The Ephemeral Metropolis:
Tokyo as an Informational World City

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If Japan is the land of contrasts it so often advertises itself as being, then Tokyo is a distillation of that quality.[1] Urban Japan is the world's optimum urban laboratory: by definition experimental, it represents both the normal and ideal context in which architects should work. Here necessity has provoked a free-for-all re-formulation of the evolving preset; to non-Japanese eyes, a paroxysm of value-free juxtapositions, in which a kaleidoscope of random parts flourish to the limits of possibility, with aggressive obliviousness to the whole. This accelerated drive trespasses our reality and reveals new values.[2]

Tokyo is the capital of the second largest economic super power, and is the world's most populous metropolitan region where, beyond the city's population of almost 12 million, 30 million people live.[3]

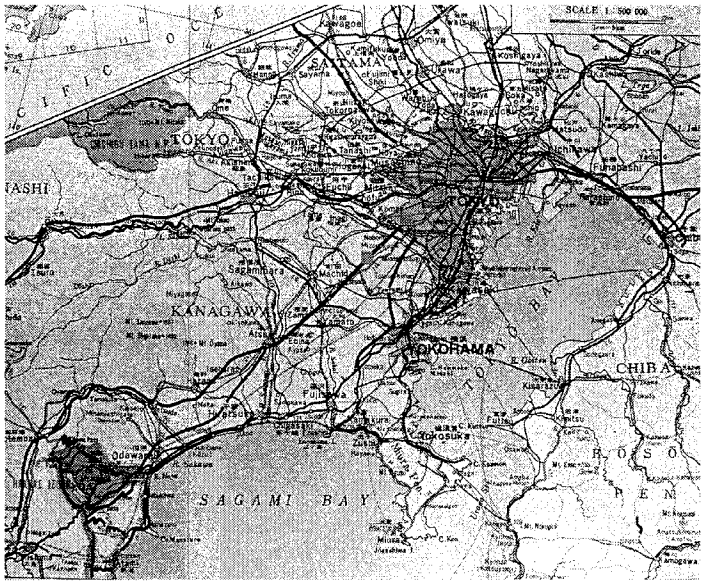

Fig. 1. Map of Tokyo and vicinity.

Along with New York and London, it is one of the world's most important centers of finance, commerce, industry, science, and information.4 With a vast concentration of international business organizations and banks, as well as scientific, educational and cultural institutions, it ranks among the top countries in the world in terms of corporate headquarters, total bank deposits, and other economic indicators. According to 1982 figures, the number of corporations with annual sales exceeding one billion US dollars was eighty-one in Tokyo, sixty-seven in London and forty-four in New York. By the end of the 1980s fourteen of the world's largest fifteen banks were located in Tokyo.[5]

Tokyo is a most dynamic, multifaceted, and futuristic—if *not* most beautiful—city with a spectacular contemporary architecture and an exceptionally prominent "post-modern" culture. What happens in today's world of global economy, very much depends upon the events that take place and shape in this city; rather than merely following others, Tokyo now also takes the lead. As a foremost informational world city, it is also the world's number one urban laboratory, indeed a leading metropolis.

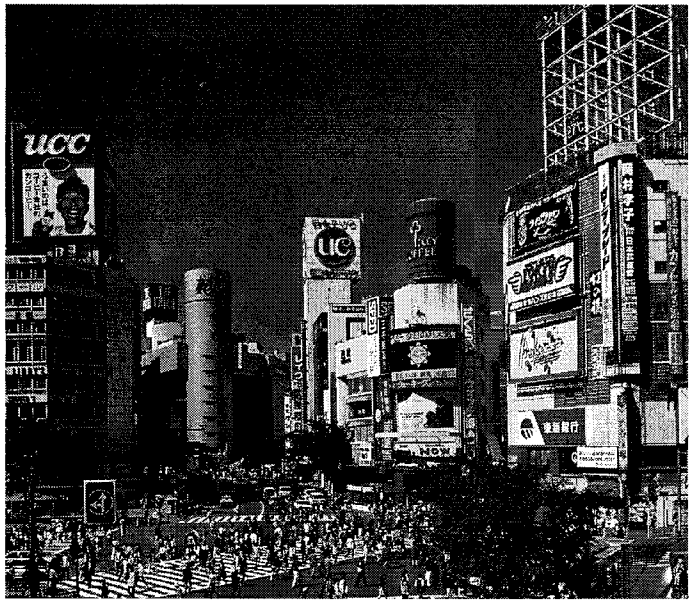

Fig. 2. Cityscape in Tokyo.

