

Tokyo—Where Light and Glass Play

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

When the Tokyo Metropolitan Government had out-grown its offices near the capital's bustling shopping center of Ginza, the internationally acclaimed Japanese architect, Tange Kenzo was commissioned to design new accommodation for administrative functions in what had become Tokyo's "modern center" in Shinjuku. The result was a building which is now one of the city's most distinctive landmarks.

Then, with the former site of the offices vacated and following the acquisition of some adjoining lots, there was an opportunity for the creation of a new facility with an international bias to occupy this prestigious site in the heart of the city.

The design of a building to house the Tokyo International Forum was the subject of a major design competition attracting some 395 entries from 50 countries, but this time Mr. Tange was one of nine judges on the adjudicating panel.

The scheme which caught their imagination and took first prize was by Rafael Viñoly, a native of Uruguay who established offices in New York in 1981. The Forum was opened this

February and marked the culmination of planning which began in 1985. Fortunately, the scheme was carried along on the booming economy of the late eighties but, had the building been scheduled for construction now, it might well have taken a completely different form.

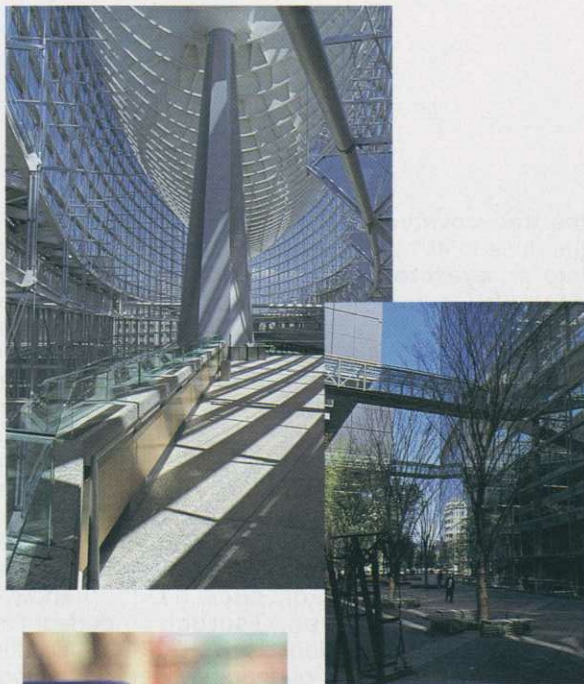
In fact, some people can only criticize this new symbolic landmark, viewing it as some kind of alien craft which has touched down in the city.

But Viñoly's scheme is thoroughly specific to the site, the Glass Hall reflecting the sweeping curve of railway tracks to the south, and the concert and reception halls to the north turning a stern face toward the somewhat dull architecture of the Marunouchi business district to the north. Then between the two he inserted an open-air plaza as a buffer.

The biggest of the halls can seat 5,000 and along with attendant reception areas in the adjacent block it now provides comprehensive international conference facilities on the one site

as never before in Tokyo. The fifteen-hundred seat Hall C with its adjustable acoustic baffles to suit a variety of classical music concert performances is paneled with Chinese quince giving the whole space the look of a violin, while the other halls are multipurpose in nature.

But needless to say, it is the vast Glass Hall which is so inspiring. Being almost entirely public, this conservatory of space can be entered at street level or from the below-grade concourse connecting the building to the subway system. A public ramp and catwalk skirting the shell of the building allows visitors to reach the seventh floor where there are two fine restaurants with comparative ease. The walk up reveals some interesting vistas of the interplay of light and shadow below, mysterious reflections and a chance to see at close quarters the whale-bone-like roof members hovering above. Add to this the changing patterns of light, weather and angle of view, and the whole structure becomes one vast fascinating kalei-



Top left: The Glass Hall at the Forum—a conservatory of space



Middle: Barcelona Ballad by Sir Antony Caro is just one of the many artworks at the Forum

Left: Edo kiri-ko, Japanese cut glass at its best.

The Tokyo International Forum lies between Tokyo and Yurakucho stations.

Public areas are open from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. There are a number of restaurants, an art shop with small gallery, and information facilities within the building as well as exhibition space. Application for use of the rentable space should be made to The Tokyo International Foundation, 3-5-1 Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100, Japan. Tel: 03-5221-9050 Fax: 03 5221 9011. General information in Japanese is available on 03-5221-9000, or visit <http://www.tokyo-telport.co.jp/english/tif>.

