12 Tokyo's architecture and urban structure

Change in an ever-changing city

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Shifts in urban transformation

The severe impact of Olympic Games on the urban structure of host cities is evident in many cases. Newly developed areas, stadiums, residential buildings and infrastructure projects shape the city and residents' lives even years after the Games. While the memory of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 is still retained and the urban legacy dissolved over the years into the fabric of the city, the expectations of the 2020 Olympics' impact on space and architecture in Tokyo are oscillating between dream and nightmare. The only thing that can be taken for granted is that Tokyo is changing.

Tokyo with its fast-changing nature exhibits a particularly fluid urban fabric and significant shifts in its urban transformation. As anthropologist Jinnai Hidenobu points out in his spatial anthropology, Tokyo is structured by a "layered arrangement of history and culture, that forms the very basis of the city's life."¹ Hence, former social, legal, and spatial layers continue to affect contemporary urban changes, as well as rules, norms and discourses, albeit intangible or hidden. To explore these structures and mechanics behind the physical structures and changes, this chapter will briefly trace the historical foundations of modern Tokyo and then explore the city through the eyes of city planners.

Changing Tokyo: a continuity throughout history

Tokyo is quite young compared to other Japanese or even European cities – it celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2018. But the starting point of the urban aggregation can be antedated to the establishing of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603, which initiated a massive process of urbanization in Edo, the predecessor of Tokyo. In contrast to planned capitals like Nara or Kyoto, no Chinese-influenced grid masterplan had been enforced.

Edo became Tokyo in 1868, and in the following years transitioned from a feudal center to a modern nation's capital. Massive population growth and industrialization lead to rapid urbanization. This development was interrupted twice, in 1923 by the Great Kanto Earthquake, which caused fires that destroyed most of the eastern part of the city, and the air raids at the end of World War II that again razed the eastern low city (*shitamachi*) to the ground. For urban planners, such massive destructions are often an opportunity to build up from scratch. But while the buildings had burned down, ownership of plots and the social cohesion of neighborhoods remained.

This resulted in unorganized human-scale reconstruction in the aftermath of these catastrophic events. This pattern is called “scrap and build” and means replacing structures after 25 years instead of refurbishing them. It is one of the most basic modes of change, structuring the city until today. In other words, buildings are erected to be demolished in a foreseeable future, and this influences the planning horizon, design, and choice of materials. One consequence is a heterogeneous process of construction and destruction, which gives leeway to react to external changes – a helpful feature in times of destruction and still in use today.

After the war the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) introduced master plans and laws, which included rudimentary zoning, infrastructure, and developments, but they did not enforce their prompt execution. Since the late 1950s, rapid economic growth propelled an immense urban sprawl along the commuter train lines. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics symbolized these changes of the postwar high-growth era, even though most venues were built on former military lands and therefore not really cutting into the urban fabric. Showpiece projects like the Shinkansen bullet train and the elevated Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway were generally necessary, and not solely built for the Olympics. In fact, these infrastructure projects and the Olympics are part of a phenomenon that occurred due to regained economic strength and national self-esteem, forming a political narrative of “reconstruction” and a “bright future.”

An architect's summary of 20th-century building practices in Japan reads: “With some exceptions, housing in Japan [especially Tokyo] happens on its own, from the bottom up. The essential rules are about the city and they are defined with a light touch.”² It is a combination of the “scrap and build” mode of architecture and the “layered arrangements” that pervade urban space. Altogether, the outcome of the process of destructive events (fires, earthquakes, war) and infinite small changes is Tokyo: an urban conglomerate that emerged through numerous distinct (private) actions along inconspicuous rules of zoning, disaster prevention and inheritance tax. Yet, when land prices and construction costs fell after

the bursting of the real estate bubble in the early 1990s and new policies in favor of “privatization and deregulation”³ passed the parliament, corporate developers adopted a new business strategy based on buying up small plots to erect multiuse skyscrapers, or “super-blocks.” This mode of corporate-scale redevelopment stands in sharp contrast to the scrap and build mode: It takes years to plan and build those concrete towers, so they are not easy to dismantle, and they produce commodified, homogenous city space instead of human-scale heterogeneity.

Acceleration and escapism: the urban impact and spectacle of Tokyo 2020

“To understand Tokyo’s bids for the Olympic Games [the unsuccessful 2016 bid and the successful 2020 bid] means to acknowledge the power of real estate developers, [their adjunct construction companies and estate agents] and their practices,” a young city planner voiced at a gathering of planning professionals serenely. “It might be sports, spectacle, or a political show for us, but for the developers it is serious big business,” one of his colleagues continued.

