

IN REVIEW

Rem's Love Letter

Project Japan: Metabolism Talks... is a thoroughly, brilliantly, even compulsively documented record of what Arata Isozaki claims was "the last avant-garde movement" in architecture.

WRITTEN BY
Philip Nobel

Koolhaas pays tribute to the architects of the 1960s who forged a new path in postwar Japan.

Older generations may still choose to see themselves in Walter Benjamin's hackneyed angel of history, propelled ever forward while, looking back, the ghosts of days elapse, stuck firm to their calendrical grids, one year enmeshed in the next as we pass on, until what was life just a few decades back, though it holds the gaze, takes on the flat magic of a fable. Not so the millennial young. Too often the reigning attitude about history—of architecture at least, among students of it certainly—may be described as blithe ignorance, or charitably, the victim of a single-minded, purposeful looking forward. The sky is falling—the sky is falling now: who can think of anything less than surviving new ends of the world?

Last fall, at a Columbia University graduate architecture review, I saw a team of twentysomethings propose, for a public housing project in East Harlem, a fantastic amalgam of forms and ideas from the middle of the last century: soaring space frames, freestanding vertical cores, snap-in domestic capsules in the shape of hexagonal crystals, the whole capable of evolving to suit the life within, it was argued, aided by adaptive prefab modules and a system of integral cranes. An urban megastructure, singular in conception, multiple in detail, born from crisis, that could grow. Grow toward Utopia. The only thing missing, to complete the borrowed reverie, was a ten-lane superhighway piercing the whole. Or perhaps a site on a reclaimed corner of Tokyo Bay.

Apart from a mid-block wetland churning gray water, evidence of a contemporary end-times fixation, the students' proposal was torn from the minds of the Metabolists, the influential movement of Japanese architects in the 1960s and 1970s. The Metabolists' drivers, toward mechanization, modularity, elaborately engineered havens in the sky or on the sea, outsize infrastructure, were natural disasters—Japan's endemic earthquakes and tsunamis—the terror and opportunity in tight cities cleared by war, and the ever present twentieth-century shibboleth of overpopulation. But still. Did the students know that their ideas, their attitude toward systems, indeed some of their very forms, had been discovered and called to service before, in the recent past, also in an effort to house the too-many, to save and heal the world, to suggest a better, more sustainable one?

No, they did not, though perhaps they had seen pictures. It is timely and fortuitous then that, only a few weeks after, I found on my desk a copy of *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks...*, a new book by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist. It is a great block of a thing, as we've come to expect from Mr. Koolhaas, 719 pages of fragrant inks full-bleed on matte paper. It is also a thoroughly, brilliantly, even compulsively documented record of what Arata Isozaki claims in one interview within was "the last avant-garde movement" in architecture.

Koolhaas concurs, in his short, clear

introduction (Obrist writes a second introduction, more expansive and nearly unreadable in its Talmudic arrangement on the page), referring to Metabolism as "the last movement that changed architecture." And what of our great individual geniuses since? Histories by architects can be funny, and fraught. One enters them fairly expecting, dreading a closeted polemic relating to the author's own accomplishment, a secret justification of his or her value structure as a working designer, perhaps even a glorious manifesto in disguise. History twisted into an instrument for present use is not history at all, despite what Sigfried Giedion or Philip Johnson or Robert Venturi or Michel Foucault would have had us believe. In this book, mercifully, none of that critical opportunism is evident. The Koolhaas we see narrating the oral histories that comprise the lion's share of *Project Japan* is the Koolhaas we can all love unreservedly: warm, curious, precise, fallible. In short, human. He must have approached his subjects, the surviving Metabolists and the interloping contemporaneous observer Isozaki, in the same manner; they are not overly impressed by his attention, sternly or charmingly contradicting his occasional overreaches in questioning. The narrator makes little effort to link his subject to his work. So the noxious whiffs of Roark that can trail behind any grand architect's jet-set global circuits are nowhere palpable. We find only a deep affection for men and buildings and ideas and times lost, affection that fueled a painstaking observation.

