

Where the Sun

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The sky is clear. Only thin wisps of cloud float just above the rim of mountains behind this city. It is midweek, and beneath this morning light the workaday lives of the people are stirring into their normal tempo. Before me the shell of a brick and concrete structure rises toward the arching blue vault of the sky. It looks to be a candidate for the wrecker's ball, an old building that has reached the end of its useful life and is now to be rendered into rubble to make way for something new in steel and glass that will fit the needs of a thriving city's center. But this building will remain as it is, shattered and empty, a home for birds and squirrels.

Readers of this series are by now well aware that I prefer to explore and relate the stories of the quieter, lesser-known corners of Japan. And while deeply interested in the 20th Century history of the Asia-Pacific region, and especially those aspects of the Pacific War that have left an imprint we can still discern from a perusal of recent events, for a long time I steadfastly avoided visiting the city of Hiroshima. This decision was not determined by some deeply-held set of political or historical prejudices, but from a strong personal dislike of "must-see" itineraries, particularly those with some kind of attached or embedded "message." Usually such messages get digested and redigested until what at last emerges from the process is the worst of clichés. Much of what I have read about the suffering of Hiroshima as the first city to endure a nuclear attack seemed to be no different. It was often obvious that some individual or group—strangely, few of these seemed to hail from Hiroshima itself—was capitalizing on that tragedy, events that led to it, or some aspect of its effects. There was usually a discernible agenda; almost without fail a finger was firmly pointed in one direction or another. It is this I detest and take pains to avoid. For the same reason—and not connected by any



other thread of logic or emotion—I avoided visiting the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor. But now, after 18 years of living in Japan, my path has brought me here.

What rises before me is the empty semi-skeleton of what was once

Hiroshima's Industrial Exhibit Hall, a prewar building done in the brick and stone style of its era. At six stories, it towered over most of the Hiroshima that was to utterly disappear on the morning of August 6, 1945. Structures of such height were few in Japan at that time.

Came to Earth



Its innate sturdiness and location almost directly beneath the hypocenter of the atomic explosion, where the effects of the blast's shock wave were less than at slightly greater distance and more acute angle, enabled some of its walls to survive the bombing. Now the area

immediately adjacent to the site has become a public park. The building was declared a World Heritage Site in 1996; it is obviously not now a candidate for demolition.

It is hard to comprehend the nature of what happened here or the scope and

scale of the war that caused it. But when I was a youngster in America, in the early 1950's, the thought of nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union was a distinct and ever-present Damoclean possibility. I clearly remember the "atom bomb drills" in school, where for a while I was selected to be the "curtain monitor," who had to close the heavy floor-to-ceiling curtains on the classroom's windowed side as my classmates scrambled under their desks when the air-raid alarm sounded. We practiced this every week, on Friday. We saw films that included footage of atomic bomb tests obliterating houses and bunkers and bridges in the Nevada desert, followed by film of the horrific aftermath of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was the memory of these that prompted me to begin searching out and photographing the physical remains of that era of atomic terror: nuclear testing sites, disused ICBM launch facilities, scrapped bombers, and of course, this battered building in Hiroshima. Now I stand here, where the horror began. I wonder if *Homo sapiens* is as wise as that Latin name seems to imply. Looking back over a million years of evolution, the cutting edge of human technological achievement was always that of weaponry, from flaked flints to what dealt destruction to Hiroshima. While the Cold War is now of the past, we should be anxious about what uncertainties are now ahead, and what tools our species might use to deal with them. **JJI**

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and has been a photographer and essayist based in Japan since 1979. He now directs a TV documentary series for the Fuji Television Network and lectures at Tama University.