

Former Akita Co., Ltd. Building

The Akita Co., Ltd. Building is a prime example of Taishō-era (1912–1926) modernism, a design movement marked by the melding of traditional architecture with Western elements and furnishings. The head of the Akita Company lived here with his family, and much of the interior design reflects both his personal success and his concern for personal security.

Built on Wartime Wealth

Akita Toranosuke (1874–1953), born Akitomi Toranosuke, founded Akita Co., Ltd. in 1905. Originally the head of his family's lumber business, he used the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and subsequent Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) as opportunities to expand into food supply. He used the profits from these ventures to establish the Akita Company. Over the next 40 years, his trading and shipping company opened 25 branches overseas, primarily in Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and Northeast China, which were then under Japanese control. The company was particularly involved in the creation of the Chinese Eastern Railway, both transporting railroad construction materials to Northeast China and performing the work of laying the rails themselves. As the company grew, Toranosuke had this building constructed in 1915 to house his family together with the company offices.

Fusion in Construction

The Former Akita Building was the first reinforced concrete structure in western Japan, built just four years after the first such structure in the country. Before the concrete was poured, the unfamiliar sight of the cage-like rebar reinforcements apparently had Toranosuke's neighbors convinced that he was building a zoo. The finished building was no less visually impressive: the copper-tiled dome of the tower looms over the southwest corner of the rooftop garden.

The company office on the first floor has a Western-style layout and furnishings to match the building's exterior. The second and third floors, however, are furnished with tatami mats and decorative wooden transoms above sliding partitions (*fusuma*). These floors were for the Akita family: Toranosuke and his wife, Kotoko (b. 1877), as well as their daughter, Umeko, and her husband, San'ichi. The rooftop has a Japanese-style garden with a teahouse for entertaining guests.

These upper floors offer a glimpse into the lives of a prosperous family in the early decades of the twentieth century. Items such as the large cedar chest for storing kimono and a pedal-driven Yamaha organ hint at Toranosuke's habit of doting on his daughter. The banisters of the stairs are inlaid with the Akita Company emblem (a bar and three circles) in ebony. The emblem was modeled after the crest of the Mōri family, who had formerly ruled the region.

The third floor has a large central space laid with tatami. The space is divided into several small rooms by posts and sliding partitions, which can all be removed to create a single large room. Facilities throughout the building, such as toilets with running water and a dumbwaiter, illustrate Toranosuke's adoption of the latest modern conveniences. (Running-water toilets had arrived in Japan only a year before the building's construction.)

An Unusually Secure Residence

The building's design shows a concern for fire safety and security that is absent from Shimonoseki's other historic structures. The main entrance has an iron security door, the first-floor windows are barred, and an emergency exit in the main office leads to a concrete firewall outside.

Even more extensive security measures protect the residential spaces. The staircases are guarded by barred iron doors, and the balusters are close together to prevent anyone from squeezing through. A nondescript sliding partition hides a secret staircase at the back of the third floor, and there is a low door in one hallway topped with nails to stop anyone from climbing over it. It is thought these measures were a response to worsening public safety in the interwar period.