The Rise of Nationalist Modernism in Japan: A Study of Kenzo Tange and Kunio Maekawa’s Works

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Abstract: The Meiji period in Japan marked a transformative era and the beginning of a new state, society, and built environment. The country then saw the emergence of a nationalist modernism that blended traditional aesthetics with Western modernism under the banner of the ‘Japan-ness’ identity in architecture. The paper analyses Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange’s works to highlight their approaches to forging a unique architectural style within the new environment. Maekawa’s nuanced designs and Tange’s avant-garde vision serve as exemplars of architectural development. Through historical analysis, the paper explores the social and political implications of nationalist modernism and how architecture becomes a crucial means of expressing Japan’s national identity and cultural values. The paper navigates the complex interplay of cultural revivalism and global modernity, probing the ideological undercurrents embedded in the architectural language of nationalist modernism. This analysis underscores the significance of architecture in shaping societal values and recommends continued examination of its role in evolving cultural identities.

Keywords: Identity; Japanese Architecture; Kenzo Tange; Kunio Maekawa; Modernity; Nationalist Modernism.

1. Introduction

The article first examines the Meiji period in Japan’s modernization. This is followed by a study of the war that led to the emergence of nationalist modernism in the country. The war led Japan to experience rebuilding and reconstruction, during which architecture became a crucial means of expressing national identity and cultural values. The movement emphasized the importance of preserving and promoting Japan’s traditional culture and identity whilst promoting a distinctly Japanese form of modernity.

The paper will then analyze the works of Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange to highlight their approach toward architecture as they maneuver the landscape of post-war Japan and its expression of national identity. Maekawa and Tange were two prominent architects who played a key role in developing nationalist modernism in Japan. They were heavily influenced by the political and social upheavals of the time, and their work was shaped by a desire to create a new, modern Japan, free from the constraints of its traditional past. Both played a role in developing nationalist modernism in Japan, reflecting the political and social upheavals of the time and their commitment to creating a new, modern Japan that was both innovative and uniquely Japanese.

The study situates Maekawa and Tange’s architecture within the broader historical context of Japan’s modernization and nationalism, critically analyzing the social, cultural, and political contexts in which nationalist modernism emerged in Japan. The paper presents the role of architecture in shaping national identity and cultural expression.
2. The Meiji Era

The period from September 1868 to July 1912 was recognized as the Meiji Era in Japan. Over forty-five years, Japan saw the construction of a new state, a new society, and a new built environment to express its identity and ambitions. It was a dramatic change, characterized by a rapid modernization of society and the establishment of a new, centralized state. The dismantling of the samurai class paved the way for a Western political, industrial, and economic regime capable of embarking on an ambitious redefinition based on a foreign model.

On April 6, 1868, The Charter Oath was issued by Emperor Meiji, marking the country’s transition from a feudal regime to a modern one (Black, 2022). The Oath consisted of five clauses that would set up the stage for Japan as a rising Westernising nation under a restored imperial authority that replaced the closed bureaucratic state of the Tokugawa shogunate. The Meiji government institutionalized the Japanese family structure after the Restoration, indicating the broad impact of the Oath on various aspects of Japanese society (Yamane & Nonoyama, 1967; Malek & Akon, 2021).

In forging new social and political institutions, Japan also adopted Western industrial technology. Japan’s programs of Westernisation for international recognition and acceptance as a modern nation were an act of survival against the encroachment of foreign powers, learning from past events of foreign access in the ports of Nagasaki, Yokohama, and the decimation of Satsuma defenses at Kagoshima in 1863 by British naval squadron (Hellyer, 2005). After that, Japan became an economic and military power pursuing Western-style progress.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, a great exponent of Westernisation, developed a slogan for the Meiji period, “Bunmei Kaika” (civilization and enlightenment). Yukichi played a crucial role in advocating for the adoption of Western values and institutions in Japan. His influence extended to various aspects of Japanese society, including education, philosophy, and political thought, instrumental in shaping Japan’s modernization and integration into the global community (Seland, 2023; Mitani, 2018; Alférez, 2019). With the slogan firmly planted in all industries, from crafts to mass production factories, and together with the government’s guidance, Japan could concentrate its capital on realizing significant projects.

Projects included massive infrastructure development programs, including railroads, ports, and telegraph lines, which helped connect the country and promote economic growth. This led Japan to go through urbanization, where people of all classes were free to move into cities to look for better jobs. Thus, the accepted practice to be followed was Western-style urban plans and buildings, as well as an occidental approach to industry, commerce, and education. New government ministries, post offices, and railway stations became the new architecture of authority. It was a national effort to redefine the image of Japan, using architecture as a means for defining identity and achieving new goals.

The Meiji era showed an enthusiasm for reviving architectural styles of classical antiquity, such as classical columns and pediments, as Alberti, Michelangelo, and Palladio had developed during the Renaissance. Western architects were invited to design buildings and townscapes, and, like Josiah Conder, they were invited to teach at the Department of Architecture at the University of Tokyo. New graduated architects looked to Western models for inspiration, adopting neoclassicism and art nouveau styles, and eventually combined traditional elements to create a “blended architecture” (Young & Young, 2019).

