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THE IMPERIAL HOTEL OF TOKYO:
THE BUILDING, THE MYTH, THE ARCHITECTURE
by
Timothy James Hart

Ever since Admiral Perry’s expedition to Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan had steadily widened its doors to the Western world. To accommodate the Western visitors who would be uncomfortable dwelling on the floor in a traditional Japanese Hotel, the first Imperial Hotel was commissioned in the late nineteenth century. This German-designed structure was heavily flavored with European and classical ornamentation. “Overly grand in style, dank and dark,” it would possibly have been appropriate in a Black Forest picture-postcard setting, but the old Imperial Hotel was ridiculously out of place in Imperial Japan.1 It contained only sixty rooms and was outdated by 1910.

For the design of a new, larger Imperial Hotel, a commission was extended to Frank Lloyd Wright, probably during his visit to Japan in 1913.2 Wright knew that the greatest threat his hotel would ever face would be the earthquakes which terrorize Japan so frequently. Existing Japanese structures offered little assistance as prototypes for the construction of an earthquake-proof building. On one extreme, the traditional Japanese home, with its rice-paper and wood construction, was certainly light enough to accept an earthquake passively and to survive it, but such structures were ready kindling for the fires which follow invariably in the wake of every major earthquake. On the other hand, the fireproof mortar buildings, with their deeply-driven pile foundations, top-heavy tile roofs, and inflexible, heavy walls were usually unsuccessful in their defense against the quake’s shock waves. In Wright’s words, “heavy masses of masonry inevitably would be wrecked. The heavier the masonry the greater the wreck.”3

Aesop’s old fable of the solid, unswaying oak tree’s destruction by storm versus the light and flexible reed’s survival offers a familiar
illustration for the scenario Wright faced. Taking, as it were, the reed's strategy, Wright designed the Imperial to accept passively, ride-out, and "outwit the quake."4

To achieve the objective, Wright took full advantage of the existing characteristics of the building site. The flat, 300-by-500 foot plot was composed of a cheese-like layer of soil, covering a layer of mud of indeterminate depth.5

The mud beneath the filling seemed to me a good cushion to relieve earthquake shocks. A building might float upon the mud somewhat as a battleship floats on salt water. Float the building upon the mud? Why not? And since it must float, why not extreme lightness combined with the tenuity and flexibility that are a property of steel instead of the great weight necessary to the usually excessive rigidity which, no matter how rigid, could never be rigid enough. Probably the answer was a building made flexible as the two hands thrust together, fingers interlocked, yielding to movement yet resilient to return to position when force exerted upon its members and membranes ceased. Why fight the force of the quake on its own terms? Why not go with it and come back unharmed?6

Such a concept would dictate taking the greatest amount of support possible from the "cheese" soil, rather than driving huge piles deep into the mud, a method which was widely used, expensive, and utterly ineffective against quakes. Wright’s solution involved pacing thousands of concreate pins, nine inches in diameter and eight feet deep, throughout the foundation area. The friction and squeeze resulting from the loads placed on these pins "brought the strength of the whole depth of eight feet of top soil to the surface."7

Extensive computations in "weighing" the different parts of the hotel enabled the placement of the building atop the pins in equal distribution of its weight. When completed, the entire structure sank an anticipated five inches into the soil--and no farther.

A flexible foundation would be worthless without a flexible building. To achieve that, the building was divided into parts; where the parts were more than sixty feet long, the building was jointed.

With a traditional post-and-lintel design, the destruction of a wall would spell the destruction of the ceiling resting upon it. Wright
believed he had a better solution:

> Why not then carry the floors as a waiter carries his tray on upraised arm and fingers at the center—balancing the load? All supports centered under the floor slabs like that instead of resting the slabs on the walls at their edges as is usually the case?

> This meant the cantilever, as I had found by now. The cantilever is the most romantic, most free of all principles of construction, and in this case it seemed the most sensible.

To ease the cantilever’s burden, the Imperial was designed to have the lowest center of gravity possible. Outer walls were thick at the base, tapering towards the top. In contrast, the typical Japanese structure was top-heavy, a condition worsened by the use of tile roofs, whose tiles became deadly missiles in even the quietest quakes. Lightweight green copper roofing panels were used in the Imperial.