Tokyo has reached such position in hardly more than one hundred years, and despite two devastating setbacks: the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and the bombings of World War II in 1945.[6] As Japan was closed to the rest of the world for more than two centuries, the city in most of its history was isolated from other countries and cultures.[7] Even after the Meiji Restoration and the new government's reopening the country in the mid 19th century, and in spite of its rapid modernization thereafter, Tokyo remained for a long time a remote and exotic city "at the end of the world."[8] As Japan was determined to catch up with the highly developed industrialized countries, Tokyo was intent to refashion itself from the seat of a feudal society into a modern capital, one which is modeled after the great cities in the West.

Nevertheless, while the country has succeeded in just about every respect—industrial production, high-technology, economy, and many others—to match as well as surpass its Western counterparts, its capital

has never really managed to become a city like any in the West.[9] Not that Tokyo has not progressed rapidly along with Japan's modernization, it certainly has, and in fact has been leading that process from the beginning, but the particular conditions of its development have consistently defied a Western type urbanization. Tokyo has attained its world city status, not simply through its efforts of Westernization, but perhaps, and more importantly, *despite* of them.

Yet, after the War, until about the 1980s, Tokyo looked upon its own process and state of urbanization in merely negative terms. For the modernist architects and urbanists, as much as for Japan's "modern" society, the *Japanese* city as it existed was sick and incurable; it was considered still lagging behind its Western counterparts.

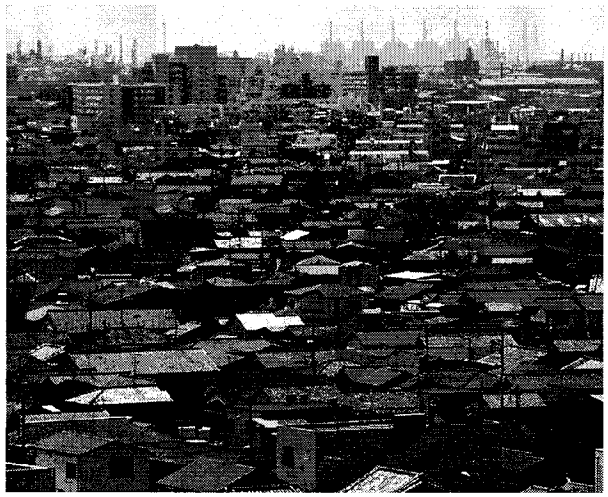

Fig. 3. Cramped neighborhood in the city.

With the advent of the post-industrial/post-modern society and the age of information after the 1970s, however, things began to change; Tokyo was ready to rediscover itself as *another*, equally valid, and perhaps, potentially at least, even more progressive or future-oriented urban model than the others it wanted to emulate. It began to measure itself on its own terms—also according to its Asian heritage—that is to say, not only as compared to, but also as opposed to Western models.

Beyond its numerous and undeniable liabilities—congestion, pollution, etc.—Tokyo now recognizes its multitude of advantages or, multiple assets as well. And such recognition comes as much from outside Japan, particularly from the West, as from within. Many leading foreign architects and urbanists have commented favorably and even with admiration about the city. Sir Norman Foster has written: "I think that Tokyo is in many ways more enlightened than other cities. There is a process of dynamic change;... I think that the idea of a city that becomes like a museum...is questionable....In that sense Tokyo is more liberated,... more dynamic."[10] Along with the rapid process of internationalization, there has been a tremendous increase in interest by foreigners, professionals, including architects, and lay persons alike, while the number of visitors in the city has multiplied. Foreign architects in Japan are now as active as their Japanese counterparts abroad.

