

Ultra Modernism in Manchuria

The date 9 August 1945 is seared into the history books by Fat Man, the atomic bomb that erased Nagasaki in a flash. Fat Man and his companion Little Boy, dispatched over Hiroshima three days earlier, brought a mercifully swift end to the Second World War, but the blinding horror of these new weapons cast much into the historical shadows, including one of the twentieth century's most intensive periods of construction and largest military campaigns of the entire war. At one minute past midnight on 9 August, just hours before Fat Man's dispatch, a million Soviet troops crossed the border into Manchuria, opening a theatre of war the size of Western Europe. The Soviet invasion of Manchuria and the American bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima shared the same objective: the unconditional surrender of Japan, the first nation outside the west to have achieved a state of full modernisation and the first to gain entry into the exclusive club of imperial nations.

Manchuria, the long-contested north-eastern portion of China that rises into Russia's underbelly was for most westerners, as one Japanese writer explained in 1925, 'a name pasted on that jumping-off edge of the world somewhere in the outer darkness of their school geography—a mere label, some 10,000 miles below their mental horizon.'¹ Flanked by Mongolia to the west and Korea to the east, Manchuria, however, had been the jewel in Japan's imperial crown—a prized possession prized not merely from China, but from a brutish group of imperial powers rasping over the territory since the mid-nineteenth century. Following Japan's outright occupation of Manchuria in 1931, the region was rebranded Manchukuo and recast as a new state. However, this youngster was by no means independent. It had been conceived by Japan and was controlled by Japanese interests. Chief among these was the South Manchuria Railway (SMR)—an extraordinary product of modernity born out of the tumultuous union of industrialisation, state-sponsored capitalism and imperialism.

Throughout the 1930s, Japan set out not only to create an imperial realm in Manchuria, but also to manufacture a modernist utopia distinct from western precedents. The vast plains of Manchuria became the site of some of the most

¹ Kinnoyuke, 1925: v.

ambitious architectural designs and urban plans anywhere on the globe before the Second World War. The subsequent conflict that brought the curtain down on Japan's exceptional experiment also concealed this unique architectural encounter with modernity from the world's attention and effectively struck it from the historical record. Forged by Japan in China, modernity in Manchuria challenges the west's exclusive claim to the programme of modernity, casting it in an eastern mold and part of China's wider experience of multiple modernities. This book explores this hidden territory and examines how architecture and planning were exploited to simultaneously create the reality and myth of modernity in Manchuria. It was an illusion that was painstakingly constructed throughout the early twentieth century until it finally shattered at one minute past midnight on 9 August 1945.



1. Between East and West

*Since the Great Wall of China the world has seen no material undertaking of equal magnitude.*²

Manchuria is classic frontier territory—the contested no man’s land between established strongholds on the global chessboard. The realm of the Manchus has been pounded for centuries by the historical tide and battered by successive waves of migration and military campaigns. The Chinese solution to incessant incursion was the construction of a wall designed to separate them from their barbaric unruly neighbours. However, by the nineteenth century the arrival of an altogether new form of barbarian precipitated China’s fundamental transformation from an inward-looking and ancient civilisation to a modern nation-state.

Various European powers had nibbled at the edges of China since the sixteenth century, but throughout the second half of the nineteenth century China’s frail carcass was picked apart by predatory western powers, its dominion sliced up and parcelled into manageable portions—colonies, leased territories, treaty ports, and foreign concessions. An unexpected and belated guest at this dishonourable banquet was Japan, China’s subaltern neighbour and cultural underling. The Japanese, as the English poet and Orientalist Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) once noted, ‘look to China as we look to Italy and Greece, for them it is the classic land’.³ By the late nineteenth century, China’s superior relationship with Japan was upended. When war broke out between the two countries on 3 August 1894, China assumed it would easily defeat its upstart neighbour. The outcome was unthinkable. The eminent Chinese reformer Liang Qichao (1873–1929) described it as a ‘thunderbolt in a dream’,⁴ but for the population of north-eastern China (which became Manchuria) it was a total nightmare. As the Japanese rounded on the natural and strategic port of Lüshun, they massacred thousands of civilians in a chilling foretaste of future

² Norman, 1902.

³ Binyon, 1908: 6.

⁴ Liang Qichao, ‘Wu Shi Nian Zhongguo Jin Hua Lun’, *Shen Bao*, 50th Anniversary Special Edition, February 1923.

atrocities and opened wounds between the two countries that would fester into the third millennium.

Japan's victory in the first Sino-Japanese War secured China's fate—a vertiginous fall from grace that reached its nadir with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on 17 April 1895. This treaty contained not only the terms of peace, but also the first drafts of the gathering storm that would batter the region for half a century. It would also permanently alter the course of China's modernisation by preparing the conditions for unprecedented construction and destruction—modernity's loyal bedfellows.

The Treaty of Shimonoseki forced China to recognise Korea's independence and pay Japan a hefty war indemnity. However, it was the surrender of sovereign territory that would have the most debilitating and lasting effect on China. Japan had taken from China parts of the northern coastline on the Liaodong Peninsula, as well as several islands in the China Sea, including Formosa (Taiwan). The generous terms not only disgraced China's ailing Qing government, but also rattled the western powers. France, Germany, and Russia performed the 'Triple Intervention' demanding Japan withdraw its claim on the Liaodong Peninsula and the port of Lüshun. On 5 May 1895, Japan bowed to the pressure in exchange for a larger indemnity, but the damage had been done. Japan had lost face and this grave dishonour would have to be avenged. Russia, whose central role in prising back the Liaodong Peninsula for China, had not acted altruistically and would pay a heavy price for this Pyrrhic victory

Enter the Russian Bear

One year after signing the Treaty of Shimonoseki on behalf of the Qing government in 1895, the eminent government official and military general, Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) was in Saint Petersburg attending the celebrations marking the Coronation of Emperor Nicholas II, Russia's last monarch. During this trip, Li negotiated the secret Li-Lobanov Treaty (June 1896), establishing a Russo-Chinese alliance motivated principally by a mutual antipathy towards Japan. The bonds of friendship between China and Russia were formed around a common enemy and strengthened by Russia's role in Japan's retrocession of the Liaodong Peninsula after the Sino-Japanese War

Li travelled to Russia armed also with the draft of an unpublished accord dubbed the Cassini Convention, named after Russia's exceptional plenipotentiary to Beijing, Count Arthur Cassini (1836–1913). Cassini believed Manchuria was the key to Russian dominance in Asia and masterfully wrong-footed Britain in the race to seize control of the region.

In 1890, Russia had started building the Trans-Siberian Railway connecting Saint Petersburg in the west with Vladivostok in the east. The railway was forced to follow a wide arc around Manchuria. It was a costly detour that Cassini was determined to eliminate and ultimately exploit. The Cassini Convention was a blueprint for a Trans-Siberian shortcut straight through Manchuria, taking 500 miles off the journey from Vladivostok to Saint Petersburg. In an atmosphere of scheming, subterfuge, and secrecy, the China Eastern Railway (CER) or *Kitaiskaya Vostochnaya Jeleznaya Doroga* (Chinese Eastern Iron-road)⁵ was born, and its iron tracks began to cut across Manchuria's vast territory.

Cassini convinced China to sign the Li-Lobanhov Treaty in September 1896, which not merely granted Russia the right to build the desired railway, but also allowed the Russians to exploit the mining potential in the region and to reserve the right to concentrate Russian forces in Lüshun and the neighbouring settlement of Talienwan (Dalian Wan, Dalian Bay).

Construction of the CER began on 28 August 1897, marking the height of Russia's fleeting but fundamental involvement in Manchuria and the first episode in half a century of foreign meddling that culminated in Manchuria's severance from China and Japan's attempt to fashion it into a uniquely modern independent state.

⁵ Clarence Cary, 'Dalny—A Fiat City', *Scribner's Magazine* 33, no. 4 (April 1903): 485.

2. Russian Manchuria: Kwantung Leased Territory

*Never, perhaps, in the whole history of colonization has so much money been so recklessly squandered as in Manchuria.*⁶

The success of the Li-Lobanhov Treaty whetted Russia's appetite for control of the region. The Russian Empire was handicapped by the paralysis of its Far Eastern Fleet in the frozen Pacific port of Vladivostok during the winter and needed a warm water alternative. The obvious candidate was Lüshun, a natural deep water port at the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula, which the Japanese wrested from China after their victory in the Sino-Japanese War only for it to be humiliatingly returned following the Triple Intervention.

On 27 March 1898, the Russo-China Convention granted Russia the lease of the ice-free ports of Lüshun and neighbouring Talienwan for 25 years. Russia renamed Lüshun, Port Arthur, and the surrounding area was renamed the Kwantung Leased Territory. Talienwan became Dalny (Dalian), Russian for 'Far Place'. Dalian would become a commercial port open to foreign trade. The masterstroke that sealed Russia's grip on much of Manchuria was the clause permitting Russia to connect the China Eastern Railway (CER) with Dalian, thereby creating the basic structure of the railway network that would 'stagger the imagination in reach and potentiality'.⁷

The original network was shaped like the letter 'T', with the CER crossing Manchuria in an east-west direction as part of the railway line connecting Europe and Asia and, from a point approximately midway along this line, a 943-mile track extending southwards to Dalian. At the junction of this triple spur, the city of Harbin was established, which would become one of the largest cities in Manchuria. The new line turned the Trans-Siberian Railway from an internal enterprise serving Russia's modernising programme, into what contemporary commentators described as 'one of the greatest arteries of traffic the world has ever seen [and] one of the chief factors in shifting the centre of gravity of the world's trade'.⁸

Russia spared no expense in laying their line from Harbin to Dalian. The cost of the railway was estimated at £30,000 per mile (three times the average price of

⁶ Whigham, 1904: 8.

⁷ Clarence Cary, 'Dalny—A Fiat City', *Scribner's Magazine* 33, no. 4 (April 1903): 482.

⁸ Colquhoun, 1898: 327–28.

railway construction). ‘Never, perhaps, in the whole history of colonization,’ claimed one visitor unfavourably, ‘has so much money been so recklessly squandered as in Manchuria’.⁹

New Towns

Russia’s consolidated position in Manchuria precipitated a building boom in Harbin and Dalian that saw, for the first time in China, the implementation of modern urban planning and, increasingly, architectural solutions to problems of a uniquely modern kind—factories, railway stations, telephone and telegraph facilities, radio stations, hotels, and international ports. Unlike the unplanned, cosmopolitan, and commercial treaty ports throughout China, Dalian and Harbin were the first cities in China’s modern history to be the subject of comprehensive urban plans.

