

## Tsukiji: Still a fish in troubled water

Director Naotaro Endo first started filming “Tsukiji Wonderland” in 2014, and it had been partly intended as a farewell to Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market, which faces a makeover and move after serving sellers and buyers for 80 years. When the film was made, the market was slated to move to Toyosu on Nov. 7, 2016.

That was then, though. Now, the Toyosu site is smack in the middle of an environmental scandal involving contaminated soil and a gaping hole in one of the building’s floors. The original construction budget of ¥6.3 billion has also mysteriously inflated to almost 10 times that in the space of three years and no one can really pinpoint where the money is going. The current Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike has issued a statement saying a final groundwater survey is being conducted, a process that may last until at least February 2017, after which the market will likely move.

Captured over a total of 16 months, spanning every season, “Tsukiji Wonderland” celebrates the old market in captivating, enthralling and mesmerizing footage. It marks the first time a film crew has been allowed to shoot for such a long period of time inside the intricate, mammoth structure of the inner market.

Rene Redzepi, owner-chef of the renowned Noma in Denmark, is featured describing Tsukiji as “one of the seven food wonders of the world,” and Endo backs that up with factual bullet points that drift across the screen: “The total amount of fish products dealt with on a single day: 1800 tons. The number of visitors per day: 42,000. The number of middle trader shops: 630. The number of motor vehicles that arrive in a day: 19,000.”

During a July interview with The Japan Times, anthropologist and Harvard University professor Theodore C. Bestor — who authored a book on Tsukiji and appears in the documentary — described the film as one that “celebrates the complications of the market as well as its accessibility.” Everyone, he explained, was “allowed to be themselves and speak about their lives within the market.”

The movie is studded with other celebrities of the food world, from restaurant critic Masuhiro Yamamoto to Iron Chef Rokusaburo Michiba and sushi chef extraordinaire Jiro Ono. They each speak of their deep appreciation for the market that has long been integral to their individual culinary missions. Yamamoto says, emphatically, that there is no place like it anywhere else in the world, while Ono stresses he wouldn’t be able to work if not for Tsukiji.

“I think it’s the first time that Tsukiji has been portrayed with such honesty,” said Bestor. “People in Tsukiji do business because of their family relationships. The objective of doing business in Tsukiji is to keep the family going — to revere the continuity of family — so the market is much more than economics, it’s heavily entrenched in the Japanese mind-set.”

To foodies and food-market aficionados all over the archipelago, parting with Tsukiji will be like having parts of their souls ripped out. It's true that the fish market will not completely disappear, but there's no denying that it will cease to be what it has always been.

Bestor believes the move will leave a historical culture gap. "Personally, I feel that once Tsukiji moves to Toyosu, Tokyo will finally have to let go of the last strands of its connection to Edo (old Tokyo). And that's truly sad," he said. "On the other hand, if I had to work in Tsukiji every day, I would be mildly afraid for my life every hour that I'm there. It's just not a good working environment — the labor conditions are too antiquated. I can certainly understand the practical side of the move, and why it's necessary."

Once Bestor toured the new Toyosu site in late July, however, he was deeply disappointed: "There are obvious design flaws in the architecture, unfinished details. The place definitely puts a distance between the fish (and other products) and the people, even the those working there. As for the general public, they would be completely shut out of Toyosu."

For the majority of people who were involved in "Tsukiji Wonderland," the extension of the old site is more or less good news — at least for them, the worst-case scenario has been postponed.

"On some sentimental level, I am glad that Tsukiji may survive for a little longer, but I recognize that a new marketplace is necessary, and that with a new place the social atmosphere of the market will inevitably change," said Bestor. "But, my attachment and my engagement is nothing like the attachments and engagements of the people who have lived their lives in the market.

What will happen now? "I suspect that the Toyosu marketplace may go down in the history of urban planning as a landmark of how not to move a market."

In the meantime, we are blessed with the unexpected possibility of being able to savor the pleasures of "Tsukiji Wonderland" and also wander around the actual Tsukiji market. Such an opportunity should not be wasted.

"Tsukiji Wonderland" is now playing at Togeki in Tsukiji and opens nationwide on Oct. 15.