

# An Urban Model Named Tôkyô

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## 1. Introduction

"Japan must create a new civilisation through the fusion of all the others. We have partially succeeded in this mosaic that is Tôkyô."<sup>1</sup> 1

Fascination or rejection: these are the two extreme reactions of visitors and hard-pressed businessmen passing through Tôkyô. It is hard to get one's bearings in this city, a round-the-clock hive of activity where the lowly and the lavish rub shoulders and the whole city is a perpetual building site. Time and space merge together, and nothing coincides with any of the urban development we are familiar with in the Western world.

In the limelight ever since Japan rose to the "Number 2" rank, Tôkyô, the gigantic metropolis, the centre of centres (political, economic, commercial, financial), has its fans, its critics and of late its theorists. "Culture" say some (in opposition to this see Bourdier & Pelletier, 1987) "Nature" say others! (in opposition to this see Bourdier & Pelletier, in print) Without avoiding the issue, let us attempt briefly to establish just how this Tôkyô can serve as a model at home (in the Nipponese archipelago) and abroad, in the "new Sinicised" (Vandermeersch, 1986) world and beyond.

## 2. Tôkyô: New Town of the 17th Century

Tôkyô, or Edo as it used to be called, would probably not even be on the map today if Tokugawa Ieyasu had not decided in 1590, after uniting all the feods of the land, to make it the seat of his military government. From that moment on, razing hills and digging canals, Ieyasu seems to have had but one objective: to defend it. In 1603 he became shogun, made Edo the political capital of the country and launched some major infrastructural work. Born of the separation of powers, so to speak, the city welcomed first the soldier, and then, some years later, the politician, relegating the symbolic and the official to what was then the capital and the place of residence of the emperor: Kyoto. this does not mean, however, that Edo was deprived of economic life in its first few years of existence, far from it. The city was situated in the Southern part of the Kantô plain, at the intersection of several major arteries (Tôkaidô, the road to Kyoto, Kôshûdôchû, towards the mountainous West and Oshûdôchû, towards the North) and on the innermost part of a sheltered bay, an ideal sight for a port (Maito, 1975, 1987).

<sup>1</sup> KAKIZAWA Kôji ( Member of Parliament for the Liberal Democrat Party) in *France Japon Eco* n° 39, 2nd quarter 1989, Tokyo, CCIFJ, p. 10.

In terms of urban design, the models borrowed from China which served as a basis in the 7th and 8th centuries for the old capitals of Nara (Heijō-kyō) and Kyoto (Heian-kyō) are not so distinct in Edo.

The deviation from the cosmogonic and orthogonal dimensions of the old models is obvious. This was the result of the choice of site and the consequent topographical constraints. The principles of beneficent directions and the crossing of axes at right angles were therefore abandoned because priority was given, by the choice of this site, to political and economic considerations. This was no time, at the beginning of the 17th century, to be building a new town along the same lines as the old ones; what was needed was a new town that could vie in prestige with the imperial capital. The "town around the castle" (jōkamachi) of Edo was born. It is often presented as one of the archetypes of the fortified Japanese town. And it is interesting to note that from this moment on, after decades of fratricidal intestine wars, the archipelago was to enjoy over two and a half centuries of peace and almost total isolation from the rest of the world (the policy *sakoku* or "shutting off the country") and the new urban design of Edo was to develop and serve as a basis from which the vast metropolis we know today would spring.

If we look closely at the plan of the new town of Edo, we notice that only the central part (the castle) was fortified (which distinguishes it from the towns of mediaeval Europe). At the very heart of the town, the castle keep, the formal expression of the initial military design of the town, was not to be rebuilt after the fire of 1657. The urban space around this centre was characterised by strong socio-spatial segregation, with quarters for the shogun's allies and vassals to the West on the upper part (the area called Yamanote) and quarters in the East reserved for traders and craftsmen (the area called Shitamachi, literally "the low town") (Pelletier, in print). The overall population was in excess of 1.1 million inhabitants in 1721. The plan of the town was strictly conservative until almost the end of the 19th century. Only the numerous fires that raged there served as a pretext for extending the town without ever revising the principles of its spatial organisation.

