

>BOOK

**PROJECT JAPAN,
METABOLISM TALKS**Rem Koolhaas &
Han Ulrich Obrist**Taschen**, £34.99Review by [Thomas Wensing](#)

We have been forgetting about the future for a few decades now. The oil crisis, global warming, and recently the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the Fukushima nuclear disaster are but a few expressions of an interconnected web of causes which have made it difficult to dream up a positive vision for the future, collectively.

In Project Japan, Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist revisit what is arguably the last Utopian movement in architecture, the Japanese Metabolists. In 2005, in the realisation that the members of this diverse group of architects, designers, and artists were soon to pass away, Koolhaas and Obrist embarked on a series of marathon interviews with them to document the group's contribution to architecture.

According to the duo, the historical moment of the Metabolists, from the late Fifties to the early Seventies, is marked by the move of the world's centre of gravity from West to East and 'the last moment that architecture was a public rather than a private affair'. The book is a gripping read in great measure because it is a lively account of the clash of two cultures and schools of philosophy

KOOLHAAS ARGUES THAT THE METABOLISTS WERE GROOMED BY THE NEW DEMOCRACY TO PROVE ITSELF ON A WORLD STAGE

of images and photo essays, but the historical context and key moments and projects are clearly described in separate chapters. This historical framework and chronology gives it a solid grounding against which the interviews are allowed to steal the

show with spice, laughter, insider knowledge, and gems of wisdom.

The formula of the marathon interview ensures the other side is heard and a fascinating dialogue, in which the depth of thinking of the Metabolists is revealed, unfolds. It turns out that the association was loose and liberal enough to include concepts as diverse as Fuhimiko Maki's 'group form' and something as outlandish as Kikutake's 'architectural syntax of the sea'. The book also shows a softer, more compassionate side of Koolhaas, who is genuinely humbled in the presence of the great generation before him.

One of Koolhaas' long-standing fascinations is the link between political and economic power and architecture. The argument which Koolhaas puts forward here is that the Metabolists were deliberately groomed and supported by an emerging democratic nation to prove itself on the economic and cultural world stage. The implication is that, given the attractive nature of the work, an 'activist' state is preferable to the current free-market chaos.

Interestingly, however, the Metabolists show little traces of nostalgia for the politics of that era, nor a preference for a particular political and economic system; they are concerned with much deeper issues. Japanese society has always existed in a state of precarious as much as it offers more insight into the enigmatic Metabolists.

The prevailing image in the West can be traced back to Reyner Banham's book *Megastructure – Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (1976), in which the work of Kenzo Tange (Tokyo Bay Project) is praised, and the Japanese are credited with the invention of the megastructure.

Banham then proceeds to dismiss the Metabolists with the claim that they have only two major interests: 'That artificial building land must be created in overcrowded cities, and that the different built elements of the city have different natural rates of metabolic change.' The theoretical programme of the Metabolists was deemed to be 'mind-numbingly simplistic', and the apotheosis of the movement in the Osaka Expo of 1970 was characterised as 'exhausted' and derivative of Archigram.

One of the many virtues of Project Japan is that it sets the record straight in favour of the Metabolists. Since S,M,L XL of the late Nineties Koolhaas and OMA have specialised in the presentation of their work and research in volumes which are graphically compelling, image-laden, factually rich and narcissistic.

In light of this I unduly feared that Koolhaas may have wanted, just like Banham, to co-opt the Metabolists for his own dialectical purposes. The pros and cons of architectural research presented in brick format are still there, but the result is no longer self-absorbed and over the top. The book in part consists equilibrium with nature; the possibility of earthquakes and tsunamis are embedded in the national consciousness, and as a consequence emphasis is placed on the essence of physical things as opposed to the actual artefact itself.

It is acknowledged that things are transient; the Ise Shrine for example, a temple complex which gets demolished and rebuilt in exactly the same manner every 20 years, is cited as an improbable but serious fascination for the Metabolists.

On top of this historical and cultural awareness are the existential questions posed by the destruction

in the Second World War. Virtually no major Japanese city escaped the incendiary bombs of the USA, but it was especially the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which shook Japanese society to its core.

The rebuilding and modernisation of Japan was vigorously taken on, and for many this meant an opportunity to reshape society as well. This is not to say, however, that the outlook was only a hopeful one. Of the group it was most notably Isozaki whose war experiences caused him to question the group's cooperation with the state and its positivist vision: 'The only doubt I had about the Metabolists was that these architects had no skepticism towards their Utopia; they represented only a form of progressivism. I thought they were too optimistic.'

At the end of Project Japan Toyo Ito ponders the fragile state of things and, like Isozaki, questions the result and objectives of 50 years of modernisation. The strength of both the Metabolists and the book is that the existential questions of birth, growth, renewal, destruction and death are never far away, that it is especially important to use our powers of imagination to imagine more peaceful, just and harmonious futures. Due to this intensity, I read the book from cover to cover with relish.

