Map of Tobikan's Highlights

Welcome, Visitors!
If you head home after just seeing an exhibition or two, you'd be missing out.
Why not take a stroll around the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (nicknamed "*Tobikan*") with this map in your hands?

QR Translator

You are in a work of art called "*Tobikan*"

Mayekawa Kunio, who designed the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, was one of the leading Japanese architects of the 20th century.
From 1960 onwards, he designed many museums. Each one is a gem, and Mayekawa's style and favorite features can be found in all of them.

Exciting approach

Step through Ueno Park's groves and into the premises, and you will be led along an exciting walk to the Museum's entrance that takes you on a zig-zag detour one second, then below ground level the next.

Choice of materials

Mayekawa's stance, in his own words, was to "produce extraordinary results out of ordinary materials."
By incorporating features such as cast-in tiles, which take a lot of time and effort to build, he gave *Tobikan*'s architecture composure and grace.

Mayekawa the gourmet

Mayekawa was a food lover who once said, "it isn't right that you can't have nice food at a museum." That's why *Tobikan* has its own restaurants right at the front.

Sense of movement

By joining blocks of the same shape with corridors, and by staggering them, Mayekawa created a building with a sense of motion and transformation. The Citizen's Galleries, for example, consist of four identical blocks staggered and placed next to each other.

A place to meet

Museums are urban spaces. Mayekawa believed that open spaces like the Esplanade and the Inner Court, where people can meet and wander at will, should be the center of cities.

At one with the scenery

By setting almost 60% of the building underground, Mayekawa kept *Tobikan*'s height low so that it harmonizes with the surrounding scenery. Doesn't *Tobikan* blend right into Ueno's groves?

Overview of Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum

Tobikan opened as the Tokyo Prefectural Art Museum in 1926 (designed by Okada Shinichiro). Due to aging, constructions began on the new building in 1972 under architect Mayekawa Kunio, and were completed in March 1975. The Museum boasts an area of approx. 12,000 m², with three floors below ground and two floors above. The outer wall is made of burnt-brick cast-in tiles. Renovations started in 2010 and finished in 2012 for the Museum's reopening.

Tobira Investigates! The Real Mayekawa Kunio

Be a foster parent!

"You can't just make a building and abandon it. Architects have to be both birth parent and foster parent."

A big eater

When it came to food, Mayekawa's rule was "quantity first, quality second." He often treated his staff to expensive sushi in Ginza.

Passion for colors

"If I wasn't an architect, I probably would have wanted to paint walls for a living."

They called him Captain

His staff nicknamed him Taisho – "Captain"– out of respect for his warm, generous nature.

A wealthy upbringing

"He was a Meiji-era man – a well-bred boy from a good family."

His favorite white Jaguar

He fell in love with the car in Europe, drove it over the Alps, then had it shipped to Japan afterwards.

Humming arias

He could sometimes be found merrily drawing away in his office, with a pencil in his hand and an opera tune on his lips.

The Amazing Life of Mayekawa Kunio

1905

Mayekawa was born in Niigata, and grew up in Tokyo around Hongo. His father Mayekawa Kan-ichi worked as a civil engineer for the Home Ministry. His youngest brother Haruo, Kunio's junior by six years, was the later governor of the Bank of Japan.

1928

Graduated from Tokyo Imperial University, majoring in architecture. He left for Paris on the Trans-Siberian Railway on the day of graduation, to apprentice at Le Corbusier's office.

1975

Completion of Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (Taito-ku), a work filled with the appeal of Mayekawa's architecture.

Mayekawa architecture you can visit right away!

There are many buildings other than *Tobikan* that Mayekawa designed. People still use and treasure his buildings today, with some having been partially renovated.
Here are his surviving works near *Tobikan*. (🔨 indicates works that have been partially renovated.)

Locations of Mayekawa's architecture
※The numbers correspond to the numbers in the timeline.

1 1942 Mayekawa's own house (reconstructed in Koganei City)
2 1954 Kanagawa Prefectural Library and Music Hall (Nishi-ku, Yokohama) 🔨
3 1955 International House of Japan (Minato-ku: Co-designed with Sakakura Junzo and Yoshimura Junzo) 🔨
4 1959 Setagaya Community Centre and Town Hall (Setagaya-ku)
5 1961 Tokyo Bunka Kaikan (Taito-ku) 🔨
6 1964 Books Kinokuniya Shinjuku Main Store (Shinjuku-ku) 🔨
7 1974 Tokyo Marine & Nichido Fire Insurance Head Office (Chiyoda-ku)
8 1975 Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (Taito-ku) 🔨
9 1979 The National Museum of Western Art New Wing (Taito-ku: Main Building was designed by Le Corbusier, Mayekawa's teacher. Registered as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016)
10 1986 Passed away on June 26 at the age of 81. Laid to rest in a grave of his own design in Senjuin Temple (Sendagaya, Shibuya-ku)