There are several important factors that have been conducive to the unique disposition and remarkable success of Tokyo as a world city. First of all, one has to acknowledge the extremely important role what Japan as an economic super power—with its financial and investment policies, wealth, as well as industrial and technological achievements, particularly in regard to information processing—has played in Tokyo's maturation. The Italian architect, editor, and critic, Vittorio Gregotti put it this way:

> *Japan...is probably still the world's most technologically advanced and productive nation, of formidable economic power, with an astounding capacity for work, organization, investment, and research, combined with a sense of accuracy and precision in manufacturing which is the result of a very old tradition in which the values of craftsmanship prevail over the rarity or antiquity of an object.*[11]

As of 1988 primary [local or traditional] industries constituted only 0.2 percent of the total industries in Tokyo; secondary [manufacturing and heavy] industries 25.5 percent (compared to 50 percent in the 1960s); and tertiary [commerce, finance, transportation, communication, and service] industries 74.3 percent.[12] One more data is important to remember in relation to an information based economy, Japan's literacy rate, as early as 1900, was already 90 percent, but has since reached 99.9 percent where it stands today.[13]

Tokyo boasts an exceptionally large number and variety of museums, galleries, concert halls, exposition, leisure, and recreational facilities, and many others, which regularly feature the best of what the world can offer: unique, international exhibitions, shows, symposia, concerts, and other artistic, cultural or sports events. Representing a new breed of urban centers in our age of massive globalization, Tokyo is not merely the capital of Japan, but also one of the most important capitals of the world or, as Peter Popham too called it, "the invisible world capital, a silent center."[14] Indeed, with Japan having one of the highest information concentrations in the world, Tokyo has assumed the attributes of a true *informational* world city, whose influence is now rapidly growing not only within the country, but also beyond.

Nevertheless, Tokyo has been shaped as much by Oriental as by Western ideologies, that is to say, by both traditionally evolved values or modes of life, social or urban conditions, and the most innovative aspirations or, the most dynamic forces that now increasingly include the role of information, media and other new technologies. Thus, despite its radical transformations, especially in the last twenty five years, Tokyo has retained its pre-modern, Edo Period (1603-1868) urban structure and predisposition as an Asian city, as well as its longstanding mentality that favors the situational over a predetermined order, and prefers an "integration without synthesis." This is apparent in the "chaotic" organization and radically heterogeneous quality of its built environment, which have, interestingly, remained largely unaffected by the inroads of Western *modernist* urban design principles.

Fig. 4. Chaotic cityscape around the Ochanomizu.

In fact, Tokyo, as practically all previous castle towns *(joka-machi)* in Japan, as opposed to the historic European city, has never had the tradition of pursuing the goal of an "ideal city" or, in Henry D. Smith's words, "[here, there is] no tradition of using the city as a metaphor for utopian ideals."[15] Just the same, there is no tradition of conceiving the city as a form of cosmic symbolism either.[16] Tokyo has continued to develop, as

before, piecemeal (or by way of a *fuzzy logic*), and not as a measured whole. Hearkening back to the times of Edo, Tokyo's predecessor, this is an urbanism where the parts are always more in focus than the whole, and where experimentation and innovation in architecture today are not merely options but in fact almost unavoidable necessities. Tokyo is a city of remarkable fluidity and resilience, wherein an air of *impermanence* prevails.

This is even more so, since Tokyo is also a *city of repeated destructions* as much as rebuildings and revivals; perhaps no other city has been devastated and almost completely destroyed so many times as Tokyo has in its relatively short, less than four hundred year history.[17] There were no fewer than ninety-seven major conflagrations between 1603 and 1868, including the catastrophic fires in 1657, 1682, 1720, and 1872. Major earthquakes in 1855 and 1923 and the fire bombings in World War II have also leveled the city with the ground. Yet the city rebuilt itself time and again, with speed and determination to not only survive, but in fact, also flourish more than before each disaster. In the calamities, however almost all old, historic structures, as well as districts were lost; Tokyo lacks, what most major cities in the world have, an "old town."

Moreover, among the citizens a sense of catastrophe prevails; Tokyo, despite its rapid and continued progress, remains a city that lives, if not really "at the end of the world" any more, then most certainly at the edge of a constant disaster. Beyond its increasingly glamorous facade lurks an impending catastrophe; when the next devastating earthquake hits Tokyo, as it, no doubt, sooner rather than later will, in addition to the destruction of much of the city's built fabric and thousands of lost lives, the world's financial markets are to also collapse in a domino effect, ruining national economies and the lives of additional millions all over the world.[18] Tokyo has become a world city, and a fragile one at that, in this respect as well.

