

Toward Housing Stock Management for a Mature Society

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1. Is housing social infrastructure?

Homes are, needless to say, an element of the three necessary preconditions for life: clothing, food, and shelter. They are required by everyone, normally in family units, as places for human life. But unlike the other elements necessary for human life (clothing and food), a home is immovably anchored to the land, is large, is expensive, and can be used for a long time. And it is not sufficient to simply provide enough for all households; it is extremely vital where each is located (location), how large it is (size) and how comfortable it is (performance).

On the other hand, a home is not used by a large undetermined number of people, but it is occupied exclusively by a specified household, and home owners include few public bodies such as those operating public housing; an overwhelming majority, both occupant owned and rented, are privately owned. Most homes are, similarly, constructed by private builders and distributed mainly through transactions on the private market, by real estate dealers, etc. In this sense, housing has a strong character as a private asset which is owned by the private sector and distributed on the market.

But housing has special features; it is fixed to the ground, is large and expensive and it is used for a long time once it has been constructed, so it is difficult for housing to respond flexibly to social change brought by new human needs and technological revolutions, as other products can. The housing stock now includes approximately 57 million homes, and in recent years, about 1 million new homes have been constructed annually, so even if the level of new housing improves, it is impossible for the overall form of the housing stock to change.

Consequently, in an era when the population soared and was concentrated in large cities for example, resolving housing problems caused by an absolute shortage of homes became a major challenge. This increase was followed by quantitative provision of a full supply, but a period when it was impossible to meet size, location, and price needs continued. A classic example of this were tiny high-rent homes in housing estates accompanied by long-distance commuting: a situation referred to as “far, costly, and narrow” housing. In recent years, the movement to provide barrier-free housing has not kept up with the

rise in the elderly population, and seismic retrofitting of homes has achieved little progress.

Considered this way, most individual homes are not publicly constructed, managed, and utilized, but if the overall housing stock of Japan is not constituted in a form needed to meet social needs, it will not function appropriately through the market. Thus, housing is not social infrastructure in the narrow sense, but is a social asset which is often included in policies which integrate housing and social infrastructure.

2. Housing problems in the second half of the twentieth century

Policy approaches are necessary in order for the private stock of homes which are places for private life to form part of the overall social stock. During the postwar years when there was an overwhelming shortage of housing, high volume building construction was the policy challenge. Then as population was concentrated in large cities, it was necessary to not only ensure a quantitative supply, but to provide new urban neighborhoods as places for human life, in housing estates or new towns for example. And when the quantitative pressure ended, the major challenge was providing larger homes, and the target was a level of housing with floor area suited to household size.

As means to overcome such challenges, in addition to systems such as municipal housing, housing supplied by the Urban Development Corporation and other directly supplied by public bodies, and the Government Housing Loan Corporation which offers long-term low interest financing, the government enacts housing construction plans which stipulate medium-term housing construction goals, to systematically supply housing. Eight Housing Construction Five-year Programs (1965 to 2005) have been enacted and changing housing problems have been accompanied by a gradual shift of their priority from ensuring quantities of housing to improving the level of housing.

3. Housing challenges in the first half of the twenty-first century

A changing trend seen in Japanese society as the twentieth century ends and the twenty-first century begins is a shift from growth to maturation and from

flow to stock. The population has stopped rising and begun to fall, and the same trend will soon appear in households. And in the field of economic growth, stable growth is now more realistic than high-speed growth seen in the past. The population is also being transformed by a rapidly falling birth rate and aging of society. The flow of the population to large cities has slowed, but the absolute depopulation of outlying regions is advancing.

At the same time, daily life needs are advancing and diversifying accompanied by a boom in highly convenient city center housing. Concern for safety is high as a result of continuous large earthquakes and the problem of seismic design frauds. Environmental problems have become a topic of great interest, and attention has begun to focus on energy conservation performance. Consequently, it is necessary to form a full-scale stock with high location, size, and performance levels. In order to smoothly provide private homes with a variety of properties to people who demand them, the market environment must be improved and suitable compensation paid to the elderly and other people who require public support.

In light of such trends, the government's housing construction program has been replaced by the Basic Program for Home Life (from 2006). Its goals are not specific numbers of new homes, but improving the overall performance of the housing stock, and promoting the renovation and redistribution of old homes. The direct goals are the formation and management of a public stock.

4. Housing research: present state and directions

The research challenges we face have changed in response to the state of new housing policies.

The initial goal was popularizing long-term superior housing—building good homes, caring for them properly, and using them carefully for a long time—in order to form a full-scale housing stock. In response, the NILIM has, as part of “development of multiple generation use type housing and housing land formation and management technologies”, taken pace-setting initiatives concerning fundamental performances necessary to construct housing which can withstand long-term use, management systems, renovation methods etc., but it will also research technologies and systems which have not yet been adequately established and promote these through summarizing the results in written guidelines (the 2009 to 2011 Comprehensive Technology Development Project is now in progress).

It is also necessary to increase the percentage of overall housing stock which is housing endowed with basic performances which can meet social demands, for seismic resistance, energy conservation, and barrier free etc. Taking energy conservation performance as an example, legal systems have been gradually strengthened, and newly constructed housing provides a higher level in this area, but

measures for the vast existing stock of housing remains a challenge. As “Research on energy consumption performance according to class of housing” we wish to clarify the effectiveness of energy saving improvements according to construction period, scale, structure etc. of existing housing in particular, and to contribute to its promotion (planned for 2010 to 2012).

The effectiveness of such measures must be evaluated. And in order to clarify the degree of inducement effectiveness of policies extending from the government level to local government level according to regional characteristics in regard to the entire housing stock, which consists of an overwhelming share of private housing and tiny minority of public housing, we are undertaking Research on Methods of Evaluating the Effectiveness of Housing Policies According to Regional Characteristics (2008 to 2010, in progress).

It is predicted that new housing (including reconstructed housing) will eventually achieve a very high level, but measures focused on the existing stock are indispensable to transform the overall stock into more desirable form and use it more effectively. Japanese housing includes more new homes than in the advanced countries of Europe and America, but it is extremely far behind these regions in terms of the resale and renovation of old homes. There is also an insufficient supply of statistics which accurately clarify the performance of the overall housing stock. A system to appropriately evaluate the performance of existing housing and to predict the effectiveness and cost of improvements must be developed. Other major technical challenges are protecting consumers through quality assurance and information provision, and introducing housing stock management for a mature society.

In conclusion, because many homes are privately owned, not only must the achievements of our housing research be reflected directly in government policies, but must also contribute to the private sector housing market. If this conforms with the direction of government policies, it will contribute indirectly to its policies.