

Japanology

The Mega-Megacity

By Martin Thureau



Source: Tomml / Getty

Metropolitan Tokyo is the largest built-up area in the world. How does such an urban machine work? How does it deal with its own inevitable decay? Japanologist Evelyn Schulz has been studying how residents use its urban spaces and cope with the attendant risks.

Evelyn Schulz will never forget the date or the hour. At the time, no one thought of glancing at a watch but, according to the official record, it was 14.46 on 11 March 2011. Schulz, a Japanologist from LMU Munich, is sitting in a restaurant in Tokyo, and all hell breaks loose. The ground shakes “with unbelievable intensity,” she later recalls. It is immediately clear that this is not one of the mild tremors that everyone here is accustomed to. The building opposite sways to and fro, slowly but so perceptibly that she expects the windows to shatter at any moment. But the façade remains intact, seemingly in total defiance of the laws of physics. Another woman in the room begins to scream hysterically, and Evelyn Schulz must fight against the instinct to panic.

The tremors continue for all of 5 mins. The local seismometers register a magnitude of 5.5 on the Richter scale. The epicenter lies some 350 km to the northeast, and there the quake wreaks unimaginable havoc. The surface oscillations and the subsequent tsunami that batters the coast together devastate an entire region. At least 15,000 people die and more than half a million are left homeless. The nuclear reactors in Fukushima shut down automatically, but the cooling system is damaged. The result is a nuclear catastrophe, whose long-term consequences are still unknown. Suffice it

to say that the quake initiated one of the largest disasters ever to strike a highly industrialized country.

Metropolitan Tokyo, Japan’s real powerhouse, is the largest conurbation in the world. Some 35 million people live there, more than a quarter of the country’s population. The city proper is home to 12.5 million individuals, resulting in a population density that is unknown anywhere in Europe. At up to 14,000/km², it is more than three times as high as in cities such as Munich, Berlin or London, says Schulz, who is a professor at Japan Center at LMU Munich. How does the mega-megacity Tokyo function? How does it cope with the ever-present threat of a cataclysmic earthquake? How vulnerable is such a complex urban organism to other sorts of shock? And how does it adapt to this vulnerability?

“Tokyo is a giant machine that churns out goods and services.”

As far as the direct effects of the tremors are concerned, Tokyo escapes serious damage on 11 March. The contingency plans work as intended, Schulz remarks laconically. Even though many skyscrapers oscillate dramatically for almost a quarter of an hour, they successfully accommodate the strain. Few buildings sustain severe structural damage.

Still in a state of shock, Evelyn Schulz pays her bill, and heads for the train station at Ikebukuro, one of the central transport hubs in Tokyo. As she is going through a narrow pedestrian underpass another aftershock occurs. The station is closed, all railway services have ceased to operate. For hours, the electronic displays inform the public that “the system is being resynchronized.” It is soon clear that there is no point in waiting for public transport. Schulz sets off again on the long, 13 km walk home.

“The city had come to a standstill,” Schulz remembers. Public transport is paralyzed, the streets are jammed with traffic. Six million pedestrians, like Schulz, make their way home, shaken every now and again by an aftershock. Many spend the night in public buildings, others choose to remain in their offices.

In light of the crucial role that public transport plays in everyday life in Tokyo, the degree of discipline that prevailed that evening is astonishing, says Schulz. “Tokyo is a giant machine that churns out goods and services.” The city generates one-third of Japan’s gross domestic product – a feat that would be impossible without a highly efficient public system of mass transportation, which conveys millions of workers back and forth between home and workplace every day.

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“The road network alone couldn’t possibly do the job,” says Schulz, although Tokyo possesses an extensive system of freeways. A web of concentrically arranged highways and radial connecting roads crisscrosses the metropolitan area. Roadways are elevated above street level, rivers are bridged and an expressway runs under Tokyo Bay.

Selling off the sky

Surface and subway trains arrive and depart at 1 min intervals, transporting 40 million passengers a day. No wonder the system often reaches its limits at peak times. As Schulz explains, trains are longer in winter to compensate for the fact that passengers wearing winter clothes take up more room. And in spite of the system’s efficiency, 90 min commutes are quite normal. In real estate, location is everything, and the density of the subway map is a pretty good reflection of the cost of accommodation. Where transport connections are good, housing is expensive, and price levels for rented accommodation in the suburbs fall with distance from the city center. Moreover, in the course of the demographic transition in Japan, the number of inhabitants will sink even in boomtown Tokyo.

Pressure on the housing stock in the inner city, on the other hand, has increased in recent years, as the more affluent sections of the populace rediscover the urban core for themselves. As in almost all the great cities in the world, the result is a wave of gentrification. In Tokyo, as elsewhere, this is leading to the replacement of relatively affordable residential property by luxurious and more costly accommodation. Urban planners speak of “selling off the sky,” because existing two- and three-storey structures are being replaced by high-rise apart-

ment blocks. The already compact structure of the city center becomes even more congested. Living in other cities can be pretty cramping, but “Tokyo takes the biscuit,” says Evelyn Schulz. “In Tokyo more functions are packed into each segment of urban space than anywhere else.” The idea is to pile as much as one can onto every square centimeter of hideously expensive building land. So one may find an expressway under a cemetery, a cinema in the pier of a bridge, a driving school on the roof of a department store.

