

## Osaka City Central Public Hall

(target: 500–750 ww, actual: 757)

The Osaka City Central Public Hall is an enduring reminder of Osaka's pre-World War II heyday, known as the "Great Osaka" period. The hall is one of the city's best-known landmarks, with a red-and-white "neo-Renaissance" facade amid the verdant trees and sparkling waters of Nakanoshima, an island between the Dojima and Tosabori rivers. The building's original construction was funded by a private citizen, and it has played a prominent role in civic life for more than a century, even earning recognition as an Important Cultural Property after a turn-of-the-century restoration undertaken by popular demand.

### *A People's History*

The story of the Public Hall begins in 1911 when local trader Iwamoto Einosuke donated one million yen to fund its construction. The amount was equivalent to billions of yen today. By his own account, Iwamoto was inspired by the corporate philanthropy he had seen when he accompanied a trade mission touring the United States.

The city held a design competition that was won by Okada Shin'ichiro, a professor at Waseda University. Architects Tatsuno Kingo and Kataoka Yasushi were chosen to execute Okada's design. Tatsuno was one of the most celebrated Japanese architects of the day, and his Tokyo Station building is known for its similar red-and-white palette and "neo-Renaissance" style.

The Public Hall opened its doors in 1918. Through its first decades, it hosted lectures and performances that brought new ideas and artistic movements to the people of "Great Osaka." During World War II, the building sheltered air-raid evacuees; after the war, it became a venue for political debate and performances of previously suppressed music like jazz.

By the 1970s, however, the Public Hall was in need of repair. Demolition was suggested as one option, but Osaka's architects and citizens were united in their opposition. Finally, from 1999 to 2002, a painstaking restoration was carried out to return the hall to its previous grandeur, complete with a seismic retrofit. Original components were restored and reused where possible, and metal fittings that had been removed during the war

were recreated. For the first time in decades, the statues of Minerva and Mercury took their places above the main arch once more, representing art and commerce respectively.

Today, the Public Hall has become the centerpiece of the city's redevelopment of Nakanoshima as a walkable riverside district reflecting Osaka's history as Japan's *suito*, or "water capital." It remains in regular use by citizens for everything from ceremonies to concerts.

### *Touring the Public Hall*

Entry to the Public Hall is free, and anyone can visit the Exhibition Room in the basement, a museum with displays about Iwamoto's life and early twentieth-century Osaka. However, the individual halls within the Public Hall are only open to those who hire them, except for the Special Room, which can be viewed as part of a guided tour.

The Main Hall is a two-story auditorium that takes up most of the first and second floors and seats a thousand people. Its stage, which has hosted luminaries ranging from Helen Keller to Albert Einstein, is adorned with a dramatic mask related to the ancient Japanese *bugaku* dance "Prince of Langling."

Above the Main Hall on the third floor are the Medium Hall and Small Hall. Both are former banquet rooms furnished in wood and accented with individual details that include paintings of the birds of Japan and chandeliers surviving from the Public Hall's earliest days.

Also on the third floor is the Special Room. This was originally rented along with the Medium or Small Hall as a special suite for distinguished guests. Its design is the most elaborate of all, boldly incorporating Japanese themes and artistry into a European-style interior. Perhaps the most striking examples of this are the fresco-style paintings by Italy-trained artist Matsuoka Hisashi depicting scenes from Japanese myth and legend. The ceiling is a painted cloudscape in which the deities Izanagi and Izanami receive the spear they will use to create the world. Above the western arch, a famous tale is illustrated in which Emperor Nintoku, said to have built his capital in Osaka in the early fifth century, surveys his domain from a hill, realizes the poverty implied by the lack of smoke rising from peoples' hearths, and resolves to suspend taxes as a result.

Taking up most of the opposite wall of the Special Room is the stained-glass window

that dominates the Public Hall's main facade. The window is made of 200 pieces of lensed glass, and combines a traditional phoenix motif with a quartet of the *miotsukushi* channel markers that the city has adopted as its official seal. The window provides a panorama of the newly developed Nakanoshima Park area.