Produced by: Tobira Project (Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum & Tokyo University of the Arts), "Architectural Map Tobi-Labo" (2013)
Support: Mayekawa Associates, Architects & Engineers, and Fuji Yogyo Translator: Yasumasa Kawata (Art Translators Collective)
Reference: Mayekawa Kunio: Deshitachi wa kataru ("Mayekawa Kunio Through the Eyes of His Students," pub. Kenchiku Shiryo Kenkyusha)
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1. Sculpture garden

Open-air sculptures welcome you into the Museum, against the backdrop of Ueno Park's groves. There are 10 works in total for you to enjoy: *my sky hole 85-2 light and shadow*, a stainless steel sphere that reflects the surrounding scenery; the enchantingly titled *Möbius Cube*; *the upside-down umbrella Sakasa*, and many more.

2. History's scar

Over the Museum's main entrance, there is a line on the building's façade, a trace of the oil crisis in 1974. Delays in the supply of concrete meant that the first pour of concrete set before the next pour could be made. When the construction staff apologized, Mayekawa is said to have replied nonchalantly: "It looks like the ridges of the Alps."

3. Hammered concrete

Go down the escalator leading to the main entrance, and you will find weighty arches on both sides. Their coarse surface was achieved by a technique that involves hammering the surface of the set concrete with a chisel or similar. The resulting texture, all produced manually by craftsmen, takes on different appearances under different lighting conditions.

4. *Tobikan*'s tombi

The courtyard is surrounded by handrails with Y-shaped supports, which Mayekawa referred to as tombi (kite) after the predator bird. Simple and slick in design, they also provide safety and stability by absorbing tremors. The reddish-brown weathering steel was one of Mayekawa's favorite materials, as it helped him realize his goal of "architecture that stands the test of time." The material is beautiful even when rusted.

5. Vaulted ceiling

You will find vaulted ceilings here and there in the Museum. They have been constructed by hanging rectangular panels on a steel frame with hooks, and then fixing them in place. It is Indian sandstone that gives the ceiling its warm pinkish hue, creating a mild and tranquil atmosphere.

6. "Holey" moley!

The exterior of the wall may look like brickwork, but it's actually all made of tiles. Some of them have holes in the middle, and if you look closely, there are also two smaller holes by the grooves. These differently sized holes are crucial to Mayekawa's beloved "cast-in tile" method, and also serve to accent the appearance of the wall.

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7. *Omusubi* everywhere

One of the motifs of Mayekawa's architecture is the *omusubi* shape (an omusubi is a Japanese rice ball), a rounded triangle. Look up the stairway at the center of the Lobby floor, and it's the shape of an omusubi. The information desk, another omusubi. The tables in the Sato Keitaro Memorial Salon – all omusubi. There may be others – why not try to find them?

8. Smooth handrails

The handrails in the stairways have their corners rounded off, giving them gentle curves. This design inherits the meticulous ethos of Mayekawa, whose work showed regard for the softness of the touch, and for the kimono's long sleeves that might catch on edges. Notice also the beautiful grain patterns of the wood, which was cut out of timber blocks.

9. Shower of light

The Gallery is full of Mayekawa's distinctive touches, like the arched ceiling and the same floor tiling from 1975. When the curtains in the large window are opened, soft daylight pours into the Gallery, and the scenery outside, framed by the window, takes on the look of a painting. In spring, you can see cherry blossoms outside.

10. Then and now

You will find colorful chairs and stools around the Museum. During the recent renovation, the seats were reupholstered based on color samples from before, and the chair legs were extended for better comfort. The photograph is of the chairs in the resting area by the Citizen's Gallery.

11. "Getting a taste" of the Museum

One of the appeals of *Tobikan* is its stylish restaurants, which Mayekawa – a known food lover – positioned at the heart of the Museum. There are currently three places to eat and drink, including a café. You can enjoy course menus at the restaurant on the 1st floor, where the café is also situated. For the restaurant on the 2nd floor, we recommend the window tables with their beautiful view.

12. Evening view at *Tobikan*

As nightfall approaches, the walls light up in red, blue, yellow and green in the dusk, creating a warm and serene atmosphere. Depending on where you stand, you will see the walls in different colors. It is only for a fleeting period just before sunset that you can enjoy this view during the Museum's opening hours.