Architecture: The Imperial: Going, Going, Gone?
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Architecture

The Imperial: Going, Going, Gone?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AS this is written, the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo is being demolished. The worst earthquake in Tokyo history failed to destroy it. Neglect obscured its exotic grandeur but it still stood. Forty-five years after Frank Lloyd Wright designed and built it, as it approached the half-century mark as an international landmark, it is the victim not of natural forces or cataclysmic events, but of the two most powerful instruments of destruction of our age: progress and obsolescence.

The arrival of the wreckers focused world attention on one of the major problems of our time — the loss of the heritage of the 20th century. This heritage is no less great than that of any other age. But its attrition has become an increasingly familiar story, compounded equally of heartache and hard economics.

The course of preservation today is largely a series of losing battles by people of knowledge and sensibility trying to act as custodians of our culture against strangely stacked odds. Not the least of these odds is the lack of knowledge and sensibility in places where the power to act resides.

There is no logic to this destruction except dollar logic, a standard that measures art, beauty, history, esthetics, environmental character and national pride with a scale of costs and conveniences on which such factors have no worth. The devaluation of our monuments, the scuttling of the arts that are peculiarly and greatly our own, are primarily the result of a value system that puts civilization at the bottom of the pile. The price of a disposable culture is the right to call ourselves a civilization at all.

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The world has deemed the Imperial Hotel a disposable treasure. Even as a work of art, it was never easy to love. It aroused intense dislike or intense admiration; it was called beautiful or ugly; there seemed to be no middle ground.

Since this observer has never seen the Imperial Hotel except in extensive photographs and plans, this is not being written with a personal bias. A Wright building, with its rich complexities of unconventional, interpenetrating spaces and inventive decorative detail, requires personal experience. It is a flowing, three-dimensional, extraordinarily direct relationship between structure and occupant that can awaken unsuspected senses and pleasures, as anyone who has spent any time in one of Wright's better buildings knows. That enlargement of the spirit is the function of architecture as art.

In spite of considerable ballyhoo in his time and Wright's own gifts as a self-publicist, his was a gigantic, Michelangelesque talent. He had one of the most brilliant architectural visions of our, or any, age. Every qualified professional knows that the Imperial Hotel, loved or hated, was a unique synthesis of technology and art, an important transitional monument blending two cultures, past and present, East and West. It was one of the masterworks of the century.

This landmark structure will be replaced, according to reliable sources, by a commercial hotel tower. Its economics, on city land that has risen vastly in value and with increasing operating costs for the old hotel's outmoded mechanical systems, are unarguable.

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If the new construction follows the present international hotel pattern and the existing addition built a few years ago, there will be the usual standard accomodations for processed travellers. Molded plastic will replace hand carved lava stone, and the traditional arts of wood and weaving, of which the old hotel's furnishings, fabrics and carpets are superb, if grimy, examples of a total design in Wright's curious and marvelous geometric style, will disappear for the homogenized hotel esthetic. (This writer treasures a teacup from the Imperial Hotel with unique Wright-designed ornament in circles of earth colors on thin Japanese porcelain.)

Tea on the terrace? Forget it. A stroll through the open courts? Not any more. Relaxation around the handsome pool that saved the hotel from the terrible post-earthquake fires in 1923? Like the architecture, an expendable pleasure.

It was that pool, retained at Wright's insistence when economies threatened the final stage of the design, that kept the building from being gutted by flames even though it had withstood the tremors. The building's stability was the triumph of the flexible, floating construction that rode out the earth's convulsions on eight feet of cheese-like soil over 60 to 70 feet of soft mud. It is described in detail in Wright's autobiography.

Only one percent of Tokyo's buildings actually collapsed in the 1923 disaster; fire was always the ravaging agent. "A wall of fire," Wright wrote in direct observation of other earthquakes during the three intensive years that he spent on the job, "drove a wail of human misery before it, sweeping across the city."

When Wright left Tokyo, many of the 600 workmen who had lived on the site during construction, from sweepers to craftsmen, crowded the entrance of the hotel. They wept, laughted and shook his hand, Western style. Sixty foreman paid their own way to the Yokohama dock 18 miles away for a final farewell.