And there was a city all set to serve as a base for the industrialisation of the country and the development of Nipponese capitalism! In other words, at the risk of repeating myself: a sight that lent itself to economic development, and a segregated, socially controlled space with its centre reserved for the power(s) that be, present and future, its low-density, highly residential area to the West and its high-density of craftsmen and tradesmen to the east (just waiting to accommodate the future urban proletariat).

### 3. Tōkyō: Capital of the Empire

All Japanese schoolchildren today learn that their country is different from all others in that it is not a republic (federal, popular or otherwise), or a union (socialist or otherwise), or a kingdom (united or otherwise), etc, but simply Japan. While the denomination commonly accepted since 1946: "Nippon koku" (the land of Japan) does not specify which type of political regime the "land of the rising sun" belongs to, there is no doubt about the definition given in the Meiji Constitution (1889): "the Empire of Great Japan" (*Dai nippon teikoku*) (Seizelet, 1990, 224).

The beginning of the Meiji era (1868), a date often considered as that of the opening of the archipelago towards the outside world also marked the move of the imperial

capital to Edo, rebaptised Tôkyô for the occasion. The emperor now occupies the centre of what had already become a vast metropolis, a centre which some consider was "empty" (Barthes, 1970), a centre we can consider was "mighty" full. After all, was it not the home of the man the politicians and economic powers of the Meiji era "restored" to the throne and in whose name Japan was to launch into a policy of military expansionism that would end in the defeat familiar to us all, the man who still represents the supreme authority even today: the Emperor?

During what is commonly called Japan's modern period (the Meiji, Taishô and early Shôwa eras) from 1868 to the eve of the Second World War, the new capital of the grand empire was to provide a support for a variety of town planning initiatives. How did they alter the fundamental structure of the city? Let us leave aside the numerous projects that never really got off the ground, and look at those that really left their mark on the shape of the city. A first major plan dates from 1888: the Plan for the improvement of the urban area of Tôkyô (Tôkyô shiku kaisei). There is no differentiation of land use (Ishizuka, 1988, 12-13) so the segregation between the upper town and the lower town was not affected. On the other hand, it confirmed the long-standing priority given to the building of infrastructures. The mayor of Tôkyô at that time, Yoshikawa Akimasa, made no bones about that when he presented the project: "roads, bridges and rivers first, houses and water supplies last" (Inoue, 1988). This plan was to serve as a model throughout the archipelago and is considered to be the first Nipponese attempt at modern urban planning. Its effects contributed to the reflexion that would lead, in the early 1920's, to the passing of the first nationwide legislation on urban planning in Japan: the Urban Building Act (shigaichi kenchiku butsu hô) and the Urban Planning Act (toshikeikaku hô) (Bourdier, 1991, 17-18).

What is there to be learnt from these two essential documents which were not modified until fifty years later? They allude directly, or indirectly, to the four fundamental elements of urban planning: zoning, alignment (kenchiku sen), land redistribution (tochi kukaku seiri) and the recovery of added value (juekisha futan, literally: charge on the beneficiaries) in the event of urban development by the community. Let us not dwell on the zoning question which requires no special comment except that even today the redefinition of zone boundaries is subject to all sorts of scheming and manoeuvring (Doi, 1986), but look instead at the other three elements.

The definition of alignments which as we know generally indicate how the authorities establish what will permit them to protect (Tribillon, 1985, 9) or extend their power, is particularly hazy in the Japanese case leaving local authorities relatively powerless in the face of private interests. Urban land reallocation techniques are more intricate since they affect all land owners, but just as perverse in so far as their effect is to take from the small landowners and give to the large. Finally, in a similar vein, added value recovery methods in the event of public development projects penalise new owners more than those who benefit by the new facilities (Bourdier, to be published 1992). These broad principles, thus defined in the legislation were to be put to the test for the first time on a grand scale following the earthquake that ravaged Tôkyô and Yokohama on 1 September 1923.

