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# Urban Regeneration in Tokyo

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Seen from abroad, Tokyo appears a fiercely modern city, with expressways cutting through rows of skyscrapers—a city designed to function effectively in support of business and the Japanese national economy. While this view may be correct, a hidden layer to this metropolitan region is slowly reemerging, one that reveals aspects of urban form consistent with the city’s original river landscape.

For the past 150 years modernization has been a major transforming force in Tokyo. Following Japan’s opening to the West in the mid-nineteenth century, the city succeeded historic Edo, and it developed as the capital of a modern nation by assimilating technologies from Europe. At the same time, the city turned its back on natural setting and history, growing swiftly to its present gigantic size.

Today, however, the growth of Tokyo has come almost to a stop. Demographically and socially, the city is maturing, new priorities are emerging, and residents are seeking changes that will improve the quality of their lives.

In this context, a regeneration of Tokyo has become possible based on renewed appreciation for its history and

natural setting. This is especially true with regard to the system of waterways—now largely hidden—that once provided a vital connection between the city and Tokyo Bay. Discussions of such a program of urban regeneration have given birth to a new, deeply rooted image of Tokyo, one shaped by an environmental interpretation of place.

In this article I discuss this potential by clarifying some of the city’s spatial characteristics. This follows the idea—not necessarily original, but essential to Japanese culture—of a “spatial anthropology,” the ability to “read” a city by tracing its fundamental layers.<sup>1</sup>

## A City Shaped by Natural Forces

Modernization changed the face of few urban areas more rapidly than Tokyo. Its predecessor, Edo, was a picturesque capital whose cityscapes were frequently painted by artists. A bird’s-eye view published at the end of the Tokugawa period, skillfully depicted this city: its integration with the surrounding natural ecology, use of natural land formations, well-planned hydrology, and skillfully



placed green spaces. Streets, housing blocks, parcelization of land, and the placement of buildings reflected a dialogue with nature. Landform, water, climate and vegetation all informed the shape of this grand design.

A bird's-eye view of Tokyo today reveals how these natural and historical features have seemingly been erased, as if the city had no connection to the past. It is true Tokyo suffered two major catastrophes during the twentieth century—the great Kanto earthquake and aerial bombing during World War II.<sup>2</sup> But what truly severed Tokyo's ties to its urban history was a period of dramatic growth around the time of the 1964 Olympic Games, when its fabric was deliberately remade.

Of course, Tokyo has not been completely cut off from its past. Cities have depth, and the creation of new spatial structures does not alter underlying configurations—even when accompanied by a seemingly irreversible change to the city's image in the minds of residents. Many of Tokyo's spatial characteristics were nurtured through history, and although only a few historic buildings remain, spatial identity exists in abundance. Indeed, there is a greater diversity of historic urban form in Tokyo than in most cities of Europe or America.

Finding these historic traces, however, requires understanding how Tokyo's formal diversity derives from its original development in a landscape of hills and bay shore. Few large cities of the world once had as many rivers running through them as Tokyo. But its residents initially lived protected from floods on the plateaus above the river valleys. This created two contrasting urban landscapes: the hills and valleys of Yamanote, the “high town”; and the canals and rivers of Shitamachi, the “low town.”

In Yamanote, settlements first developed on the

Musashino plateau, forming an intricate weave between urban spaces and natural land forms. Like Rome, Yamanote had seven hills, and their countless slopes gave the city great charm. The hills, frequently referred to as mountains, were also covered with green, and contained many temples and shrines that conveyed a sacred atmosphere.

By contrast, Shitamachi was a “water city,” and, like Venice, it was dominated by a meandering network of waterways. Indeed, from the end of the Tokugawa period to the 1920s, many comparisons were made between Venice and Tokyo, indicating the importance of water to the city's image. However, no other “water city” in the world—not Venice, Amsterdam, Brugge, or Suchou—had a setting that also included as many hills as Tokyo.

In the current era of renewed environmental awareness, the opportunity exists to rediscover this fascinating setting and historic spatial variety. In planning for a twenty-first-century capital, the aim should be to reveal natural and historic traces covered up during the modernization process.

### Functions of a “Water City”

Through field surveys on small boats and by traveling along hidden canals it is still possible to trace how Edo/Tokyo was shaped by water. Such direct observations may be confirmed by archival sources, historic maps, literature, and other records.

**Opposite:** The city of Tokyo nowadays.

**Above left:** Tokugawa-period drawing showing the relationship between historic Edo and its landscape.

**Above right:** A group of students surveying the city of Tokyo from the water.



Many urban functions linked Edo/Tokyo to water. As already mentioned, the lower city was dominated by a network of canals and waterways. The many branches of this network both protected the city from floods and facilitated shipping. Large quantities of merchandise arrived in Edo from all over the nation. Individual shipments would then be loaded onto smaller boats to be carried deep into the city on canals. Nearly every property in the lower town was connected to the water and could function as part of this port structure.

