



Asaka Buraku

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • OCT 2020

Japan's 6,000 Buraku communities have faced centuries of institutionalized discrimination, isolation and impoverishment. When government programs were introduced in the 1960s to right some of those wrongs, the Asaka Buraku community was one of the first to take advantage of them, to completely redevelop their dilapidated riverside community and improve their incomes and social support systems. In the process, this pioneering community inspired other Burakus around Japan to rebuild, and spearheaded a larger community-led redevelopment in their own polluted, industrialized neighborhood.

- Project Asaka Buraku
- Location Sumiyoshi Ward, Osaka City, Japan
- Size 634 households
- Finished 1990
- Type On-site redevelopment of a centuries-old Buraku settlement, with support from various government Buraku redevelopment and participatory town planning programs

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

Participatory community planning in Japan

For a long time, urban planning in Japan has been highly centralized - first in the laying out of imperial courts, feudal castles and the towns which served them, and later in the developing of big infrastructure to serve the country's post-war industrial development. But in the 1970s, growing concern about urban environmental problems like air pollution, fires, earthquake safety and loss of historic neighborhoods began opening space for greater local involvement.

Machi-zukuri ("participatory town planning" in Japanese) is a concept which emerged from a few seminal redevelopment projects undertaken in the 1970s by poor communities who wanted more say in how all these problems were dealt with in their neighborhoods. These projects became very well-known and inspired other communities to do participatory plans of their own. Machi-zukuri was gradually incorporated into national town-planning policies through a series of new laws and regulations. First, neighborhood consent-based building control was instituted in 1976, then district-wide planning was introduced in the revised City Planning Law in 1980. This prompted many municipalities to adopt local machi-zukuri bylaws, since rules about how district-wide plans are implemented in Japan are made locally. Finally, three Machi-zukuri laws were established in 1998.

Real and fake machi-zukuri: Institutional mechanisms to support community-driven redevelopment now exist, and communities in all Japanese cities can take advantage of them. But relatively few do. In fact, a lot of municipal machi-zukuri projects being done these days follow the same old top-down planning style, with only a token "participation" of the people who live there. Real machi-zukuri takes a lot of time and requires strong communities and good, committed professional support. In this case study, one of the earliest and most famous of the real machi-zukuri projects - in the Asaka Buraku in Osaka - is profiled.

How machi-zukuri works

Machi-zukuri is a central government policy which provides financial and technical support to communities wanting to redevelop their areas through a collective, participatory planning process. The policy is centralized, but the implementation is decentralized and highly flexible. Local governments can develop their own procedures for how to support communities wishing to do machi-zukuri style planning and how to distribute budgets. The national government often supports two-thirds of the costs and local governments support one-third, but cost-sharing between central and local government is also negotiable, depending on the nature and scale of each project. Machi-zukuri projects are all different, but the policy usually provides :

- Funds to support the community design process, including salaries of the planners or architects the people select themselves to provide technical assistance.
- Funds to buy land from land-owners in areas being redeveloped for constructing public infrastructure and amenities.
- Funds for the construction of public infrastructure, facilities and housing, usually by private contractors hired by the municipality, following local standards and bylaws, but according to the community's plans.
- Subsidies to encourage people to reconstruct their houses using fire-proof materials in which the city "buys" the old structures that are demolished as part of the people's redevelopment plans.

Japan's Buraku communities and machi-zukuri

In the 16th century, Japan's feudal society was organized into a strict caste system of warriors, artisans, farmers and merchants. Below them were those who slaughtered animals, dug graves and worked leather (thereby becoming tainted with the impurities of death). These were the system's "untouchables." First they were called *eta* (extreme filth), or *hinin* (non-human), and much later *burakumin* (villagers) or *dowa*. These outcastes were forced to live in squalor, poverty and social exclusion in designated *Buraku* (outcaste districts or settlements) on the outskirts of towns and cities, where they were easy targets for abuse.

Discrimination against the Buraku was outlawed in 1871, but mistrust and hostility continued right up to the 1960s, when pressure from the Buraku's long-standing liberation movement induced the government to launch a series of special programs to help improve the lives and settlements of the Burakumin.

Besides improvements to education, employment and welfare, these programs provided support for the physical upgrading of the 6,000 Buraku districts which still existed in Japan at that time (representing some 3 million people), in which government budget was passed directly to the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) branch in each community. Two-thirds of the money came from the national government, and one-third from the local government, but it was up to each community to negotiate with its local government and decide how to plan and implement the projects.

