

The Ironai Banking District

The view along Nichigin Street from the intersection with Ironai Street reveals the history of a modern city. In a radius of some 500 meters, the buildings of the distinguished banks that made Otaru the economic center of the north are eminent examples of modern Japanese architecture. Ten of the original twenty-five bank buildings remain, some designed by the leading Japanese architects of the early twentieth century.

The first banks and warehouses were established around Minami Otaru, but after the area was almost completely destroyed by a fire in 1881, the commercial center was moved north to the Ironai district, where it remains today. The district is like a museum of modern architecture, lined with banks and trading houses from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

Banks adopted classical architectural styles to express wealth, integrity, and stability. Architects looked to Europe and America for inspiration: the Bank of Japan's Otaru Branch (1912) was designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919) and his protégé Nagano Uheiji (1867–1937). It incorporates Baroque elements, such as decorative masonry and turrets. The Otaru Branch of Mitsui Bank (1927) was designed in the simpler Italian Renaissance Revival style by Sone Tatsuzo (1853–1937).

In the mid-twentieth century, Otaru's financial vigor diminished as the main source for the nation's energy needs shifted from coal to oil, and the city lost its status as a coal shipping port. Many banks withdrew from Otaru, leaving their stately buildings vacant, until they were restored as museums and other facilities.