

# **The Changing Face of Suburban New Towns —Seeking the “Slow Life” for an Ultra-Aging Society**

by Akio Doteuchi

Social Development Research Group

doteuchi@nli-research.co.jp

## **Introduction**

Recently, a phenomenon called the “return to central Tokyo” has attracted much attention. The residential population of Metropolitan Tokyo, which began declining in 1988, started increasing again in 1997. In fact, despite the general slump in the condominium market, sales have been brisk in central Tokyo. Moreover, large new office buildings have sprouted up amid a rush of massive urban redevelopment projects, prompting more businesses to relocate in central Tokyo.

During the bubble economy from the late 1980s, an over-concentration of people and businesses occurred in central Tokyo. This created external diseconomies, triggering an outflow of both housing and offices to the suburbs. When the bubble economy eventually burst, land prices tumbled, and idled properties were released on the market amid corporate restructuring and the shift in industrial structure. This led to a surge in the supply of new condominiums and offices in the central Tokyo market, causing selling prices and office rents to decline.

Moreover, building restrictions on factories and universities in central Tokyo (and other existing urban districts) were lifted in 2002 with the repeal of the Law Concerning Restriction on Factories in Existing Urbanized Areas of the Metropolitan Region. As a result, universities have rushed to upgrade campuses in central Tokyo, hoping to attract a greater share of the dwindling population of students.

How is the return of housing, offices, and universities back into central Tokyo affecting the spatial structure (land use) of urban and suburban areas? This paper examines the background and current issues confronting new towns, and considers the direction and prospects for consolidating and realigning the spatial structure.

## **1. Present Status of New Town Development**

During Japan's miracle growth years of the postwar era, rapid industrialization and urbanization brought about a tremendous concentration of population in Tokyo and other metropolitan areas. To accommodate the wave of new workers arriving in these cities year after year, new town residential development projects were constructed in outlying areas.

A typical new town project in the Tokyo area is Tama New Town, located approximately 30 kilometers west of central Tokyo. The project spans an area of 2,980 hectares, planned population of approximately 300,000, and includes the administrative districts of Tama City, Hachioji City, Machida City, and Inagi City. After the master plan was adopted in 1965, project permits were issued in 1966, and the first stage of occupancy began in 1971. Today, Tama has a residential population of approximately 190,000.

In the beginning, the new town represented a new urban lifestyle. However, after three tumultuous decades of social and economic change, new towns must now confront a range of new issues. Japan's population and number of households are in decline, while offshore manufacturing and other changes have radically altered the industrial structure. Since metropolitan populations are expected to decline, housing demand in suburban areas will decrease significantly, bringing to an end the era of supplying massive new housing.

Moreover, in the past, new town development had operated under the premise of rising land prices. But with dim prospects for land prices to rise significantly, the cost of infrastructure development is prohibitive for developers. The primary developers of Tama New Town—the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Urban Development Corporation—have already suspended all new projects.

Meanwhile, as society matures, there is a growing orientation to seek more leeway and comfort in space and time. Suburban housing must not only provide a residential space, but fulfill other functions of daily living as well. Above all, the family image and lifestyles of new town residents have changed radically.

The role of new towns to provide new housing supply has ended. The challenge they now face is to consolidate and realign the urban spatial structure so as to accommodate changes in the population structure, household structure, and lifestyles. Below we examine the transformation of the family image in the new town, and consider the future direction of change.

## **2. Dwellings Designed for the Nuclear Family**

The high growth era from the 1960s was supported by the modern nuclear family living in the suburbs. Typically, the husband was a “salaryman” worker who worked in central Tokyo, while the wife stayed at home raising children and performing housework.

This household structure was premised on a rigidly defined sexual division of labor in which the husband engaged in economic activity as a “company soldier,” and the wife not only provided logistics support to the husband, but also reproduced the labor force by raising children. At the time, this was a rational lifestyle for most people, and the most efficient production system as far as companies were concerned.

Companies espoused “traditional” Japanese-style management practices such as lifetime employment and seniority-based pay system. Lifetime employment enabled workers to secure a long-term housing loan and realize their primary life goal of buying a house with a yard.

Also, since the seniority-based pay system established a correlation between income and age, people became able to purchase a home at a certain age, and this largely determined the age composition of new town residents. As a result, community residents shared a homogeneous lifestyle and uniform living standard. Since most new residents of the new town were young and in the prime of life, the community was young at first. No preparations were made for the inevitable aging that would occur.