The earliest Japanese builders of Western-style structures were carpenters, and they made various adaptations in terms of materials and techniques. Subsequently, the use of timber for institutional buildings waned among Japanese architects, but interest in Japanese-style architecture did not fade. Instead, their efforts shifted to replicating forms and details of wood construction in reinforced concrete. By the 1930s, architects used ferro concrete in Japanese-style design, known as the...
Teikan yoshiki, or Imperial Crown Style, associated with the pre-World War II years. The teikan yoshiki exemplifies a fusion of tradition and modernity by blending traditional Japanese design elements with modern construction materials and techniques, which allows for greater flexibility in design and structural integrity (Fricke, et al. 2022; Pernice, 2014). The architecture was not only used to display Japan’s urbane civilization to foreign visitors but it was also given the highest national significance.

Takenaka Komuten was a carpentry workshop that utilized concrete and became a modern construction firm. In 1911, a prominent carpenter within Takenaka designed and built the Kyoto Takayashima Department Store in ferro concrete (Sacks, 2013), marking a pivotal moment in the utilization of concrete in construction. Their other prominent accomplishment was the construction of the first reinforced concrete apartment buildings in Japan, in the Tokyo areas of Aoyama (1926) and Daikanyama (1927). Since the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, both steel-frame and reinforced concrete structures have been valued as the most outstanding structural methods in modern Japanese architecture (Imaizumi et al., 2016).

Dojunkai apartments, also known as the Japan Housing Corporation, were constructed in steel-reinforced concrete as a response to the housing needs of the victims of the 1923 earthquake (Tewari & Beynon, 2016). It was an external body of the Interior Ministry and was funded by contributions from within Japan and overseas. The Dojunkai supplied 12,000 housing units, including 2,500 apartments, between 1926 and 1941. All the apartments were made of reinforced concrete structures that placed a premium on earthquake resistance, and most of the properties were three stories in height. In addition to having proper electricity, plumbing, and gas, each unit had flush toilets. At the time they were built, these housing units were well-known and admired for their leading-edge conveniences and technologies, such as elevators, steam heaters, telephones, and baths.

In 1920, a group of young architects formed the first organization of modernist architects. The group was called Bunriha, literally meaning ‘Secessionist’, taking after the Viennese Secession, becoming a significant movement. The Bunriha group wanted to break from the classical academic revival that dominated architectural practice in Japan (Reynolds, 2001). Echoing the criticism of the European architects simultaneously, the Bunriha rejected the reductive practice of choosing pre-established styles and the superficial use of ornaments. The establishment of the Bunriha greatly influenced the development of modernism in Japan. The movement was active until 1928, the group organized seven exhibitions, providing young architects with platforms to present their ideas to the public. The Bunriha explored new developments in European architecture and promoted these ideas within Japan’s architectural community. They pursued new architecture and helped catalyze a modernist independent identity. The Bunriha became essential to modernism’s emergence as a viable architectural movement. The movement was influenced by the broader nationalist and cultural movements of the time, which emphasized the importance of preserving and promoting Japan’s traditional culture and identity in the face of growing Western influence (Reynolds, 2000).

However, their effort was halted by the intense nationalism and increasing political isolation of the 1930s, which produced tremendous pressure to halt the influx of Western culture and promote certain practices drawn from premodern Japanese society to affirm national unity. However, the profession could not completely abandon its modern building technology and revert to premodern construction practices. This debate over the role of Japan’s architectural traditions in contemporary practice became an increasingly divisive issue in the 1930s and 1940s. Architects like Ito Chuta (1867-1954) cloaked modern structures with traditional decorative ornament in a deliberate effort to “Japanese” foreign construction as a way to counter the Eurocentric narrative of aesthetics (Conrad, 2020).
Particular emphasis was placed on roof design: curved, tiled roofs with decorative gables invoked tradition without interfering with the modern structure underneath. The Japan Railways Nara Station, built in 1934 and designed by Shibata Shirō and Masuda Seiichi, has a wooden roof with a temple-style spire that was placed on a rectangular concrete building (Young & Young, 2019). The reintroduction of traditional architectural ornament was used as clear political significance. Those in power sponsored a new architectural style they believed was conspicuously and unambiguously “Japanese” to help redefine Japan’s national identity and its role in world politics (Reynolds, 2001).

After World War II, the interest in tradition did not dissipate with the change in the political climate. On the contrary, modernists embraced the concept with new enthusiasm and saw tradition as valuable for forging a new, democratic Japan (Seligmann, 2016). When Japan faced the daunting task of rebuilding, modernists such as Sutemi Horiguchi, Bunzo Yamaguchi, Kunio Maekawa, Junzo Sakakura, and Kenzo Tange had the necessary experience in leadership of their profession. They sought to undo the political hegemony of wartime Japan by appropriating one of the tools used by the nationalists to bolster their policies. Traditional Japanese house architecture influences modernists because of similar architectural principles: simplicity, multi-use space, and modular planning. The modernists combine elements of modernism and their particular interpretation of Japanese tradition into a thoroughly integrated whole.