The role of real estate developers becomes clear by focusing on the Olympic Village, branded under the name “Harumi Flag” for the domestic housing market. The land, constructed through land fillings in Tokyo Bay dating back to the 1930s, was slated to host the International Exposition and Tokyo’s first Olympics, both scheduled for 1940 yet cancelled because of World War II. The TMG paid for the construction of residential buildings to host the 17,000 athletes of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, but already sold the property back again to the main developers for a sixth of its market value. For them, the construction of the super-block architecture as well as the redistribution after the Games promises to be a profitable investment. New apartment blocks at the waterfront are also spreading alongside the Olympic Village. At some sites in the eastern low city, they are actively replacing small scale structures that were often considered “the real Tokyo.” The 2020 Olympic Games are fueling and accelerating the construction activities that lead to the vanishing of the old city feel. One such example is the relocation of the Tsukiji fish market, the world’s largest (see Figure 12.1).

Former Vice-Governor of Tokyo Aoyama Yasushi prefers to envision the positive effects of “urban development,” “improved infrastructure,” and a “change of civic life” for a “matured society of sports and leisure.”⁴ Contrary to this optimistic perspective, more sinister or pessimistic views regarding the outcome exist as well: “Maybe it is a deception to give people hope and something to talk and think about, but social and

Figure 12.1 Redevelopment of former Tsukiji fish market into Olympic transport hub, 2019.

Source: © Isaac Gagné.

economic problems won't be solved by the Olympic Games. What can you do?" commented an architecture consultant. After two decades of economic recession in the 1990s–2000s, the catastrophic earthquake, tsunami and nuclear incident of March 2011, and the reality of a shrinking and aging population, the political instrumentalization of the Olympic Games is comprehensible. Besides a positively tuned bureaucracy, this buoyant outlook might also explain why many unrelated undertakings, such as infrastructure developments, reconstruction measures, and urban improvements, are scheduled to be finished in 2020. It is "a sunny spot in a not so bright future," said a young bureaucrat as a summary of his view that the 2020 Olympics are more escapism than eudaimonia.

Whose Games? Whose city? The urge for legacy

The critical question of "whose Games the Tokyo Olympics are" is not easy to answer, but it is quite simple in terms of the brick-and-mortar aspects: The construction and real estate businesses sack the profits, while the national and metropolitan governments harvest a political success story and positive media coverage, resulting in increased international tourism. In contrast, those who live and work in Tokyo are requested to comply and work around this event at their own sacrifice.

This leads us to the second important question regarding the critical assessment of the urban legacy that prevails long after the Games have left for the next host city, Paris 2024: Whose city is Tokyo? The Japan Association of City Planners in 2015 proposed seven recommendations for a balanced post-Olympics legacy, voicing the concerns of inhabitants. They advocate for ecological visions and standards, a sustainable urban landscape, open and human-centered waterfront development, walkable living environments, barrier-free infrastructure, flexible, community-centered institutions, and re-naturalization.⁵ While progress can be seen regarding some aspects such as barrier-free(er) public transport and efforts to strengthen communities based on urban development (*machizukuri*), other proposals concerning sustainability and ecological visions are clearly contradicted by corporate interests and the governmental plans to increase international mass tourism.

Undoubtedly, the ever-changing character of Tokyo is not jeopardized by the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics; it is just another event that contributes momentum to the process. And yet, as revealed above, the open question is which changes, in which mode, to what amount, by whom are shaping the next stratum of Tokyo, and these decisions are not finalized but similarly contested. In other words: “The rulebook that controls Tokyo is flexible. The future vision of the city is outlined but not planned in detail.”⁶ This flexibility is the city’s biggest strength when facing future challenges, but if small-scale change is hamstrung by a preponderance of corporate interests, it also constitutes a vulnerability for the urban organism that is Tokyo.

Notes

- 1 Jinnai, Hidenobu. 1995. *Tokyo: A spatial anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 220.
- 2 See Galloway, William, et al., 2017. “What rules make (Tokyo’s secret code).” In Mundle, Kent (ed.), *House us*. Winnipeg: OCDI Press: 179–186.
- 3 Tsukamoto, Yoshiharu, Jorge Almazán. 2006. “Scrap and build: Alternatives to the corporate redevelopment of Tokyo.” *MONU – Magazine on Urbanism* 4: 6–9.
- 4 Aoyama Yasushi. 2014. “Olympic cities. Spatial planning challenges for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.” *The Japanese Journal of Real Estate Sciences* 28: 42–48.
- 5 Nihon Toshi Keikakuka Kyōkai [Japan society of urban and regional planners]. 2015. *2020nen Tōkyō Orinpikku pararinpikku – mirai e no regashi to suru tame no nanatsu no teigen* [2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics]. Tokyo: Nihon Toshi Keikakuka Kyōkai.
- 6 Galloway et al. 2017: 185.