Many less-active Buraku communities were content to let local governments take charge of upgrading their settlements, and most municipalities were only too happy to take on these lucrative state-funded construction projects. But some Buraku communities, like those in Asaka (in Osaka), Misaki (in Fukuoka) and Kitagata (in Kitakyushu), took advantage of provisions which allowed them to develop a variety of improvement projects themselves, in a more participatory style.

Through these early community-driven upgrading projects, Japan's Buraku communities played a pioneering role in establishing the institutional and financial arrangements for the machi-zukuri facility, and became test-cases for the model in which communities are empowered to design and implement their own redevelopment - and the local and national governments support that. Even today, community-driven planning continues to be most visible in Buraku settlements around Japan.

THE ASAKA BURAKU COMMUNITY

In the 17th century, a huge civil project to straighten the Yamoto River, in Osaka City, drew poor laborers from all over Japan, including hundreds of Burakumin who became sand-carriers on the project. After the work was finished, the Shogunate allowed them to settle along the banks of the newly-straightened river. That was the birth of Asaka, and in the coming centuries, this Buraku community remained an impoverished and unserved slum of wooden shanties, geographically isolated from the rest of the city to the north.

In 1962, about 900 households (3,000 people) lived in poverty and miserable conditions in the Asaka Buraku. More than 200 of the families lived in tin-roofed shacks built right in the bed of the river, where they faced damp, mosquito infestations and yearly flooding during typhoon season. Though the settlement was right in the middle of Japan's third largest city, the people had no municipal piped water and were forced to share a few broken-down pit latrines. The lanes were so narrow that neither fire engines nor emergency vehicles could get in to help people when there were accidents or fires - and accidents and fires were frequent, health care was non-existent, nutrition was poor and schools, markets, transport and civic amenities were far away.

The community process and the project:

When Asaka's Buraku Liberation League branch was organized in 1965, it might have been easy to blame all the community's problems on the government and expect government to solve them. But gradually, this resolute community began to realize that the government's new Buraku-support programs gave them an opportunity to decide for themselves how they wanted their community to be. Asaka became Japan's first Buraku community to explore machi-zukuri style community planning, and its efforts created ripples that went far beyond the community's boundaries.

In the 1960s, community participation in housing and neighborhood planning was unknown territory in Japan, so the people of Asaka had to make up the rules as they went along. They began by negotiating for local government funds to survey their community, looking carefully at their existing housing, occupations, education and health conditions and researching the new policies that could be used to help them improve these conditions. Under Asaka's charismatic young leader Yamamoto Yoshihiko, the community invited professionals, students, municipal officials and Buraku leaders from other areas to join the survey process. They used the data they collected to create a common understanding about problems they faced and a common vision of what they wanted to change. The survey became a means to organize their community internally and to build a support base externally.

With the help of technical consultants they recruited themselves, they then set about drafting a master redevelopment plan for Asaka, which went through many cycles of discussion and adjustment in small workshops and large meetings. The final plan was eventually approved, funds were released and construction work began. In the 1970s and 80s, Asaka's ramshackle houses were replaced in several stages by three-story and eight-story blocks public rental flats, where people pay a subsidized rent adjusted to each tenant's income. The mucky river banks were replaced by concrete embankments, broad avenues and tree-lined sidewalks where elderly ladies now walk their poodles. The work was all done by contractors, according to the people's plans, and paid for by the special government Buraku subsidies. Next came parks, tennis courts, an ornate Shinto shrine and a thorough upgrading of their centuries-old graveyard. Before redevelopment, there were 900 families in Asaka. About half of them opted to stay and move into the public rental housing, and half opted to take the government compensation and leave the area. There were many especially younger residents who had good reasons to abandon the Buraku address that had stigmatized them and cut off so many opportunities in their lives.

Asaka's planning later reached beyond housing to encompass other aspects of people's lives. After leading a long but successful campaign in the surrounding Sumiyoshi Ward to get the a big subway train manufacturing yard - which had been a huge source of noise and air pollution in the area - removed in 1987, Asaka worked with other non-Buraku communities in the ward to develop a participatory master plan for this huge 28-acre newly freed-up public land. Most of the projects in the plan were completed, including a clinic, elderly housing, a community center, a day-care nursery, an after-school student center, a community workshop, a park, a public bath-house, a history museum, a sports field and a junior high-school - all built according to people's plans, tapping various government subsidies and programs.

