

Tokyo's Urban Landscape Transformed by International Architects

Omotesando Area Revisited

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Meiji Shrine & Its Processional Path

To some readers, Omotesando is already a familiar boulevard. The name “Omotesando,” which translates to “the processional approach path,” is a zephyr tree-lined boulevard leading up to the Meiji Shrine, which was dedicated in 1920. The *Shinto* shrine was built as the memorial for the Emperor Meiji (1860-1912), whose reign was responsible for the rapid modernization of Japan. Over the years, the quiet residential neighborhood was invaded by a US military base after World War II, which brought an international image to Omotesando. Just prior to the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, the base was returned to the Japanese government and an Olympic swimming pool and a gymnasium were opened, designed by Tange Kenzo, Japan’s most well-known architect.

In the era of expanding GDP and the coming of the bubble economy, the quiet residential area experienced an aggressive commercialization. A phenomenon of youths congregating on the Sunday street mall called “*Hokoten*” or the “pedestrian heaven” to dance and perform street music, invaded the neighborhood in the 1980s. Small residential buildings and apartment units were taken over to be retro-fitted into boutiques, restaurants, gift shops and avant-garde hair salons to accommodate the demand for commercial space in the neighborhood. By the early 1990s, the Harajuku/Omotesando area had become a hangout for the hip young generation. For the eight years between 1991 and 1998, and again today, an association of shop owners initiated a Christmas lighting of the zephyr trees along the boulevard. The image of the “Champs Elysees of Tokyo” was created and Omotesando became a boulevard of high-end fashion boutiques.

Architects' Row Appears

Although outside the boundary of the processional path, one of the first buildings to be completed by an internationally prominent architect was the Collezione by Ando Tadao, a recipient of the Pritzker Prize (equivalent to the Nobel Prize in Architecture) from Osaka. The cylindrical-shaped commercial building was completed in 1989, at the height of the “bubble.” The bubble burst in 1992 and a quiet transition period arrived. But then, in 1999, came the *Comme des Garçons* shop along the same street, a storefront architecture by Future Systems of Britain. The design featured a series of blue inclined patterned windows in a series of conical forms situated along the sidewalk. The striking appearance of the windows attracts the attention of pedestrians. In 2003, a relative newcomer to the international scene and extremely popular Japanese architect, Kuma Kengo, completed a commercial building

Another Bubble Economy?

MEMORY of the “bubble economy” in Japan is fast fading into history for ordinary citizens. In a recent movie titled “*Bubble-Go*” (*After the Bubble*), a mother and a daughter take a trip back 15 years into the past to manipulate the course of the Japanese economy at the time of the crash. Riding on the time machine to go back a mere 15 years exaggerates the distance between 1992 and today.

In parts of our urban landscape today, we are seeing yet another bubble-like phenomenon brought on by the globalization of the international apparel industries. Landing of the “second wave” of fashion boutiques onto our shores features its architecture as one of the primary elements in their marketing strategy. As in other cities around the world, international “star” architects were assigned to display their talents to “dress up” the boutique shops, including such brands as *Prada*, *Armani*, *Dior* and *Louis Vuitton* to name a few.

The urban landscape of Tokyo has also seen the opening of several large-scale mixed-use redevelopment landmarks. Unlike conventional redevelopment, these projects are located relatively remote from transportation nodes such as Shibuya, Shinjuku and Ikebukuro. Many of the buildings are designed by an all-star cast of international architects and thus, today, our urban economy seems very much alive and well in Tokyo.

To orient readers for your next visit to Tokyo, let us highlight one such environment that is fast becoming among the new landmarks for metropolitan Tokyo.



Photo:
PRADA Japan

Prada boutique in Tokyo's Aoyama featuring bubble glass panes



Photo:
TOD'S Japan

Tod's Omotesando building: designed to symbolize the shades of boulevard trees on the walls of the building

with over-scaled vertical wood louvers, his “brand-architecture,” at the entrance to the boulevard. The Japanese style of the louvers acts as an appropriate backdrop to the stone lanterns that become the gateway to the processional path. The same year, in 2003, a landmark building was launched. The *Prada* building, designed by another Pritzker Prize recipient, a Swiss partnership of Herzog & de Meuron, was completed just down the street from the Ando building. The building has a unique and unforgettable form of polygon frames with transparent bubble glass panes that animate the people and the fashion products contained within. Soon after the opening of the *Prada* building, the pace of Omotesando accelerated. A popular Japanese architect, Aoki Jun, once a staffer of another internationally known Japanese architect, Isozaki Arata, presented a façade design incorporating the spatial depth of the display window with yet another use of patterned glazing, printed on the surface of the panes. The resulting effect is a façade with a *moiré* (moray) pattern creating an illusion of three-dimensional storefront, siphoning passers-by into the forbidden price zone of *Louis Vuitton*. Nearby, Tod's building opened with another amusing façade, this time by Ito Toyoo, a creative master architect of light modernism. Ito collaborated with structural engineer Sasaki Mutsuro, creating an amazing fusion of metaphor and reality. The shadow of the zelkova tree has transformed into an integrated structural expression on the façade of the building. Similarly, Sejima Kazuyo, one of the most significant architects of her generation and well known internationally, teamed up with Nishizawa Ryue in a unit named “SANAA” to present the *Dior* building to Omotesando. Although the *Dior* building is a four-story building, the way the spandrel is placed on the façade induces an illusion that the building is eight stories. Lightness of the building is achieved by the use of fine white metal drapery that hangs just inside the curtain wall of the façade.

Along Omotesando, the most prominent building may be the Omotesando Hills complex, situated on the north side, with its 270-meter façade fronting the boulevard. The Ando-designed complex, opened in 2006, was built on the site of the Dojunkai Apartments, a landmark apartment complex built in 1926 as one of the series of post-earthquake reconstruction projects after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. The multifamily residential complex was designed as an earthquake-resistant reinforced concrete structure. In 1998, the property was sold to a consortium, which included Mori

three floors below the street level. All of the shops front the ramp, thus creating a vertical street 26 meters in depth. Incidentally, the angle of the slope is equivalent to the street slope of Omotesando. Above the roof level are two residential blocks at the level of the branches and leaves of the zelkova trees that line the boulevard. The height of these apartment units is kept no higher than the top of these trees.

More to Come

In the past 15 years Omotesando has experienced a transformation from a quiet residential neighborhood to a thriving international shopping promenade. Hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors come daily to the Champs Elysees of Tokyo. A processional path for a Japanese shrine has become a promenade to showcase the contemporary architecture of the 21st century.

In November 2007, another newcomer to the neighborhood opened its doors. The Gyre building, which houses such brands as *Bulgari*, *Yves St. Laurent* and *MoMA Design Store*, was designed by Dutch architectural firm MVRDV. The building is composed of five “shifted” floors from which odd spaces are generated. They become the public space within the complex.

Thus, in Omotesando, architecture has come to perform an important role as purveyor of commercial iconography. For the city walkers and architectural buffs, Tokyo, today, has become a “must-be-seen” metropolis.

J.S.

Photo: Omotesando Hills



Omotesando Hills complex: a new landmark opened in 2006

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