

**THE
JAPANESE WAY**



M A R K A N T H O N Y

This book is dedicated to Gilles Ronnet and Rogier Tonies and the entire Caterpillar team; to Jonathan Davies and Tracey Earp and to all at Finning UK, to Francisco Cobo - European Demolition Association (EDA) President, to Jose Blanco and everyone at the EDA; to the members of the Japanese Demolition Contractors; to my fellow Japanese travellers and adventurers; and to the global demolition brotherhood.

Thank you all for this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOLITION

Demolition magazine editor Mark Anthony recently attended the European Demolition Association Study Tour to Japan. In this book, he shares some of the sights, sounds and lessons learned during a truly epic voyage.

Put 10 or 20 demolition men and women in a room and, regardless of their country of origin and their native language, sooner or later they will find common ground. They will share anecdotes and stories of the challenges they each face on a daily basis; they will speak of the peaks and pitfalls of a life within the demolition arena; they will each grasp the enormous pressures faced by demolition contractors because they experience them too.

Demolition is a language all its own; a language spoken and understood only by those that ply their trade within the industry. But, like any language, it comes with its own regional dialects, accents and nuances.

At the nearest point, the UK is just 26 miles from France; on a clear day, it is possible to see Calais from atop the white cliffs of Dover. But demolition in France is different to demolition in the UK. Each has its own quirks and foibles.

France borders Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland but each of these also practice the art of demolition in their own distinct manner. Hop across the Atlantic to the US and you discover a wider use of explosive demolition, and crawler cranes and wrecking balls still actively working while most on this side of the pond have long since become rusty relics of a bygone era.

Between the cracks of those differing styles of demolition lies a learning opportunity. How do the Dutch and the Swedes achieve such remarkable recycling rates? Why was the UK so quick to leap aboard the high reach excavator bandwagon? Why does the US – advanced in so many ways – still call upon the trusty wrecking ball long after most of their European counterparts have turned them into museum pieces?

And then there is the great divide: The Pacific Ocean. As an island nation, Japan has evolved its own very specific demolition methodologies; practices largely isolated from outside influences; systems developed to contend with local conditions, local regulations, and – to a huge degree – local culture.

This was precisely the thinking behind the European Demolition Association's Study Tour to Japan – A delegation of European demolition contractors (together with representatives from India, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia and the US) travelling to the Land of the Rising Sun to explore the differences between European and Japanese demolition methods; to compare and contrast those methods; and to return to their native countries hopefully enlightened, educated and inspired by what they had seen.

As you will see over the coming pages, the Study Tour achieved that and so much more.



Demolition study tour

May 19-24, 2019
JAPAN

Organized by:



CULTURE OF RESPECT

From crossing the road to organising health and safety on a massive demolition site, there is a system for everything in Japan; and that system is driven by respect and concern for others.

I consider myself a seasoned traveller. I have been doing this job for 30-odd years now and although the EDA Study Tour to Japan was my first time in Asia, I have been fortunate enough to travel extensively, to see some incredible places and to meet some equally incredible people.

Being British, I have only a tenuous grasp of my own native language and I possess no others. Instead, when I travel, I tend to fall back upon that very English trait of speaking loudly and pointing until a local takes pity on me.

Cultural Divide

Not so with Japan. From the moment that my hosts Caterpillar and UK Cat dealer Finning UK issued my invitation, I started to prepare for the journey; learning words and simple phrases to allow me to get by in this most alien of nations. But during my preparation for the trip, it quickly became clear that my ability to say thank you (arigato), pleased to meet you (aete ureshi yo) and one beer please (biru ippai kudasai) was merely the tip of a cultural divide-shaped iceberg. In fact, if you Google “travelling to Japan”, you will find hundreds of thousands of pages dedicated entirely to the do’s and don’ts of Japanese culture.

I had been warned in advance about the Japanese love of business cards, the fact that they hand them over with two hands, and that they study them as if you have handed them some priceless artefact or treasure. But when you experience it for the first time, it feels strange, as if the recipient of the business card is desperately scanning for a spelling or grammatical error.