Kunio Maekawa (1905-1986) and Kenzo Tange (1913-2005) were notable for injecting Japanese aesthetic ideas into starkly contemporary buildings, returning to the spatial concepts and modular proportions of tatami and using texture to enliven the bare ferro concrete and steel. They also employed modified Japanese gardens in their designs. Maekawa produced thoroughly international and functional modern works, and Tange used the cantilever principle in a pillar and beam system reminiscent of ancient imperial palaces. The pillar is a hallmark of Japanese traditional monumental timber construction, which became a fundamental essence of his design (Abdolmaleki & Daneshfar, 2011). Both architects sought to design a future of ethical revolution for the survival of traditional Japanese culture (Frampton, 2007).

National modernism was a movement that was driven by a desire to promote Japanese cultural identity and assert the nation’s political aspirations. However, nationalism can be a problematic concept, particularly in the context of Japanese history and its militaristic past. Some critics may view the nationalist element of the movement with skepticism and argue that it reinforces exclusionary and homogenizing tendencies.
recognition through inclusion in prestigious Tokyo exhibitions and Japanese publications such as Kokusaikenchiku (Reynolds, 2001; Yasuda, 2018).

Back home, Maekawa worked with the emigre Czech architect, Antonin Raymond, for five years. At the firm, Maekawa’s stamp of modernist architecture manifested in projects like the Viscount Soma Residence (1932) and the Akaboshi Tetsuma Housing (1933). In the former, he designed an oblong, horizontal structure, echoing Le Corbusier’s housing in Weissenhof Estate (1927) or the iconic Villa Savoye (1931). The incorporation of a roof garden lent a distinctive allure to the latter housing. Maekawa’s participation in the Tokyo City Hall competition in 1932 offered a glimpse into his ethos, at the same time, reflecting the influence of August Perret.

In 1935, Maekawa left Raymond’s firm to set up his own office in Tokyo’s bustling district of Ginza. His earliest projects were the Hinomoto Hall of 1936 and his design submission for the Memorial Hall for the Founding of the Nation competition in 1937. A hallmark of Maekawa’s work during this period was the adept utilization of concrete, large panes of glass, and cast-in-place ceramic tiles. Maekawa’s ceramic patterned tiles can be seen in his later work building, Tokyo Bunkan Building in 1961.

In 1937 Maekawa was commissioned by Sato Yoshimura, a prominent figure in the Foreign Ministry, who was also a family friend, to design two houses – a main house in Tokyo and a vacation house in Karuizawa. These domestic undertakings aspired to the modern style, while preserving an appearance of traditional style with overlapping roof segments and creating an interplay of planes (Reynolds, 1991). By 1939, Maekawa was entrusted with designing employee dormitories for Kako Commercial Bank in Shanghai, where he positioned himself strategically across the sea to set up a satellite firm near the project site. He continued to receive commissions, building three technical schools for mining and manufacturing in Manchuria. However, these projects’ primary consideration were function and cost, foregrounding technical proficiency over aesthetic innovations. As World War II unfolds, Maekawa’s commissions were largely confined to military endeavours. Nonetheless, he was fortunate to be well-connected and able to secure contracts in times when projects were scarce.

At the height of war in 1943, Maekawa designed his own house in Shinagawa. His house served as a canvas for experimenting with modern architectural concepts, playing a crucial role in the early-period development of detached houses in Japan (Kim & Jun, 2017). The house’s gable roof and central column are perhaps inspired by the traditional Japanese architecture of Ise Shrine. His house stands as a testament to his architectural prowess and innovative spirit.
In the tumultuous mid-20th Century, Maekawa emerged as dominant figure in Japanese architecture. By 1944, he set up an office in Yotsuda, and three years later, he founded the MIDO Research Institute. During the same year, he published Maekawa Kunio’s Kenchiku Jimusho Sakuhin Shu (the collected works of the Maekawa Kunio Architecture Office). Maekawa would design the first branch of the Kinokuniya bookstore in Shinjuku in 1946 using timber, a remarkable structure of the immediate post-war period. Later in 1964, Maekawa showcased his visionary approach with the reconstruction of the bookstore, where he used concrete to create a modern curved design. With an expanded base, the store was able to accommodate the increasing inventory of books, and also anticipate the cultural shifts in Shinjuku, integrating an art gallery and a theatre.

