

Interview with Nihonbashi Urban Planners of Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.

# Reforming Nihonbashi to Recreate Communal Prosperity

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

Nihonbashi, a downtown district of Tokyo consisting of traditional sweet shops, tea shops, the oldest Japanese department stores such as Mitsukoshi and Takashimaya, and traditional Japanese restaurants, evokes nostalgia in many Japanese, particularly the elderly, for the good old days of the 1950s or 1960s. It was a center of Edo culture during the Tokugawa Era (1603-1868) before the Meiji Restoration, the beginning of Japan's modernization, but also a symbol of modern Japan even after that with its large department stores and Japanese Western-cuisine restaurants. Even later, in the 1960s when Japan enjoyed high economic growth, it continued to be a symbol of prosperity. In those days, Nihonbashi offered a taste of the wealthy life and culture of the upper class. In recent years, as more trendy spots increase, such as Tokyo Midtown in Roppongi, the glory of Nihonbashi seems to have started to fade.

To try to restore it, the Nihonbashi community of traditional shop owners, residents and urban developers got together and started a project of urban planning and development. Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd, one of the giant urban developers in Japan, which started its original business, a traditional clothing shop, 300 years ago in Nihonbashi, joined this group as its core member. The following is an interview with the two key officials of Mitsui Fudosan involved in this revitalization project. Mitsutoshi Tenda is project manager of the Corporate Communications Group, Corporate Communications Department, and Osamu Nakahara is executive manager of the Planning Group, Nihonbashi Urban Planning and Development Department.

## History of Business

**JS:** Tokyo is now undergoing reform everywhere. Since it is one of the largest cities in the world, people all over the world will be curious to see how it will change, and there will be a growing interest as the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics approach. Before looking into the Nihonbashi Reform Project, I would like to ask you to give a brief history of your company's involvement in the urban development of Tokyo.

**Tenda:** The origin of our Mitsui Group Corporation was in 1673 in the Edo Period when our founder, Takatoshi Mitsui, opened the Echigoya clothing shop in Nihonbashi. Echigoya's business led to a money-exchange business and was eventually developed to become a major business group with many leading companies.

Our company, Mitsui Fudosan, encouraged by such historic connections with Nihonbashi, is now as one of the residents of this



*Mitsutoshi Tenda (left) and Osamu Nakahara, Mitsui Fudosa Co., Ltd.*

region working on its reform in collaboration with long-established stores in the area.

We were founded in 1941 for the purpose of managing the real estate assets of the Mitsui Group, independently from its other business operations. At the beginning, we mainly worked on running office buildings, but as the business expanded we got into reclamation for industrial land in the second half of the 1950s. We had a number of historic buildings in our list of constructions, such as the Kasumigaseki Building, the first skyscraper in Japan in 1968, LaLaport Tokyo Bay, the first American-style suburban shopping center in Japan in 1981, and Mitsui Outlet Park Osaka Tsurumi, the first large-scale outlet mall in Japan in 1995. We call ourselves the first challengers, having tried to get into

new areas such as large office buildings, residences and commercial facilities earlier than our rivals. This is because we did not have any large-scale real estate assets and thus we had to try to enter into new business. We also worked on Tokyo Disneyresort and LaLaport Ski Dome SSAWS, though the latter does not exist anymore.

On the question of the reform of Nihonbashi, we started to feel the area was declining as a center of retail business when one of the oldest department stores, Tokyu (once called Shirokiya), located on the corner of Nihonbashi Intersection, closed in the second half of the 1990s. During the Edo Period, Nihonbashi was the center of commerce, culture and art in the city of Edo, then the largest city in the world, but as time passed during the modernization of Japan it was replaced by Ginza as the center of commerce and by Marunouchi and Otemachi as business centers. The residents became increasingly concerned about its decline in status and began thinking about how to restore it. We got involved in its revitalization as one of the land proprietors. The second stage of our Nihonbashi revitalization plan started in 2014 and to restore the prosperity of this area to that of earlier times, nine projects are now underway towards the 2020s in the Nihonbashi and Yaesu areas.

**JS: Have you been mainly working on residential and commercial facilities rather than business facilities?**

**Tenda:** No. Our main business has always been office buildings. During the high growth period, they had business offices in the center of the city, and in the suburbs they had residential areas, but now the concept of residential areas in the center of the city has started to draw attention. In conventional thinking, an office building is very formal, so that outsiders find it difficult to feel at home there. But today we see increasingly complex buildings with offices on the upper floors and commercial facilities on the lower floors — buildings for a wide range of people. Our urban development projects today are shifting to construction of such buildings whose utility is enhanced by more complex use, and with strengthened services and operations added or with events showing the good performance of the whole district. This is urban development based on combined facilities and services.

In Nihonbashi there are still many longtime established shops remaining. In the old style of urban development, the mainstream business would be to replace them with large-scale buildings by purchasing those shop owners' land. Now we are changing our way of business to try to increase the area's charm by keeping its diversity, such as having office buildings equipped with high technology for work during the daytime, old established restaurants for lunch and traditional Japanese-style pubs for drinking at night. This is the trend of our business.

