

Workshops Taking on World Markets

A Diverse Cluster of Small but Mighty Manufacturers

Ota City, one of the 23 special wards of Tokyo, is home to some 3,500 small to medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, primarily in the machinery and metal-processing industries. The vast majority are small workshops with nine or fewer employees, but many have developed high levels of technological skill in their fields of specialization. As the life cycle of IT devices and other products shortens, major manufacturers need to speed up their development processes, and they are looking for partners among small workshops like these, which offer both superior technology and quick turnaround times.

The municipal government is seeking to make Ota a place that will continue to contribute to cutting-edge manufacturing by bringing together businesses with superior technologies. For this purpose, it is extending substantial support to domestic and foreign enterprises that want to set up production or research facilities within the city.

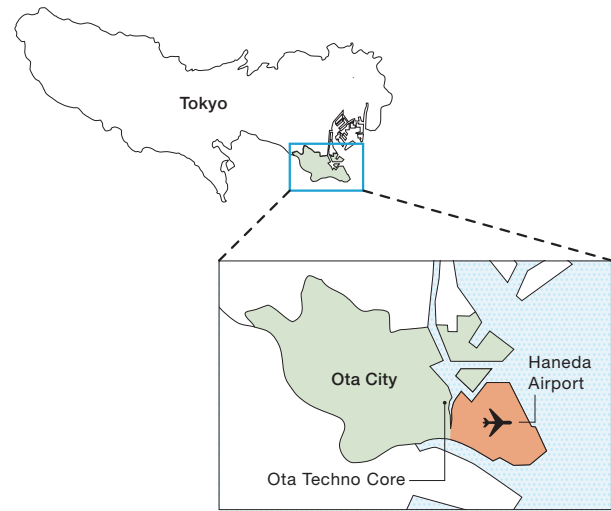
One example of this support is Ota Techno Core, a facility opened in 2012 on a riverside site facing Haneda Airport. The city has leased this “plant apartment” from a Singaporean company and is renting out space to promising small businesses. The four-story facility with a smart exterior now houses 17 firms.

One of the tenants is Climb Works, Inc., a producer of prototype parts for automobiles and electronics. Specializing in processing of hard-to-cut metals, such as titanium and magnesium, Climb Works turns out more than 10,000 one-of-a-kind parts every year. The company, founded in Ota in 1990, now has 55 employees and annual sales of JPY 1 billion (USD 8 million). Seiji Yamaguchi, founder and president, has built up the business in close cooperation with his wife, Minako, who serves as managing director, overseeing the firm’s work and delivery schedules.

Yamaguchi notes that the small manufacturing firms in Ota have strong lateral networks, enabling them to do things that would ordinarily be impossible. Once Climb Works received a request from a major automaker for immediate delivery of some small metal parts, but it did not have the appropriate materials. At a loss, Yamaguchi asked an acquaintance if he had any ideas. This person, a workshop owner, ambled over to a local hardware shop, picked up some quite ordinary screws, and turned them into the desired parts—just two hours after the request came in. The parts were then air-freighted to the automaker’s test course from nearby Haneda Airport.

Yamaguchi reports that the lateral connections among businesses are alive and well within Ota Techno Core, where firms commonly place and receive orders from other tenants. Meanwhile, Climb Works last year set up a pair of sales offices in the United States. This and other small manufacturers in Ota, while keeping up their traditional ties with each other, are also taking advantage of their location near Haneda Airport to develop international business connections.

Ota City and Haneda Airport: Location within Tokyo



1. Ota City, located at the southern end of the 23-ward area forming the core of Tokyo, has long been home to a concentration of small workshops that have supported Japan’s economic development. Ota is now moving to enhance its manufacturing sector further, taking advantage of the increased number of international flights in and out of Haneda Airport.
2. Ota Techno Core: Inside the sleek exterior of this “plant apartment” are workshops where skilled mechanics are busy at work.



3. The interior of the facility has a roomy layout, including corridors wide enough for forklifts to pass.
4. The Climb Works plant has an orderly array of advanced equipment under a high ceiling.



5. Prototypes manufactured by Climb Works. The firm is expert at processing plastics as well as metals. 6. Climb Works President Seiji Yamaguchi and his wife, Minako, the firm’s managing director.