

Chapter 9

Made to Last (contd)

Part 3 : Do We Need Economic Growth?

One key way of curbing the generation of waste is to manufacture sturdy, durable products that last for years and years without breaking down, but doing so would result in a halt to economic growth. However, even if economic growth were to come to a stop, the only thing that would really suffer is nothing more than a very recent artifice in the history of humanity, this bizarre social structure created as a matter of policy since the period of rapid economic growth.

People in the past held no expectations of sustained, high-level economic growth. Such reference materials as charts issued by the Bakufu government after major conflagrations indicating the upper limit for Edo carpenters' wages, and wages paid to carpenters employed in the construction of Edo Castle reveal that carpenters' wages almost doubled during the 200 years between the early Edo period of the mid-1600s and late Edo period of the mid-1800s, but this rise represents annual economic growth of no more than about 0.3%, an almost insignificant increase.

Compared with this, the price of a bowl of soba (buckwheat noodles), which was set in 1668 at 16 mon, remained the same until 1865 when it finally rose to 20 mon, which suggests that the living standards of carpenters whose wages almost doubled in the same period would have risen substantially in the Edo period.

Economic growth of about 0.3% per year would be regarded as totally unacceptable in present-day Japan, but surely this makes a lot more sense than nowadays, when no one bats an eyelid at that fact that Tokyo bus fares have risen from 15 yen in the 1960s to 200 yen by 2000, a thirteen-fold increase in no more than 40 years.

At any rate, in an age when almost negligible economic growth was considered the norm, there was nothing to be gained in throwing things out. In a society in which new items cost a lot more than used ones, it paid to use the same item as long as possible. In any societies but those that promote the junking of goods to generate economic growth, nothing could be more normal than using stuff to the very end, like the yukata that in its final incarnation becomes fuel for the kitchen fire. And in such societies, everyday utilitarian goods were accordingly made to last. It just made sense to make them sturdy and hard-wearing.

Buildings were typical of such an ethic. Horyuji, the Nara temple that still stands in its original form of 1400 years ago, is admittedly an exception, but you can go out into the Japanese countryside and still find plenty of old farmhouses built about 200 years ago. During WWII, when I was in elementary school, our family was evacuated for a short spell to a mountain village in Okayama Prefecture, and the house in which we stayed was the small home of a former samurai family that had been erected 300 years earlier. Though it was a samurai dwelling, it didn't differ greatly from a typical farmhouse, having as it did a thatched roof, and an earthen-floored entrance hall leading to the raised floor of a living room which boasted a big irori (open hearth).

In 1998 I visited the place again for the first time in many years, and found the house unchanged except for the fact that the thatched roof had been replaced by steel sheet roofing. The same went for the other five or six former samurai houses in the area. Well-built homes of the past, even if they were of no special historical significance, did not disintegrate easily as long as they were given normal upkeep.

However, present-day houses - even the steel-framed concrete variety - may look sturdy, but if built

carelessly, apparently last no longer than twenty years or so. Houses being built nowadays incorporate all sorts of new materials, and look nice on the surface, but they just can't compare with traditional Japanese wooden houses in terms of sturdiness. While I don't think they are being deliberately built flimsily to maintain demand for rebuilding, I wonder how many architects and builders there are in Japan who aim to create houses that are still in good shape after 100 years.

According to a 1999 report by Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Cleansing Department titled "Tokyo's Industrial Waste: Current Trends and Public Sector Involvement No. 13", construction-related waste accounted at the time for 39.5% of Tokyo's industrial waste, and was predicted to rise as buildings and urban infrastructure constructed during the period of postwar rapid economic growth came up for replacement.

In the neighborhood of my home too, there are plots which have already been rebuilt twice during the past forty years, and now boast third postwar generation housing, due largely to the fact that when land changes hands, new owners tend to rebuild. Given that houses are replaced nowadays every fifteen to twenty years, it's hardly surprising that construction waste is increasing.

In the prosperous society of today which puts priority on economic growth, all this makes sense, but in an age in which society depended solely on "recent" solar energy (as opposed to fossil fuels), it paid - as the yukata example showed - to use things to the hilt, and the artisans of those days made things to last as long as possible as a matter of course, since they would soon lose any custom they had if their products developed a reputation for flimsiness.

I've recently seen a number of collections of old tools, and the impression I've received is that the tools used in the past really were built sturdily. Of course one could argue that it's probably only sturdily made tools that have remained to be displayed in such collections, but I don't think that's the real reason. You can tell by looking at them - and I'm talking here about utilitarian rather than ornamental items - that, whether made of wood or metal, such tools were designed for sturdiness, designed to last.

Old houses which have been the homes of a number of generations frequently boast chests and other traditionally built items of furniture that have been part of the household right from the start, and they are a lot sturdier than modern furniture with its emphasis on appearance. I too have a wooden desk which is made entirely of natural wood except for the drawer bases, which are plywood. I've been using the same desk now for 45 years, and even after going through two moves, it's as sturdy as ever. I reckon that it could be used every day for another fifty years without showing much wear, since it's of a very simple structure with no parts that are liable to breakage.

However the chair that I use at my desk is another story. I don't know how many I've got through. Particularly since such chairs have come to be made from metal and plastic, they don't last long. The back of the chair I'm now using came apart after just four years of use, breaking up in a way that defies proper repair, but since the seat is still serviceable, I used a roll of duct tape to bind the back to its base, and continue using it.

Even sturdily made items eventually break. That's a fact of life that can't be helped, but at the very least, one would hope that proper repair is possible. If things aren't made in a way to enable their easy repair, the breakage or malfunctioning of just a single part can render the whole item unusable. Do we really have to go to such lengths to ensure economic growth?

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