The Nihonbashi canal was the spine of this “water city.” The most powerful merchants concentrated their shops along this “main street,” making it the country’s financial nucleus. Composed of wooden buildings, Edo was frequently plagued by fire. But the city’s principal canal was lined with fireproof, whitewashed warehouses to protect merchandise. A fish market also opened at the foot of the Nihonbashi Bridge, which carried on until expansion necessitated its relocation to Tsukiji after the Kanto earthquake.

The Nihonbashi canal’s functions continued into modern times. Throughout the early Showa period, following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, new buildings were oriented toward it, producing a beautiful urban scene. The most remarkable was the Venetian-style residence of Eiichi Shibusawa, the founder of Japanese financial society, which deliberately sought to evoke an image of Tokyo as an international trading city.

During the period of recovery following the 1923 earthquake, examples of new, modern architecture were also oriented toward the Nihonbashi waterfront to produce a handsome effect. However, the value of this location was ultimately lost when an expressway was constructed above the canal in anticipation of the 1964 Olympic Games. Until its reactivation in the last several years, the Nihonbashi canal was forgotten as an urban space.

Fishing was another important activity on Tokyo’s waterfront. With its shoaling beach, Tokyo Bay provided a natural fishing ground, and cultivation of *nori* seaweed was also widespread. Many fishermen populated the city’s shoreline until their activities were curtailed by preparations for the 1964 Olympic Games.

Nevertheless, along portions of the waterfront being considered today for large-scale development, traces of fishing towns can still be found, some dating to the Middle



Ages. They can be recognized by their small-scale block structure, high density, and numerous alleys. Such areas also frequently contain family-run fish restaurants, and are sometimes the site of rituals. For example, the Shinagawa community still celebrates the summer Mikoshi festival, during which a portable shrine is immersed in the water. At a time when the city is seeking to revitalize its waterfront, these remnant fishing towns offer a great asset.

Tsukuda Island is another location that inherited this structure of fishing villages. At the beginning of the Edo era, the Tokugawa government forced skilled fishermen from the Kansai region to immigrate here in return for fishing privileges in Edo Bay. Many of the traditional small wooden structures here are remnants of their original settlements.

Of the related sacred sites on Tsukuda Island, the Sumiyoshi Shrine is most important. This includes a gate, or *torii*, at the water’s edge, which provided a spiritual gateway to the community. Here, too, portable shrines would be taken into the sea during festivals, until construction of a high breakwater in the mid-1960s made this impossible.

During the 1980s, a plot of land on Tsukuda Island, previously used as a shipyard, was redeveloped to accommodate a highrise residential area called River City 21. Fortunately, following strong community opposition, the island’s remaining housing was saved from destruction.

Along the banks of the Sumida River, Asakusa has also long provided a spiritual center for Tokyo residents. The Asakusa Temple originated during the Middle Ages when a statue was caught in a net by a fisherman. Today it is the largest and most important religious site in Tokyo.

Unlike Europe or America, religious spaces in Japanese

Above: Former fisherman’s village in Shinagawa.



cities normally materialize in close relation to nature. Temples and shrines are frequently built on hills, where they remain shrouded in greenery, or along the shore of a river or sea.

In literature, music and painting, much creativity was directed to the charm of the “water city.” Further up the Sumida, Bokutei remains a famous spot to enjoy cherry blossoms. A street of playhouses added to the red-light district of Yoshiwara has also lost none of its appeal. It was built at the end of the Tokugawa period to create Edo’s largest pleasure space. Such sites demonstrate how closely urban culture was related to water in the Edo period.

Like the Nihonbashi canal, the Sumida lost much of its attractiveness after World War II. Yet, since the 1970s, its banks are again becoming a promenade and gathering space.

One can learn much of Tokyo’s history by observing the city from water level. For example, from the Shinobazu lake, it is easy to understand how Ueno Hill has been regarded as a sacred area since the Middle Ages.

The Tokugawa Shogunate placed the Kan-eiji Temple (its family temple) there, and enshrined Benzaiten (the goddess of wealth) in the lake. This beautiful landscape both holds religious meaning and can be used for popular recreation. It is a special feature in the heart of Tokyo.

### From Destruction to Regeneration

After the Meiji Restoration a new urban civilization emerged in Tokyo. Japan’s opening to the world brought changes to its waterfront, as splendid European-style architecture was built along the canals and near the bridge approaches. However, over time the city also shifted from a water to a land orientation. Streets were widened and paved, and streetcars appeared. Railroads gradually displaced shipping by canal. Factories were constructed on the opposite side of the Sumida River.

As the sacred meaning of water and popular inter-

Above: The Edo-bashi area in early Meiji times, c. 1870.



est in waterborne amusement faded, a modern “water city”—different from Edo, but with similar emotional significance—came into being. After the Kanto earthquake, transportation by boat was still brisk, and new canals were still under construction. Many beautifully shaped bridges were also built to add character to the river landscape; small squares were created at each bridge approach to provide much-needed public green space; and waterfront promenades were built along the Sumida River.

