



TOKYO's
megalopolis
utopia?

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Shintaro Ishihara

In 2001, the Tokyo prefectural government enacted a new zoning policy which was intended to stimulate the redevelopment of core commercial centres throughout the megalopolis. The policy was part of a large-scale "emergency" urban regeneration/renewal program designed by the governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara. The program was a response to the Japanese financial crisis and was implemented in an attempt to revive the national economy. The government created the "Council for the Promotion of the Urban Regeneration Project in Tokyo" (CPURPT) which has enacted various high-impact initiatives since its inception. The new zoning policy which was created has eased building regulations in order to promote more efficient urban-core development. As a result, numerous areas within central Tokyo have been subject to redevelopment. The most recognizable of these new developments are the high-rise "tower mansions". These towers are generally over 30 stories high, some even reaching over 50 stories, and were a rare sight in Tokyo before the regeneration project began. A contributing and coinciding factor which allowed the towers to be built was the popular theme of corporate re-structuring, which has caused many corporations to liquidate their warehouse properties, consequently freeing up land for residential developments. Another easily recognizable product of the redevelopment project has been the redesigning of numerous commercial complexes, the most famous of these being those which are located near Tokyo station. The example of the Tokyo station district, in which large areas of the surrounding real estate are owned by the Mitsubishi corporation, is consistent with the overall philosophy of the CRURPT, which has stated on their website:



The TMG has utilized the vitality of the private sector to promote progressive urban development programs. This has included adopting architectural plans that are designed to secure open spaces, create the level of public facilities required by specific communities, introduce development plans matched to local needs and pursue other creative ideas by mobilizing urban development systems that relax controls on the ground-area-to-building-size ratio, the height/line building restrictions and other building-related controls.

In response to this philosophy, the Mitsubishi corporation has enacted a redevelopment strategy which will effect 111 hectares of land located within their holdings in the proximity of the Tokyo station district, as well as the Marunouchi and Yurakucho districts. Mitsubishi has released statements similar to those of the TMG:

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The goal is to convert the area from its former mainly business-oriented atmosphere to an open, diversified district, particularly through functional renewal of areas surrounding Tokyo Station.

Upon my visit to the Marunouchi complex, where I ate a ten-dollar Kua'Aina avacado burger with an associate of mine, I was struck by the natural appeal of the building's interior design. The dining area for the restaurants was located on a wooden island surrounded by trees and water, which faced a set of massive windows overlooking the city outside. It was an upmarket marriage of cafeteria and atrium, with bamboo trees, fish and grass, it would have been an oasis if it weren't for the exorbitant prices. My associate was a junior engineer at Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and had taken the opportunity of our casual lunch to over-indulge in one-two many large cups of Hawaiian beer. He told me that he had worked on a project which involved designing the computerized internal guidance system for the US military's Patriot 3 missile. However, recently he seemed to have very little work to do, and generally spent his days riding his motorbike around town at high speeds and getting blind drunk whenever possible. He began to go on about some girl he met in the club the other night or something to that degree, but I couldn't help retreating into my mind and pondering the irony of how Mitsubishi Heavy, the main target of the US nuclear attack on Hiroshima, was now being contracted to help the US military build a better missile, I suppose the arms trade is infinitely malleable.



“TimeBokan” by Takashi Murakami

The infinite malleability of arms corporations is not the subject of this article, but rather it is the profound possibilities of social transformation which the example illuminates that is of interest to me. Possibilities that can be projected into all realms of human life. One such realm being the medium of the urban organism; how it lives, how it relates to itself and how it evolves.

In the spring of April, 2003, the urban organism entered a new stage of evolutionary development. The best word that could be used to describe this new state of civic living is probably that which was chosen by the man who designed and developed this next era of civic life. The word: Vertical. The man: Minoru Mori. The simplicity of the word "vertical" and the basic geometrical patterns which it provokes betrays the social possibilities that its complexities will allow. Minoru Mori is not a modest man, he is a visionary, and thus expounds his vision with the energy of a prophet and actualizes this vision with a cataclysmic precision. Thusly, it is only natural, that within the context of this fresh century of ours, that a certain romantic futurism would accompany such an inspired effort. While reading the prosaic press releases and statements from Mori and his corporation, Mori Building, one does feel the contagious presence of utopianism. The fact that we have entered a period of time which is incidentally denoted by a turn of digits, and in this case, a turn of centuries, is meaningless in a realistic sense. So we are living in the 21st century? Not much changed during the six months that proceeded from the end of the last century, but more and more is the idea of this new century gaining power and influence over the world's preeminent iconoclasts. The 20th century was a mess of ideological and industrial war, and we have been presented an opportunity to learn from our horrid mistakes and propel our species into an entirely different direction from its sordid, oil-and-blood soaked past. Like myself, Minoru Mori seems to be hypnotized by the possibilities of a new breed of social organization from which a new order can be organically developed. Not Fukuyama's vision of politik-dominated super-states, but the new, 21st century super-city.