I thought I was prepared for the bowing as mark of respect. But I wasn't. Upon arrival at my hotel in Kobe, my first stop, I took the elevator to my hotel room and I shared the elevator with a young Japanese lady wearing an air hostess uniform. She bowed as I entered the lift and then, when we arrived at her floor, she stepped out of the lift, turned and bowed to me again, more deeply this time as if I had somehow earned her deep and everlasting respect in the space of 11 floors.

Later that same day, I took myself off for a walk to take in the local sights. I came to a set of traffic lights where a group of maybe 20 locals had gathered to wait for their signal to cross. When that signal came accompanied by an audible signal - a mix between electronic beeping and birdsong - around half of them stopped, pointed right, pointed left and then pointed straight ahead before heading across the road. This was a practice that I saw repeated countless times, even in office corridors.

Now I mention all of these things not to mock the Japanese way of life (if anything, I wish the UK and Europe would adopt a similarly structured approach to life). I do so to illustrate a theme that would remain present throughout the trip, regardless of whether I was in an office, a factory, on site or just in the street. The Japanese, it seems, like a system. And when they have a system, they abide by it unequivocally. If they have been told to both look AND point right and left before proceeding, that is precisely what they will do.

Single File

All of this is born from a culture of respect for others; and it is a trait that is evident in every aspect of daily life in Japan, including within excavator factories and on demolition sites. I will get to both of these shortly, but here's a quick example.

As part of the Study Tour, we were given the opportunity to visit Caterpillar's Akashi factory; a global hub for Caterpillar excavator manufacturing and development and also the birthplace of the company's latest demolition industry offering - The Cat 340 SB (Straight Boom).

During that visit, the factory workers - resplendent in remarkably clean navy blue overalls and white hard hats - broke for lunch. In the UK, this would have triggered a stampede towards the factory canteen. But the Japanese factory workers walked slowly

towards the canteen in virtual silence and in strict single-file. When we left the factory, a number of factory office workers and administrative staff lined up to wave our coach on its way.

And at no point did I get the impression this was done for the benefit of their European visitors. The workers walk single file to lunch because that is how they have been taught since infancy. Likewise, the office staff waving us off was an unspoken demonstration of respect ingrained since birth and reinforced almost daily.

By the time we took the famous bullet train from Kobe to Tokyo just a few days into my week-long visit, it came as no surprise whatsoever that the train arrived and departed precisely on time or that it delivered us to our final destination in the same fashion.



尊敬



SONKEI - RESPECT

STRAIGHT AND TO THE POINT

Caterpillar took the opportunity to unveil the latest addition to its demolition armoury. EDA Study Tour delegates and Demolition magazine's Mark Anthony looked on admiringly.

I am about to give away a trade secret; to afford you a peek behind the journalistic curtain, so to speak.

Way back in March of this year, I wrote about the all-new Cat 340 SB (Straight Boom) demolition excavator following an international press visit to the company's Training and Demonstration Centre in Malaga, Spain. But the truth is that the machine wasn't actually there. Instead, the massed ranks were shown a number of presentations, handed press releases and specification sheets and several computer-generated photos of just how the machine would look when it was ready for public consumption. Well now it is. And the delegates that attended the EDA Study Tour to Japan were among the first to see it.



Sleek & Powerful

Do you ever look at a thing and just think that it's somehow, you know, right? The original Coca Cola glass bottle with its feminine curves. The Audi R8, a car that exudes just the right mix of luxury, power and menace. The "Golden Arches" McDonalds logo; recognisable the world over. Well that, in a nutshell, was my first thought when I finally got to see the Cat 340 SB "in the flesh".

So many demolition excavators appear like cruiserweight boxers that have been falsely "bulked up" for that one shot at the heavyweight title. But while they're bigger and, perhaps, more powerful, they lose some of their agility, stability, speed and performance. If those excavators are bulked-up heavyweights, the Cat 340 SB brings to mind an Olympic swimmer: sleek yet powerful; every muscle and every fibre designed to deliver what is required without excess weight and mass.

One of the first things I noticed about the Straight Boom machine – the first Caterpillar demolition machine to be built upon its new excavator platform – is that it sits low. Despite a ground clearance of 720 mm and the protective belly plates that are a feature of any modern demolition excavator, the machine appears crouched to deliver an exceptionally low centre of gravity. It seems ready to pounce; almost cat-like if you'll pardon the deliberate pun. The machine has clearly been designed with safe working at height very much to the fore. Even with the 5,465 kg work tool that it can wield at heights of up to 13 metres, this is a machine that will refuse to nod like the proverbial nodding donkey.

