



# Olympic Proportions

By Régis Arnaud



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## Olympic Enthusiasm

The 2020 Tokyo Olympics seem to have become the rationale for any political and economic decision in Japan. Each public speech must now mention at some point the 2020 Olympics to be taken seriously. Most policies seem to have this event as a final goal. At the same time, the country is bathing in nostalgia for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, by almost all accounts a stunning success for Japan and Tokyo.

It is indeed inevitable to put in parallel the 1964 Olympics and the 2020 Olympics. The decision to give the first Olympics to Tokyo was announced in 1959, when the prime minister was no other than Nobusuke Kishi, the very grandfather of current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who clinched the 2020 bid for Tokyo. In 1962, the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) president was Tsuneyoshi Takeda, the very father of the current JOC president Tsunekazu Takeda. Yet these two Olympics do not have the same significance at all for Tokyo and Japan.

## Olympics 1964

The 1964 Olympics are often mentioned as a key moment in Japan's “economic miracle”. Rightly so. In a study published in 2013, MUFJ bank chief economist Nobuyuki Saji recalled the fantastic boost that the 1964 Olympics provided for the country at that time. According to figures from the Tokyo Institute of Municipal Research that Saji mentions, the country spent ¥1 trillion (\$2.8 billion at the 1964 exchange rate) for the Olympics, or an amazing

one-third of the country's annual budget for 1964, and 3.4% of Japan's GDP. Most of this investment was spent in the layout of the Tokyo-Osaka Shinkansen bullet train (which started only nine days before the opening ceremony of the 1964 Olympics), the *Shuto kosoku* (the suspended highway that runs above the streets of Tokyo) (Photo 1), and many subway lines. In the following years, Japan laid down the Meishin Nagoya-Osaka highway (1965), the Tomei Tokyo-Osaka highway (1969), and, last, the Sanyo Shinkansen between Osaka and Fukuoka (1975). In short, much of Japan's transport infrastructure of today rests on the foundations of what was drawn up at the time and on the occasion of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

The impact of this event was also felt on the global stage. Japanese industry became very competitive after the Olympic games of 1964 and the Osaka Expo of 1970. Thanks to these two events, Saji explains, Japan could show the world its steel, textile, cars and TVs. Between 1964 and 1985, Japanese car exports rose by 36 times, while TV exports rose by 150 times. Perhaps most important of all, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics filled Japanese people with memories that shine to this day. It is not rare, talking to the old generation, to hear tales about the 1964 competition. For example, Japan's women volleyball team success captured the imagination of the entire country (Photo 2 & 3). These Olympics were also a celebration of Japan's modern culture. At the time, Japanese art was probably at its highest level, not only in architecture but also in cinema, literature and design. In Tokyo, the Nippon Budokan and the Yoyogi National Stadium, both built on the occasion of the Games, are still landmark buildings admired by the rest of the world.



Photo 1: JJI

The nearly completed Route No. 4 on the Shinjuku line of the expressway in 1964



Photo 2: AFLO

The Japanese women's volleyball team, “The Oriental Witches”, in action against the Soviet Union in 1964



Photo 3: ©The Asahi Shimbun

Elementary school kids in Nagoya watching the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964



*Kappabashi Dogu-gai, a shopping area with 170 stores offering Japanese, Chinese and Western tableware and lacquerware, kitchen utensils, confectionery, various foods, and many other items*

## Aging Olympics

The first Tokyo Olympics were the symbol of the return of Japan among the most advanced countries after a 15-year long parenthesis of war. Japan was a nation at peace with itself and other countries at that time. Its population was in its prime: the median age in Japan in 1964 was 27. Tokyo, severely hit by the Allied bombings, needed modern infrastructures to sustain its growth. But the country in 2020 will be very different from the country in 1964. Today, the median age in Japan is 46, and it is the oldest in the world. Japan has become a “gray nation” that lacks dynamism.

