

Chapter 1 Transition of Tokyo's Urban Planning

1 Transition of Laws and Regulations for Urban Planning

After the Great Ginza Fire of 1872, the Meiji Government issued a statement to build a fireproof city and built a Western-style brick quarter in Ginza. This was the first modern urban city building in Japan. Afterwards, the Tokyo Town Planning Ordinance – the origin of city planning legislation in Japan – was established in 1888. Hibiya Park and the road that runs along the Imperial Palace moat are legacies of the city development project at that time.

Then, in 1919, the Tokyo Town Planning Ordinance was replaced by the City Planning Act. This was followed by the Imperial Capital Reconstruction Project after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake and a wide-scale land readjustment project, in which a significant part of the affected areas was developed by the method of city planning. Metros were also constructed for the first time in Tokyo, between Asakusa and Ueno in 1927, Ueno and Shimbashi in 1934, and Shimbashi and Shibuya in 1939.

Although city planning and the relevant projects continued to be carried out, all such projects were discontinued by the end of the Pacific War due to the intensification.

In September 1946, the government enacted the Special City Planning Law for war-damage reconstruction. The first step towards the post-war reconstruction in Tokyo was made under the Tokyo Special City Plan (e.g., land readjustment for reconstruction) based on the Law. In June 1950, the Capital Construction Law was established in order to construct the capital city of Tokyo under a national project. This Law, however, made it difficult to respond sufficiently to the trends in the enormous expansion of urban areas into the suburbs, which resulted in the establishment of the National Capital Region Development Act in April 1956 that was aimed at development from a cross-regional, capital-region perspective.

After that, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) promoted an all-out revision of urban plans: parks and green spaces in 1957, expressways in 1959, and high-speed railways in 1962.

Figure 1-1



Earthquake reconstruction project planning map

Figure 1-2



Overhead view of the urban planning for reconstruction

Also, the street planning was revised in terms of the area surrounded by Loop Road 6 and Ara River in February 1964, and then in terms of the other areas in July 1966, which resulted in the street network of the current urban plan. In this connection, revisions were also made for districts and zones (e.g. use districts, fire prevention districts and vacancy areas).

The partial revision of the Building Standards Act of May 1950 in January 1963 resulted in the designation of bulk districts in the Ku-region area for the first time. This was intended to form urban areas while securing open spaces, to redress the imbalance between the over-concentrated population and urban facilities and to formulate reasonable land use plans, which opened up new avenues for the development of skyscrapers.

Also, the green spaces designated around the Ku-region area since 1948 were abolished in May 1969 under the land readjustment projects with the policy of comprehensive development of those areas for residential uses.

2 Enactment of the New City Planning Act

After the post-war turmoil, the high economic growth period started. This growth caused the population and industry into the metropolitan area, which often resulted in confusion in land use in and around urban areas.

Also, due to the trend of urban sprawl in which urban areas sprawl into suburbs, there was growing awareness of the importance of urban problems such as commuting difficulties, dwelling shortage and pollution. The new City Planning Act, therefore, was promulgated in June 1968 and put into force in June 1969 with the recognition that strategic land use is necessary in order to prevent urban sprawl and realize a desirable urban form ensuring good urban quality.

The features of the new City Planning Act are as follows. First, in response to the post-war trend towards local autonomy, it devolved the decision-making power on urban planning to prefectures and municipalities and added resident participation procedures. Secondly, the new Act divided city planning areas into urbanization promotion areas and urbanization control areas in order to prevent urban sprawl. The former are areas that have already been built-up areas and those that should be urbanized preferentially and systematically within about 10 years, while the latter are those where urbanization should be controlled. Thirdly, it established the development permission system in order to secure the area division, in which the authority may grant exceptional permissions only to entities that intend to develop necessary public facilities and systematically develop urban areas on their own initiative.

