

# Tokyo Achieving Yet Another Major Metamorphosis

By *Imamura Souhei*

It has been said that once one could see Mt. Fuji from anywhere in Tokyo on a clear day, but now one can only see it in a few places, if one is lucky, a few times a year. When one looks down on Tokyo from the top floor of a skyscraper, the highlight is the way that the closely packed buildings appear to completely engulf the surface. Although people don't usually notice it on the ground, from up in the air they see that the metropolis is always slightly hazy from exhaust fumes. The optical illusion of a sea of buildings is dizzying: stretching as far as one can see into the hazy horizon, it appears that buildings have flooded the whole world. The vast majority are relatively low-rise buildings, or concentrations of detached houses in some areas, but tall skyscrapers that stand out are scattered here and there. And among them, there are many more buildings just ready to spring up like new grass after the first spring rain. The skyline of Tokyo is changing.

This is a result of the 2002-2003 rush to build skyscrapers. Major redevelopment projects are making steady progress in Roppongi, Shiodome, Shinagawa, the Tokyo Station area, Osaki and in various other locations. Some have already been completed, and 2003 will see a peak in the scheduled completion of a range of projects. The completion of these buildings will determine Tokyo's cityscape for the next few decades and will compel the reconstruction of Tokyo's infrastructure.

Roppongi Hills in Roppongi 6-chome aims to be a 24-hour city that combines the arts, media and business. It consists of a 238m office building with a science fiction appearance, designed by U.S. architects Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, two 159m high rise residential buildings for which Conran & Partners supervised the design, the new Asahi National Broadcasting Co. (TV Asahi) headquarters designed by Maki

Fumihiko, the Grand Hyatt Tokyo hotel and other facilities, on an 11 hectare building site. It is Japan's biggest private redevelopment project, and is scheduled to open in spring 2003, with total costs amounting to ¥270 billion.

In the Shiodome area, the largest central business district (CBD) redevelopment project in Tokyo is taking place on a total area of about 31 hectares. Part of the project is already open, including the 210m new headquarters of Dentsu designed by world-renowned architect Jean Nouvel, and the Caretta Shiodome integrated commercial and cultural facility, designed by Jon Jerde. The completion of the new Nippon Television Network Corp. headquarters and the new Matsushita Electric Works Tokyo headquarters buildings is set to follow, and Shiseido Co. is also relocating its head office functions to this area. Ultimately, 13 skyscrapers are planned, and they will all be completed by the spring of 2005.

Shinagawa is a focal area as a strategic point for transport, with a new *Shinkansen* bullet train station to be completed in fall 2003 and easy access to Haneda Airport. Ten skyscrapers about 150m high have already been completed, and the area will form a very important hub of offices, with major companies including Sony Corp., Canon Sales Co., Obayashi Corp. and Mitsubishi Corp., taking up residence.

In the Tokyo Station area, the Maru Biru (Marunouchi Building), which was the old face of Marunouchi, was reborn as a skyscraper in 2002 and achieved the stunning feat of attracting 7.1 million visitors in the three months after it opened with its bevy of fashionable restaurants and retail tenants. In addition, the Four Seasons Hotel Marunouchi has moved into Pacific Century Place Marunouchi, which was built with investment from Hong Kong. More than 10 skyscrapers are planned in

this area alone, which is expected to achieve a transformation from a business area to an urban arena for entertainment.

The number of skyscrapers under construction elsewhere runs well into double figures, including nine 100m skyscrapers under construction in Shinagawa Seaside Forest and others in Nihonbashi, Akihabara and Akasaka.

