



## JUST WRIGHT

The famous US architect has an enduring presence in Tokyo

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“There’s a certain calmness I feel every time I walk in here; it feels sacred,” Iori Hamada from Tokyo’s Imperial Hotel says as we step inside the Frank Lloyd Wright Suite on the 14th floor. He directs me to take a seat on one of the chairs designed by Wright, pitched lower so the eye can easily travel through the window across to Hibiya Park and the Imperial Palace Gardens. “Doesn’t it feel that you’re in that natural environment, not in the hotel? It’s got a beautiful aspect,” he says of Wright’s “borrowed landscape” concept, using windows like picture frames, known as shakkei in Japan.

This year, to mark the 100th anniversary of the Frank Lloyd Wright building, the Imperial Tokyo is opening the 214sq m suite to the public for the first time. Usually reserved for dignitaries, it features original designs from the architect, including Mayan motif carpets and rectilinear oak furnishings; even chandeliers showcase Wright’s glasswork. Iori points out reliefs of oya stone, handcrafted from the American’s designs. Everything is Wright, he tells me, from the ceiling mouldings to the door handles. It’s the only suite in the world to bear the name of the architect, under an agreement with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

It features some of the last traces of Wright on the site; his 1923 building was razed in 1967. When commissioned to design the second incarnation of the Imperial Hotel Tokyo, Wright took five trips to Japan between 1917 and 1922. The architect had long admired the country, and was a collector of Japanese woodblock prints. His structure stood for 44 years until it was demolished.

A travesty surely? Iori tells me we should blame the jet set. When the jumbo arrived, and international interest in visiting Tokyo after the 1964 Olympic Games gained momentum, a hotel on this prime site, just across from Tokyo’s theatres, the palace and the hub of Ginza, needed more rooms. Sure, Wright’s Mayan-revival, symmetrical concrete and oya building was considered a masterpiece; a combination of eastern and western architecture, but at three storeys, and with 50 per cent common space for the likes of jazz performances and garden weddings, it was considered



too small. Plus, there were mutterings about whether the structure, with all that porous oya stone, could resist an earthquake. So, in 1970 a utilitarian high-rise replaced Wright’s work. Luckily, some vestiges remain.

Downstairs in the giant lobby, beyond the intricate cherry blossom display where newlyweds pose for photographs, is The Wright Imperial; a Century and Beyond exhibition showing scaled models of his building, drawings, the original mosaic glass and furniture. It also introduces guests via an architectural render to the next chapter in the Imperial Hotel – with the current main building to be demolished to make way for the next Jewel of the



Orient. Paris-based architect Tsuyoshi Tane has been tasked with the reinvention, which resembles a multi-tiered palace, set to be completed in 2036.

The Imperial Tokyo is a hotel of firsts. The concept of Japanese hotel weddings incorporating chapels and banquet rooms was introduced here, as was Japan’s first hotel shopping arcade, where time-poor guests could pop down and pick up a kimono, ceramic piece or even a katana sword as a souvenir. In 1911, it was the first hotel to implement a laundry service on site. Lose a button on your shirt? No problem; there is a cabinet full of every button imaginable to replace it. Former guest Keanu Reeves was so impressed by the service he ad libbed in the



Frank Lloyd Wright Suite, top and left; Wright’s original Mayan-revival building, above; Marilyn Monroe at the hotel on her honeymoon, inset; a Wright mural in the bar, above right; the hotel’s more recent exterior, top right

### IN THE KNOW

Imperial Hotel Tokyo, a member of Leading Hotels of the World, is at 1 Chome-1-1 Uchisaiwaicho, Chiyoda City, Tokyo. The Frank Lloyd Wright suite package, available until March 31, 2024, includes breakfast, guest attendant service, one nightly drink at the Old Imperial Bar, tea ceremony at Toko-An, use of the pool, fitness centre and laundry; JPY1,400,000 (\$4453) a night, twin-share, plus accommodation tax. Other rooms from \$548 a night. [imperialhotel.co.jp](http://imperialhotel.co.jp)

movie Johnny Mnemonic, “I want my shirts laundered like they do at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.”

A visit to the hotel’s teahouse, Toko-An, starts with a stroll through a garden to clear the mind. Togo Murano, who also designed the Gaudi-like Nissei Theatre across the road, conceived the traditional teahouse where guests enter through a tiny door (encouraging Samurai warriors to abandon their swords), kneel on tatami mats and take time out to ponder with a tea master over matcha and red-bean paste covered in cherry-blossom leaf. The alcove, known as a tokonoma, displays a calligraphy scroll and flower arrangement.

The impeccable service extends to an in-room tea service for those staying on the Imperial floors (levels 14-16 in the main building), where kimono-clad attendants serve matcha tea. They can also organise a buff by the resident shoe shiner, schedule a shiatsu in-room massage or book a table at one of the 13 restaurants onsite. Keen for more Wright? The hotel offers a chauffeur-driven car to Nagoya (an eight-hour roundtrip) to view the grand entrance and lobby of the Frank Lloyd Wright-era Imperial, reconstructed at the open-air Meiji Mura architecture museum.

The hotel’s unexpected highlight is at the dimly lit Old Imperial Bar. Like Wright’s designs, it features clean geometric lines, oak panels and original brickwork from the 1923 building; even the glassware is his work. In the back corner, past photographs of previous guests Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio (who honeymooned at the hotel), and suited business types enjoying after-work drinks, is a glorious Frank Lloyd Wright handcrafted mural featuring patterns of terracotta and oya stone. The centrepiece to the Imperial Hotel until 1967, it’s an enduring tribute to the man who saw Japan as “the most romantic, artistic, nature-inspired country on Earth”.

Andrea Black was a guest of Imperial Hotel Tokyo and Oceania Cruises. [oceaniacruises.com](http://oceaniacruises.com)