I walked across Nihonbashi Bridge in Tokyo's Chuo Ward the other day during a sunny break in this year's rainy season. The bridge is the 20th "reincarnation" of the original structure that was erected after the historic Battle of Sekigahara at the start of the 17th century. The parapet is adorned with sculptures of a kirin and a lion, giving the bridge a majestic air. But overhead, the underside of the Shuto Expressway that runs above the bridge completely blocks out sunlight.

A stone's throw away is the flagship outlet of the Mitsukoshi (currently Mitsukoshi-Isetan) department stores chain. The Shuto Expressway was under construction when 81-year-old Taneo Nakamura, a former Mitsukoshi president, joined the company. "The expressway symbolized Japan's postwar reconstruction, and I was thrilled and delighted to watch the work in progress," Nakamura recalled. And to his knowledge, nobody ever objected to the project, he said.

But in less than five years after the expressway's opening, people began to have serious second thoughts. "We can't see the sky" and "the bridge's appearance has been ruined (by the overhead expressway)" were among the litany of complaints voiced by local shop owners. This resulted in the establishment of "Meikyo Nihonbashi Hozonkai" (society to preserve historic Nihonbashi Bridge). And exactly 50 years
ago, its members kicked off a movement to demand that
the expressway be either relocated or dismantled.
They collected signatures and presented them to the
Diet, while engaging patiently in various tasks, such as
scrubbing the bridge with water, to keep it
well-maintained. But it was only last summer that the
Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
and the Tokyo metropolitan government began to take
the society's campaign seriously. During a meeting last
month, a specific proposal was made to move
underground a 1.2-kilometer section of the expressway,
including the part that runs right above Nihonbashi
Bridge.
However, with the cost of this project estimated at
several hundreds of billion yen, some people are
balking at it. I myself have heard them questioning why
Nihonbashi Bridge alone should receive special
treatment, and that the money would be better spent on
building nursing care facilities for the elderly and
daycare centers for children.
These are totally legitimate arguments. Still, the sight
of a massive "lid of iron" looming over the bridge is
heartbreaking. We should recall that, for a certain period
during the Showa Era (1926-1989), we Japanese were
simply too unmindful of the scenic beauty and history
of our towns around the nation. A 100-year plan to
restore them to their original charm, with Nihonbashi
Bridge as the starting point, may not be a bad idea at all.

--The Asahi Shimbun, June 9