

# Events to Revive the Regions

By Yasuhiko Ubukata

The information network that blankets Japan today has plugged every corner of the Japanese archipelago into an overarching "information-oriented urban society." This has been made possible by the shared linguistic background of all Japanese and their strong intellectual curiosity. The end result, however, is that our lifestyles are affected in a host of ways by all manner of information originating not only in Tokyo and other major cities but around the world, and conveyed to us via television transmissions and broadcast satellites, newspapers, magazines, radio and digital communication systems.

These days, all Japanese, be they living in big cities or rural towns and villages, can enjoy a reasonably high standard of living. Furthermore, it is virtually guaranteed that they will be able to maintain that standard of living in the future. Very few Japanese are greatly dissatisfied or uncertain about the hardware essential to urban life that they need to enjoy good health and an acceptable cultural life. The transportation network of railways, airlines, ports and harbors, bridges, roads and highways has reached a nearly satisfactory level in functional terms, as has the social infrastructure of city water and sewerage systems, electricity and gas.

Given these circumstances, people today are less interested in hardware than they are in "humanistic software," that is, the design and color of the hardware, utilization systems and services. Their attention has turned to planning, production and distribution. The economic and social frontier is shifting from hardware to software.

The average Japanese lifespan is approaching 80 years, while Japan's national income ranks among the highest in the world. Many Japanese now want to design their lives to enable them to spend their free hours affluently in the age of the 700,000-hour lifespan. It is all but impossible to discuss Japanese cities, regions and events without taking into account

this mounting desire to design and create a lifestyle keyed to enjoying free time. This report seeks to discuss the link between regional communities and events, keeping in mind the information-oriented urbanization sweeping the country and the growing "life awareness" underlying Japanese lifestyles.

## The new Japanese consciousness and regional events

Individualists seeking originality in their lifestyles have become a conspicuous part of urban society. Many Japanese wish to live in such a way as to feel the throb of the big city, enjoying the dazzling variety of entertainment it offers, absorbing its culture and art, and immersing themselves in its invigorating hustle and bustle. Young people in particular give top priority to lifestyle: how to attain self-fulfillment, how to look attractive, how to dress. They favor situations and places in which they can stand out. Young men use cosmetics, queue up to buy designer clothes and tune their cars to their own satisfaction. They use every available opportunity for self-assertion. When going to an event, they consider how to go, what to wear and whose company to keep to be equal in importance to the event itself. Nowadays, event sponsors have to pay close attention not only to the selection of a hall but to its subsidiary facilities, to access, and to the availability of parking lots.

In the era of the 700,000-hour lifespan, everybody is naturally deeply interested in health and sports. The recent popularity of "money games" in Japan, with people rushing to play the stock market, should not be considered a consequence of the money surplus. To the players, it is actually an astute way to gain the means to live a long life in comfort.

The growing propensity of Japanese to put family and hobbies ahead of work can be observed in the way people are spending their money to enjoy a standard of living "one rank higher" than the one they

had before. If six million Japanese traveled overseas last year, it was only partly due to the strong yen. At a more fundamental level, it was only another expression of their desire to seek fulfillment in their off-work hours. The popularity of audiovisual equipment, cars, gourmet food and marine sports is all part of this trend. And not surprisingly, the tendency is obvious in events as well. There has been a striking upsurge in exhibits and conventions on audiovisual equipment, computers, cars and leisure.

There is also a growing trend to turn back to history and tradition, and value lifestyles that are uniquely Japanese. Regional communities are building memorial halls, archives and historical museums to preserve the unique heritage of their own localities. This is proof that people appreciate what is good about their native towns and treasure the traditions, polished and refined with the passage of time, handed down from their ancestors. Regional expositions invariably include local history, traditions and customs among their themes.

## Attractiveness and vitality

This look at trends in the perceptions of the Japanese people reveals many of the underlying forces behind the flow of young intellectuals and workers from the countryside to big cities, a phenomenon that has troubled rural communities for more than a century. Today's information-oriented urbanization has assembled in big cities virtually everything anyone could want, from access to sophisticated information to economic vitality, culture and art, round-the-clock entertainment and interesting and attractive people. If they hope to counter these big city attractions, local communities must foster regional identities and vitality strong enough to attract and regain the young generation.

