



Terunobu Fujimori

Modern Japanese Architecture:

From the Meiji Restoration to Today

TERUNOBU Fujimori, Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, is an architectural historian and architect known for his inventive building designs including elevated tea houses [private structures used to hold tea ceremonies]. We asked Professor Fujimori about the characteristics of modern Japanese architecture.

How would you characterize the development of modern architecture in Japan?

Modern architecture in Japan can be broadly divided into two periods. The first period is from the Meiji Restoration [1868] to before the Second World War; the second period is from after the Second World War to the present. Japan started to adopt Western-style architecture while advancing modernization, chiefly from the English but also from the French, the Germans and the Americans. In the Taisho and Showa periods [1912-1926 and 1926-1989], Japanese architects started to design a wide range of architecture using their own style and flair, but the buildings were very similar to those in Europe. After the war, Japanese

architects finally started to work on modern-style architecture, which is still in existence today.

Who is Japan's most representative postwar architect?

It has to be Kenzo Tange [1913-2005]. The studies that spanned a long period of time finally bore fruit after the war with Tange, an outstanding architect. He can be said to be one of the top architects in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. He shocked everyone in 1955 with his design for the Hiroshima Peace Center [now the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Park], followed by the Kagawa Prefectural Government Office in 1958. These two buildings showcase a beautiful combination of columns and beams that is unseen in Europe and which ensured the elevation of Japan's modern architecture to the top level globally. Tange noticed that a combination of columns and beams would produce a framework, and he discovered the resultant beauty. He successfully replaced the wooden frameworks traditionally used in Japan with as-cast

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

concrete. European architecture is constructed with an emphasis on columns and floors, but not on beams. Tange presented frameworks that did not exist and which astounded people at the time.

Kenzo Tange is also famous for designing the National Gymnasium (now the Yoyogi National Gymnasium) for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, isn't he?

In particular, the swimming pool [see pp. 8-9]. Frankly, this is the pinnacle of post-Second World War Japanese architecture. Of course Tange didn't become one of the top architects in the world all alone – he was influenced for example by the American architect Eero Saarinen – but the swimming pool built for the Tokyo Olympics put an end to any competition. The building incorporates characteristic elements of Japan. The roof for example is reminiscent of Todai-ji Temple. Columns support the roof, which also adopts the suspension structure used for suspension bridges. The walls extend in an arch toward the roof. This is a highly characteristic modern structure that utilizes columns, arches, and a suspension structure to reflect the structure representation principles, in other words, a method to represent structures as beautifully as possible, developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. The swimming pool designed by Tange is the ideal form of these principles, and architecture has not surpassed this swimming pool to this day. Tange cleverly elevated the traditional qualities of Japan and incorporated them into modern architecture.

What are the characteristics of Japanese architecture after Tange.

Overall, they share the unique characteristics found in Japanese manufacturing, such as highlighting the beauty of raw materials, and opting for thin, light and narrow lines. Architecture subsequent to the swimming pool designed by Tange does not highlight the elements traditionally

used in Japan directly. For example, buildings designed by Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima embrace free expression and have a unique sense of style. Sendai Mediatheque, known for its distinctive structure constructed with a focus on cylindrical columns, and the opera house in Taiwan [National Taichung Theater] designed by Ito are pure works of art. The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, designed by Sejima and [Ryue] Nishizawa, is the best representation of a space that is composed of narrow and light lines. Behind the free expression embraced in their architecture lie sensuous characteristics such as thinness and narrowness, although these may be difficult to see at first viewing. Each detail is built by meticulously using such characteristics. This is very much part of the Japanese tradition.

As an architect, you have designed numerous tea houses. How do tea houses fit in with modern architecture in Japan?

Making use of small architecture, such as tea houses, is a unique characteristic found in Japan. I believe this is significant in the history of modern architecture. You might associate European cities and civilizations with enormous architecture, such as the pyramids, but nothing similar is found in Japan. There is a global tendency for people to demand more sophisticated, compact and beautiful things, as well as smaller and higher quality objects as civilization advances. You can appreciate the architectural uniqueness of tea houses, which are the complete opposite of pyramids. They have timber structures, and the raw materials and delicacy are their very essence. This also applies to modern architecture in Japan. Thanks to the combination of such elements, modern architecture in Japan is highly evaluated worldwide. 

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
