

The House of Your Dreams

by Richard Evanoff

In our last column we were talking about the government's new "Five Year Economic Plan," which is rallying behind the slogan "Sharing a Better Quality of Life Around the Globe." The purpose of the plan, according to an article in the November, 1992 issue of *Sumitomo Corporation News* is to build Japan into a "lifestyle superpower" with the following three goals specifically in mind: "shorter working hours, home ownership, and social capital expenditure from the standpoint of the user." Last month we showed that the real rationale behind "shorter working hours" is not the benevolent goal of more leisure time for employees, but the tight-fisted goal of less overtime expenses for corporations. This month we'll look at how "home ownership" fits the same pattern — the real purpose is not to give ordinary people an improved quality of life and "superlifestyles", but rather simply to promote further economic growth. While developers reap ever-greater profits, more and more nature is being paved over with concrete. The ultimate result is not a "Better Quality of Life Around the Globe," but a diminished quality of life for all of us.

I enjoy looking at old Japanese landscape paintings, and have always been impressed by the "harmonious" relationship between humans and nature one finds in these paintings. In the distance are towering mountains, enveloped in mysterious clouds. A white river flows past large, wind-swept pine trees. And there, hidden in the folds of this luxuriant landscape, is a single house with tiny human figures going about their daily activities. The house is dwarfed by the majesty of the nature which surrounds it. Humanity seems small, yet somehow-drawn in its proper proportions. I suppose such a home would be the home of my own dreams — and there's nothing particularly "Japanese" about such a home either. Americans have their own archetypal images of houses that stand apart, in harmony with nature, yet within walking distance of human community. Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond and even the "Little House on the Prairie" are examples.

But what kind of homes are we living in now? The fact is that despite our remarkable "economic growth" over the past few decades homes are getting smaller, not larger, and we can pretty much forget about nature and open space. When I first came to Japan I lived in a traditional Japanese-style house with a relatively large garden in front containing a wide variety of trees, flowers, and shrubs. I was obliged to move out of this beautiful home,

however, when the owner decided to tear the house down and build not one, not two, but three new "homes" on the same site. His rent income tripled, of course, but you can imagine what happened to the beautiful garden. This problem is hardly unique to Japan. In America, too, nature is being eaten up by new housing developments.

I had never heard the expression "rabbit house" until I came to Japan. Most Americans have virtually no knowledge of what Japanese houses are actually like and thus no opinion whatsoever of them, either in praise or condescension. So when people tell me, "You Americans think we Japanese live in rabbit houses," I suppose what they're really communicating is that they themselves are self-conscious about living in small houses and would prefer to live in larger houses. The fact is, however, that Japanese houses are extremely livable and energy-efficient as well. Heating one room at a time is vastly superior to central heating; sleeping in *futon* instead of turning on the heater at night also saves energy; Japanese *ofuro* are not only more comfortable than Western style-baths but also save hot water; using the bath water for laundry is also an energy-saver, as is the practice of drying laundry outdoors instead of throwing it in an electric dryer. Space is indeed a problem, but the fact is that homes in America are also getting smaller and for much the same reason: more and more people are competing for less and less housing space, which drives up prices and provides an excellent opportunity for those who deal in land and housing to exploit the situation. This explains why prices are increasing in both countries even as houses are getting smaller.

In Japan's case, the increasing price of land is directly traceable to the speculative excesses of the bubble economy. Since the bubble recently burst, however, land prices have declined, which puts developers, real estate agents, construction companies, and banks in a difficult financial position. Demand among ordinary people for spacious housing remains high, of course, but salaries in Japan have unfortunately not kept pace with the greed of those who profit by dealing in land and accommodation. At present, as the article in *Sumitomo Corporation News* notes, "The rapid rise in land prices in Japan during the late eighties led to housing prices seven to eight times higher than the average income." The goal of the government's "Five Year Economic Plan" is to "realize acquisition of quality housing at roughly five times the average income of a working household." The upshot is that few people in Japan can presently afford to buy houses and it's having a devastating effect on "economic growth" (and profits, too). The real goal of the plan is not to provide "quality housing to people," but rather to stimulate the real estate, construction, and banking industries.

