



LEGO® Architecture

Imperial Hotel

Tokyo, Japan





© Ayuko Yonezu

Imperial Hotel

When Frank Lloyd Wright's legendary Imperial Hotel opened in 1923, it marked the emergence of Japan as a modern nation.

The building quickly became the most famous landmark in Tokyo and it would go on to have a history as colorful and dramatic as the country itself. Eventually demolished in 1968, the iconic entrance and lobby wing was dismantled and rebuilt at the Meiji Mura Museum in Nagoya.

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Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation



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Its place in the history of architecture

The original Imperial Hotel was a three-story, wooden Victorian style structure built across the avenue from the Emperor's palace. It opened in 1890 and was the only European-style hotel in the country at that time. By 1915 the hotel was no longer able to accommodate the growing numbers of visitors and it was decided to replace the out-dated building with a new, more modern hotel.

Looking for a western architect who could bridge the cultural divide between East and West, the hotel's owners commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design and build the new Imperial Hotel. In many ways Wright was the perfect choice for the task. He had long been fascinated with Japanese culture, especially after his first visit to the country in 1905, and had become an avid collector of Japanese prints.

Wright was glad to spend a great deal of time in Tokyo working on a project that consumed his attention, off and on, from 1916 to 1922. His goal from the outset was to design a building that would appeal to many and genuinely respect the Japanese culture.

The 250 room hotel was designed roughly in the shape of its own logo, with the guest room wings forming the letter "H", while the public rooms were in a smaller but taller central wing shaped like the letter "I" that cut through the middle of the "H". The visual effect of the planned design would be both stunning and dramatic.

The design & construction process

Wright worked on the Imperial Hotel with 18 to 20 Japanese draftsmen, the only other foreigner apart from himself being Paul Mueller, an experienced builder from Chicago.

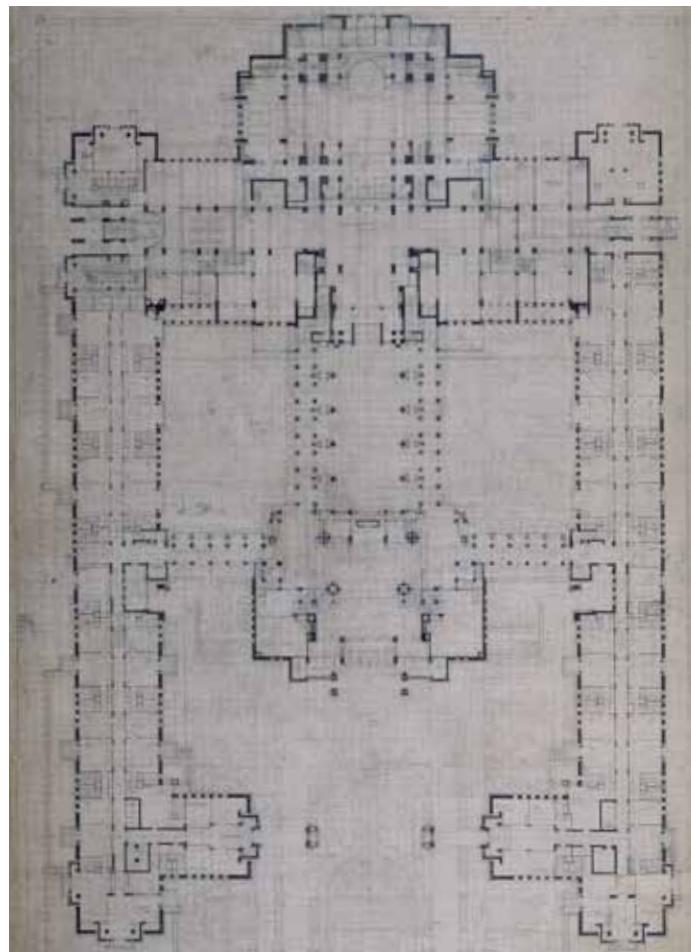
One of the major concerns during the initial design and construction process was how to safeguard the building from the many earthquakes that occurred in the area. Wright had noted that Japanese architects, trained by centuries of natural disasters, always "built lightly on the ground."

With between 18m and 21m (60-70 ft.) of alluvial mud beneath the 2.4m (8 ft.) of surface soil, it would be impossible to obtain the rigidity needed for traditional foundations. Instead, his idea was to float the building upon the mud using shallow, broad footings. This would allow it—in Wright's words—"to balance like a tray on a waiter's fingertips."

Other design features to combat the threat caused by earthquakes included cantilevered floors and balconies to provide extra support, seismic separation joints every 20m (65.6 ft.) along the building, tapered walls that were thicker on the lower floors, plus the consistent use of smooth curves, which were more resistant to fracture.

