

Much like Tetsuo's character in *Akira*, Tokyo's urban landscape continues to grow seemingly out of control – its suburbs and outlying cities merging to become one colossal living, breathing organism. Yet, despite its almost incomprehensible size the fuel that powers the Tokyo economy looks, in large part, far less cinematic. Newcomers may be shocked to find that much of residential Tokyo actually resembles the low-rise, high-density habitats one normally associates with cities like Mumbai and Manila.

Alongside the futuristic visage of skyscraper Tokyo, a human-scale city lies along twisting, backstreets where mom-and-pop stores sell homemade noodles, and private homes double as independent shops engaged in local trades like printmaking and woodworking. This "everyday" suburban Tokyo is very much different to the one that most short-term visitors and tourists will experience.

To this day, Tokyo is often described as a collection of villages. Small stations such as Eifukuchō, Nishi-Eifuku, Hamadayama, Takaido and Fujimigaoka – each of these villages is essentially just a main street with a bank, a supermarket, a flower shop. Many even share the same main road. Simply put, each train station in the city is the core of a little town. Therefore, with 924 stations in Tokyo, the city could be said to be made up of 924 towns.

It's hard to imagine now, but these small hamlets were smouldering ash pits 70 years ago; reduced to rubble by the bombs of Allied forces during World War II. When the war ended, the Tokyo government made it ostensibly clear that the citizens would rebuild the city. The government would provide the infrastructure, but beyond that, the residents would be free to build what they needed on the footprint of the city that once was, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Such unplanned, organic, incremental building forms the basis of the suburban Tokyo you see today: houses and shops that sit side by side in harmony, yet with no real formal connection. An informal city that has long since become formal. The term organised chaos may be a brutal oversimplification, but it's nonetheless apt.

On the surface, many residential areas of Tokyo will never win any beauty contests. But

it's only when you get high up that you can really appreciate how beautifully ugly this city can be. The large number of high-rises means there is also an unusually large amount of observatories in the city – glass-walled top floors that allow you to look down upon the rambling concoction of interweaving, claustrophobic streets that are the lifeblood of the city. You do have to wonder, though, if Tokyo was once again flattened as it was during World War II, would there actually be an existing framework on which to rebuild?

Despite the apparent lack of space, Tokyo continues to grow, swallowing everything in its path. The Tokyo-Kawasaki-Yokohama Kehin region is the world's largest urban area with a combined population of nearly 38 million – and with Tokyo now set to host the 2020 Olympics, this sustained growth and construction is only destined to continue. Small traditional quarters are most at risk, with soulless skyscrapers threatening to literally overshadow entire residential neighbourhoods. With space running out, for Tokyo it looks like the only way to build is up.

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First-time visitors to Tokyo may arrive with one of two fantasies dancing around in their heads. One is the hyper-modern city of sleek 100-story skyscrapers and gleaming architecture. The other is a darker version: the city that inspired *Blade Runner* and *Akira* – a super-dense metropolis in which grinning manga faces on towering billboards look down on neon puddles and claustrophobic alleyways.



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