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Kenzo Tange, Hiroshima and Japanese Architecture

by Jonathan Glancey

Tadao Ando, one of Japan's greatest living architects, likes to tell the story of the stray dog, a stately akita, that wandered into his studio in Osaka some 20 years ago, and decided to stay. "First, I thought I would call her Kenzo Tange; but then I realised I couldn't kick Kenzo Tange around. So I called her Le Corbusier instead."

Kenzo Tange, the most influential figure in post-war Japanese architecture, who has died aged 91, was profoundly influenced by the work of Le Corbusier. In turn, Tange's hugely impressive body of work was to influence, indeed dominate, that of a younger generation of brilliant young Japanese architects up to, and including, Ando.

If Tange began by imitating the late-flowering, sculptural concrete designs of the Swiss-French genius, he went on to create a body of internationally recognised work that was very much his own, fusing traditional Japanese forms with the very latest in structural daring. His finest buildings include the twin arena of the two national gymnasiums for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the Yamanashi press and broadcasting centre at Kofu (1964-67) and, beginning at his beginning, the peace park and peace centre at Hiroshima (1949-55).

Many of Tange's later buildings, including the new Tokyo city hall complex (1991), the United Overseas Bank Plaza, Singapore (1995) and the Tokyo Dome hotel (2000), were realised on daunting scales. Utilizing new

construction drawing software and older techniques, Tange was able to

create large scale buildings that were stylish and safe. Yet, as the prolific architect said: "We live in a world where great incompatibles co-exist: the human scale and the superhuman scale, stability and mobility, permanence and change, identity and anonymity, comprehensibility and universality.

"I like to think there is something deep in our own world of reality that will create a dynamic balance between technology and human existence, the relationship between which has a decisive effect on contemporary cultural forms and social structure."

Ironically, as a young man, Tange did not expect to become an architect. He was born in Osaka, and brought up, in modest circumstances, in the small city of Imabari, on Shikoku Island. Nevertheless, he won his way to the University of Tokyo's architecture department, and began working, in 1938, for Kunio Maekawa, who had practised with Le Corbusier in his Paris studio in the late 1920s.

During the second world war, Tange furthered his studies as a graduate student in Tokyo, becoming an assistant professor at Tokyo University in 1946. He set up his own studio, through which such distinguished architects as Fumihiko Maki, Kisho Kurokawa and Arata Isozaki passed, learned, contributed and flourished.

His first major commission was hugely symbolic: the replanning of the city of Hiroshima after its destruction by Little Boy, the atomic bomb dropped by the USAF B-29 Enola Gay on August 6 1945. At the heart of the revived city, Tange built a peace centre, raised on stilt-like, Le Corbusier-style columns, or piloti, faced by a monument that married ancient forms and the latest structural technology.

This peacetime fusion of a traditional Haniwa tomb and a concrete hyperbolic parabola was very much a symbol of the new Japan, resolutely looking to the future while proudly recalling the best of its pre-imperial past.

As Le Corbusier long dreamed of rebuilding the centre of Paris, so Tange worked long and hard on a comprehensive, and highly contentious, redesign of his country's capital city. His plan for Tokyo (1960) received

worldwide attention. In practice, it would have meant projecting the city out over the bay, using man-made islands connected by a proliferation of bridges, and characterised not by buildings as such, but by eye-boggling concrete megastructures.

These great concrete concatenations, although never realised on the scale Tange had intended in Tokyo, were hugely influential in Britain, encouraging a generation of architects who were in love with raw concrete and sheer scale, and were labelled "brutalists" by the critic Reyner Banham. For many, Tange was the godfather, or shogun, of 1960s brutalism. In fact, his most successful brutalist design, the Yamanashi press and broadcasting centre, was as much a samurai fortress brought into the late 20th century as it was a modern concrete megastructure. Intriguingly, although it seems all of a piece, this was a determinedly indeterminate building in the sense that, theoretically at least, its 16 massive cylindrical towers, housing the centre's services, could be greatly extended, while yawning gaps left between occupied floors could be filled in with future offices and studios as required.

Today, these gaps have been filled in with terraces and roof gardens, adding to the enigmatic and unexpectedly romantic quality of this powerful design.

"The role of tradition," said Tange, "is that of a catalyst which furthers a chemical reaction, but is no longer detectable in the end result. Tradition can, to be sure, participate in a creation, but it can no longer be creative itself."

The cathedral of St Mary, Tokyo (1964), another powerful meeting of historic and contemporary form and structure, both confirms and denies this article of architectural faith. Tange visited several medieval cathedrals before producing his design. "After experiencing their heaven-aspiring grandeur and ineffably mystical spaces," he said later, "I began to imagine new spaces, and wanted to create them by means of modern technology." Which he did, and yet the soaring concrete cathedral is recognisably medieval in inspiration.

Outside Japan, Tange was more overtly modern, as in the examples of his extension of McKim Meade and White's Minneapolis art museum (1975), his only work in the United States, and in the office and hotel towers he designed for the Taiwanese capital, Taipei, and Singapore.

An often profound thinker and learned teacher, in Japan, Canada and the US, Tange continued until he died, although he retired from practice three years ago, to imagine how architecture could be convincingly reconciled with the very latest communications and building technologies. He had disliked the wilful excesses of postmodern design in the 1980s, and watched cautiously as a new wave of gratuitous bendy, twisty buildings sprouted from city skylines worldwide in the 1990s.

He was, though, quietly optimistic, considering these fashionable affectations to be no more than "transitional architectural expressions", an accusation it would difficult to level at the Yamanashi press and broadcasting centre or the national gymnasium, Tokyo.

Kenzo Tange, architect, born September 4 1913; died March 22 2005
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