

A New Strategy Offered by Mitaka, Tokyo – The Aging Society and Community Development –

By Seki Mitsuhiro

JAPANESE companies are accelerating their expansion into China and other Asian countries, and some fear a hollowing out of domestic industry. In this era of globalization, the importance of local society is also growing. The significance of “communities where individuals are visible” will continue to increase. The aging of society changes the flow of people, and active seniors are returning to local communities. An environment must be prepared that will meet the needs of these people, and new communities full of hope must be created. The term “*chiiki*” (region or community) in Japanese actually has a very broad range of meaning – from the “Southeast Asian region” to a “neighborhood association.” The meaning of *chiiki* that I am addressing here is the “residential community where individuals are visible,” which means communities on the city, town and village level. The important point is focusing on the size of community that people view as their own town.

I have been involved with local industries for the past 30 years. When looking

back the period, it seems that the workplaces of local industry in Japan have changed so much that they now seem to be in a different country, especially during the period from 1985 to 1990. The local worksites in the decades up to 1985 were full of activity. However, after that time the number of companies and residents have been shrinking. The situation that we have today is the result of a dramatic change that took place in the years between 1985 and 1990. Internationally, Japan focused on its relationship with the United States, in addition to new relations with other Asian countries, and domestically Japan changed from a “young and poor country” to the world’s most “elderly and affluent society,” excluding the area of housing. However, this change has been so intense that people in Japan have not become fully aware of it yet.

Given this background, I would like to focus on the municipality of Mitaka, a part of Greater Tokyo, which has undertaken pioneering initiatives, and discuss the way of life in this community and

how industry and companies are formed under the current situation characterized by the elderly and affluent society.

Community Management in Mitaka

One of the important objectives of local industrial promotion is to explore and identify conditions that will make the community well off and enable the local people to be economically self-sufficient. In order to realize this target, it is important that the residents, local government, and business leaders that make up the community should work together. Although companies, local governments and residents in the regional areas of Japan have a relatively close relationship, there have been many cases of the relationship becoming confrontational in large urban areas. In these areas, companies and factories in particular became the main culprits behind the pollution that plagued the cities during the period of rapid growth after World War II, and they were in effect deprived of their rights as “local citizens.”



However, companies and factories are expected to play a new role as strong corporate citizens in this new period. When this concept began to take root around 1989, the Foundation of Municipality Autonomy Research, an organization affiliated with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, began a one-year training program on the theme of local industrial promotion. As many as 20 people around the age of 30 who were in charge of planning in their respective municipalities were brought together for the program.

A research group is launched

A very interesting movement began among the graduates of the training program. At the beginning of 1990, Seki Sachiko, who had been dispatched by the planning section of the municipality of Mitaka, wondered if they could start the same kind of local industry research group in the city.

A fortunate thing also happened in Mitaka prior to this, in 1989. The Asahi Shimbun newspaper launched an essay competition with a grand prize of ¥5 million. Although a huge number of ideas were received from across the country, an essay by four young office clerks

of the municipality of Mitaka won the first prize. The four winners each kept ¥1 million, and the remaining one million yen was turned into a fund for starting “The Mitaka Hyper City Problem Research Society (MHCPRS)”, as an independent organization. The intent of the group was to independently research the various problems facing the community. Initially, young office clerks from the Municipal Office made up the group, and later, residents, business owners and specialists also joined, and making a total membership of about 300.

Seki proposed launching the Mitaka Local Industry Research Society (MLIRS) as a branch of the group that had just been established. I became the chairperson of the MLIRS, and Seki took the position of secretary general. With about 30 members, the committee met once a month for five years starting in 1990. The members included young municipality office clerks, residents and business owners.

Concept of community management

When I began chairing the MLIRS, I pointed out that Mitaka is blessed with a solid financial situation, because there

are many householders who are high-income employees. Around 1990, Mitaka’s financial soundness was good, but there was not much influx or outflow of residents. With about 70% of residents staying put, every year the average age in the city was increasing by as much as 0.7 years. Although the entire Japanese population is following an aging trend, many suburbs of large cities are leading the way in this development. As a result, in the near future, more and more high-income taxpayers will become pensioners.