Minoru Mori is Tokyo's most prolific property tycoon, CEO and president of Mori Building. He attended Tokyo University and planned to become a novelist, but chose to take over the responsibilities of his family's real-estate business when duty called. Mori Building was founded by Minoru's father, Taikichiro, a professor of business who built the Mori empire by capitalizing on the bargain basement land prices of post-war central Tokyo.

“In the 21st century, people, goods, money, and information will all be concentrated in fascinating cities. Reflecting the growing importance of cities, Mori Building is dedicated to building Vertical Garden Cities tailored to 21st century lifestyles and economies. This new cities give people more time to enjoy their lives. These cities are launching pads for new urban culture. Their density also creates new opportunities for business. Since they are the nodes at which people with diverse values, outstanding sensibilities, culture and information congregate, they give birth to the knowledge and networks that will transform all our futures” - **Minoru Mori**

The first of these "vertical garden cities" was Roppongi Hills. Completed in April, 2003, it has since redefined urban living standards. Mori has infused Roppongi Hills with his own unique humanitarian, and sometimes nationalistic (or possibly Tokyo-istic) outlook, and expects it to revolutionize human interaction. He views the "building" not as a mere structure or venture, but as an opportunity for social betterment. By compounding all aspects of urban life into one dense complex, he hopes that by eliminating the associated commute times, his vertical cities will allow more time for creative thought. Which in turn will heighten the competitive ability of Tokyoites as well as their general happiness and spiritual well-being.

“We describe ourselves as "a business that creates new, more enjoyable urban lifestyles." Our aim is creation of richer, more fulfilling lifestyles for people who live in cities. The boundaries implied by calling us developers no longer apply. We are constantly seeking new challenges” - **Minoru Mori**

I find Roppongi Hills to be an admirable venture for a few reasons, although my understanding of it is limited. The first time I ventured through this "ARTELLIGENT" city was after I had tumbled out of a nearby nightclub, bleary-eyed, my shirt stained with whiskey-kisses and maybe the dull scent of contraband hashish still lacing the collar of my newly purchased Lacoste button-up. The sensations that the "hills" design evoked within myself are difficult to articulate, so please entertain my struggle to define this unique experience. While walking down the spiraling stone staircase which leads into the Mohri garden and TV Asahi centre, I felt as if I was entering an ancient palladium on a distant planet. Everything was brand new without a hint of decline or even that common overt sublimation which haunts so many "ultra" modern architectural projects. The otherworldliness that I felt was a result of the prominent and unabashed creativity which surrounded my person, Mori and the artists he had employed made no attempt to appeal to the test market tastes of a general public, everything was hypothetical. This marriage of classic design sentiment with an experimental artistic nature encapsulated everything I had come to love about 21st century Tokyo style.

Roppongi Hills

area: 11.0ha residence: 800 units

features:

Grand Hyatt Tokyo

Toho Cinemas

Roppongi Hills Arena

TV Asahi

Mori Arts Center

Tokyo City View

Mori Art Gallery

Mohri Garden

Roppongi Library

Artelligent School

Roppongi Forum

over 200 shops and restaurants

Police Station

Post Office

Banks

Currency Exchange

Clinic



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The garden is done in traditional Japanese style, but favours overgrown greenery rather than trimmed refinement. It covers over 4,300 square feet and features a large pond which is home to a few descendents of the "killfish" or "medaka"; fish born during a trip into outer-space. The garden is located on a plot of land which was once inhabited by an Edo-period Feudal lord. Luckily for me, on this young summer morning of 2005, the centre of the pond featured a sculpture created by the prolific artist/designer Takashi Murakami. The sculpture was of a large white character with lovely pink and blue highlights, a character named "TONGARI-KUN and his four guards". TONGARI-KUN means: "Mr. Pointy" and is a character featured throughout Murakami's work.



Born in 1963, Takashi Murakami went on to receive a PhD from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. His works have been featured in prestigious galleries and museums all over the world, and are available for purchase in many easy to consume formats.



