

## Back to the Future

With Metabolism, postwar Japanese architects looked beyond the end of the century to the future of architecture, predicting trends that are still emerging, as a new oral history of the movement by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist finds.

By: Thomas de Monchaux

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"Japan," the cyberpunk novelist William Gibson famously observed, "is the global imagination's default setting for the future." Gibson's prophetic 1984 novel *Neuromancer* (Ace Books), in which he coined the term "cyberspace" and predicted today's digital dystopias, begins in a soulfully sleazy, neon-and-noir neighborhood near Tokyo Bay. The seeming futurity of Japan that Gibson projects, or rather depicts, originates in its rapid industrial modernization in the Meiji era; in its gadgetry and pageantry; and in its animatronic pop culture of dancing robots, kindly monsters, and Harajuku girls. And in 2012, a year trending toward the apocalyptic, Japan grimly fascinates for suffering natural and unnatural disasters, surviving distant nuclear attacks and recent nuclear accidents, and enduring economic miracles and lost decades that may preview our own.

For architects, the Japanese future lies in its glorious 20th-century past: the Metabolists. These were a consortium of designers, including Fumihiko Maki, Hon. FAIA, Kisho Kurokawa, Kenji Ekuan, and fellow-traveler Arata Isozaki, Hon. FAIA, who all orbited architect Kenzo Tange (1913–2005). Their innovation and influence was framed, roughly, by the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo and the 1970 World Expo in Osaka. At the former, they announced Metabolism to an audience including Alison and Peter Smithson, Louis Kahn, and Paul Rudolph. (The deliberately English "-ism" was produced by journalist Noburu Kawazoe from *taisha*, a Japanese term for regeneration that he recalled from a Japanese translation of Friedrich Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*.) At the latter event, they conjured up a mid-air, space frame "Big Roof" with installations by Hans Hollein, Yona Friedman, Moshe Safdie, Archigram, and others—not to mention actual dancing robots.

The Metabolist architects proposed vast megastructural complexes, such as Tange's 1960 artificial islands for Tokyo Bay, which would house 7.5 million people. They produced civic and commercial work in brooding concrete, such as Tange's Yamanashi Press and Broadcasting Center of 1966. And they made miniature monuments of mutability, such as Kurokawa's celebrated Nagakin Capsule Tower Building of 1972.

Their moment is documented and illustrated in the book *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks ...* (\$59.99; Taschen, Oct. 2011), a remarkable 719-page work of oral history and historiography by Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, with spirited graphic design by Irma Boom and editing by Kayoko Ota and James Westcott. The text interweaves exhaustive documentation of projects with intimate interviews of surviving members of the group, supplemented by the intricate timelines, diagrams, and indexes that one has come to expect from Koolhaas.

Two of today's critical architectural issues are illuminated by this particular yesterday. First, there is our current interest in biological processes of constant change: in the biomorphic formal systems that might embody them and in the computational tools that approximate them by simulating evolutionary form-finding and optimization. The Metabolists loved big pictures of tiny organisms and tiny pictures of big cities. They affirmed that, as Kawazoe would later put it, "there is no fixed form in the ever-developing world." The plastic pods of the Capsule Tower were intended to plug in and out as the needs of occupants changed, giving buildings the mutability and mechanical beauty of construction sites. Unsurprisingly, these apartment modules never moved an inch, even as the city changed haphazardly and unbeautifully around them; residents voted recently to demolish their building rather than embark on costly maintenance for a structure that was, ironically, never designed to last as long as it has.

The second issue, current and ancient, is the relationship between architecture and political power. Project Japan takes a cool look at the complex legacy of Tange's early work, which included both a 1942 project for a monument to what Imperial Japan called its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere as well as the design for a memorial and museum (partially adapted from a proposal by Isamu Noguchi) at ground zero in Hiroshima. Both the undeveloped steppe landscape of Japanese-occupied Manchuria and the bomb-flattened postwar Japanese city provided unsettling variations on the Modernist tabula rasa. Much group's projects was inspired by an interest in public policy and development at a national scale—and demanded, explicitly or tacitly, the resources of a very big government indeed.

There is, in this examination of scale, some poignancy. Koolhaas in Japan is adjacent to Koolhaas in China. It may not be possible to understand one project without the other. History will decide whether OMA's colossal Beijing headquarters for state media agency CCTV—and similar works by many peers—prove to be fleeting adornments to totalitarianism or promising engagements between a progressively evolving Middle Kingdom and the brightest cultural producers of the free world. One wants the CCTV building, especially, to someday prove itself to have been a vessel for the resistant ironies and urbane liberties so passionately present elsewhere in Koolhaas's work. There is something about the shapeshifting antimonumentality and sublime awkwardness of that particular structure that encourages such hope.

Irony and tyranny are an odd yet enduring couple. Koolhaas's inquiries suggest reflection on the matter. Of Isozaki, he asks, "Isn't it ironic that avant-gardes only exist when there's a strong government, but fall apart when there's a weak government? There's nothing to react against and nothing that could possibly support the fantasies. I think one great weakness of architecture since the '70s is that we can never find the support we need." Of Kurokawa, Koolhaas asks, "In the 1960s, you focused your intelligence on various government efforts or directives, even helping them to define their policies. You were able to expand while the public sector was very strong, when it had a lot of money and was deciding almost everything. In the last 10 or 15 years, however, the public sector has declined in power and there has been a corresponding shift to the private sector, to private developers who never have that kind of broad perspective." (Isozaki answers: "I think [...] from 1968 until 1989 [...] was a period of suspended animation in which nothing happened." Kurokawa, who later ran for office in Tokyo, answers, "Now I look at you and see you doing things similar to what I did when I was young.")

A condition in which one agent decides almost everything is not exactly the petri dish in which transformative metabolic processes transpire. Hence there is something of a divided dream in the Metabolist project, between top-down organization and bottom-up complexity. In the 1970s and '80s, the Metabolists and their followers produced palaces, stadiums, and other XL projects for Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran, and Singapore—a realization of only half of that dream. "Do you like a highly organized city?" asks Archigram in a poster that was part of the group's installation at the Metabolist-curated Expo 70. "It may be obviously structured or dependent upon social constraints unseen."

One way to be an architect is to believe that the voluntary constraints of good design transform the involuntary imprisonments imposed, unseen, by everything else. Among so much else in *Project Japan*, there is the mortal thrill of seeing a young band (and avuncular producer, in the person of Tange) emerge from wartime childhood and discover the bliss that it was to be alive. And then the sadness of seeing them, and their works, age and pass away. But it's not just skinny ties and cigarettes. It's a reminder of a kind of engagement with the world that produced, and may have been eclipsed by, the ultimately sclerotic piety of *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* and Team 10.

It's a vision of architects who meet, as Koolhaas says to Kurokawa, "very late into the night"; who produce shambolic conferences and audacious pamphlets and short-lived magazines; whose most enduring influence, as with the Metabolists, is through their seemingly most fleeting ephemera. Koolhaas describes the Metabolists as "solid introverts, meditative poets, charismatic wunderkinder, feudalists, provincials, revolutionaries, cosmopolitans, thinkers, doers, fanatics, mystics—a kaleidoscopic inventory of the Japanese psyche." But surely he is describing his own psyche, and the kaleidoscopic soul of the architectural profession, at its once and future best?

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