow and coexists with the pedestrian and the bicycle.

Most of these characteristic residential neighborhoods originated in a series of urban expansions starting in the 1920's along the newly constructed private railways that guaranteed easy and fast access to the inner city. Unlike the automobile-based suburbanization of the United States, introduced in Japan from the 1960's, this expansion led to a progressive congestion of the urban centers, rather than to its decay. The outer wards of Tokyo are basically composed of this dense low-rise pattern, like Setagaya, the most populous ward with a population of almost 815,000 inhabitants (8). Yet even in the central wards of the city, like Shinjuku or Minato, behind the large buildings that line along the heavy-traffic avenues, it is possible to find this residential scale.



Commercial main street (shotengai) of Okusawa, Setagaya ward



View of Roppongi Hills, a high-rise complex including residential and office towers (Roppongi, Minato ward)

These areas combine the Western idea of 'garden city' with spontaneous and vernacular construction. The individual buildings may show the influence of western architectural styles, but the relation between inner and outer space, the refined treatment of greenery, the human scale and management of community life are all deeply rooted features of Japanese lifestyle. Unfortunately, the living conditions of these neighborhoods are not only menaced by the high-rise mega developments, but also by internal problems. Attempts to withstand earth quakes and fire are upsetting traditional structures, streets are being widened to accommodate fire engines and larger parks are being opened to provide assembly areas in case of emergency. Especially troublesome is the progressive subdivision of the land lots, due to inheritance taxes. The heirs receiving a lot from their predecessor have to pay an inheritance tax so high that they see themselves obliged to sell a portion of their lots in order to pay the tax. The outcome is higher density, smaller houses, less greenery and more awkward lot shapes.

Smooth access, privacy, natural ventilation and natural light are becoming difficult issues for architects operating in these areas, especially for a new generation that shares a common sensitivity towards this type of neighborhood and appreciates its fragile character. As opposed to the defensive attitude of certain Japanese architects, represented by Tadao Ando (9) and his bare-concrete houses, these architects don't turn their back on the city. For them the environment is neither hostile nor chaotic, but full of qualities –and complexities– that they want to embrace. Unlike huge redevelopments, which scrap and build a whole area, these architects intervene in the existing dense residential texture and scrap and build each grain of house. Most of the residential projects of Kazuyo Sejima, Manabu Chiba, Ryue Nishizawa or Atelier Bow-Wow are located in these areas and manifest this integrative attitude.

The Japanese architects of the 1960's imagined an alternative urbanism according to the metaphor of organic metabolism, a city that was able to undergo change and regenerate itself. The challenge posed to the new generation of architects mentioned above can also be understood as kind of metabolism of the city, yet of a different nature: their projects do not assume a tabula rasa as starting point, but the reality of the existing residential areas; they do not build megastructures, but delicate strategic interventions according to each site. This fine-tuned, small-grained urban metabolism, based on the vernacular culture and impelled by a gradual scrap-and-build process, opens an alternative strategy for Tokyo's renewal, a different paradigm from that of the large corporations.

An alternative paradigm

The vertical city model of the corporations destroys precisely what it promises to create. It promises to densify the inner city and in fact

it does, but at the cost of erasing the existing scale, spatial intimacy and community cohesion, so appreciated by the Tokyo residents. The urban pattern of mixed residential areas is flexible enough to open possibilities of densification and revitalization without killing the local lifestyles.

The other promise is to reinforce Tokyo as a 'world-class' city. The high-rise mega-development solution belies the government's and the corporations' 20th century inferiority complex that saw Western cities as the only urban model and the Japanese cities behind the times. Now that Japan has reached a level of modernization in economical and technological aspects equivalent or perhaps greater than the West, a new mentality is emerging to find its original way. In fact, the world is immersed in a global era marked by value and international appeal founded in specific identity and distinct character.

The soft urban structure of Tokyo, based on the 'scrap and build' practice and its mixed residential areas, generates an energy not found in the European and American cities, creating a living environment, spatial structure and lifestyle with a unique character. It is within this existing structure where we can find the keys to solve emerging social needs and strengthen Tokyo's identity in any context, global or local.

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Notes

1. See Jinnai Hidenobu, Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology, trans. Kimiko Nishimura (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) P. 122.
2. See Focus Japan, Urban Planning: Dawn of an urban renaissance, Focus Japan, January/February 2003
3. Tokyo has seven "priority urban redevelopment areas", designated by the government in 2003, six in the center of the city and one in the bayside area, consisting largely of reclaimed land. The metropolitan government has decided on the general outlines for the improvement of each of these zones, but under the new law even these outlines are merely guidelines; the actual plans are to be drafted by the private sector.
4. See Mori Building's website: http://www.mori.co.jp/companyInfo/threethemes/en_index.html
5. Basic Policies for Urban Renaissance, April 16, 2004 (Modified). Available at: http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/tosi/kettei/040416kihon_e.html
6. Tokyo Municipal Planning Council, The attractiveness and problems of Tokyo for foreign-owned companies, 1994, cited in: 'Mid Tokyo Maps' [online] Available at: http://www.mid-tokyo.com/12_e/aboutthis.html
7. See Jinnai Hidenobu, Journey into a mysterious city, Process Architecture, no. 72
8. Source: Year 2000 Population census of Japan, Tokyo-to (Statistics Bureau of Public Management, Home Affairs, Post and Telecommunications Japan)
9. In a recent interview, Tadao Ando criticized also the 'scrap and build' process: "In Japan, where the ongoing scrap-and-build process changes the cityscape every decade, we seldom have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with a hundred-year-old modern building. Ultimately, I think culture emerges from the accumulation of things. It doesn't just involve generating new things. Culture exists on an axis extending out of the past, through the present to the future. Every time I visit Paris, I'm reminded of this." (interview with Tadao Ando, in Casa Brutus Magazine, no.30, September 2002).



Residential street in Okusawa, Setagaya ward



Street crossing the Roppongi Hills complex, Roppongi, Minato ward

Street in Shiodome (Chuo ward) with an elevated train line