Edo style cut glass can be found at many department stores or at the

Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: 03-3403-2460. It is also available at 3-7-8 Oshima, Koto Ward, Tokyo. Tel: 03-3681-0961.



doscope.

The open-plaza, too, is a place to enjoy such light and time driven effects, added to which come breezes funneled through this airy public space. But such muses of light and reflective illusions of glass can hardly be related to Japan's architectural heritage. They can, however, be likened to Tokyo's very own brand of cut glass, *Edo kiri-ko*.

While ancient imported examples existed in Japan, it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that the craft really began to develop, and Captain Perry who arrived in Japan in 1853 was somewhat surprised to find such finely crafted cut glass in the country at all.

Both then and now, cut glass is a luxury. Similarly, the amount of open space at the Tokyo International Forum

is nothing short of an extravagance.

But there can be little denying that the Forum brings to Tokyo and to Japan a diversion of light, glass and space worthy of toasting, in cut glass, of course.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

TO THE HERBS—in Nishi-Azabu



The most popular book in Japan in 1996 was *Shitsuraku-en* ("Paradise Lost") by Watanabe Jun'ichi. This story of an extramarital relationship between a middle-aged man and woman appears to have captivated some 3 million readers of the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, many presumably intellectuals. The tale was first serialized for about one year in this daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Japan. Not only corporate CEOs, but also mid-level managers, new recruits, and office women were absorbed in the development of this love affair. The story was later published as a book, and became a million-seller. It was also made into a movie. Although the story is enjoyable, it is just short of pornographic, and I personally think that *The Bridges of Madison County*, by Robert James Waller, is a much more romantically beautiful depiction of a love affair. As for the title, I am sure John Milton turned in his grave.

Unlike pre-war Japan, present-day

Japan is one of the "most advanced" countries in the world as regards the sex industry and grotesque pornography. If any of the world's respected dailies in the U.S. or Europe featured a fictional story running several months, it would never be a vivid pornographic narrative like the Japanese version of *Paradise Lost*.

In a social environment where this kind of story is widely available to the general public, it is a great joy for me to find something fresh, clean, and uplifting. In this quest I have found a restaurant, near the Nishi-Azabu Crossing, named *TO THE HERBS*.

Due to its popularity, you often have to wait on the terrace by the entrance for a table. However, three portable heaters keep the patient clientele cozy and warm in winter. Although the combined seating capacity of the first and second floors is about 80, you may want to avoid lunch hour. On the other hand, opening hours are long—from 11:30 a.m. to 5 a.m.

The interior of the restaurant is bright and chic, but the atmosphere is unpretentious. This restaurant is without peer in its casual but pleasant atmosphere for dining with co-workers, families, close friends, or for more romantic occasions.

Food and prices are equally as important as atmosphere. I rate *TO THE HERBS* tops in these two areas as well. The chef goes through weeks of trial and error to create a single recipe. The most epicurean palate will surely be satisfied by the large selection of original pizza and pasta dishes. The chef takes special pride in his pizzas B.L.T. (¥1,250) and *TO THE*

HERBS (¥1,300). Seafood Pesto Style with Garlic (¥1,300), Black Olive & Octopus with Rosemary & Garlic (¥1,100), and Penne Pomodoro (¥1,100) are everyone's favorites. Veal Cutlet and Beef Carpaccio are also popular. No food item on the menu costs more than ¥1,400. The wines the restaurant recommends, and I concur, are Col Dorcia Bianco Deglispezieri and Col Dorcia Chianti Gineprone (¥2,300 each per bottle). Red and white house wines are ¥1,000 a decanter. Their four kinds of herbal tea live up to the name *TO THE HERBS*. With a deliciously fragrant cup of peppermint tea, I found happiness redolent of "paradise." There are also branches in Aoyama, Yokohama, and Mejiro (pasta dishes only).

Hori Yoshimichi President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

TO THE HERBS

1-13-13 Nishi-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo

Tel: 03-3479-4200

Hours: 11:30 a.m. – 5:00 a.m.

* Sundays and holidays: 11:30 a.m. – 10:30 p.m. Open year-round

