

Japan's Housing Conditions: 'Detached and Small'

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Some people may think apartment units form the bulk of today's housing stocks in Japan. This perception is understandable, especially in view of the impression one usually has of Japan: mountainous, little flat land, not a lot larger than England yet with more than twice its population. Yet, this is NOT the case. The most common form of housing is still a detached or semi-detached unit, albeit small. Godzilla usually demolishes the high-rise towers only, you see.

We have abstracted the following brief statistics from relevant published government sources for reference and interest:

- a) Japan has a population of around 120 million people in 44,000,000 households, most of which do not have to share an accommodation unit with another household / family.
- b) There are approximately 50,000,000 housing units, thus implying very roughly a surplus of around 6,000,000 units. Nonetheless, many such units are in dilapidated status while others are retained for other uses. Hence, the vacancy situation may not be as bad as it appears.
- c) Based on the 'occupied' units, i.e. essentially the 44,000,000 households, around 26,000,000 (61%) of them own their own homes, while the rest (39%) are renters.
- d) Based on the 'occupied' units, around 25,000,000 (60%) belong to some form of detached houses, while the bulk of the remaining 17,000,000 (40%) are apartment units.
- e) Based on the 'occupied' units, around 28,000,000 (67%) housing units use timber as the main construction element, while 16,000,000 (33%) use non-timber materials e.g. concrete, bricks, blocks etc as the major construction element.
- f) Based on the 'occupied' units, the average floor area per housing unit is around 1,000 square feet (ft²). Only around 6,400,000 (14%) housing units have floor areas larger than 1,700 ft².
- g) Based on the 'occupied' units, around 50% of the households i.e. 22,000,000 contain 1-2 persons (household members), while 15,000,000 (33%) have 3-4 persons. The rest have 5 or more persons.
- h) Based on the 'occupied' units, the average number of "rooms" per housing unit is around 4.76, with 3-6 room units being the most common occupying around 60% of the stocks.
- i) Based on the 'occupied' units, 33,000,000 (75%) of the housing units are 30 years old or less, implying a building rate of 11,000,000 housing units every 10 years, while the bulk of the remainder were built in the 1960s.
- j) Based on the 'occupied' units, only 2,200,000 (5%) households have an annual household income higher than 15M Yen (i.e. around HK\$1M, or US\$125,000), and 22,000,000 (50%) households have an annual household income of less than 5M Yen (i.e. around HK\$330,000 or US\$45,000). The rest are somewhere between the two.
- k) Based on the 'occupied' rented units, the typical rents range from 30,000 Yen to 80,000 Yen per month. Rents higher than 80,000 occupy around 13% of all rentals.

- l) Based on the 'occupied' units, around 18,000,000 (40%) housing units have installed some form of elderly design or facility features such as handrails, larger width corridor (fro wheelchairs etc), special type bathtubs and so on.

Using the above, perhaps the following observations can be made:

- 1) The detached house form is still the most popular building type, albeit most houses are much smaller in size than say their North American counterparts.
- 2) The typical household annual income is not (or does not feel) incredibly high overall, despite Japan being one of the developed industrial economies.
- 3) Rents are not necessarily expensive, though this may not apply to good residential locations in major cities. The same may also be said of prices.
- 4) Households with 3 generations (i.e. grandparents + parents + their children) living together may not be commonplace anymore as reflected in the distribution and number of household members. Reasons could be many including trends such as lower birth rates, marrying late, remaining single and so on. Also, younger people might have been tempted to leave the countryside to relocate to the cities in order to search for better (economic) prospects. This means the parents would usually be left behind.
- 5) With a maturing / graying population, elderly design features and facilities will likely increase in popularity and application.

Please note the above was based on statistics collected in the late 1990s though it can still make a good rough reference.

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