Collective working strategies:

It was their system in Asaka that whenever the people needed to talk to the government, they'd go in groups which included both strong leaders and less-strong community people, so everyone could take part and everyone would get an education in negotiating and dealing with the bureaucracy. In meetings, people would clap if they understood things, and by common consent, divisive issues which could not be agreed upon were set aside for the time being, so the community could present an agreed-upon plan to the city.

Yamamoto-san and other Buraku leaders later realized, though, that their strategy of pressuring the government to deliver services and subsidies could lead to dependency on the government, and they began searching for a new strategy for self-reliance. Beginning in the late 1980s, Asaka's Buraku Liberation League launched a series of innovative community enterprises and social welfare programs to provide jobs for the community's unemployed, to care for it's elderly and handicapped and to provide a sustainable source of funds for their ongoing development activities. Buraku League membership fees were covering only a fraction of the cost of their activities, and they wanted to be more self-financed, so the idea came up of establishing a company that could employ Asaka's aged and unemployed residents and generate income for their movement at the same time. In 1989, Asaka Personal Relations, Inc. was officially launched. Their new company began by successfully negotiating to take on municipal contracts to maintain the newly-upgraded river bank and to clean the nearby subway yard. As they went along, they began learning how to bid and tender for public and private-sector contracts to clean buildings. From building maintenance, the company branched out into selling food, importing paints and setting up their own pharmacy and clinic. All these enterprises provided good, well-paid jobs to community members and also bolstered the independence of their liberation movement.

Decline and revival of Asaka:

In 2002, many of the national government programs and subsidies that had been fought so hard for by the Buraku Liberation movement, to make up for centuries of discrimination and oppression, were terminated. Then in 2007, changes in Japan's rent control laws began driving up public housing rents and driving out young people, with the result that many Burakus - including Asaka - became half-empty settlements of mostly elderly, mostly poor and mostly single people living alone. Osaka's pro-business mayor made matters worse by pursuing an aggressive policy of taking back and selling off to private commercial interests the public land, housing and amenities (like schools, clinics, community centers, playgrounds and public bathhouses) in Burakus, and this loss of common facilities and meeting places further eroded the quality of life and community management in Asaka and other Buraku communities in Osaka.

Fast-forward to 2014. Japan was continuing to get older and poorer, including the three million people who still lived in the country's remaining 840 Buraku communities. Many Burakus that had been upgraded and revitalized in 1970s and 1980s were becoming run-down and deserted. The residents in those Burakus, which were slowly turning back into slums, realized they could no longer depend on government assistance and needed to develop their own systems of mutual support within their communities.

Buraku integration:

Some people, like Osaka's mayor at that time, believed that Buraku people should not remain in isolated islands, and felt that the discrimination would disappear only when the people 'integrated' and become indistinguishable from other Japanese people. To them, the assimilating of young Burakumin into the larger fabric of Japanese society was a sign that the Buraku liberation movement had been a success. But Yamamoto-san wasn't buying that line. "I am proud to be from a Buraku, where we have built mutually supporting communities of people who live together and help each other. But this doesn't mean we should be an island. Because we have been discriminated against, we have become aware of other forms of discrimination - against women, against elderly people and against those with low incomes. That is why the Asaka Buraku Liberation League has built welfare programs and organized so many community activities over the years, to give space to these various groups - both inside and outside Burakus, to rekindle the community spirit. Through this process, real integration will be possible."

Yamamoto-san and other Buraku leaders in Osaka (including leaders from the Yata and Kashima Burakus) were understandably alarmed to see all the community-managed services and facilities they had painstakingly built over many decades being seized and sold, at the same time their communities were facing impoverishment and loss of population. So they decided to set up a joint study team, with support from friends at the ACHR-Japan network and Osaka City University, to look at how to cope with this new situation. After undertaking surveys and analysis, they began taking action.

Originally, most of the land in Asaka belonged to the Buraku, but when the community was redeveloping itself in the 1970s and 1980s, a deal was struck in which the land was sold to the municipal government (becoming "public land", which paved the way for developing the public rental housing on it), and the money from the sale was put into a special fund that belongs to the Asaka branch of the Buraku Liberation League. So one of the Asaka community's first moves was to use that fund to buy back some of the sites the city had decided to privatize and sell off (including the much-loved public bath house). They also decided to revive the practices of community management and to bind the remaining Burakumin into an active process and create a new generation of leaders through a variety of community activities.