Dwellings designed for the nuclear family have what is called an “nLDK” format (meaning n bedrooms, a living room, dining room and kitchen). In postwar Japan, the first step in improving the dismal housing situation was to separate the space used for eating and for sleeping. Then with the family sharing the LDK area, parents and children came to occupy separate rooms, which led to private bedrooms for children. As the nLDK format grew ubiquitous in collective housing built in the suburbs, the model of the homogeneous modern family and family dwelling became entrenched. Thus the simplified nLDK dwelling format played a key role not only in defining the image of family, but in nurturing the typical suburban lifestyle of the postwar era.

## **3. Characteristics and Issues of the Suburban Spatial Structure**

The family image or model associated with the suburban dwellings described above has had a significant impact on the spatial structure of the suburbs. An examination of the spatial structure, which is intricately related to the family image of residents, reveals the following

characteristics and issues.

First, being based on a modern family model with a salaryman husband and full-time housewife, the new town was intended from the start to be a place to reside, not a place to work. Compared to new towns in the West, which are designed to bring the workplace closer to home, new towns in Japan focus exclusively on the residential function to the point of being described as “bed towns.”

New town policy shifted in the mid 1980s when the over-concentration of population in Tokyo became a serious problem. A composite new town plan was drafted to help diversify operations and functions away from Tokyo. However, the spatial structure was left unchanged—planners took for granted that people worked in the city and lived in the suburbs, and commuted long distances on the radial transportation network. The new town’s daytime population remained considerably smaller than the nighttime population.

Indeed, this spatial structure helped to firmly establish the modern family’s sexual division of labor between the salaryman husband and full-time housewife. However, since the husband is no longer assured of lifetime employment, the wife also needs to work, but cannot find any job opportunities in the community. Moreover, as the baby boom generation enters retirement ahead, healthy elderly persons will also seek work in the community. Here as well, unfortunately, the new town has no employers who can utilize these human resources.

Second, because the seniority pay system established a correlation between age and income, the population structure is highly concentrated in age. Thus when families had children, the number of school-age children surged and created a classroom shortage, but subsequently plunged as the population aged. As a result, schools in new towns have been consolidated and reduced, while welfare facilities for the elderly are growing short in supply. Such changes in the generational composition of the community will be a critical factor in the new town’s future.

Moreover, since most residents were nuclear families in the same age group, they shared a remarkably homogeneous lifestyle and uniform living standard. And parents transmitted the homogeneity to their children by zealously seeking high educational attainment—a requisite for success in the salaryman’s world—and exacerbating the already rigorous exam hell. The educational curriculum, itself being homogeneous, was also unable to accommodate the growing demand for diversity.

Indeed, the spatial structure of the new town, being uniform and inorganic, does not accommodate lifestyle diversity, and increasingly threatens to stifle not only children but other residents as well.

Third, most new residents were young households, and little consideration was given to their aging in the future. The hilly landscape of Tama New Town poses no problems for residents in their 30s, but becomes increasingly challenging as they age. Providing barrier-free access across steep terrain is a much more difficult problem than making dwellings barrier-free. Moreover, the new town concept of using pedestrian bridges to separate car traffic from pedestrian traffic further complicates matters.

Since most of the initial housing structures were medium-rise buildings with no elevators, elderly persons living at the top on the fourth or fifth floor are severely discouraged from venturing outside. Also, with the advance of motorization, large shopping centers have sprouted up along roads far from the community, while neighborhood stores have faded away. As a result, people who cannot drive may have difficulty shopping even for daily needs.

Also important is the fact that most dwellings have the basic nLDK floor plan designed for nuclear families. As nuclear families decrease and single-person and married-couple households increase, the growing diversity of households creates a mismatch with the housing supply. It is not uncommon to see freestanding houses in the new town with the rain shutters on second floor windows permanently drawn because the children have grown up and left the family.

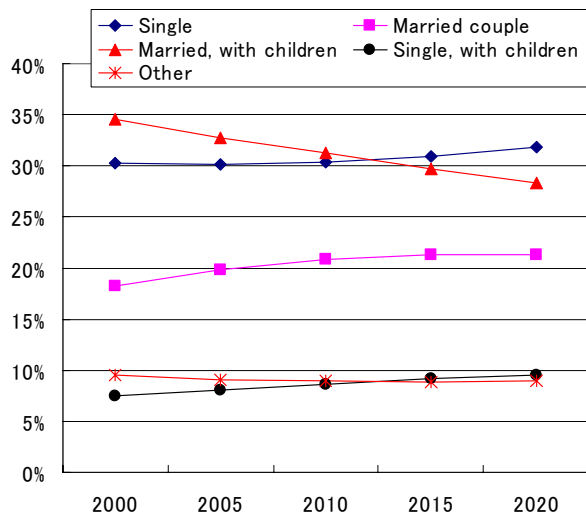
#### **4. Response to Changes in Population and Household Structure**

There is no question that Japan's population and household structure are changing radically. The elderly population is growing, while the young population is decreasing. The productive population already began decreasing around 1995, and the total population is projected to start decreasing in 2006.