Space & Comfort

The 39.9 tonne machine is operated from an all-new cab that is as spacious as it is comfortable and that is offered with a deluxe heated seat and climate control as standard. Controls for the machine are all located ergonomically and easily to hand. Operators can also stow their gear with plenty of in-cab storage beneath and behind the seat, overhead, and in the consoles (trust me – there was room for my backpack, camera, four lenses and a tripod). A cup holder, document holder, bottle holder, and coat hook are also provided.

As you might expect from a current generation machine, operators can also use the standard radio's USB ports and Bluetooth technology to connect personal devices, listen to their own playlists, and make and receive hands-free calls.

First Impressions

Yet, for all those positive first impressions, the key advantages of the Cat 340 SB are largely invisible to the naked eye.

There's the 15 percent reduction in fuel consumption over the Cat 336F Straight Boom machine that it replaces in the Caterpillar line-up. Three power modes – Power, Smart, and Eco – allow the machine to be matched to each specific application. Smart mode automatically matches engine and hydraulic power to working conditions, providing maximum power when it's needed and reducing power when it isn't to help save fuel.

A number of auxiliary hydraulic options allow the use of a wide range of attachments and work tools, including the heaviest tools needed for demolition work. And users can track the precise location of those attachments using Cat asset tracker technology.

Product Link™ provides location, machine hours, fuel usage, productivity, idle time, diagnostic codes, and other machine data on demand through the VisionLink online interface, helping customers improve efficiency and reduce operating costs.

Adding yet more sophistication and modernity, the machine can be monitored by the new Cat App that is designed to allow users remote access to telematics data—tracking machine hours, location, receiving diagnostic codes, and managing maintenance directly from their mobile phone without turning on their computer. With the operator ID feature, individual performance can be tracked and training opportunities identified.

Furthermore, users can use their mobile phone as the digital key for starting select Next Generation Cat machines. Users can also find value in viewing telematics data and additional equipment management resources on the companion website. Also new is a suite of Cat Connect technologies that provides remote equipment diagnostics and software updates. Cat Remote Services includes two key offerings—Remote Troubleshoot (allows dealers to run diagnostic testing and pinpoint potential issues) and Remote Flash (allows dealers to remotely load current versions of on-board software).

In short, the new Cat 340 SB demolition excavator sounded good when I was told about it in Malaga a few months ago. It is even better when you finally get to see it in the flesh.



BIG IN JAPAN

A visit to the largest demolition project in the country provided a fascinating insight into Japanese demolition methodology. Editor Mark Anthony is equal parts impressed, surprised and perplexed.

If you really want to learn a language, you don't do it from a book or in a classroom. It is far better to immerse yourself into that language, speaking to those whose native tongue you're attempting to master; hearing the rhythm in their words; the accents, dialects, slang and nuance.

Likewise, if you want to truly experience a foreign cuisine, don't eat it at home or from a takeaway where it will have been adjusted for speed and convenience. And don't eat it from a tourist restaurant where it will be expensive and where subtleties of flavour will have given way to the need to suit a non-local palate. Far better to eat it in the home of the people raised on that food.

So, although visits to factories, presentations from knowledgeable equipment experts and round table discussions are all fine, a visit to a major demolition site was the most eagerly-anticipated part of the EDA Study Tour to Japan. Here we would not just hear how demolition is supposed to work; we would see it first-hand for ourselves. And if you're going to experience a Japanese demolition site, what better project to choose than a site that was (a) a former Caterpillar factory and (b) currently the largest demolition project in the whole of Japan.

Sheer Scale

I regularly struggle to picture large numbers. In my head, I can picture a crowd of 60,000 people because that's a full football stadium. But any more than that and my imagination starts to falter. I know what 100 yards looks like and I know what a mile looks like. But when I am told that a site covers approximately 30 hectares (73 acres in old money) I know it's big but I cannot picture just how big. If you are similarly afflicted, let me tell you this. Before we actually got to get up close and personal with the former Caterpillar Sagami factory, we toured it in a coach. That coach took fully 15 minutes to drive around the perimeter of the site.

