
Osaka Renaissance News

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Welcome to “Osaka Renaissance News” - the email newsletter of Osaka City Government’s “Urban Revitalization Task Force”.

The Osaka Urban Revitalization Task Force

We are the first *City Task Force* established in Japan to address urban regeneration and revitalization issues within a common framework. We also collaborate with the central government’s “Urban Renaissance Program”. The role of the task force is to coordinate and promote the set of initiatives that taken together from the Osaka Revitalization Plan.

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“Osaka Renaissance News” is distributed through multiple email channels to spread the word about important initiatives taking place in Osaka.

This Issue: Symbol of Super-Creative Osaka

Osaka has lacked a real centre and symbol of its future. The Knowledge-Capital Project is a plan to fuse the new technology of robotics and lifestyle industries in a downtown location next to JR Osaka Station.

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SYMBOL OF SUPER-CREATIVE OSAKA

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INTRODUCTION

Osaka's city centre is getting ready for a transformation as work begins on the first phase of a massive redevelopment just above Osaka JR Station on land partially vacated by a freight yard. Osaka wants to use the opportunity to create an exciting downtown area, which will serve to attract truly creative kinds of activities. Ideally it would like to create an area where researchers, entrepreneurs, NPOs, and international networks interact.

To help make this happen, it has placed several conditions on the development of the first block of land so that it will become a landmark and anchor for the development of the rest of the site. It is calling it, "The Knowledge-Capital", with an emphasis on next-generation technologies, notably robotics, ubiquitous IT and lifestyle industries.

Osaka has many of the necessary assets, including one of the liveliest education sectors in Japan, to rebrand itself as a super-creative city. The saying in Japan is that the weather and new ideas come from the west (i.e. west Japan). The Knowledge-Capital will serve as a centre-piece as well as a

symbol to activate the region's potential.

However, this still depends on making sure that the vision, and the potential, translate into drawing to it the best possible tenants. It has the perfect location, next door to the major transport hub in west Japan. Also, rental and operating costs are lower than in Tokyo. The Osaka region is also home to the largest cluster of robotics-related research and manufacturing expertise in Japan, and probably the world.

The other key is how well it is run. A Knowledge Management Organisation will be established, which will run it as a business, with promotions to attract as many people as possible to visit. If it can be run as a truly private business, it will have an even stronger chance of success, as private-public partnerships have shown in Europe and North America.

Alex Stewart

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SYMBOL OF SUPER-CREATIVE OSAKA

The Knowledge-Capital will be the centre-piece and future symbol of Osaka within the redevelopment of the Umeda Station Freight Yard project.

(1) The Freight Yard Redevelopment

Work on the redevelopment of Osaka's most attractive area of real estate, north of Osaka Station, in the heart of its downtown area, has begun, following the purchase of the first of several blocks of land by the Orix Real Estate Group in May.

Since 1925 it has been a railway freight yard, obstructing more creative development in the very centre of Osaka. When this site started to become vacant, the redevelopment of the area could start. The remainder of the freight yard is due to move once the first phase of the site's redevelopment is completed.

The redevelopment gives an opportunity for Osaka to promote itself in a new and bold way. This is extremely important for the image of the city. Ideally a city wants a building, monument, or an activity for which it is famous. Osaka has a reputation as a city of business, much like Manchester of old, but it lacks association with something specific. It doesn't have a Manchester United Football Club, for example.

(2) New Symbol

The developers therefore have been specifically instructed under the terms of the sale of the first block of land to

develop the site in a way which not only makes it a central feature of Osaka, but also an internationally-recognised centre. This rules out an entertainment park. Other options could have been a cultural centre (but difficult) or a central city park (but the land is too precious being so central). What the city has decided therefore is to establish a new business-cum-entertainment-cum-education centre, with a high technology focus. It calls it the "Knowledge-Capital" project.

A developer might balk at having to build semi-public facilities and meet other content specifications, which may not maximize a commercial return, were it not for the fantastic location - next to the main railway station. There are 2.5mil passenger movements through the area each day, carrying some of the world's most sophisticated consumers of high-end technology products.

The Knowledge-Capital will occupy 1.5 hectares out of a total of 7 hectares in the first phase of the redevelopment. The total area occupied by the freight yard is 24 hectares. Once the rest of the freight yard is transferred and the second phase begins, probably some time after 2010, the Knowledge-Capital will be extended to cover all of the central block of land

within the site. Hence it will be the centre of the whole development.

