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HOUSING A NATION

Providing homes & building communities
that all are proud of

Ng Chiu Chin
Deputy Director (Projects & Redevelopment Planning)
Estate Administration & Property Group
15 Mar 2023

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Country One-Pager: Japan

The organization of Japan is overall quite different from BC and indeed Canada, and there are also some striking differences in the way they handle zoning and land use planning. In Japan, zoning is defined at the national level. There are 12 zones designed to capture progressively increasing levels of nuisance (ranging from low-rise residential zones to exclusively industrial zones) which local governments can select from (although allowing for some local variation). Each 'higher' zone (more nuisance) also permits all uses from the lower nuisance zones below it.

Useful Differences

Although the system of having a limited number of pre-defined zones that local governments can pick from isn't likely to be adopted here, the overall permissiveness of the system is worth considering. It would be within the power of BC local governments to achieve today, and a system where each successively more 'intense' zone permitted uses from all 'lower' or less intensive zones could eliminate the need for a lot of rezoning processes. It also has the benefit of encouraging (or at least removing barriers to) mixed-use development. The drawback of this system is that land needed for systemically important but perhaps less immediately desirable or profitable uses (such as industrial) could be taken up by less intense but more easily saleable or financed residential uses. Another benefit of this approach to zoning is in legibility for the non-professionals: the public and developers for example. Many zoning bylaws in BC are extremely long and complicated, often with many 'one-off' zones that apply to only a single property or development. This simpler approach to zoning in Japan could lead to a zoning system with less administrative overhead and perhaps greater accessibility.

Use	Zone					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Residential	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Schools	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Neighbourhood Stores	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Commercial	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Big Box Commercial	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Industrial	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

Principle of permissiveness in Japanese zoning: zones include all uses up to a maximum "nuisance level". (Adapted from: <https://urbankchoze.blogspot.com/2014/04/japanese-zoning.html>)

Within the limited number of zones in Japan, residential zones are not differentiated from one another in the same way they tend to be in BC. Whereas in BC, it is common to see separate zones for single family, two-family, townhouse, apartment, etc., the Japanese system lumps all of these typologies together and differentiates on the basis of floor area ratio (FAR) instead. So for example, in a zone that permits residential uses up to three stories and a FAR of 60%, a developer could build a large single family dwelling, a group of townhouses, or a low-rise apartment building all by-right in the same zone. This approach builds in much more flexibility allowing the market to respond quickly to changing demands without requiring site by site zoning consideration from the local government. In BC, this style of zoning could be implemented under our current legislative framework and still allow for aesthetic control through form and character development permits (which of course may be delegated to staff).