

# The Chiyoda Life Insurance Company headquarters in Tokyo

AN EXAMPLE OF A FAMOUS POSTWAR COMPLEX SURVIVING WITH A NEW ROLE AND FUNCTION

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As more administrative services were needed, the district started suffering from insufficient office space. Facilities were dispatched in six different buildings, scattered over the district's area. A new and bigger office building was urgently required.

In October 2000, the Chiyoda Life Insurance Company, a medium-sized insurance company with its headquarters in Meguro-ku, went bankrupt. Its equity receiver approached the district with a proposal to sell the headquarters' land and buildings. The district decided to accept the proposal and, in February 2001, the land and buildings became the district's possession. It was affordable for

**In Tokyo, a masterpiece of modern architecture, built after the war, has found a new role as a public building. The district's office of Meguro-ku (Tokyo) has just moved to a facility designed by the famous architect Togo Murano (1891-1984). Meguro-ku (Ku means district) is one of the 23 districts in Tokyo. It ranks 14th among the districts in population (246,549 as of June 2003) and 16th in area (14.7 km<sup>2</sup>). Since around the 1920s, the district has developed mainly as a comfortable residential district with many conveniences.**

the district, although not inexpensive. However, if the district had tried to build a new office on the lot where it was already, it would have had to find rented office space during the construction and move twice.

Having bought the land and facility, whose building area is about 2.3 times larger than its previous location, the district renovated the buildings: it took over a year to make them suitable for the district's use, while making as much as possible of Murano's original design; it meant remodeling the office space to welcome its citizens and setting up the assembly hall and functions related to it on the fifth and sixth floors.

The buildings reopened in January 2003 (fig. 1).

To purchase and re-use an extant private building as a public office is not that common in Japan, let alone a famous building whose architectural values are preserved. The headquarters of the former Chiyoda Life Insurance Company were built in 1966. Their architect Murano is considered one of the greatest master architects of modern Japan. One of his early works, the Ube City Public Hall (1937), belongs to the docomomo Japan 20 selection of 2000.

The facility consists of three parts: the main building, the annex, and the resting space and parking area. The main building is six-storied with three additional floors underground and the annex nine-storied, also with three basement floors. The main building is steel-framed ferroconcrete, and the annex in steel. The resting area and the parking lot are under the plaza in the southern part of the lot. The main entrance, which forms an independent cube-like shape, is attached to the southwest end of the main building. The main facades of the buildings are curtain walls, clad in aluminum-cast thick panels, while sidewalls are tiled. It is here that the cast material was first applied for a big building in Japan. The aluminum-cast panels and their shadow give the buildings a dignified



Fig. 1

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Fig. 2

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and sophisticated appearance. The lot slopes down to the north. The architect set the main building along the northern edge of the lot and the annex at the east end to create a plaza between the access road and the buildings, which was rather rare for a big office building in Japan at the time. Using of the lot's configuration, he introduced a big L-shaped pool along the longer side of the main building. Facing the pool are Japanese-style rooms, which were used by the insurance company's club (fig. 2). They are now open as rest rooms for the district's citizens and behind them, the tea ceremony rooms, also used by the company club, are today at the citizen's disposal.

At the main entrance, is a spacious hall flanked with a shallow basin and pebbled open space along the sidewalls. The hall leads to a winding staircase (fig. 3), whose design is one of Murano's trademarks. In a word, this building is characterized by the careful disposition of volumes and materials, the relationship between built volumes and void, and sophistication in design. The renovation applied to the buildings is highly valued from an architectural preservation point of view, thanks to:

- 1) Respecting the architectural value of the building by carefully introducing of reinforcement pieces.
- 2) Making the best of the characteristics found in the original building.
- 3) Establishing a relationship between the public and the architect and the architectural value of his buildings.

Firstly, for the renovation, the district had to respect the seismic-proof standards now in force. In Japan, as standards become tighter each

time a big earthquake causes damage, a renovation often means reinforcement of the structure of the building concerned. But the reinforcement is likely to spoil the original design by broadening pillars and adding awkward braces between pillars. In some cases, transforming an opening into a solid wall is even required. The renovation by the district skillfully cleared these obstacles by the careful arrangement of reinforcement members, which are not too much of an eyesore. For example, the outer walls of the main entrance hall have actually been reinforced (the four corners and a long wall have been somewhat thickened), but few notice it without being told so.

Secondly, the original buildings' fundamental characteristics have been preserved: the appearance of the buildings and the relationship between the buildings and the open space are not altered. According to the district, it avoided changing what could be left untouched. The winding staircase was slightly modified. It was characterized by its fine details and slender members, but the height of the rail was rather too low for public use. Therefore, the district introduced another rail above the original. The added parts were designed with the advice of Murano's disciples, and it is safe to say that the result would fit his taste.

Thirdly, in the waiting lounge of the main building, a video on a big plasma screen presents the original buildings' design and architect. Such an effort in public relations is evidence for the citizens of the district that it is significant and reasonable to reuse an architecturally famous landmark as a public building; it has now become a public asset.

The re-use and renovation described above can be a good precedent in Japan to encourage the protection of good works of post-war modern architecture, although the said restoration started by accident. It shows that restoration is an alternative to tearing an extant building down and erecting a new one in its place. To re-use an extant building is often cheaper and causes

less damage to the environment. And if it is a good piece of architecture, you can derive new ideas and possibilities by reinterpreting and trying to make use of its character. That means that preservation leads to creation: trying to preserve requires finding and reinterpreting architectural and historical values, which in turn creates new cultural values.

Today, similar cases can be noticed in Japan: in 1998, the former City Library of Oita (1966), designed by Arata Isozaki (b. 1931), was renovated with the architect's supervision and reopened as an art gallery. The building was meant for demolition, but saved after all, with the backing of local citizens' and architects' tenacious preservation actions. Last year, the former NCR Building (1962) in Tokyo reopened as the Nippon Foundation's headquarters. The building is one of the architect Junzo Yoshimura's (1908-1997) masterpieces and famous for its double-skin air



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Fig. 3

conditioning and sophisticated design. The Foundation decided to buy it and move in, instead of erecting a new building. This trend has just begun to develop in Japan. We, at docomomo Japan, hope that it will help the preservation of the masterpieces of Japanese modern architecture.

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