

City of Contrasts

By Hidenobu Jinnai

Tokyo is a mammoth city with problems to match. Its houses are small and its parks are few. Its people have to commute to work in sardine-can trains. It is a nerve-racking, energy-consuming, downright uncomfortable place to live. Yet at the same time, Tokyo has an irresistible charm that attracts millions to its crowded streets. Multifaceted Tokyo is a stimulating metropolis, brimming with vitality.

To be sure, the large-scale development and modernization projects undertaken since World War II have resulted in a visually dull and uniform cityscape. Many critics charge that Tokyo has imitated American and European cities at the expense of its Japanese character. A closer look, however, reveals many aspects evocative of a history dating back to the Edo period (1603-1868). Tokyo has a charm strikingly different from that of cities in the West.

Tokyo is a city with two faces. This split personality is the secret behind this highly varied and attractive city.

Take the striking contrast between Tokyo's downtown "Shitamachi" and uptown "Yamanote" districts, a division traceable to the topography underlying the old capital of Edo. Shitamachi, springing up on the shores of Tokyo Bay and along the banks of the Sumida River, was a district of canals and waterways spreading out like the mesh of a net. It was filled with the vigor of merchants and workers, and dotted with gaudy amusement centers which gave stimulation and excitement to the people's lives. The Yamanote, developing on the Musashino Plateau, was a pastoral community rich in greenery. Even today the image of Yamanote is that of a quiet, refined residential area, rich with amenities and quality schools. The striking contrast between the hustle and bustle motion of Shitamachi and the composure or repose of Yamanote molds the fundamental character of Tokyo.

This same contrast is even evident in the scale of Tokyo's city structure. Towering skyscrapers and massive expressways



appear to completely dominate the city. Yet that is only on the surface. Around their feet sprawls a labyrinth of "micro-scale" alleys and jostling smaller buildings. In these areas, packed with small houses, you unexpectedly come across the warmth and comfort of traditional Tokyo life.

The "front" and "back" of Tokyo present a striking contrast. Wide, functional thoroughfares built for efficiency are lined with uniform high-rises. Congested with cars and deafeningly noisy, they are little different from the thoroughfares of modern cities all over the world. Yet step into a back alley and you will find an entirely different atmosphere. It is here, amid the overcrowded small wooden houses, that Japanese find a sense of relaxation and ease.

Twice destroyed

The contrast between modern and traditional elements in Tokyo may be unique in the world. And it stems from the fact that it was once a city of wood. Tokyo has been all but destroyed twice in modern times, first by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and second by U.S. air raids during World War II. These were followed by a process of repeated demolition and remodeling during the high growth era of the 1960s, until today it is very difficult to find structures even 100 years old.

The remodeling of Tokyo in pursuit of economic efficiency continues today. The cityscape is changing constantly, and historical relics disappear one after another. Yet in the layout of its space and in its lifestyles Tokyo seems to have developed a technique for handing down messages from the past to each new generation for the continuity of its lifestyle and cultural identity, even without architectural preservation. Although it has evolved into a highly information-oriented city girded with state-of-the-art technology, it retains pre-modern features wherever you go. In order to understand this remarkable city, we have to delve into its history, going back to the days when it was still called Edo.

Tokyo is built on Edo, and continuity

can be found in its layout as well as its geography.

What was Edo like? The feudal city of Edo had at its center Edo Castle (today's Imperial Palace), the seat of the Tokugawa shogunate until imperial rule was restored in 1868. In addition, Edo faced Tokyo Bay. It was riven by the Sumida and Kanda rivers and the far-flung outer moat of the castle. The central part of Edo consisted of the merchant towns of Kanda, Nihonbashi and Kyobashi, which live on today as busy commercial centers packed with modern commercial facilities. The spacious mansions of *daimyo* feudal lords were located around Edo Castle, in areas which today have become the business and administrative districts of Marunouchi, Hibiya and Kasumigaseki. As in the days of Edo, these districts form the power center of all Japan.

The downtown Shitamachi area was laid out systematically in a grid pattern, but not so the Yamanote area. Uptown Tokyo grew up organically around local topographic features. Indeed, one of the features of old Edo was its rich topography. Tokyo is made up of seven hills, with interconnecting valleys between them. Although they are largely hidden behind the modern cityscape, Tokyo has made the most of a terrain full of ups and downs to create a unique city with strategically placed urban functions.

The layout of Tokyo's roads and highways is intriguing. All highways radiating from the city center run along highland ridges. The *daimyo*'s stately mansions that faced onto these highways have now been replaced by modern public and cultural facilities. In Edo days, farmers living in the low-lying areas were gradually displaced by merchants as the city grew. Now these merchant houses have given way to the local shopping areas which still thrive in many parts of the city.

This combination of quiet highland residential districts rich in greenery and a merchants' town full of vitality is seen everywhere in the city. Slopes link residential quarter to shopping district, and are a vital element of the Yamanote landscape. This community composition is almost the same as in Edo days, and is one of the characteristics of Tokyo.

Many of the hotels and universities in the heart of Tokyo were built on the sites of former *daimyo* mansions. They make the most of the spacious compounds and rich greenery. The University of Tokyo in Bunkyo Ward, for example, retains an old Edo-style garden laid out around a central pond. There is relatively plentiful greenery in the center of Tokyo, not because of trees planted in line with modern city planning but because the trees of Edo are still standing.