The imperial capital reconstruction Plan (Teito fukkô keikaku), which took seven full years to execute, emphasised the development of communication channels and the construction of public facilities. The public housing built on this occasion was as innovative as it was scarce (Bourdier, 1987). The urban planning methods used and the architectural style of the buildings erected point to considerable Western influence.

While this may be true of certain earlier projects (Ginza avenue, 1872-1877; Marunouchi business district, 1890-1911; Tôkyô station, 1914), although these isolated operations had no overall effect on the structure of the city (Berque, 1991), it no longer applied when the capital was rebuilt after the earthquake in 1923. Once again, the city rose up out of its ashes, only the popular neighbourhoods being redesigned (3,000 ha reallocated) for improved social control and the authorities favoured private interest, generally in the hands of people who combined political and economic responsibilities who were both enlightened visionaries and sharp speculators. The reconstruction of Tôkyô in the mid-twenties confirmed that the fundamental elements of modern urban planning were in place even then.

#### 4. Tôkyô: "The Capital of Capital"<sup>2</sup>

The first thing industrial capital needs in order to develop is land. For the most part, this has been generally been supplied by the State in Japanese history. The redistribution of existing land or even the construction, with public funds, of land reclaimed from the sea and subsequently transferred into private hands. In this way the Mitsubishi group became the owner of vast areas of Nagasaki, Yokohama and Tôkyô at the beginning of the 19th century. The case of Tôkyô also confirms the traditional analysis: the State and the local authorities finance costly infrastructures that private enterprise then uses for more profitable ends. The most lucrative activities are not all industrial, however. The names of the main railway lines used everyday by millions of commuters remind us that Japanese capital has avoided putting all its eggs in the same basket: Odakyû line, Tôkyû line, Seibu line.

It is interesting to note how these railway infrastructures developed: at one end, there is the Tôkyô station with a gigantic chain store (Shinjuku, Shibuya, etc.); at the other end, Japanese-style garden cities, which have now become residential areas for the wealthy (Den-en chôfu, etc.); between the two ends, the almost exclusive property of the areas in the immediate vicinity of the tracks, then the construction of building lots that are subsequently sold. The whole operation being tax-exempt because of its public utility value.

The so-called "high economic growth" period (1955-73) that followed the post-war period, considerably accentuated the urban and industrial concentration process. Space became a vital commodity. Tôkyô changed fast to provide logistical support for this economic growth. Most of the land reclaimed from the bay (over 2500 hectares) was constructed during this period. Most of it was then occupied by industry. For reasons of speed, the construction method adopted was that of landfills rather than drying by pumping (Flüchter, 1975). Not only was this land cheaper than "dry ground", but it was also well-situated in relation to land and sea transport routes. Finally, note that the original public ownership of these reclaimed lands makes it easier, as in the past, and still in the name of the interests of the country, to negotiate building leases or even sales of land (Bourdier, in print).

<sup>2</sup> An expression borrowed from Philippe PELLETIER, in "La Machistique - ou le poids du politique dans la constitution des villes japonaises", contribution to the 6th congress of the European Association for Japanese Studies, Berlin, 16- 19/09/91, 8.

In fact, town planning<sup>3</sup> is in private hands. When Prime Minister Tanaka launched his land development policy in 1970, property speculators had a field day. The larger companies already solidly implanted had the upper hand and seized the opportunity to corner the property market, particularly in Tôkyô and in metropolitan areas (Bourdier & Pelletier, 1989). It was the age of the "great rush" (*sô kaishime*). The subsequent inflation in the 1980's merely reinforced the trend towards concentration of landed property in an ever smaller number of hands. Local authorities no longer have the planning means they would sometimes like to have. And the State has found nothing better to do than denationalise certain public companies. All this makes the conurbation of Tôkyô as dynamic as its economy. The wise patience and large investment capacity of the major private developers are covering the capital's most typical neighbourhoods with new developments (the Mori real estate company and the Ark Hills operation). Public housing developers are obliged to compromise with the private sector in order to be able to build new housing in the city (the Mitsui real estate company and the Okawabata operation, River City 21). The building of new road infrastructures has become virtually impossible inside the city, the cost of the land amounting to 99 % of the overall cost of the operation. The only path now open to the Tôkyô city authorities to decongest the city and plan for the future is to recover the last areas of unused public land or to build new artificial islands (Bourdier, 1988).