People-based Town Development Agency

One of those activities was to establish a *People-based Town Development Agency* to help the residents in these Burakus to regain their self-management capacities and revive their once-strong communities, in the face of adverse government policies and aggressive market forces, through a variety of activities:

- organizing collective activities for community revitalization
- purchasing or renting some strategic land and housing in the area
- safeguarding community-managed welfare establishments and services
- facilitating community business enterprises and build community spaces for interaction.
- negotiating with the government and private sector for people-friendly land and housing programs
- organizing exchanges with other Buraku and non-Buraku communities and Asian poor groups on people-managed community maintenance.

They began raising funds (\$100,000 was raised locally, to match a \$20,000 grant from ACHR's ACCA Program) and organized a series of planning workshops and exchanges with friends in Korea. The idea was that the activities would be tailored to meet the specific needs and opportunities in each of the three Buraku settlements taking part in the effort. In Asaka, they acquired a house for the disabled (which was about to be sold by the local government to a private developer) by mobilizing people's contributions, and then placed it under community ownership and control.

Enter Cafe Cosmos:

Perhaps the most immediately transforming project the new town development agency undertook was the opening of a little cafe in Asaka. The community negotiated with the city to use one of the vacant rental housing units, and in August 2013, they converted this apartment into a cafe, where the community's young and old people can gather, enjoy coffee and traditional Japanese treats, organize house maintenance consultations and generally mingle. They called their new community gathering place *Cafe Cosmos*.

Because so many of the community facilities and gathering places in their Burakus had been closed down by the city (like the small shops and various community centers), the lack of venues for people to gather meant that people were no longer getting together and were becoming increasingly isolated in their separate apartments. Stories went around of elderly people dying alone in their apartments and being found only when the newspapers started piling up outside their doors. So it's no surprise that the Cafe Cosmos has been a hit, and is almost constantly packed, with 20 - 30 customers at a time, filling all the tables. The cafe is open every day from ten to five o'clock, and is run by two community women volunteers, Akiko and Etsuko, who prepare and sell inexpensive plates of *okonomiyaki* (Japanese pancakes), and *ramen* noodles and vegetables, as well as a popular breakfast set (toast, coffee and a boiled egg, for 250 yen). Four months after the cafe opened, the smiling Akiko said, "Older people here used to isolate themselves, but gradually, they are becoming regular customers here at the cafe."

Inspired by this success, other Buraku leaders in Osaka began setting plans to occupy other vacant rental housing units, expand the functions of Cafe Cosmos and add a "life-support consultation" center, where elderly community members who live alone can be assisted and linked to various social welfare programs and support services. There have also been discussions about starting community-oriented businesses and other community-managed welfare programs, as part of the People-based Town Development Agency's program to revitalize their Burakus. By reviving their model of community management in these three Burakus, Asaka's Buraku leaders hope the project will expand to involve a large number of other low-income

settlements in Osaka - both Buraku and others - facing similar problems and coping with the same adverse policy trends.

Death of Yamamoto-san

In December 2014, the longtime leader of the Asaka Buraku Liberation League, Yamamoto Yoshihiko, died of cancer. This was a great loss for the community, but also for the Asia region, which had lost a friend who had taken active part in Asia's larger community-driven housing movement for three decades and had inspired and energized so many others. Yamamoto-san's friend of many decades, Professor Mitsuhiko Hosaka, wrote this in the affectionate obituary he sent around a month after Yamamoto-san's death:

Yamamoto was born in Asaka. Since the age of seven, he would wake up at four o'clock every morning and go out vending vegetables until it was time to go to school. At noon, after getting out of school, he would then work in a leather production workshop and keep working there until deep into the night. One day, little Yamamoto asked his mother why he had to work so hard? His mother burst into tears and could only say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Forgive me!" That was when Yamamoto learned that he was a bonded child laborer. His childhood experience of such exploitation and poverty made Yamamoto-san deeply empathetic with and considerate of people who are poor and discriminated against - all through his life. While visiting an outcast community in India once, he found himself crying with anger at the lasting discrimination that still took place against people and that forced them to live in such inhuman environments as he was seeing.

