

Effects of Mass Transit on Japan's Development

Introduction

Like much of Japan's built environment, Tokyo was already thoroughly developed before the rising popularity of private automobiles. As a result, mechanical transportation has focused on railroads and other forms of mass transit, rendering Tokyo too dense for much high-speed automobile traffic. Tokyo is also filled with mixed land uses; without significant car ownership, people must live within walking distance of various daily necessities. In Japan, mass transit and land uses mutually reinforce each other, giving transportation a large role in shaping the country's historic and modern development. (Phang, 2007; Ericson, 1996; Hormigo et al, 2007)

How movement has shaped Shibuya, Tokyo

Shibuya throughout history

Perhaps the best example of transportation's influence on Japan can be found at the geographic and commercial center of the capital of Tokyo: Shibuya. Shibuya is located within the Yamanote Loop rail line in the center of Tokyo. While it always served a commercial purpose as a crossroads, Shibuya gained status as a major commercial and entertainment center only after the Yamanote Line opened in 1885—though it wasn't incorporated as a modern ward of Tokyo until 1947. (Kasai, 2001; Hormigo et al, 2007).

Like Tokyo more generally, Shibuya's development has come in phases following

crises, disasters, or (on the positive side) rapid industrialization. Some of these happy or sad events include: the Kanto earthquake of 1923; the damages suffered during World War II; celebratory events such as the 1964 Olympic games; and most recently, the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis. (Ishikawa, 1992; Hormigo et al, 2007; Washington Post, 2011).

Following the widespread destruction of Tokyo during WWII, Shibuya was rebuilt at a larger, more modern scale than before. New buildings replaced the destroyed—or even just the old—structures, and pre-war department stores increased in size and complexity, incorporating entertainment and cultural activities into spaces once reserved entirely for commercial activities. The owners of these increasingly mixed-use complexes usually owned the transportation companies as well. (Ishikawa, 1992; Hormigo et al, 2007)

Less than two decades later, Tokyo hosted the 1964 Olympic games, with some events held at Shibuya. In addition to Shibuya's existing train and subway lines, the city constructed an elevated highway through the center of Shibuya, which relieved some of the traffic congestion that plagued cars and pedestrians at the ground level. This further stratification of transportation types allowed an even greater traffic of individuals and goods through Shibuya, reinforcing this area's appetite for density. (Hormigo et al, 2007)

The Shinkansen, or high-speed rail (HSR), line completed just in time for the Olympic games did not pass directly through Shibuya. Nevertheless, HSR has influenced Japan at

large, reinforcing regional connections by expanding the range of its commuters beyond that of traditional railroad or automobiles. (Ericson, 1996)

More recently, Shibuya has benefitted from a wave of technological concentration that made it the center of Japan's Information/Technology (IT) sector in the 1990s. While this was not directly caused by transportation, Shibuya's status as an IT hub did reinforce its increasing popularity with Japanese youth, as well as the general Tokyo metropolitan trend of increasingly concentrated employment in the central city. With its location within the Yamanote Line, Shibuya experienced increasingly congested traffic in all transport modes as the commuting patterns shifted ever more intensely into a hub-and-spoke model

with Tokyo at the center and the suburbs as the "spokes." Today, Shibuya is a magnet for nightlife and for high fashion in the form of smaller designers and, as always, large department stores that retain close ties with railroads. (Hormigo et al, 2007)

So, although no transportation innovations have dramatically altered Shibuya since the 1960's, Shibuya's development cannot continue without the support of transit and the stratification of all transport modes. These elements are critical to the access and density that continue to ferment new talent and culture within Shibuya. (Ericson, 1996; Watarai, 1915; Hormigo et al, 2007; Goto, 2001)



Shibuya, 1952. Source: Wikimedia Commons.