Maekawa, rooted in pragmatism, emphasised on the mass production of prefabricated structures as a reflection to the conscious effort to democratise architecture. He took inspiration in part from Henry Ford’s assembly line theories of mass production for making products accessible to the less wealthy working class. He formed a new company called Prefabricated Maekawa Ono Kaoru San’in Manufacturing (PREMOS); it was named in part for Kaoru Ono, a professor at Tokyo University and a colleague of Maekawa. By 1946, under the guise of the new company, the first two PREMOS units were
completed. The tiny house was made of standard wooden panels, which, assembled in different ways, could create several different styles of houses. The small model afforded 52sqm of floor space, a living, dining/kitchen area, and a one-bedroom and toilet. These initial units were used as a club for soldiers in occupied Totori. Other PREMOS units were adapted as housing for railroad workers in Shimonoseki, a coffeehouse in Ginza, and private homes. The use of standard wooden panels in the construction of the PREMOS units exemplified Maekawa’s innovative response to the challenges of the post-war era. These prefabricated units not only provided practical solutions for housing needs but also showcased Maekawa’s architectural vision in addressing post-war challenges through innovative architectural solutions (Kumagai, 2018).

After five years, 1000 units had been manufactured, but the PREMOS project ended due to a lack of cost-effectiveness. Nonetheless, PREMOS served as a blueprint for Japan’s burgeoning prefab industry. The versatility and adaptability of the PREMOS units provided practical living spaces and also reflected Maekawa’s commitment to modernist principles (Reynolds, 2002). He later used this technique in his 1959 Harumi Flats, heralded as the earliest high-rise apartment building in Japan. Inspired by Le Corbusier’s Unité de habitation in Marseilles (1946), Maekawa’s design uses strong vertical lines, with receding and projecting planes, and sculpted units on the roof (Larkham, 2016).

The apartment is a modernist concrete skeleton containing traditional Japanese interiors. For many, this building marked the historical moment that an authentically Japanese version of modernism is plausible. Departing from conventional design, Maekawa’s mega-block innovatively crafted access to flats through both single-loaded open corridors and staircases. The living spaces of the flats are divided equally between dining areas and rooms, which are furnished with tatami mats.

Another figure to have worked with Le Corbusier was Junzo Sakakura (1904-1969), although not simultaneously. In 1936, Maekawa and Sakakura entered a limited-entry competition for the Japanese pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1937. The competition was overlooked by Kishida Hideto (1899-1966), a professor at Tokyo University. Sakakura, who had just returned from Corbusier’s office, received the commission for the
design after Maekawa’s plan, which was initially favored, was dismissed as too modernist. Sakakura’s building comprised a grey walled box on a black piloti with a free-formed and ramped access. It was a reinterpretation of a traditional tea house into a modern structure. Maekawa was involved in the Japanese pavilion at the World’s Fair in Brussels and again in New York City in 1954.

In 1961, his Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall (Tokyo Bunka Kaikan) garnered acclaim for the humanist expression in his various choices of materials, notably employing marble sheeting in a striking manner across its interior surfaces. The design, drawing inspiration from rural Japan and the classic Minka (farmhouse) structure, pays homage to the Japanese tradition (Reynolds, 2002). The Gakushuin University Library (1958-1960), design of roof sculptures, ramping, and...
pyramids can also be said to be a reflection of the farmhouses. Regardless, both design were perhaps another influence by Le Corbusier’s form play and roofscape design. In 1974, he designed what would be considered his final structure, the Tokio Marine and Fire Insurance Building (1965-74). He was 75 years of age when the building was completed. As he grew older, his concern became more entwined in communication and the nature of technology to be particularly poignant and enlightening.

Maekawa’s office was re-organised from Maekawa Kunio Associates, Architects & Engineers to Maekawa Associates, Architects & Engineers in 1975. His later projects were conceived by the young architects he employed in his office, one of whom is now the director, Isao Hashimoto, who graduated from Nihon University and came to work with Maekawa in 1970. These are some of the projects that his office realised: City Museum in Fukuoka (1979), Prefectural Museum, Miyagi (1980), Kumamoto Prefectural Concert Hall and Theater (1982), Kunitachi College of Music Concert Hall (1983) and Niigata Municipal museum (1985). Maekawa came to be admired for not only his technical skill and good judgement, but for his humanistic and democratic attitude toward life (Saito, 1962).

Figure (12). 12a, 12b & 12c: (from left) Japan Pavilion, Universal and International Exhibition, Brussels, 1956-58, view from main entrance, and view from exhibition hall. (Images: Setgysels and Dietens)

Figure (13). 13a & 13b: (from left) Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, 1961, (Image: JA 117, Spring 2020), and Gassho-zukuri farmhouses in Shirakawa-go. (Image: Box of Badger, flickr.com).

