



A NEW JAPANESE TEMPLE FOR MODERN TIMES



In April 2013, the new Dououji Temple was inaugurated in Takanawa, Tokyo. The temple belongs to the Pure Land sect of Japanese Buddhism. Originally built in the Edo era in the 17th century, it houses a holy Goddess of Mercy and is one of Edo's 33 celebrated pilgrimage temples. In the early planning stage of this project, there was a choice between the old temple's renovation or a new construction. Reflecting on the roles of the temple for the future, the chief priest decided to build a new temple.

Dououji Temple is situated on a difficult site; halfway up a hill, backed by a large apartment building at the top. The new three-storey temple building has its main hall on the first floor, the multi-purpose rooms on the ground floor, and the dwelling for the priest family in an annex on the 3rd floor. The total floor area is about 1.240 square meters. The structure is of reinforced concrete and a partially wooden structure (the laminated timbers of Douglas fir) which forms the roof beams, pillars, and diagonal braces that support the large pent roof, whose curved surface characterises the building's appearance.



The main hall on the first floor is on the same level as the facing roadway, and a covered walkway from the gate on the roadway side leads to the entrance. The composition of approaches from the gate to the entrance is not done in a monotonous linear manner; by exquisitely combining curves and angles through the approaches,



the architect has succeeded in letting the visitors enjoy seeing the building as well as the gardens at the lower level. As they walk along the walkway with its five brownish wooden pillars, people will feel the structural robustness and elegance of the temple.

Sliding back the entrance door, the visitors arrive at the reception, where white walls and a black ceiling, together with a minimalistic design of strips of black-painted wood create beautiful Japanese style. The combination of white and black and the green of the plants with artworks on the wall generates a modern and warm harmony.

Adjoining the inner corridor, the wide open main hall spreads out to the left. To design this temple, Masaki Ogawa, the Japanese architect who undertook the project, both reviewed the history of Japanese Buddhist architecture and considered the temple's role for the future. The key elements were the position of Buddha's statue, the shape and height of the roof, and the inclusion of garden views and natural light in the interior.

In the early Japanese Buddhist temples, according to Masaki Ogawa, the statue of Buddha used to be placed at the centre, allowing people to see and pray to it from all angles as they moved around. However, as Buddhism grew, and the space in the hall was needed to fit as many people in as possible, the statues were pushed deep into the dimly-lit, low-ceilinged insides. (In fact, the darkness of many existing temples seems to be one of the main factors distancing Buddhism from contemporary Japanese life.)

The design concept of Dououji Temple was to allow both movement around the statue and enough space for people to gather, and to fill the hall with natural light to bring about spiritual openness and spaciousness. The bright light from high side windows filters into the hall, and the glass pane behind the Buddha's statue reflects the scenery of the exterior greenery. On top of that, a light tower installed high above the statue casts a brilliant light over it, and highlights its golden tone that dates back to the Edo era. The dynamic diagonal braces supporting the roof are reminiscent of the shape of the traditional temple's ceiling, and disperse the bright light through their narrow openings; there is no recollection of a conventional dim temple here.

Also worth noting are the patterns of flower petals, which are hollowed out (like "ranma" – Japanese openwork screen) on the light tower's surface, and scatter small lights around the hall, adding a unique beauty. Its design motif was the lotus flower used during "sanga" at Buddhism rituals when - lotus flower leaves are thrown to commemorate Buddha.





Louis Poulsen's Aeros pendants, designed by Ross Lovegrove, were used for the lighting in the hall. According to Masaki Ogawa, the reason for choosing the lamp was not only for its functional light and design, but also because he saw, in the design concept of Aeros, something in common with Oriental philosophy - "samsara", the cycle of reincarnation. (The embossed pattern on the surface of Aeros is based on Fibonacci spirals, alluding to a microcosm of the universe, and the structure of bone tissue influenced the thousands of holes on the shade.) The large 72cm-diameter pendants made of ultra-thin aluminum in a "golden sand" colour harmoniously float in the Dououji hall, as if they were specially designed for this temple.

In the last half of the 20th century, the day-to-day relationship between the Japanese and Buddhism lost its intensity. Nowadays, the Japanese people's contact with temples may be limited to funerals and memorial services. The new Dououji Temple renews the older image of Buddhist temples, and its excellent architectural design will be favourably accepted by contemporary Japanese people. The temple has the potential to inspire new activities and usages including, for instance, the revival of Buddhist-style weddings that faded away a long time ago.

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