Still struggling to imagine the scale of the site? Well how about this. Imagine a European demolition site where you might find three, four or even five excavators working in unison. Now imagine how big a site would need to be in order to accommodate as many as 80. You are now starting to grasp the sheer scale of the project facing the collective of Japanese demolition contractors that have joined forces to tackle this gargantuan contract.



Three-way Split

The Sagami factory can trace its history back almost to the very beginning of Caterpillar's first real foray into Japan. In November 1963, the company initiated a joint venture with industrial and engineering giant Mitsubishi. Less than two years later, production of the Caterpillar D4D track-type tractor (that's a dozer to those unfamiliar with Cat-speak) began at the Sagami factory, an hour or so outside Tokyo.

Between 1965 and 2013, the product range produced at the Sagami factory would swell to include small and mini excavators, small and medium dozers and small and medium-sized wheel loaders. Towards the end of its functional life, the factory would also produce engines, axles, hydraulic pumps and motors, valves and final drives.

The factory at Sagami was established to take advantage of the transport links with the nearby port of Tokyo and across Japan. Those same links were an important factor in the sale of the site to logistics company GLP which acquired the site late in 2016 and then leased it back to the demolition main contractor, Shimizu co. Shimizu subsequently divided the vast campus among three demolition sub-contractors: Honma, which is tackling Zone 1; Takagi, which is responsible for Zone 2; and Fujimura, which is taking on Zone 3, the largest portion of the works.

As a requirement of the contract, Cat equipment is used exclusively on the site (although some attachments and work tools are from third-party manufacturers). Any Cat equipment not already owned by the three demolition sub-contractors is supplied via leasing company Tokyo Rental or through local dealer Nippon Caterpillar which has established a satellite depot at the site to service and support the plethora of Cat machines carrying out the demolition works.

Japan vs Europe

Although the campus also includes administrative buildings and car parking, the vast majority of the site comprises former factory buildings; vast warehouse-type structures that – while large – present very little challenge to the 50+ Cat machines currently employed at the site. And maybe the relatively straightforward nature of the works has set a somewhat relaxed tone among the demolition sub-contractors. Because, even before the coach had stopped to allow the EDA Study Tour delegates to take a closer look at proceedings, it was clear that none of the machines were working particularly hard. In fact, this was the first notable difference between the Japanese approach and the traditional European approach to demolition. In Europe, and certainly in the UK, the tendency is towards deploying the minimum number of machines required to get the job done in the allotted time (although that does differ, of course, on a time reliant contract – an overnight bridge possession, for example). In Japan, however, it seems that the opposite is true: throw lots of equipment at a project but don't work any of it particularly hard.

In recent years, the European “fewest machines possible” philosophy has been strengthened by the widespread adoption of quick couplers that allow a single carrier machine to tackle a multitude of tasks using an array of specialist work tools. There was no evidence that this was currently being repeated in Japan. Quick couplers have yet to make a real impression in Japan where contractors seem to prefer a dedicated machine and attachment combination.

Speaking of attachments, here was another notable difference between the European approach and that of our Japanese counterparts.

Hardly any of the attachments and work tools in use at the Sagami factory featured powered or even free rotation capabilities. According to a Japanese engineer, Japanese operators have become accustomed to using fixed attachments and have become so adept at using them that they do not need powered rotation. It is a valid argument and there is much to be said for tradition. But I cannot help thinking that powered rotation would be adopted more widely if Japanese contractors were expected to achieve European levels of productivity.

A number of the machines tackling the processing of the reinforced concrete arisings were equipped with crackers and pulverisers that incorporated large and very unwieldy

magnets to allow steel to be extracted on an ongoing basis rather than – in the European manner - as a separate procedure once the concrete was broken. Is that a more efficient way of extracting steel? Perhaps. But hauling around (and constantly powering) a magnet must surely impact negatively upon the carrier machine's fuel consumption?



Lessons Learned

All of those observations make it sound like the Europeans have got everything right and the Japanese are somehow lagging behind in the demolition evolution stakes. But that is really not the case. Indeed, although some of the methods and equipment being used at Sagami left EDA delegates perplexed, there were undoubtedly lessons to be learned.