4. Kenzo Tange (1913 -2005)

Kenzo Tange was born in Osaka and had a modest upbringing in Imabari on Shikoku Island, before moving to Hiroshima in 1930. While studying at the Hiroshima High School, he saw Le Corbusier’s competition entry for the Soviet Palace in a foreign art journal, leaving a lasting impression. Subsequently, Tange began his studies in the architecture department at the University of Tokyo in 1935. There, he studied under Hideto Kishida and Shozo Uchida. Whilst learning, Tange became fascinated with the Katsura Imperial Villa, particularly in the co-existence of the Jomon and Yayoi aesthetics. Jomon is characterised as dynamic and plebeian, representing the spontaneous creative energy of people. In contrast, Yayoi was passive and ordered, indicating the highly sophisticated aesthetics of aristocracy (Zhongjie, 2010). For Tange, the intersection of the two aesthetics has no clear boundary, integrating the upper class’s cultural formalism and the lower class’s vital energy (Tange, 1960). Nevertheless, Tange continues to be inspired by Le Corbusier. He even chose to join Kunio Maekawa’s firm to remain in contact with Le Corbusier’s oeuvre (Liu et al., 2023). During his tenure, he travelled to Manchuria, participated in an architectural design competition for a bank, and toured the Japanese-occupied Jehol on his return.

In 1942, Tange participated in the competition for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Memorial Hall and won the first prize. His design for the memorial hall was a unique blend of Shinto shrine architecture and the plaza on Capitoline Hill in Rome. It was a fusion that symbolised a mix of Japanese and Western influences, reflecting Japan’s imperial ambitions during that period (Fisher, 1950). Additionally, Tange collaborated with Maekawa on a design submission for the Japan-Thailand Cultural Center in Bangkok competition. This collaboration highlights the architectural and cultural exchanges that were taking place between Japan and other Asian nations during the early 1940s. While it was largely seen as a propaganda, the ideals of the Co-Prosperity Sphere was to free the region from white colonial rule. Nonetheless, the competition served as a platform for promoting cultural diplomacy and showcasing Japan’s influence in Southeast Asia (Swan, 1996).

During World War Two, Tange furthered his studies as a Graduate of Tokyo University and later became an assistant professor in 1946. He set up his studio, which served as a hub for budding architects like Fumihiko Maki, Kisho Kurokawa, and Arata Isozaki, who learned and flourished under his mentorship. In the post-war reconstruction in 1946, Tange was invited by the War Damage Rehabilitation Board to submit proposals for war-damaged cities.

Figure (15). 15a, 15b, 15c, 15d & 15e: Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Memorial Hall, 1942, competition entry by Tange Kenzō. (Clockwise from top left) Elevation drawing, aerial perspective, plan of the memorial hall compared to Capitol Hill, Rome floor plan and aerial view of Capitol Hill, Rome. (Image: Kenchiku-zasshi 56, no. 693, Dec 1942)
He submitted plans for Hiroshima and Maebashi. The Peace Centre in Hiroshima has a layout similar to that of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Memorial Hall submission. The project was completed in 1955, and showcased a blend of ancient forms and modern structural technology, reflecting his innovative approach to architecture (Lin, 2010; Melis et al., 2017). The initial design featuring stilt-like columns with the arch was also a homage to Le Corbusier's competition entry for the Soviet Palace.

Tange’s first public statement was a ten-page article published in the Journal of Gendai Kenchiku (Modern Architecture) in 1939 titled “Ode to Michaelangelo: As an introduction to the study of Le Corbusier”. The publication is a manifestation of Le Corbusier’s influence on Tange, which persists throughout his career. Tange incorporated the latest technologies into his designs, aiming to establish a new urban order that balanced historical forms and technological innovation. His involvement in the Metabolist Movement further exemplified his commitment to incorporating cutting-edge technologies and urban planning concepts into his work (Lin, 2010).

Tange sought to transcend the purely technical approach, employing a symbolic idiom expressing the modern age’s spirit. Following the devastation of Hiroshima during World War II, there was a profound desire for the reconstruction of a national identity, driven by a pervasive sense of cultural disconnection (Schalk, 2014). The Peace Centre in Hiroshima stands as a poignant symbol of Japan’s recent history, embodying the collective aspirations of its people. Guiding the reconstruction efforts in Hiroshima, Tange led a comprehensive survey of the city, which lay virtually in ruins. Moving away from the functionalist planning approach, Tange employed a classical layout and a monumental scale to arouse the urban dignity characteristics of traditional city centres. The second floor layout of the exhibition hall follows a tsuzumi-shape design which is a Japanese two-headed drums. Moreover, central to his design was an axial and hierarchical arrangement of buildings and landscapes, centred on the cenotaph which served as a focal point for the city’s rejuvenation (Tamari, 2014).

This amalgamation of a traditional Haniwa tomb with a concrete hyperbolic parabola symbolised the new Japan, resolutely looking to the future while proudly recalling the best of its pre-imperial past. Tange’s architectural vision served as a potent symbol of Japan’s resurgence, showcasing the nation’s remarkable embrace of technological innovation. The post-war period saw Japan grow from a nation on the brink of destruction to one of global prominence.

