

Weathercock House

Weathercock House (a.k.a. the Former Thomas Residence) is an iconic Kobe building, and its namesake weathercock is a beloved symbol of the city's Ijinkan-gai district. The elegant and imposing structure was built around 1909 for the successful German trader Gottfried Thomas. The house is made of wood but is unique among Kobe *ijinkan* houses in having exterior walls clad in brick and a half-basement clad in granite. It was designed by the German architect Georg de Lalande (1872–1914), who worked on many important public and private buildings in Japan, China, and Korea during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The interior of Weathercock House shows a sophisticated sensibility that is dignified but also playful. It incorporates traditional German design features such as heavy beams and dark woodwork. Stained glass, brass doorknobs, light fixtures, and cabinet hinges and hardware incorporate decorative elements characteristic of the *Jugendstil* (German Art Nouveau)

movement. The house is surrounded by an elaborate wooden fence with a tall trellised gateway bearing the name “Rhenania”—the Latinized name for the Rhineland—in Germanic script, a reference to Thomas’s home region of Koblenz, on the Rhine River. The house itself appears raised on a stone base formed by the walls of the half-basement. In addition to brick, some exterior walls are clad in painted wood with decorative details, as well as half-timbering on plaster. The striking three-story tower at the front corner of the house has a painted iron weathercock at its pinnacle that can be seen from a distance. The complex hipped roof is covered with slate in a diamond pattern.

The dramatic granite porch opens into a vestibule, and then to a high-ceilinged central hall with a large wooden staircase. The spacious living and dining rooms are connected by a wide opening with wooden sliding doors, giving the ground floor a feeling of great openness. One corner of the living room has a more private raised nook with a railing. The dining room features a built-in wooden sideboard with *Jugendstil* ornamental brass hinges. The sideboard, wooden wall paneling, and doorframes are all

topped by a crenellated motif intended to evoke Stolzenfels Castle in Koblenz. A study with a sunny octagonal bay is tucked next to the entry porch. This allowed the owner to see who was approaching. The floor here is raised as well, and it has a railing with *Jugendstil*-derived painted panels. The ground floor also contains an elegantly appointed drawing room and a spacious veranda.

The second floor was devoted to private family space and is more subdued in decoration. It contains a large main bedroom and a children's room, a guest room, and a breakfast nook, as well as a glassed-in veranda. All of these rooms open onto the second-floor hall, which was originally used as a billiard room and retains the dual hanging light fixtures installed for that purpose. A small observation room only accessible from the attic occupies the top level of the tower.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the Thomas family was in Germany on vacation and was unable to return to Kobe. The house was

sold, and in later years it became a laboratory and then a Chinese school. In January 1978, Weathercock House was designated an Important Cultural Property and was purchased by the city of Kobe. Though damaged by the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, it was subsequently restored. Seismic reinforcement work on the house began in 2023.