

Tokyo, the Industrial City

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By Paul Waley

Offices in Tokyo are not always the most stimulating of places: lines of paper-strewn desks, gray like the filing cabinets that surround them and the expressions on the faces of the people who occupy them. It might seem perverse, therefore, to suggest that this is a city where the work place receives a higher priority than the residential environment. Yet whenever a conflict of interests occurs, it is inevitably resolved in favor of the work place. This is not so much the triumph of the work ethic as the inexorable result of the primary logic of life in Japan, that is, the definition of personal identity in terms of doing rather than being.

The doing has a clear kinship with making. The making of objects, the manufacturing process, has an unbounded fascination for Japanese. All over Tokyo, but particularly on the east bank of the Sumida River, things are being made in factories, workshops, even in the converted front rooms of people's houses. For a long time it was taken for granted that the city was the natural location for industrial manufacturing. When pollution reached intolerable levels in the 1960s, the local and national governments adopted policies to move larger factories out of inner city areas. Sumida Ward, however, was one of a small number of local authorities that appreciated the importance of industry in maintaining both stability and vigor in the community: stability in the links with the area's industrial past, and vigor as a result of the employment opportunities and social and demographic balance that small scale manufacturing industry confers.

Probably it is the seamless move out of the proto-industrial manufacturing of the late nineteenth century that led to the concentration of small-scale industry in what are now inner urban areas. It was also a result of the rapid growth of the city at the start of this century, spreading out in

tentacular fashion to encompass those pioneering factories like the Senju Woolen Mill that, when completed, has stood well outside the bounds of the city. The mill, like several other pilot plants of the late nineteenth century, and like the older iron foundries of Kawaguchi, was situated near the river. Water was fundamental to the early factories, for transport, power, and drainage. The waterways, not the railways and certainly not the roads, dictated the siting of factories.

Roads took over first from rivers and now railways, changing in the process many of the strategies of urban industry. However small the scale, manufacturing is no longer the most profitable way to use inner city land.

Made in Sumida

Sumida Ward and the area on the east bank of the Sumida River has, since the Edo period, produced many of the goods that are needed to lead a comfortable existence in the city: tiles, glass, matches, toys, clothes—this and much more. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a district in another capital city where there has been such a variety of industrial activity. What is even more surprising in the case of Sumida Ward is that much of this manufacturing effort continues today.

That the ward is still the center of production for a fascinating array of commodities is a tribute both to the perseverance of the people who work there and the farsightedness of leading ward officials. For much of the 1960s and 1970s, factories were considered a source of pollution, unsuitable presences in the city. Most of Sumida Ward's larger plants were moved out. Now, however, opinion is changing. Local governments in areas like Sumida Ward have come to realize that the social and cultural fabric, not to mention the economic health, of the ward depends on an active and flourishing industrial sector.

Excerpted from *Fragments of a City, A Tokyo Anthology* by Paul Waley (The Japan Times, Tokyo, 1992), pp. 129-132.

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