

IF ONE WERE TO TAKE the basic principles of traditional Japanese aesthetics, wherein the transience represented by the short-lived splendor of the cherry blossom is considered the epitome of beauty, and apply them to the realm of urban planning, Japan's capital city might just emerge as the world's most beautiful city.

Tokyo is, in sum, the anti-Rome, an eternally ephemeral city wherein 20 years is considered old age for a building and edifices predating the Second World War are few and far between. While the city's long-standing lack of architectural continuity has throughout history been primarily due to forces beyond its control – fires, earthquakes and wartime bombardment – 60 years of uninterrupted seismic and geopolitical peace have done nothing to slow the rate of destruction and rebuilding in the metropolis.

Various explanations have been proffered for this seeming indifference towards preservation, including a lack of deep emotional attachment to the city on the part of its inhabitants (who for the most part trace their family roots elsewhere), a belief in the futility of building for posterity in one of the world's most notoriously earthquake-prone regions and land prices that have been so high in recent decades that the buildings constructed thereon have scarcely been more than afterthoughts. Add to all this a fashion and modernity-obsessed culture and a real estate market dominated by powerful corporate interests, and it is little surprise that, apart from the shrines and temples that have long stood sentinel in the city, the average life expectancy for a Tokyo building is dwarfed by that enjoyed by its citizens.

The destruction of Tokyo's pre-war architectural legacy is, however, a sad tale given that the late-19th and early-20th century represented a period of extraordinary creativity in the field of architecture in Japan, and in Tokyo in particular. Following the relocation of de jure political power to the city formerly known as Edo in 1868, European building styles quickly took hold, and, by the turn of the century, grand European-style brick and timber edifices (known as the *Giyofu* style) had come to dominate the urban landscape. The best example still to be seen today in the Old Ministry of Finance Building (completed in 1920), the most famous is, of course, Tokyo Station, which was modeled after Amsterdam's central railway and first opened to the public in 1914.

Meanwhile, the fertile architectural ground that was early 20th-century Tokyo worked in attracting the attention of some of the western world's most renowned architects, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright, who resided in Tokyo on a part-time basis between 1913 and 1922 during the construction of his magnum opus, the old Imperial Hotel, and Kenzo Tange, Raymond, a protege of Wright's who stayed on in Japan for much of his career and is widely acknowledged as the father of modern Japanese architecture. The period following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 represented a golden architectural age in Tokyo architecture, with a mix of modernism and expressionism culminating in the creation of some of the city's most famous buildings, including Ginza's Wako Department Store (1932) and the National Diet Building (1936).

While much of this era of architecture perished during World War II, a significant amount survived into the post-war era, only to face a new foe in the form of relentless redevelopment. The post-war era saw one pre-war landmark after another succumb to the wrecking ball in spite of public opposition in such cases as Wright's Imperial Hotel, which was leveled in 1967 and replaced by the existing uninspiring building.

This onslaught reached a crescendo during the real estate bubble of the 1980s, when old buildings sitting on the world's most expensive real estate came to be viewed as mere liabilities, and accelerated once again in the late-1990s and early 2000s due to declining land prices and the resultant construction boom. The last decade has seen the destruction of numerous beloved old buildings, including the Sagacho Shokuryo Building (an antiquated rice warehouse-cum-art exhibition space) in 2000, Omotesando's 75-year-old modernist Dojunkai apartments in 2003 and the Hibiya's Sanshin Building in April of this year.

With little pre-war architecture remaining, the icons of the early post-war era appear to be next on the chopping block. A proposed extension to Route 54 threatens to cut through the heart of the bohemian enclave and 1960s countercultural icon of Shimokitazawa, confirming many Tokyoites' fears that with the exception of religious sites, nothing in their city is truly considered sacrosanct by the powerful forces that run the place. While theories abound, most preservationists agree that the primary obstacle to preservation is the prevalent view in Japan that real estate – and everything located thereon – is the exclusive property of the landowner. >>

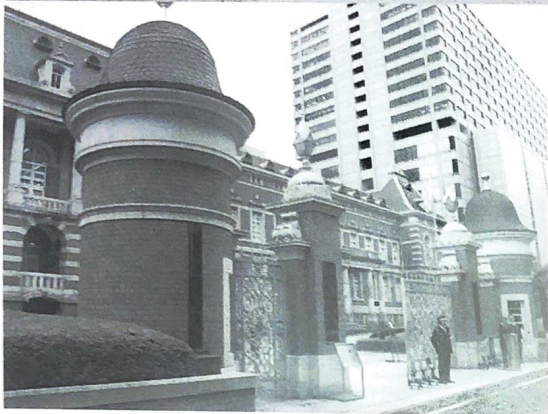


AGAINST



Benjamin Freeland examines
Tokyo's preservationist struggle
to save the remains of the city's
pre-war architectural legacy.
All photos by the author.

THE TIDE



The former Ministry of Finance building



TOP: Tokyo Station

RIGHT: An old shop house in Shirokane



Tokyo Central Post Office



"It's a different understanding of who owns the city," explains Karen Severns, the co-founder of the Wrightian Architectural Archives Japan (WAAJ), a non-profit group dedicated to the preservation of Frank Lloyd Wright's Japanese legacy. "The attitude here is one of, 'Who are you and why do you have anything to say about my property? I have plans to redevelop it. Back off!'"

