



Maekawa Kunio. Radio station, main façade, 1928. Graduation project, Tokyo Imperial University. Archives of Tokyo University

Jonathan M. Reynolds

Maekawa Kunio and the Emergence of Japanese Modernist Architecture

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Jonathan Reynolds's *Maekawa Kunio and the Emergence of Japanese Modernist Architecture* is a seminal contribution to the surprisingly small body of English-language research on modern architecture in Japan. Although Anglophone observers have long shown interest in this topic—Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock included a work by Yamada Mamoru in their International Style exhibition of 1932—the period between 1850 and 1950 has attracted few serious scholars. Reynolds's book on Maekawa Kunio is in fact the first scholarly monograph on a modern Japanese architect, although numerous coffee-table books outline the work of such figures as Tange Kenzo, Isozaki Arata, and Ando Tadao.

Born in 1905, Maekawa was not the first Japanese architect to embrace European modernism; that honor belongs to a number of architects born a decade earlier, including Yamada, Ishimoto

Kikuji, and Horiguchi Sutemi. Nor is he the most celebrated architect of his era: Tange, eight years his junior and his former employee, attracts more attention both inside and outside Japan. Yet in certain ways, Maekawa cedes neither precedence to his elders nor eminence to his disciple: he was the first Japanese architect to work for Le Corbusier in Paris (1928–30), and through World War II none of his peers was more active in advancing the modernist cause. Maekawa can thus be viewed as a case study in the rapid dissemination and transformation of modernist architecture outside Europe, a topic of continually growing interest within the historiography of modern architecture.

Reynolds's extensively illustrated monograph begins with a chapter that outlines the development of modern architecture in Japan between 1850 and 1930. This section—and indeed many of the characteristics of the book—reflects the paucity of material available to the English-reading audience. The reader of a monograph on Erich Mendelsohn, for instance, would surely not expect a chapter covering the basic development of modern German architecture—such material is widely available elsewhere. Yet Reynolds's concise treatment of this

period is extremely useful because no other book, with the arguable exception of David Stewart's *The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo, 1987), provides the historical background necessary to understand the development of modernism in Japan.

Chapter two covers Maekawa's family background, education, and architectural activities to 1930. Reynolds notes that Maekawa's deep interest in Le Corbusier's work began while he was a student at Tokyo Imperial University, and that his 1928 graduation project for a radio station shows strong similarities to Le Corbusier's League of Nations project from 1927. Following graduation, Maekawa journeyed to Paris, where he spent two years in Le Corbusier's atelier. There he encountered numerous young architects from around the world, including Albert Frey from Switzerland and José Luis Sert from Spain. One of the most compelling aspects of Maekawa's career, and indeed of architecture in modern Japan, is its fundamentally international orientation. As Reynolds argues throughout the book, the tensions and attractions between "international" modern architecture and native, traditional styles were crucial to the development of modern architecture in Japan.

The dialogue between international and domestic, modern and traditional, provides a major theme for chapter three, which treats Maekawa's career from 1930 to 1945. For the first five years, Maekawa worked for Antonin Raymond in Tokyo. Raymond was born in Bohemia and then worked for Cass Gilbert and Frank Lloyd Wright in the U.S. In 1919, he accompanied Wright to Japan, and later established his own office there. After two years in Paris, Maekawa thus found himself working for a Bohemian-born, U.S.-trained, French-influenced modernist who drew inspiration from traditional Japanese architecture as well. Reynolds is perhaps at his best when placing Maekawa within this remarkable international circulation of architectural forms and ideas in the 1920s and 1930s.

During this period, Maekawa submitted a number of projects to design competitions, the most notable being his 1931 entry for the Imperial Household Museum. The competition brief called for a project based on "Japanese taste," and most of the entries, including the winning design, used ornamentation and roof forms derived from historical Japanese architecture. Maekawa, though, proposed a symmetrical modernist structure completely devoid of explicitly Japanese elements. Reynolds writes, "Emphatically affirming his respect for Japanese tradition, Maekawa insisted that his was the most Japanese design in the competition because the spirit behind the creation of his new forms represented the true Japanese tradition: courageously making necessary changes in the face of obstinacy and corruption" (97). To use Reynolds's term, Maekawa was a "modernist crusader," a righteous rebel who drew upon selected aspects of Japanese history to assert the appropriateness of modernist architecture for his homeland.