In this context, one should not expect too much from these Olympics in terms of domestic economic growth. When asked if the Olympic Games would be good for Japan, the Japan economist Richard Katz retorted: “For the Olympians, yes...If Japan thinks that a two-week event like the Olympics will bring economic growth, then the country is truly desperate.” Yet one must acknowledge that Olympics have important economic side-effects. Although they generate huge wasteful spending, they have an impact on the psyche of the organizing country that can turn into innovation and trade. Already, the telecom industry is preparing for the launching of the “5G” standards, pushing Japan ahead once again in the key area of telecommunications.

## Tourism as Japan’s New Export

The biggest impact of the organization of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics will probably be a huge boost to tourism in the economy of the country. It could be said that tourism is, after all, an “export” industry: even though foreigners spend their money in Japan, they buy Japanese goods. The tourism industry will take the place steel, TVs and cars had in Japan’s economy after 1964. It will have an impact on hotels, trains, planes, cars, restaurants, and other sectors.

Foreigners will, therefore, smoothen the current demographic fall of Japan by partly replacing the Japanese clientele. Tourism will have an impact also on the real estate value in Japanese cities, as foreigners force Japanese people to see value in places they consider second-grade. In Tokyo, places like Shinjuku’s *Golden Gai*, the downtown Yanaka area, Shibamata or even Kappabashi (*Photos 4*) are very popular among foreign tourists. They could very well create a “niche” market for properties there.

## A Modest Megalopolis

Tokyo itself has become one of the most modern cities in the world today. But most importantly, it is probably the megalopolis that is the most agreeable to live in, as international comparisons regularly point out. In food, education, pollution, safety, convenience, Tokyo ranks among the best places on earth. How did the city achieve that? Foreigners who do not know Tokyo usually believe the city is part of the “Asian” urban landscape, along with places like Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai, where skyscrapers are the norm. But as people who arrive in the city immediately notice, Tokyo is a unique sort of “modest megalopolis”, where buildings are in general quite small, and neighbourhoods have kept the atmosphere of a “community life” despite economic growth. Like Paris, Tokyo has long been a “horizontal” rather than a “vertical” city. Its beautiful sky is very visible from most parts of the city. The Tokyo Station building, for example, is striking because it is very small compared to its surroundings. Most streets in Tokyo are very calm. This makes Tokyo fundamentally different from other big cities in the rest of Asia. This is what makes Tokyo stand out.

## An Attack on Modesty

This “modesty” is now being challenged from all sides by real



estate developers, who constantly destroy traces of history and beauty in Tokyo in the name of growth. The most striking fact for a foreigner living in Tokyo is the discrepancy between Japan's constant attempt at preserving delicate traditions from the far past, and its enthusiasm in destroying anything of value born in the 20th century. Tokyo in this respect has had a long history of self-destruction in the name of development which continues to this day and will continue in the years ahead.

A few examples. The Imperial Hotel designed in Hibiya by Frank Lloyd Wright survived the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, but not Japan's construction industry that demolished it in 1967. In 2007, the Hibiya Sanshin Building was torn down by its owner Mitsui Fudosan to complete indifference from the local powers. This building, born in 1929, represented the best of early 20th century Japanese architecture. By chance, the destruction of the Sanshin building started the very same day as the construction of the commercial and residential Tokyo Midtown complex of Tokyo, by the same real estate developer. One could not have invented a clearer sign of Tokyo's lack of consideration for its glorious past, and its faith in progress, even if this progress rests on amnesia. More recently, the Tokyo Station Hotel reopened after what it called a "grand renovation". In reality, practically nothing is left of the original hotel. It looks as new and fake as Tokyo-Disneyland Station. In front of Tokyo Station though, the Japan Post building was miraculously saved from demolition by Liberal Democratic Party politician Kunio Hatoyama. Truth be told, this building does not have a high architectural value. Yet it was difficult for Kunio Hatoyama's view to prevail and force Japan Post to back down on its grandiose plan of, again, destroying the whole building.