Severns, a Chicago-born journalist and filmmaker, experienced a life-transforming visit to Wright's sublime Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikan edifice in Mejiro (a building saved after a fierce 14-year battle) that eventually led her to direct the critically-acclaimed documentary *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan*.

She points out that many of the institutions that exist in other countries that facilitate the preservation of historically significant buildings – landmark preservation commissions and the like – simply do not exist here.

Moreover, decisions pertaining to property redevelopment are more often than not made behind closed doors, with members of the public only finding out about planned demolitions when it

is too late.

"In the case of the Sanshin Building, they just interviewed people one by one," notes Koichi Mori. "There was no collective voice."

Adding to the problem is the fact that the preservationist groups that do exist in Tokyo and elsewhere have not generally been empowered to succeed. "[Preservation groups] often spring up to save one iconic building," Severns notes, "so they're often not able to develop expertise quickly enough to be effective."

What is clear, however, is that a popular backlash of an increasingly grassroots nature is at last gathering momentum. The displacement of the Aoyama Dojunkai apartment blocks by Minoru Mori's controversial Omotesando Hills development sparked popular indignation and the announcement in 2005 of the demolition of the beloved art-deco Sanshin Building by its landowner Mitsui Fudosan (owners of the Tokyo Midtown development) was met with vocal opposition, with some 2,300 petitioners urging Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara to save the building.

The past five years have seen the emergence of a grassroots preservationist front determined to

save the remains of the city's prewar architectural legacy, and signs are afoot that the city is at last starting to pay attention. Plans to demolish and replace Tokyo Station, citing age and decrepitude, were met with outrage and widespread grassroots campaigning (including a notable "paint-in" campaign outside the station by an army of watercolor painters), leading the metropolitan government to shelve the plan in exchange for an ambitious refurbishment plan aimed at restoring the station to its original splendor.

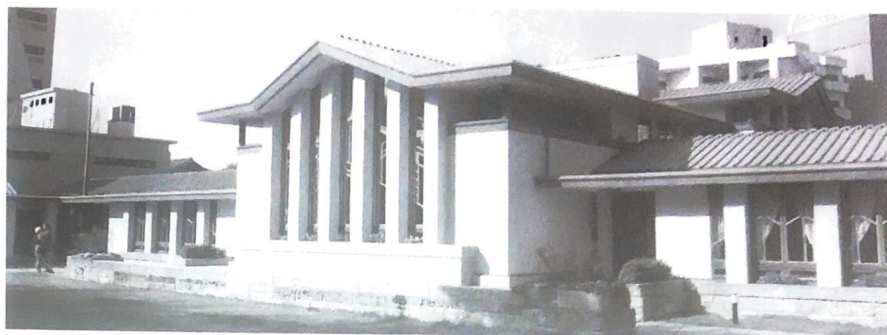
Literally a stone's throw away, the proposed demolition of the 75-year-old Tokyo Central Post Office has become the epicenter of a heated campaign, as has the proposed redevelopment of Shimokitazawa.

Dr Hiroyuki Suzuki, a University of Tokyo professor of architecture and an esteemed crusader on behalf of Tokyo's pre-war modernist architectural legacy who is currently at the center of the campaign to save the Central Post Office, insists that citizens have had enough of runaway development.

"Landowners want to make their properties as high-density as possible and current building re-



igned by Frank Lloyd Wright and completed 1922, the Myonichikan ("House of Tomorrow") originally served as a school. Designated an Important Cultural Property in 1997 after a lengthy conservation battle, Wright's last surviving creation in Tokyo was extensively restored over a four-year period and since 2001 has been open to the public as a museum dedicated to Wright and his work in Japan.



The Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikan's sparse interior



The Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikan edifice in Mejiro was saved from the wrecker's ball after a fierce 14-year battle

ons encourage this," he explains. "However, the public has a vested interest in these buildings, and increasing numbers of people are fed up with the win-win attitude of developers and the relentless drive towards high-density construction." Such determination is indeed apparent in an increasingly well-organized preservation lobby in Tokyo, which consists of a motley assortment of associations that includes the Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ), the Japan Institute of Architects (JIA), DoCoMoMo (short for the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement) Japan, the 'Save the Shimokitazawa' group and the WAAJ, as well as a collection of smaller groups, and recent successes like the campaigns to save Myonichikan and Tokyo Station suggest that their efforts may be yielding results. Nevertheless, activists such as Severns are cheered in their optimism.

"I would like to think there is a greatly increased understanding of the importance of a city's tapestried architectural landscape," she says, "but often it feels like too little, too late. Tokyo's developers are now deploying architect-

ture as a marketing tool with unprecedented success and the new laws allow them to build taller towers if they retain portions of historical buildings."

Severns notes that Mitsubishi, which owns most of the land in the Marunouchi area, is in the process of ring-fencing the station with high-rise buildings that may end up effectively obscuring the old building from sight.

"Even if the Central Post Office and other buildings can be saved, there are so few commercial and residential buildings left from Showa, let alone Taisho and Meiji, that the victory tastes hollow," she says.

In the end, the greatest hope for Tokyo's grand pre-war architectural legacy may lie in commemoration and archiving, causes which organizations like the WAAJ and DoCoMoMo are advancing in concert with actual preservation.

Moreover, should the notion of preservation and building for posterity take root in Tokyo, the likelihood that modern-day masterpieces such as the Tokyo International Forum and the National Art Center will be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations would be all the greater. ★

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