Almost all the Cat excavators operating off the hard-standing slab on the site were stood on steel plate that had been laid prior to the commencement of work. Was it there to provide a flat, stable base for the machines? Was it to protect the ground from the worst effects of an oil or fuel spill? Was it to simplify post-contract clean-up? No-one seemed to know; the reasoning behind it lost in the mists of time and tradition. But, whatever the reason, it worked.

Although the work tools utilised by the Japanese contractors did not benefit from powered rotation, they were certainly no slouches in the speed department. With wide opening jaws designed to chomp through earthquake-resistant columns and beams, these attachments feature extremely fast opening and closing jaws that almost chew through concrete and steel.

The Sagami site also had a number of mini track-mounted telescopic cranes, each equipped with a boom-mounted dust suppression system that could be deployed at height to tackle dust at its point of origin. On a vast, open and breezy site like this, this seemed to be a far more accurate solution to dust containment and control than the dust cannons used by European contractors. While some UK contractors – notably AR Demolition – has a dedicated telescopic handler equipped with a dust suppression system, these mini cranes would be a cost-effective alternative. And, as they're mounted on tracks, they have the ability to operate almost anywhere.

Forging the Future

Now of course, the three sub-contractors currently demolishing the former Caterpillar Sagami factory knew that the European delegation was coming. And while they didn't actually roll out a red carpet to welcome us, it is entirely possible that they were on their very best behaviour. But, having briefly experienced other aspects of Japanese culture, I don't actually think that was the case.

So while on a UK or European site you will find workers in well-worn, dirty and mismatched (and sometimes missing altogether) personal protective equipment (PPE), Japanese demolition workers all wear navy blue overalls with reflective white high vis' strips. Everyone wears the same pristine white hard hat, all of them with a chin strap to keep them in place. Even though some of the machines were no longer new, the insides of the cabs were pristine and clean; their operators maintaining them out of pride, not duty.

And therein lies, perhaps, the greatest difference between the European way and the Japanese way. In Europe, the behaviour of the average demolition contractor is driven and dictated by legislation. Workers require constant reminding of health and safety practices; and the way in which they remain within dictated work parameters is largely ad-libbed.

In Japan, working methods are driven primarily by respect: respect for workers, for neighbours and local people. Workers have been taught from an early age that there should be a system for everything and that that system should be followed without question. While that approach might impact upon the Japanese ability to think outside the box, that almost military-style adherence to rules and regulations is to their credit and is a major contributor to the Japanese health and safety record.

It would take an extensive time and motion study to determine whether the ongoing gathering of steel is better or worse than collecting it as a separate exercise. Someone far more intelligent than me would need to calculate the cost implications of running lots of machines but not working them hard against running fewer that really graft.

The European approach to demolition is not 100 percent right, nor is it 100 percent wrong. Similarly, the Japanese have much to learn and much to teach.

But somewhere between those two very different and disparate approaches lies the next generation of demolition contractor. And through the European Demolition Association Study Tour to Japan, the groundwork for building that next generation demolition contractor has just been forged.





WHERE TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION

The Caterpillar Akashi factory can trace its history back to the very beginning of hydraulic excavator development. Yet it remains at the cutting edge of global excavator development. Mark Anthony steps back in time for a glimpse of the future.

Even though it happened five or more decades ago, arguments continue to rage about which company officially produced the world's first hydraulic excavator. One of the companies with a strong claim to that title is Mitsubishi which - through a joint venture with US equipment giant Caterpillar - would subsequently take those machines to every corner of the globe.

If Mitsubishi was in fact the first, that machine would have been produced at what is now the Caterpillar Akashi factory, a facility that now doubles as Caterpillar's global excavator development hub. Reinforcing the factory's historic claim, a fully-chromed first generation excavator - a Yumbo - sits just inside the entrance to the factory as a constant reminder of the Akashi legacy.

The fact that one of the originators of the hydraulic excavator should remain at the cutting edge of development today is just one of a number of examples of where Caterpillar Akashi mixes old and new, modern with tradition, and history with innovation.



Juxtaposition

The main administration building at the Caterpillar Akashi factory is new and looks to all the world like it might be home to a tech company like Google or Apple. But behind that modern façade, the factory itself looks largely unchanged since it was opened in the early 1960s.

