

Touring the Many Landmarks of Otaru

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

Architecture and the Forerunners of Architecture in Ironai

In 1873, the first school of engineering in Japan, later to become the Imperial College of Engineering in 1877, opened, and a department of architecture was established. This was the forerunner of the University of Tokyo's Department of Architecture. In 1877, professor J. Conder was invited from England to teach authentic Western architecture.

Throughout the Ironai district of Otaru there are numerous buildings from the Meiji, Taisho and Showa periods which were designed by graduates of the Imperial College of Engineering and the Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo), and you can see the genealogy of modern architecture in Japan compacted into one area. The designs of the buildings are a combination of international architecture styles that became widespread post war, ranging from ancient Greco-Roman architecture to Italian Renaissance and Parisian Art Deco. It could be said that Ironai is in fact a "microcosm of modern architecture."

Another interesting fact is that there are buildings in Ironai which were designed by three of the four graduates of the first generation of the Imperial College of Engineering; Kingo Tatsuno, Shichijiro Kitachi, and Tatsuzo Sone.

First, Shichijiro Kitachi designed the Otaru branch of the Japan Mail Steamer Co. (1906). Stones were used to make the walls, with Greco-Roman style pillars on the first floor and decorated the walls of the second floor were decorated with Japanese leather paper. This building which faithfully follows the teachings of Professor Conder raised the bar for modern architecture in Otaru and influenced architects who followed in later years.

The designing of the Otaru branch of the Bank of Japan, with Kingo Tatsuno on board as advisor, was done so with the Japan Mail Steamer Company in mind, and there is record that information was exchanged between the branch manager and the main branch design department. The Otaru branch of the Bank of Japan was built with cutting-edge materials and technology for its time. Iron was used for the structure of the roof, and concrete covered the metal panels to make it fireproof. Brick was used for the foundation and exterior wall siding and then covered with mortar. This was the newest technology that had not even been introduced to the building of the main branch. At the same time, Ueji Nagano (graduated from the Tokyo Imperial University in 1893), the apprentice of Tatsuno, was the chief engineer who handled the designs to build the main branch of the Hokkaido Bank (1912) across the street.

Tatsuzo Sone, together with Seiichiro Nakajo (graduate of Tokyo Imperial University in 1898) designed the Mitsui Bank Otaru Branch in 1927. Architectural design that began in Florence, Italy was incorporated and combined with earthquake-proof structure. This Renaissance style of architecture included numerous large arches in the stone walls, with striking detailed decoration on the eaves. The structure of reinforced concrete was a new structural concept and technology that many adopted after the Great Kanto Earthquake disaster that devastated Tokyo and neighboring areas in 1923.

This means that just 21 years after Shichijiro Kitachi designed the stone building of the Japan Mail Steamer Co. building, that Tatsuzo Sone and company built the Mitsui Bank with reinforced concrete, a method that is