

## On the Heels of Meiji Era Architecture – Part 2

By Mohan Gopal



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### Foreword

My first article on this topic appeared in the March/April 2020 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*. The article was inspired by a visit to Meijimura, the theme park created in Inuyama in Aichi Prefecture, as a site to preserve Meiji Era architectural artefacts ([www.meijimura.com](http://www.meijimura.com)). This article too focuses on Meiji Era architecture which was originally located in Tokyo. The capital area is an endless source of history and it may be a while before I am able to extend the subject to Meiji architecture which had its beginnings in other parts of Japan.

At the outset, I shall express my gratitude to a book that I stumbled upon – *Meiji Revisited: The Sites of Victorian Japan* (New York, Weatherhill, 1995) by Dallas Finn. The book has become my veritable Bible on the subject and large parts of the writing that follows are based upon information therein. This article is dedicated to the author's passion and depth of research on the subject and her excellence in making it very readable.

### The First Couple

On a sunny afternoon in the late 1990s, I was seated inside the then glass-façade outdoor restaurant attached to the Tokyo station building on the Marunouchi side. My table was by the glass wall and on the outside, about 50 meters away, was the station's central doorway which was always kept closed. Almost innocuously, there was a sudden flurry of activity there. In quick succession, Japan's national Hinomaru flag appeared above the doorway, a red carpet was laid beneath it leading to the road in front, traffic was stopped in the immediately adjoining road, then on the second road beyond it and finally on yet another road beyond. Almost simultaneously, the doors opened, the emperor and empress of Japan smilingly stepped out and gracefully walked the 20 meters or so to a waiting black Toyota Crown embossed with the imperial gold Chrysanthemum insignia which had suddenly appeared seemingly from nowhere. In seconds, the automobile was off with its regal occupants, almost immediately followed by the same flurry of activities in quick reverse. The flag was rolled up, the red carpet vanished, and traffic was already running normally on the three roads, as though no event of significance had ever occurred in the 15 minutes that had just passed. To me it was an event that remains etched in memory and I still wonder at the efficiency, simplicity, and absence of any disruption, with which an important activity was accomplished.

### Tokyo Station – Marunouchi Side

Tokyo Station was the centrepiece in the Meiji scheme of architecture. As most of the great world capitals at the time boasted a grand central station, it would have seemed appropriate that the capital of a new Japan should also showcase one. A famous architect of the times, Tatsuno Kingo, was commissioned with the task in 1903 and the station in all its grandeur was ready in late 1914, two years after the Meiji Era ended, almost like a posthumous child of the era that founded modern Japan. Tatsuno had already had constructions to his credit, notably the grand red brick building of the railway station at Manseibashi about 3 kilometers to the north, two years earlier. Tokyo Station was designed as a three-story red brick building in European style with large glass windows, elongated along a north-south axis. The main central entrance reserved for royalty and their guests would face directly west towards the Imperial Palace, several hundred meters away. The passenger entrance and exit were designed to be at the northern and southern ends, under lovely domed structures. The building would be a miniature town with shops, restaurants and even a hotel, plus a few regal rooms in the central royal area.

The building survived the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, unlike its elder brother Manseibashi, but fared rather badly during World War II when bombing destroyed the third floor and the domes in 1945. The station itself remained standing and was functional again after a week of temporary repairs. The next pressure on the legacy building would be during the economic boom years, but thankfully destiny would have it that Tatsuno's masterpiece would survive these too. After years of deliberation and almost six years of painstaking and detailed renovation work after that, the current fully restored building opened in 2012. Tatsuno, who died in 1919, was spared the sight of the devastation wrought in 1923 and 1945 and he would be satisfied with the outcome that stands today (*Photo 1*).

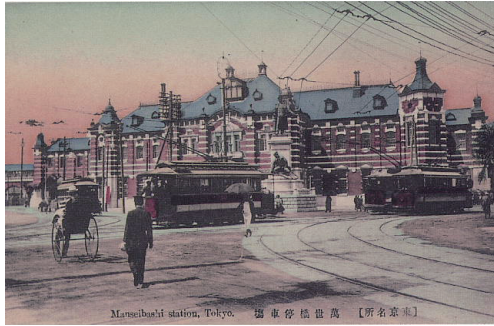
### Manseibashi

The Kanda River which snakes through central Tokyo almost slicing it in half into a northern and southern portion is actually not a river, but a man-made canal built two centuries before the