By the end of 1902, Russian engineers had completed their prized CER, and the first trains started running along the shortened Trans-Siberian Railway on 1 July 1903. The new route to Europe accelerated the development of Harbin, the initial plan for which was determined by a combination of natural and manmade features. The original town was planned by the engineer Obromievski and laid out on 4,000 hectares of raised ground to the south of the later settlement in 1898. On the swampy south bank of the Songhua River, workshops, warehouses, and a sawmill were erected to store and supply the building trades. By 1901, a New Town (*Novui Gorod*) was planned on 3,000 hectares of raised ground to the west of the Old Town adhering to modern urban planning principles emanating from Europe and North America. Streets were laid out in a regular and orderly pattern, with a combination of rectilinear, diagonal, and curved routes converging at, or radiating from, key sites, such as parks or civic buildings, to create a grand and dignified appearance. A smattering of public gardens provided a ‘few cherished trees and plots of grass [to] relieve the eye, and a military band sometimes played without positive offence to the ear’.¹⁰ The result was a city with a variegated urban layout formed by a series of differently scaled open spaces and roads, from monumental boulevards to quiet backstreets.

⁹ Whigham, 1904: 8.

¹⁰ Whigham, 1904: 79.

Harbin’s rapid development coincided with the global proliferation of the biomorphic style of Art Nouveau, furnishing the town with the most concentrated ensemble of this contemporaneous global style anywhere in China. Less than a decade after the Belgian architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) had unveiled the flamboyant organic ‘whiplash’ style in Brussels, the seeds of Art Nouveau travelled the length of the Trans-Siberian Railway and blossomed in the unlikely setting of Manchuria in the form of hotels, shops, department stores, offices, and residences (see Fig.01).



Fig.01: Examples of the many residences for the staff of Russia’s China Eastern Railway, designed in the early 1900s in an Art Nouveau style.

At the other end of the railway line, Dalian was the only Chinese harbour north of Shanghai at which ocean-going liners could discharge their cargos, plugging Manchuria directly into the international network of maritime trade for the first time in history. The site on which the Russians had chosen to build Dalian was, as one journalist remarked, an area of land that ‘nature had done little to mark out as a future metropolis’.¹¹ Mr Kerbech, an engineer from the CER, designed this new city with the assistance of the future governor and chief of engineering construction, Mr

¹¹ Whigham, 1904: 7.

Saharoff.¹² Kerbech and Saharoff were responsible for introducing China to modern town planning. With a massive budget of 20 million roubles, their ambitious scheme covered an area of 100 square kilometres (*see Fig.02*).

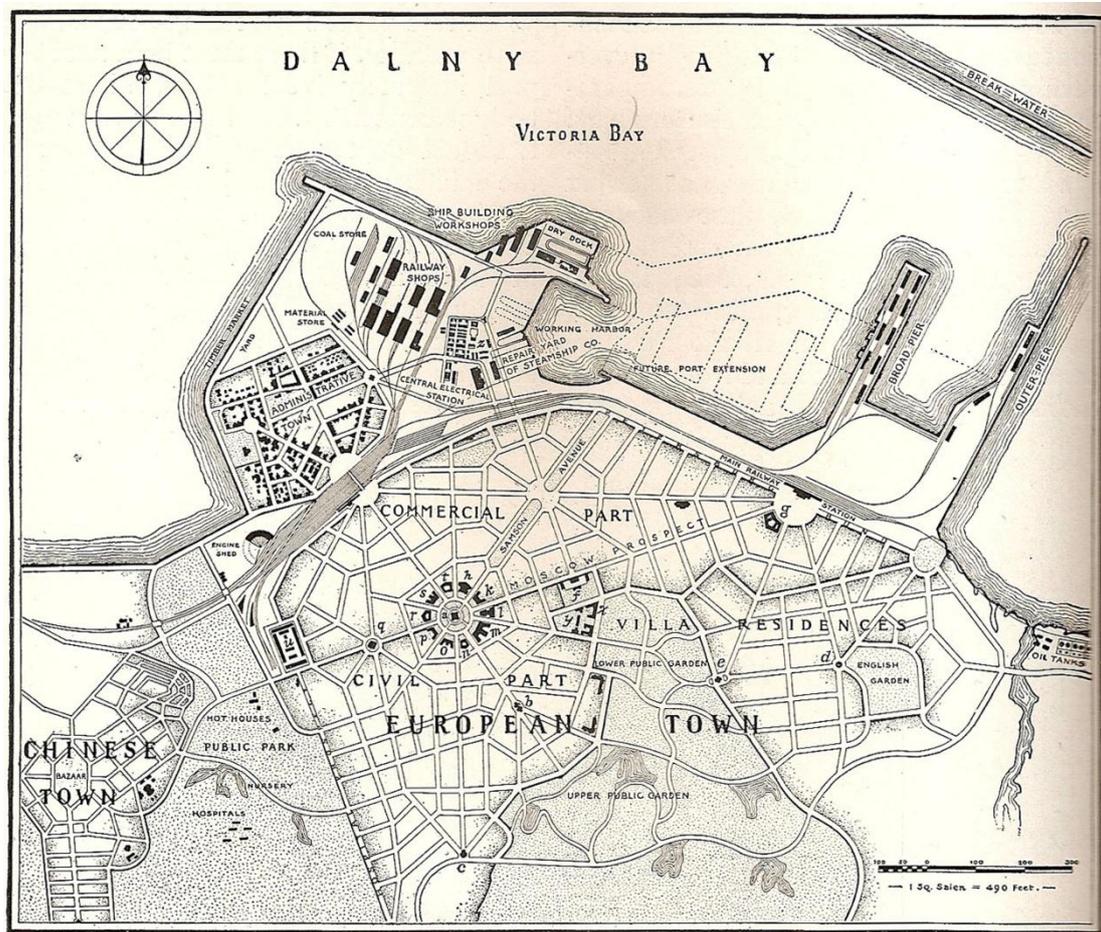


Fig.02: Plan of Dalian (1903) showing (clockwise from top left) the first Russian 'administrative' settlement, the railways workshops, docks, proposed new 'European' town with main circus, and the separate Chinese town.

'The manifold requirements of modern city construction,' observed the American writer Clarence Cary when visiting Dalian in 1903, were 'created at demand in double-quick order, by the exercise of an alert and intelligent foresight, backed with a generous purse'.¹³ For 'those who love analogies,' wrote one observer, 'see in Dalny the future New York of the East ... There is something splendid and Oriental and almost barbaric in [its] wholesale creation ... For surely nowhere else in the world

¹² *Dairen*, South Manchuria Railway Company, 1935: 3.

¹³ Clarence Cary, 'Dalny—A Fiat City', *Scribner's Magazine* 33, no. 4 (April 1903): 489.

has a Government built a city and port of such dimensions on absolutely barren soil, hundreds of miles from its own borders, without a penny's worth of trade already in existence to justify the expense.'¹⁴

The heart of Dalian's urban plan was an arterial circus in the city centre from which major roads radiated. It was to be a modern and rational civic landscape that created a sense of formality and grandeur through the arrangement of broad boulevards connected at key nodes and junctions often landscaped as public parks, forming a more dense urban grain with minor streets serving residential or smaller commercial functions. Streets were sealed, guttered, paved on either side, and electrically lit. Tramways, telegraph lines, and a clean water system were laid, and public parks were ample in size and number to accommodate the city's future growth. The British architect Inigo Triggs included Dalian's plan in his seminal book, *Town Planning: Past, Present and Possible* (1909), where it features alongside Sir Christopher Wren's plan for London after the Great Fire in 1666.

Behind ambitious plans and exorbitant budgets there was an omnipresent sense of ephemeral opportunism lingering over Russian Dalian. The harbour had been built, but there were no ships. Not yet at least. Macadamised roads criss-crossed the empty plain on which the city had been laid out on paper but had yet to be built in brick or stone. One road had even been carved through mountains at considerable expense so as to reach the sandy coastal beaches where 'future millionaires of Dalny will have their summer bungalows'.¹⁵ But the millionaires were nowhere to be seen. Modernity had arrived in Manchuria but it was embryonic and unevenly distributed. A much larger and more immediate impact would be made by modernity's omnipresent companion: war.

As Russia sought to strengthen its position, confidence gave way to complacency. Territorial tensions between Russia and Japan reached boiling point. As had occurred ten years earlier against China and would happen again four decades later at Pearl Harbour, Japan seized the initiative and launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in the opening salvo of the first Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). Few imagined that Japan would emerge victorious, though with 81,455 dead and

¹⁴ Whigham, 1904: 8.

¹⁵ Whigham, 1904: 9.

381,313 wounded Japanese soldiers,¹⁶ they paid heavy price and prepared the ground for future myth-making that would excuse far larger conflicts and much greater losses.

Japan had reclaimed from the Russians the same territory they had been forced to relinquish a decade earlier, only in the meantime it had been richly furnished with the embryonic accoutrements of modernity—industry, manufacturing, mining, construction, ports, architecture, urban planning, and, most importantly, railways.

The Russo-Japanese War marked the first time in the modern era that a western nation was defeated by an eastern counterpart. It signalled also the completion of Japan's second vital step in its quest for empire. The balance of power in the region shifted dramatically and laid the grounds for events over the next four decades.

¹⁶ Young, 1998: 89–90.

3. The Golden Age of the South Manchuria Railway (1906–1931)

*For the first time in history, a non-white race has undertaken to carry the white man's burden, and the white man, long accustomed to think the burden exclusively his own, is reluctant to commit it to the young shoulders of Japan, yellow and an upstart at that.*¹⁷

The Russo-Japanese War was, according to the historian and Japan-specialist, Harry Harootunian, the moment ‘the geopolitical monopoly of modernity was shattered’.¹⁸ Despite the west’s considerable effort to lay claim to modernity throughout much of the twentieth century – which was as strong in architecture as in any other field – Japan’s experience, especially in the context of Manchuria, reveals modernity’s many forms.

On 5 September 1905, Russia and Japan signed the Treaty of Portsmouth, which outlined the terms of peace and defined Japan’s spoils of war. Japan acquired the lease of the Liaodong Peninsula, or Kwantung Leased Territory, along with all public works and properties and Russia’s railway as far as Changchun. Russia was permitted to retain the CER with its three-way junction at Harbin and the southbound track as far as Changchun. On 11 August 1906, the Japanese government officially announced the birth of Mantetsu—the South Manchuria Railway (SMR)—the physical and figurative backbone of Japanese-occupied Manchuria.

The SMR was a product of the early twentieth century and of modernity itself. Commercial and colonial enterprises that had their roots in the sixteenth century had flourished fully by the twentieth century. The SMR continued the colonial tradition of utilising a combination of political and commercial interests to infiltrate and exploit a foreign territory, echoing Britain’s East India Company, but it also vitally different: not only was it based on land rather than sea, but it was also the first time that such an enterprise had originated outside the west. The SMR was subtle, sophisticated, and scientific—learned even—and thus could be presented as a mutually beneficial enterprise that supported China’s struggle against pernicious western influence and, eventually, the entire liberation of Asia.