3 Revisions of the City Planning Act and the Building Standards Act

The City Planning Act has undergone partial revision every year since it entered into force in 1969, responding to changes in situations. For the purpose of promoting the standardization of the intended use of land and the intense use of land, the City Planning Act and the Building Standards Act were partially revised in June 1970 to reduce eight use districts to four, basically abolishing the building height restriction in term of the building form restriction and incorporated both floor area ratios (FARs) and building coverage ratios into the use district.

In the decade after 1975, the population flow into cities was mitigated while there was a stronger trend in their settlement in rural areas due to the transition to the steady growth of Japan's economy. In such a situation, the residents' demands for urban planning shifted towards more participatory city building. Consequently, the "district planning system" was established in 1980, in which municipalities – local governments closest to residents – are given decision-making power. The District Plan is the detailed plan at the district level, which introduced relatively flexible measures (i.e. notification and recommendation procedures) to realize the plans. In this connection, this groundbreaking framework set the stage for later developments in deregulation and guided urban planning.

Also, in the same year, in order to respond appropriately to the demand for the intense use of land in built-up areas, the revised Urban Renewal Act set out an obligation to include urban redevelopment policies (redevelopment programs for built-up areas including urban redevelopment projects and land readjustment projects) in the "Policy for Improvement, Development, and Preservation of City Planning Areas and Urbanization Control Areas" in the cases of built-up areas including certain cities such as Tokyo and Osaka.

In response to the expectation for utilization of private-sector vitality and the increase in the actual willingness to invest, in November 1986, TMG adopted the Urban Redevelopment Policy, a redevelopment master plan, for the purpose of effective implementation of projects such as those for urban redevelopment and land readjustment, and appropriate guidance of private building activities.

In the decade after 1985, there was relocation and closure of plants and classification yards in the central part of cities due to social and economic changes during the steady growth period, which often resulted in a large sum of unused or less-used lands. In 1988, for the purpose of effective utilization of these pieces of land, promotion of redevelopment tailored to local circumstances and creation of attractive urban space, the Redevelopment District Planning System was established.

Also, the City Planning Act and the Building Standards Act were revised in 1990, thereby introducing the Bonus FAR Type District Planning System by expanding the district planning, and establishing the Zone Planning System for Intensive Use in Housing Land and the System for Unused Land Use Promotion Areas.

In 1992, the City Planning Act and the Building Standards Act were reviewed as part of the comprehensive land policy and were considerably revised. This revision includes the following: (1) revision of use districts (subdividing conventional eight-use districts into 12, while promoting the enhancement of special-use districts, for proper protection of the living environment), (2) establishment of the floor area incentive scheme, (3) establishment of the basic policies of municipal urban planning, (4) expansion of the district planning system, (5) improvement of the development permission system, (6) streamlining of building restrictions in areas other than city planning ones (7) streamlining of restrictions concerning wooden buildings.

In May 1996, new-use districts were designated under this revision,

In January 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (Southern Hyogo Prefecture Earthquake) occurred, which caused heavy casualties and property damage. In February 1995, the Special Measures Concerning Disaster-Stricken Urban District Reconstruction was enacted for full-fledged reconstruction of affected areas by the disaster and immediate responses for future large-scale disasters, while the Urban Disaster Recovery Promotion Areas were established as urban plans.

Moreover, in May 1997, the Act on Promotion of Improvement of Disaster Control Districts in Populated Urban Districts was enacted for the purpose of comprehensive promotion of improvement of concentrated urban areas that are in a perilous situation from a perspective of disaster prevention (e.g. potential of urban area fire in case of a large-scale earthquake), and the Disaster Prevention Block Improvement Zone Plans were established as urban plans.

In addition, in June 1997, the “high-rise residential attraction districts” were established for the purpose of realizing an urban structure with work and home proximity and forming a good urban environment by attracting the construction of high-rise apartment buildings at the heart of Major Urban Areas.

