

# Connection in Contemporary Art

Renovations at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo breathe new life into the community.

by Rosie Ball

After three years of renovations, Tokyo's downtown Kiyosumi-shirakawa district welcomed the reopening of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT) in March 2019. The area has always had a close-knit community and has in recent years evolved into a new hub for young families. To support the ever-changing cultural landscape, MOT has set out to become an open and barrier-free public space. Enlisting designer Yoshiaki Irobe to oversee interior planning and architect Jo Nagasaka to design the new signage and fixtures, the renewal was a landmark project for MOT. By making facilities even more user-friendly and welcoming to people from all walks of life, the museum invites visitors to join an open discussion about contemporary art and culture. The renewal is a significant step in MOT's ongoing quest to further link community and modern art.

Though the building's exterior remains as striking as ever, the museum's interior has seen a total revitalization. Throughout the museum's interior, the major aesthetic difference is the embrace of textural, earthy materials. Signs have been remade with plywood, while benches are now made from textural cork that awakens the senses. Contrasting with the metal and steel of the surrounding architecture, this incongruity serves two useful functions: to make the signposting more distinctive, and to create an overall feeling of warmth. It is a place where visitors can relax and yet still witness the immense possibilities of human innovation. The wood materials also acknowledge Kiba Park's original role in the community. *Kiba* literally means "wood place," and long ago the land was home to a timber mill and various factories. Today the area adjacent to MOT is a vast, multipurpose space that attracts the



Neighbors and casual passersby can now enjoy the new outdoor seating, and other thoughtful additions have been made to aid accessibility.

whole community with its network of paths, play equipment, and botanical gardens.

To make navigating the museum easier, the renewed MOT has embraced symbols on their signage. Not only is the new visual direction handy for foreigners and the elderly, parents of young children can also rest assured. With clear, concise visuals printed on each board, the time and stress of decoding many different languages disappears. Now it is even easier to find the redesigned restaurants on the basement and second levels, or the public art book library on the basement level. The final major design change is the additional bench space inside and outside the museum. Suddenly, the building's vast interior has a relaxed and cozy air. Families can enjoy sitting in the refurbished courtyard for as long as they like, while the benches inside the museum are great for visitors who want to be comfortable and contemplate the artworks.

Aside from aesthetic changes, over the last three years MOT has undergone a meaningful shift in its relationship with the surrounding Kiyosumi-shirakawa community. Resolving to maintain its connection during its closure, the museum launched MOT Satellite, a free event that brings

contemporary art directly into the neighborhood, displaying remarkable works in temporarily-vacated factories, houses, and public spaces around the area. In the spirit of a mini art festival, visitors receive maps to move freely around the exhibition spaces as they wish.

Throughout the last three years MOT Satellite has become a treasured event within the local community. Supporting artists by giving them a place to exhibit their work, the program also boosts local businesses like cafes and independent galleries by forming special partnerships. The fourth MOT Satellite event was titled "Wandering, Mapping," and encouraged visitors to roam through the lively surrounding streets of Kiyosumi-shirakawa after their visit to the museum. MOT hopes that people from far and wide will form deeper connections with this small but vibrant community, marking it on their own mental maps of Tokyo.

The joy of visiting MOT lies in the duality of being in a spectacular museum that is also a public space. As you leave the building you can see children playing, joggers running, and families strolling in the nearby park. Nestled right in the heart of daily life—this is where contemporary art belongs.



The courtyard of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, with cork benches, after the renewal.

Photo: Kenta Hasegawa