

TOKYO is a city constantly rebuilding itself. Due to the absence of a concrete vision of town planning, the scrapping or construction of buildings goes on somewhere in the metropolis all the time. Tokyo's landscape is in disarray at a glance, but its residents take it for granted. In Tokyo, once a skyscraper is built on the site of a former cluster of buildings, it becomes a new sightseeing spot that attracts a huge throng of visitors.

High-Rise Buildings Deter Winds

In the original 1954 version of the first Godzilla film, the genetically altered dinosaur emerged from the Pacific Ocean to rampage through Tokyo while whipping its deadly tail to and fro and scorching the whole town with its fiery breath. The largest building destroyed by Godzilla was, to the best of my memory, the Diet building. The granite-made structure, with its central tower standing 65m-high, was completed in 1936. It was designed to withstand a massive earthquake, but was helpless against the onslaught of the 50m-tall Godzilla.

Half a century hence, the number of buildings taller than 100m in Tokyo easily exceeds 200, according to statistics. The Shiodome district neighboring Ginza, Japan's premier shopping district, is lined by a complex of high-rise structures taller than 150m, which tower like castle walls. The heat wave that hit Tokyo last summer was partly attributed to the wind-blocking effect of the complex. Should a resurrected Godzilla attack Tokyo now, the behemoth might use up its energy in destroying the skyscrapers even before reaching the Diet building.

Utilization of Limited Land

High-rise buildings began to appear in Tokyo in 1968. First came the Kasumigaseki Building, built close to Kasumigaseki, the home of Japan's bureaucracy. The 36-story, 147m-tall building aroused nationwide interest and attracted waves of visitors following its opening.

The 1970s saw the completion of four high-rise buildings exceeding 200m on the western side of Shinjuku station and the 240m-tall Sunshine Building in Ikebukuro, heralding the advent of a skyscraper building rush in the Japanese capital. The Shinjuku high-rise complex was built at the former site of a water plant, while the Sunshine Building was built on the site of the former Sugamo Prison.

The building of high-rise structures in Tokyo was aimed at addressing various problems that arose from the high population concentration, as economic development with the end of the post-war chaos triggered a massive influx of people from rural areas. High-rise buildings were necessary for effective utilization of limited land.

Ginza's Problems

Building skyscrapers changes skylines. Above all, the blue sky disappears from sight. A plan to build a 170m-tall building in central Ginza is encountering strong objections from residents who

Skyscrapers Changing Tokyo's Skyline — 100-Plus-Meter High-Rises Now Number Over 200 —

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

Photo: Kyodo News



Skyscrapers in the Shiodome district

claim that it would impair the skyline of the upscale shopping district. The Ginza Association of Shops has a voluntary rule not to build structures taller than 56m, a height that allows people to look up to the sky while walking.

Ginza's land prices are the highest in Japan. Accordingly, building high-rise structures is the only way to effectively use land, but Ginza's residents refrained from building skyscrapers in order to preserve the skyline.

Germany's Dresden and other European cities, like Ginza, were devastated in air raids during World War II, and are striving to restore their skylines to the way they looked before. Ginza, too, has done its best to preserve its appearance, though its efforts stopped short of reproducing its prewar self.

Will their efforts become futile in the face of a skyscraper under economy-first initiatives?

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