

JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE QUALITY OF CONSTRUCTION

Stanley Russell¹

¹ *University of South Florida, USA*

Keywords: Architecture, Design, Building Construction, Quality, Contemporary Japanese Architecture, Japanese Architects, Interviews, Craftsmanship, Quality control, Japanese Building Industry

Introduction

Many regions along the Silk Road have distinctive architectural traditions from the Roman Empire, through Persia and Tibet and into China and finally Japan. However, few architectural traditions have had as great an impact on contemporary architectural practice as has Traditional Japanese architecture. After a long visit to Japan in the 1950s Walter Gropius wrote, " I am convinced that invaluable benefits will accrue to a contemporary student of art and architecture from a visit to Japan. There he will find sublime, mature solutions of the intricate, ever-new problems of space and human scale, the very media for the art of architectural creation." [1]

Today the challenges facing Architects and builders are very different from those faced in the distant past. Today building codes, economic constraints and changing social norms all conspire to make the creation of quality buildings a difficult proposition. Even so, until the present, Japan has maintained a high level of quality in its contemporary Architecture. The creation of high quality architecture in a contemporary context involves many different factors. The process must begin with a good design but that is not enough to ensure that a high quality building will result. Continued involvement of the architect during the construction phase of the project is critical to the creation of a high quality product. This research focuses on aspects of building design and construction in Japan that result in high quality architecture.

Methodology

This paper is a summary of interviews between the author and six prominent Japanese architects chosen because of their reputations for producing well-designed, high-quality architecture. As an indication to their competence and the relevance of their ideas, one architect is a Pritzker Prize laureate and several are university professors now or have taught extensively in the past¹. All have been published widely and have won numerous awards for their work. Four of the architects practice in Tokyo and two of them practice in the Osaka area giving them slightly different perspectives on the building industry. The author drew from his own experience as an architect and craftsman in Japan² to design questions and to sustain conversations with the interviewees that begin to shed light on the current state of quality in contemporary Japanese architecture. To establish a standard of consistency through all of the interviews the author sent a research abstract and interview questions to each architect prior to the meetings³. The questions acted as a general outline for each interview but the ensuing conversations went on many interesting tangents.

Results

Each of the six architects interviewed has his own approach to design and method of working with client's, contractor's, craftspeople, academics etc. so generalizations about the results of the interviews are difficult. Because of the relatively long period of downturn in the Japanese construction industry many of the architects referred to the difficulty of making high quality buildings with limited budgets and with the bidding system for awarding work to contractors. Yasuhiro Yamashita of Atelier Tekuto emphasized the importance of research in producing quality buildings. Yamashita has been successful at forming alliances between companies and academics to perform research that benefits all parties and results in innovations that improve building quality. Kengo Kuma has worked closely with crafts people on many of his projects to produce high-quality contemporary buildings using many traditional craft techniques. Toyo Ito has taken advantage of highly skilled workmen to produce some of his most innovative structures. His Mediatechque library in Sendai (Fig.1) was on the cutting edge of technology when completed in 2001 and much of the building's interest center's around a group of cylindrical steel supports that would not have been possible without the contribution of highly skilled steel workers who improvised on the design of the supports as they were being built. Go Yoshimoto is practicing in The Kansai area where he has access to skilled carpenters who contribute greatly to the quality of his buildings. Shuhei Endoh who is well known for his innovative building techniques works closely with builders to realize his designs.

