

History of the Former Kaichi School Building

The Kaichi School first held classes in 1872. The founding of the school reflected the Meiji Restoration of four years prior, which had brought a wave of social and political changes, including changes to the educational system. After roughly 250 years of near isolation from Western culture, Japan began to adopt Western concepts and technologies. The Kaichi School exemplified this Western influence in its mission and principles.

Classes at the Kaichi School were initially held on the former grounds of a Buddhist temple. However, the traditional temple architecture was seen as a mismatch to the Kaichi School's modern curriculum, and the decision was made to construct a new, Western-style school building.

Tateishi Seijū (1829–1894), a local master carpenter, was tasked with designing the new building. He made several trips to the bustling cities of Tokyo and Yokohama to study the latest examples of Western architecture. On the basis of these observations, he designed what would later be the Former Kaichi School Building, which was completed in 1876. At that time, there was little government funding for educational expenses, but the public strongly supported the creation of the new school, and nearly 70 percent of the construction expenses were covered by donations.

Pseudo–Western Style Architecture

The Former Kaichi School Building is famous for its pseudo–Western style architecture. Knowledge of Western construction techniques was limited during the early years of the Meiji era (1868–1912), and most builders and architects knew only the all-wooden, post-and-lintel designs that had dominated Japanese architecture for centuries. To create the outward appearance of Western buildings, carpenters had to make creative use of the materials and methods they already knew.

Many examples of this creativity can be seen at the Former Kaichi School Building. The exterior stonework and the brickwork of the octagonal tower were made of wood, then stuccoed or painted to resemble stone and brick. Fittingly, the elaborate decorations on the front balcony combine Western and Japanese motifs: two cherubs hold a scroll bearing the school's name, and a dragon guards the front entrance below them.

A History of Education: From School to Museum

Although the Kaichi School's main purpose was to provide elementary education, its campus included many facilities, including a middle school, a girls' school, and a school for the blind. When reforms of the educational system began in the late nineteenth

century, the average school attendance rate was only 30 percent nationwide. However, the attendance rate at the Kaichi School exceeded 60 percent, reflecting both the quality of the instruction and the degree to which education was valued by the local community.

Over the next 84 years, Metoba River flooded repeatedly, damaging the Former Kaichi School Building. Following further damage from a typhoon in 1959, the historic school building was designated an Important Cultural Property in 1961. This designation prompted the decision to relocate and restore the building for posterity. The school was closed in 1963, and the building was reopened at its current location in 1964 as a museum dedicated to the history of modern education in Japan. In 2019, the Former Kaichi School Building became the first modern-era educational building to be designated a National Treasure. Along with Matsumoto Castle, it is now one of two National Treasures in Matsumoto.