It may take ten years or more to acquire a sufficient number of small plots to make it worthwhile investing in a new building project, so realtors have to be patient. They are helped by the fact that death duties on real estate are high in Japan, which means that legatees actually inherit much less than the market value of the property. Families tend to fear the prospect of inheriting property in the center of Tokyo, because they know they will not be able to retain it, says Evelyn Schulz.

By European standards, the Tokyo-Yokohama conurbation is a bewildering tapestry of settlements, a web that is highly frayed at the edges. However, within this web, one can discern a polycentric structure. Tokyo evolved around an “empty core”. This is how the French critic Roland Barthes once described the enclosed area of gardens and pavilions surrounding the Imperial Palace.

Around this nucleus is a handful of subordinate centers, such as Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro and Shinagawa. Each of these could be taken for an autonomous city with millions of inhabitants and a rich infrastructure, if they weren’t all so tightly integrated into the urban fabric.



Space is scarce. Some houses just squeeze in. Source: Michael Freeman / Corbis

Tokyo has always evinced a penchant for radical restructuring. At the beginning of the 20th century, the capital was the most important “laboratory of modernism” in Japan. In the decades following, the city was twice reduced to rubble; first by the huge earthquake of 1923, then by the firestorms unleashed by carpet bombing during the Second World War. In 1964, preparations to host the Olympic Games set off a boom in construction. The prosperity of the 1980s



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initiated yet another, which was marked by over-ambitious architectural projects and attempts to outcompete other Asian contenders for the title of “Real” Global City.

There are no really run-down areas in Tokyo. As Evelyn Schulz points out, a mixture of strict social control and old-fashioned neighborliness still provides enough social cohesion. Nevertheless, the pressure is mounting “because poverty is a growing problem,” says Schulz. Following the recession in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, Japan experienced an unprecedented rise in homelessness. Many people lost their jobs – and their company housing. In Japan, employers are responsible for providing the sort of affordable accommodation that would elsewhere be built by local authorities. Of course, those who have lost their jobs have no chance of finding a new home on Tokyo’s overheated property market.

But according to Schulz, the trend towards living spaces dictated by “global” taste, as exemplified in the glitzy world of high-rise apartments and offices, does not have the field to itself. A counter-trend has set in, which seeks to “revitalize older neighborhoods and present them as places with a consciously local urban culture.” A kind of grassroots town-planning movement has appeared, which does not think in terms of major traffic arteries but of so-called roji. These are the lanes lined with traditional wooden houses. Too narrow for cars, they provide a social space with cafés and small shops.

This type of urban renewal began in Yanaka in the center of old Tokyo. Long dominated by dilapidated shacks, it has now been refurbished, and small businesses, workshops, bars and restaurants make it a popular attraction. Meanwhile, this form of attentive resto-

ration is now being subsidized by the government, but in the beginning it needed energetic promotion. Writers played an important role as cheerleaders. Japan has a rich tradition of local histories. These tales preserve and elucidate the social history of the different strata that make up modern Tokyo. “These narratives speak nostalgically of a loss of social roots and the sense of belonging,” says Evelyn Schulz. But the clash between the two models of the city’s future continues. While districts like Kichijoji are undergoing a phase of gentrification, others, like Shimokitazawa, are slated for demolition to make room for large-scale infrastructural projects.

Revitalizing old neighborhoods vs. large infrastructural projects

Evelyn Schulz will not hazard a guess as to how the course of urban development in Tokyo will play out. She sees the 11 March as a watershed. Although the enormous costs of reconstruction will tax even a stable economy like Japan’s, Schulz hopes that the halting efforts now

underway to make a city like Tokyo into a greener, more sustainable environment can be intensified.

She frankly admits to being amazed that the country should have become so dependent on nuclear energy, after having experienced the horror of nuclear attack. In one of her seminars, she traces “Japan’s Route from Hiroshima to Fukushima.” In this context, she discerns a “paranoid disjunction” in Japanese society. “Drastically oversimplifying”, as she says, she attributes this to the shock effect of the oil crisis in the 1970s, and the fact that the dominant political role of the Liberal Democratic Party effectively led to one-party rule. The LPD was in government for more than 55 years, and facilitated the creation of a close-knit network that connects politics and administration to the power companies and industry. But a tentative debate on the future of nuclear power has begun in Japan. The issue of the country’s dependence on this energy source is now on the agenda, and everyone talks of energy conservation.



Prof. Dr. Evelyn Schulz teaches and conducts research at LMU Munich’s Japan Center. Born in 1963, Professor Schulz studied at the University of Heidelberg and in Kyoto. She obtained her doctorate in Japanese Studies in 1995 and completed her Habilitation in 2001. From 1995 to 2002 she served first as a Research Associate and then as a Senior Research Associate in the Institute for East Asian Studies at Zurich University, before assuming her present position at LMU in 2002.