The Knowledge-Capital in the first phase will have a total floor space of 150,000m² (a volume-to-plot ratio of 1,000). An office tower approximately 40 stories high will make it a major landmark. The main feature however will be a 40m wide circular “Knowledge Plaza” flanked by a 5-storey ring of buildings, currently known as the “Knowledge Core”. It will resemble a modern-day Coliseum in so far as people will be able to look down on the plaza from each of the various levels where events and entertainments will take place. The “Knowledge Core” will take up about 32% of the space, commercial facilities, such as shops and restaurants, will take up 18%, and the office tower the remaining 50%.

(3) Keyword, Creativity

The keyword is “creativity”. It is a theme frequently promoted by the Mayor of Osaka, Dr. Jun-Ichi Seki. His vision of Osaka is a city capable of producing and attracting creative people. He wants to see established not only new businesses, but new kinds of NPO, and more opportunities for artistic expression. The Knowledge-Capital is designed to foster all of these.

The likely centre-piece will be a Cyber Arts Centre being planned in collaboration with “Ars Electronica”, an interactive media laboratories-gallery-meeting and education centre in the German city of Linz. Other public attractions will be a “Robotic Open Space Laboratory” and experimental and testing area, called “RoboCity Core”. This will be a mixture of laboratory and test bed where the public will be invited

to participate for obtaining better feedback.

To run the facility, a Knowledge Management Organisation (KMO) will be established, which will be responsible for promoting events to ensure that as many people as possible visit. The idea is that the Knowledge Capital will serve as a showplace, as well as test bed and entertainment point, to attract interest and stimulate creativity. Since it is next to the busiest transport hub in West Japan the chances of success are high.

(4) Robo Capital

There is a very strong focus on robotics planned, since Osaka industry has strengths in producing both the hardware and software for new-generation robots. One plan is to make the Knowledge-Capital a centre for testing the capability of such robots to work as “partners” for carrying out human-type activities, such as cleaning, security, and doing chores for housebound or elderly and handicapped people. It draws on technology derived from artificial intelligence programming, vision sensing, voice recognition, and new materials with sensors which behave like “skin”. The hope and the opportunity is that Osaka could become the Robot Capital of Japan and of the world.

(5) Type of tenants

In April 2004, the Urban Renaissance Headquarters belonging to central government funded a project for the “Formation of a Manufacturing Base in the Osaka Area for Robots that Support Daily Life”. At the same time the City of Osaka organised 80 companies and laboratories to establish a platform, called RooBO, to handle planning and

design through to the production of the next generation robots.

The city is especially keen to attract collaboration between local and foreign universities. To promote this it is offering rental subsidies to foreign educational institutions. At least two cases are under discussion or planned: University College London (UCL) and Osaka City University have agreed to collaborate initially in the area of research on fatigue. This could result in joint medical research and exchanges of teaching staff. In July, Osaka University and the Judge Institute of Management at Cambridge University announced a joint training programme for executives in the Management of Technology and Innovation.

(6) Benefits for tenants

The benefits of selecting the Knowledge-Capital as a base include the quality of the facilities, the networking opportunities and support, and the location – convenient for all transport links, including a 3-hour door-to-door connection to Tokyo. As well as this, it is much cheaper than a similar location in downtown Tokyo. It should be of strong interest to any companies interested in participating in areas related to next-generation robotics, ubiquitous networking services, and their associated fields. Taking the strength of the Kansai region in these areas and the convenience of having facilities so close to the centre of where

people meet and exchange, this has the potential to be the most exciting location in Asia, and the world, for connected research and experimentation.

Osaka still has to overcome the hurdle that many foreign companies hesitate to choose Osaka to start business in Japan, even despite the lower cost of an Osaka location. They assume that it will be difficult to progress due to the smaller size of the city and perceived lack of an international infrastructure. However, this is not true. Osaka is Japan's second city and is a replica in many ways of Tokyo, albeit on a much smaller scale. This offers advantages to pioneering companies. They receive more recognition locally, and there tends to be more interest in their services. Information sharing is easier, so it takes less time to get started.

Osaka therefore can be a very suitable place to incubate a new business idea, not only for Japan but for a worldwide market. The Knowledge-Capital, for companies with a high technology offering, can offer an ideal combination of benefits and opportunities for participating in the New Japan. Eventually, the roll call of tenants may read like the future of Japan's new manufacturing economy – a highly sophisticated blending of the human dimension and the robotic control technology underlying it.

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