Another important reason for Tokyo's perpetual renewal or rather volatility, is the fact that land is very expensive in Japan, and skyrocketing in Tokyo; the average building today costs about 20% of the land on which it is erected.[19] Thus, relative to the value of the land, construction is much cheaper than elsewhere, resulting in frequent up-datings, or demolishing and rebuilding in the city. The "bubble economy" of the 1980s, with Japanese consumerism in overdrive, accelerated this general practice, changing Tokyo at a delirious rate. Indeed, Tokyo is a "brand new" city. The vast majority of its buildings has been constructed and/or reconstructed after World War II, and—estimated in 1993—"more than 30% of all [its] structures have been built since 1985."[20]

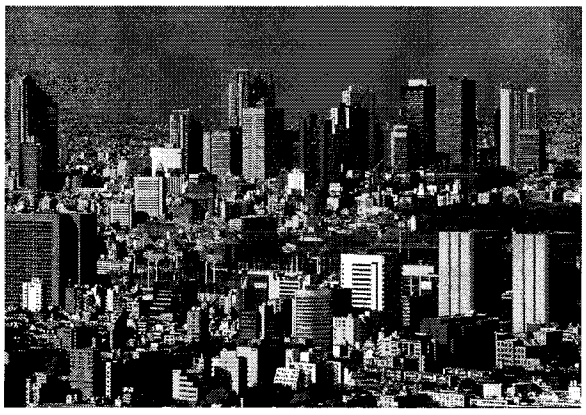

Fig. 5. The new urban area of Shinjuku developed in earnest after the 1970s.

With its history almost eradicated, the "mutable city," a high-tech camp of the new urban nomads, Tokyo has assumed the attributes of a *city with no memory*. Therefore the "essence" and traditions of Tokyo's urbanism lay hidden, are "invisible," and represented by the urban land—its scarcity, distribution, ownership, high value, etc.—that is, by its prevailing chaotic system, fragmented landscape, and spaces of flows and "floating," rather than the permanence of its individual buildings. The city is better defined by its events, human activities, fast and continuous change, and a penchant for novelty, than by the physical entity or, material essence of its built fabric. As the Japanese traditionally tend to apprehend things as events rather than as substance, *in Tokyo the city is happening*.

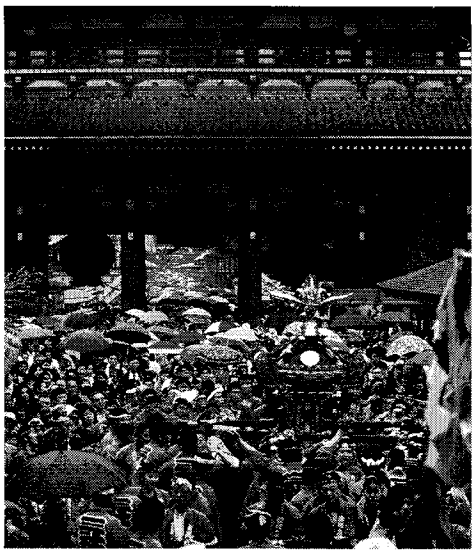

Fig. 6. Sanja Matsuri festival in the Asakusa area.

After the Meiji Restoration in the mid-19th century, Tokyo became an experimental laboratory for testing, primarily Western urban models. The Metabolism movement of the 1960s continued this "tradition" of experimentation with renewed energy and optimism. However, this time in such endeavors one could recognize the first signs of a non-Western type of urbanism as well, insofar as the advocated notions of change and interchangeability, among others, were also derivative of certain tenets of Japanese Buddhism and traditional urbanism. This line of early departures reached special intensity in a plethora of new directions in architectural and urban design during the 1980s and early 1990s.

In conjunction with the overheated economy, exorbitant land prices, and the virtually all encompassing process of commercialization during this time, the most significant change in shaping Tokyo's cityscape was a manifest shift from the previously dominant industrial or "hardware" technology, toward a new, highly sophisticated and innately invisible electronic or "software" technology that, like a computer program, is run with "fuzzy logic." Architecture in Tokyo since the 1980s can be characterized by the wholesale penetration of *information and media technologies* into the urban realm. Although capable of engaging the speculative mind if used critically, they are by nature better predisposed towards appealing to human emotions and desires, thereby eliciting an increased fascination with the *image* and sensual quality in architecture.