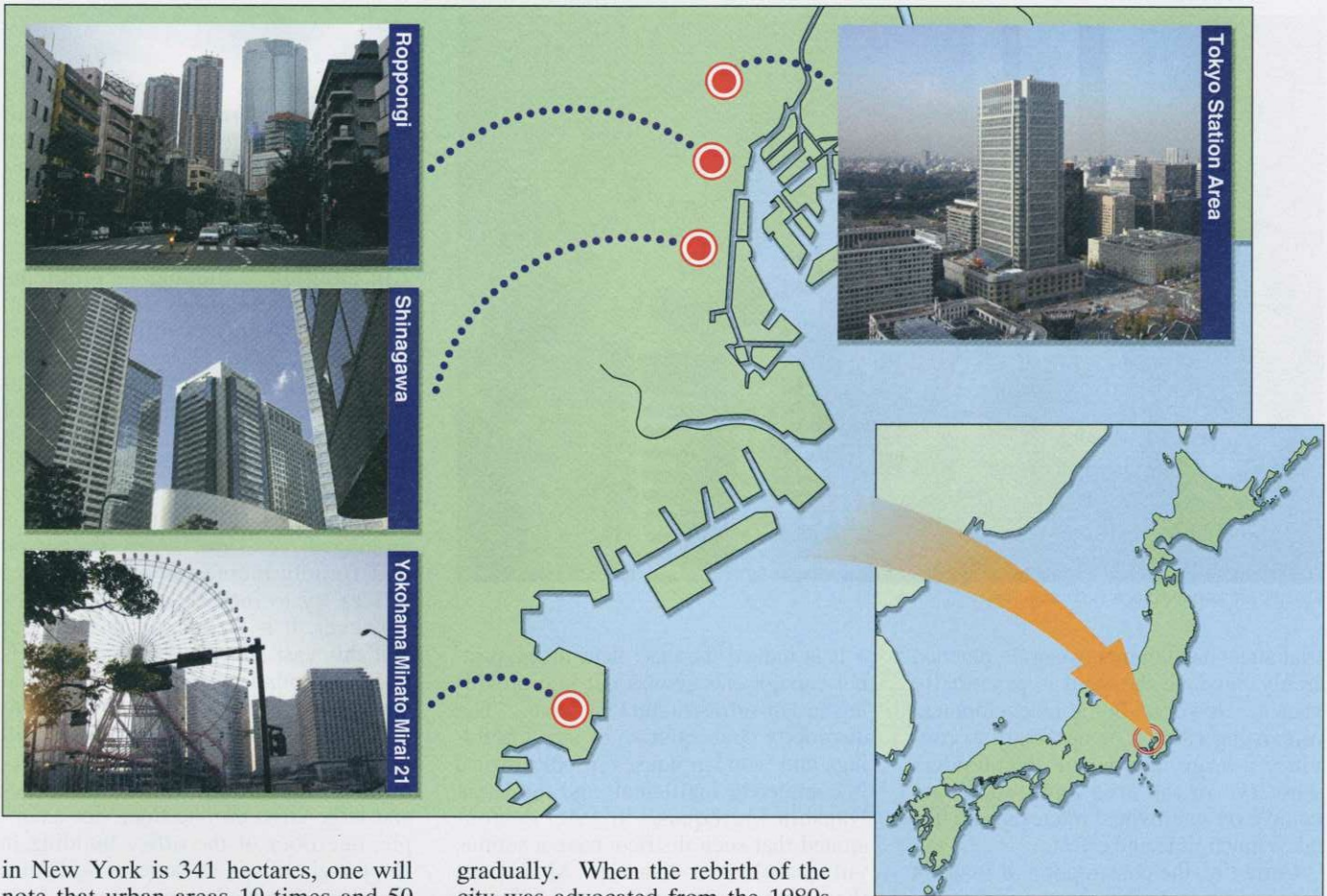
In the past, there were very few examples of skyscrapers, with an average of only one built per year. The current flood of skyscraper construction is clearly unusual. It is not only transforming the Tokyo skyline, but is also bringing about significant changes in the structure of the city itself. In addition, until now, skyscrapers have simply been buildings that stacked office space, as typified by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the representative architect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although they may arguably have been considered symbols of civilization, they were black boxes with no relationship to the lives of ordinary people. However, in the redevelopment projects currently under way, the areas and the skyscrapers are becoming akin to giant theme parks that function as machines to draw in customers for new experiences of amusement.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone, the city of Tokyo has had reason to achieve three major transformations. In the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the whole of Nihonbashi and 98% of Asakusa were destroyed by fire, and a 3,740-hectare area of buildings was burned to the ground. It was the world's biggest pre-war urban conflagration. Furthermore, Tokyo was subjected to air raids by the U.S. military during World War II, and about 19,000 hectares was destroyed by fire. The scale of each of these events is probably too big to be easily imagined, but if one considers that the area of Central Park



The Skyline of Tokyo is Changing;  
Major Redevelopment in Roppongi, Yokohama, Shinagawa and the Tokyo Station Area

Photos : Imamura Souhei



in New York is 341 hectares, one will note that urban areas 10 times and 50 times bigger were reduced to ashes in a short time. The third transformation took place around the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics during the high growth era. Expressways were laid over the rivers and canals of Tokyo, which in the past had been termed a city of water like Venice, and a great deal of reclaimed land was created in Tokyo Bay.

