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Nihonbashi Bridge symbol of what Japan lost to development

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

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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.

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