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Tokyo Builds A Microcosm Of Itself

By JAMES BROOKE
Published: January 4, 2004

LET'S meet at the spider.

A year ago, that invitation had no meaning. But since April 1, the 30-foot-high Louise Bourgeois bronze sculpture has tiptoed into Tokyo's collective consciousness. The children of Japanese who once worried about Godzilla are now sheltered by the eight welcoming limbs of an arachnid formally called "Maman."

The spider is the jumping-off point for exploring Roppongi Hills, Tokyo's new "city in a city," two miles from the Ginza, in Roppongi, a neighborhood of bars, restaurants and upscale housing.

For style-obsessed Tokyo, always striving to be 10 degrees ahead of New York and London, this 29-acre, \$4 billion complex of curving glass, minimalist metal and earthy stone arrives after a decade in gestation, offering an enticing conglomeration: cutting-edge restaurants, shopping, a hotel, movie theaters and art, as well as a 54-story office tower and a residential complex. Exploring Roppongi Hills is a new key to understanding Japan today -- and tomorrow.

Although 99 percent of the clientele is Japanese, the new complex is deliberately welcoming to English speakers. Signs are largely bilingual and tenants are under orders from Minoru Mori, the real-estate force behind the ambitious development, to hire employees with basic English skills. The omnipresent free brochures, however, with such

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titles as "Artelligent Christmas," "Hills Life" and "Floor Guide," turn out to be all in Japanese.

Still, remarked a friend over drinks, "The English here is better than at the Imperial Hotel." Rick Herman, a portfolio manager from Philadelphia, had temporarily defected from the Imperial, Tokyo's famous downtown standby, to join my wife, Elizabeth, and me at Maduro, the elegant new bar in the Grand Hyatt Tokyo at Roppongi Hills. Exuding an exclusive clublike air, the bar's door is a gray, anonymous block that silently slides open on approach.

With warm, subdued lighting and an impressive wine list, Maduro was to be named Morgan, until the designer, a New Yorker, learned that the two anchor tenants of the Roppongi Hills office tower were to be Lehman Brothers and Goldman Sachs.

Even though Elizabeth and I were staying at the Hyatt, Maduro would not take reservations. But the tables were plentiful before dinner. Peeking in after dinner, we discovered that there was a \$14 cover charge, and the place was filled with Tokyo's beautiful people.

For dinner, we went to Juniper, a Hyatt restaurant about 50 feet away -- which, like many excursions in Roppongi Hills, involved briefly getting lost. A Scandinavian-Japanese fusion menu at Juniper is based on the lean cuisine of northern Europe and served with Japanese attention to detail and subtlety. The smoked salmon and turbot came in just the right size portions to be savored, not gobbled. A D.J. played music, but not so loud that it impeded conversation.

After dinner, we strolled from the Hyatt, down Keyakizaka Street, window shopping our way past Louis Vuitton, Courrèges, Coach and La Perla lingerie. Just the way the mature trees add instant grace to the eight-month-old street, the high-class lineup of stores is making Keyakizaka an overnight competitor with the Ginza, Tokyo's Fifth Avenue, albeit with a neon touch.

Modern Japan's best buzz meter is the concentration of cellphone cameras. On that Friday night, the cameras were out in force: couples on dates taking self-portraits in front of the Christmas tree sculpture and knots of office workers gathering, slightly inebriated, for year-end snapshot e-mail messages.

The setting of the winter sun had provoked the disappearance of those who populate the place during the day: the fashionistas, the strollers through the gingkos and ponds of the one-acre traditional Japanese garden, and the high-tech tourists each equipped with a headset as if on a museum tour.

Some of the tourists had ducked inside the nearby TV Asahi headquarters building to sip tea at the cafe overlooking the garden or to browse in the lobby, decorated with costumes

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Others had gone upward, 700 feet up to the sky deck, Tokyo City View, reached by elevators that whisk visitors 52 stories up the Mori Tower, the glass-sheathed centerpiece of the complex.

Peering through glass walls that seem to be polished every 18 minutes, a visitor can walk around the main office tower, to see all of Tokyo, night or day. Perhaps the world's only high-rise that sells gin and tonics and wasabi muffins, its sky deck is open early enough to see Mount Fuji lighted by the morning sun and late enough to allow couples on dates to cuddle.

The City View ticket -- \$14.25 for adults and \$4.75 for younger children (at 109 yen to the dollar) -- also allows admission to the Mori Art Museum, (the Mori Art Museum is part of the Mori Arts Center) on the two floors above the observation deck, at the pinnacle of the complex. Lured initially by the city panorama, visitors flow naturally up escalators and into the galleries of the full-size big-city modern art museum.

As with the museum's first exhibition on the theme of "Happiness: A Survival Guide for Art and Life," running through Jan. 18, the idea is to assemble pieces from different countries, from different media, to create a fleeting intellectual moment, and then to move on.