Murakami's designs have penetrated the visual atmosphere of every developed nation in the world, although most of us aren't aware. His most famous and recognizable design has been the high contrast and multi-coloured Louis Vitton hand-bag variation which can be seen being clutched about in any major North American city on a daily basis. It has been counterfeited, reproduced, remixed etc to such a degree that it has become the definitive fashion pattern of the new century, being embraced by rich and poor, hip and chic, anti and pro. This ultra-cute pattern, although without apparent meaning, is representative of his "SuperFlat" design ideology. SuperFlat is a wonderfully inspired and ambitious attempt to integrate, deconstruct and illuminate the Japanese philosophical and historical tradition with its current late-capitalist/consumer socialscape.



The project began in 1999 with the publication of the *Tokyopop Manifesto* written by Murakami and featured in the magazine *Advertisement Criticism*. In the manifesto, Murakami states:

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"The art world of the West is searching for the next new theory. This search has reached as far as Asia, a less-Westernized cultural sphere in which Japan, and its capital Tokyo, are receiving the most attention. Postwar Japan was given life and nurtured by America. We were shown that the true meaning of life is meaninglessness, and we were taught to live without thought. Our society and hierarchies were dismantled. We were forced into a system that does not produce "adults". The collapse of the bubble economy was the predetermined outcome of a poker game that only America could win. Father America is now beginning to withdraw, and its child, Japan, is beginning to develop on its own."

Throughout the rest of the manifesto, Murakami goes on to detail the "apparently negative factors" within the current Japanese system, and how this system has given birth to a group of unique artists who have created a new standard of expression, which defines and explains Japanese post-war culture. After the Tokyopop article, SuperFlat was used as a way to label, market, and properly describe this new Japanese pop/subculture. **Flat** refers to the aspects of the Japanese which are related to a "flattened" culture; defeated, meaningless, computerized, rich, self-mocking. It also refers to the nature of 2-dimensional art, which is often created and manipulated upon a flat-screened desktop or laptop monitor. It also intentionally denotes this process of manipulation. Specifically, when an artist, while using a graphic arts program, is working with multiple layers, and when these layers are fused into one. SuperFlat intends to chronicle a reality in which numerous flat elements; erotica, pop, tourism, etc are fused into one continuous *super flat* image/experience. For the past 5 years, Murakami has labored through the creation of various projects, advertisements, designs, shows, sculptures, architecture and books in order mould his idea of SuperFlat into an "original concept that links the past with the present and the future". In the initial and definitive work of SuperFlat, definitively named SuperFlat, Murakami states: "Super Flatness is an original concept of the Japanese, who have been completely Westernized. Within this concept, seeds for the future have been sown. Let's search the future to find them. Super Flatness sets the stage for the future."



All of these events and innovations, from Ishihara's zoning policy to Murakami's grand theories of Japanese ingenuity, can be traced back to one common origin: the crash of the bubble economy. Since the crash, there has been an explicit shift in the Japanese cultural dynamic. This transformation manifests itself in all levels and compartments of institutionalized and informal life. The more obvious examples of this would be the governmental policy changes made in order to reform corporate governance, the restructuring of public education systems, or most importantly, the explosion of fresh new fashion styles on the streets of cities like Tokyo and Osaka. Before the bubble burst, Japan was too rich, everything was too secure, and thusly too commercial. People were comfortable in European brands, cultural capital was easily cultivated through the consumption of these brands and no one was forced to develop their own sense of style. After the crash, everything changed. The promise of a secure life within a large corporation quickly evaporated, and over the years many young people began to feel left out of a system in which they had no place. The most natural reaction to this sea change was to create one's own culture, and overnight a thousand subcultures blossomed in which Japan Inc's rejects could find refuge and comfort of a sort. The story of these subcultures and the fractured, closed-circuit economies they have spawned, is the real story behind Tokyo's re-invigoration and resurgence as global design capital.

OTAKU

“Otaku”, literally meaning “house” is a label used for isolated individuals who are generally obsessed with anime or manga, but can be extended to anyone who is overly interested in a given topic.



The Akihabara area of Tokyo, famous for its never-ending stream of electronics-related stores, is the centre of otaku culture. Otaku are often regarded as social misfits and the rise of their subculture is seen social crisis. The common otaku who would fit into the stereotypes of his/her critics is a person who has little or no connection to the outside world, is overweight, and is only able to communicate through electronic mediums.