Tokyo Station - Marunouchi Side in 2020

Photo 2: Wikimedia Commons; Public domain



Original Manseibashi Station

Photo 3: Author



Entrance to the recreated Manseibashi station platform

Meiji Era began, as a result of the victorious Tokugawa shoguns deciding to make Edo Castle their headquarters. The centralization of the country's governance in Edo – as Tokyo was known then – brought in its wake the need to supply water to the rapidly growing population. By the time of the Meiji Era, the canal had become critical and large enough to be considered as a river transporting people and products. Bridges were built to span it, wooden at first, transforming later into stone and iron. Manseibashi was one such bridge and lent its name to the station built close by. By the time Tatsuno's hallmark station building was ready, the Manseibashi area was already a central transportation hub with roads, tram lines, and railway lines.

However, drastic changes were in the offing. With Tokyo Station being completed in 1914 followed by an elevated railway line between it and the Ueno hub 5 km to the north, and the westbound Chuo line being extended from Manseibashi to the new Tokyo station, the former's importance started declining. The nail in the coffin was the earthquake of 1923. While a simple station building temporarily replaced its destroyed grand predecessor, two existing stations nearby – Akihabara and Ochanomizu – and a new one at Kanda in 1919 eliminated its *raison d'être* in the eyes of the city planners. Though the brick building is no longer there, a part of the old Manseibashi Station has been fondly recreated, including the original platform and station staircase as a historical artefact. It is located inside a restaurant, built into the red brick viaduct of the Chuo railway line (Photos 2 & 3).

### Nikolai-do

About 500 meters upstream from Manseibashi along the Kanda River is Ochanomizu. Coming out of Ochanomizu Station onto a series of by-lanes filled with students and academics from the numerous universities in the vicinity, on turning a corner one sees a building which strikingly marks its uniqueness by being in stark contrast to its surroundings. It has a byzantine appearance – almost mosque-like minus the minarets – with a large off-green central dome and a smaller dome of the same color beside it. Coming closer, the ornate walls with slender long dome-shaped windows like an up-turned U come into view. The larger dome seen from a distance tops a central building and the smaller one houses a bell. Both domes are topped by the holy cross in proportions akin to those adorning eastern Orthodox churches. Indeed, the arched wrought-iron gate leading to the cathedral has the inscription *Slava v vyishnikh bogu* ("Glory to God in the Highest") in the Cyrillic script. This is the Russian Orthodox

Church of the Holy Resurrection, or more popularly and affectionately known as the Nikolai-do (Photo 4).

The original Nikolai-do was constructed at this site in 1891. It was engineered by Wilhelm Heise famed for his construction of the main bridge to the imperial palace (the *Nijubashi*) and designed by none other than Tatsuno's teacher Josiah Conder, one of the most famous architects of the period and revered as the father of modern architecture in Meiji Japan. While Conder is supposed to

have based the design on architectural plans received from Russia, the onion domes that characterize Russian cathedrals are absent. The Nikolai-do is like a small brother version of the St. Alexander Nevsky cathedral in the heart of Sofia in Bulgaria – the largest Orthodox cathedral in the Balkans – also constructed during the late 19th century in neo-byzantine style (Photo 5).

The heart behind Nikolai-do was a young Russian chaplain, Ioann Dmitrievich Kasatkin, given the name Nikolai upon graduation from his seminary in St. Petersburg, who arrived in the newly opened Russian Consulate in the northern town of Hakodate in 1861. In that town, Nikolai initiated the construction of the first Orthodox church in Japan, before moving to Tokyo in 1872. The Meiji Era had meanwhile begun, with extra energy put into analyzing and recreating the West in Japan. Nikolai was passionate about both Japan and evangelism. He learnt the language, culture, and local traditions of his adopted country. Not even the souring of relations between the empires of Japan and Russia in the opening years of the 20th century could discourage him, and when he died in 1912 his funeral at the church he had inspired was well-attended, including a floral tribute from Emperor Meiji himself. After his death, Nikolai's name became fondly etched in Tokyo's Meiji history, just as that of the emperor during whose reign he had lived and who died only a few months later.