Within the factory, however, skilled and highly-trained engineers produce some of the most sophisticated and advanced excavators to ever grace a demolition site. But they do so accompanied by music that sounds – to Western ears at least – like the ringtone from a first-generation mobile telephone. And while the factory is manned by workers that go about their business with a quiet and traditional Japanese efficiency, they do so alongside state-of-the-art robotic cutting and welding machine tools upon assembly lines that would not look out of place in the most modern automotive factory.

It is this juxtaposition of old and new that marks the Caterpillar Akashi plant as different; and it is how the facility has remained at the very heart of excavator development for more than 50 years.



Excavator Storm

That position at the eye of the excavator development storm shows no sign of changing either. It was the research and development team within the Akashi excavator development team that cooked up the all-new Cat 340 Straight Boom demolition excavator; the first demolition machine to be built upon Caterpillar's new next generation excavator platform. It is the engineers at the Akashi plant that took that machine from drawing into living, breathing reality. It is the same team that will upgrade the popular Cat 340F UHD (Ultra High Demolition) machine to the same platform in the very near future. And it is the same team that are currently working on another larger addition to Caterpillar's demolition excavator offering. A prototype of that machine was on display at the Caterpillar Akashi plant during the European Demolition Association Study Tour to Japan although delegates were requested not to photograph it because there is at least another year of improving, honing and testing to do before it will be available for sale to the global demolition community.

The Akashi Way

Although it will likely be 2021 before we see that new machine turn a track in anger, it – together with the new Cat 340 SB – sums up the approach of the team at the Caterpillar Akashi facility.

With a history as proud and as long as that enjoyed by this plant, it would surely be tempting to sit back; to rest on their laurels; to take their collective foot off the gas and let the legacy speak for itself.

But that is clearly not the Akashi way. The Akashi way, apparently, is “good is never quite good enough”; where even as a new machine is setting a new benchmark in the demolition excavator field, work is underway on applying those same improvements to other machines; where they are constantly striving to produce machines that consume less fuel but deliver more power and productivity, machines that can reach higher but with larger and heavier tools, machines in which a safe operator can always be that little bit safer.

The Factory Factor

Aside from acknowledging the pride of those that work there, I have never been entirely sure of the purpose of factory visits to see where demolition and construction equipment is made. I am not an expert in modern manufacturing techniques, in laser cutting methodologies, or in robotic welding. My guess is that most demolition company representatives aren't either. Like them, I will quite happily purchase a car without a visit to the BMW or Mercedes factory. I am not overly bothered what materials are used in the manufacture of my widescreen TV, so long as I can watch the football on it without interruption. I am not even sure which country manufactured my dishwasher and my washing machine. What I am interested in – and what demolition companies are interested in – is the end product.

The Caterpillar Akashi factory might have been around for more than 50 years; and the factory buildings might well be older than a good many of the customers for the excavators it produces. But you don't remain at the very forefront of your chosen field for half a century without doing something – or possibly everything – right. And when the first of those new UHD machines rolls out of the Akashi plant in late 2020 or early 2021, it will not be the culmination or the end of the process; it will be merely the latest step on what has been a remarkable and ongoing journey.

JAPANESE TAKEAWAY

After more than a week immersed in Japanese demolition culture, just what will European Demolition Association Study Tour delegates take away with them. More than you might think, according to Mark Anthony.

The “Caterpillar portion” of the European Demolition Association Study Tour began with a semi-formal dinner atop the ANA Crowne Plaza Hotel in Kobe. In a manner that would come to typify the remainder of the trip, true formalities were kept to a tolerable minimum; there were no sales pitches from the host; and each table was a heady mix of nationalities, personalities and opinions.

I bumped into Stefano Panseri of award-winning Italian demolition giant Despe. I make no secret of the fact that I admire Stefano and his family enormously; I admire what his company has achieved just as much. Stefano was the first to point out the fact that this was not, in fact, the first EDA trip to Japan. In fact, his father Giuseppe – a former president of the European Demolition Association – attended the previous study tour some 30 years ago. It was a visit that would have a profound and lasting impact upon Panseri senior and upon the company we now know as Despe.

