

## On the Heels of Meiji Era Architecture

By Mohan Gopal



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### Foreword

In this article I will trace the location and movement of some of the buildings of the Meiji Era (1868-1912). The subject is vast, hence I have only covered buildings that were either located in or continue to be in Tokyo. The deeper I went into the subject, the more interesting it became and though I have never studied architecture, I can say that the richness of it in Japan is astounding. At some later date, I hope to take this topic further and explore architectural sites and their journey in other parts of Japan.

### The Imperial Hotel

I was sitting at one of my favorite coffee locations in Tokyo: the lobby lounge of the Imperial Hotel in Uchisaiwaicho. I had a seat by a wall. It was not just any wall. It had a décor which seemed like a combination of bricks, tiles and stones of different colors and hues placed in purposeful geometric, essentially rectangular, patterns. This rectangular aspect of the stone and brick décor consistently presented itself across the architectural features of the hotel. The spacious rectangular lobby lounge was directly adjoining the central pillared lobby, also rectangular. At the opposite side of this rectangle was the hotel reception and at another side the hotel main entrance. Looking up from the central rectangle, one could see the veranda of the mezzanine going around on three sides – the fourth side being taken from floor to ceiling by the unique wall mentioned earlier. A broad central regal staircase led to the mezzanine from the lobby. The hotel carpets and crockery corresponded to the décor and the geometric patterns. The overall effect was one of Western elegance.

Unlike the interior, the outside of the hotel, though imposing, cannot be called architecturally aesthetic. It seemed to me to resemble a gigantic diesel locomotive, like those which used to operate extensively on Indian railways, hauling long passenger and freight trains.

### An American Architect in Meiji Japan & After

The main building of the Imperial Hotel in its present form was completed in 1970. This is the hotel's third avatar. Its signature décor was the brainchild of the architect of its second incarnation in 1923. This was Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959), an American interior designer and architect who had created over 1,000 designs during his lifetime and had seen over half of them implemented. Wright's philosophy was that architecture was to be in harmony with humanity



Photo 1: Author

Plaque inside the Imperial Hotel commemorating Wright's architecture

and its surroundings – organic architecture, as he called it – and he achieved this in his original design of the Imperial Hotel by using wood and uva stone – a volcanic rock found in the Tochigi area north of Tokyo (*Photo 1*).

Around the time Wright was a year old in his place of birth, the city of Richmond Center in Wisconsin, a revolutionary transformation which indirectly would play a major role later in his life was happening 10,000 kilometres away. The last shogun of Japan had stepped down and the Meiji Era had begun, marking the end of a violent decade of domestic strife and 200 years of a relatively peaceful Edo Period. The least of the big changes to happen was that Edo would be renamed Tokyo. The bigger of the changes was that it fast-forwarded Japan into an industrial megalith and an imperial military power. In the decades that followed, Japan was involved in two world wars and several smaller ones, and also experienced devastating earthquakes. In spite of these events, a century after the start of the Meiji Era, Japan had become an economic powerhouse that amazed the world.

The mantra of the Meiji Era was to excel the West in all the fields they appeared to be good at. By funnelling considerable investment into bringing in European and American experts and scholars specializing in every contemporary field and by sending their own people to learn and return with Western knowhow, a new Japan was being built. There was a boom in providing the Western look and feel. The first Imperial Hotel opened in 1890. Designed by Yuzuru Watanabe, a student of famous British architect Josiah Conder, it was one such establishment along with its architectural contemporary and neighbor, the Rokumeikan, designed by Josiah Conder (*Photo 2*). Many other Western and quasi-Western style buildings were being constructed and two leading Japanese architects of the time were

Photo 2: Wikimedia Commons



Rokumeikan

Kingo Tatsuno and Kiusuke Shimizu II. Frank Wright, who was a Japanese art collector, made his first visit to Japan in 1905. A fellow art collector recommended him to Aisaku Hayashi, the first general manager of the Imperial Hotel, and Wright was commissioned to design the second Imperial Hotel in 1916, four years after the end of the Meiji Era.

## Kiusuke Shimizu II & Kingo Tatsuno

In the late Edo Period, there was conflicting opinion in Japan on the extent to which foreign influence should be permitted in the country. As the Tokugawa shogunate started admitting more foreigners, architect and entrepreneur Kiusuke Shimizu II carried forward the legacy of his entrepreneurial father, Kiusuke Shimizu I, laying the foundation of what was to become a present-day Japanese corporate leader in architecture and construction, Shimizu Corporation. Having close connections to the person who is considered the pioneer of Japan's modern corporations, financial system and banking, Eiichi Shibusawa, Kiusuke Shimizu II laid the plans for constructing a modern building for Japan's first bank – a private one, the Dai-Ichi Kangyo – for the Mitsui group, in what is today's Nihonbashi-Kabutocho area near the Tokyo Stock Exchange. The outcome was a superb piece of new eclectic architecture which was a visible combination of Western and Japanese styles, consisting of three stories of a traditional Japanese castle-like structure built on top of two stories of a Western building with pillars, verandas, eaves, balustrades, large glass windows and stone façade. Around the same time in 1872, the new Meiji government felt it should lay the foundations of a national banking system modelled on the US system. It created four national banks and the Dai-Ichi Kangyo was acquired, becoming the first national bank in Japan – *Dai-Ichi Kokuritsu Ginko* – the forerunner of today's Mizuho Banking Corporation (*Photo 3*).