### Death of the Okura Hotel

Another tragic example is the announced "renovation" of the landmark Okura hotel. This Tokyo institution was built to be on time for the Tokyo Olympiad in 1964. It opened in 1962. "Japanese traditional essence was incorporated in the design, such as *shoji* applied in the main lobby and *namako* wall motifs as seen in old Japanese houses; the sophisticated design achieved by the handiwork and skill of craftsmen was tested in every detail. It was achieved for the first time in history by the joint design work of great architects such as Yoshiro Taniguchi and Hideo Kosaka. This is undoubtedly the greatest example of modern architecture and the masterpiece of hotel architecture Japan has ever had, and it has a cultural and historical value that cannot be reproduced ever again," explains Hiroshi Matsukuma, a leading Japanese expert on modern architecture. Its lobby is legendary among designers around the world. It has hosted countless dignitaries and stars. Yet it is now being destroyed piece by piece. Under the name of "renovation", its rooms have already been "modernized" and lost the unique charm they provided. "The presidential suite of the Okura was absolutely amazing. I just had the time to photograph it for *Wallpaper* before it was torn down," says Fiona Wilson, the Asia editor of *Monocle*, the

most influential magazine on design and architecture. But do Tokyo developers read *Monocle*?

A few months ago, the Okura company announced it would rebuild the main building of the Okura hotel for the stunning cost of \$1 billion, sure enough "by 2019, to be ready for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics". "The plans for renovating our flagship Hotel Okura Tokyo will assure its top position in Japan and Asia-wide," said Toshihiro Ogita, president of Hotel Okura. "The hotel will continue to welcome international VIPs and guests with the very best, most modern conveniences while retaining its traditional Japanese aesthetics."

But it is simply impossible to maintain the charm of the hotel after renovating it. The first sketches of the building show that the "new" Okura will be a building as soulless as the ones in Shinagawa or Nishi-Shinjuku. Everybody in the industry knows that the Okura has already lost what Ogita calls "its top position in Japan and worldwide" — not because the building is too old, but because it has not been properly managed the way modern hotels are being managed by truly global groups like Hyatt or Marriott.

### Threat or Opportunity?

These examples are not isolated cases. On the contrary, they are the norm. Countless buildings in the center of Tokyo of the Meiji and Showa era that would have been kept in a European city like Vienna or Paris are being destroyed through near indifference in the name of "renovation". It seems that every sign of beauty must be destroyed, for any tolerance of it would lead to a slowdown in construction. It is true that were beautiful buildings protected, Japan would follow the same path as France, where buildings are so protected that the construction industry has become a small part of the economy.

And this is why I think the Olympics pose a threat to Tokyo rather than being an opportunity. The 1964 Olympics happened at a time when Japan was still a developing country. They helped kick-start the rebirth of Tokyo when the city needed it. But Tokyo has failed to provide a vision for 2020. What does the city want to look like in five years? Nobody knows. What is certain, however, is that these Olympics have added yet one more reason to make new unnecessary public works in a city that does not need them.

The new National Stadium itself is a case in point. In its bid, Japan had promised the building of a mammoth stadium in Jingumae, one of Tokyo's greenest areas near Meiji Shrine. The stadium has been designed by "starchitect" Zaha Hadid, who had designed the swimming pool for the London Olympics. Since then, the building has been vehemently denounced by Fumihiko Maki, a winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize (often called the Nobel Prize of architecture), Toyo Ito, Kengo Kuma and Arata Isozaki — in short, the most famous and revered Japanese architects around the world. Maki, 85, points out that the 80,000-seat futuristic-looking stadium — some critics say it looks like a bicycle helmet — will be the largest stadium ever built in Olympic history. It will cover 222,000 square meters, or 2.6 times the Tokyo Dome where the Yomiuri Giants play baseball. It would be 70 meters high. The local zoning

law for the stadium neighborhood hitherto authorized only 15-meter high buildings; but it has been changed for this one exception, without proper notification to the local residents.

Maki added that this design would have a disastrous effect on the surrounding scenery; that emergency procedures are impossible with such a design; that no thought has been given to the fantastic maintenance fee that the building will generate after its use during the mere 17 days that the Olympics will last; and that the decision-making process leading to the choice of this project has been completely murky. In an article published in 2013 by the *Kyoto Shimbun*, Hiroshi Matsukuma wrote about this stadium and the criminal neglect of Japan's scenery: "This is not a problem unique to this situation of trying to get the Olympics. This is happening everywhere throughout Japan...Is it not possible in this country to have a democratic process: an open, thorough discussion to try to preserve the scenery created by generations before, in order to give it to ensuing generations?"