Yamamoto was a tough guy though - and he *looked* tough too. To some he conveyed the air of a *yakuza* (gangster). When he participated in ACHR's People's Dialogue meeting in Seoul, in June 1989, he was singled out at immigration and taken into a separate cell for interrogation before being let go. In Seoul, all of us who had come for that meeting stayed in one of the slum communities. On the strength of those tough looks, a strange local fellow came that first night to talk to Yamamoto, and to propose a drug deal! But he was very popular among the Asian participants in that meeting, and that first gathering of housing activists and community leaders was eye-opening for him. He initiated grassroots exchanges between Korean evicted people and Japan's Buraku communities, and contributed greatly. Indeed, ten days before he died in December 2015, there was a Japan-Korea seminar in Osaka commemorating the anniversary of people-to-people exchange programs, which Yamamoto himself had organized, but was too ill to attend.

Project timeline

- 1600: Japan creates new caste system, in which Burakumin are the out-castes at the bottom
- 1704: Project to redirect Yamoto River begins, drawing poor laborers from around Japan
- 1721: Land is allotted to Burakumin river workers for their housing, Asaka Buraku starts
- 1871: Emancipation Edict officially ends discrimination against Buraku, but discrimination continues
- 1922: Leveler's Association is formed by Burakumin, as an early liberation movement
- 1962: Population of Asaka Buraku is 900 households (3,000 people)
- 1965: Government measures to address Buraku discrimination and poverty begin; Asaka Buraku Liberation League branch established; Negotiations with the city begin
- 1968: Housing and area redevelopment in Asaka starts
- 1974: After-school students center built
- 1977: Public rental housing construction starts
- 1983: Yamoto riverbank improvement project starts
- 1988: Subway train yard is removed and plans to redevelop that area begin
- 1989: Yamoto riverbank improvement project is finished
- 1989: Asaka Personal Relations, Inc. is officially launched
- 1990: Population of Asaka Buraku is now 634 households (1,619 people)
- 2002: Government programs to support Burakus are terminated
- 2007: Japan's rent controls change, making rental housing more expensive
- 2013: Cafe Cosmos opens in Asaka Buraku
- 2015: Yamamoto-san, Asaka's leader, passes away

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was prepared by ACHR, using materials from Yamamoto-san at the Buraku Liberation League chapter in Asaka, and from field notes taken during visit to the community over the years. For more information about the redevelopment of the Asaka Buraku, please contact ACHR.

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)
73 Soi Sonthiwattana 4, Ladprao Road Soi 110, Bangkok 10310, THAILAND
Tel. +66-2-528-0919, email: achr@achr.net website: www.achr.net

PHOTOS



Aerial photo of the Asaka Buraku was taken in 1962, a few years before the community organized itself and began to plan its redevelopment. The community's houses can be seen along the river, with a fringe of vegetable gardens on the dry-season riverbed. To the right is the big subway train manufacturing yard, which brought terrible noise and air pollution to the whole area.



When the community wasn't being flooded during typhoon season, the people made use of the fertile riverbed to grow vegetables.



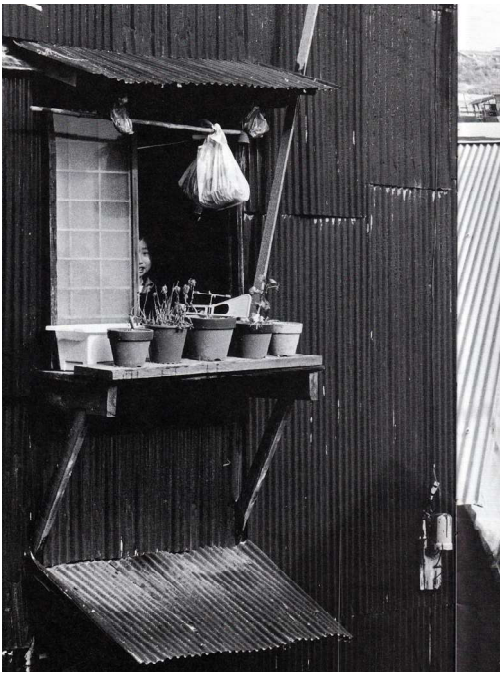
Some of the houses in the old Asaka settlement were built on rickety stilts over the steep banks of the Yamoto River.



There was no piped municipal water in the settlement, so people had to pump water for washing and cooking from a few open wells like this.



There were no sewers either, so the 900 families had to make do by sharing a few pit latrines like this one, here and there in the community.



A child peeps out of the window of her tin-sheet shack, from behind a shoji paper screen, with a few bedraggled flowers in pots on the sill.



Some 200 of the houses were built right in the Yamoto riverbed, and got flooded almost every year during typhoon season.



This photo could be almost any informal settlement in an Asian city - but this one was in the middle of one of Japan's major cities in 1965.