Return Trip

According to Stefano Panseri, his father took away a good many lessons on that previous trip. First and foremost, that tour provided his father with his first glimpse of a number of new attachments and work tools that were not available in his native Italy at the time. “European demolition contractors were reliant upon hydraulic breakers but those were about the only attachments we had,” Stefano Panseri says. “But in Japan, my father saw concrete crackers and pulverisers, shears and a variety of other hydraulic work tools.”

Although his father could not afford to import those attachments himself at the time, he designed and built his own when he returned to Italy, setting the company upon a journey of innovation that continues to this day.

Stefano Panseri also recalls a story that his father shared about his trip to Japan; a story that would make – perhaps – the most visual impact upon the Despe equipment fleet. “My father met a Japanese demolition contractor who was operating a brightly-coloured Caterpillar excavator. My father asked why he had chosen to paint the machine and the contractor said, simply: When the machine was made, Caterpillar owned it and it was in Caterpillar colours. But now I own it and I want it in my company colours.”

Today, Despe machines are easily identified by their distinctive all-white livery. “If it hadn’t been for that first trip to Japan, the Despe you know today would not work the same and would not look the same,” Stefano Panseri insists. “Much of what Despe is now famous for stems from that study tour 30 years ago.”

Of course, the world we occupy today is much changed. Faster and cheaper international travel combined with the rise and rise of the Internet means that there was never likely to be any industry secrets lurking undiscovered and unseen by European eyes in some remote part of Japan. Equipment-wise, there were very few surprises beyond the way in which those machines were utilised.

But this was, above all, a study tour. And I would be genuinely astounded if anyone that took part in this trip returned to their respective countries and companies without some insight or nugget of information that will help make their business better for themselves, their employees and for those living and working close by.

Discipline & Education

I am not a demolition contractor: never have been; never will be. So maybe some of the finer lessons to be gained from this visit were lost upon me. But personally speaking, the greatest lesson I learned on this fascinating trip was of the influence of culture upon the demolition industry.

In Europe – and particularly here in the UK – demolition is not generally a career of choice. For many, it is the last resort. In many instances, workers find their way to this industry having underachieved at school and – in some cases – having largely bypassed formal education entirely.

The demolition industry – ever eager to fill the skills gap with willing workers – then takes these individuals and attempts to condition them into a safe method of working. Those that failed to conform at school are expected to conform in the workplace. Those for whom reading and writing proved to be beyond their grasp are suddenly expected to adopt both in order to qualify to work, to qualify for competence cards, and to meet ever more stringent regulations.

To the eyes of an outsider, Japan feels different; very different indeed. Almost from birth, Japanese children are raised in a highly structured manner. There is a system for everything, and each system is governed by a set of universally adopted rules and regulations. There is seemingly no desire to waiver from accepted wisdom.

It is tempting to use the term “military-style” to describe the Japanese willingness to adhere to rules and to not question authority. But that conjures images of a police state; and Japan is about as far removed from that as it is possible to be.

The truth is that they are raised in a culture within which there is seemingly a rule for everything. And those rules go unbroken, not because of the threat of punishment and penalisation but because they have been raised to believe that those rules are right and that they are best for everyone.

Here in the UK, we have training courses, certificates of achievement and an ever-more-complex range of competence cards. Despite all this, we are required to reinforce safety messages on a daily basis. Workers need to be reminded to put on their high vis’ vests and hard hats. They have to be reminded to wear gloves and safety

glasses. They even have to be reminded to drink water and use sun protection when it's hot.

In Japan, no such reminders and reinforcement is necessary. Japanese workers have been raised to follow a clearly defined set of rules – whether that's walking in single file to the factory cafeteria or putting on a hard hat at the start of the working day.

So my personal takeaway from this trip is not some top secret excavator or a laser-guided, robotically-controlled super attachment that the Japanese having been keeping under wraps. My personal takeaway is that in Europe in general and in the UK in particular, the demolition industry tries to force square pegs into round holes, hoping that a few weeks or months on site will knock off the jagged edges of those that find themselves thrust into the world of demolition. In Japan, they craft round pegs from the time their children start school. By the time they arrive on a demolition site, they slot readily and unquestioningly into their allotted role.

Such an approach leaves precious little room for creative thinking or innovative development among the industry's lower grades. But it leaves virtually no room whatsoever for mistakes, incidents or accidents either.

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