## **New Town Building of Nihonbashi — Amusement Created in Tokyo**

**JS: In Nihonbashi there seem to be many new entertainment spots, such as COREDO Muromachi, a complex for entertainment with restaurants and boutiques. When was this new building launched?**

**Nakahara:** I think the closing down of Tokyu Department Store provided great momentum. It was a great shock to see one of the three long-established department stores — Mitsukoshi, Takashimaya and Tokyu — close down when the bubble economy burst in the 1990s. This motivated us and the residents and shop owners in the area to promote a revitalization plan through collaboration between the public sector and private business. COREDO Nihonbashi opened in 2004, effectively replacing Tokyu. In 2005, Nihonbashi Mitsui Tower with the Mandarin Oriental Tokyo Hotel was completed. COREDO Muromachi 1 opened in 2010 and COREDO Muromachi 2 and 3 were finished in 2014. So you can see how the Nihonbashi Revitalization Plan has been progressing steadily.

**JS: When it was decided that Tokyo would host the Olympics and Paralympics in 2020, many urban development plans seemed to have been launched already. Are you trying to work on new town buildings in preparation for the Olympics?**

**Tenda:** Not really. The nine projects in progress at this moment to restore the prosperity of Nihonbashi will be completed towards the 2020s. But since this is a 10-year long-term urban development project, we had started it before Tokyo decided to bid for the Olympics. Nevertheless, we do see now a specific target towards 2020 and feel it absolutely necessary to promote the values of Tokyo and Japan to the increasing number of foreign tourists who will visit on the occasion of the Tokyo Olympics.

## **Collaboration with Regional Community**

**JS: In promoting your new buildings, how are you cooperating with local residents and local governments to ensure the community shares the same goals?**

**Nakahara:** We have meetings with people from the community and the public sector on mutual collaboration and elaboration of plans for new buildings. I believe we are all moving in the same direction. Our interests could differ when specific projects are implemented in practice, so in order to keep them progressing we need to confirm exactly what kind of building we are engaged in in advance. In our case, from the start of the projects, all the interested groups have been involved in this process of prior consultation.

**JS: Is this prior consultation process involving all the interested groups working well?**

**Nakahara:** Yes. We have many long-established shops here in the Nihonbashi area and these shops' owners might be considered very

conservative, but they say unanimously that it would be difficult to maintain their business by stubbornly sticking to old ideas or customs. They say that they have always been trying to adopt new ideas, which may be one reason why they have survived. So they are not reluctant to start a new project to attract young people as well and renovate the district to eliminate the image of Nihonbashi as a town for elderly people. They are all very positive about the introduction of events to attract younger people and foreign tourists. This innovative spirit in the community is exactly in line with our company's revitalization plan, that is to create a town while "Retaining and Reviving".

**JS: Nihonbashi seems to have already started to be attractive for young people today. What do you think is going well, and what needs to be improved?**

**Nakahara:** We have "ECO EDO Nihonbashi" as an event organized by the whole area during the summer holidays. Thanks to this event, there were many more young visitors in their twenties and thirties to the area, enjoying walking in *yukata* on the streets. Since COREDO Muromachi 2 and 3 were opened we have been doing our best to attract people in their thirties or forties and we feel that visitors are now beginning to encompass a wide range of generations.

As for tourists from overseas, I believe the Nihonbashi area should have its own charm for them, distinct from other popular spots such as Ginza. We do not have large drugstores or any large discount shops of home electronic devices that Asian tour groups frequently visit, so we cannot expect explosive purchases of such goods. But we are seeing a steady increase in individual tourism, and have

created a "tour for enjoying Japanese hospitality" by using the Nihonbashi Information Center or Japanese tatami rooms. We believe the most important idea in attracting tourists to Nihonbashi is that they can find authentic high-quality goods there, but not necessarily the most expensive ones.