Fig. 7. Building-size media screens in Tokyo's Shibuya center.

Compounded with unparalleled investment and construction activities, these developments have produced a delirious urban environment which, as observed in its extreme, is free from all but the frenzy of human desires, borders on the schizophrenic, and wherein the traits of a "stable reality" are rapidly eroding. Thus, it is no surprise that in the *in(de)finite* city of Tokyo designers go to extremes to search for strategies in order to define or address new realities with and within their architectures. The paradox of such attempts however is that, if architects intend to be realists, then they have to acknowledge and work within the "reality" of the largely fictitious urban realm what Tokyo now represents to an unheard-of degree. And often, the more they try to come to terms with this urban reality, the more they contribute to its unreality.

This state of urban affairs and the related architecture however cannot be judged as unequivocally negative, and, to be sure, such state is not the simple result of the insidious workings of recent, consumerist or late capitalism; within the most complex developments, it is also engendered by, on the one hand, the historically evolved predisposition of Tokyo's urban culture that in the times of Edo was extensively shaped by the ethos of a "floating world" *(ukiyo)*, on the other hand, by the impact of new scientific discoveries, such as *chaos theories*, concepts of fractals, progress in astronomy, and others, which have expanded the horizon of human consciousness in both the macro and microcosmic dimensions.

Thus, contemporary developments in Tokyo have brought about not only the flourishing of the most trivial and inane urges in architecture, but have also ushered in a new "golden age of Japanese architecture." The large and growing number of exceptional projects represent a truly world class architecture which, more often than not, is second to none both in terms of embodied ideas and their resolution.[21] While it is undeniable that Tokyo's unprecedentedly restless and chaotic urbanism has rendered the fate of architecture both literally and semantically unpredictable, it has also opened up *virtually* unlimited possibilities, and an almost unavoidable necessity to forward most innovative, experimental designs that can be characterized by a sense for both *realism and fiction*.

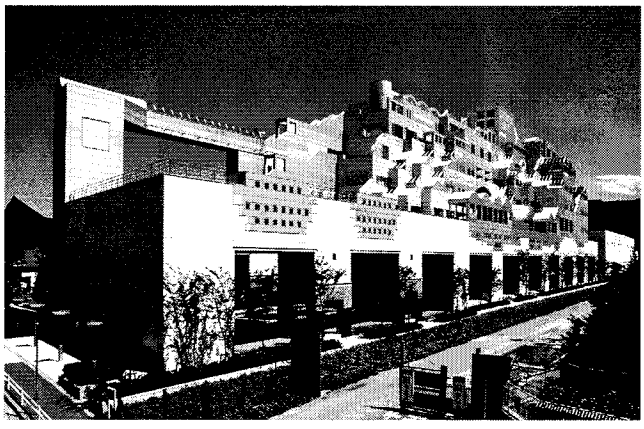

Fig. 8. Hiroshi Hara: Yamato International Building, 1987.

Today a growing number of architects, instead of striving for monumental permanence, began to foster new urban sensibilities that favor ambiguity and perceptual instability with an implicit indeterminacy of meaning. In a characteristic Japanese way, boundaries are frequently defined without being rigidly established or set .

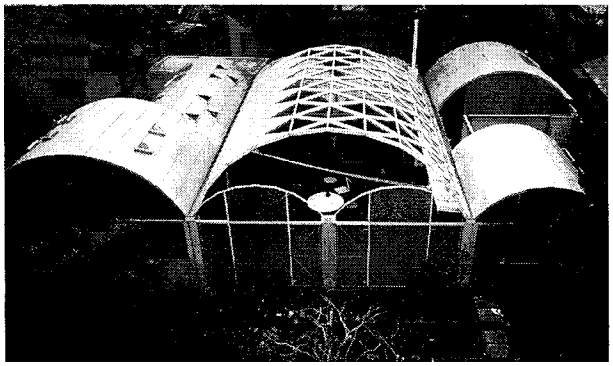

Fig. 9. Toyo Ito: Silver Hut Residence, 1984.