Demographics would seem to point out the absurdity of thinking you could take a population half the size of America's, squeeze it

into an area the size of California (with 80% of the land being mountainous and uninhabitable), and have everyone living in Hollywood-style mansions. Given the population density and geographic characteristics of Japan, it is absurd for the Ministry of Health and Welfare to be advocating more population growth simply so that Japan can have more workers in the future who will help Japan's economy "grow" even more. (See JEM #21 for details on the ministry's recommendation). When you realize that the population of Japan was only 27 million in 1854 when Perry arrived on these shores, and that it's now approaching five times that number, it's easy to see why houses are getting smaller. It should also be self-evident that further development in Japan, particularly in large urban centers such as Tokyo and Osaka, will result in even smaller houses, with more crowded conditions, and less nature for everyone. Tokyo is already one of the most densely populated, congested cities in the world and the government's "Five Year Plan" will only make it more so. Far from improving our "quality of life" the plan will only help to turn Tokyo into another Mexico City.

The plan's stated goal is to "build a stock of quality housing and improve residential environments." But where would all these new homes be built? According to *Sumitomo Corporation News* the plan calls for the "development of farmland into housing lots in major metropolitan areas." As it so happens, I presently get a high percentage of my food through a coop that deals with farmers right here in Tokyo. If the government's plan is successful we can say goodbye forever to the idea of local food production for local consumption. Think of all the farmland still within the borders of the Tokyo Metropolitan District that is currently being taxed out of existence the next time you hear someone say that the reason Japan has to keep out foreign agricultural products is because it has a "national interest" in maintaining self-sufficiency in food production. If food self-sufficiency is the government's real priority, why is so much agricultural land being "developed" into airports, housing, golf courses, and industrial sites?

The government's plan would also try to "improve our quality of life" by extending the "radius of one-hour access to major regional cities." In other words, first build more housing in areas outside cities, then improve train service so that more people can commute into the city center. Right now the population of Tokyo increases by something like 3 million people during the daytime as commuters from outlying areas enter Tokyo to work. That's like moving the entire population of Chicago daily into a city already the size of New York and Los Angeles combined. "Improved" train service will ultimately

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Food Robbers

A number of Japanese activist/authors have warned that when food becomes scarce, city people will begin to steal without thinking twice. Well, food isn't by any means scarce in Japan, at least not yet. Although higher priced than usual, there are still plenty of vegetables, and the government will be importing large quantities of rice to make up for this year's crop failure.

But already prophesy is being fulfilled. There have been newspaper reports of vegetables being stolen from farmers' fields during the night, and as if to underscore the problems with the Japanese government's rice policy, the press reports that rice robberies, which occur to an extent every year, are especially prevalent this year, with already 208 reported incidents totaling approximately 92 tons of rice stolen from warehouses and farmers' storerooms.

In response to real possible food shortages and overdependence on foreign countries (Japan also imports considerable amounts of vegetables), environmental and consumer groups have been demanding that the government revamp its food policy. One example is the September 30 statement issued by the Consumers' Union of Japan (according to

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jected to a comprehensive inspection generally 25 years after beginning commercial operation, on the basis of which authorities decide to either decommission reactors or extend their terms of operation. Many of these reactors have actually been decommissioned after about 25 years of operation, and in France almost all GCRs have been decommissioned after about 20 years. By contrast, Japanese reactors continue operating without comprehensive inspections, with authorities excusing themselves by saying, "We carefully perform regular annual inspections." But as shown above, Tokai No. 1 is badly aged and should be quickly decommissioned. □

Nippon Shohisha Shimbun, Oct 1). It asks the government to set up a system for food self-sufficiency, to end its rice acreage reduction program, to start a food storage program to prepare for shortages, to prohibit the ownership of agricultural land by businesses, and to restore organic agriculture. □

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necessitate a more "advanced" system, such as the maglev, which would bring Kofu, for example, within "one-hour access" to Tokyo. (See JEM #18, #25, and #29 for a rundown of the social, economic, health, and environmental problems connected with maglev madness.) And what of the 80% of those mountains in Japan that are "uninhabitable"? Stop off at Shiotsu on the Chuo Honsen sometime on your way into Tokyo from Kofu to see how it is possible for developers to decapitate an entire mountain in order to create land in order to build more houses in order to sell them at prices which, if nothing else, should ultimately help to restore the bubble economy. In the future, not coincidentally, there are plans to "improve" train service on this line and make Shiotsu an express stop.

High population growth and new housing developments will not help me to realize the house of my dreams, but on the contrary, make it completely unattainable. Most of us probably wouldn't want to live in log cabins, but affordable houses surrounded by nature would be nice. The way to get there, however, is not through population growth and economic development — *but exactly the reverse!*