In November 1998, we made efforts to diversify Special-Use Districts (by abolishing their 11 categorizations) from a standpoint that, in order to promote town buildings corresponding to local characteristics and circumstances, it is desirable that municipalities, with their originality and ingenuity, can respond flexibly to various needs in consideration of opinions of residents. Also, the Order for Enforcement of the City Planning Act was revised in advance of the move towards decentralization, which reduced the scope of urban plans formulated by prefectures.

In April 2000, the City Planning Act was revised as part of decentralization. In terms of decentralization, this revision includes: (1) clerical works of local governments are those concerning city planning to be carried out by local governments (e.g. designation of city planning areas and decisions on city planning); (2) for city plans to be established by prefectures, the state authorization requirement is abolished, while the consultation is to be held in which the State consent is required, (3) as for city plans to be established by municipalities, the prefectural-governor authorization requirement is abolished, while the consultation is to be held in which the prefectural-governor consent is required, and (4) Municipality City Planning Councils are enshrined into law (once going through the discussion at this Council, there is no need to go through the discussion at the Prefectural City Planning Council).

4 Enactment of the Revised City Planning Act

Although having been partially revised according to the requirements of changing circumstances since the enactment of the new City Planning Act, the urban planning system has remained the same at its core since then.

Nonetheless, the socioeconomic situations surrounding cities significantly changed (e.g., more moderate increases in population concentration in urban areas and the progress of motorization) in more than 30 years since the enforcement of the new City Planning Act.

With this situation in mind, to increase the accessibility of the urban planning system so that it can accommodate the current stable and mature “urban” societies and have flexibility and transparency that allow local governments, mainly municipalities, to exactly respond to their community problems, a major review of the entire city planning system was undertaken, thereby resulting in the promulgation of the revised City Planning Act in May 2000 and its enactment in May 2001.

The main points of this revision are as follows: (1) introduction of an obligation to set Policies for the Improvement, Development, and Conservation of the City Planning Areas (City Planning Area Master Plans) for all the city planning areas, (2) streamlining of the decision-making system for city planning (e.g. attachment of the statement of reasons in proposing a draft city plan for inspection), (3) introduction of new systems (e.g. the system for exceptional FAR districts, and (4) establishment of the new system for suburban areas (e.g. Quasi City Planning Areas and Special Use Restriction Districts).

Also, in the partial revision of the City Planning Act in July 2002 that came into force in January 2003, the suggestion system for city planning was established as a system to reflect residents’ town-building initiatives in city planning, and the district planning systems were consolidated.

Moreover, the Act was revised in May 2006 as part of the reform of three laws in town-building, and the revision fully came into force in November 2007. This revision strengthened the regulations on the development of commercial facilities over 10,000 square meters, established a new district planning system (development improvement promotion districts) and transferred decision-making authority from municipalities to prefectures for the designation of quasi-city planning areas.

Afterwards, the City Planning Act was further revised in tandem with national decentralization. For comprehensive promotion of decentralization reform, the central government established the Council for Decentralization Reform in 2007 and the Local Sovereignty Strategy Council in 2009 to advance discussions on decentralization, and then promulgated the Act to Prepare Related Laws for the Promotion of Reform to Enhance Local Autonomy and Independence (hereinafter referred to as the Decentralization Law) in May and August 2011 (the first and second package bills, respectively). Together with the enforcement of these laws and regulations, the City Planning Act was also partially revised, including a modification that prefectural consent is no longer required for city planning in which each city has decision-making authority and a transfer of decision-making authority from prefectures to municipalities for certain part of city planning in April 2012.

Following that, in June 2013, 2014, and 2015, the City Planning Act was partially revised in association with the enforcement of the Decentralization Law (the third, fourth, and fifth package bills).

In June 2020, the Tenth Decentralization Law was promulgated and enforced, and the City Planning Act was partially amended to eliminate the need for prefectural approval of city plans decided by towns and villages, thus promoting decentralization.