Attractive layout

The Azabu district of Tokyo is a good example of an attractive town laid out using the old urban environment. Universities, public halls, foreign embassies, stately mansions and deluxe condominiums are located on the hills to the north and south, with the thriving Azabu-Juban shopping district lying in the valley between. Temples are located on the southern slope, while an old Inari shinto shrine stands at the base of a cliff in the northern hills. Slopes connect the valley with the hills. One of the slopes descending toward the east is called Shiomi-zaka (sea viewing slope), indicating that Tokyo Bay was visible from here in the olden days.

Not only the stately mansions of *daimyo* feudal lords but also the houses of middle- and low-ranking samurai contributed to developing residential sections in the greenery-rich Yamanote. Today houses are giving way to condominiums and office buildings because it has become so uneconomical to maintain individual dwellings which generate no profit in the heart of Tokyo, where land prices have gone sky high. This transformation is causing a serious loss of greenery.

Shitamachi was the complete opposite of Yamanote. Edo's Shitamachi was a town of canals and waterways comparable to Venice. Landscape paintings dating back to the Edo era underline the beauty of its rivers and canal banks. Taking advantage of the local terrain, canals and waterways were laid out in Edo like the mesh of a net. Boats transported goods and supplies. All town activity, from sales

and distribution to culture and amusement, depended on the waterways.

In the neighborhood of Nihonbashi, crowded with big merchant houses, warehouses lined both sides of the canals. Nihonbashi thrived as a center of commerce and distribution for the mammoth consumer market of Edo. As the city prospered, people began to crave culture, and entertainment and amusement centers and sight-seeing spots began springing up along the banks of canals and along the shore of Tokyo Bay in the middle Edo period.

One was in Edobashi, only a short distance downstream from Nihonbashi. It was the feudal government's policy to create a spacious square at the ends of the city's bridges to aid fire prevention. In Edobashi a market soon appeared in the square, followed by teahouses and inns for boat passengers. Eventually a game center and other amusement facilities were built and Edobashi's transformation into a bustling amusement center was complete. It is a feature of Japanese cities that amusement centers usually grew up at the ends of bridges where people naturally congregated.

More uninhibited amusement centers and sight-seeing spots also appeared along the banks of the Sumida River. Blessed with water and nature, they provided welcome relaxation to people living in the crowded town. They were uninhibited in another sense as well. In the old days, when amusement centers were created, they were located around Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. On the pretext of going to worship, people could escape for a while from the pressures of their daily lives and enjoy themselves away from home. Be it on the banks of the Sumida or by Tokyo Bay, water contributed to the image of Edo as a colorful and alluring town.

Industrialization after the Meiji era left the water around Tokyo contaminated and destroyed much of the city's beautiful nature. The reconstruction of Tokyo after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 left the waterfront decorated with bridges, promenades and modern buildings which gave new life to the city of waterways.

It was thus not until the rapid economic



Traditional houses still survive in ultramodern Tokyo.

growth after World War II that the beauty of the rivers and the shore of Tokyo Bay was lost completely. Tasteless concrete embankments put up along the Sumida River and canals to prevent flooding cut the link between waterway and city. Motor expressways constructed over rivers and canals at the time of the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 turned waterfront areas, the old face of Tokyo, into dark, gloomy backwaters. The importance of the waterfront to the life of the city was ignored for a long time.

For the past several years, however, Tokyo has been in the throes of a belated and somewhat overheated "waterfront boom." Today, there are high hopes that riverbanks and the shoreline can be used more wisely to create an attractive urban environment. Tokyo has the potential to become once again a "city of waterways" as it was in Edo days.

Constant flux

Tokyo is one of very few cities in the world where the city composition is in constant flux. Basically, Tokyo was and is a city with many competing centers. It continually gives birth to vital new districts, flexibly restructuring itself to meet the needs of the times. Amusement centers and recreation zones which both generate information and culture and anticipate future needs have always been a key source of stimuli for revitalizing the city. Amusement centers cannot be ignored when discussing the allure of Japan's greatest metropolis.

Tokyo's amusement centers have always been located close to its transporta-

tion systems. In the Edo period, such exciting amusement centers as Ryogoku, Asakusa and Fukagawa were created at the ends of bridges and around religious complexes on the riverbanks. When railways and other land transport replaced the waterways, big amusement centers like those in Shinjuku, Shibuya and Ikebukuro appeared around railway termini. As subways grew in importance, they gave rise to such popular amusement areas as Roppongi and Aoyama. Today, the mass media helps attract crowds of young people to Harajuku, Shibuya and Daikanyama, as well as recreation spots along the waterfront.

Tokyo, like all Japanese cities, is extremely safe, and people can walk its streets late into the night without fear. One reason why Japanese amusement centers have prospered throughout the nation's history is because Japanese urban communities are such well-managed societies. This is why the Japanese can let their hair down and communicate freely with other people at amusement centers long after dark, as they have for hundreds of years.

An exploration of the Tokyo mystique reveals urban elements dating back to the days of Edo. The identity Tokyo has nurtured throughout its history can only become more important as the city seeks a unique place for itself in the international society of the future.

Hidenobu Jinnai is professor of architecture at Hosei University, and has published many books on urban design. He studied in Venice and Rome 1973-1976.