

No Place Like Home

By Ato Ekusa

Japan is a very small country, with a land area only one twenty-fifth that of the United States. What is more, a long mountain range runs right down the middle of the Japanese archipelago, leaving very little flat land on which to build housing. Partly because of these geographical features, land prices in Japan are extremely high. The tendency of Japan's population to concentrate in a few major cities has pushed land prices up even higher.

In the center of Tokyo, a piece of prime land costs from ¥50 million to ¥100 million (from \$357,000 to \$714,000 at the rate of ¥140/\$) per *tsubo* (one *tsubo* being equivalent to 3.3 square meters). The terrible thing is that land sells even at these astronomical prices, because the Japanese prefer to live in a detached house with a garden rather than in a condominium.

The results of a recent survey on housing by the Prime Minister's Office made this point clear. The survey, carried out in November 1990, covered 3,000 men and women over 20 years old living in households with two or more members in either their own housing or in rented accommodation in the Tokyo metropolitan area and Osaka-Kobe area.

Asked whether they wanted to live in a detached house, a high ratio of 83.4% of the respondents answered in the affirmative, while only 6.1% said that they wanted to live in a condominium. Needless to say, of the respondents already living in a detached house, more than 90% replied in the affirmative to this question. The main reason stated by the respondents for wanting to live in a detached house was to have a garden. Japan has become one of the most advanced technological states in the world, but at the roots it is still an agricultural, rice-cultivating nation.

In the ancient past the Japanese called their country "the land of abundant paddy fields and rice." The Japanese people had a strong belief in the soil. Indeed, according to religious scholars, one of the



A popular desire to live in a detached house with a garden rather than in a condominium causes already high land prices in Japan to keep on increasing.

most important aspects of Shinto, the folk religion that constitutes the foundation of the Japanese mentality, is belief in the *ubusunagami*, or god of the soil. The Japanese maintained a kind of religious belief in the power of the soil, which puts forth buds on plants and trees in spring, covers them with green leaves in the summer, and makes them bear fruit in autumn.

Twice a year a national high-school baseball tournament takes place at the Koshien Stadium in Osaka. As a souvenir of their playing at the mecca of high-school baseball in Japan, students traditionally put some of the soil from the ground into a bag and take it home with them. Many religious scholars claim that this custom has its roots in the Japanese people's belief in the *ubusunagami*. Because of this belief lingering in their subconscious, the vast majority of Japanese long to live, as the statistics reveal, in a detached house with a garden.

When asked about the size of the plot they would like to own, however, 32.4% of the respondents modestly opt for one in the 150 to 200 square meter range. Americans and Europeans often tease the Japanese for living in what they call rabbit hutches. But with residential land in large cities costing at least from ¥300,000 to ¥1 million per square meter, it is not surprising that the Japanese dream of nothing more spacious.

Of the respondents living in rented accommodation, 68.7% expressed the desire to live in their own detached house. Perhaps the figure should be higher, but the fact is that many people have simply

given up the hope of buying a house with prices so high. Of the respondents living in rented accommodation, 29.1% replied that they would like to own a house if possible, but cannot hope to do so.

At present, the Japanese cannot even live in rabbit hutches. Of the total number of respondents, 63.8% stated that they had no plan to build a new house in the next 10 years. Some 55% of the respondents living in rented accommodation who had no plan to build a new house said the reason was that they could not afford to do so. Of the respondents aged 40 or over, 60% replied that they had given up hope of owning a house.

In answer to a multiple response question about what housing and land policies they hoped the government would adopt, 59.3% of the respondents, the highest figure, cited the need to reduce land and housing prices, 50.2% cited reductions in taxes on fixed assets and inheritance taxes, and 47.8% cited the reduction of taxes to make it easier to own a house.

The results of the survey brought into relief the pitiable situation of the Japanese. While Japan as a state goes about purchasing bonds in the United States and earning a reputation as the wealthiest country in the world, individual Japanese cannot even afford to buy a cramped home. Japan is an economic superpower whose people cannot scrape together enough money to buy a house even if they keep working until the day they die. ■

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Photo: Kyodo News Service