The book is structured atemporally as a series of interviews, alternating with captioned photo-essays covering the important projects and events that shaped the movement: the antecedents in vast settlements for housing emigrant farmers in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, the shock of tabula rasa after Hiroshima and the firebombings of Tokyo and elsewhere, the accretion around Kenzo Tange (the leader, deceased, and so omnipresent in the accounts) of like-minded young architects sharing the sensibility to merge notions from traditional Japanese architecture (already equipped with a fascination for the modular and demountable) with the scale and possibilities **continued on page 40** of newly available modern methods. Two convenient points in time—the World Design Conference of 1960, at which the movement presented itself fully formed to invited guests from overseas (Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Peter and Alison Smithson among them), and Expo '70, at which the group exhibited its consolidated thinking about architecture and culture before branching out to build works in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—serve as date stamps that organize the book's travels through time. Obrist refers to the narrative as a "polyphonic portrait"; these recurring moments provide a welcome meter.

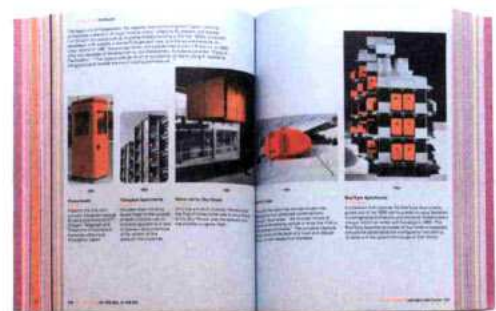
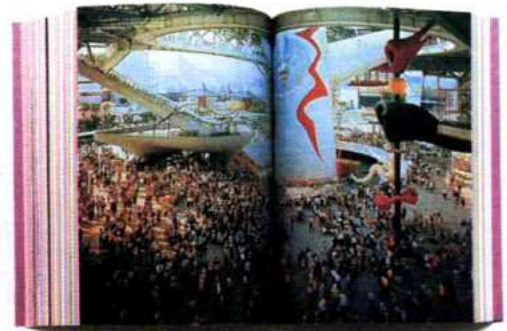
The Metabolists themselves are brought back to life in the interviews, with seven of the principals involved, including Fumihiko Maki, known best now perhaps for his mirror-glass-clad contribution to the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site, and Atsushi Shimokobe, an architect in Tange's office who migrated to an influential bureaucratic post from which he played the role of rainmaker for the group, securing real work, behind the scenes. A major theme, one that Koolhaas seems

interested in teasing out, is the nature of the relationship between the Metabolists, and avant-gardes in general, with political leadership, as either active promoters or a foil against which to push. Is it necessary, he asks Isozaki at one point (the specters of China and the United Arab Emirates perhaps rearing in his mind), for revolutionary architecture to find the support of "strong government"?

Project Japan is a colorful journey. Section breaks are swaths of Dutch orange, the orange reappears as occasional text on white pages (illegible), the intros to the interviews are hot pink with text reversed (legible enough). The obvious hazard in such a candy-colored approach to a potentially fragmented and image-heavy book is that it might only endorse and enable the happy habit of skimming, learned online, that begot the unconconscious formal familiarity demonstrated by our innocent Columbia students. But the depth achieved in the interviews—the other kind of colorful: free-ranging and fast-paced—the commitment to sourcing new and contemporaneous photography, superlative throughout, and the inclusion of many primary texts anchors the whole effort in a vivid world of fact. The presence of Koolhaas engaging so knowledgeably and respectfully with the players may then serve to mark the enterprise, in the minds of those for whom he is a hero—the same minds who may otherwise decide the work is impossibly distant—as important. And so one episode of history lives to be known again. M / *



Published by Taschen,
Project Japan: Metabolism Talks...
by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist
includes a number of interviews with leading figures of the architectural movement. The book was designed by Irma Boom.



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