The SMR’s President, Gotō Shimpei (1857–1929), knew that if managed properly, the railway could perform many of the functions of a colonial enterprise and

¹⁷ Kawakami, 1933: vi.

¹⁸ Harrotunian, 2000: 63.

guarantee Japanese control of the region by more subtle means: *bunsō teki bubi*—‘military preparedness in civilian clothing’. The Japanese and their supporters insisted the SMR’s mission was humanitarian. As the journalist Henry Kinney described, it was ‘a civilising force’,¹⁹ and saw its purpose as ‘instructing the Chinese in the arts and means of modern civilization’²⁰—of ‘showing them the way ... Not Conquest, But Development’²¹ (see *Fig.03 overleaf*). The SMR was one of the essential cogs in the much larger geopolitical machine that was neither colonial nor imperial, not yet at least.

The SMR grew into an enterprise of such immense power and influence that it became the very object through which Japan was able to realise its subsequent imperial ambitions. It controlled the trunk line between Changchun and Dalian, and numerous branch lines linking other towns and cities. It also owned the mining rights in the mineral-rich regions of Fushun and Yentai, and the ports along the coast. It was responsible for the planning, construction, and public administration of the settlements along the railways. It also became a vital route for social and cultural engagements within Manchuria and throughout Asia more broadly. White Russians fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution, European émigrés, Chinese overseas students, warlords and legions of soldiers, merchants, and adventurers relied on the SMR to gain entry to or exit from China through the early twentieth century. It laid the fabric of modernity in Manchuria and very quickly became the region’s primary asset.

From the outset, the SMR engaged in architectural production. Ports, mines, and railway facilities all had to be developed swiftly for the company to be able to begin repaying its shareholders. Propelled by Japan’s obsession with modernisation, Manchuria’s built environment was swiftly transformed by the erection of entirely novel structures: wharfs, offices, stores, silos, factories, stations, warehouses, mines, workshops, hospitals, public libraries, town halls, fire stations, and modern hotels.

¹⁹ Kinney, 1928: 27 and ‘Recent S.M.R. Development Work’, *Far Eastern Review* (September 1928): 401.

²⁰ Kinney, 1928: 28 and ‘The South Manchuria Railway’, *Far Eastern Review* (May 1927): 210.

²¹ Kinney, 1928: 26.



Fig.03: SMR advertisement from the mid-1930s proudly declaring its imperial mission: 'Carrying the Light of Civilization into Manchuria'.

In 1907 at Changchun, the Japanese initiated an urban plan designed by the civil engineer, Katō Yonokichi (1867–1933), who implemented similar plans for Shenyang and oversaw the expansion of Dalian.²² These preceded by more than a decade Japan's first urban planning laws in 1919. Katō's plan for Changchun was an organised and generous grid dissected by diagonal roads that radiated from two circuses and converged in front of the railway station (1914). Katō's urban plans were earnestly modern and, with the exceptions of Harbin and Dalian, were unlike anything seen before in China. Streets were wide, sealed, tree-lined, and flanked by pavements. They formed regularly spaced city blocks served by modern utilities: water, drainage, and electricity.

Architects such as Kingo Tatsuno's (1854–1919) former student, Matsumuro Shigemitsu (1873–1937), designed many of Changchun's early public buildings. Seizing the opportunity of an embryonic empire, Matsumuro became head of the construction department in the Civil Affairs Bureau of the Kwantung Leased Territory and was the Bureau's only architect until 1916. Other organisations like the SMR had their own architects, such as University of Tokyo graduate Ichida Kichijirō, who designed the three buildings around Changchun's new public square: the new railway station, the SMR offices (1910), and the Yamato Hotel (1909).

The Mukden Incident

By 1931 the SMR operated one of the most modern railways in the world and owned a total of 1,129 km of track.²³ Flanking these lines were the valuable and controversial railway zones (*fuzokuchi*) covering a total area of 233 square kilometres. Unlike the foreign treaty ports and concessions throughout China, the precise boundary of this occupied land on which Japanese businesses were established and thousands of residents lived was never ratified by any treaty and consequently was the source of festering resentment and constant tension.

Such tensions contributed to the most significant confrontation between China and Japan before the Second World War, the consequences of which continue to reverberate today. On 18 September 1931, Japan masterminded an 'incident' on the

²² Katō Yonokichi worked in the Civil Engineering Section of the Niigata Prefecture when he was appointed manager of the SMR's Civil Engineering Department by Gotō Shimpei.

²³ Prior to the Mukden Incident, the total length of railways in what would become Manchukuo was 6,219 km.

railway line outside Shenyang. The orchestrated explosion was framed as Chinese insurgent activity and provided the pretext for Japan's total occupation of Manchuria and the creation of Manchukuo. On 23 February 1932, Itagaki invited the former and last Chinese emperor, Pu Yi, to become the head of state of the new nation that comprised five races (*gozoku kyōwa*): Japanese, Manchus, Hans, Mongols, and Koreans.

Before 1931 Manchuria had been a site of Japan's quasi-colonial exploitation from the motherland. After 1931, with the effects of the Great Depression undermining economic confidence, Manchuria was recast as Japan's future and its lifeline, protected in self-defence and preserved at all costs. In this new guise, Manchukuo became the site of some of the most concentrated architectural encounters with modernity during the twentieth century—an encounter that was promoted by and in pursuit of a distinctly Japanese modernist agenda.

4. Manchukuo: Modern Mirage (1932–1945)

*Those engaged in public works and building construction are the pioneers in the establishment of a new order in East Asia and this branch of industry forms the basis for the construction of Manchoukuo.*²⁴

From 1932, the balance of power shifted dramatically in Manchuria. The reverberations from the Mukden Incident affected Japan and would soon be felt across Asia before rocking the entire globe. To justify their territorial claims, Japan's position shifted from treating Manchuria as a convenient accessory to becoming the country's lifeline—the motherland and progeny connected by the fragile chord of the SMR. The inviolability of this vital connection caused Japan to sever its relationship with the League of Nations.

After the creation of Manchukuo, modernity's promise began to work not only in the conventional direction of metropolitan centre to imperial periphery, but also in the other direction. Manchukuo's claims to modernity were so compelling that, directly and indirectly, they effected the modernisation of the motherland and of Japanese society.²⁵ Manchuria was seen by the Japanese as a component in the larger structure of empire, but Manchukuo was empire defined. For architects and city planners motivated by the possibility of designing the future and the irresistible thrill of having these designs built, Manchukuo bristled with opportunity. The new state was framed as blank canvas and 'a new country with no cultural legacy needing to be preserved and a mixed race country requiring a new architectural style'.²⁶ The vision was sufficiently alluring as to reflect an alternative image of modernity back to Japan, whose architects, planners, and engineers flocked to Manchukuo to thrive in the warm glow of imperial opportunity.

²⁴ 'New Building Law Announced', *Manchuria* (1 June 1940): 262.

²⁵ For a thorough account of this particular aspect of Manchukuo's encounter with modernity, see Young, 1998.

²⁶ Masami Makino, 'Architecture of the Ten Years of Manchukuo', *Journal of the Manchurian Architectural Association* 22, no. 10 (October 1942): 19.

Construction Boom

For the majority of Japanese businessmen, many of whom had little or no experience of China, Manchukuo was a place that occupied imagination rather than experience. China had for too long been a wild frontier worthy of contempt, not investment. By the mid-1930s, a combination of profit and patriotism had stimulated an economic recovery that was propelled further by a growing political will. Among the foremost profiteers from Manchukuo were Japan's architects and planners. Tired of the bureaucratic, political and economic obstacles that impeded progress at home, architects in Manchukuo could realise their dreams. Ambitious plans became reality through the combined abundance of willing clients, copious land, and available funding.

The ensuing construction boom not only attracted men of vision (and they were almost entirely men), but also huge numbers of skilled and semi-skilled labourers. An army of construction workers—engineers, transport experts, concrete form workers, scaffolders, carpenters, plumbers, plasterers, painters, and stonemasons—that doubled throughout the 1930s and included in its ranks over half a million Chinese migrants, was vital to Manchukuo's physical transformation.

The funding of Manchukuo's construction boom fell squarely on the state and the Japanese taxpayer. Large institutions such as the Bureau of Public Works, Central Bank of Manchu, General Directorate of State Railways, the Kwantung Office's Public Works Department, and municipal offices collectively spent over 100 million yen annually on construction. The Bureau of Public Works, which spent over 10 million yen a year, was the office responsible for the construction industry and 'looked after the drafting of plans, unification of construction, and the supply of materials for governmental construction'.²⁷

New Architecture for a New State

The question of what form architectural modernity in Manchukuo should take posed a dilemma for the Japanese. It was complicated enough in the motherland, where the subject of architectural modernity was not only contested by different factions of

²⁷ Shinsaku Tsutsui, 'Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo', *Manchuria—Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 46–47.

varying political hue vying for dominance throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but also courted by a number of western admirers that included Frank Lloyd Wright, Bruno Taut, and Antonin Raymond. The crown-topped style popularised by Kikutaro Shimoda had found its home among nationalists and imperialists. The gothic style popularised by Yoshikazu Uchida was attributed to an emergent form of Japanese expressionism. And the rationalist concrete frames produced by Japan's growing band of young European-trained architects were international at best, but viewed domestically as suspiciously western. Japanese architects that either migrated to empire or engaged in it from a distance, exported these domestic experiences and squabbles to Manchukuo, where the colourful language of Japanese architectural modernity acquired a distinctly local inflection.

The evolution of a distinct architectural response to Manchurian conditions combining local, regional, and international elements took several decades and paralleled similar debates about architectural authenticity in both Japan and China. Huge resources were committed to architectural theory and practice in Manchukuo, supported by new professional bodies such as the Manchurian Architectural Association (*Manshu Kenchiku Kyoukai*). Researchers examined every detail of traditional building and its response to local conditions. The lack of earthquakes, a drier climate and extreme temperature variations throughout the year were features of Manchuria that determined its built form and distinguished it from Japanese norms.

Timber—the elemental material for Japanese architects—was substituted by locally manufactured bricks (*peitzu*) comprising dried blocks of rammed earth that for millennia had risen out of the Manchurian plains in the form of city walls, forts, ramparts, temples, and the humble dwelling of the peasant farmer. In towns and cities, *peitzu* were substituted by a more permanent fired brick, which became a characteristic feature of Japanese architecture in Manchukuo. Over 150 million bricks were used each year, 120 million of which were manufactured locally.