Maki explains why, at 85, he decided to fight: "This stadium is bigger than any Olympic stadium ever built. After the Olympics, the building will remain. Who will take care of it? It will be difficult to get income to compensate for its necessary expenditures. An 80,000-seat stadium is not like an opera house or a museum; when unused, it is just a huge chunk of concrete and steel. Look at the stadium that Beijing built for its Olympics, which now stands unused. Another problem is the chosen area, in the middle of Tokyo. This area was created to commemorate the accomplishments of the Meiji Emperor after he passed away in 1912. It includes such world-famous attractions as the shopping area of Omotesando, the Meiji Jingu temple, the nearby Shinjuku Park. Had this stadium been located in Tokyo's waterfront, for example in Odaiba, we might not have raised any objection. But why are they building it in this particular place? There is also the question of security. The building itself is three times bigger than the London Stadium, yet the site is only 70% of the site area of the London stadium! This leaves no openness for emergency procedures. What happens if there is an earthquake when 80,000 people are there?"

Since then the Olympic committee has marginally reduced the footprint of the stadium and changed its design. Prominent architects estimate that the new design is destroying the original design imagined by Zaha Hadid, turning the stadium into another ugly piece of concrete.

### Missed Opportunity

The 2020 Olympics could have been an opportunity to show what truly generates admiration around the world for Japan: its frugality — what Japanese people call *mottainai*. It should have rested more on what already exists. The Tokyo government could have used this opportunity to at least establish strict rules for preserving its landmark buildings the way historic cities like Paris or New York have. It has not done so. If the city becomes a city of tasteless skyscrapers, a sort of elegant Pyongyang that does not differ from

Shanghai or Canton, what is left of the value of Tokyo? With proper restoration programs, the *tsubo* in areas like Shibamata or Yanaka could very well be worth more in 20 years than areas like Roppongi. This requires a political will that seems singularly absent from the Tokyo city hall.

The whole world comes to Paris to admire its buildings. But Paris could have turned out a different way. Had there been no legislation to limit their ambition and protect historical sites, real estate developers would have turned the city into another ugly city in the name of "renovation". Today's most trendy area in Paris is called Le Marais, an ensemble of streets behind the Paris city hall that were saved from real estate development by Culture Minister André Malraux, precisely in ... 1964. Without the single will of this man, this "miracle" would not have happened and Le Marais would have been a commercial district as boring as Shiodome.

### Tokyo Governor Should Not Forget Cultural Policy

Even Tokyo Governor Yoichi Masuzoe, who is always keen on showing his knowledge of French and of French culture, fails to notice that Paris is visited by the whole world not despite the fact that it is old but because it is an old city. Masuzoe has now the grand plan of turning Toranomon into "the Champs-Élysées of Tokyo". He wants to widen the sidewalks of this boring area so that cafés and restaurants can be set up and prosper. But he does not realize that the true attractions of the Champs-Élysées are not the cafés and the restaurants. They are the buildings themselves, which have been there for centuries, preserved against real estate speculation, and the ecosystem of theaters, operas and cinemas surrounding the Champs-Élysées. Every time somebody raises the issue of preserving old buildings, the Tokyo government replies with the same answer: "It is simply impossible because most buildings are made of materials that cannot be kept" or "It would be too expensive." But it is simply not true. All techniques are today available to preserve the most beautiful buildings of Tokyo. As for the costs, they are offset by earnings generated by the valorization of the land and by tourism earnings. Without a proper cultural policy, Tokyo will not be able to maintain its attractiveness. So then, why would tourists come to Tokyo?

This is what former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had in mind when he proposed to take out the part of the expressway that passes over Nihonbashi bridge in Tokyo, arguably the most vivid example of urban developers' contempt for true Japanese culture. By stressing how sad this view is, Koizumi was calling on all Japanese to beware of "progress" that is made at the expense of the cultural legacy of Japan.

The slogan for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic bid was "discover tomorrow". In its application, the Tokyo Metropolitan government boasted that Tokyo is "the world's most forward-looking city". Tokyo may discover tomorrow, but its government still has not discovered the value of yesterday. **JS**

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