COSPLAY

Cosplay, a Japanese compound of the English words Costume and Play, is a special type of Otaku; a person who enjoys dressing up as their favourite anime, video game or manga character and hanging out with their friends. The most popular area of Tokyo for cosplay types to be seen in is Harajuku, which is one of Tokyo's many "youth cities".



The Hipster

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The Cities

Shibuya: original youth city which is host to countless night clubs, clothing boutiques and cafes. Also the centre of Tokyo's drug culture. Most notable styles include "yamamba" style in which young women (and sometimes men) are extremely tanned, have their hair dyed blonde or platinum, and often shave their eyebrows and replace them with sharp angles created through use of a permanent black marker.



To many young Japanese, the life of a salaryman does not appeal. Working all day, into the late evening, and then being forced to get drunk with your co-workers in a karaoke bar, has lost its glamorous luster for some.

For those who choose to reject the corporate lifestyle, securing a constant flow of livable income is a challenging task. Many of those who opt out, often end up becoming members of Japan's "youth crisis", which are denoted by the acronym "NEET" or the expression "Fureeta". NEET means "No Employment, Education or Training". The Japanese government has estimated that there are over half a million citizens which fall under this criteria, and have begun to treat it with serious concern due to the possibility of the group having a negative impact on the economy. Basically, a NEET is someone who has rejected the standard of full-time employment and tends to live with their parents and is an avid member of some form of subculture. The Fureeta, is similar but different. Rather than being labeled based on their ineptitude, they are understood to be individuals who really enjoy their free time. Some of them are rich, usually supported by their highly-employed parents, but many of them are middle-class. A fureeta who has lower economic standing would probably be more accurately described as a NEET. In the most positively viewed of scenarios, the fureeta is the Japanese comrade of the Western "hipster", but many Japanese, although they fall under the fureeta criteria, would reject the label and view its stereotypical lifestyle negatively. Within the fureeta spectrum, we have two opposites which are both in their own ways, deserving of the moniker. On one side, we have the unambitious fureeta who is so disenchanted with his/her social reality that they do not even pretend to take part in a subculture, let alone a hobby of some sort. They are marginally interested in manga, sometimes listen to the radio, often watch TV, and enjoy drinking. Other than that, they work a part time job which either secures rent and food if they are independent, or spending money for clothing or travel if they live with their parents. Beyond this, there is nothing. Their minds are empty and they might as well be urban zen masters because they have no thoughts in which they vest enough interest in to actually embrace for longer than a minute or so.

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On the flip side, we have the admirable fureeta, an individual who has consciously rejected the ideology of corporate employment, choosing to fully embrace his hobby or subculture and truly master everything there is to know in relation to it. These types of fureetas are often surfers, musicians, DJs, breakdancers, designers, artists, martial artists or anything else which requires refinement or perseverance. They are inspired individuals, and it is their broad subculture and its high level of creative energy which has fueled Tokyo's ascension from "where art goes to die" to "design capital of the universe". One of my own friends is a fureeta success story. After graduating from university where he studied political science, Kenni, the prototypical young Japanese man, went to work at a high profile securities firm located in the glitzy Ginza district. He didn't explicitly dislike his job, but would opt out of any non-requisite work-related affair whenever possible, for he loved to surf and party, and this love superseded his samurai work ethic. One night, Kenni and I, and some other guys were downing drinks and listening to a bootlegged DJ Shadow show on some blasted speakers, we smoked a joint and drifted a bit, then an idea hit us, like a cloud of gas floating towards us from beyond the moon...

"Lets go surfing"

So we drove until 4 am, hit the beach and passed out, woke up at dawn and met the ocean with open arms.



Kenni (on the left) a fureeta success story

Daikayama: the Roppongi Hills of the successful fureeta. Only the coolest of the cool hang out in this swanky area which is home to a large collection of style boutiques, beautiful cafes and clothing shops. Most likely, this was the neighbourhood in which the current global "designer sneaker" fad was born.

