

# Curved or Warped?

By Shozaburo Kimura

The face of Japan is changing.

In its most obvious outward manifestation, there are more curved lines in city buildings. Japanese architecture—be it single-dwelling private homes, imposing office buildings or high-rise apartment complexes—used to be composed primarily of straight lines and right angles. And not just the building's outlines. Windows, *tatami* mats, *shoji* partitions, furniture, advertising signs and everything else were rectangular. The graceful lines so often seen in European architecture were virtually nonexistent.

Yet this is changing. The New Kasumigaseki Building boasts a combination of curves standing in stark contrast to the older Kasumigaseki Building next door. The striking use of curved lines made Tokyo's Hotel New Otani a very distinctive sight when it was built in the Akasaka area 23 years ago. Yet today this pacesetter has been joined by numerous other similar buildings. Nor is this phenomenon restricted to Tokyo. The same is true in Japan's smaller cities. The Koshi Kaikan (called "Palais Blanc") built in Toyama last year, for example, uses dynamically sweeping curves to highlight its dazzling white.

Far from seeing this tendency to sweep and curve as a passing architectural fad, I suspect it reflects a basic change in the Japanese concept of beauty and a fundamental shift in values. People are even writing this way. The *kanji* characters used to write most Japanese is made up of straight lines and angles, yet today's young people have created a new calligraphy style called *mangaji* with rounded strokes. Straight lines become curves, and angular corners are rounded.

## Straight and narrow no more

In the past, Japanese made a virtue of straight lines. People lived straight-arrow lives. They pursued their work with un-

wavering determination. The simplicity of the straight line was considered beautiful, and the winding of curves a distraction. While there are exceptions, such as the roofs of ancient temples and the blade of the Japanese sword, traditional Japanese beauty has been the beauty of the straight line. Armor plating was rectangular, as were paddy fields, tofu blocks, *bento* lunch boxes, *ad infinitum*.

Roundness now seems to be all the rage, and all of the sharp edges are coming off Japanese society and the Japanese. While I have used physical examples, this trend is just as evident in young people themselves. Unlike their elders (people in their 50s or older), today's young people do not get their hackles up and take even scathing criticism lightly. Even though oldsters such as myself complain that young people lack logical thought processes and do not have any drive, they shrug it off with a casual "You hit the nail right on the head, Pops." In the past, young people would get hot under the collar arguing back to justify their behavior. But now there is nothing. It is just "If you say so. . . ." It is like arguing with the wind, and we end up gritting our teeth and turning away in frustration. Maybe these people are old before their time. Maybe they assume that nothing we say can be relevant. Or maybe they admit the justice of our criticism and have no rebuttal. But whatever the reason, the lack of reaction is most dissatisfying. Today's young people are not going to ride forth in pursuit of lofty ideals seeking to make the world better. Idealism seems to have died with the slowdown in world economic growth.

In the late 1960s, Japan was torn asunder by a strident student movement, an outpouring of energy and fierce criticism of the status quo that marked the end of the rapid-growth period. Today, this youthful passion has subsided without a trace, and today's young people are as docile as a flock of sheep. In the class-

room, they diligently take notes, their faces down the way sheep placidly munch grass. They are plastic people, adapting readily to whatever norm is established. It is as though they have shut their own emotions away somewhere and killed them by suffocation.

Just to see what would happen, I recently asked some of my students at the University of Tokyo what their ideals were and what they wanted out of life. For the most part, all I got was silence. Ideals are something on a different plane, and these students seemed, if anything, uncomfortable at being asked about them.

## Laxity and lassitude

There is an ennui about these people, and they say it would be so "tiring" to have fire in your belly and to dash off in determined pursuit of lofty ideals, doing battle with everyone or everything that gets in your way, and then advancing again toward the attainment of your ideals. This is also why they prefer the rounded-off *mangaji*—because they are easier, and they get so tired writing the old way with all of those forceful straight lines and sharp corners.

Likewise, they find it tiring to have parents and teachers telling them to do this or that—or *not* to do this or that. Their brief is that it is up to each person how he wants to live, and that it does not really matter what a person does or how he does it so long as it does not impose on other people. And no matter how they live, society is affluent enough that they do not need to fear starvation. After all, they say, postwar democracy is founded on the principle that the state is responsible for ensuring that everyone is able to live as he pleases.

It is old-fashioned to spend a lot of energy trying to make the world better for other people. The important thing now is to put all the factors into your computer, crunch the numbers and see if this is go-

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ing to be of any direct, immediate benefit to you or not. If it is, do it. If not, why bother? They have no use for working hard from morning to night for the good of the company. Rather than go out drinking with the boys from the office, they want to go home. And if they do go out drinking, please do not talk business. They want to talk about something more "interesting"—something like sports, movies, travel or television.

They want to leave their work in the office. When a long-time editor went out drinking with some younger colleagues and tried to impart a bit of the wisdom of his years, that is what they told him. "Come on, we're off work for the day." He was flabbergasted.

Even at the Ministry of Finance, supposedly the most elite of Japan's elite bureaucracies, the young bureaucrats do not want to stay until late at night working to prepare briefing materials and position

papers when the Diet is in session. They are anxious to get home, and the older people do not quite know what to make of this new breed.

As in any meritocracy, Japan's bureaucracy has tests for the higher levels. Yet recently, there have been increasing numbers of civil service personnel, both national and local, who would just as soon not take the tests, even though they know that they are forfeiting their chances for promotion. Why? "So you take the test and get a promotion. That just means more responsibility. I'd rather stay at a lower level all my life. It'd be so tiring to have to do all that."

It used to be that students saw the university as a place to study and a place to grow intellectually. Today's students do not want to "go to all the trouble" of thinking things out for themselves. "If you know the answer, why don't you just tell us? Teachers are supposed to teach,

aren't they? Don't be so stingy." It takes energy to think things out. It is very tiring. It is so much faster and so much easier to ask your teacher or punch the numbers into a computer and get the answer painlessly. Why waste time reinventing the wheel? That is today's young people's approach.

The company that wants to survive today has to computerize, automate its office and factory operations, be conservation-minded, get rid of unnecessary staffing, cut costs, improve maintenance, keep inventories to a minimum and eliminate waste in all its forms. Given the choice between a 1% chance of a major breakthrough with spectacular rewards and a 99% chance of disastrous failure, few of Japan's big companies would take the risk.

This risk-aversion behavior has permeated society, and young students in particular have picked up on it. People used to be willing to defy convention and to try the unusual in the name of progress. No longer. Nobody wants to be hurt or embarrassed. Everybody wants to be cool. There is a great emphasis on harmony with your peers and with society, on staying in touch and staying in step. People want to avoid trouble. They want to go along and get along, live and let live. Avoid the hard decisions, and go with the flow. Ambiguous curves are far better than uncompromising straight lines.

Women who used to swoon over a rugged individualist willing to bump elbows against society for what was right now prefer a softer-hewn, caring, more predictable type of man. People today prefer the more fluid, softer lines of gentle curves to the stark harshness of assertive straight lines.

The face of Japan—and more than the face of Japan—is changing. Today's move away from sharply angular buildings to an architecture of curves reflects a basic change in the Japanese sense of values. ●

(This is the fourth of six essays to be written by Mr. Kimura.)