



# The Aneha Syndrome

## Part 1: Don't lynch Aneha – blame the flawed system.

When I was invited last year to an ACCJ forum about the pitfalls of finding the right architect, I recalled former General Electric Co. CEO Jack Welch saying his main task had been hiring the right staff.

From the perspective of a client, real estate agent, project manager and building contractor, the "Selecting an Architect" forum asked, "Why do we need architects?" and "What is the architect's role?"

It seemed silly to me at the time. I wondered: Is architecture such an esoteric, misunderstood profession that it needs to defend or explain itself? The dictionary says an architect "designs buildings and supervises their construction." Yet, the profession

has the image in Japan of being a superfluous luxury in the construction process.

The sad result of this mentality can be seen by looking out the window.

We architects are thoroughly trained in a wide range of subjects and can advise clients on all aspects of property. Construction is a very complex procedure and people need to have someone they trust to guide them through this daunting task. The recent fake earthquake-data scandal involving first-class certified architect Hidetsugu Aneha won't improve the image of architects. It is well documented that Aneha was hired to perform structural calculations, and that he stands accused of forging documents to reduce reinforcements in the

specifications to cut costs. This, as you can guess, weakens the structure with potentially devastating effects, particularly in a country as prone to earthquakes as Japan.

According to Prof. Charles Scawthorn, an earthquake disaster-prevention expert at Kyoto University, the Aneha scandal is a result of the ever-increasing "commoditization" of engineering. Indeed, referring to books such as Thorstein Veblen's *The Engineers And The Price System* (Kessinger, 2004), Scawthorn sees commoditization as a crisis that many professions face. In my opinion, the media frenzy focused too sharply on one man, ignoring the bigger picture. Should we believe that removing one bad apple would cure the rotten bunch?

By Martin van der Linden / The Aneha Syndrome

Japan is an architecturally confused country.

### Concrete jungle

Many visitors to Japan seem shocked by its ugly cities. The amount of concrete that blights Japan's cities and countryside is astronomical. Alex Kerr's excellent book, *Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan* (Penguin Books, 2002), exposes the process that led to the gargantuan construction site that is Japan.

When I first came here, in 1988, my arrival in Kyoto was a rather disappointing affair. Coming from Maastricht, a Dutch city with a rich 2,000-year history, I expected much more from the 1,200-year-old "cultural heart of Japan," as the tourist brochure boasted. Stepping off the Shinkansen, I walked into a dreary shack masquerading as a train station that was surrounded by dull, gray nondescript 10-story buildings. In Maastricht, like in many European cities, almost every city-center building is listed as a monument for preservation, ensuring it appears much the same as when my great-great-grandfather strolled through town in the late 16th century.

Despite being spared the WWII bombs that flattened many other cities, Kyoto has not successfully resisted the post-war assault by concrete that has poured over much of Japan.

The beautiful old temples, Kyoto's main attractions, are like tiny island time capsules trapped by a relentless sea of concrete. Irony would have it that four

years later I would return to Japan, but this time as an architect working on the new Japan Railways (JR) Kyoto Station.

In Maastricht, our cultural baggage controls architects working in the city. But to my amazement I found that JR would dominate the Kyoto project, dictating the size of the station, which also contains a hotel, department stores, shops, theater and parking for hundreds of cars. The proposed size of the enormous building prompted some protests from the residents of Kyoto.

Although Hiroshi Hara won the international competition to design the project with his concept that involved the city in a kind of abstract way, there was very little even he could do about JR's requirements: A box structure 470m long, 60m high and 55m wide.

### Best and worst

Japan is an architecturally confused country. Despite ubiquitous domestic urban and rural evidence that could suggest the contrary, many internationally acclaimed architects are Japanese. Tadao Ando, a former boxer who never attended architecture school, and Yoshio Taniguchi are behind some of the most prestigious projects in the world and have been showered with top awards. Ando received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1995, placing him firmly on the international stage, which led to design commissions in the U.S. and Europe. Minoru Takeyama

and others have achieved global recognition for architectural avant-garde successes. Charles Jencks' influential book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (Rizzoli, 1988), displays cover photographs of Takeyama's amazing towers in Shinjuku's Kabukicho district as icons of post-modernism.

Minimalism, which seems to be the latest fad in architecture magazines, not only has its nonsense and simplicity-obsessed Japanese roots, but also has launched a whole new younger generation to new heights abroad, such as Kazuo Sejima.

These developments have helped put Japan on the map of countries that produce world-class architects and clients who are not afraid to create unusual buildings, although most of their best work is lost in the urban jungle.

There are two distinct types of architectural businesses in Japan. Hara's office, where I worked, is called an atelier. All the well-known domestic architects are ateliers, which are usually small operations run by between one and 30 staff members, some of whom could be architects, and led by the main architect, which the company is named after.

The atelier suggests a rather romantic notion of a design-driven company. But, ateliers are there to serve the egos of their creators. Working for an atelier is not unlike entering a cult, the obsession with design sometimes attaining the level of fanaticism.