Without electricity, cooking arrangements in Asaka were also a bit primitive, and rice had to be boiled on wood and coal-fired stoves like this.



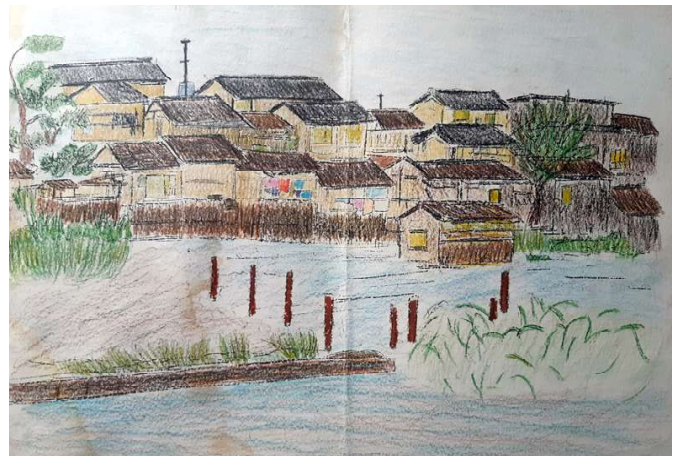
These figurines were made by community members to show the life of Burakumin: sand collectors (top) and trash collectors (bottom).



In one of the adult literacy classes organized in Asaka later on, this sketch was made to describe the work of trash recycling many did to survive.



Many Asaka residents survived by collecting and selling recyclable trash, which was sorted in this big area in the old community.



Another sketch from the adult literacy classes, this one showing what the Asaka Buraku looked like before the people's redevelopment began.



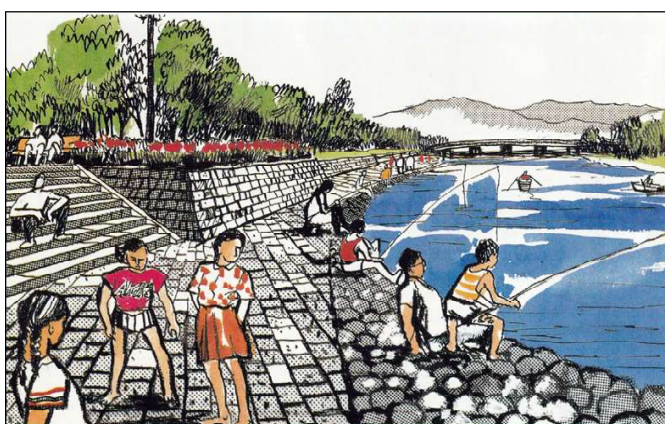
It was in 1965 when Asaka established its own branch of the Buraku Liberation League and began their community redevelopment.



When the people had to go talk to the government, they'd go in groups, with strong and not-so-strong people, so everyone would learn.



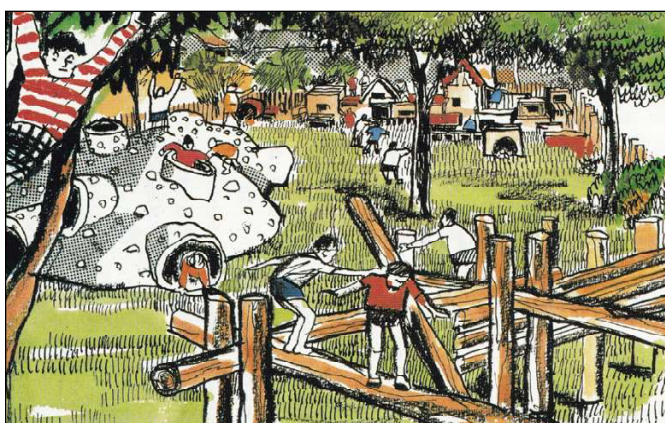
Here is an architect's sketch of the three-story public rental apartment blocks that were built in 1968, in the first phase of the housing redevelopment. More housing came up in the 1970s.



An architect's sketch of the redeveloped embankment of the Yamoto River, which became a public recreation place for the whole ward.