Spaces are wrapped in multiple layers of screens and other thin membranous elements which, beyond an increased reliance on lightweight and translucent / transparent materials, take advantage of the latest technologies in their operation or display, including lighting, lasers, and various computer controlled devices. Amazingly, phenomenal lightness is also achieved by way of unique conceptions of high tectonic and large structural solutions. About this phenomenon, the architect Fumihiko Maki commented this way:

> *Tokyo has undergone many changes in physical appearance over the last century. The city, so decimated by World War II, has had to rebuild from ashes. In its rebuilding it has become—perhaps it has returned to being—a city without heaviness. It was once a city of wood and paper; it has now become a city of concrete, steel, and glass. The feeling of lightness, however remains.*[22]

On the other hand, in Tokyo's accelerated and simulated world of the ephemeral, mirroring again to a certain degree the "floating world" of Edo, the conditions are conducive to the eclipse of a clearly critical practice. Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian have pointed out that the:

> *"critical consciousness appears immaterial in their [Japanese] view before such a visible and tangible success. Thus the nation's critical and intellectual space is now painlessly absorbed into its productive space, calming the discontented and silencing all the dissenters."*[23]

In other words, a critical practice in architecture tends to be absorbed in the very processes it intends to oppose or keep in check at least. Maintaining a critical position therefore may mean to pursue a practice which, while equally at odds with both technological domination and rampant consumerism together with its relentless drive for mere image making, acknowledges their modus operandi as the last viable alternative toward an architectural and perhaps also urban renewal. This much is clear from the words of Toyo Ito who writes:

> *I believe architecture must reflect the city called Tokyo.... (R)ight now [in the Japanese city] life and architecture itself are gradually losing their reality. They are not down-to-earth. I often use the word 'floating' not only to describe a lightness I want to achieve in architecture, but also to express a belief that our lives are losing touch with reality. All of life is becoming a pseudo-experience. This trend is being encouraged by the consumer society, and architecture itself is rapidly becoming more image—or consumption-oriented. This is a matter of grave concern to the architect yet, at the same time, architecture today must be made to relate to this situation. This is the contradiction we are confronted with."*[24]

And he goes on saying: "I do not want merely to reject this state of affairs; instead, I want to enter into this situation a bit further and to confirm what sort of architecture is possible [within it]."[25]

With the passing of the "bubble" years, Japanese urbanism and its "floating world" experience calmer waters, but much of the conditions that launched and fueled architecture in the previous two decades, namely the advancement of the consumerist late capitalist society, the progress of new technologies, new scientific discoveries, and the resulting new sensibilities toward the changing phenomena of Tokyo, do prevail and, even if at a slower pace, are at work. In addition to shifting from industrial to information society, Japan is now undergoing another change, posing several new problems that architects and urbanists have to resolve in the coming years. The tasks range from addressing the continued congestion in the city, providing more urban amenities, parks, and green areas while protecting the environment. Also, new types of facilities need to be designed for not only the more mobile society of "urban nomads," but also for the one that is now rapidly aging *(koreika shakai)*—an alarming trend that is only outpaced by the fast decrease in the birth rate of the Japanese population.[26]

In the final analysis, Tokyo—a city of processes (as opposed to a monument or artifact) or a huge "theater" (as opposed to a "museum")—remains an in(de)finite city, a "dream machine," where urban reality and fiction form an inseparable entity. *Paradoxically,* representing an new type of urbanism, one that is different from other postmodern modes of urbanization, Tokyo has developed along a mentality and way of life that understands *the world in flux* whose order of "creative chaos," unfettered by the perspective conception of reality, can only be approached by a "modal consciousness." If so, the ephemeral metropolis of Tokyo today finds itself not at the end but rather in the forefront of future urbanization. Weather given to optimism or pessimism, in many respects the 21st century, with all its promises, dilemmas, problems, and contradictions, has indeed arrived, and manifests itself with a special intensity in Tokyo.

NOTES

[1]Donald Richie, "Introduction," *Introducing Tokyo* (Tokyo: Kodansha 1987): 10.

[2]Eleni Gigantes, "Lifestyle Superpower: Urban Japan as Laboratory of the Limits of Reality," *Telescope* (Winter 1993): 166.

[3]The United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs. *Prospects of World Urbanization, 1988* (New York: United Nations, 1989): 76-77. This study ranks the Tokyo/Yokohama urban agglomeration as the largest, followed by Mexico City, New York, Sao Paulo, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, London, etc.