Having sold their bank to the government, the Mitsui group decided to have their new headquarters in an area called Surugacho. The place was so named because directionally it headed southwest towards Suruga in present-day Shizuoka Prefecture. Surugacho was a bustling area for trade. There was a main street running up to the outer wall and moat of Edo Castle a kilometer away and beyond which Mt. Fuji was visible on the horizon. The street was lined with shops of which the hallmark was Mitsukoshi, then a leading drapery and kimono store. The Mitsui group had a currency exchange and it was this building that

Photo 3: Author



First National Bank of Japan (left) and Mitsui House (right)

was to be recreated by Shimizu as the new Western-style Mitsui House. A graceful three-storied Western building with several Japanese architectural elements was completed in 1874, occupying a prominent spot in the features of Surugacho.

The main street of Surugacho is today's Chuo-dori and Surugacho itself is the Nihonbashi-Muromachi area between Kanda and Nihonbashi Bridge. Mitsui House and the Currency Exchange Bank transformed into the Mitsui Bank which today is the Nihonbashi branch of the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation. The old Mitsui House is immortalized in the Mitsui memorial museum which also occupies the same spot.

If there is one building today that stands unchanged since it was constructed in 1896, it is Japan's central bank, the Bank of Japan (*Nichigin*). Through the Edo Period there was a considerably de-centralized system of banking and currency which lasted until early in the Meiji Era, when a unified currency system was created. Kingo Tatsuno designed the country's first central bank building in baroque style and to this day it functions from its original location in Nihonbashi-Muromachi on a site whose previous occupant was the *Kinza*, a gold mint run by the Edo shogunate. This site was at the end of the main street of Surugacho just before the outer walls and moat of Edo Castle begin (*Photos 4 & 5*).

Other notable buildings in Tokyo of that period credited to Kingo Tatsuno include the Bankers' Association Assembly Rooms in Sakamoto-cho (1885), the College of Engineering of Tokyo Imperial University in Hongo (1888) and the Shibusawa Mansion built for Eiichi Shibusawa in Nihonbashi-Kabutocho (1888). The close ties between the architect and the industrialist would have injected a considerable amount of passion into the design of the Shibusawa Mansion and represent a reflection of the ideas of the owner as the financial architect of modern Japan. Interestingly, Shibusawa's main home was in the Mita area of Tokyo and in 1876 he purchased the grand house of a merchant that was in the Kiyosumi area of the city. Kiusuke Shimizu II relocated it to Mita and rebuilt it with Western modifications. This building in postwar Japan changed ownership and arrived in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan. In memory of Shibusawa, present day Shimizu Corporation has purchased the property and plans to relocate it back to Tokyo (<https://japanpropertycentral.com/2018/09/140-yr-old-house-to-be-relocated-to-tokyo/>).

Two iconic buildings of Kingo Tatsuno which grace Tokyo to this day and are still in good use are the Akasaka Palace built in 1909 and the



Photo 4: Wikimedia Commons



*Surugacho c.1858 - Woodblock by Utagawa Hiroshige*

Photo 5: Author



*Bank of Japan*

Marunouchi side of Tokyo Station built in 1914 – both of which have been appropriately renovated for safety and modern conveniences (<http://www.aonghascrowe.com/journal/tag/175467370488>).

## The Tsukiji Hotel

Kisuke Shimizu II also designed Japan's first Western-style hotel, the Tsukiji Hotel. The location earmarked for this hotel was Tsukiji, at the spot where stands today a multi-level car park of the Tsukiji wholesale market. The year in which the Tsukiji Hotel was completed was, notably, 1868 – the first year of the Meiji Era. In those days, Tsukiji adjoined the waterfront so it was an appropriate location for foreigners arriving by sea. The hotel was grand by Western standards, even boasting the first Western-style flush toilets in Japan. One can imagine the hotel as an important landmark; even the stagecoach to Yokohama had a stop here. Artists competed to capture the hotel in *nishiki-e* (colored woodblock prints) including famous artist Utagawa Yoshitora (1828-1888). Regrettably, just a short three years later, the hotel became a victim of Japan's historical Achilles heel. In 1872, it was gutted by a fire. A similar fate befell the first Imperial Hotel in 1922. Wright's Imperial Hotel fared a bit better, several parts of the building including the main lobby surviving the devastating Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, an event that occurred on the very day the new building opened. The earthquake flattened large swaths of Tokyo, leaving in its wake the charred remains and rubble of a great bustling city (*Photos 6 & 7*).