With respect to this, I emphasized, “The real meaning of autonomy will increase in the future. Decentralization means independence and the basic principle of independence is financial responsibility. We have to take responsibility for ourselves.” In order to provide a high level of social welfare, we would have to cover the costs ourselves. It is possible to predict the future age demographics, and we could also estimate the costs needed depending on the level of welfare to be provided. There needed to be a minimum level of revenue to meet these costs. This is what I explained using the simple term of “community management.” I also

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Mitaka seniors working, teaching, learning...

stressed the necessity of “industrialization” to meet the actual circumstances of the community.

Industry is generally divided into three sectors: primary, secondary and tertiary. In the case of Mitaka, which is quite urbanized, it would be impossible to rely on primary industry. Then someone said that maybe tertiary industry might work.

But western Tokyo’s best known commercial district, Kichijoji, lies right next to Mitaka, on its eastern side. To the west of Mitaka lies Musashisakai, which has been remarkably active in recent years. Mitaka’s position is like the bottom of the gorge between these two robust communities. We could not match the level of commercialization of the neighbors.

A city with the remnants of an aircraft industry and condominium-based businesses

The industrial history of Mitaka is quite remarkable. Before World War II, around Mitaka was targeted for industrial relocation under the Tokyo-Yokohama industrial zone evacuation, and most of the industries related to aircraft manufacturing were relocated to the area. These companies included Nakajima Aircraft Industries, Yokogawa Electric Corporation, and Japan Radio Corporation. However, due to the heavy aerial bombardment by the US military just before the end of the war, these munitions factories were dismantled. After the war many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) sprung up like mushrooms and were run by the local mechanics who had worked in the wartime plants. In the 1960s or later, most of the SMEs had been turned into residential housing, and manufacturing had been removed to rural areas due to the problems caused by industrial pollution. Mitaka was on its way to becoming a residential suburb community of Tokyo.

I explained this history of Mitaka to the members of the MLIRS, and suggested that we visit some SMEs still remain-

ing in the area. There were 400 factories still in operation in the 1990s and it was important to revitalize the civic interests of these companies. However, we learned that it was impossible to saddle them with the financial burden of Mitaka’s future.

On the other hand, there are often small new businesses hidden away in condominium complexes near the main train stations in suburbs like Mitaka. We easily found 80 such companies in the area, and when we visited some of them to ask why they were located here, we received the kind of responses that we had expected:

(1) The rent in Mitaka was cheaper than in central Tokyo.

(2) The high tech industry in Greater Tokyo was developing in the Hachioji area, in western Tokyo, and Mitaka was located exactly halfway between these areas and central Tokyo.

(3) Mitaka Station offers many benefits for basing a business, as it provides access to three railway lines: the JR Chuo line, the JR Sobu line and the Tozai subway line.

(4) They pointed out the abundance of skilled personnel in the Mitaka area. There are many retired technicians, homemakers with high educational backgrounds, and many students studying science, technologies and fine arts.

These facts, with the spontaneous appearance and accumulation of new businesses, made it clear that Mitaka offered a lot of potential. The focus of our industrialization strategy would need to involve creating an environment for these kinds of entrepreneurs to gather here in large numbers and prosper.

Energetic seniors come forward

It was all very clear to us after researching the above issues for five years. However, in order to make policy proposals, it would be necessary to explain the situation to the average residents and the municipal council. In order to do that, we needed a new approach.

Today mandatory retirement at age 60 is the norm, and after talking to people around this retirement age, we noticed a huge gap in attitude between working people who spend most of their time at work in central Tokyo, and retired people who spend almost all of their time in the community.

When we asked people about to retire if they could keep doing their daily two-hour commute even after they reach 60, they all replied, “No problem. I’ve already done this for 20 to 30 years.” However, when we asked them the same question after they had retired, they usually replied, “No way, maybe if it were a 30 minute commute.” Japanese men feel a huge responsibility to their families and society up until they reach retirement. However, once they reach the milestone age of 60, they begin to feel that they have fulfilled their responsibilities, and come to the human realization that 30 minutes is the maximum time someone would want to commute.

Fortunately, these retirees are very energetic, and for most of the 20 years after retirement they live in the “community where individuals are visible.” People recommend them to just kick back and enjoy retirement or even do volunteer work. However, it is often very difficult for these returnees to the community to do voluntary work after 40 years working in a world of “corporate speak.” They do not have the language skills to communicate in their community.

A large majority of these people do not know what to do with themselves after they first return to the community. When we asked these people how they wanted to spend their next 20 years, they often replied that they want to help society by doing work that can make good use of their long experience, irrespective of the pay.