There are few examples where a modern metropolis has repeatedly experienced unwanted transformation into a "vacant lot" like this. Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann is famous for the great rebuilding of Paris, with which he created the modern city by clearing the districts of the past and laying out a number of major boulevards in the existing city. Many buildings in the centers of cities such as Berlin and Rotterdam were destroyed during World War II, and many other cities in Europe also sustained major damage as a result of the war. Nevertheless, these cities achieved their subsequent development

gradually. When the rebirth of the city was advocated from the 1980s and large-scale urban redevelopment went ahead, cities conducted major development away from urban centers, as in London's Docklands, without taking a scalpel to their existing city centers. New York, almost a synonym for a metropolis, has never experienced the rebuilding of the entire city and has arguably grown steadily to reach its present form. Structure, size and other factors vary from city to city, and it is difficult to make simple comparisons, but a metropolis like Tokyo that has experienced several radical transformations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is obviously unusual. In addition, each time Tokyo has achieved miraculous revival and development. However, the fact that there has been virtually no effective urban planning on any of these occasions has both given rise to the distinctive features of Tokyo as a city, as well as being at the root of a range of contemporary problems.

Turning now to the differences in the

locations of large-scale redevelopment in post-war Tokyo, they can be divided roughly into three categories. The first category is development carried out on land created through reclamation from Tokyo Bay. While reclamation has been going on since Tokyo became the heart of Japan 400 years ago, the areas reclaimed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were extensive, and recent examples include Makuhari, Tokyo Seaside Subcenter, Yokohama Mirai 21 and Tennozu. The second category is the conversion of vast industrial lots that are no longer needed. Shinjuku Fukutoshin is a former waterworks while the redevelopment at Shiodome and Shinagawa is on former national railway sites. The third category is the reorganization of existing urban districts, and examples include Roppongi Hills, Daikanyama Address and the Osaki district redevelopment. In the case of reclaimed land and indus-



Photo: Imamura Souhei



Closely packed buildings in central Tokyo

trial sites, developments can be planned freely because the land is practically vacant. However, in the redevelopment of existing cities, it is necessary to convince a large number of stakeholders who live in the area and coordinate complexly intertwined interests, and this takes much time and effort.

Currently, the construction of roads in provincial areas has become a major political problem in Japan. This is because in the past, it has been guided by the interests of politicians so that road projects with no prospect of profit have been implemented in provincial areas, creating a massive cumulative deficit. As a result, the general public has the commonsense impression that new construction will be avoided as much as possible in the future, and the Koizumi Cabinet is also attempting to advance reforms in this direction. This is one example showing that the myth that the dispersion of funds through public works will support local economies, which has been stubbornly protected in post-war Japan, is beginning to crumble. However, as if to compensate for that, the Koizumi Cabinet forced the approval of a special law to promote the development of CBDs. The law aims to facilitate urban development by significantly deregulating the content and processes of construction in special CBD areas.

It is indeed the case that, in the past, not enough energy was put into providing urban infrastructure in Japan. The disorderly concentration of small buildings and wooden houses in old districts is completely inefficient, and the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 demonstrated that such districts have a serious vulnerability to disaster. Moreover, there is chronic traffic congestion in CBDs. For example, the proportion of roads by area is 15.4% in the Tokyo city center, which is quite low in comparison to 23.2% in New York and 20% in Paris. However, the primary objective of the Koizumi Cabinet's promotion of urban development is salvaging the economy, rather than providing better urban infrastructure. In particular, active support for facilitating development means it will be more difficult to protect existing cityscapes and the rights of current residents than it has been in the past. Therefore, far from developing the cities, there is a strong possibility that this measure will exacerbate the urban environment, and the criticism that the only people who are happy with the policy are some of the developers starts to make sense. I will examine this point again later, but there is still new technological work being done in the construction of high-rise buildings. This consists largely of efforts to build them more efficiently, so the era when

such buildings could not be built because they were technically difficult has gone. Therefore, such construction must be discussed from the perspectives of the environment and safety, but there is still very little debate from these perspectives.

In addition, a number of problems have been pinpointed as stemming from the massive supply of office space that will peak in 2003. These issues are collectively termed the "Year 2003 problem." Apparently, in the single year of 2003, 2,180,000m<sup>2</sup> of office space will be completed, which is equivalent to 20 skyscrapers. Where will that amount of demand come from in the midst of a prolonged recession? Area per person is definitely increasing every year as offices try to increase comfort levels. However, it is frequently pointed out that this vast supply of office space is based on optimistic forecasts of demand made during the era of the bubble economy. In fact, because the newly built offices in skyscrapers excel in convenience, as they have the latest facilities and large areas on one floor (for example, one floor of the office building in Roppongi Hills is as large as 4,500m<sup>2</sup>), they have received strong support from tenants. On the other hand, many old low-rise office buildings suffer from a number of problems. These problems include the inability to accommodate today's needs in terms of facilities related to developments in IT and concerns about safety in disasters, such as earthquakes. Therefore, more and more tenants are moving out. As a result, office vacancy rates of 30-40% are beginning to appear in some parts of the CBD, which is a major problem. However, there is no indication that the large supply of office buildings will end in 2004, given favorable conditions for building that include government policy, the release of land that is accompanying the disposal of non-performing loans and low interest rates.