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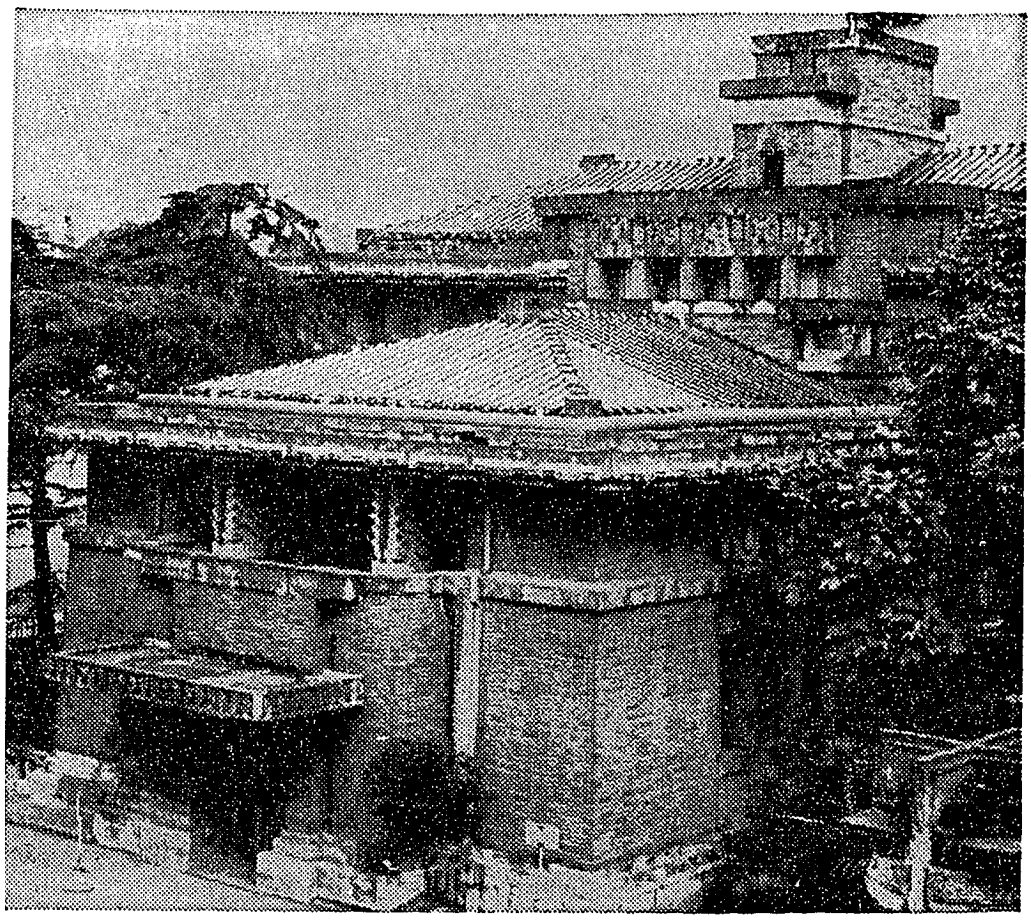
Last week the farewell was to the building, and it was final, indeed. There was never much hope that the huge complex could be saved as a whole. The open, spread form of the monumental group of low buildings, courts and wings, corridors that had tilted and settled from subway construction as well as earthquakes, made preservation particularly problematic. The cost would have been $4 million. Wright was never a man for easy answers, in his lifetime or after.

It has been pointed out by Professor Bunji Kobayashi of the Architectural Institute of Japan, who has been active in the rescue movement, that Japan's National Committee for Preservation of Important Cultural Properties hesitated to designate the hotel because the estimate for restoration or removal was more than the Committee's entire annual budget. But valiant and potentially practical efforts to save at least part of the structure — the superb, somber, central public rooms — are still being made.

The Committee for the Preservation of the Imperial Hotel has established fund-raising headquarters in Tokyo and New York. Tetsuzo Inumaru, president of the Imperial Hotel, has professed willingness to have a section of the structure moved to another location if it does not delay his building schedule. Possible sites are under discussion. It must be done, he says, by January 15, an alarmingly close date. Provision for careful dismantling and moving will naturally take longer than just knocking the building down. Anything less would be an act of barbarism.

Curiously, of all the cities in the world, only Tokyo, that odd repository of Eastern and Western cultures, had buildings by two of the great masters of modern architecture, Wright and Le Corbusier. The score now: one down, one to go.



Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, 1917-1922
Destruction is the price of a disposable culture