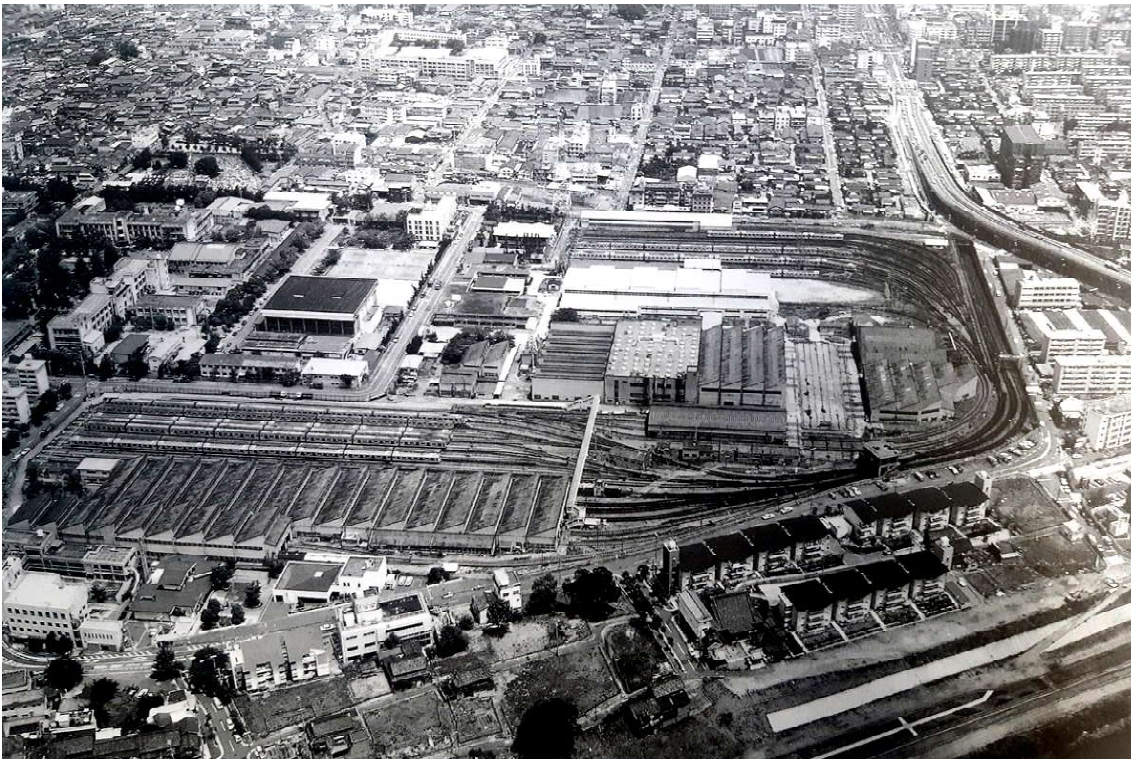
The Asaka community people's planning included lots of small spaces for gathering with friends, enjoying a sunny day and hanging out.



And there were also several parks planned in the housing area, and in the larger area where the subway train yard was removed.



The Asaka community people had good friends in the architects and university people who assisted them in their community planning.



▲ This aerial photo of the Asaka Buraku was taken in 1985, when the Yamoto Riverbank improvements had been finished, and the first phase of the rental apartments had been constructed - but the noisy, polluting subway train yard was still there.



▲ These four photos were taken in 1976, when the people from Asaka went to the Osaka Municipality to press their demand that the noisy and polluting subway train yard be relocated. The negotiation went on for 18 hours, and the people finally won. (That's a very young Yamamoto-san speaking in the photo on the top right)



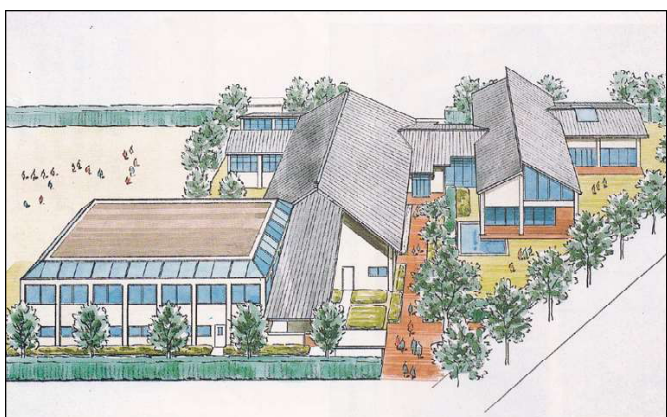
▲ The children of the Asaka Buraku also took part in the long campaign to get the subway train yard moved out of the ward.