One such opportunity will come next year when Japan celebrates the centenary



Various events are scheduled throughout Japan with the aim of revitalizing local communities.

of its local government system. But if planners are to capitalize effectively on centennial events, they must have an accurate understanding of today's colorful and varied lifestyles. They must create software that appeals to real people, even as they improve and upgrade regional hardware and infrastructure. At the same time, the centennial events they plan must attain the administrative objectives of each region.

One solution to this difficult challenge is to plan expositions from both the hardware and the software side which can contribute materially to revitalizing the host region. In the past, the principal objective of most expositions was simply to exhibit the foremost technology and products of the age. One way to move beyond this is to increase the number of regional "compound" events using the leverage of private-sector vitality. Under this formula, private enterprises and organizations provide displays and facilities designed to draw a favorable reaction from visitors. From the corporate perspective, the exhibition is a living media where they can engage in public relations, sales promotion or cultural activities emphasizing their corporate stance before an audience of millions.

An exhibition can only succeed if the theme of the region where it is held and the themes of the cosponsoring private enterprises and organizations coincide. By employing advanced technology, holding unique international events or installing amusement facilities which can be

enjoyed by all, private enterprises can sell their corporate identity to local residents, and raise the intellectual and cultural levels of the host region. People coming to the exhibition can participate in exhibits and tap into fresh information useful to their own lifestyles. Such exhibitions can further contribute to development if they are linked to urban redevelopment projects or major construction projects. A major center for Japanese agriculture, it is only fitting that Hokkaido should host the World Food Festival bringing people together both to enjoy fine food and to explore the global imbalance between surfeit and starvation.

The Seto-ohashi Expo '88, held to commemorate the completion of the bridge linking Okayama on the main island of Honshu to Takamatsu on the island of Shikoku, is one example, as is the Seikan Tunnel Commemoration Expo '88 marking the opening to traffic of the undersea tunnel connecting Aomori in northern Honshu and Hakodate on the island of Hokkaido. Both bridge and tunnel are in effect massive hardware newly added to their respective regions. Similarly, at the time of Future Watch '88 a mammoth sporting arena will be constructed in Gifu City. Reclaimed waterfront areas are to serve as the sites of the Yokohama Exotic Showcase (YES '89) and the Asian-Pacific Exposition Fukuoka '89. Both events are closely tied to urban planning. In Nagoya, the Design Center and convention facilities serve as the World Design Expo '89 halls. As new

urban facilities, all of these developments are expected to prime the pump of regional revitalization.

Sports events, too, are inherently cheerful, and heavy coverage in the mass media ensures their ability to mobilize large numbers of people. The annual "National Athletic Meet," inaugurated shortly after the end of World War II, is one such event that has made an enormous contribution to regional development. Held in a different prefecture each year, it has already made the rounds of the entire nation and is now on its second time around. Wherever it has been held, it has been an occasion for constructing and improving sports facilities and transportation routes, and has implanted in people's minds a healthy regard for the importance of sports and physical fitness. It has taught regional organizers how to manage large events and mobilize huge crowds. It is an outstanding example of how to use a major event to revitalize regional communities.

Many events have been scheduled around Japan. They boast highly varied themes, ranging from afforestation to special local products, traditional events and the construction of new facilities. Their success in stimulating local economies will merit close attention.

Events, in their role as attracting live media coverage and receiving live information, constitute a new industrial frontier. They draw large crowds, which is one of the biggest tasks facing Japan's regional communities. They help consolidate the business foundations of other related industries, from sightseeing to printing, entertainment, broadcasting, publishing, advertising, leasing, transportation and construction. Regional communities can add the know-how of software planning to their intellectual assets. Superb events not only encourage young people to settle in outlying regions, but also enhance the charms of local communities and revitalize their economies. ■

*Yasuhiko Ubukata is a deputy director of the Urban Development Division of Dentsu Inc.*