The structure’s lightness was greatly aided by the extensive use of a workable lava stone called Oya, which possessed a lightness comparable to green oak. The stone was underfoot everywhere; it was considered a “sacrilege to use this common material for the aristocratic edifice,” but Wright, as usual, had his way in the end. The spotted Oya was used both as the central wall material covered by brick and, more dramatically, in most of the designs and accents found throughout the building.

An earthquake’s flexing of walls and foundations usually tears apart piping and wiring imbedded in the structure. In Wright’s design a shallow trench, independent even of the foundations, contained the mains for both systems, while flexible lead piping was used elsewhere throughout the building.

Finally, the plans called for the construction of a large pool filled with water for use as an emergency water supply to offset the fires and broken water mains so symptomatic of earthquakes. This feature almost was omitted from the final structure. Cost overruns in the building’s construction were enormous. In the eyes of the building directors, the pool was superfluous, a waste of 40,000 yen. Only after Wright threatened to abandon the project did the pool’s construction proceed.

This was not the only obstacle encountered during the building’s
construction. Wright’s frustration with construction delays was perhaps surpassed only by that of the Cologne Cathedral’s architect: for months, no contractor could be found who would build the Imperial. The language barrier was only slightly lowered over the entire seven years of construction. Workmen insisted on sticking to their own traditional building techniques, no matter how inferior or inefficient. After each payday, the workers would abandon the site until their funds were exhausted; three-day work weeks were the norm. The rainy season led to extensive delays.

In addition, rumors began to spread that the building was unsafe. The Western Society of American Engineers warned that Wright’s “scheme for foundations was unsound.”11 The American Institute of Architects published articles in Tokyo papers declaring the work an insult to American architecture, [and notified Wright’s] clients, and the world generally, that the whole thing would be down in the first quake with horrible loss of life.12

Only the strong guidance and support of Wright’s friend and patron, the Baron Okura, kept the project going.

Finally, a catastrophe was turned into salvation for the project. In 1922, an earthquake—the strongest to hit Japan in 52 years—struck the Imperial, visibly swaying and shaking it. The hotel stood completely undamaged. The work continued; Wright’s controversial foundation had proven its worth.

With the building nearing completion, Frank Lloyd Wright left Japan in the fall of 1922, never to return. The completion of the building was assured the architect had departed. but the Imperial Hotel’s biggest challenge was to come on September 1, 1933—the date of the official opening of the Imperial Hotel, and the date of the greatest earthquake ever recorded in Japan’s history. As Wright recalled in his autobiography:

Appalling details came day after day. Nothing human, it seemed, could have withstood the cataclysm. Ten days of uncertainty and conflicting reports, for during most of that time direct communication was cut off. Then a cablegram...

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
OLIVE HILL STUDIO RESIDENCE B 1645 VER-
MONT AVE HOLLYWOOD CALIF
FOLLOWING WIRELESS RECEIVED FROM
TOKYO TODAY HOTEL STANDS UNDAMAGED
AS MONUMENT OF YOUR GENIUS HUNDREDS
OF HOMELESS PROVIDED BY PERFECTLY
MAINTAINED SERVICE CONGRATULATIONS
OKURA

For once good news was news and the Baron's
cablegram flashed around the world to herald the
triumph of good sense. When the letters began to come
in and nearly all the friends were found to be safe the
most gratifying to the architect was the fact that after
the first great quake was over, the dead rotting there in
unburied heaps, the Japanese in subsequent shock
coming in droves dragging their children into the courts
and onto the terraces of the building, praying for
protection by the God that had protected that building;
then as the wall of fire, driving a great wail of human
misery before it, came sweeping across the city toward
the long front of the building, the hotel boys formed a
bucket line to the big pool, the water there the only
water available anywhere. And then kept the window
sashes and frames on that side wet to meet the flames
that came leaping across the narrow street.
The last thought for the safety of the New Imperial
had taken effect.13

