

Building a New Tradition

By Naohiro Amaya

The kinds of houses people live in are largely determined by the natural conditions where they live. In Japan, a land frequently beset by violent earthquakes and raging typhoons, it was, until recently, impossible even with the best technology available to build houses able to withstand these ravages. Houses of stone were able to keep out the wind, but they were especially susceptible to earthquakes. As a result, Japanese houses have been built of wood.

Likewise, the need to adapt to Japan's hot and humid summers has meant that homes were built to facilitate ventilation. There was a very open architecture, and wood-and-paper *shoji* and *fusuma* partitions for easy opening and closing.

The drawback of this type of construction was that these homes were highly flammable. Thus Japanese opted for simple homes—homes that could be easily replaced. The Grand Shrine at Ise—rebuilt every 20 years of unpainted wood and thin walls—is the epitome of this traditional Japanese architectural philosophy.

Yet recent technological advances have made it possible to build homes that are much more resistant to earthquakes, typhoons and fires. And modern air conditioning makes the summer's humidity much more bearable. As a result, it is now cost that is the main constraint on new home construction. And Japan's postwar economic growth has made even this a less-important factor than it once was.

With the overcoming of these constraints, Japan is in a position to be able to make radical reforms and improvements in its housing situation. However, there are still two impediments blocking the way: one is the very serious impediment of how land is used and the other is the fact that, even as old concepts of the Japanese home are crumbling, we are inundated with conflicting architectural ideas—every idea having its advocates until the result resembles nothing so much as the Tower of Babel.

In Edo-period Japan, as in modern European villages, the stylistic harmony created a pleasing effect enhancing the beauty of each building. Yet this harmony is lost in the modern Japanese home and the modern Japanese town. Instead, an incongruent jumble jars the senses.

This discordant architectural goulash also results in higher home construction costs and higher urban development costs. Japanese life is today marred by a profusion of cramped, ugly, but very expensive homes on small but very expensive plots of land. People work hard and save diligently in the hope of someday being able to own a home of their own, but when it comes time to buy, they find that the price of land has increased several times faster than either their earnings or their savings.

Thus the average Japanese is doomed to the life of an impoverished workaholic, forever living in a rabbit hutch even as Japan overall racks up massive trade surpluses and becomes the world's largest creditor nation.

If we are to break out of this policy gridlock, we first need to overhaul the land use system and the outdated regulations governing housing and urban development. Next, we need to build a new consensus on what constitutes the beautiful home and the beautiful town. And third, we need to develop new interdisciplinary ideals spanning the political, legal, administrative, economic, social and cultural realms to enable us to use our wealth and technology to best effect.

If these things can be done, the frustrating gap between aspirations and reality can be closed and Japan can be at home with its new-found affluence.

COMING UP

The May/June issue of the *Journal* will focus on the enormous changes taking place in the Japanese people's lifestyle and consumption patterns as a result of the nation's economic prosperity. Kimindo Kusaka, managing director of the Soft-nomics Center, will review these trends.

There will also be reports on new businesses and on various markets where changes are particularly noticeable, including fashion, leisure and food.

Agricultural Potential

I would like to add to the excellent and well-reasoned article by Yasuhiko Yuize on Japanese agricultural policy in the September/October 1987 *Journal*. I worked extensively in American agriculture for 20 years and am now producing a documentary on the problems and potential of Japanese agriculture. With this experience I see numerous possibilities in the total restructuring of the agricultural sector. Just as manufacturing industries export their high-quality products, farmers might organize to export their high-quality items—Fuji apples, persimmons and *nashi* come to mind.

Mass-marketing and air freight would facilitate this effort. Rice subsidies could be reduced over time as the size of farms increases, resulting in economies of scale and lower prices for consumers.

In ecological terms, the farmers must renew and revitalize the soil to enrich its productive capacity, taking care to limit or eliminate noxious products that pollute the environment and contaminate the food supply. In addition, with a government-supported program, young, aggressive and ambitious farmers might explore the possibilities of farming overseas with the idea of sending these agricultural goods back to Japan. It would be an offshore method of achieving food self-sufficiency. The vast lands of Brazil and Australia may provide opportunities for Japanese farmers who wish to engage in large-scale farming.

Susan Prevot
President, Focus Productions
Florida

Legal Focus Wanted

I happened to be in New York when President Reagan announced the punitive measures against Japanese semiconductor manufacturers in March 1987. I was surprised at how critical Americans were of Japan. This criticism was further exacerbated by the Toshiba Machine case, and I have been watching events

with concern for the future of the Japan-U.S. economic relationship.

While business competition is at the heart of the economic friction, it is imperative that both sides make greater efforts for mutual understanding on the cultural level so that this business competition does not escalate into conflict. And because culture is such a complex mix of diverse elements, it is imperative to utilize language studies, personnel exchanges and every other means at our disposal.

I have found study of the two countries' legal systems particularly useful. An American lawyer who had recently arrived in Japan looked at a Japanese legal journal and exclaimed, "This is just what I have been looking for." If this is true even for experts in the field, it should be clear that most people know virtually nothing about the other country's legal system.

Most Japanese know only that America is a more contractual society than Japan is. They may also know from the news that a criminal convicted on multiple counts may get consecutive sentences running as long as 150 years, or that someone accused of a crime can receive limited immunity in exchange for cooperating with the prosecutors, but beyond that they know very little about the basic constructs of American jurisprudence and how radically it differs from Japanese law. And the average American is probably even more ignorant of Japanese law.