### For the Interest of Tourists

**JS: What kind of public services would be available for foreign tourists visiting Nihonbashi?**

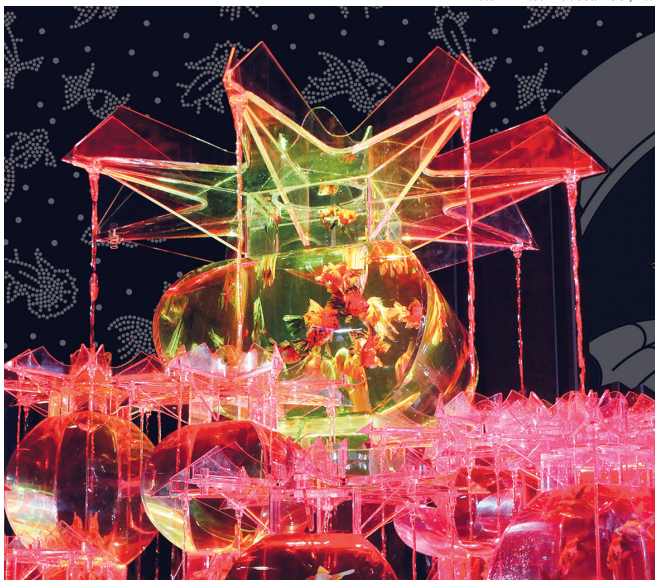
**Nakahara:** We have concierges from many countries working in the Nihonbashi Information Center on the basement floor of COREDO Muromachi 1 for the convenience of foreign tourists, and their planned tour of this shopping building titled "Best of Japan Tour" has already gained a good reputation. Nihonbashi used to be the starting point of the five main routes in Japan and there was also the Nihonbashi river. This meant that at Nihonbashi all goods and materials came together and the people in the town were supposed to be able always to get the highest-quality goods and the most delicious food. Given this historical background, the key concept of COREDO Muromachi is to have the best and highest-quality goods from all over Japan in the shops. The "Best of Japan Tour" enables foreign tourists to find brand goods from all over Japan, and it also demonstrates how to make small pieces of sliced dried bonito for cooking, how to sharpen kitchen knives and how to use chopsticks. What Japanese regard as routine can often be new and fresh to foreign eyes, as we have discovered from this tour (*Photo 2, 3*).

**JS: Are there any plans for new tourist attractions in Nihonbashi? For example, how is the plan to put the overhead expressway underground to restore scenic views going?**

**Nakahara:** The question of the view being destroyed by a highway over Nihonbashi Bridge was mentioned when it was constructed on the occasion of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. There is a local NGO called the "Association for Preserving Nihonbashi Bridge" whose mission is exactly to restore the sky over Nihonbashi Bridge. Our company is also supporting them and participating in their activities. It is up to the government to decide on this question and nobody knows what will happen. Nevertheless, we locals are continuing to work to restore the view.

At this moment, we are working on blueprints of some specific development projects towards the 2020s for the riverside area in cooperation with land owners there. If we restore the view of the blue sky over Nihonbashi Bridge and develop the riverside area and create an agreeable space, that will be something that no other area has.

Photo 1: Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.



Art Aquarium at Nihonbashi Mitsui Hall



Photo 2: Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.



Best of Japan Gourmet Tour in COREDO Muromachi with English-speaking foreign concierges working in the Nihonbashi Information Center

Photo 3: Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.



Japanese hospitality through OMOTENASHI Experience at a tea ceremony in the "Kyorakutei" room in COREDO Muromachi 3

## JS: We have the River Seine in Paris and the River Thames in London, so shouldn't we also have a River Nihonbashi in Tokyo?

**Nakahara:** Yes. We have four key targets in our revitalization plan: "creation of industries", "creation of a neighborhood", "coexistence in the local community" and "revitalization of an aquapolis". We consider "revitalization of an aquapolis" as the most crucial one. This is an attempt to restore the riverside district that used to exist in the Edo Period in the center of the city. This, including the question of the revitalization of the quality of the water, can only be done by pursuing help from the administration. We hope to create a space where a variety of people including office workers and foreign tourists can enjoy getting together.

### Best Mix of Past & Future

**JS:** I think you are trying to respect the traditions of Nihonbashi and restore the old town in contemporary circumstances rather than creating a brand new town.

**Nakahara:** Yes, that is true. Our concept of town building is to preserve the historic architecture and utilize it as much as possible, restore the lost views and fuse them with the contents of the future.

**Tenda:** We are working on preservation of historic buildings such as Nihonbashi Bridge itself, Mitsui Main Building and Takashimaya Nihonbashi Store, designated as a national cultural asset, and also devising ways to blend them with contemporary buildings. For example, we reconstructed Fukutoku Shrine when we created COREDO Muromachi. This shrine, founded in the Heian Period (794-1185), had been declining due to urbanization, in particular during

the post-World War II period, and was finally moved to the roof of a building. We restored it as a symbol of the local community. We believe it is key to Japanese town building to keep a balance between the old structures and the new ones we have to create.

**Nakahara:** In talking about the revitalization of Nihonbashi, people tend to think about the big buildings along the main street (Chuo-dori), but we are thinking about a little wider area. For example, in the whole area of the old Nihonbashi town places like Ningyocho, Hamacho and Bakurocho still retain many aspects of old culture, such as traditional cuisine. There are also increasing numbers of offices or ateliers of design and art businesses in Higashi-Nihonbashi, and young people are working in those places. Bakurocho and Yokoyamacho area, for example, used to be the area of the textile wholesale business and their old storage houses or offices remained unused even after their business was gone. The art and design offices have recently started using those deserted spaces. So we are seeing today many creative people coming to this area. I guess this is because of the cultural background of Nihonbashi.

We truly want to take advantage of this momentum in our building plans. How to associate these cultural aspects of the Nihonbashi East Side with the more urbanized area along the main street (Chuo-dori) will be an issue that needs to be resolved in the future. In the meantime we will try to promote an attractive balance between the past and the future in this area. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who works for the NPO Yokohama Community Design Lab and is also a Hama-link Project leader and writer for the Yokohama Keizai Shimbun.