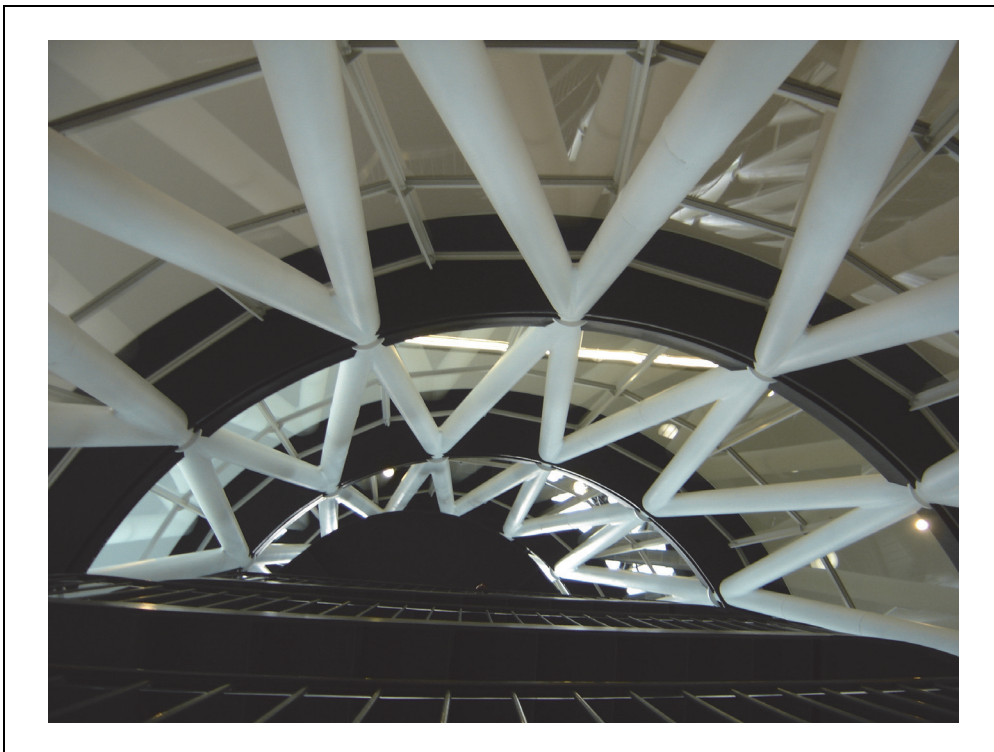


Fig. 1: Sendai Mediatheque Library by Toyo Ito

Conclusion

Although the Japanese Construction Industry is facing many of the same problems that work against the production of high quality architecture in developed western countries, certain situations and circumstances [some historic, some social, some cultural] have helped them overcome these obstacles to a large extent and they continue to produce some of the most creative, innovative, and highest quality architecture in the world. This series of interviews with some of the leaders in the field brings to light many of the circumstances that contribute to the creation of high quality architecture in 21st century Japan.

Notes

1. Architects interviewed

Toyo Ito – Toyo Ito and Associates Architects
2013 Pritzker Prize Laureate, Professor –Japan Women’s University
Kengo Kuma- Kengo Kuma and Associates
Professor- University of Tokyo
Shuhei Endo- Shuhei Endo Architect Institute
Professor- Kobe University
Takaharu Tezuka- Tezuka Architects
Yasuhiro Yamashita- Principal- Atelier Tekuto
Go Yoshimoto- Go Yoshimoto Architect and Associates

2. Stanley Russell worked for Team Zoo Atelier Iruka in Kobe Japan and apprenticed with a master carpenter on Awaji Island. Russell designed and built several projects in Japan under the office name “Teuchi Kenchiku”. Russell’s work has been published in Jutaku Tokushu, Kenchiku Chishiki, Shonan Style and Kazi.

3. Interview questions:

How do you feel about the current state of the building industry in Japan?
How do you feel about the quality of construction now compared to other times in history?
What signs do you look for to judge the quality of construction in your projects?
What steps can the architect take to help ensure high quality construction takes place?
How does the size of a building project relate to the quality of construction?
How important is collaboration with other professionals in your work?
Are architecture students in Japan taught the importance collaborating with others?
Is craftsmanship an important factor in contemporary Japanese architecture?
Is craftsmanship a part of the work of the architect?
How important is the contribution of craftsman to the successful completion of a project?
What is the relationship between Architects and craftsman?
Are architecture students in Japan taught the importance of good craftsmanship in buildings?
How have digital tools influenced the quality of design and construction?
Do you think that Japanese clients will pay more for high quality design and workmanship?
What are the major differences in creating high quality architecture abroad vs. in Japan?
Please talk about one of your projects that you feel achieved a high quality of construction and craftsmanship. What factors were involved in the successful completion of the project?

References

- [1] Ishimoto, Yasuhiro, *Katsura. Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, Yale University Press Press, 1960.