

The Iron Lady of Downtown Tokyo



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Photo: James Cope



MOST nights on my walk home from work, I come across small groups of Japanese people standing stock still, often pointing their *keitai* (cellphones) in the air, a look of intense concentration on their faces. Some are tourists, some look like *salary-men* on their way home. There are groups of friends, families, lovers, all gazing upwards to the stars, or more accurately towards the brightly lit orange glow of the Tokyo Tower.

Tall buildings are always objects of fascination and this middle-aged self-supporting steel tower – the world’s tallest – does not disappoint. Did you know that it takes 28,000 liters of paint to cover it from top to bottom? Or that its livery is white and ‘international orange’ as opposed to the ‘safety orange’ often used to set things apart from their surroundings and in particular offer a contrast to the blue sky. International orange is a deeper, more reddish hue which, along with the white, for some recalls the colors of the national flag.

One friend of mine says for him it is “iconic” representing “both happiness and the loneliness of metropolitan life.” Others are not so keen. Design critic Stephan de Roeck, founder of Tokyo Design Connection, complains that “some scaffolding around construction sites in Tokyo is more beautiful than this primitive structure.” “Keep it at arm’s length from me,” he says.

This year the tower celebrates its half century. For some a 50th birthday brings worry that perhaps because you are not as young as you used to be, you are less attractive to others, less interesting, unable to attract bright young things like you once could. And so it is for the Tower which in a few years will witness the birth of a newer, taller, more flashy competitor that plans to take over some of its functions (as a TV antennae) and will possibly supercede it as the dominant landmark that defines the Tokyo skyline.

Celebrating half a century – the Tokyo Tower at twilight. Its lights bathe the streets around it with an orange glow but has it had its day?

Young Pretender

Tobu Railway Co. is responsible for constructing the new Tokyo tower, as yet unnamed, which will be erected in the Oshiage district of the Sumida Ward in downtown Tokyo. It is expected to take three years to construct. When it is finished it will stand 610 meters high, dwarfing what by then we will probably have to start calling the old Tokyo Tower, which stands at just 333 meters. When the present Tower was completed in 1958, the bill was around ¥2.8 billion. Some reports put the cost of constructing the new structure at ¥50 billion.

All nations seem to share a sense of national pride at building something taller than anything found anywhere else. For a journalist, trying to make comparisons between the different structures is an exercise fraught with danger. Often the claims are conflicting, the terms of comparison unclear, and a long delay between submission of your article and publication can result in facts you were sure of literally being 'overtaken' as towers get taller and supersede their rivals. But I will risk it.

The new Tokyo tower should when it is finished become the world's tallest freestanding tower, its 610 meters beating the current record holder, Toronto's CN Tower, by more than 50 meters. However, it may have to share the title. The southern Chinese city of Guangzhou is reported to be building its own 610-meter tower (at less than half the cost), which is due to be completed a year earlier. Perhaps Japan's builders will sneak a flag pole on top or something similar to pip the Chinese in the interests of national pride.

Good Reception

Its design is based on the similar lattice-work design inspired by Gustav Eiffel although the finished effect of the light glass and steel construction will be more futuristic than the Tokyo Tower or its French antecedent. But this is not a vanity project.

Japan will end all analog TV transmissions by 2011. Six terrestrial broadcasters

are working with the railway company to construct the tower that will be used to transmit digital signals across the city. As more and more high buildings crowd the Tokyo skyline, the current transmitters on the Tokyo Tower (14 of them analog, 10 digital) just aren't high enough and are approaching obsolescence.

So once the new structure is ready, the old Tokyo Tower will suffer the indignity of not just being overshadowed by its new brash cousin, but will end up out of a job. Well, not quite. It will be a backup transmitter. But that is not much consolation for a structure that has served its purpose for half a century.

Discussion boards on the Internet still host debates on the rights and wrongs of the decision to build a new tower. Some dismiss communication towers as 'vestiges of 1960s analog technology.' Others point out that the geographical features of the Kanto plane make a tower necessary as the mountains are too far away to site effective transmitters.

Star of Stage & Screen

So will the new structure supersede the Tokyo Tower's place as a cultural icon, a landmark used often by movie directors to signpost where the action is taking place? The creators of the hit film "*Always 3-chome no Yubi* (Always Sunset on Third Street)" used computer graphics to create the as yet unfinished tower as an evocative backdrop for the earlier years of the Showa Era (1926-89). Often it is the site of a climatic battle in *manga* or *anime* adventure. But who will remember the second tallest structure in a city, once the tallest tower is opened in all its glory?

Of course it is already immortalized in works like "*Tokyo Tower – Okan to Boku to Tokidoki Oton* (Tokyo Tower – Mum and me and sometimes Dad)," the book – and now the film – that tells of an ordinary family through the decades in Tokyo and in Chikuho (the old coal-mining area in Fukuoka, western Japan). And it will remain where it is. Its owner Nippon Television City Corp. is reported to be considering upgrading its facilities.

Hirotaka Inoue, a local designer, sees this as an opportunity. "They should remove all the stupid shops and vending machines that litter the site," he says. "They will all need to go if it is to regain its Japanese minimalist beauty." Inoue would also change the color. "Paint it black and light it up with blue diode, which is a Japanese invention," he says. "Or have a vote on what color to paint it. People would be more interested in a poll on that than they are in elections for unreliable politicians."

For a while yet, the busloads of tourists will still turn up each morning to ride the rickety lifts up to the observation deck. They still come now despite the attractions of the 360-degree observation gallery on top of the nearby Mori Tower – a more slickly presented attraction. Perhaps there is a fascination with the iron structure from a bygone age that will continue to draw them no matter what the competition.

The tower was (and still is I suppose) a symbol of postwar reconstruction and global aspirations. A replica of the Eiffel Tower that trounced its European forbear, standing taller (although as French friends of mine point out only thanks to a mast on top) and comparatively lighter. It is like a grande dame, standing rather stiffly erect, aware that the world is changing around her but unwilling and unable to change with it.

I bet those walking home past this floodlit monument to the hopes of a nation half a century ago will still pause to gaze, perhaps to capture its image, for some time yet. For me the orange glow of the Tokyo Tower is always a sight that lifts my mood as I walk past it even on the coldest of winter nights or after the longest of days in the office. I hope as it celebrates its 50th birthday, it will not fall victim to the insecurities of middle age but continue its stately progress towards retirement and, like Japan's other baby boomers, find a new role in a rapidly changing Japan. **JS**

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