At the crux of Reynolds's discussion is the question of "modernism" itself. Reynolds argues that "two of the most important criteria for defining modernists are self-identification as a modernist and participation in explicitly modernist institutions" (5). Throughout his early career, Maekawa met these criteria, and his rhetoric and designs closely recalled Le Corbusier. Yet as his work evolved, his treatment of "modernism" became ever more complex. Beginning in the late 1930s, many of Maekawa's designs diverged sharply from the white, abstract forms of his earlier projects. Take, for example, the Maekawa residence of 1941: constructed from wood instead of concrete or steel, this gable-roofed house drew on Japanese vernacular homes and included ambiguous elements that could be read as either modernist or traditionalist. Reynolds notes that the prominent column in the middle of the façade evokes both the *munamochi bashira* (center pillar) of Shinto shrine buildings and the *pilotis* Maekawa knew from Le Corbusier's work.

Although Reynolds effectively

describes the aesthetic melding of European modernism and Japanese traditions, he is less interested in the other ways in which foreign and native practices intermingled. For instance, he claims that "inside, the house was predominantly Western, as the plan immediately makes clear: it centers on a living/dining room with other rooms arranged symmetrically on either side" (117). A closer examination, though, suggests that if the interior of the house is not typically Japanese, neither is it simply "Western"—whatever that term may indicate. While the symmetrical plan and living/dining room denote a non-Japanese layout, the zoning of the rooms is in fact quite "Japanese": the main rooms for the family (living/dining room, bedrooms) face south, while the service rooms (kitchen, boiler room, maid's room) are located to the north, as in typical upper-strata traditional houses.

The layout and planning of modern buildings in Japan also raise other questions about modernism. For instance, what was the relationship between use and aesthetics in such buildings? Was there a "modernist" lifestyle or household structure in the dwellings, or a "modernist" organization of labor in office buildings? More broadly, should discussions of modernism—especially the inflected modernism of Maekawa—be confined to aesthetic issues? And how did modernism in architecture engage with modernism in other fields of the creative arts? These are the kinds of issues that Reynolds treats only in passing, and that future scholars will undoubtedly pursue.

The second half of *Maekawa Kunio* covers the architect's career from 1945 to the mid-1970s. In a postwar climate less overtly hostile to modernist architecture, Maekawa completed numerous projects, including his innovative Premos prefabricated construction system, major public commissions, and housing. Perhaps because Maekawa's work is so little known outside Japan, Reynolds has chosen to present a large number of projects, which makes his book an excellent reference for the architect's overall oeuvre.

vre. Unfortunately, this means some detail is sacrificed; for instance, even the discussion of the Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall (1957–61), which Reynolds argues is “in some ways the culmination of all of Maekawa’s previous work” (191), occupies only about three pages of text and is focused tightly on the building’s formal and aesthetic qualities.

In comparison with Reynolds’s coverage of some of Maekawa’s prewar designs, the treatment of this building’s context is rather cursory. The Festival Hall’s massive yet often exuberant forms demand comparison with contemporary work elsewhere—for instance, with that of Le Corbusier in the 1950s (including Chandigarh) and of Tange in Japan. The political and cultural context, too, deserves greater attention: in noting that “the Festival Hall was inaugurated in April 1961 with a special concert by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein” (191), Reynolds begins to hint at the importance of the project to Japan’s international standing in the arts, but he goes no further.

Ultimately, these criticisms of Reynolds’s approach should perhaps be taken as comments on the state of the field rather than as an indictment of his project. If Reynolds has at points sacrificed depth of analysis in favor of breadth of material, this appears a viable strategy given the need to introduce Maekawa’s work as a whole to an English-reading audience. No one monograph, however well researched and illustrated, can treat the manifold aspects of Japanese modernism. Reynolds’s book, which boasts clear prose and excellent illustrations throughout (including the cover photo by the author), is a major step forward in the study of modern architecture in Japan.

DON CHOI

University of California, Berkeley