Meanwhile, the number of households is projected to continue growing until 2015. This increase in households despite the decrease in total population will occur as the size of households decreases. In other words, single-person and married-couple households will grow rapidly.

In the greater Tokyo area (consisting of the four prefectures of Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa), married couples with children will be the predominant household type until 2010, but be overtaken by single-person households in 2015. The diversity of households will increase as single-person and married-couple households together come to comprise over half of all households in 2005 (Figure 1).

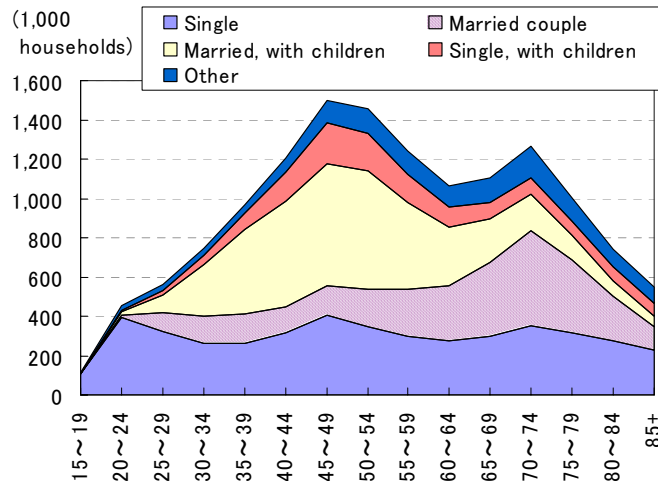
**Figure 1 Household Composition by Family Type (Greater Tokyo Area)**



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, *Household Projections for Japan by Prefectures: 1995-2020 Reported on March 2000*

According to household projections by type and age group for greater Tokyo in 2020, single-person households will comprise a significant portion of households across all age groups, while married-couple households will be prominent in older age groups (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Household Projection for 2020 by Family Type and Age Group**



Source: See Figure 1.

The response to these changes in population and household structure involves two separate issues: responding to the aging process as it advances to ultra-aging, and responding to the decrease in household size, which will require society to assume certain functions previously performed by the family.

Since aging and the decrease in children are inevitable consequences of a maturing society, we need to consider how to respond to rapid aging. Looking at the relationship between the

aging rate (proportion of the population age 65 and over) and welfare policy, care can be provided at home by the family for an aging rate up to approximately 7%, and at facilities for up to 14%, but social long-term-care at home must be relied on for higher levels.

The public long-term care (LTC) insurance system, introduced in Japan in 2000, set up a system for providing social long-term care. However, with the aging rate projected to reach 20% in 2005 and exceed 30% by 2030, the LTC insurance system will become insufficient. We predict a community care era will arrive in which the entire community participates in supporting elderly persons.

## **5. Toward a New Spatial Structure**

In light of the above changes in population and household structure, below we consider what type of consolidation and realignment of functions are required for the suburbs.

First, we must achieve a spatial structure in which work and home are located close to each other. In the past, when the sexual division of labor was a key feature of the modern family, the long commute between the workplace in the city and home in the suburbs was taken for granted. But in an aging society where gender equality has become a necessity, the spatial structure that separates work and home is no longer practical. It is important to designate the suburbs as a workplace as well. But this involves not only moving conventional large offices that perform business functions; jobs must be created in the community for elderly persons, women, and retired workers.

Second, as households grow smaller, functions ordinarily performed by family members—unpaid work such as housework, childcare, and long-term care—must increasingly be provided in the form of social services.