Most of them find themselves unable to do anything besides their former occupation. After working for many years in accounting, legal affairs, sales, or engineering, they find that they do not have anywhere to use their skills in

the community.

Therefore, the aging of society is bringing us closer to the era of “communities where individuals are visible.” It is desirable to have homes and various workplaces situated within an area that can be traversed in 10 or 15 minutes on foot, or 20 minutes by bicycle, or 10 minutes on the municipal bus route. We therefore need to strive for an ideal community of that size filled with various residential, commercial, and industrial areas. This means moving from the era of separated work and living areas, to the coexistence of homes and various workplaces.

■ Mitaka's SOHO experiment

Given this background, there was a need for community management in Mitaka, and as a realistic choice a new initiative was conceived to strive for what we called “primary +” and “secondary +” industrialization. Today, Mitaka is well known as “SOHO City Mitaka” (SOHO: Small Office/Home Office), but this does not mean that our plan was promoted based on the general popularity of the SOHO idea. The plan that we developed, based on the particular circumstances faced by Mitaka, just happened to resemble the notion of SOHO, which is the only reason why the term was adopted.

The Mitaka SOHO experiment began in December 1998. Initially it started on a small scale, and we planned to repeat the experiment in three locations. For the first Mitaka SOHO pilot office, the municipality rented the second floor (about 248m²) of a building at the entrance to a bar district in front of the station, and began renovating the space. When eight offices were ready for rent, applications were received from as many as 60 people, and the development was off to a surprisingly good start. Since this was part of a model experiment we kept diversity in mind during the tenant selection, and a wide variety of people were chosen.

In addition to providing small offices, we also provided a space equipped with

PCs and copiers that could be used by those working out of home offices. In the area from Mitaka to the neighboring city of Musashino, there are many homemakers working from home by using computers. Although they communicate with clients using phone and e-mail, sometimes they also need to meet them. At that time there were very few places in the community where these home-based workers could arrange meetings. In fact, this part of the plan received an immensely favorable response.

After the first phase, there actually was no concrete plan, but the development really took off. Under the Law on Improvement and Vitalization in the City Center, the seven-story Mitaka Industrial Plaza (MIP) was completed in April 2000, and 26 SOHO entrepreneurs took up tenancy here.

An offer was made to donate a factory and employee dormitory on the condition that they be used for industrial promotion support. This donation came from a local small business that valued the series of industrial promotion policies that Mitaka had been undertaking. The facilities were renovated to create 19 offices, and the Sanritsu Mitaka SOHO Center was opened for use in April 2000. Having a company donate facilities that had outlived their initial purpose to the municipality was widely appreciated and launched a wave of support among local industries and businesses.

■ Senior SOHO Salon Mitaka

Soon after MIP opened, we received an offer from the local Keio University alumni organization. This group of engineers offered to hold free computer classes for local residents if they could use part of the Internet café on the first floor of the MIP.

Many retired white-collar workers then joined the group and the Keio University name was dropped as it grew into a local volunteer organization run by seniors. It was renamed the “Senior SOHO Salon Mitaka,” and obtained offi-

cial NPO designation in the fall of 2000. This group had a character that was somewhat different from previous local volunteer groups. Since it was comprised mostly of retired corporate workers, they used their work experience including technology, accounting, and legal affairs to carry out their activities almost like a business.

In particular, in the case of Mitaka, we saw people who were clearly working in small businesses through the SOHO experiment. Most of them worked alone or in groups of several people, and they did not have much knowledge of technology, sales, accounting or legal affairs. Thus the group wanted to offer them wide-ranging support. This trial gained a great deal of interest from retired corporate workers, because the group represented one of the only venues in which retirees could use their 40 years of work experience to help the community. Today there are over 200 members.

The thing that is clear from the Mitaka experiment is the increased importance of “communities where individuals are visible” in an aging society. It is essential to provide venues for active seniors to fulfill their *raison d'être* by utilizing their wealth of experience, as well as to create opportunities to start up their own small businesses. This means nurturing a large number of new entrepreneurs who are developing themselves on their own, and thereby fulfill the hopes of the entire community.

The importance of “communities where individuals are visible” in an aging and affluent country like Japan continues to grow. There is also an increased need for the diverse people that make up a community to work together in order to find the best ways to pursue independent self-development. Mitaka offers a prime example of this kind of pioneering initiative. **JS**

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