In 1951 Tange began designing his own
home, and completed its construction in 1953. He showcased a blend of traditional Japanese building materials like wood and paper with a design influenced by Le Corbusier, evident in the raised structures on stilts (Ciora & Ostende, 2016). The structural principle permits a flexible arrangement of the spatial sequence on the upper level. To integrate the house with the outdoors, Tange applied the external corridors common to traditional Japanese houses for moon watching. The sequence of the facade can also be seen as a Palladian play of alternate 2-1-2 bays. The use of fusuma sliding doors allows the open space to be divided into smaller rooms, adapting to modern movement characteristics, while paying homage to Japan’s architecture heritage. The Katsura Imperial Villa can be seen as an influence on the interior of Tange’s house which is centred around the tatami mat as a foundational dimension, subtly enlarged to accommodate modern lifestyle needs. The interior fittings are extremely simple, with selected pieces of furniture that do not interfere with the free spatial effects produced. Tange’s house testifies to an effort to discover a synthesis of Japanese tradition and the exigencies of modern living.

Tange’s architectural design in the 1950s represented a significant departure towards breaking down the barrier between public and private spaces. Examples of projects include the Children’s Library in Hiroshima and Ehime Prefectural Hall both completed in 1953, and the Shimizu City Hall in Shizuoka (1954). Unlike earlier designs that segregated public and office spaces horizontally and vertically, later town halls integrated a large hall
on the ground floor to connect administration with the public (Toyokawa, 2022). These architectural advancements by Tange were distinguished by the utilisation of a steel frame and reinforced concrete, demonstrating a fusion of modern materials and design principles.

In 1957, Tange completed the construction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office, the Shizuoka Convention Hall and the Sumi Memorial Hall in Aichi. The Tokyo City Hall for instance applied the Jomon timber technique in concrete, demonstrating a fusion of ancient building methods with contemporary materials (Hamada, 2015). Tange’s Kagawa Prefectural Office of 1958 is an example of integrating both Jomon’s and Yayoi’s aesthetics and modern architecture. Here he again referenced the Katsura Imperial Villa. His use of expressive construction is also likened to the Daibutsu style seen at Todai-ji in Nara. By strategically designing columns on the elevation to bear only vertical loads, Tange was able to create thin columns, maximising glazing surfaces across multiple stories, including the penthouse levels.

The Kagawa design is composed of a square, eight-story administrative office tower alongside a low-rise rectangular legislative assembly hall and built-in reinforced concrete. The two buildings are positioned in L-shape, partially framing the central courtyard and taking inspiration from temple gardens. The building emulates traditional Japanese wooden architecture, fusing inherent simplicity with modernist rationality. The building is lifted above the ground on high pilotis, with elements discreetly abstracted from the international style. Tange’s play of the duality of modern/non-modern and concrete to imitate wood can be seen in his building of the same year, the Sogetsu Memorial Hall.

The Kurashiki Town Hall was built in a town that escaped the air raids of the war. Tange’s design, reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s Brutalist style, includes features such as exposed concrete box articulated with horizontal, and sun-shielding
windows, reflect a forward looking structure that contrasts with the traditional surroundings (Parkhomchuk, 2023). Progress and expansion were accounted for when the facilities were erected in 1960, planning for a future municipality of 150,000 inhabitants. Facilities include a public assembly hall, offices, meeting rooms, and the mayor’s office. Notably, the assembly hall overlooks the grandeur of the lobby space, while the administrative offices occupy the lower tiers, underscoring a hierarchical spatial arrangement that reflects both function and symbolic significance.

Tange’s inclination toward open plaza design can also be seen in the Kurashiki project. The columns supporting the building were massive, and the facade consisted of horizontal planks with recessed windows, reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s Unite d’habitation. Tange’s early period, particularly pre-1960, was characterized by a static and deterministic design approach, where each function was allocated to a distinct space. However, he later critiqued this rationalist methodology, deeming it inadequate for the dynamic nature of contemporary cities, marked by constant flux and rapid urbanization. He thus advocated the strategy of structuring in urban design. According to Tange, structuring is “a process of coupling the functional units” and a basic theme of urban design, which “thinks of the spatial organisation as a network of communication and as a living body with growth and change” (Kultermann, 1970).

Tange’s design of the Headquarters Building for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva in 1960 was a departure from traditional rectangular plans. The design, influenced by his time at MIT, featured a unique curved structure symbolically reflecting the building’s surroundings facing Lake Geneva and the Alps. Tange dramatically departed from the basic rectangular plan and created a characteristic curved type of building. The two office blocks lean toward each other at the summit to create a tent-like structure. Tange formulated a new relationship between office cells and big public halls by designing the external walls of the converging towers as progressively upward-recessed terrace structures (World Meteorological Organization, 1961). The continuation of the design for the residential quarters in the Tokyo Bay plan shows this early plan’s inherent dynamic urbanist vision.
The dramatic socio-cultural changes in postwar Japan stimulated Tange’s techno-utopian ideas in his Tokyo Bay plan in 1960. This blueprint represented a systematic and forward-looking approach to urban planning, advocating for the radical restructuring of cities on an unprecedented scale. At its core, the Tokyo Bay plan introduced a linear civic axis, fundamentally altering the city’s spatial dynamics to embrace its coastal identity. Important national and urban functions are relocated along the metropolitan centre within the axial spine. The linear axis elongates with the process of urban expansion into a series of overlapping transportation loops linked together to form a graduated process of growth unit by unit. The main transport axis is suspended above the city, with parallel highways connecting perpendicular to the axis. The city engages in a dynamic process of movement and evolution by designing a cyclical transportation system for this civic axis, consisting of several highway loops. In 1964, Peter Smithson doubted the feasibility of such a linear transportation system, claiming the plan was more like a symbolic gesture of tackling the transportation problems than a practical proposal (Smithson, 1964).