Harajuku: Home to the Cosplay kids and miles of winding back streets which house hundreds of clothing stores aimed at the more economical of Tokyoites. Everyday thousands of highschool students flock to its streets in order to waste time and shop. Typical Harajuku fashion is very inventive and often involves a colourful mash-up of numerous styles. Much more innocent and cutesy than Shibuya, as one can see from this photo:



I'm not sure if that night was a turning point in Kenni's life, but he soon gave up his position at the securities firm in order to further pursue his love of surfing and the beach. He has recently become manager of a surf/record shop in a beach side city two hours outside of Tokyo and is now able to embrace the ocean with open arms whenever he pleases. Tokyo is filled with people like Kenni. They aren't opposed to hard work, but their sense of individual freedom leaves them naturally incompatible to the stifling corporate system. Like-minded creative Tokyoites have worked hard and created a sort of "hipster nation" in which they are able to drop out of the norm and live along their own guidelines. They work at surfshops, or record stores, boutiques, design firms, bars, cafes, restaurants, hairdressers or any other vocation which allows themselves to stay connected to their everyday lifestyle. The economy they created is "closed-circuit" in the sense that it is self-supporting and often re-circulates any capital which is introduced into the circuit, a possibility provided through Tokyo's uniquely dense and chaotic civic structure.

the floating world of a Tokyo graphic designer

Ayumi is a girl that I met while working as a photographer's assistant in Ginza. She is an independently employed graphic designer who was lucky enough to sell some of her designs to the popular clothing store "BEAMS". Her life is very simple: eat, sleep, create, drink, love, repeat. She lives and works in a studio apartment located in Daikayama. After she receives her paycheck, she generally goes to consume various products and services in her neighbourhood, or possibly in a similar neighbourhood like Takadanobaba, Omote-Sando, Ebisu, Azabu, Kichijoji, or maybe even Shinjuku or Ginza. If she wanted a haircut, she would go to her friends tiny little shop a few blocks away. For a drink, she would go to her favourite bar in Ikebukuro; "Quarter" a not so well known spot where skateboarders and breakbeat enthusiasts commonly patronize. After hearing a solid track that night played by one of the DJs, the next day she would make the trip to the tiny record-store in Shibuya which specializes in instrumental hiphop. And so on...



Ayumi's monthly budget

income (per month): 250,000 yen
expenses (per month):
rent: 75k
food: 50k
alcohol: 20k savings: 30k*
haircut: 15k
clothing: 20k
events (club, concert): 15k
other product purchases: 5k
transit: 20k

*savings generally spent on
travel; two or three trips a year

Guam, Hawaii, NYC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Seoul, Melbourne,
Vancouver, San Francisco, London, Paris, Okinawa, Sapporo

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Whats so special about how this girl spends her money? 40% of her income is spent on products and services provided by her peers. Because Ayumi and similar individuals are able to spend such large portions of their income within their own cultural atmosphere, the culture is able to easily thrive and evolve, every year becoming more developed and sophisticated. Create and consume the creative products of those around you. In this sense, pockets of Tokyo are able to function as a consumer utopia, in which consumer culture is localized and focused on quality and individual expression. However, these pockets are very small and inclusive, only a select few can make a living in the dream world of the independent Tokyo creative class. This situation is alot like the availability of spaces in Roppongi Hills, there are very few, but once you are in you will easily be able to compound your ability to succeed. Unfortunately, the opposite goes for those who fail and are unable to fit within Tokyo's economic framework. These days, even many who do wish to get full time jobs are sometimes unable to do so, so they slip through the cracks. These cracks are much deeper in Japanese society than they are in the Canada, and effect not just the realm of economics and employment, but also cultural-well-being.

Takashi Murakami: "Japan doesn't have high culture, only subculture. Or rather, the high culture we do have is floating on a cloud, as invisible as the emperor. Apart from that there is just subculture, from Beat Takeshi to erotic mangas, and then the outgroup of the otaku, or hobbyists. I think we won't need art and artists some day. That's why Japan is the future, don't you think so? We don't have any religion, we just need the big power of entertainment."

This statement alludes to a quasi-utopian existence based upon consumption and entertainment, but the pitfalls of such a civilization are deep and dark. One must look no further than the 1995 terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway system, which was perpetrated by a religious cult whose members were over-acheiving scientists and engineers.

While Minoru Mori professes that his vertical cities will be the key to Tokyo's future, behind the facade of this ideologically-charged excercise in conspicuous consumption rests an unknown outcome. While he provides the ultra-rich with 50,000 USD-a-month luxury apartments, 14 dollar a night box hotels are springing up all around Tokyo, and applications for low income housing have doubled in the past 4 years. In the old Japan of the 80s bubble, everyone had a place, albiet a relatively stagnant and boring place. Nowadays, Japan is more dynamic and has grown into a global monolith of pop and avante-garde, but with this dynamism comes many abrupt and unforeseeable perils.