Tracing the history of skyscrapers in Tokyo or Japan, we note that the first was the Kasumigaseki Building, completed in 1968 about a century behind the first high-rise buildings in Chicago and New York. However, although a



high-rise building, at 147m, the Kasumigaseki Building came nowhere close to the 444m Empire State Building completed in 1931. The reason high-rise buildings were not built in Tokyo earlier was that the Building Standard Law set a uniform maximum height of 31m. This was for two reasons: the technical issues involved in a country prone to earthquakes and protection of the cityscape. Subsequently, Nishi Shinjuku became synonymous with skyscrapers. For a long time, skyscrapers brought together the latest technical knowledge and sought the highest technical and design standards. Each was a major project akin to the staging of an immense drama. However, since the 1990s, as the numbers have increased, they are no longer so special. In addition, as the technical difficulties have decreased, they are now relatively easy to build. In the past, skyscrapers were front-page news, but nowadays a whole succession of high-rise buildings is being built without anyone noticing. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is as if skyscrapers are being mass-produced. It has frequently been pointed out that the Tokyo cityscape has always been unimposing, but in the midst of this, the skyscrapers of the past at least maintained a position as symbolic landmarks. However, many of the buildings constructed over the past few years are now mediocre and cheap looking, although there are a few outstanding designs by famous foreign architects. Skyscrapers once incorporated the dreams and pride of all the contractors, planners and builders involved in their construction, but now they have become mere buildings thrown up in accordance with a simple economic principle.

Recently, the astonishing speed and scale of urban development in China has frequently been under discussion. For example, apparently, a new urban area the size of all Tokyo's CBDs combined is created every year in the suburbs of Shenzhen. On the other hand, China is a surprisingly vast country, where it is said that desertification affects an area about the size of the whole of Japan every year. In Shanghai, which is arguably symbolic

of Chinese development, buildings are now being constructed at a great pace. It is rumored that architects design buildings at the rate of one per week. Apparently, they scan the facades of the latest buildings from international architecture journals, create a processed image on computer, pass it on to the builders, and the building is built just like that. Even non-specialists can probably see that a one-week design time is too short, and to provide a point of reference, the design time for the new Dentsu headquarters building in Shiodome that I touched on earlier was two years and eight months, or calculated simply, about 150 times longer. Obviously, standards for design time on which calculations are based are completely different, so it is clearly unfair to make a simple comparison. However, I think this enables us to see that as the time needed for design by an architect completely differs between Japan and China, Chinese methods are extremely radical. In other words, buildings and cities are clearly being produced in an entirely different way in China than in Europe, the United States and Japan. Although I have not in fact seen them myself, the cities and buildings produced in this way are very cheap and crudely designed structures, judging from photographs and reports. So the large number of mediocre designs among Japanese skyscrapers is not without relation to this global tendency. The rush of skyscraper construction in Manhattan of the 1920s and 1930s reflected the energy of America at the time, producing many very high quality buildings such as the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, which are now cultural assets. It is highly questionable whether development conducted by general contractors simply because construction prices have fallen in Japan's current recession will make a contribution to cities, while it destroys the environment.

Consequently, while I certainly do not agree with this cavalier approach to urban design, it is not an easy task to disregard trends. In Vienna 100 years ago, architect Adolf Loos predicted that buildings decorated with ornamentation

would become like outdated props and would have to be replaced by simple, functional, modern buildings in the future. In fact, cities around the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been dominated by that kind of office building. Although the loss of the traditional buildings was criticized at the time as barbaric, the times no longer permitted the labor and time involved in ornately decorating each building.

Looking at the current situation from this perspective may be the key to interpreting today's circumstances: perhaps it is useless to deplore the deterioration in the quality of design in the face of the enormous force of today's social conditions. Naturally, although talking of problems is a generalization, the variety of issues that need to be discussed are complexly interwoven, and yet it is unacceptable to tolerate the way development is now being implemented without comment. It is forecast that the Japanese population will continue to increase slowly from the current 130 million, and after peaking in 2007, will decrease and then stabilize at about 60 million to 80 million around 2050. In other words, Japan will experience a time of transition from an era characterized by dreams of future growth to an era of a stable society like Europe. To be frank, the Japanese people are actually extremely bewildered about the social change that has already taken place and have yet to take hold of a real and concrete image of what the environment around them will be like. However, at least in the cities, carrying out incoherent development is already ineffective, and we need to search for the best form of maturity that will enrich urban life. Tokyo has achieved major metamorphoses, but it has not improved the quality of its environment at all. It is to be hoped that we will soon stop repeating this history. As an architect, booming construction means that my own opportunities for work increase, but the times do not at all permit unqualified joy about them. JTI

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