To combat the extreme winters and temperatures below -40°C , Japanese architects experimented with 'the tatami-less house' and adopted domestic interiors that used tables and chairs.²⁸ Such foreign devices had become the norm in offices, schools,

²⁸ Masami Makino, 'Architecture of the Tens Years of Manchukuo', *Journal of the Manchurian Architectural Association* 22, no. 10 (October 1942): 17.

and shops in Japan throughout the Meiji era, but less so in the domestic environment, where the tatami reigned. Homes were kept warm by an integral form of central heating known as a *kang* (Russians called them *pechka*)—a raised platform projecting from the wall about 70 cm high with a fire inside that warmed the walls and floor of the house.²⁹ Other local conditions besides the continental climate included wartime preparedness, such as bomb-proofing and anti-air raid design. ‘All of these things,’ noted one commentator, ‘contributed to the rise of a new, and different type of construction and architecture that had never existed before.’³⁰

While practical considerations concentrated on construction techniques, materials, customs, and local conditions, theoretical concerns focussed on the question of architectural modernity in Manchukuo and what form this should take. The solution was not the adoption of architectural modernity from the west, but a multifaceted modernity from the east forged by Manchuria’s climatic, geographic, and political conditions. Initially, as one observer put it, ‘a new type of construction was introduced by the Japanese, which was neither purely Japanese nor purely foreign ... The buildings put up by the Japanese were a compromise between western and Japanese types of construction.’³¹

Later, with the advent of Manchukuo, architects were conscious that ‘Manchurian architecture needed to be unique’.³² Inspiration for the ‘concrete massive walls and phantastic [*sic*] roofs’ of new buildings came from ‘the style of the “potala’s” and the “p’ai-lou’s” of Mongol monasteries’.³³ In the domestic realm, the combination of ‘native Manchus [taking] in the modern facilities’ and the Japanese adopting certain characteristics of Manchurian dwellings produced ‘a new type of residential

²⁹ Shinsaku Tsutsui, ‘Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo’, *Manchuria—Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 46.

³⁰ Shinsaku Tsutsui, ‘Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo’, *Manchuria—Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 46.

³¹ Shinsaku Tsutsui, ‘Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo’, *Manchuria—Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 42–43.

³² Masami Makino, ‘Architecture of the Tens Years of Manchukuo’, *Journal of the Manchurian Architectural Association* 22, no. 10 (October 1942): 19.

³³ T. V. Gilchrist, ‘Hsinking’, *Manchuria* (15 September 1939): 1442.

building’.³⁴ The process of translation resulted in ‘Manchurian construction coming to possess qualities and characteristics peculiar to the country’.³⁵

Architecture in Manchukuo was a predominantly metropolitan undertaking engaged in two main spheres of activity: architecture of the state (e.g., government offices, schools, hospitals, fire stations, railway buildings, industrial facilities, and public housing) and private practice (e.g., department stores, shops, cinemas, hotels, factories, and private housing). The architectural departments of state organisations were largely responsible for public schemes funded by private capital and commissioned by state organs such as the Kwantung Army, the SMR, and municipal departments, while some public commissions were open to competition or subcontracted to independent architects whose work was otherwise principally engaged with private clients.

The distinction between these two spheres assumed an aesthetic connotation with the imposition by the state of stylistic censorship, especially after the foundation of Manchukuo. The charged political atmosphere and the desire for buildings to represent a fledgling nation under the patronage of an expanding empire imposed a loose set of stylistic conditions on design. With the benefit of hindsight, many architects were critical of this initial phase, where the explicit incorporation of Asian style roofs and decoration on modern buildings driven by political expedience were seen as lazy, uninventive, and even embarrassing.³⁶ Amidst a political landscape rife with rivalries, the Japanese found themselves supervising the creation of a new style that was neither Chinese nor Japanese, but attempted to embody the solidarity between Japan and Manchukuo and reflect the utopian idea of the new state: a modern ‘Manchu’ style.

Manchuria was a vast laboratory in which a new generation of Japanese architects and planners gained unprecedented experience and opportunity, the fruits of which

³⁴ Shinsaku Tsutsui, ‘Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo’, *Manchuria—Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 45.

³⁵ Shinsaku Tsutsui, ‘Construction and Architecture of Manchoukuo,’ *Manchuria – Special Manchoukuo Economic Number* (25 May 1938): 43–45.

³⁶ See Masami Makino, ‘Architecture of the Tens Years of Manchukuo’: 15–24 and Hideo Fuegi, ‘The Building Industry and Architectural Profession Past and Present’, *Journal of the Manchurian Architectural Association* 22, no. 10 (November 1942): 35–44.

would materialise much later. It would take nearly two decades and one world war before such futures were realised, but Manchukuo's role in Japan's post-war developments, whether acknowledged or not, are indisputable.

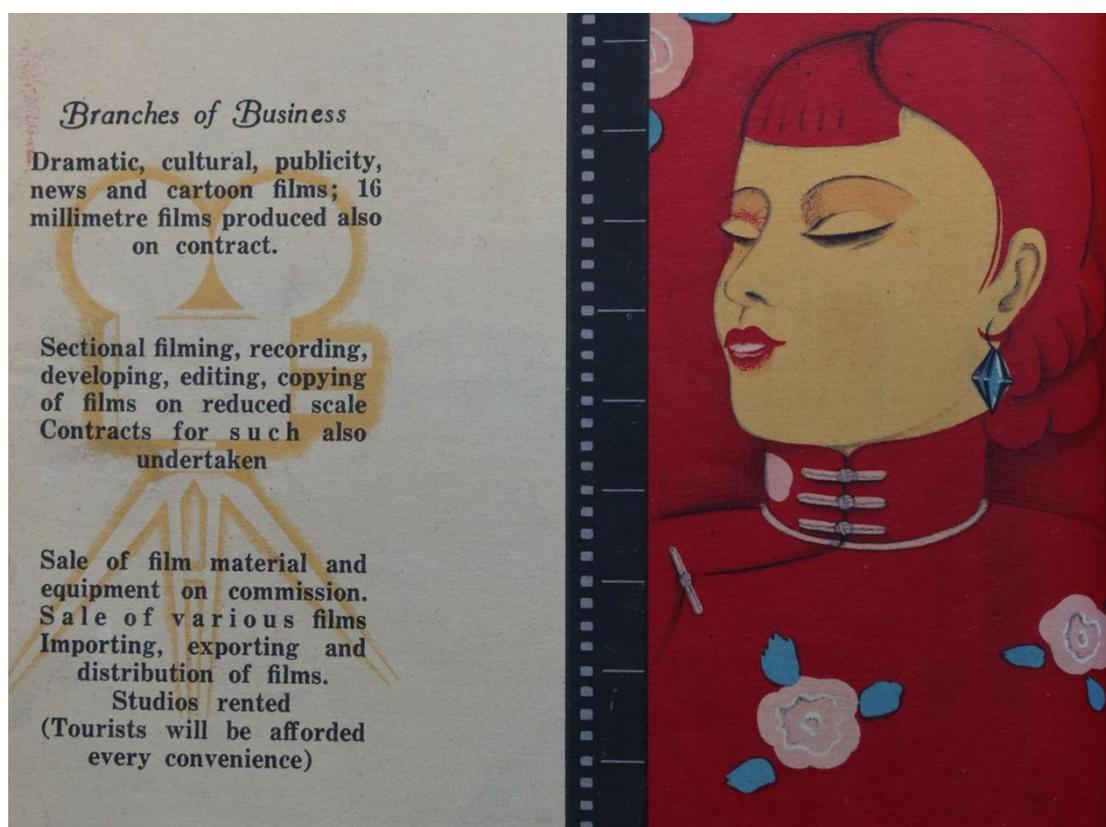


Fig.04: Advertisement for the Manchuria Motion Picture Producing and Distributing Corporation (Manshu Eiga Kyokai).

Manchukuo became a film set on which the drama of Japan's imperial project was played out in glorious detail and projected back to a thirsty public at home and overseas (see Fig. 04). Films were made to convey every aspect of Manchukuo's path to modernity and played heavily on modern themes and imagery, including architecture and planning. *Honeymoon Express* was set on board the ultra-modern locomotive, the Asia Express. *Sora No Tabi (Aeroplane Trip)* was a story about a honeymooning couple on a journey around Manchuria by aeroplane. *Nobiyuku Kokuto (Growing Capital of Manchukuo)*, commissioned by the Capital Construction Bureau, contrasted Manchukuo's new capital of Hsinking with its former incarnation, Changchun,³⁷ and *Kokuto Sai (Capital Construction Festival)*, commissioned by the

³⁷ *Nobiyuku Kokuto* was filmed in two reels and subtitled in Japanese, Manchukuo, German, and Italian.

State Council's Bureau of Information, celebrated the completion of the first Five-Year Capital Construction Plan in 1937. In a quadrangular romance titled *Chi Chiao Tu* the lead protagonist was cast as an architect.

Manchukuo was portrayed as a place to experience the future and became the ultimate destination for the discerning Japanese tourist. The number of guests visiting SMR hotels rose from 21,865 in 1932 to 58,207 by 1939.³⁸ Tourism was founded on the cult of the modern. It relied on modern technology, new buildings, novel facilities, and mass communication with all their comforts and gizmos: pneumatic suspension, air-conditioning, elevators, refrigerators, telegraphy, telephones,³⁹ and radios. Manchukuo possessed luxury hotels; glamorous passenger steamers with the latest interior designs; a network of highways plied by inter-city buses, chauffeur-driven motor cars and 'motor omnibuses'; a state-of-the-art railway boasting 'ultra-modern' high-speed trains and new airports that plugged it into an expanding web of international air travel. The elements were indivisible, each one a vital cog in the imperial machinery that forged the new state of Manchukuo.

No single object epitomised Manchukuo's encounter with modernity more vividly and embodied its modernist urge more succinctly than the streamlined Asia Express, 'the last word in modern steam railway transportation'.⁴⁰ This ultra-modern high-speed train was the pride of the SMR's empire and the prototype to Japan's later bullet trains.⁴¹ Capable of travelling at 140 km per hour, the Asia Express was comparable to the fastest trains in America and 15 km per hour faster than the fastest train in Japan.

³⁸ Young, 1998: 263.

³⁹ From 1906 to 1932, the number of telegraph and telephone offices in Manchukuo rose from 44 to 214 and from 21 to 254 respectively and the number of long distance calls rose from 17,000 to 1.25 million. From 1906 to 1937, the number of telephone subscribers in Manchukuo went from 785 to 69,246, 42,446 of which were Japanese. This paled in comparison to Japan, where for every hundred people, telegraph use was 450 compared with 32 in Manchukuo and the number of telephone subscribers was 9.8 compared with 0.15 in Manchuria. 'Manchuria's Electrical Communications', *Far Eastern Review* (September 1938): 339.

⁴⁰ *Manchuria* (25 May 1938).

⁴¹ The cost was boasted as being cheaper than the \$200,000 three-car express trains operated by the Union Pacific in the United States.



Fig.05: The Asia Express, the ‘ultra-modern’ high-speed train and jewel in the crown of the SMR’s service.