The museum has no permanent collection (the next exhibition, "Roppongi Crossing: New Vision of Japanese Art 2004," runs from Feb. 7 to April 11). David S. Elliott, the director, is from Britain, making him the first foreigner to run a museum in Japan.

Back at ground level that Friday evening, the sake had been flowing. A tipsy young jaywalker shook with giggles as her girlfriends labored to extricate her boot heel from a chain fence along the sidewalk.

Then they then collapsed onto Droog Design's pink sofa. Designed to be admired -- and sat upon -- Roppongi Hills' "street furniture" includes Shigeru Uchida's benchlike red ribbon and Tokujin Yoshioka's translucent chair.

At night, the outdoor furniture takes on a magical aspect as fizzy white light rotates across walls and one sidewalk glows with indented lights in the shape of blue diamonds. High atop the office tower, a bowtie effect of lights and shadows looks vaguely like the black bat shadow once projected in the Gotham sky to call Batman.

Leaving the fantasy of the streets, we walked into Starbucks, which is a port of entry to Tsutaya, a two-level store that sells books, magazines and the kind of manga (comic books) and anime (cartoons) that are now Japan's cultural calling card the world over.

From there, we wended our way up one escalator and past Virgin Cinemas, where our



13-year-old son, James, has undoubtedly seen enough movies to allow him to fly to Shanghai on his Cinemileage card.

We passed the food court, where a bagelry sells minibagels, and then down an escalator to Heartland, a small, extremely popular standup bar.

Blocking our entrance were three well-dressed young blond women. They peered inside and conferred. After some indecision, they wheeled off into the night with a flash of pearls.

Inside, smoke hung in the air. Western men, largely 20-something traders from upstairs, bellowed into one another's faces and hoisted beers. A few brave Japanese women cautiously sipped drinks, while standing on the fringes.

Out we spun into the fresh air, and then ducked into the Hyatt, with its lobby that features dramatic abstract sculptures. Not to be confused with the Park Hyatt Tokyo, which was featured in Sofia Coppola's movie "Lost in Translation," Tokyo's newest Hyatt in Roppongi Hills has become a destination in its own right since opening last April. Twice in 12 hours, I bumped into friends at the hotel. The nine restaurants and bars are a major draw, including the French Kitchen on the second floor, a restaurant where the line between kitchen and customer dissolves.

Fast becoming a favorite for Tokyo suburbanites on a weekend in town, the hotel has a spa on the fifth floor and a swimming pool that looks as if it were borrowed from a Greek myth.

Up we went to our room on the 20th floor, where we tumbled into a firm bed that Elizabeth pronounced "better than at home." With blond-wood paneling and flat-screen TV's, the room projected a minimalist elegance. In the morning, I stretched out my right arm, held down a switch and raised the blackout curtain. Cool. Another button rolled up the second shade.

Before us stretched western Tokyo's low-rise buildings, the high-rise cluster of Shibuya's entertainment district, outbound traffic clogged on Metropolitan Expressway No. 3, swatches of green parkland, and on and on, to the foothills of Mount Fuji, which, true to form, was blocked by clouds.

Twelve hours at Roppongi Hills was a reminder that while the headlines say the Japanese economy is in a state of stagnation, the Japanese are always creating. One year ago, the experts were predicting failure. But Roppongi Hills drew 26 million visitors in its first six months, double the draw of Tokyo's two Disney parks. The complex gives a glimpse of a new Tokyo: high-rise, high-tech and high style.

If you go

For information on Roppongi Hills, visit www.roppongihills.com/en/information.

Although there are over 2,700 parking spaces in the complex, the simplest way to get there is by taxi.

Tokyo City View, (81-3) 6406-6652, www.tokyocityview.com. Admission, \$14.25 for adults (at 109 yen to the dollar); high school and college students, \$9.50; younger children, \$4.75. Open 9 a.m. to 1 a.m.; last admission at midnight.

Grand Hyatt Tokyo, (81-3) 4333-1234, www.grandhyatttokyo.com. Standard rates in the 389-room hotel start at \$438. In the Maduro Bar, reservations (81-3) 4333-8888, four glasses of wine cost \$86. At the Juniper restaurant, (81-3) 4333-1234, dinner for two with two glasses of wine was \$201.

Photos: Along came a spider ("Maman" by Louise Bourgeois) and sat down beside the Mori Tower. Outside the TV Asahi building. Mount Fuji as seen from Tokyo City View, on the 52nd floor of the tower. (Photographs by Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert for The New York Times)(pg. 6); Street seating, by Droog Design. Multitasking outside a Roppongi Hills store. RIGHT Juniper restaurant, Grand Hyatt. Entrance to Mori Arts Center. (Photographs by Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert for The New York Times)(pg. 7) Map of Tokyo shows surrounding area.

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