

LAND REUSE IN TOKYO MIDTOWN



On a former military site in the centre of Tokyo a new urban landscape was created, straddling the interface between Japanese tradition and contemporary European parks.

Stories of reuse are generally those of physical regeneration. They are common in the lexicon of urban design and planning. We green brown-field sites, we revitalize dilapidated neighborhoods, we bring heritage buildings back to life, or we restore an ecosystem. These are the narratives of reuse. They involve taking a place and making it anew. And there are other kinds of reuse such as the re-appropriation of ideas, forms and behaviors in ways that are relevant to contemporary audiences.

In Tokyo, one of the world's greatest cities, the most recent success story of land reuse can be found at Tokyo Midtown. Tens of millions of visitors have flocked there since it opened in 2007. The site is a 10.1-hectare development in the Roppongi district on the former location of the Japanese Defense Agency headquarters. Before its days as a government ministry, it served as General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters and officer housing for American military families in the post-Second World War era. Its military origins can be traced to the time of Emperor Meiji in the 1800s, when it first became an army post; before this period it had served as the seat of the feudal lord and samurai, Motonari Mouri. Archeological excavations conducted before construction discovered 50,000 pieces of Edo Era (1636-1864) pottery and two valuable gold coins. For centuries, the relatively large site has remained contiguous, a rarity in Tokyo's complex latticework of minuscule land plots. Until now, it had always been closed off from the city. Nearby residents were never able to enter.

In 2001, Mitsui Fudosan, one of Japan's largest real estate developers, acquired the area through a competitive bid process after presenting a plan to develop a mixed-use complex with a hotel, an office block, a high-end retail offer, residences and a public park. SOM New York and Nikken Sekkei, Tokyo, were the design and local architects. EDAW, now AECOM Design + Planning, were engaged as landscape architects to design the entire open space, which would take up half of the available land, a novel move for real estate developers, especially in a crowded Asian context such as this one.



Redevelopment of Tokyo Midtown started in 2001. The buildings nestle into generous swathes of public space. The plaza and streetscapes are urbane, while the design of the park is more gardenesque in character.

Page 52: The Main Entry Plaza is illuminated at night. Tens of millions of visitors have been to the site in the Roppongi district since its opening in 2007.

Anchoring the park is the 50-storey Midtown Tower, which houses a branch of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and office floors, two smaller office towers, a four-storey retail Galleria with more than 130 stores and restaurants, a medical clinic, a multifamily low-rise as well as a museum. Eschewing a podium-plus-towers approach, it is the landscape that sits front and center.

The public realm consists of two key components: an urbanized domain that frames and grounds the project's buildings, and an arc of urban parkland that makes up the north and west areas of the site. Within the first area are a main entry plaza and a collection of sidewalks that flow continuously into the surrounding urban context. Highly pedestrianized, this is the space where thousands of people move daily, back-and-forth between offices, shops, homes, galleries and subway stations. The second area bursts open into a generous swathe of textured, green space with a meandering stream-like water feature. Various pathways lead to the

21_21 Design Sight Museum (designed by architect Tadao Ando, and an initiative of fashion designer Issey Miyake), bridges and promenades connect the adjacent architecture to the landscape, and there is a large lawn. The revitalized Hinokicho Park is a traditional Japanese garden which predates Tokyo Midtown. Dotting this new open space are 140 preserved cherry and camphor trees that were carefully saved and transplanted from other areas within the site. The cherry trees were rearranged to create a cherry promenade that conveys the impression of a mature park, altering the visitor's sense of time and history.

Tokyo Midtown's transformation from closed-off military office and housing blocks to vibrant public amenity is an obvious and telling story of reuse, which has led to ongoing experiences of discovery by neighbors. One such story is about a woman named Yuko, who grew up next door to the Tokyo Midtown site, and for years had peered over the walls to see what was there. Today she walks her dog daily through the Midtown park, and keeps communication with its landscape architects, frequently emailing them anecdotes about how she and her dog enjoy the park.

There is another dynamic at play in the design – that of cultural reuse, or the regeneration of traditional antecedents, qualities and behaviors. More than a land reuse, Tokyo Midtown represents a redefinition of a genre of cultural landscape. The designers infused the notion of *Wa*, or a sense of Japanese-ness, into many aspects of the design. Meanwhile, they blended this with distinctly international land uses. The landscape has the introspective qualities of a Japanese garden with the democratic, even populist aspirations that are more characteristic of Western public spaces. It is an approach that does more than simply update traditional Japanese landscape in a contemporary way relevant to current end-users, but it reclaims the underpinning culture and casts it in a new light. It is design as a process of reincarnation and regeneration. The landscape is profoundly localized, but equally globalized – much like contemporary Japan itself.

Surrounding the retail center and towers, the hard landscape areas that make up the main entry plaza and adjoining pavements are finished in a cream stone paving with decorative banding in black. The pattern is laid in 2:1 proportions that are based on tatami mats, Japanese traditional woven rice straw floor coverings. At intervals, the paved surface is broken by glazed areas to provide natural light, filtered through shimmering water, into retail spaces and subway routes below. The surface is also pierced and planted with trees and interrupted by bamboo-filled planters that rise from the paving to create intimate gathering areas on wooden decks. They appear as islands, floating in a calm and gentle sea – recalling traditional Japanese garden techniques of recreating nature through

The Tokyo Midtown lies within a highly urban context. It was one of the last remaining sites of such proportions in central Tokyo and consequently one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in the world.



Despite of the high value of the site, just more than half of the area has been dedicated to public open space. The landscape in Tokyo Midtown is very heavily used.



