

Zen and the rise of Mr. Donut

Small may be beautiful in North America but here in crowded Japan it definitely is not. This island nation's 122 million people are jammed into an area the size of California. Take away about 70% of Japan made up of mountains and what's left is one of the world's most densely populated areas.

As Japan's mighty economy continues to surge, the biggest problem facing the country is lack of space. Japanese of all walks of life are feeling the squeeze.

Land prices here make Toronto or New York real estate look like a steal. Some figures I was given show that the total value of all Japanese real estate is three times that of the entire U.S. In more understandable terms, renting a 600-square-foot apartment in Tokyo costs about \$5,800 per month. For most Japanese, rents and mortgages are crushing; the homes and apartments tiny. Incredibly, for a nation with a per capita GNP higher than our own, 25% of Japanese homes still lack indoor plumbing.

This big squeeze affects the entire economy. Japan's trading partners are pressuring it to import more consumer goods. But the Japanese can't buy more appliances because there's no more room in their tiny kitchens. They can't buy more clothing because there's no closet space left. No more cars because there's no place to park. Products and appliances sold here must be small; most foreign firms do not make products small enough for the Japanese market.

Foreign luxury items may be in great demand but for everyday products the Japanese see no reason to buy abroad. The traditional complex wholesale system adds huge markups to products but most Japanese don't seem to care; they feel it's more important to support the many retailers who run small stores and other businesses than to buy at discount stores or from foreign sources.

Eric ARGOLIS in Tokyo



There's no doubt Japan is a low-overheard operation. Social programs are limited, compared to the West, and Japanese are used to conditions we would consider hardship. The average work week here is still 50 hours; travelling late at night on the Tokyo subway, I saw scores of exhausted executives making long commutes home. I watched the Toyota car assembly line and marvelled at the speed, efficiency and evident morale of its workers. All of Japan, in fact, seems to be working harder — and smarter — than most of the world. Japan looks like one giant factory, with worker housing and an occasional rice field thrown in. Its cities, while spotless and incredibly safe, look in some cases, like an environmentalist's worst fears come true. What strikes me so strongly here — and dismays me constantly — is the paradox between the greyness and haphazard clutter of urban Japan with the great beauty and grace of the non-industrial areas.

Last week I spent a glorious day climbing the forested hills outside of Kyoto that remind me so much of British Columbia. Rains and mist bathe the ancient, majestic red pine forests. Fantastic shapes of green moss and lichens decorate rocks on the forest floor that are themselves works of art.

I followed winding trails in a heavy downpour, discovering small temples and shrines along the way. There

were no people, only rain, the song of birds and the sound of running or dripping water. I sat on a log and nibbled on wild laurel leaves, reflecting that the beauty of Japan's forests must be seen in the rain: The basic Zen elements. Most visitors rarely see this most lovely part of Japan. Ironically, the Japanese seem almost reluctant to show this hidden facet of their complex nature; they take pride in glass and steel.

Later, clad in a yukata, I sat on the straw-matted floor of a ryokan, or traditional inn, just as people here did hundreds of years ago — except that I was watching the news and bits of a Japanese baseball game on a Sony TV. Japan has been most successful among non-western nations in adopting much of the West's best without destroying its own culture and traditional strengths. Neon lights and hi-tech have not at all dulled the Japanese sense of hard work, obedience and loyalty, nor the startling politeness that becomes infectious, nor the honesty of the people.

The adoption of all the trappings of western hi-tech society, from skyscrapers to Mr. Donut shops, makes many westerners expect the Japanese to think and react as we do. No so. To many Japanese the outside world is a strange, frightening place filled with disease, corruption, violence and anarchy. To westerners, Japanese are enigmatic, frustrating, clannish and commercially ruthless. The twain certainly have not yet met here.

Still, nobody but the Japanese could live in such a cramped handful of islands and manage to maintain their good nature and grace under pressure. This is a lesson Japan can teach the rest of our overcrowded world. Even so, if real estate prices go any higher, it will soon pay to start tearing down the nation's mountains and using the rubble for landfill. The alternative: Selling land by the teaspoonful.