The Japanese were keen to assert that before 1932, Manchuria was industrially and ‘economically the most modernly and intensively developed region of China’ outside Shanghai.⁴² After 1932, Manchukuo produced more coal, iron, and steel than China. It had more railway lines than China. It had faster trains than China. It had more good roads than China. It had a more efficient long distance telephone network and proportionally more telephone subscribers than China. Per capita it had more subscribers to radio,⁴³ more electrical bulbs,⁴⁴ and a higher use of electricity⁴⁵ than China.

⁴² ‘The Development of Manchuria’, *Far Eastern Review* (October 1927): 430.

⁴³ By 1936, there were over 100,000 radio users in Manchukuo.

⁴⁴ Manchukuo had 6.7 electrical lamps per 100 people, compared with 59.4 in Japan. More lamps were installed in Osaka (2,753 million) in 1934 than the whole of Manchukuo. ‘Electricity in Manchuria’, *Far Eastern Review* (July 1937): 275.

⁴⁵ In 1934, 0.7 per cent of China’s population had an electrical supply compared with 5.4 per cent in Manchukuo and 92 per cent in Japan. ‘Electricity in Manchuria’: 275.

City Planning

The constellation of towns and cities scattered across Manchukuo relied on and owed their existence to the railways. For most metropolitan centres, this sprawling network of iron filaments determined not only their encounter with modernity but also their physical form. In the plan of Dalian the Japanese retained the Russian ‘spider-web’ system, whereas the ‘square system’ predominated in the earlier railway zones planned by SMR, and in the larger cities ‘both systems [were] blended’.⁴⁶ Modern city planning arrived on the back of Russia’s railways and thrived in Japanese-controlled Manchukuo, reaching its apogee in the state’s new capital, Hsinking (formerly Changchun). Free from cultural precedent and unencumbered by large pre-existing urban areas and landownership issues, Changchun, more than any of the other cities, was the tabula rasa that the Japanese sought on which they could fashion the ideal city.

In 1932, Hsinking’s Five-Year Capital Construction Plan represented one of the most ambitious and consciously modern city plans ever undertaken at that time, not merely in Manchukuo, but throughout the world. In October 1933 the Town Planning Section was established in the Public Works Bureau of the Department of People’s Welfare ‘to direct and supervise town planning . . . on modern lines. The Town Planning Section subsequently was transferred to the Department of Communications and expanded as the Town Planning Bureau’,⁴⁷ which was instrumental in drafting the Town Planning Act of 1937.⁴⁸ Town planning in Manchukuo was carried out in conjunction with land improvement so that the municipal authority was able to make a profit from the sale of the land improved by the accoutrements of modernity: water and electrical supplies, waste systems, telephone and telegraph lines, recreational parks, wide and sealed roads, and abundant public amenities.⁴⁹

All across Manchukuo, urban planners followed in the wake of railway engineers. Mudanjiang, once a small settlement around a railway station on the eastern section

⁴⁶ *The Kwantung Government, Its Functions & Works* (1934): 138.

⁴⁷ ‘Communications in Manchoukuo’, *Far Eastern Review* (September 1940): 339.

⁴⁸ In May 1940, the Manchukuo Public Works and Building Association was established and geared towards military requirements such as national defence.

⁴⁹ By 1940, 26 towns had a modern water supply and 30 others were under construction. Communications in Manchoukuo’, *Far Eastern Review* (September 1940): 339.

of the former CER near the Korean border, had become a large town of 46,000, but urban planners were confident they could transform the city to accommodate 300,000 residents. In nearby Jiamusi, urban planners eagerly anticipated a city of 300,000 in 30 years replete with all modern services, facilities, and infrastructure. The same railway line opened up the rural settlement of Boli, where urban planners drafted ambitious plans to convert 'wild tracts stretching beyond the existing small town in front of the railway station into a modern city of decent size'.⁵⁰ On the other side of Manchukuo, in Qiqihar urban planners immediately began making provision for a city of 600,000 within 10 to 20 years. By 1935 there were 6,623 Japanese residents (2,236 households) and a modern system of water supply was under construction. A familiar story unfolded at Hailar, near Manchukuo's western border with Russia. Despite the formidable construction effort since 1931, 'the increase of buildings in number [was] still disproportionate to the rapid growth of the population'.⁵¹ The formerly sleepy town was transformed by macadamised streets, parks, a sports stadium, 'houses of modern type, schools, hospitals, bridges, and roads; sawmills worked by electric power; telegraph and telephone lines'.⁵²

⁵⁰ 'Tumen-Chiamussu Railway Completed', *Manchuria* (15 February 1937): 109.

⁵¹ I. A. Kuklin, 'Japanese Development of Hailar', *Manchuria* (15 November 1936): 322.

⁵² I. A. Kuklin, 'Japanese Development of Hailar', *Manchuria* (15 November 1936): 322.

5. The Badlands of Harbin

*Lodged in the very heart of Manchukuo, [Harbin] posits the Manchurian problem, which comprises three factors: the West, the East and Russia.*⁵³

Harbin was as much a product of Manchukuo's short history as it was a victim of its fortunes. Few cities were as severely buffeted by the political storms that swept from Europe to Asia and back again. For Russians and romantics, Harbin was the 'the new Moscow of the Far East',⁵⁴ but such pronouncements relied on a questionable blend of optimism, nostalgia, and propaganda. Harbin's development was always capricious, heavily dependent on international events unfolding far beyond its boundaries.

In 1932 Harbin was a vivacious, anarchic, and nocturnal city 'jammed with cabarets, taxi dance hall cafés and Russian restaurants',⁵⁵ somewhat at odds with Japan's morally charged imperialist ambitions. It had a thriving sex trade and notorious criminal underworld that flourished in the narrow alleys of downtown Pristan with its assortment of gaily lit Russian bars and night clubs. Electric light was a feature of Harbin. It had more electric lamps per capita than Japan (and 16 times the average for Manchukuo).⁵⁶ Petty crime was rife, and kidnappings were a regular inconvenience that law breakers and lawmakers both entertained. Had it not been for the romance of Harbin's character, created largely by 'the renaissance style or "art nouveaux"' architecture, a complete reorganisation might have been implemented by the new Manchukuo administration.⁵⁷

Harbin's new Municipality, inaugurated on 1 July 1933, initiated a city plan that laid the foundations of a 'Greater Harbin'. The aim was to clean up the city's rugged reputation and bring order to its patchwork character. After a protracted and troubled upbringing, Harbin came of age by 1935. With the population approaching half a million, a five-year plan was launched, aimed at bringing order to the city.⁵⁸ Stalin's sale of the former CER paved the way for the first direct train service from Dalian,

⁵³ Scherer, 1933: 78.

⁵⁴ Kinnosuke, 1925: 66.

⁵⁵ Kaname Tahara, 'Harbin and Environs', *Manchuria* (1 August 1940): 403.

⁵⁶ Harbin had 109 electrical lamps per 100 people. Manchukuo had 6.7 and Japan had 59.4. 'Electricity in Manchuria', *Far Eastern Review* (July 1937): 276.

⁵⁷ Kaname Tahara, 'Harbin and Environs', *Manchuria* (1 August 1940): 352.

⁵⁸ The 1936 census put the population at 466,472.

which arrived in Harbin's central station on 1 September, 1935. The Badar swamp, between Pristan, Fuchatien, and New Town, which had for decades been an incubator for disease and contagion, and had long broken the heart of the city, was drained and filled in with the intention to turn it into a park with 'shadowy walks, summer houses, fountains and grounds for sports' as well as tennis, football, and baseball pitches.⁵⁹ The city's water was transformed, with the antiquated system of putrid and often poisonous wells⁶⁰ being replaced by a new municipal water supply. The Waterworks Department laid 100 km of iron pipes along and connected them to individual properties proving a fresh water supply pumped from 3 km away.⁶¹ Construction of a new dam on the Sungari River was designed to stop the devastating floods that frequently ravaged the city.

However, Harbin would forever remain a victim of history and its origins. Consequently, the Japanese invested less here than in other cities nearer to the commercial and political centres of Manchukuo. Ultimately, its history and relative proximity to Russia encumbered Harbin's development, particularly in comparison to the other key cities along the SMR, notably Dalian and Hsinking, which enjoyed their status as Manchukuo's modernist gateway and its ultra-modern capital.

⁵⁹ A. V. Upshinsky, 'Harbin Sees Many Improvements', 20.

⁶⁰ Harbin had 411 wells, 93 of which were not fit for drinking, 150 were only good for drinking after boiling, and 51 were drinkable after filtering. A. V. Upshinsky, 'Harbin Sees Many Improvements', 20.

⁶¹ A. V. Upshinsky, 'Harbin Sees Many Improvements', 20.

6: Dalian: Gateway to Manchukuo

*I wish I could show you the Dairen of today. It is a city of telephones, electric lights and street cars, automobiles, broad, paved streets, and hard-surfaced roads leading out into the country.*⁶²

By the 1930s, Dalian had become Manchukuo's gateway to the world. After much deliberation, the Japanese chose to maintain and develop Dalian's Russian plan. By defeating Russia, Japan won the right, as all victors do, to pen Manchuria's official history. It was a privilege they exploited thoroughly up to their own capitulation in 1945. The Russian origins were erased in an airbrushing of history that, like Manchuria's vast plains, was treated as a blank canvas on which a new history could be painted. Writing from the safe distance of 1933, one contributor to the *Far Eastern Review* confidently claimed: 'Everything in Dairen begins in the year 1907'.⁶³

Gotō Shimpei, the SMR's first president, appointed Katō Yonokichi⁶⁴ to plan Dalian's expansion. Katō was responsible for the extensive grid system that stretched westwards from the Russian-planned core, anticipating the city's growth from an initial 200-acre site to 1,700 acres by 1919, and 5,270 by 1929.⁶⁵ By the early 1930s, nearly a quarter of a million Japanese lived in Dalian, most of whom were affiliated in some way to the SMR. The SMR was also responsible for introducing into China (and even Japan) the comparatively new theory of urban zoning, defining industrial, residential, mixed, and commercial zones designed to aid the efficient functioning of the modern city.

Dalian's promise of modern living, its convenient location, and its salubrious climate attracted the largest concentration of Japanese outside Japan. New suburbs were planned and furnished with rows of houses built from modern non-combustible materials such as reinforced concrete and brick. Even after the creation of Manchukuo, when Japanese businesses had spread out across the region and the

⁶² Scherer, 1933: 41.

⁶³ J. N. Penlington, 'Manchoukuo and Engineering Developments', *Far Eastern Review* (June 1933): 262.

⁶⁴ Buck (2000: 68) cites Katō as being a public works specialist that designed the SMR settlements at Changchun and Shenyang and carried out the official survey of Changchun in 1907. He was also chief of SMR's Public Works Office from 1914 to 1923, after which he retired.