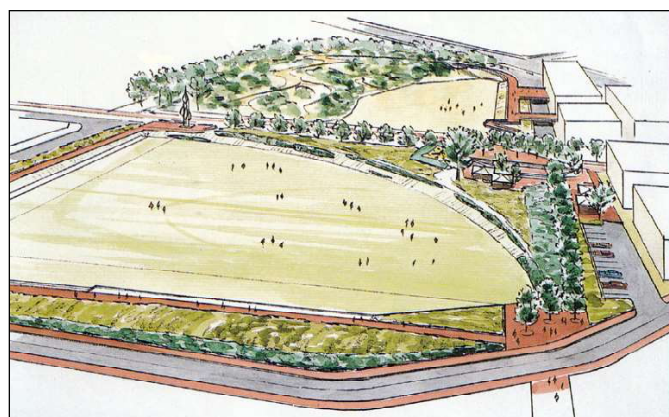
▲ Here the subway workers line up to bid a ceremonial goodbye on their last day at the Asaka train yard, which was relocated in 1987.



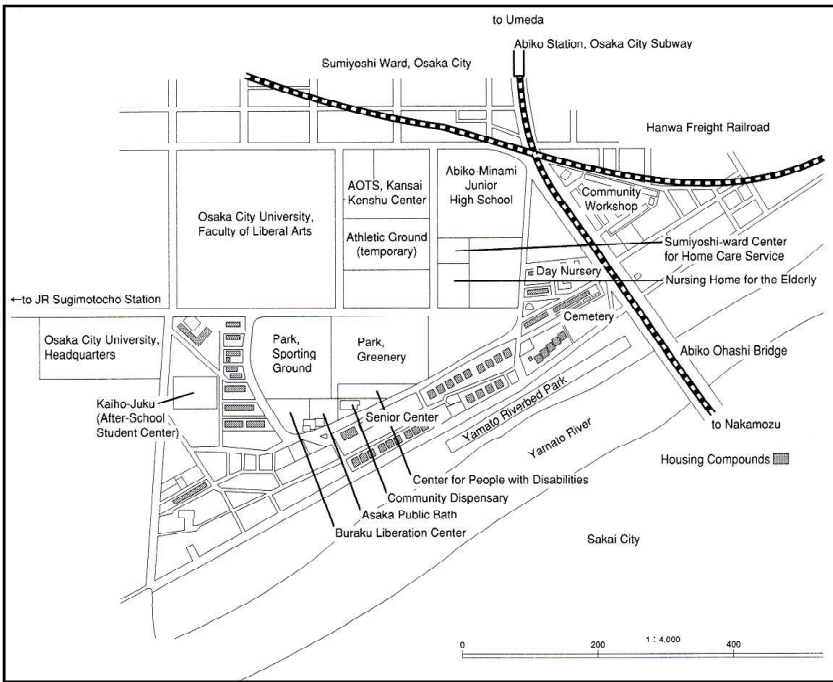
▲ When the train yard was finally removed, that left 28 acres of public land which could now be used for public purposes. This drawing shows the schools, clinics, playgrounds, parks and community facilities the Asaka Buraku people and their neighbors in Sumiyoshi Ward planned for the area.



▲ The community had good allies in the architects who helped them to design the public facilities that would replace the train yard.



▲ A sketch of one of the public sports fields that was eventually built on one part of the former subway train yard.



▲ *Map of Asaka in February, 1995, showing all the new neighborhood facilities that were planned by the Asaka community to replace the big subway train yard that they lobbied to get rid of.*



▲ *That's the Asaka Center for People with Disabilities, for classes, therapy, meetings and services.*



▲ *The Asaka After-School Student Center helps Buraku kids get extra help with their lessons.*



▲ *The Asaka Buraku Liberation Center provides welfare and employment counseling.*



▲ *The Asaka Community Dispensary provides health care and medicines in the community.*



▲ *The Asaka Higashi Day Nursery looks after the children of working parents in the community.*



▲ *The Asaka Senior Center provides opportunities for recreation and assistance of various sorts.*



▲ The first set of public rental apartment buildings built in the Asaka Buraku community included Shinto shrines, street trees and plenty of small parks for the many children who lived in the community to play.



▲ This photo shows some of the public rental apartment blocks in Asaka which overlook the Yamoto River, where the residents used to live in miserable conditions. The photo on the right (above) shows a cheerful abundance of laundry hung out to dry on a sunny day.



▲ Some of the public housing blocks built later in the project, in the 1970s, were taller, with eight floors and elevators inside.

▲ The Asaka Buraku community's ancestral burial ground was kept intact as part of the redevelopment plan, and was even spruced up a bit with a new shrine and landscaping and flowers.