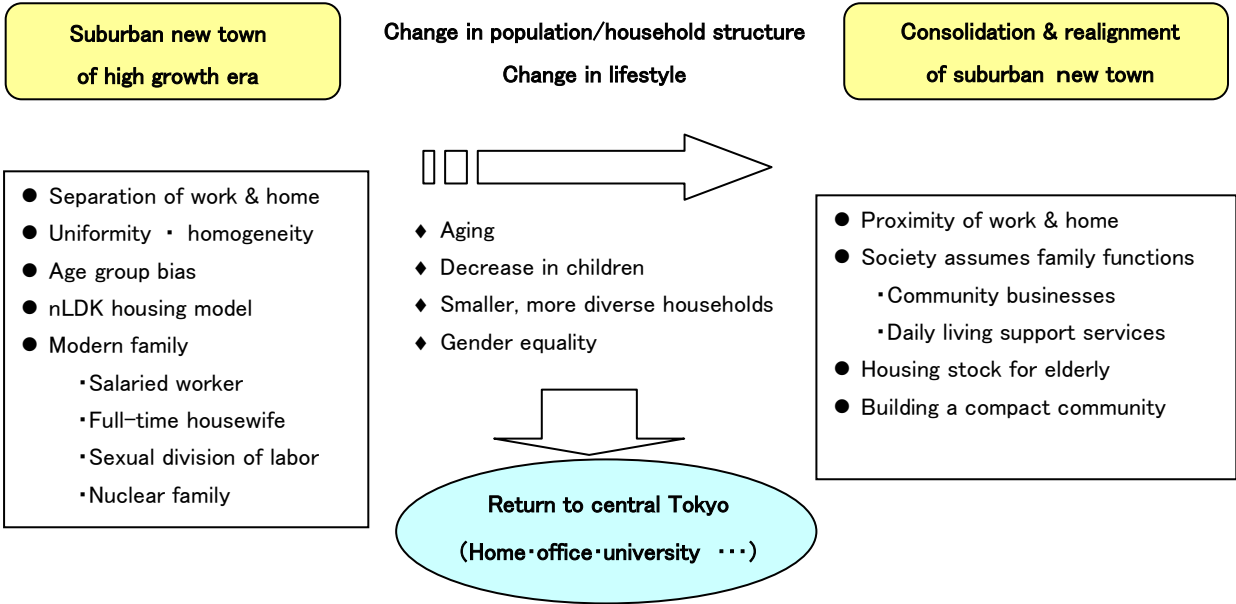
This calls for a “community business” approach, wherein local residents take the initiative and use the community’s resources to address community issues. For example, to support the employment of women, it is necessary to enhance childcare services and services to support daily living. The community business model is well suited for these types of services.

In the past, after the children grew up and left home, living in an empty house with a yard was thought to be the culmination of a successful life. But with lifespans now extending into the 80s, the empty house and yard no longer hold much appeal. Despite the hassles of a sudden change of habitat in old age, it is becoming more important to move into a dwelling that is functional and suited to the family size.

The number of persons aged 75 and over is predicted to grow, which will increase the need for long-term care. And with lifespans growing, almost everyone will inevitably need long-term care at some point in the future. Thus elderly housing must be able to flexibly accommodate all possible health conditions. It is essential that the new town supply housing and land that accommodate these specific needs of the elderly.

Finally, communities must be made compact so that people need not rely so heavily on car transportation in daily living. We need commercial establishments that blend into the community rather than massive establishments located along major roads. The shopping district provides necessary services for daily living and forms the backbone of the community. What is needed is a spatial structure that can accommodate diverse lifestyles by achieving an appropriate balance between ensuring privacy on the one hand, and encouraging familiarity and interaction on the other.

**Figure 3 Evolution of the Suburban New Town**



**Conclusion—In Search of the “Slow Life”**

Compared to the hectic pace of life in the city, the suburbs can offer a more peaceful life surrounded by a rich natural environment. But while this is one form of the “slow life,” below we propose a new kind of “slow life” for the ultra-aging society.

The “slow life” concept can be traced back to Italy’s “slow food” movement, which began in 1986 as a criticism of the globalization of fast food. The movement sought to preserve and



transmit the traditional food culture—including flavoring, ingredients, and recipes—of the nation and local communities. However, its real significance lies in how it cultivated a deep respect for the importance of the local community. In the same way, the slow life represents more than a simple desire to lead a relaxed and carefree life; it creates possibilities for a lifestyle rooted in the local community.

For the salaryman, living the slow life means discovering a new place for himself in a community once regarded merely as a place to sleep. The slow life comprises a lifestyle that is connected to the community across all areas of daily life, including work and community activity.

Thus the conventional spatial structure separating work and home, and create an environment that brings together work and home with job opportunities for men, women and elderly persons.

Moreover, while suburbs in the past have been defined mainly by their relationship to the urban center, for the slow life, suburban areas will have to differentiate themselves through unique local characteristics. They must become a space to support lifestyles that take advantage of the local environment, be it is the sea or the mountains. We are entering an era in which suburban communities will champion uniqueness through the local environment and culture. What the ultra-aging society represents is an era of living the slow life in such unique communities.

We conclude with a revealing quote from a novel by Kiyoshi Shigematsu called *Teinen Gojira* (Retirement Godzilla), winner of the 2001 Naoki literary prize. The story, set in a new town suburb of Tokyo, eloquently depicts issues confronting the new town through the eyes of four retired salarymen. Of the many interesting insights, perhaps the most memorable is as follows:

“In the block that was occupied first, the residents are older on average, and several streets have not been adequately cleared of snow. Shoveling snow is much harder work than it looks. The snow in front of two-family homes has been neatly cleared, but not where elderly couples live. The difference is striking. Snow piled on the street tells the story of how the community is aging, and how younger generations are replacing the old.”