The construction history of the New Imperial Hotel of Tokyo,
Japan, is certainly a thrilling story, perhaps reminiscent of Ayn
Rand's novels. But far more important than the role of the Imperial
Hotel as legend is its role as architecture. The distinction between the
two is not always easy to draw; part of the blame for this must rest
upon the architect himself, for in Frank Lloyd Wright's writings, his
"automatic legend-making mechanism" is invariably employed.14
For example, it is easy to be led to believe that the Imperial Hotel was
the only building in Tokyo to survive the quake; this is, in fact, quite
untrue.15 Even the underpinnings and the cantilever structure
were not unique to the Imperial.16

What qualifies the Imperial for consideration as architecture, even
"organic" architecture, was the remarkable way in which the design
completely satisfied the functional and aesthetic needs of the hotel's
patrons, staff, and owners.

First, the actual functional purpose of the hotel must be recognized. Obviously, the Imperial was designed to be first a hotel, a lodging-house “complete in all details for the comfort and entertain­ment of the travelling public, or residents.”

Second, the hotel was to function as a “social clearing house,” both for the functions incurred in official Japanese relations with visiting representatives of other lands and “for the great social functions now inevitable in the high life of the Capital.”

The demands for these two functions were met in other hotel designs, including those of little architectural distinction. The Imperial Hotel, however, was outstanding for its integration of, and interaction between these functions.

The concept was most visible in the various related levels of the Imperial Hotel. For example, the great centrally-located kitchen could directly service the cabaret and main dining hall to the sides, while the private dining rooms were readily accessed via stairways and elevators, as were the banquet hall and ballrooms above. Beneath the banquet hall was the theater, transversed by a 20’ by 300’ promenade accessing the guest rooms. Thus, the service elements were efficiently organized in the vertical in the main building, joining the guest rooms in the horizontal throughout the great wings.

But perhaps the greatest triumph of the Imperial Hotel was its success at satisfying the aesthetic purpose of its construction. To understand this function, one must recall what the Imperial was not. With the then recent influx of Western elements and influences, “foreign culture was being so freely and carelessly bought” that Japan itself faced a dilution of its traditions as they mixed with occidental trends. An obvious manifestation of this development was the shoddy “old” Imperial Hotel.

Frank Lloyd Wright approached the project with the object of keeping “Japan for the Japanese”—an attitude which led to blackballing actions against him by the American Institute of Architects and others who held vested interest in the exploitation of Japan.

Just as the Imperial Hotel was designed to embrace and accept the earthquake rather than fight it and face certain defeat, Wright
designed the Imperial to satisfy its primary aesthetic need—to meet the present demands of Western amenities and customs, but not at the sacrifice of the proud customs of the hosts. In the words of the architect:

No foreign architect yet invited to work in Japan ever took off his hat to the Japanese and respected either Japanese conditions or traditions. And yet those aesthetic traditions are at the top among the noblest in the world. When I accepted the commission to design and build their building it was my instinct and definite intention not to insult them....

So while making their building 'modern' in the best sense I meant to leave it a sympathetic consort to Japanese building....In short, I desired to help Japan make the transition from wood to masonry, and from her knees to her feet, without too great a loss of her own accomplishments in culture.23

Such beauty, it is hoped, should last forever, but sometimes it lasts a good deal less. The Imperial Hotel was demolished in 1967 to make room for a new, larger hotel. The building had stood for only 45 years. The main entranceway was preserved and reconstructed in the Meiji Architectural village, 90 miles outside of Tokyo. The building which had outwitted the earthquake was destroyed by the building contractor.

This much did remain: it had been shown to the world that a building could be designed which elegantly satisfied the needs of both patron and owner, both functionally and aesthetically. As such it deserves to be considered as more than a structure: the Imperial Hotel was indeed organic architecture.

Here in the Far East a significant transition building was born....But for the quality of thought that built it, the ideal of an organic architecture, it would surely have been just 'another one of those things' and have been swept away.24

Though the Imperial Hotel has been literally destroyed, its concept will not be soon “swept away.”
FOOTNOTES

11 Olgivanna Wright, p. 69.
14 Tafel, p. 96.
18 Olgivanna Wright, p. 58.
21 Olgivanna Wright, p. 68.
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