Internationalization and cultural understanding are buzzwords in today's Japan, but I believe law is the ultimate condensation of a nation's culture. If this is true, then more discussion of the legal system could be highly significant for promoting better intercultural understanding.

Shoji Yoshino
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The *Journal* welcomes letters of opinion or comment from its readers. Letters, including the writer's name and address, should be sent to: the Editor, Japan Economic Foundation, 11th Floor, Fukoku Seimei Bldg., 2-2 Uchisaiwai-cho 2-chome, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, 100 Japan. Letters may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

Private-Sector Labor Groups Form Alliance

Japan's largest labor alliance was established in November 1987. The 5.55 million-strong Japanese Private-Sector Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) comprises 62 industrial labor organizations and represents about 60% of Japan's organized labor in the private sector. It is the first national alliance since the war in a field which has seen constant disbandments and regroupings for four decades.

Rengo hopes to bring public-sector unions into the fold in two to three years, making it a true national labor alliance. The move could spur two of Japan's labor-supported opposition parties, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), to explore the possibility of reuniting after their 1960 split. Some left-leaning unions, however, led by a group of unions affiliated with the Japan Communist Party (JCP), have billed Rengo a "rightist labor reorganization." They seem set to remain a major rival force to the new alliance.

Rengo brings together four major labor organizations—the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan (Sohyo), the Japanese Confederation of Labor (Domei), the Federation of Independent Unions

and the National Federation of Industrial Organizations. Sohyo, Japan's largest labor group before Rengo came into being, consists primarily of public-sector unions. Domei, the second-largest, was made up of private-sector unions. It and the Federation of Independent Unions disbanded prior to Rengo's debut. Rengo incorporates more than half of Sohyo's member unions and most unions belonging to the other three groups.

Rengo's stated goal is to raise not only wages, but the overall living standards of Japan's workers, to a level comparable with that in the other major industrial democracies. At its inaugural meeting, Rengo President Toshifumi Tateyama said the group will seek to set a course for Japan in the 21st century, and called for establishing "concrete means of protecting jobs and realizing a way of life in keeping with Japan's economic power." He pledged that the new labor alliance would campaign for shorter working hours and work to rectify unfair taxation and exorbitant land and home prices.

Japan's labor movement has fallen on hard times. Wage hikes were kept to a minimum for the 13th straight year in 1987 as the ratio of organized labor to the total work force sagged to a record low of 27.6%. Labor leaders hope Rengo will reinvigorate the movement. ■



The birth of Japan's largest labor alliance, Rengo, which came into existence at this convention last November.

The Hit Products of 1987: Reaching for a Better Life

The year 1987 saw an unprecedented bumper crop of hit products in Japan. According to Dentsu Inc., Japan's largest advertising agency, a striking feature of these products was that they were not limited to any given field, but were to be found in every corner of daily life. A number of factors contributed to this phenomenon—the high yen, the so-called assets effect of an easy-money environment combined with steep rises in land and stock prices, and the economic recovery hastened by the government's domestic stimulus policies. But the real key to the striking success of 1987's hit products roster was, says Dentsu, the way they satisfied people's hunger for upgrading their lives a notch or two and enjoying more individualistic lifestyles. It's all evidence, the advertising agency says, that Japan's consumerism has reached maturity.

Dentsu classified last year's hit products into 10 broad categories. Falling under the category of products reflecting the people's desire for "upgrading" their lives were large-screen television sets, which enjoyed booming sales as the start of sat-

ellite broadcasting spurred interest in high-quality pictures and sound. The parabolic antennas needed for picking up satellite broadcasts were also a hit. As domestic shipments of color television sets soared to an all-time high, large-screen sets shared 30% of the total.

Similarly, automatic bread makers became popular because they enabled people to easily bake bread at home and eat it piping hot instead of carting it home cold from the bakery. Catering to consumers' desire for a more comfortable life, as many as one million of the bread makers, worth some ¥35 billion, were sold in 1987 alone.

Replacement demand for housing also surged as people moved into better dwellings. The number of housing starts in 1987 was the second-highest in history, thanks to lower interest rates and preferential tax incentives. At the same time, established residents hurried to renovate their kitchens, bathrooms and toilets. It was all part of a boom in products for more comfortable living, which included everything from new types of draft beer to air cleaners, low-noise washing machine and a sink especially designed for washing hair.

Improvements on conventional products were also a hit during the year, Dentsu found. These "idea" goods included odor-free socks and teethcleaning gum. In the housing area, renovation-related products were big hit during the year, with sales expected to continue to soar for years to come.

A surprise category of hits was what Dentsu terms "retro-roman," meaning retrospection and romanticism. These ranged from old-fashioned electrical home appliances to membership resort clubs. The "strong yen" category, meanwhile, included overseas travel and imported cars, both enjoying unprecedented popularity in 1987. Yet other hit items reflected the trends of the times. They included such "high-tech" products as extra-powerful detergents developed with biotechnology, CD (compact disk) players, electronic pocket diaries, and chameleon-like ski outfits that change color in different temperatures. The key words common to other hit products constitute a mini-guide to what was on the minds of Japanese consumers in 1987: "convenience," "health," "play," "substitute services" such as house-cleaning and gardening and "investment in the self."



Some of the most popular new products on the Japanese market in 1987: a deep sink specially designed for washing the hair, the million-selling automatic bread maker, and large-screen televisions which boomed with the advent of satellite broadcasting.



Photos: sink (Matsushita Works Ltd.), bread maker (Matsushita Electric Industry Co.), TV (Sound & Visual City Itoy)