### War & Peace

Interestingly, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was not about the land of either of the countries as known today. It was about which imperial power would have influence over the Korean Peninsula and Chinese Manchuria. In the context of the times and what was at stake, the war ended badly for Russia, with Japan laying siege to the crucial Russian harbor of Port Arthur on the Manchurian coast (present day Dalian in China) and the whole of Sakhalin Island off Russia's far-eastern coast. Victory in the war earned Japan a

Photo 4: Author



Nikolai-do



Photo 5: Wikimedia Commons



Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky

place on the Western imperial bandwagon and was celebrated with statues of prominent military figures being erected in central locations in Tokyo. A statue of Commander Takeo Hirose, who died a war hero in the battle of Port Arthur, was erected outside the landmark Manseibashi Station terminal.

A few months after the fighting had ceased in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States successfully brokered a peace treaty between the combatants, signed in the city of Portsmouth in New Hampshire. The US government left no stone unturned to create a setting that could assist in arriving at a settlement. This included the selection of furniture for the conference room and the centerpiece was, of course, a large rectangular negotiating table made of walnut. After the conference, the table found its way to the boardroom of a polytechnic in upstate New York, adorning those premises for the next eight decades. In 1989 it was enthusiastically acquired by a Japanese collector who in the interest of posterity gifted it to Meijimura. The historic table around which peace was negotiated in 1905 had found a home. It was ceremoniously installed inside none other than the queen of the recreated Victorian village – the lobby of Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel (*Photo 6*).

Photo 6: Author

## A Touch of Zen

The station at Shinagawa marks the southern point on the Yamanote railway line which circumnavigates central Tokyo. The station is also a bustling hub for trains heading southwest to the industrial belt of Kawasaki city, Yokohama and beyond to the metropolises of central and western Japan. Shinagawa exudes the image of an ever-expanding corporate hub with swank glass fronted high-rise buildings, hotels, restaurants and lots of people and traffic.

However, when the Meiji Era started in 1868, Shinagawa was a very



Portsmouth Peace Conference Table of September 1905

different place. It was a small remote outpost and fishing village on the Tokaido highway linking Edo to western Japan, with the waters of Tokyo Bay lapping against it and the Meguro River flowing through into the bay. It had its pleasure spots, the crowning point of which was the hill of Gotenyama, which with its renowned cherry-blossoms and lovely views made it to many an artist's sketch board. The area also was host to greater Edo's third-largest temple complex, the temple of Tokaiji. Built in the 17th century by Japan's then feudal lord Tokugawa Iemitsu, the shogun donated it to the venerable Zen monk Takuan Soho. There is a beautiful legend concerning the shogun and the monk. The young Iemitsu was a gourmet and was anxious to know about the best delicacy in the world. He directed his feverish question to the monk, who in response invited the shogun to lunch one day at his monastic abode. The lunch, which was served after a long four-hour wait that considerably raised the hunger levels of the stoic Samurai, was a bowl of plain boiled rice with slices of pickled radish. The starved shogun devoured the fare delightedly and then, with his hunger fully satisfied, was treated to an admonition by the Zen master about being a slave to one's senses. In gratitude for both the profound wisdom and lunch received, Iemitsu later urged the populace to enjoy the simplicity of pickled radish. To this day, the dish known as *takuan* is served in many a household with veneration. It is usually oval shaped, very similar to the oval stone that graces Takuan's tomb.

Regrettably, the vast complex of the Tokaiji temple no longer exists. The Meiji leaders in their penchant for rapid industrialization decided that the area was too materially valuable to be left to the spiritual pursuits of Zen practitioners. The area was carved up and most of the land apportioned to factories, railroads, roads, and schools. What remained of the once vast campus were a few of the subsidiary temples, one of which is the current Tokaiji temple. Nearby is the famous 12th century hilltop Shinagawa Jinja (known as the Shrine of Gozu Tenno) which preserves remnants of the formerly splendid temple complex.

Fortunately, also left untouched was the tomb of Takuan, located at a corner of the original temple complex. It is the centerpiece of the compact Oyama Cemetery which is now wedged in between the Tokaido shinkansen bullet train line on one side and the Tokaido main railway line on the other. Close by is the busy Yamate-dori road and a little further beyond one of the main roads connecting Tokyo with Yokohama, the Dai-ichi-keihin highway. In midst of the surrounding sounds of whizzing trains and cars, nuzzles the tomb in astonishing serenity. The monk's last written word was apparently the single character for "dream" – indeed Zen, that everything we experience in the world is but a passing dream, including what was to become of his own monastery 200 years later. (Adapted from *The Japan*

Photo 7: Author



Entrance to the tomb of monk Takuan Soho at Oyama Cemetery

Photo 8: Author



Shinagawa Glass Factory at Meijimura

Photo 9: Author



Marker and plaque at original site of Shinagawa Glass Factory

*Times*, Life, June 19, 2003, "Strolling in a Dream" by Sumiko Enbutsu) (Photo 7).