This is the purpose of the new Zone 13 being built in the middle of the bay, where the programme changes with the changing balance of power between the metropolitan Government and the Mitsubishi real estate company. The Government would like to see a mixed-activity area (housing, leisure, offices) and total control over the use of land on the artificial islands. The Mitsubishi company thinks its own project to build 60 high-rise office buildings on the land it occupies in the Marunouchi zone is quite sufficient to satisfy much of the demand for office space in the capital. The lucrative investments for the private sector, the others for the public sector!

## 5. Tôkyô: The Contagious Amoeba

Since the beginning of the 1980's, the Japanese approach to the city has become more structured: abundant literature in bookstores, numerous government initiatives, symposia, encounters, etc. The virtues of Japanese urban planning are showered with attentions. Firstly, they are vaunted by the specialists. For some, the traditional European model is no longer fashionable. The Paris of Haussman, long considered as the form to imitate, is now responsible for the sclerosis of European cities where the forces of law and centralisation reign. Only a model in the Japanese style, flexible, adaptable and efficient, based on the autonomy of the actors, where human relations are privileged and the crime rate is the lowest in the world, can possibly enable cities overwhelmed by their populations, to face up to the 21st century (Ashihara, 1986, 1987).

This is not the first time Japanese architecture has been taken as a model. In the heyday of Japanese militarism, Taipei, Seoul and certain Chinese towns underwent colonisation which actually left its mark on the urban design. today, economics has replaced the military and Tôkyô, the "great chaos" (according to Shinohara, 1987,

<sup>3</sup> "L'urbanisme" in French, in the sense proposed by Jean-François Tribillon (1991), partic. p. 6 ; namely "Giving form to the urban".

104), the "amoeba-city" (Bourdier, 1988), is now set forth as an example again, but this time as the *nec plus ultra* in urban design for the future. Spontaneous growth at the service of town planning has shown its worth since it is the spatial form that allowed the Japanese economic miracle to happen and kept apace of it. This was the substance of the message to be conveyed on the occasion of the celebration in Tōkyō of the international year of the homeless patronised by the United Nations Organisation in 1987. Nobody really knows whether the visitors who came from all over Asia, who are already past masters in the art of city living, were convinced by the Japanese version.

Having said this, the system has been included in a longer-training strategy in urban problems developed by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (Kokusai kyōryoku jig'yōdan) for the attention of government officials from the so-called developing countries. Upon request from any countries interested, the Agency also organises teams of experts who go out and give advice to local authorities in the field. In so doing, it is paving the way for the major Japanese construction firms, ever ready to launch out and conquer certain risk markets with the backing of their government. Remember in this respect that while North-North relations are dealt with mainly by the private sector in Japan, North-South relations (or perhaps one should say East-West relations in this particular case) are handled by the government in the form of particularly well-targeted official development aid, mainly concerned with developing infrastructures (Beaux, 1991, 140).

Initially technical and reserved for the specialists alone, this idea has now been taken up officially by politicians. "Conciliation, coordination, cooperation, compromise": these are the key words (see footnote 1). If town planning in Japan functions in a three-way dialectic pattern which sets the planned and the accomplished, the local and the global and voluntarism and opportunism in opposition, Tōkyō as the new model to imitate and export cannot hide a very precise urban order under its chaotic appearances. Let us say tentatively that this style of town planning hinges on an inescapable axis generated by the imperial or tennōcratic system (from tennō = emperor). This makes it easy to understand the fact that it manages to transcend the apparent dichotomy between the public and private sectors, that it is not always palpable, and finally that it should be so far from what we are entitled to aspire to: democratic urban planning.

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