

# Private Sector Urban Development in the Meiji Era

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When hearing the words, “private sector urban development in the Meiji era” in Tokyo, most people will probably picture the development of the Marunouchi office district by Mitsubishi, which had a very close relationship with the authorities at that time. This development was modeled after one of the most prominent Western economic centers, London, and after its completion, the area was called “Iccho London.”

What I wish to introduce here is not urban development led by companies with political ties, which made advancements as industrialization progressed in the latter half of the Meiji era (from the 1890s). My focus will be on a new type of town development that was born before this time, in the nascent years of the Meiji era (1870s), through redevelopment of land that

was formerly held by the samurai class (mainly the former daimyo (feudal lord) estates) in the areas surrounding central Tokyo. This redevelopment was mainly implemented by the “common people.”

Edo (the former name of Tokyo) was the seat of the early modern samurai government, the Tokugawa shogunate, and many samurai dwelled in the city. In the final days of the Tokugawa government, the land occupied by samurai residences made up as much as 70 percent of all of the area of Edo. The residential estates that were maintained by the daimyo, the feudal lords of domains throughout Japan, made up a large portion of this. This was one outcome of what was called the sankin kotai system in which daimyo spent alternate years between their home domains and their residencies in Edo. This was a way for the government to ensure the stability of its reign.

Then, with the Meiji Revolution in the mid-19th century, the reins of government changed hands from the Tokugawa shogunate to the new Meiji government,

and Edo began its conversion to Tokyo, the capital of the new government. The first steps taken by the government were to confiscate almost all of the samurai residences, which occupied a major portion of the land in the city. At the same time, of those lands, government functions that had been located in Kyoto were transferred to land within the inner precinct, called *kakunai*, of Tokyo, while the former samurai residences in areas outside this inner precinct, called *kakugai* (the outer precinct), were allocated to the former daimyo.

I should perhaps give some explanation about this latter development, the process of the former daimyo acquiring land outside central Tokyo in the early years of the Meiji Era.

In the final years of the Tokugawa government, as it became increasingly difficult to maintain the *sankin kotai* system, many of the daimyo lords were allowed to return to their home domains. However, it was not to the advantage of the new Meiji government, which shortly afterwards seized the reins of government from the Tokugawa shogunate to have them living in regions throughout Japan. Immediately before the decision to centralize power (the abolition of feudal domains and establishment of prefectures in July 1871), the new government ordered them to again return to Tokyo. In other words, the government wanted to cut them off from their former domains and have them where they can be watched. But, rather than allotting them land in the inner precinct of Tokyo where government functions were concentrated, they were given comparatively less important land of the outer precinct, which had been used as second residences or villas.

The former daimyo were thus forced to live permanently in Tokyo following the dawn of the Meiji Era, but their livelihoods were not rock solid, and there were many among them who were facing financial difficulties. For example, samurai residences, including daimyo estates, were not subject to taxes in the Edo period, but taxes were suddenly levied on this land with the new government’s revision of the land system (land tax revision of 1873). Although all land, not just the land possessed by the former daimyo, was subject to this tax, lands such as their residences were generally very expensive, thus imposing very heavy tax burdens on the owners, former daimyos.

As a result, from the first decade of the Meiji Era, estate grounds in these areas just outside central Tokyo

were subject to developments so that the owners (e.g. former daimyo) could raise money to pay land taxes.

Let me introduce a specific case. I had, in the past, researched how the daimyo estate (currently within Awajicho, Chiyoda-ku) owned by the Tamba Sasayama Clan in the final years of the shogunate was used in the beginning of the Meiji Era. Developments on this land started around 1873. The center of the site, where the daimyo’s mansion used to be, was reborn as a theatre and other facilities, and the surrounding row houses where the retainers had lived were turned into stores, with merchants moving in. The theater and merchants had operated for many years in a public square on the road, but the aforementioned land tax revision prohibited use of the square, and they had nowhere to go.

It is interesting to note that these developments were led not by the land owners, the former daimyo, but rather, the former artisans and merchants of the neighboring area. In the abovementioned case, this was the wholesalers of the Kanda Vegetable Market. In other words, while the landowners started renting out their expansive lands due to financial difficulties, it was the former artisans and merchants renting the land who made investments and drove town development, which incorporated the public square-like features of Edo. This was the kind of development scheme generally taken in this new type of town development.

Tokyo’s population dipped significantly due to these changes from the end of the Edo Period through the Meiji Revolution. However, this new development of towns played a major role at the start of Tokyo’s change and growth as not just the center of government, but as Japan’s central city that seamlessly carried on the socio-cultural aspects of Edo. One of the reasons why Tokyo today has so many unique communities can be found in this urban development led by the “common people” at the beginning of the Meiji Era.

Reference: Matsuyama, Megumi. *Edo Tokyo no Toshishi: Kindai Ikoki no Toshi, Kenchiku, Shakai. (An Urban History of Edo-Tokyo: City, Architecture, and Society in the Changing Capital of Japan, 1850-1920)* University of Tokyo Press. 2014.



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