The main building materials used were reinforced poured concrete and brick, while the choice of soft volcanic Oya stone enabled the extensive carving of elaborate ornamental carving and decoration. Wright was particularly impressed by the craftsmanship of the Japanese stonemasons - so much so that he modified many of his original decorative concepts to make the most of their talents.

Furnishings were exquisite. Furniture was designed for specific seating areas and the restaurants. Oya stone carvings in the shape of peacocks and other intricate patterns adorned the walls; ceilings were hand painted or embellished in gold leaf on both interior and exterior



Top: Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation / Bottom: © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation

wall surfaces. Over a hundred specially designed abstract, geometric, patterned rugs and carpets were created by Wright so they could be easily woven in China.

The new Imperial Hotel opened on September 1st 1923. The same day a massive earthquake would rock Tokyo and the surrounding area.

Wright was in Los Angeles at the time and it would be ten long days of conflicting reports before it was confirmed that hotel still stood. Indeed, thanks to Wright's unique design features, it would be one of the few buildings to survive the quake.

Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation



About the architect

Arguably America's greatest architect and among the world's most gifted, Frank Lloyd Wright was also a man of boundless energy. In a career that spanned over 74 years, he designed more than 900 works – including houses, offices, churches, schools, libraries, bridges, museums and many other building types. Of that total, over 500 resulted in completed works. Today, over 400 of these buildings still remain.

Wright's creative mind was not only confined to architecture. He also designed furniture, fabrics, art glass, lamps, dinnerware, silver, linens and graphic arts. In addition, he was a prolific writer, an educator and a philosopher. He authored twenty books and countless articles and lectured throughout the United States and in Europe.

Wright was born in 1867, in the rural farming town of Richland Center, Wisconsin, just two years after the American Civil War ended and he passed away at the age of 91 in 1959. While there is evidence of Wright attending both high school and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, there is no record of him graduating from either. In 1887 Wright moved to Chicago, and by the early 1890s he was already head draftsman at the architectural firm of Adler & Sullivan.

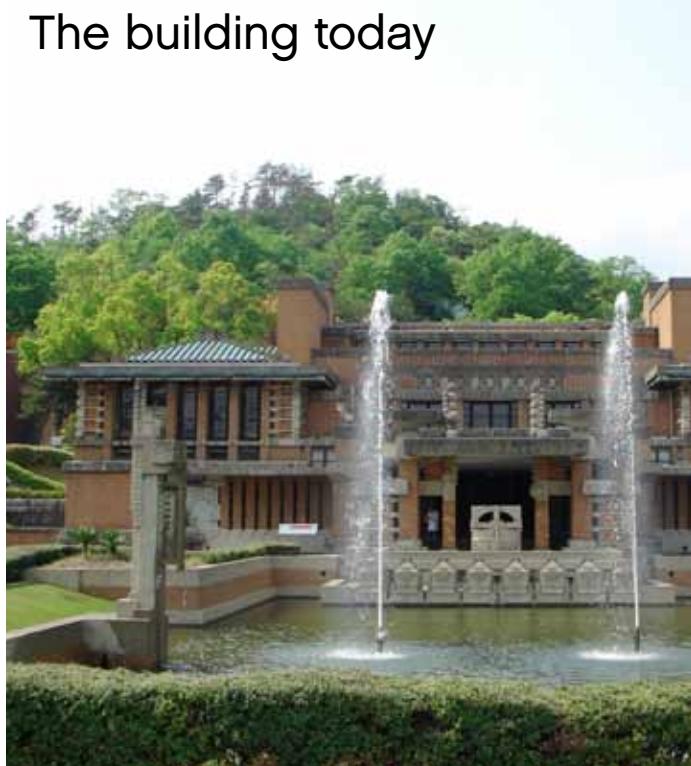
As an architect and artist, Wright was both intrigued and inspired by the Far East, and especially Japan. He would eventually design and complete six buildings in the country, the most famous being the Imperial Hotel.

Wright was recognized as a brilliant architect by his peers and continues to be revered today. No other architect took greater advantage of setting and environment. No other architect glorified the sense of "shelter" as did Frank Lloyd Wright. As he famously stated: "a building is not just a place to be. It is a way to be."



OBMA © F. L. Wright Foundation

The building today



By 1968, the Wright designed Imperial Hotel had survived several earthquakes, a growing Japanese population, and increased pollution which had caused some of the intricate Oya stone carvings and other decorative details of this masterpiece to deteriorate. Thousands of hotel guests had stayed, visited, or attended grand events held at the hotel.

The management made a most difficult and controversial decision to demolish this iconic Japanese landmark to make way for a newer and larger multi-story structure. However, the main entrance and lobby wing were carefully dismantled and rebuilt at the Meiji Mura Museum and can be seen in Nogoya, Japan.