The 1960 Plan embodied a symbiotic relationship between technology and societal advancement. Justifying his bold vision, he drew parallels with the burgeoning trends of a technological era, citing the proliferation of automobiles and rapid advancements in communication technologies. Consequently, the concept of symbolism was extrapolated to a grander scale. The housings in his design are a reminder of the roof of the Ise Shrine, which Tange has visited several times in other projects (Reynolds, 2001). The spectacular linear spine served as a structure to generate the city form. It provided an unmistakable icon of the post-industrial city characterised by speed, mobility, free communication, continuing growth, and cultural perseverance.

Tange’s name received global attention for his design of the 1964 National Gymnasium for the Olympic Games. The exaggeration of the form is seen as reverence to roofs of Shinto shrines or a modern equivalent of Ise. Upon completion, the National Gymnasium boasted the world’s largest suspended roof, a feat both aerodynamic and monumental, signalling a departure from the constraints of the International Style. The space is organised symmetrically, distributing the stands to the north and south, emphasising the east-west direction in both the roof and the location of the entrances, reminiscent of the Buddhist yin-yang symbol. Tange worked with Professor Yoshikazu Tsuboi of Tokyo University to solve the difficult cable-stiffened roof design. The roof has different curvatures, concave and convex simultaneously, and responds to both wind and seismic lateral loading. Supported by substantial 13-inch diameter cables anchored to ground-level concrete supports, the graceful cantilevers imbue the structure with a sense of ethereal lightness. The Yoyogi National Gymnasium stands as a testament to Japan’s architectural prowess, surpassing the benchmarks set by advanced Western nations, as noted by Laga (2014).

In that same year, Tange designed the St. Mary Cathedral in Tokyo, accompanied by Wilhelm Schlombs, who was the architect to the Archdiocese of Cologne and Tsuboi. The cathedral’s original Gothic-style wooden structure, built in 1899, was destroyed during wartime air raids. Tange’s architectural vision for the cathedral stands as a remarkable fusion of historical essence and contemporary structural innovation. The layout is configured in the shape of a cross, from which eight hyperbolic parabolas rise as a wall and open

Figure (25). 25a & 25b: Tokyo Bay Plan, masterplan (L) and model of housing types (R), Tokyo, 1960. (Images: en.tangeweb.com)

Figure (26). 26a & 26b: Yoyogi National Gymnasium, aerial view and cable-stiffened roof design, Tokyo, 1964. (Images: Kultermann, 1970)
upwards to allow light to permeate vertically along the length of the four facades. This interplay of light and shadow, facilitated by glazed gaps contrasts with the dark internal space. The cathedral’s design incorporates elements of Japanese aesthetics, such as wabi-sabi, which celebrates the beauty of imperfection and transience. This concept is also reflected in the cathedral’s grim tones and unfinished textures, adding a layer of depth and cultural significance to the space. The monochromatic cladding of stainless steel enhances the structure’s curves and dynamics. The building is a synthesis of Occidental themes and Oriental sensibilities, weaving together abstract symbolism with tangible form, and juxtaposing the bright and polished exterior and the dark and rough interior (Urban, 2011).

In 1961, Tange received a commission from Yamanashi News Group and took advantage of this opportunity to test his structuralist idea of the “three-dimensional space network” in architecture, which was elaborated in the 1960 Plan for Tokyo (Tange, 1967; Tange, 1985). This concept involved grouping service spaces including elevators, stairs and other services, into reinforced sixteen reinforced concrete cylindrical towers with identical diameters of five meters, that formed the structural framework of the building, creating a 3-dimensional lattice for functional units (Lin, 2010). By arranging these towers in a gridiron plan and incorporating functional elements within them, Tange effectively integrated vertical cores for circulation and horizontal containers for various spaces. The largest span between the towers was seventeen meters, and the absence of auxiliary supports in between ensured the spatial flexibility of floor plans where a few voids were left for potential spaces for future expansion. Horizontal members were clipped on the towers with large beam joints similar to wood structures but made of concrete. However, the building did not expand into its urban context as Tange had expected, nor did it catalyse similar mega-structural development in the surrounding area (Lin, 2010). Nonetheless, Tange managed to embody a unique blend of modern megastructure and traditional samurai fortress elements. The building at the time, stood alone within Kofu’s medieval urban texture.

