

ODE TO THE OKURA

The days are numbered for this landmark hotel, where echoes of 1960s Tokyo glamor are destined to give way to the crash of the wrecking ball
BY REBECCA MILNER

In a city like Tokyo, there is something particularly decadent about a building that sprawls horizontally as the Hotel Okura does. It's such a flagrant misuse of space, especially in the heart of downtown. And oh, how the Okura sprawls—its grounds cover an expanse more than three times the size of the city's baseball stadium. It has its own post office, its own barbershop, a private art museum, a tea ceremony room, and a salon just for playing *go*, an ancient board game akin to chess.

Opened in 1962 in the Toranomon business district, the Hotel Okura is a window into the luxuries of another time, when seats in coach had legroom and nobody had ever heard of molecular gastronomy. The genteel Orchid Room restaurant still serves things like lobster thermidor, brought to the table by tuxedoed waiters. Lobby attendants wear kimonos. But it couldn't last forever; it's a miracle it lasted as long as it did.

The past decade in Tokyo has seen a crop of luxury hotels pop up like bamboo shoots after the rain, as the Japanese say. They are all models of efficiency and all cast in the same mold: a skyscraper with the first 20 or more floors housing offices and then, in the top floors, the hotel. This is contemporary Tokyo, ever more streamlined.

Soon, the Okura will be no different. On the last day of next August, its main building (an annex was added in 1973) will shut its doors, and when those doors reopen in the spring of 2019—a year ahead of the Tokyo Olympics—they will be within a 38-story glass tower.



Gone will be the endless corridors; offices will occupy the new building's first 18 floors. Half the land will be turned over to a public park. It's hard to find fault with the latter, and there's no doubt the reopening will receive much fanfare. New openings usually do, and Tokyo always has a new opening.

What the city doesn't have, however, is many outstanding examples of 1960s design, especially those with the power to make design wonks go weak in the knees. Case in point: *Monocle* magazine has launched a quixotic campaign to save the hotel's main building, as when this landmark goes, so too

will its iconic vision of Japanese modernism. It feels like the passing of an aging Hollywood star, the last of her era.

When the Hotel Okura debuted in advance of the first Tokyo Olympics, it was the height of '60s glamour. Royalty, heads of state, and diplomats checked in, as did celebrities like John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who holed up for several months in the Okura's Presidential Suite in 1977. Even James Bond stayed here in the Ian Fleming novel *You Only Live Twice* (though the hotel that appears in the film version is actually the rival Hotel New Otani), and it's no stretch at all to picture a young Sean

COURTESY OF HOTEL OKURA TOKYO



MARKING TIME Clockwise from left: A vintage photo of a banquet at the Hotel Okura's Emerald Room, where waiters still wear tuxedos and bowties; the unique design of the hotel's lobby blends '60s sensibilities with the traditional colors, textures, and crafts of Japan; the main building's modernist facade. Opposite: Pendant lamps still hang in the Okura's lobby, though not for much longer.

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Connery—or *Mad Men's* Don Draper—at the Orchid Bar, sipping a martini on one of its black-leather banquettes.

As with many of the structures built for the 1964 Olympics, the Hotel Okura was intended to showcase the very best of Japanese design. Lead architect Yoshio Taniguchi, who was also responsible for Tokyo's Imperial Theater and Museum of Modern Art (his son, Yoshio, would go on to redesign the MoMA in New York City) arranged the main building as a stack of horizontal planes—like a pagoda, but without the curling edges—and imprinted the outer walls with a crosshatch pattern that nods

to a decorative style favored by the rich merchants of centuries past.

Sure, the guest rooms feel a little old-fashioned now. But oh, the lobby! Never was there a better example of what excellent bedfellows mid-century modernism and Japan's traditional aesthetic could be. A great expanse of carpet the color of *tatami* straw runs toward windows shaded with paper screens. The tables, perfect discs, look like lacquer trays polished to a high sheen. And the chandeliers, strings of faceted orbs, dangle like gemstones from the ears of a starlet.

On one wall, there's a world clock that con-

tinues to mark the time in Leningrad, as if to demonstrate that time really does stand still at the Okura. The chandeliers might survive the renovation and be installed in the lobby's next incarnation, but I have doubts about the clock. The months are numbered for this and other relics of the jet-setting 1960s. Until then, should you find yourself passing through Tokyo, raise a glass—a Manhattan maybe, or an Old Fashioned—to the Hotel Okura, a Tokyo icon that will be sorely missed. ©

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