⁶⁵ *The Kwantung Government*, 1934: 138.

political centre had shifted to Hsinking, Dalian's population continued to rise sharply. In July 1938, 162,123 of Dalian's 515,743 residents were Japanese.⁶⁶

The Japanese were careful to ensure Dalian's development did not compromise its pleasant natural setting or damage its physical character. 'Avenues [were] lined with elms, poplars, acacias or other shady trees, and public squares with flower-beds, evergreens and grass plots' helped to beautify the built up areas.⁶⁷ Further afield were larger parks, such as the former 'Tiger Park'—named for the abundance of wild cats that once roamed the area—and Central Park, popular for its flora and fauna, and its sporting facilities, which included a baseball pitch, archery, riding clubs, and swimming pool.

At the foot of Central Park, was Tokiwabashi, an area transformed into a self-consciously modern commercial district designed by the Munakata Architectural Office and constructed between 1928 and 1931. The centre comprised shops (including the Rensagai Shopping Centre, the Municipal Market, and the Mitsukoshi Department Store) and offices (the Gas Company, the Manchurian Electric Company, and the Dairen Transportation Company). In the middle was the famous Tokiwa Cinema, a little gem from the golden age of cinema owned by Dalian's king of cinema, Romoo Koizumi, and among the first cinemas in Asia, let alone Manchuria, to air 'talkies' (*see Fig.06*).

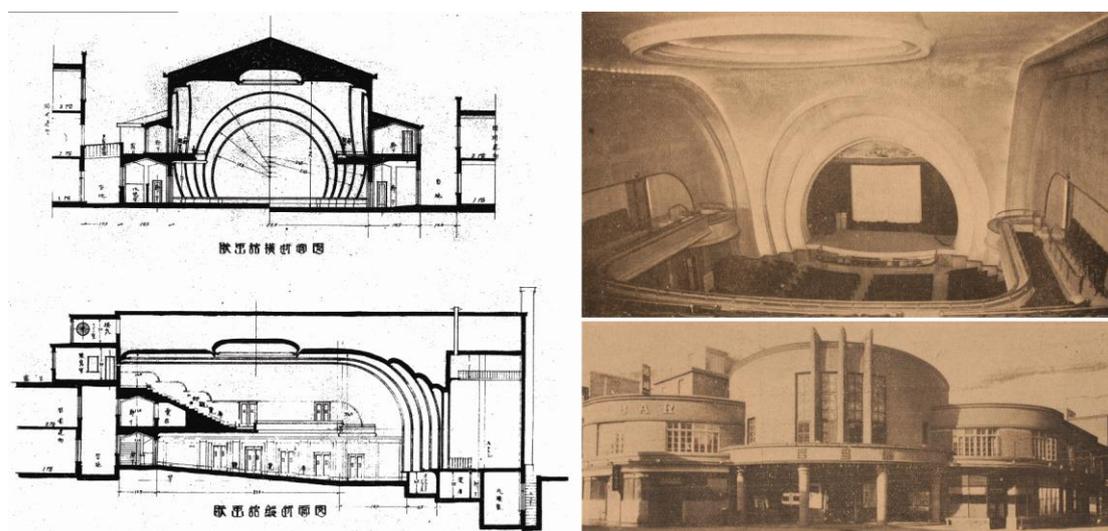


Fig.06: The Tokiwa Cinema (1928–31), designed by the Munakata Architectural Office. Clockwise from left: Sections; interior; and exterior main entrance.

⁶⁶ 1939 Manchuria Yearbook, cited in 'The Port of Dairen', *Far Eastern Review* (May 1940): 178.

⁶⁷ 'Engineering Feats in Kwantung', *Far Eastern Review* (February 1927): 75.

‘I wish I could show you the Dairen of today,’ wrote an American visitor in 1933. ‘It is a city of telephones, electric lights and street cars, automobiles, broad, paved streets, and hard-surfaced roads leading out into the country.’⁶⁸ By 1940, journalists acclaimed its cosmopolitanism and claimed it ranked ‘as one of the leading modern cities’,⁶⁹ matching and often exceeding modern urban experiences in Japan.

Modern communications demanded modern infrastructure, which in turn embraced modern architecture. Japan’s architects had to consider the form and appearance of entirely novel building typologies: cinemas, railway termini, factories, workshops, and radio stations. One of the most striking structures was the futuristic premises of the JQAK radio station on Shotokugai Park, built in the western suburbs of Dalian to avoid interference from the concentration of wireless communications in the port. Construction of the idiosyncratic building began in March 1936 and was completed by October (*see Fig.07 overleaf*).

In 1936 the municipality drafted plans for Dalian to accommodate one million people, extending the city over 16 km to the west. By mid-1938, the city’s population exceeded half a million.⁷⁰ In the city centre, old markets were replaced by sanitary indoor facilities and fashionable department stores that matched those in Tokyo’s Ginza district. Two million yen were spent constructing a ‘Japanese version of a modern shopping quarter’⁷¹ at Rensagai, opposite the railway station. Throughout the 1930s Dalian also boasted a new hospital and museum, and the largest public library in East Asia. Even the fire brigade underwent wholesale modernisation, with new stations designed and built throughout the 1930s in a style and manner that reflected the speed and efficiency of the modern service.⁷²

In 1935, construction began on Dalian’s ‘ultra-modern’ railway station. Being in the centre of the city, numerous houses had to be destroyed to make way for the huge building and the colossal piazza in front. Both were completed by March 1937 and officially opened on 1 June.⁷³ The station stood in an elevated position overlooking the square with approach roads giving access to the station’s entrance on the first floor level via ramps supported on plain concrete pillars. Upon its inauguration a

⁶⁸ Scherer, 1933: 41.

⁶⁹ ‘The Port of Dairen’, *Far Eastern Review* (May 1940): 178.

⁷⁰ The actual figure for July 1938 was 515,743.

⁷¹ ‘The Port of Dairen’, *Far Eastern Review* (May 1940): 178.

⁷² In 1937, 224 fires caused over one million yen of damage in city.

⁷³ The old station was closed on 31 May 1937.

spokesman for the Takaoka Building Contractor claimed fittingly: ‘The SMR has designed the building to be the largest and most stately station along its entire line, a building worthy of Dairen, the gateway to Manchuria.’⁷⁴ Dalian was a model of Manchukuo modernism, but it was not the site of Manchukuo’s ultimate encounter with modernity. This experience occurred further north in the fledgling nation’s newly prescribed heartland: Hsinking (Changchun).

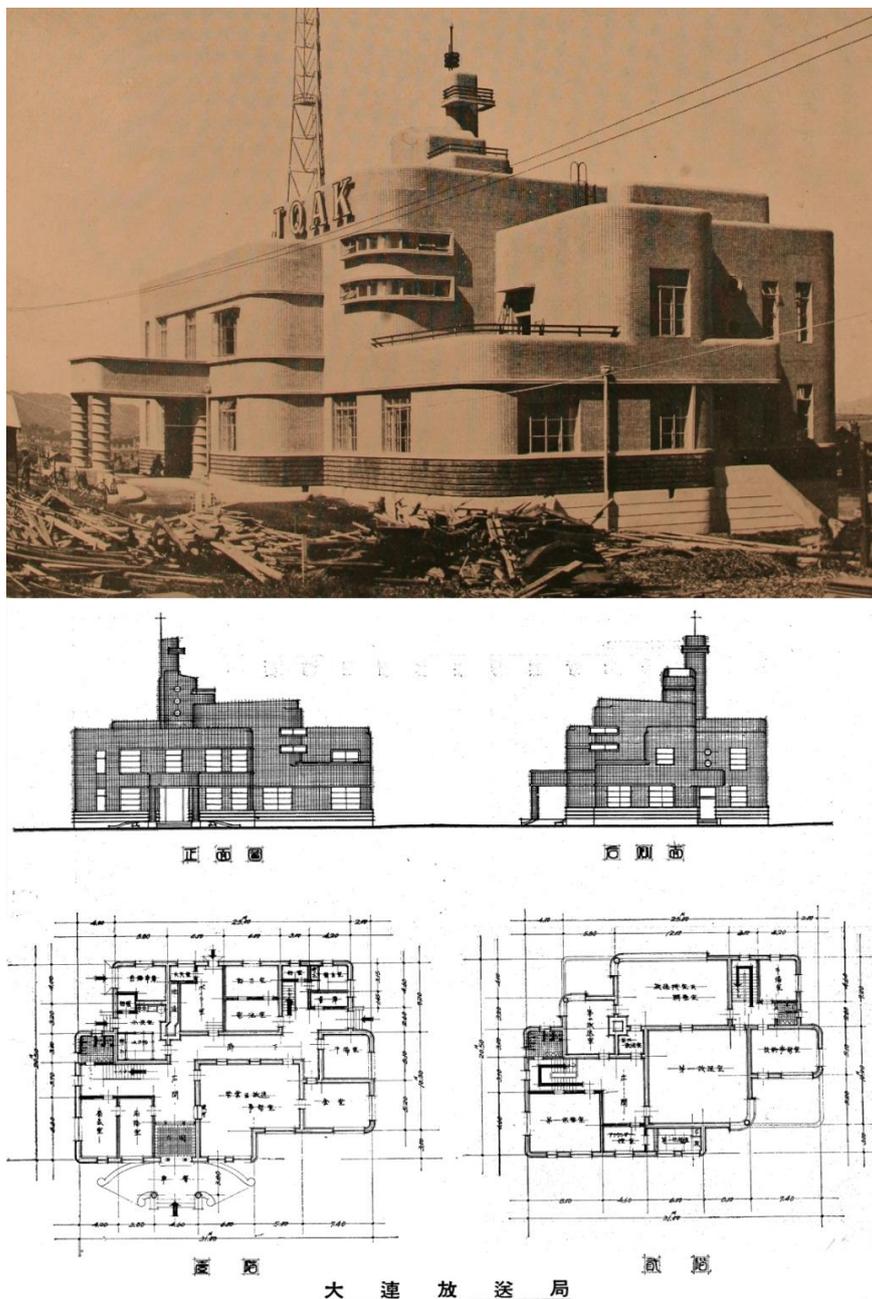


Fig.07: The ‘ultra-modern’ JQAK radio station (1936), with elevations and plans.

⁷⁴ ‘New Railway Station for Port of Dairen Is Being Completed’, *Far Eastern Review* (July 1936): 317.