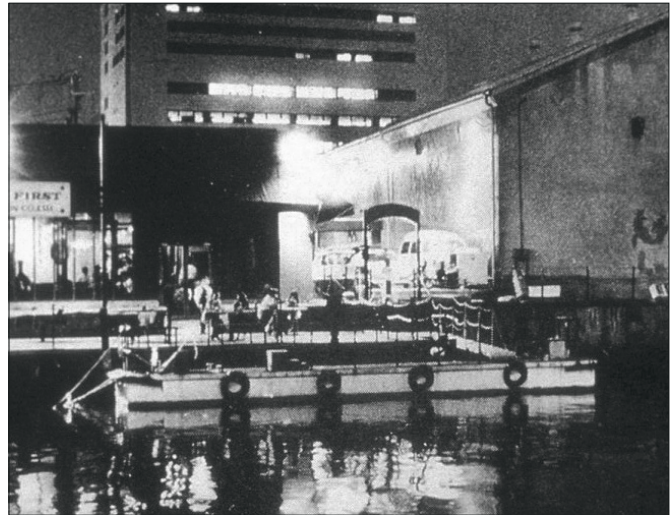
Modern and glamorous buildings also appeared one after the other along the meandering canals. Their lights produced the glittering modern Tokyo, and new architectural styles introduced from Europe created unique urban spaces within the Japanese context. In Sukiyabashi, for example, a new canal, bridge, and modern buildings produced a dazzling modern ensemble.

However, after World War II, many of these waterways lost their charm, and in 1964 the city was rapidly restructured to improve circulation for the Olympic Games. Expressways, the Shinkansen (Bullet Train), and a mono-rail were built, often using space occupied by canals. The condition of Tokyo’s waterways reached its nadir during the period of high economic growth in the 1960s, when many were covered over and transformed into sewers, and the Sumida River became highly polluted.

Since the 1970s, however, several important trends have opened the way for a recovery and reconstruction of Tokyo’s waterways. One has been the improvement of water quality and the return of fish to the Sumida River. This has allowed people to return to the riverside for fireworks, cherry-blossom festivals, regattas, and other events. Amusement on *yakatabune* (house-shaped pleasure boats) has also revived. The restoration of waterways spread to the bay shore at the beginning of the 1980s, and Odaiba Park now also has become very popular.

A second trend has been the construction of new residential areas such as River City 21 on plots of land formerly occupied by factories and warehousing. This has brought a permanent new population to the water’s edge.

A third trend has involved the conversion of obsolete warehouses for use as galleries, restaurants and discotheques, transforming the waterfront into a place of culture and entertainment. Since the onset of modernization Tokyo’s cultural center had been shifting west; now cultural functions have begun to return to the city’s original center.



Economic change has also had an effect. Following a period of improvement, Tokyo rushed into an era of inflated real estate values around 1985. And as its urban industrial infrastructure lost importance, the city was also transformed into a global center of information and finance. This led to the construction of a succession of highrise office buildings on the former estuary of the Sumida River and on reclaimed land. There was even serious discussion of the merits of 100 or even 200 super skyscrapers.

During this time of economic overheating, capital rushed in to acquire waterfront properties. But many of the new commercial buildings featured large floor plates that covered much of the reclaimed land and allowed little space for existing canals or rivers.

During these boom years Tokyo’s metropolitan government even initiated development of a new regional subcenter, Teleport Town, which was to be built on a floating island. Its financing collapsed in 1992, and the project ultimately fell through. But a residential area, trading zone, and event facilities surrounding Odaiba Park were successfully built.

Following the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, speculative interest in waterfront properties receded like an ebbing tide. But today there is renewed interest in these properties as sites for high-end residential development. In the face of such new speculative pressure, the time may be right to bring people-oriented activities back to the meandering canals where industrial and distribution structures once stood—not simply as a copy of waterfront development from Europe or America,

**Above:** The waterfront in the Shibaura area.

**Opposite:** The Odaiba Park.



but according to a relationship nurtured by Japanese society throughout history.

### A Mature Society

Demographers have predicted that Japanese society will soon face a population decrease. Urban expansion will no longer be possible under such conditions. As Tokyo's population matures, its urban culture will also become introspective and place a higher value on quality of life—including an appreciation of the city's original landforms and distinctive local features.

At present, citizens' activism to restore rivers and canals and put them to good use is becoming more vigorous. Professionals are taking a fresh look at flood control and water quality issues. And Tokyo's Metropolitan Administration has begun a program to identify profitable new uses for rivers and canals. The phrase "canal renaissance" has produced much expectation.

To restore Tokyo's original character as a "water city" and give it a modern interpretation must become the

most important vision for the city's future restructuring. In doing so, however, Tokyo needs to adopt a long view, reflective of history and ecology, and not act upon short-sighted financial prospects or superficially clever designs.

### Notes

1. Hidenobu Jinnai, *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
2. A major earthquake devastated the Kanto region of Japan at noon on September 1, 1923. It was later estimated that the quake's strength measured 7.9 to 8.4 on the Richter scale. The quake and the fire that followed destroyed 570,000 homes in Tokyo.

All images are courtesy of the author.