Facts about the Imperial Hotel

Location: Originally Tokyo, Japan
Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright
Date: 1916-1923
Construction type: Hotel: 250 rooms, 5 ballrooms, 10 banquet rooms
Materials: Reinforced Concrete and Brick
Original Cost: Approximately 6 million yen
Surface area: 34.765m² (114,058.399 sq. ft.)



© Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation

Facts and statements



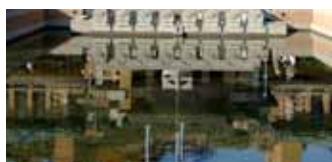
Wright expected the shallow foundations of the hotel would allow the foundations to "balance like a tray on a waiter's fingertips".

© Frank Lloyd Wright



The Great Kanto earthquake of September 1st 1923 was the most powerful one ever recorded at that time. It measured 7.9 on the magnitude scale.

© Wikipedia.org



Wright designed a shallow pool outside the lobby that could provide a source of water for fighting the firestorms that often occurred after an earthquake.

© Christophe Richard



Instead of traditional heavy roof tiles that always caused dangerous debris during earthquakes, Wright opted for a lightweight copper roof.

© Christophe Richard



The copper rain gutters atop the perimeter of the building ensured rainwater would drain through elaborately patterned grills.

Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation



Approx. 600 craftsmen were employed continuously for four of the seven years of the construction process.

Courtesy of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation

A Word from the Artist

As a LEGO architect, I set myself a triple challenge while designing this model: to faithfully capture Frank Lloyd Wright's genius, to respect and accent the Japanese nature of the building and to create an intriguing model, that would be placed alongside existing Frank Lloyd Wright's sets in the LEGO Architect series.

The task began with choosing what to actually represent in LEGO; the whole of the hotel, or only the entrance lobby that was dismantled and reassembled at the Meiji Mura open-air architectural museum. This part of the building showed great potential for fulfilling my aspirations.

This entrance lobby is (relatively) small-scaled but richly decorated; so the next challenge was how to translate as many of the architectural elements of the original as possible, while keeping the overall size of the LEGO model small. The starting point became the demanding cross section with many different levels, coupled together with the side-wing elevation with its windows.

In the end, the harmonious whole of the model was achieved with a variety of LEGO techniques, including offsetting, sideways construction and SNOT (Studs Not On Top) techniques, as well as the use of LEGO holder plates together with light saber blades as the horizontal accent. "

The Imperial Hotel model was created in close collaboration with the LEGO design team. They look at the model from a LEGO building point of view and ensure the construction process is simple and logical, and a positive experience for the user.



The 'Scale Model' line – LEGO Architecture in the 1960s

The history of the current LEGO Architecture series can be traced back to the beginning of the 1960s, when the LEGO brick's popularity was steadily increasing. Godtfred Kirk Christiansen, the then owner of the company, began looking for ways to further expand the LEGO system, and asked his designers to come up with a set of new components that would add a new dimension to LEGO building.

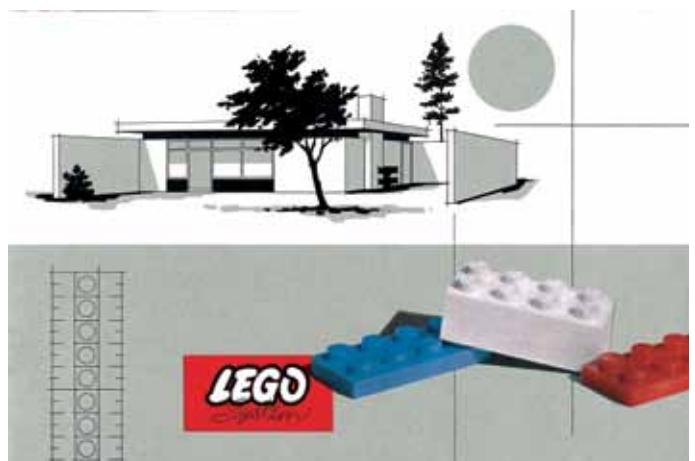
Their answer was as simple as it was revolutionary: five elements that matched the existing bricks, but were only one third the height. These new building 'plates' made it possible to construct more detailed models than before.

This greater LEGO flexibility seemed to match the spirit of the age; where modernist architects were redefining how houses looked, and people were taking an active interest in the design of their dream home. It was from these trends that the LEGO 'Scale Model' line was born in early 1962.

The name itself was a direct link to the way architects and engineers worked and it was hoped that they and others would build their projects 'to scale' in LEGO elements.

As with LEGO Architecture today, the original sets were designed to be different from the normal brightly colored LEGO boxes, and also included 'An Architectural Book' for inspiration.

Though the five elements remain an integral part of the LEGO building system today, 'Scale Model' line was phased out in 1965. It would be over 40 years before its principles would be revived in the LEGO Architecture series we know today.



References

- <http://www.franklloydwright.org>
- <http://designmuseum.org>
- <http://wikipedia.org>

