

# Touring the Many Landmarks of Otaru

From the Unspoilt Landscapes of Shukuzu to the Microcosm of Modern Architecture

---

## Construction of Canneries and Otaru Port

The full-scale construction of Otaru Port began with the building of the breakwater. The construction of the northern breakwater stretching from Temiya began in 1897 and was completed in 1907, becoming the first concrete breakwater in the nation. This breakwater was designed by Isami Hiroi, the project manager of harbor construction for Otaru Port at that time. Hiroi, a member of the second generation of the Sapporo Agricultural College, having graduated in 1881, immediately became an official in the service of the Hokkaido Development Commission, and soon was appointed as administrative officer for the coal mining industry. Due to supposed influence from Soichiro Matsumoto and Seiji Hirai, who had graduated from Rensselare Polytechnic Institute, Hiroi ended his career of three years to study abroad in the U.S. and in Germany, and later returned to his alma mater as a professor.

It is Hiroi who also decided on the construction of the canal along the Otaru Port. He drew up a plan to construct a canal that would haul cargo on small boats to the wharfs. The wharf was constructed by leaving a 40 meter width of water's edge and filling in the remaining oceanside to create land. The landfill consists of four sections, the first zone on the Temiya side, which stretches to the fourth zone on the harbor construction side, and was completed in 1923.

Now the original plan was that the landfill on the canal was to be used for warehouses and goods shed for the railroad, a road and railway. However, a third of that land was comprised of the entire group of Hokkai Canneries, which were promoted by the end of the Russo-Japanese War. It was necessary to bring in cans manufactured in the factories to the fishing grounds as the northern fisheries expanded their area into the Kamchatka waters of Russia. The convenient completion of the landfill and canal were the perfect location for the construction of such canneries.

The Hokkai Cannery buildings built between 1921 and 1935 are worthy of attention, because it was necessary to use reinforced concrete to build massive factories on weak landfilled ground, a cutting-edge technology of that time. Presently these 90-year-old buildings are still standing and operational as factories, which is a very rare case.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the canal, vast stone warehouses were constructed from the early 20's of the Meiji Era to handle and store cargo, creating an impressive scenery filled with warehouse after warehouse. The warehouses were made by a method called timber framing, where the frame is made of wood, and then large stone 20 centimeters thick are used for siding and held together with iron clamps. Stone warehouses were seen all over Japan because they were simple and easy to construct. However, they disappeared over the years due to their weakness in earthquakes. Presently, the largest number of timber-framed stone warehouses can be found in Otaru. The landscape of stone warehouses and concrete factories reflected in the canal is truly unique and beautiful.