7. Hsinking: Manchukuo's Ultra-Modernist City

*Hsinking is a true city of the 20th century, and not a casual product of "Colonial" style of the 19th century as so many other cities in the Far East. It is strange to find that ultra-modernism here.*⁷⁵

Hsinking was designated the capital of Manchukuo in March 1932, stealing the region's political heart from the ancient capital of Shenyang. At Hsinking, Japanese planners and architects had the opportunity to design and build their ideal city, almost from scratch. Within days, the new government established the Capital Construction Bureau (CCB) headed by Yūki Kiyotarō, and launched an ambitious Five-Year Capital Construction Plan. The plan was to develop a vast area of agricultural land outside the old Chinese city of Changchun capable of accommodating 1.5 million people (*see Fig.08 overleaf*).⁷⁶ With a budget of 30 million Manchukuo Yen for the first five years, construction began in spring 1933 at such a rapid pace as to be termed derisively 'fast-ism' by the local architectural profession.⁷⁷

Completely new and consciously modern cities had been envisioned on paper by some of the most resolute modernists, such as Le Corbusier, but none had ever been built. Hsinking was the first on this scale, but conventional history tells us that such utopian projects were only accomplished after the Second World War, in the post-colonial era. Hsinking does not fit into conventional accounts of architectural history and thus has been written out entirely—an anomalous victim of historical circumstance defined by three consequent conditions: the west's assumed ownership of modernism, Japan's dishonour, and China's humiliation.

⁷⁵ T. V. Gilchrist, 'Hsinking', *Manchuria* (15 September 1939): 1442.

⁷⁶ This was later scaled back to one million. 'The Birth of a New World Capital', *Far Eastern Review* (July 1936): 296. In 1931, Changchun's population was 128,040, of which 11,483 were Japanese.

⁷⁷ Masami Makino, 'Architecture of the Ten Years of Manchukuo', 19.

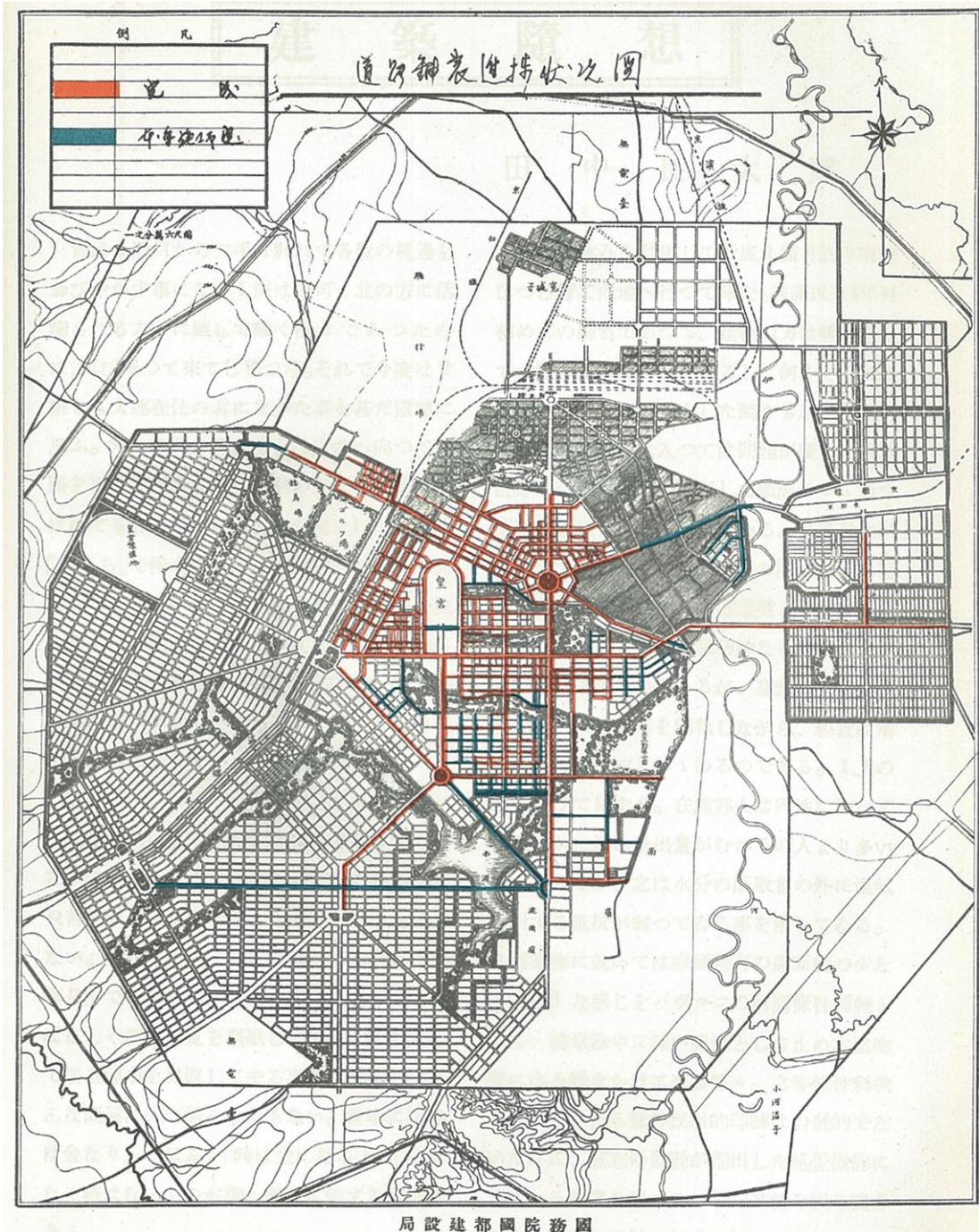


Fig.08: Plan of Hsinking, showing complete and planned road surfacing. The plan is dominated by the Tatung Circle in the centre, with the old SMR Zone to the north and the old Chinese city to the east, the new imperial compound to the west and much of the new capital spreading out to the south and south-west.

Nevertheless, in the fleeting period between Manchukuo's establishment in 1932 and Japan's wholesale invasion of China in 1937, conditions were right for the world's first non-western modernist capital: 'A splendid new capital for a new empire.'⁷⁸ For some, Hsinking was 'a "neo-Japanese" city, in which the ideas of Nippon and those of Europe have been ingeniously blended'.⁷⁹ Others observed 'it did indeed seem to be the town of which Le Corbusier was dreaming.'⁸⁰ But modernism in Hsinking was not that of Le Corbusier or other self-acclaimed modernists in the west. It was inevitably different. Hsinking's urban plan and architecture were entirely Japanese. Hsinking, more than any other city in Manchukuo, defined the aspiration to be ultra-modern—more modern than the motherland. Its built environment embodied Manchukuo's distinct and eclectic encounter with modernity.

The Kwantung Army, the principal authority in commissioning Hsinking's urban plan, appointed Sano Toshikata (1880–1956) as chief advisor. Hsinking's form and layout was characterised by axial roads linking circular nodes that permitted a modern 'rotary system' of traffic management and provided expansive open areas and monumental vistas that dissected a rectilinear grid-system of smaller roads. Such urban planning features had precedents in the west, but the conditions under which Hsinking was being realised were wholly different from the likes of L'Enfant's Washington, DC, Haussmann's Paris, Prost's Casablanca, Burley Griffin's Canberra, or Lutyens's New Delhi. Whether the desired state of 'ultra-modernity' was ever achieved or not in Hsinking is immaterial. Modernity was the driving force behind the city's total planning and design in a way that surpassed these antecedents and was not matched until after the Second World War with modernist urban reconstruction programmes elsewhere in the world and the advent of the post-colonial city.

Densities were kept low by a generous allocation of public parks and open spaces. The undulating landscape helped planners define parks, lakes, and spaces between the different zones—residential, commercial, civic, and industrial—as well as serving as 'excellent centres of refuge in times of emergency'.⁸¹ Parks also played an important role in hosting cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, public halls, zoos, and botanical gardens.

⁷⁸ 'Manchoukuo News', *Manchuria* (1 August 1938): 539.

⁷⁹ *Contemporary Manchuria* 2, no. 3 (May 1938): 124.

⁸⁰ T. V. Gilchrist, 'Hsinking', *Manchuria* (15 September 1939): 1442.

⁸¹ 'The Birth of a New World Capital', 296.

Hsinking's construction plan included an extensive network of road building, the construction of thousands of public and private buildings, a new airport, a meteorological observatory, a wireless station, an athletics stadium, an international racecourse and proposals for an underground railway—second only in Asia to Tokyo's.⁸²

In the first fiscal year (1932–33) 5.2 million Manchukuo yen was spent on constructing seven government buildings, 547 special residences and 160 other structures.⁸³ This more than doubled the following year to 12.6 million Manchukuo yen on the construction of 11 government buildings, 971 special residences, 795 shops, stores, and dwellings, 185 offices and apartments, and 130 Manchu houses. In the third year, expenditure rose by 500 per cent. Over 24 million Manchukuo yen was spent on 12 government buildings and 1,225 special residences, 1,325 shops, stores, and dwellings, and 538 offices and apartments. Construction of government offices continued to rise rapidly throughout 1936, with 42 built in the year, while 'shops, stores, and dwellings' remained stable at 1,384 units and 'special residences' and 'offices and apartments' decreased to just 258 and 344 respectively. The total number of buildings in 'the new building area in the new capital' was 8,243 costing 57.3 million Manchukuo yen.⁸⁴

By the end of 1935, Hsinking's total population had risen to 267,951, of which 51,708 were Japanese. However, despite the prodigious figures, the actual population growth was less than planned and by 1937 was still far short of the 500,000 people that the Japanese had hoped would be living in Hsinking. Even by April 1939, the total population had risen only to 381,135, of which 94,666 were Japanese.⁸⁵

Pre-eminent among Hsinking's new streets was the Chuo-dori (Central Thoroughfare), 'the most representative modern thoroughfare in the city'.⁸⁶ It formed the central section of the city's spine that extended in a straight line from the railway station in the north to the city's southern perimeter. From 1932, the central and southern section of the Chuo-dori was laid out across open fields and named the Tatung Boulevard. This main axis became a stage set on which the drama of this new

⁸² 'The Birth of a New World Capital', 296.

⁸³ 'Capital Construction in Manchoukuo', *Manchuria* (1 February 1937): 72.

⁸⁴ 'Capital Construction In Manchoukuo', 72–74.

⁸⁵ 'Hsinking, Capital of Manchoukuo', *Far Eastern Review* (April 1940): 139.

⁸⁶ 'Hsinking, Capital of Manchoukuo', *Far Eastern Review* (April 1940): 140.

city was dutifully choreographed. Architecture assumed the leading role in this performance, with a host of characters in the form of major public departments, offices, and commercial venues. The ‘severely modern’⁸⁷ Kwantung Army Headquarters (1934), which contained the seat of the Japanese Legation, was housed in a ‘magnificent castle-like structure bearing the Imperial crest of the chrysanthemum’.⁸⁸ The eight-storey Hozan Department Store offered its guests a rooftop garden from which they could admire the attributes of the modern city. Nearby were the Minakai Department Store and the Kotoku Kaikan, a large four-storey crenulated block with rounded corners and turret rising above the main entrance, recalling the battlements of an old city wall. In contrast, next door, was the ‘ultra-modern’ Nikke Gallery, an affiliated concern of the Nippon Woollen Textile Company (*see Fig.09*). An illuminated needle tower crowned the structure in a series of glass panels stepping up in three vertical stages to a flagpole at the summit.