[4]With Tokyo, New York, and London accounting for 80% of the world market capitalization as early as 1986, and having increased their share since then, Manuel Castels in his *The Informational City* identifies only these cities as the undisputable leaders among today's world cities, or more precisely, "informational world cities." Manuel Castels, *The Informational City* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

[5]Quoted in Roman Cybriwsky, *Tokyo: The Changing Profile of an Urban Giant* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991): 12.

[6]Both the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake and the fire-bombings of World War Two razed the city to ashes.

[7]Japan was closed to the rest of the world by the Tokugawa Shogunate from 1639 to 1853.

[8]This is a reference to Peter Popham, *Tokyo: The City at the End of the World* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1985).

[9]For example, also in terms of standard of living, measured in per capita national income in 1980 Japan ranked 16th, but by 1990, Japan advanced to the rank of 4th.

[10]Sir Norman Foster, "A New Structural Expression for Tokyo," *Tokyo. The Japan Architect* (3-1991): 147.

[11]Vittorio Gregotti, "A dis-oriented modernity," *A dis-oriented modernity,* Special issue of *Casabella* Nos. 608-609 (January-February 1994): 113.

[12]*Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1993): 1594.

[13]Ibid: 893.

[14]Peter Popham, "Tokyo: Notes Towards Four Chapters," Minoru Takeyama (ed.) *Tokyo Urban Language - Process Architecture* No.49 (Tokyo: 1984): 31.

[15]Henry D. Smith II, "Tokyo as an Idea: An Exploration of Japanese Urban Thought Until 1945," *Journal of Japanese Studies* (4/1, Winter '78): 45.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Tokyo's predecessor, Edo was established by the Shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603, when only a small fishing hamlet occupied the land. The name Edo was changed to Tokyo (East Capital) by Emperor Meiji in 1868.

[18]Tokyo has a major earthquake roughly every sixty or seventy years, thus after the last one in 1923, the next is now overdue. A sad reminder of the constant danger of unpredictable and devastating jolts in Japan is the 1995 Kobe Earthquake that hit the city on January 17 leaving in its wake a ruined city and more than 6,000 dead. "According to the recent prediction of a seismologist, three million people may die in Tokyo's next great earthquake." Cited in Peter Popham, *Tokyo: The City at the End of the World*, (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1985): 13.

[19]In 1987 "one square meter of land in the 6-chome section of the Ginza shopping district [sold] for ¥120 million per tsubo— about [US]$24,000 per square foot." Takashina Shuji, "Creative Chaos." Special Issue of *Japan Echo* on *Tokyo: Creative Chaos (*Vol. XIV. 1987): 3. At that time the land-price / construction-cost ratio was about 10%.

[20]Ichiro Suzuki and Scott M.Gold, "Collective Housing: Typologies in Evolution," *Japan: a dis-oriented modernity.* Special issue of *Casabella* (No. 608-609, January-February 1994): 119. One is also prompted to note that the practice of building / dismantling is not a new phenomenon in Japan; in addition to regularly changing several parts of traditional wooden residences, and the rebuilding of structures after frequent fires, the ritual of periodic reconstruction of Ise, the most revered Shinto Shrine in the country, still continues; the last such reconstruction in 1993 being the 61st.

[21]Japanese architecture's achieving world class status and international recognition is underscored also by the fact the in recent years many Japanese architects won numerous international prizes and awards, including the annual Pritzker Prize in Architecture; since its establishment in 1979, Kenzo Tange received it in 1987, Fumihiko Maki in 1993, and Tadao Ando in 1995.

[22]Fumihiko Maki in an "Interview," *Perspecta* (No 24).

[23]Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian (eds.), *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989): XI.

[24]Toyo Ito, "Shinjuku Simulated City," *The Japan Architect* (3/1991): 51.

[25]Ibid.

[26]The percentage of the elderly (over 65 years of age) in Japan was 14% in 1995, and is predicted to be 17% in 2000, 24% in 2015, and 26% in 2030. The birthrate (number of live births per woman) in 1997 reached 1.39, the lowest ever recorded, and has been since then further decreasing. The 2.1 births, necessary to maintain a steady number of population was last recorded in 1974. Data quoted from: *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993) and *Japan Almanac 1999* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1998).