### Firebrick & Glass

The Oyama Cemetery is also home to several other notable people who contributed to modern Japan. This includes the father of Japan's amazing railway system, Viscount Inoue Masaru whose tomb at his behest was built here next to the Tokaido railway line after his death in 1910. Also, in the same cemetery, is Meiji Era entrepreneur Nishimura Katsuzo, who died in 1907 leaving a legacy across several industries of manufacturing using Western technology. Amongst the most impactful of these was the Shinagawa Refractories built in 1875 which were able to manufacture fire-resistant bricks for the first time in Japan. In a country perennially plagued by fires, this was a major breakthrough and it enabled the adoption of brick in construction – a critical characteristic of Western architecture. The backbone of the technology owed to Henri Pelegrin who had earlier done extensive work in Shanghai and developed fire-resistant clay. Nishimura was indebted to this French engineer and indeed so was Japan, for Pelegrin significantly laid the base for the country's gas technology, leading to the construction of the first gas-fired streetlamp in Yokohama in 1874. In 1885, Nishimura bought the government-owned Shinagawa Glass Factory located on a site adjoining the tomb of Takuan in the erstwhile Tokaiji temple complex.

Glass was not used in traditional Japanese architecture. From houses to palaces, shops to castles, glass was not on the list of a builder's construction materials. Glass has been known in Japan for centuries as a material for making artefacts and glass-molding was carried to perfection as an art with exquisite craftwork. Until the modern age of the Meiji Era, however, window glass used in construction was not to be found. Construction is based upon the environment and earthquake prone Japan was most certainly not conducive to the usage of glass in buildings. The Meiji Era brought in its wake a strong interest in the extensive presence of glass in Western architecture. Initially glass was imported at considerable cost. In 1873, an entrepreneur, Niwa Matsumune, built the Shinagawa Glass Factory, thereby establishing the first Western-style factory to attempt the manufacture of sheet glass with the expertise of famous British engineer Thomas Walton.

The attempt, however, failed, and funds were insufficient to continue investment in costly experimentation. Three years on, the Meiji

government decided to buy the factory to cater to its thirst for Western architecture. While limited manufacture of glass was possible, the production of sheet glass remained elusive and the government decided to disinvest in 1884, leading to its purchase by Nishimura. He was probably upbeat after his resounding success with firebricks and invested in German technology to turn around his new glass works acquisition. However, once again, the manufacture of sheet glass was to remain a dream unfulfilled. The company tried to stay afloat by mass manufacturing beer bottles instead, but sluggish demand grew the company's debt to a final collapse in 1892.

On the positive side of Shinagawa Glass Factory's 20-year history was that it was the training ground for many budding young Japanese glass engineers who later contributed significantly to the domestic manufacture of different types of glass. Even the elusive sheet glass was finally achieved by an alumnus of the Shinagawa Glass Factory, Shimada Magoichi, in 1902 at his factory in Osaka. In memoriam to the glass legacy created by the Shinagawa Glass Factory, one of the factory buildings built in Meiji Era redbrick architecture has been preserved at Meijimura. The site of the original factory is marked by a plaque (Photos 8 & 9) and is getting readied for the next phase of construction (Photo 10).

Japanese technological genius explored ways to successfully produce sheet glass and then strengthen it to be able to withstand the country's perennial earthquakes. The steps towards achieving this were clear, though not easy: study the technologically advanced West, recreate, perseveringly learn from failures, and discover ways to continually improve on a path to perfection while catering to the specifics of Japan. In 1907, Iwasaki Toshiya, younger son of Mitsubishi conglomerate co-founder Iwasaki Yanosuke, established the Asahi Glass Factory in Amagasaki in western Japan. Initially with the help of Belgian technology, Asahi Glass started manufacturing sheet glass. Just seven years later, they exported their first sheet glass consignment to the United Kingdom. Asahi Glass is today the world's largest manufacturer of glass. A dream had been fulfilled. JS

Photo 10: Author



Construction over original site of Shinagawa Glass Factory, viewed from Oyama Cemetery

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