

Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa: A Rough Guide to Distinguishing Periods of Twentieth-Century Japanese Architecture

The historic buildings of the Kanmon Strait area were built during an era of widespread transformation, when Japan increasingly drew on Western cultural influences in shaping its new, “modern” society. These buildings are visible testaments to that change. The characteristics of each period’s architecture reflect the country’s developing identity, and it is possible to distinguish between these broad architectural periods using a few key design elements.

Western influence on local architecture first appeared after the US envoy Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) sailed his fleet into Uruga Bay (near Tokyo) in 1853, and thus forced an end to over 200 years of Japanese seclusion. As other foreign powers including France and Britain gained access to Japanese ports in 1858, outside ideas and technology flooded into the country. A style known as pseudo-Western architecture (*giyōfū kenchiku*) was developed by Japanese carpenters, who creatively used traditional methods to replicate the appearance of Western architectural features such as stonework and towers.

Meiji Architecture (1868–1912)

The pseudo-Western style expanded during the Meiji era as the Japanese government invited architects and engineers from abroad and sent young people overseas to study. One of the most influential foreign experts was British architect Josiah Conder (1852–1920), who became a professor at the Imperial College of Engineering in Tokyo in 1877. Many of his students went on to become highly successful architects. Of them, Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919) designed several buildings in the Kanmon Strait region, and Tsumaki Yorinaka (1859–1916) oversaw the designs for the Moji Customs House.

Red brick was widely imported from the West during this period, and the distinctive material has become a symbol of the Meiji era. The Former British Consulate is one example of buildings designed by foreign architects using red brick and following a thoroughly Western aesthetic. Such buildings were often governmental, corporate, or educational buildings, but some private structures (such as storefronts and warehouses) were also built in this style. Generally speaking, the presence of red brick is a clear sign of late-1800s or early-1900s architecture.

Taishō Architecture (1912–1926)

Architects of the Taishō era had some familiarity with Western design styles, and the architecture from this period often blends traditional and foreign elements. One example is the 1915 Akita Shōkai Building, which incorporates Western-style offices on the first floor and traditional Japanese carpentry on the upper residential floors. Beginning in the first decades of the 1900s, all-brick designs were gradually replaced by steel framing and reinforced concrete. This transition was hastened by the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which tragically demonstrated that brick buildings were vulnerable to earthquakes.

At the same time, Taishō architects began to experiment more with artistic expression. The first modern Japanese architectural movement, the Bunriha (Secessionist) Movement, began in 1920. It was inspired by German expressionism and the Vienna Secession (formed in 1897). The movement's guiding principle was progression away from traditionalism and into more original, free-form designs. Although the movement died out in 1928, its members went on to influence architecture in Japan through the mid-twentieth century.

Shōwa Architecture (1926–1989)

The early Shōwa era was characterized by influences from Western artistic movements such as Art Deco, which can be seen in the Moji Yūsen Building and the Former Dalian Route Terminal. These early Shōwa buildings feature elaborate flourishes and lavish motifs. Over time, this style gave way to more originality and artistic freedom, as seen in Shimonoseki's Kanmon Building and the Moji Ward Office.

In the lead-up to World War II, the designs of public buildings showed a return to traditionalism in the form of the Imperial Crown style of architecture, which was marked by neoclassical buildings, often of red brick, topped with traditional hip-and-gable roofs. Buildings from all architectural periods were destroyed in the widespread firebombing during World War II. In the reconstruction period that followed, architects turned to Western methods and materials (such as reinforced concrete), which were comparably faster, cheaper, and more resistant to fires and earthquakes. Viewed from a modern perspective, buildings from the later Shōwa years may seem drab, but in their time, they were emblematic of Japan's growing postwar prosperity.