The Imperial Hotel's relatively undamaged survival of the great temblor had a lot to do with both the structural methods and the materials used in its construction. Less dependency on wood played a big role, fires being a primary cause of devastation in those days. It was indeed hailed as the great survivor and continued to be the leading hotel in Tokyo. The next big shock was during World War II when large parts of the hotel were destroyed by bombing raids, but once again miraculously the main lobby survived. Finally, during Japan's industrial re-awakening in the 1960s, it was decided that in the interests of both safety and business viability, a completely new Imperial Hotel had to take shape. Some architectural elements of

Wright's Imperial were retained in the modern hotel. However, like several other stalwart structures which after surviving earthquakes, fires and wars, were bulldozed to pave the way for the new, what remained of Imperial Hotel the second was slated to go.

## Meijimura is Born

One person who had witnessed the devastation caused by both nature and man in his country was an architect who had been a child in the last years of the Meiji Era. Yoshiro Taniguchi was born in 1904. His architectural interest developed into a deep understanding of the combining of

Japanese and Western elements, perhaps in relation to the major socio-economic-techno changes that occurred during the transition from the Edo Period to the Meiji Era. Taniguchi lamented the demolishing of old buildings and seeing the vacant site on which the majestic Rokumeikan had once stood deeply aggrieved him. He resolved that he was going to do what he could to preserve the architectural treasures of the Meiji Era. Teaming up with his old classmate Motoo Tsuchikawa, who was connected to the Nagoya Railroad Company (*Meitetsu*), in 1965 in a vast area of rolling hills near the city of Inuyama in Aichi Prefecture, they established a home for this cultural inheritance. They named the architectural theme park "The Meiji Village" (*Meijimura*). The main lobby and façade of Wright's Imperial Hotel would now have a permanent home. With dedication and archaeological precision, Taniguchi oversaw the onerous task of relocation.

Meijimura ([www.meijimura.com](http://www.meijimura.com)) is a 1 square km theme park housing 67 buildings of cultural value mostly from the Meiji Era from across Japan. The park has been landscaped and in order to make it attractive to families with children, it has recreational

Photo 6: Wikimedia Commons



*Tsukiji Hotel c. 1870 - Woodblock by Kunishige*

Photo 7: Wikimedia Commons



*Imperial Hotel (Watanabe House)*



Photo 8: Author



Shinagawa Lighthouse (Meijimura)

Photo 9: Author



Wright's Imperial Hotel Main Entrance - Meijimura

Photo 10: Author



Imperial Hotel lobby

facilities including eateries, in-park transportation, period costumes, and theme shows – all based on the Meiji Period. The buildings create images of a bygone period for a history buff. I focused in this visit on artefacts which were originally in Tokyo. These included the old Shinagawa lighthouse built in 1870, which was relocated to Meijimura in 1968, saved from imminent destruction at its original site in the Odaiba area (actually the late Edo Era Shinagawa battery number two, which today would correspond to the place where Fuji TV stands; the Shinagawa batteries – *Odaiba* – were constructed from reclaimed land as an emergency reaction to the arrival of American warships commanded by Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1856); the first railway machine works tool shed built with components imported from the United Kingdom and set up at Japan's first railway station in Shimbashi in 1872; the Shin-Ohashi tram-cum-road bridge of the last year of Meiji (1912), and finally the largest exhibit, the Imperial Hotel. After savoring the main lobby of Wright's Imperial, its successor – my longstanding favorite in Uchisaiwaicho – exuded even more depth and legacy than ever before (*Photos 8, 9 & 10*).

## A Railway System Starts

A kilometer away from the Imperial Hotel is the bustling Shimbashi Station, surrounded by traditional Japanese eateries. It is the Japanese salaryman's weekday evening paradise in Tokyo, still maintaining a Showa Era atmosphere. The steam engine in front of the station immortalizes the location as the start of Japan's amazing railway system. The original Shimbashi Station from which the first train in Japan worked its way to Yokohama on Oct. 14, 1872 is about 500 meters away, right in the middle of the swank Shiodome high-rise corporate area. The Great Kanto Earthquake had taken its toll on the station in 1923. With reconstruction, modernization, multiple railway lines and high-speed trains, the station was rebuilt at its current location. Meanwhile, the old Shimbashi Station has been painstakingly recreated as a national museum designated as the "Old Shimbashi Station National Historic Site". The museum has on display shards and other artefacts buried in the rubble of the earthquake which were later excavated, as also a portion of the station's original platform and

Photo 11: Author



Old Shimbashi Station recreated

mile-Zero marker (*Photo 11*).

## Conclusion

It is never easy to strike a balance between maintaining old artefacts and the necessity of modernization. There are enormous economic, social, political and emotional implications either way. Many practices are initiated based upon the needs of the time. Traditions – both undesirable ones and invaluable ones – evolve. This is true of architectural artefacts also. Japan is a country with a long history and bitter memories of both natural and man-made disasters. Fortunately, in modern times, steps are increasingly being taken to minimize the impacts from natural disasters and avoid man-made ones through dialogue and the de-escalation of tensions. Japan presents an excellent example of how the past can still be preserved while actively pursuing the benefits a modern society is entitled to receive. Meijimura is one such showcase.

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