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Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan

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Produced, directed and photographed by Karen Severns and Koichi Mori. Written by Karen Severns: 2007, \$29.95.

The two-hour documentary *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan* explores Wright's long relationship with, and lasting legacy in, Japan. Though a significant portion of the movie is devoted to the design, construction and sad fate of the Imperial Hotel, the film offers more. It continues beyond Wright's departure from Japan in 1922 and examines how Wright, and the architects he trained, shaped Japanese architecture for much of the rest of the century. The film marks the first time that the full extent of Wright's influence on the country has been examined.

Wright was inspired by the traditional art of Japan—its simplicity, colors and unusual perspectives—even as that nation was aggressively modernizing and importing Western architects and foreign styles. Japan was the first foreign country Wright visited (in 1905) and in 1911 the first contact was made between Wright and the investors planning a new hotel. The Imperial Hotel, backed with money from the imperial household, was to be a showpiece for Western visitors. Wright seized the opportunity to revive his career, and in 1913 he traveled to Japan to lobby for the commission. Wright won the job partially on the strength of his designs for the Larkin Building and Unity Temple. The final contracts were signed in 1916 and Wright arrived in Japan the next year to begin work. In Japan, he produced a number of other designs, including an American embassy, another hotel, a school and several residences, and he devised a revolutionary foundation system for the hotel to compensate for the unstable soil and the seismic activity of Tokyo.

After the Imperial Hotel survived the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, Wright's techniques became wildly popular. The architects he trained, including Arata Endo and Antonin and Noemi Raymond, put their own, Wright-flavored, stamp on Japanese architecture. Other architects, with varying levels of originality, would emulate his style. When European Modernism arrived in Japan, the architects trained and inspired by Wright ensured that Japanese traditions survived, even as materials, techniques and external forms dramatically changed.

In the post-World War II decades, as Japan's economy grew and land values exploded, Wright's creations—the buildings that had saved his career and that had inspired a generation of Japanese architects—were endangered. In 1968, the Imperial Hotel was demolished, despite a vocal and active preservation movement to save it. While the rescue effort failed, a new awareness of preservation issues grew in Japan. Today, a small portion of the Imperial Hotel is preserved in an architectural park. A school, Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikan (1921) Tokyo, Japan, designed by both Wright and Arata Endo, has undergone a thrilling restoration and the Yamamura House (1918) Ashiya, Japan, has been designated a cultural landmark and is open to the public.

The two-hour documentary has a few, brief reenactments and interviews with a handful of well-chosen specialists—including Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and Margo Stipe from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation—but most of the movie is devoted to a surprising wealth of visual material: plans,

drawings, historic photos, archival video and footage of architectural models. The filmmakers do a superb job of conveying the dimensional complexity of Wright's designs. The visuals are not limited to architecture; the Japan that Wright fell in love with in the early 20th century is well-illustrated, as are the settings of his buildings, the evocative landscape, the vast destruction wrought by the Great Kanto Earthquake and even the heart-rending demolition of the Imperial Hotel.

The film is briskly paced, covering a century of architectural history in just two hours, and favors architecture above biography. Details of Wright's life are not ignored, but the film does not dwell on his scandals and shortcomings. Events in Wright's life are related to his career as an architect. The film bears an accurate title: it is about Wright's buildings and legacy in Japan, not his personal life or character.

The film is an unqualified success; it does more than simply string together superlatives over images of the Imperial Hotel. It wraps context around Wright's Japanese work. Better than a catalogue of his buildings, *Magnificent Obsession* proves that Wright's legacy in Japan is about far more than one building. The documentary illustrates how Wright changed the course of Japanese architecture, both by the example of a handful of buildings and by the work of the gifted architects he nurtured and trained. Wright's love of Japanese art, his respect for Japanese traditions and his ability to transform those feelings into architecture ensured that despite war, catastrophe and a headlong rush to modernize, Japan's traditions still have a place in her architecture, even in the first decade of the 21st century. ■

VIEWING WRIGHT