The Shizuoka Press and Broadcasting Centre (1967) was built on the same concept of Yamanashi, but Tange opted for a solitary cylindrical shaft. Offices are located from the third floor up, radiating from the central core (Cho, 2018). Balconies formed in the gaps between the clusters was to allow for future units to be plugged in, but it never materialised. Subsequently, in 1991, Tange completed the Tokyo City Hall Complex in Shinjuku. Comprising of three interconnected structures, each taking up a city block tower 48 stories tall that splits into two sections at level 33rd,
resembling a Gothic Cathedral. The external skin of the building makes dual references to traditional and modern conditions. Tange incorporated vertical and horizontal lines reminiscent of timber boarding and semiconductor board lines. Overall, Tange’s architectural legacy is characterised by a blend of traditional and modern elements, innovative design concepts, and a deep understanding of the symbolic significance of architecture.

5. Conclusion

Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange were architects building during the rise of global national movements which were running parallel to industrialisation and material progress. Both saw the potential of the west’s universal modernism, yet cultural tradition persists in their architectural works. The exploration of Maekawa and Tange’s architectural contributions illuminates the rise of Nationalist Modernism in Japan, showcasing the unique fusion of Western modernism and indigenous Japanese aesthetics and cultural identity. This fusion resulted in a distinctive architectural style that not only reflects Japan’s rich heritage but also embodies modern functionality. Their work underscores the pivotal role of architecture not only in the country’s reconstruction but also in shaping national identity and cultural expression, serving as a symbol of Japan’s aspirations and resilience. Maekawa and Tange navigated this landscape by crafting architectural identities that resonated globally while preserving cultural heritage.

Maekawa’s philosophy underscored the integration of technology and art with human life, while Tange’s approach emphasised the creative evolution of tradition through technology. Tange loves tradition’s architectural achievements but never commits the romantic error of assuming that temporal limits do not count. Instead, he acknowledges the study of old works can contribute to present architecture but requires contemporary solution. Tange, through his works, led to the emergence of the next generation of architects in Japan in the 1960s, such as Fumihiko Maki, Masato Otaka, Arata Isozaki and Kisho Kurokawa, to name a few.

Both architects believed technology fundamentally changes urban life and would inevitably influence city form, so design methodology should address this changing relationship. Tange was aware that technology is a double-edged sword. Maekawa, too, thought of modern science and architecture as something reductive and inhuman. Despite differing generational perspectives, they shared concerns about the ethical implications of rapid technological progress, advocating for a balance between innovation and cultural preservation. Through their visionary designs and critical reflections, Maekawa and Tange contributed to a nuanced understanding of architecture’s role in navigating the complexities of modernity while safeguarding cultural identity.

This study of Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange’s architectural legacies sheds light on the interplay between tradition, modernity, and the evolving socio-cultural landscape of post-war Japan. The research presented their contribution to the country’s reconstruction and cultural resurgence through their works against the socio-political dynamics of that era. Future research can navigate the complexities of cultural representation and the broader technological implication towards the development of Japan.
At the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo, Tange called for human ingenuity to bridge the gaps between technology and humanity:

"...we are experiencing a vital change in cultural forms, social structure, and the human environment. There is no way to predict the future, but I believe we can say this much: the current great change is resulting from the development of atomic energy and electronics, and the direction of the change is not toward unregulated expansion of energy but toward the controlling and planning of its development. Humankind is engaged in a second attempt to gain superiority over scientific techniques."

6. References


صدور الحداثة القومية في اليابان: دراسة لأعمال كينزو تانج وكونيماي ميكاوا

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ملخص البحث. كانت فترة ميجي في اليابان بمثابة حقبة تحول وبداية لدولة ومجتمع وبيئة مبهرة جديدة، ثم شهدت البلاد ظهور الحداثة القومية التي مزجت الجماليات التقليدية مع الحداثة الغربية تحت شعار هوية اليابانية في الهندسة المعمارية. وتحل الورقة أعمال كونيو ميكاوا وكينزو تانج لتسليط الضوء على أساليبها في صياغة أسلوب معماري فريد من نوعه في البيئة الجديدة. وتُعد تصميمات ميكاوا الدقيقة ورؤية تانج الرائدة بمثابة نماذج للتطور المعماري. ومن خلال التحليل التاريخي، تستكشف الورقة الآثارات الاجتماعية والسياسية للحداثة القومية وكيف تصبح الهندسة المعمارية أمرًا بالغ الأهمية كوسيلة للتعبير عن الهوية الوطنية والقيم الثقافية للجنة. كما تدرس هذه الورقة التفاعل المعني بين النهضة الثقافية والحداثة العالمية، وتستكشف التصورات الأيديولوجية الكامنة في اللغة المعمارية للحداثة القومية. ويتضمن هذا التحليل على أهمية الهندسة المعمارية في تشكيل القيم المجتمعية ويوصي بمواصلة دراسة دورها في تطور الهويات الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هوية؛ العمارة اليابانية؛ كينزو تانج؛ كونيو ميكاوي؛ الحداثة؛ الحداثة القومية.