TOKYO MIDTOWN, JAPAN
Client: Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.
Lead design: AECOM Design + Planning (formerly EDAW), San Francisco; Steve Hanson (principal in charge, design lead), Todd Kohli (project manager) Joe Brown (CEO, principal advisor), Aki Omi
Collaborators: Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, New York, USA; Communication Arts, Inc., Colorado, USA; Fisher Marantz Stone, New York, USA; Buro Happold, New York, USA; Nikken Sekkei, Ltd., Tokyo, Japan; Kengo Kuma & Associates, Tokyo, Japan; Sakakura Associates Architects and Engineers; Tokyo, Japan; Jun Aoki and Associates, Tokyo, Japan; Tadao Ando Architect and Associates, Osaka, Japan; Landart, Inc, Tokyo, Japan (landscape architects, Hinokicho Park)
Area: 10.1 hectares
Realization: 2007
Costs: 360 billion yen

idealized miniatures. Noren, vertical slits of fabric often found at entryways in Japanese homes or shops, are another vernacular feature used in the entry plaza; here they are vividly reinterpreted through layered placement of the bamboo “islands”.

Within the park, the central feature is a stream, which recalls a natural stream that once existed on site. It bisects a green space crisscrossed by oblique pathways and water features woven through a collection of flower gardens. The historic stream is re-interpreted as a contemporary, romanticized water feature that transitions from active jets to terraced pools, drawing people into the park and leading them down through meandering pathways. The stream is a metaphor reminiscent of a classical Japanese landscape: it flows down from a “mountain top” spring (the street-edge of the park), crosses the forest edge (as the park continues alongside the Ando museum), and finally empties into a pristine lake (in Hinokicho Park). In warm weather, Tokyo Midtown’s management encourages users to sit on the water’s edge and dangle their feet in the stream, enjoying the refreshing waters – an unexpected luxury in Tokyo. A pedestrian bridge linking the galleria to the park gives the impression of traditional bridges found in historic Japanese gardens. It literally and figuratively bridges the landscape and the architecture of the buildings, reinterpreting both while revealing how they influence one another.

The park gently flows into a great lawn, an innovation for a Japanese landscape. The lawn is a “foreign” intervention in the sense that it is evergreen and invites public uses that are not typical of Japanese public space; namely picnicking and sunbathing. A programmable extension of the retail galleria, it becomes a common. It is an area for many events, such as a park library that is held seasonally, where visitors can “check out” a picnic basket with a book and enjoy both on the lawn. This interactive lawn divides the new park from the revitalized Japanese garden at the northern end of the site. The smaller gardens have a jewel-like intensity and crisp detailing to contrast with the larger open areas and transition from a landscape evocative of mountains to one of lowlands, over a 15-meter grade change. Using the conceptual plan devised by the EDAW/AECOM design team, the park was carefully invigorated by Landart and Nikken Sekkei. All of the Midtown places and spaces have been designed for seasonal change and year-round use with a mixture of deciduous and evergreen planting, not unlike traditional Japanese garden settings, where stark winters contrast with lush green summers, and spring brings regeneration every year.

In a typical Japanese urban context, the street is an important place of human activity and interaction, while parks are not. They are spaces for contemplation, for admiration, which are customarily closed off from

the city. At Tokyo Midtown, however, it is a different story. The open space exists for participation. While its design is inspired by local qualities, its uses are a clear departure from local norms, in that the public domain is to be utilized rather than viewed, lived-in rather than admired. The landscape sets the tone for the entire Midtown development.

All the design decisions suggest interconnectedness – of time (past and present), of character (urban and naturalistic), of culture (Japanese and Western), and of uses (hard pavement and soft park). There are forms, relationships and materials in the landscape that are familiar to Japanese sensibilities. This localism is carefully superimposed with an internationalism found in the clarity and openness of the design and in the contemporary programming. In discretely evoking *Wa* and permeating it throughout this new Japanese landscape while retaining an international perspective, the designers have reawakened culture in a way that is both constructive and august. It is a model that would work well for mixed-use developments in other world cities. One could only imagine what the equivalent approach would deliver in the heart of London or Paris – capitals of two other cultures with deeply distinct landscape traditions. How would a “London Midtown” look through this lens of cultural reuse? Could it be a re-appropriated polite English garden with a yet-to-be-realized urbane sensibility? The prospect of such an innovation is tantalizing.

Tokyo Midtown has been called by some a Rockefeller Center for the 21st century. It is a distinction that speaks to yet another dimension of reuse: the reinterpretation of the mixed-use urban development itself. Tokyo Midtown re-imagines this mixed-use paradigm; and it is through its culturally-grounded landscape that it goes beyond the civic ideal of mixed uses. It is a new kind of urban initiative. Cultural reinterpretation in contemporary design often is a recipe for careless pastiche. Especially when executed by someone from the outside, the concerted quest for an “other’s” cultural authenticity in a hyper-modern environment can quickly become a condescending mess. We could easily have had orientalism anew; or worse, the roadside vanilla that typifies most commercial landscapes today. Instead, in this active Japanese park, there is more than a careful balance, there is something completely new: a connective open public space that is at once vernacular and cosmopolitan, genteel yet bustling, urbane but gardenesque; new yet grounded – the essence of today’s Tokyo.

There is no better place for this than right in the center of this megapolis, at the heart of an ancient society that sits at the forefront of modernity across a wide platform, from high technology to high fashion. Here, context shines. Tokyo Midtown’s has generated a landscape that belongs here, and only here.

The birds eye view from Midtown Tower reveals the coherence of Tadao Ando’s 21_21 Design Sight Museum, the meandering pathways and a corridor of preserved mature cherry trees.



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