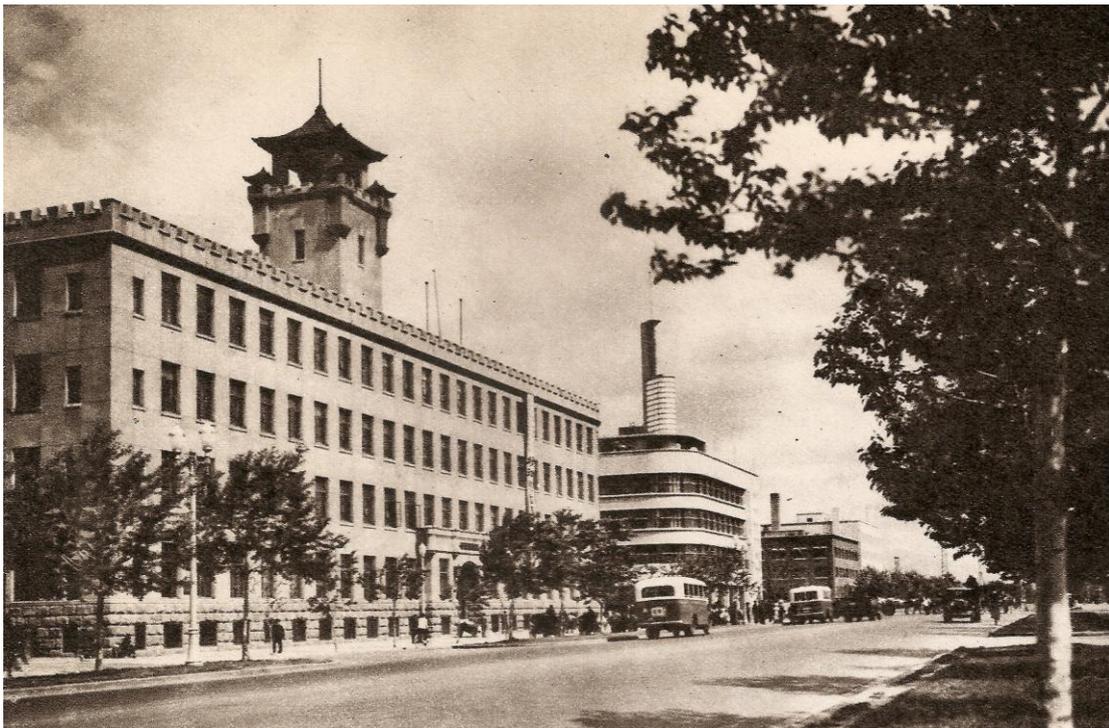


Fig.09: The Tatung Boulevard showing the crenulated Kotoku Kaikan and the ‘ultra-modern’ Nikke Gallery with its illuminated needle tower.

⁸⁷ ‘Souvenir Enthronement Supplement’, 1934: 59.

⁸⁸ ‘Hsinking, Capital of Manchoukuo’, 140.

In the smaller streets behind the Nikke Gallery and Kotoku Kaikan were some of Manchukuo's most modern cinemas: the Asahiza (Morning Sun) and Feng Le (*see Fig.10 overleaf*), a striking brick structure evoking the expressive brickwork of Northern Europe popular in Japan in the 1930s. Hollywood was the staple supplier of films to Manchukuo until the Manchuria Motion Picture Producing and Distributing Corporation (*Manshu Eiga Kyokai*) banned American imports in 1939.⁸⁹ In the absence of Hollywood, the Corporation was tasked with creating Manchukuo's own silver screen from its Hsinking studios that were 'the largest and best equipped in the Orient'.

The vast annular form of the Tatung Circle punctuated the Tatung Boulevard's straight line about a third of the way down its length, creating the city's centrepiece. Like an enormous version of Dalian's central circus, the Tatung Circle was an urban spectacle that formed the heart of the city plan. Six roads radiated from the Tatung Circle, between which were some of Hsinking's most important buildings: the headquarters of the Telephone and Telegraph Company, the Police Headquarters, Hsinking Special City Hall, the Capital Construction Bureau, and the headquarters of the Central Bank of Manchu, designed by Kensuke Yokoi.⁹⁰

To the west, standing at the northern end of the Shuntian Highway, was the State Council, designed by Ishi Tatzuro and the most important civic building in Manchukuo (*see Fig.11*). Completed in 1936, the design was based on the controversial National Diet Building (1918–36) in Tokyo, designed by Kikutaro Shimoda, who created the *teikan-yōshiki* or 'crown topped' style. At the southern end of the Shuntian Highway was the Manchoukuo Mixed Court (1939), a monumental steel framed structure clad in brick and topped with an 'oriental' roof. Nearby was the South Lake Complex, which was the site of a new suburban district for wealthy Japanese residents and businesses commissioned by the Japanese government in 1939. Junzo Sakakura (1901–69), who was working in Le Corbusier's office at the time, was invited to design the large mixed-use scheme of offices, apartments, and villas. Plans were drafted but the complex was never built.

⁸⁹ Construction of the Manchuria Motion Picture Producing and Distributing Corporation studios began in 1937 and was completed in 1939.

⁹⁰ The Central Bank of Manchu was established on 15 June 1932 and had 150 branches in Manchukuo and one in Tokyo.

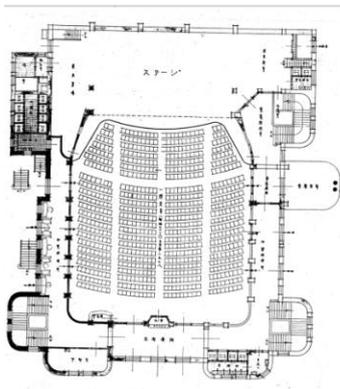


Fig.10: The Feng Le Cinema (1936), Hsinking. Clockwise from top left: Exterior after completion, interior from upper gallery, first-floor plan.



Fig.11: The State Council (1936), designed by Ishi Tatzuro.

Nevertheless, the project's scale and ambition, like a microcosm of Manchukuo more broadly, made a significant impact on a generation of young Japanese architects. Kenzo Tange (1913–2005), an employee of Le Corbusier's other Japanese apprentices, Kunio Maekawa (1905–86), travelled around Manchukuo and worked with Sakakura on the South Lake Complex. Tange would become one of Japan's most celebrated post-war architects and in 1960 drew on his experience in Hsinking to design the celebrated and influential plan for Tokyo Bay. Maekawa, like many Japanese architects in the 1930s, exploited Japan's invasion of China in 1937 by opening an office in Shanghai in 1939.

Hsinking's ultra-modernity, like so many modernist visions of utopia, was encountered more fully on paper than in concrete reality. Despite the considerable efforts of the state-sponsored media and hired foreign hacks, the pan-Asian co-prosperity dream that the Japanese claimed Manchukuo represented quickly turned into a nightmare of global proportions. 'In Europe modernism expresses itself in slaughter and destruction,' asserted one visitor in 1939, firmly in denial; 'Here it

finds its expression in planned construction.’⁹¹ On 7 July 1937, Japan launched its all out invasion of China as the grisly preface to the Second World War.

For Manchukuo, construction peaked in 1937 and would never again return to the same feverish levels experienced in the preceding five years. Despite the deteriorating situation, many professionals engaged in realising Manchukuo’s modernist city remained in their posts at the SMR, the CCB or numerous municipal authorities throughout Manchukuo during the war. However, as the tide turned, they were left stranded and exposed—the incidental flotsam marking the high-water mark of empire. These individuals and their families, friends, and colleagues would pay a terrible price for their involvement—for many, it cost them their lives.

⁹¹ T. V. Gilchrist, ‘Hsinking’, 1442.

8. The End

*Western writers visiting Manchuria have claimed that here is found a picture of what Japan will be in the future.*⁹²

The full horror of Japan's imperial project is still being debated. The rape of entire cities is still officially denied by many and Japan's continued honouring of known war criminals keeps old wounds festering. Throughout the Second World War, tens of thousands of Manchukuo's non-Japanese residents died at the hands of the Kwantung Army. Most notorious were Unit 731 in Harbin and Unit 100 in Hsinking,⁹³ which operated a covert programme of human experimentation ranging from vivisection without anaesthesia to research in biological warfare that killed thousands. As the imperial edifice crumbled, the oppressed turned on the oppressor. Manchukuo became a site of slaughter, as Chinese and Russian residents of Manchuria visited revenge on their former imperial masters.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Stalin promised that the Soviet Union would join the Pacific War within three months of Germany's surrender. News of Hitler's eventual downfall reached Moscow on 9 May. Exactly three months later, almost to the hour, a vast Soviet army of one million soldiers arrived on Manchukuo's doorstep for the final showdown in Asia. In the early hours of 9 August, two vast Soviet armies embarked on the biggest pincer movement in history to wrench Manchukuo from its beleaguered imperial host by severing the lifeline of the SMR.

For some, Manchukuo was the illegitimate offspring of the non-consensual liaison between China and Japan—the bastard child of imperialism delivered into a dysfunctional and violent domestic environment doomed to fail. To others, it was a window on the future. Either way, Manchukuo represented an encounter with architectural modernity that was unique in scale, time, and context. Despite this significance, it has escaped historical attention. Only recently has a reappraisal of modernity generated a wider acceptance of its complex character and genuine multiplicity. As the author of *Manchoukuo: Jewel of Asia* observed, 'Not only are

⁹² Kinney, 1929: 44; 1930: 48.

⁹³ Other units were established throughout China, including Unit 1644 in Nanjing and Unit 8604 in Guangzhou.

actual conditions [in the East] quite different from western conditions, but events seem to take place in an entirely different way.’⁹⁴

After the war, Manchukuo’s modernism lived on in Japan through the work of some of the most accomplished protagonists, such as Maekawa, Arata, and Tange. But that was in the future. Hours after the Soviet army entered Manchukuo on 9 August 1945, Fat Man fell on Nagasaki. The combined effect of the Soviet invasion and two atomic bombs in three days brought an end to the global war and an end to Japan’s empire and its modernist dream. The desolate landscapes of post-war Hiroshima and Nagasaki echoed the barren plains on which Manchuria’s modern cities had been built; both brutal reminders of the overwhelming and often contradictory forces of modernity. Manchukuo was returned to China. Within five years, its neighbour, Korea, returned to war and China turned to Communism. Manchukuo’s fleeting tryst with modernity was swiftly overtaken by history and plunged into obscurity—too humiliating for China, too shameful for Japan, too dishonourable for Russia and too remote for the west, which, as victor in 1945, earned the right to pen modernism’s official history.

⁹⁴ Collier, 1936: 248.

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