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Five decades after the pioneering Japanese architecture group **Metabolism** was founded, *Amelia Groom* considers its legacy on the occassion of a major touring survey while *Nick Currie* talks to **Rem Koolhaas**, author of *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*, about the organic cities and flexible buildings that they envisioned

The young Japanese architects who launched themselves with the manifesto 'Metabolism 1960' at the World Design Conference in Tokyo that year had all been teenagers in 1945, when the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were wiped out by atomic bombs. Devastatingly aware of the impermanence of built spaces and the destructibility of cities, they responded to the widespread housing crisis of postwar Japan by calling for more flexible and dynamic urban models. Promising to design spaces for living bodies that would be more in line with the metabolic processes of those bodies, they conceived of cities as living, moving and evolving creatures. Buildings would be adaptable organisms perpetually rejuvenating themselves; the metropolis would be a verb rather than a noun. Mentored by the great Modernist architect Kenzo Tange at Tange Lab, his experimental architecture studio at Tokyo University, their imaginative and sometimes impossibly ambitious proposals advocated *kinko tochi* or 'artificial ground' (to be built on the sea and in the sky), plug-in megastructures and prefab modular capsules.

As it happened, the first major exhibition of Metabolism opened at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo in September 2011, not only half a century after the movement's genesis, but also half a year after the first nuclear catastrophe Japan had suffered since the destruction from which Metabolism
was born. The earthquake-triggered tsunami of 11 March 2011 swept away homes, schools, hospitals, motorways, trains and aeroplanes, leaving behind 25 million tonnes of debris that will take years to clear. With flattened cities and towns along 400 kilometres of Japan's coast, this was the first time since the Tange Lab that Japanese architects had been forced to think about building entire municipalities from scratch.

As the country faces these dire post-disaster planning and reconstruction challenges, the boldly inventive thinking to which 'Metabolism, The City of the Future: Dreams and Visions of Reconstruction in Postwar and Present-day Japan' paid homage was particularly apposite – and with the remaining Metabolists now all octogenarians, a retrospective of the movement was both pertinent and pressing. But from the outset, the exhibition's large team of curators and advisors faced a number of quandaries: how to faithfully reconstruct ideas that were so much of their time? How to exhibit something founded on being unpredictable, transient, anti-fundamental and anti-monumental? How to avoid historicizing the group in a way that pins it to a moment in the past and cuts off potential ties to the present? Perhaps most crucial of all was the question of how to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the movement, which was so riddled with internal contradiction and dissent that 'movement' may not even be the right word.

Happily, the exhibition was well researched and presented multiple voices and ideas without constructing any false continuum or coherence. Models, drawings, posters, texts, photographs and archival films were arranged in a suitably jumbled manner that avoided consensus and rewarded careful viewing. An easily missed drawing by Takashi Asada, for example, pointed to an important proto-Metabolist experiment originally published in *Shinkenchiku* (Japan Architect) in 1955. Titled 'Asada's Scale', the diagram proposes a system of measurement that could be applied to anything in the physical world – from atoms to nebulae – bringing to mind Metabolism's advocacy of continuous modular growth from rooms to buildings to cities.

Working together throughout the 1960s, the Metabolists (the official members included

four architects, an industrial designer, a graphic designer and a critic) had their apotheosis at Expo '70 in Osaka. Successfully branding Japan as a technocratic trailblazer (*TIME* magazine's cover story read: 'No Country Has a Stronger Franchise on the Future Than Japan'), it was the first World Expo to be held in Asia, and the largest and best attended in history. It was here that the ongoing contention about the country's aesthetic heritage and its place in Japanese modernity came to a head – most visibly with the artist Taro Okomoto's 70-metre-tall statue, *Tower of the Sun*, piercing the middle of Tange's colossal space frame, titled Big Roof. Since returning to Japan after living in Paris (where he studied under Marcel Mauss in the 1930s), Okomoto had pushed for modern Japan to embrace what he considered to be the dynamic, primitive spirit of the nation's Jomon legacy (c.14,000–300BCE), as opposed to what was perceived as the refined, reductionist and aristocratic aesthetic of the subsequent Yayoi era (300BCE–300CE).

Okomoto's tower was allegedly named in reference to *Season of the Sun*, the 1955 novel by the disreputable current governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, in which the protagonist breaks through a *shoji* paper screen with his erect penis. The Metabolists' disapproval of it is encapsulated by Arata Isozaki's histrionic condemnation in his 2006 book *Japan-ness in Architecture*: 'Alas, when at last I saw Okomoto's tower (looking like a giant phallus) penetrating the soft membrane of the roof, I thought to myself that the battle for modernity had finally been lost. The primordial [...] ended up as bombastic kitsch, in all too candid a manner [...] a black mask faced the Festival Plaza with a rough and eerie grin. We must heed the bitterness projected by that mask, for Japan-ness readily descends into sheer vulgarity, to the extent of the horrifying.'

Isozaki was Metabolism's great ambivalent non-member. After declining an invitation to be involved in writing their manifesto, he went on to share ideas and collaborate with the Metabolists throughout the 1960s, while maintaining a clearly stated conceptual distance from the group. In a recent interview with Rem Koolhaas (in the excellent 2011 book, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*, which sheds light on Metabolism's political, philosophical and stylistic divergences) Isozaki recalls his hesitation in the face of the Metabolists' optimism, and his desire to inject some doubt into their Utopian naivety. He was opposed to what he saw as their linear model of time and progress, feeling the need to point out the destruction concomitant with all construction. The first room of the retrospective at the Mori (for which Isozaki was on the advisory committee) contained a re-creation of his photomontage *Re-Ruined Hiroshima* (1968), in which images of crumbling Metabolist megastructures are superimposed onto the razed landscape of postwar Hiroshima, intended as a reminder that even the most magnificent techno-futurist cities will one day become ruins.

The most famous Metabolist building that was actually realized is the late Kisho Kurokawa's ill-fated Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972) in Tokyo's Ginza district. Taking its cue from the modularity of traditional Japanese interiors (particularly the adaptable *tatami* flooring), it was made from 140 pods that were prefabricated with built-in furniture and wall-mounted appliances like typewriters, reel-to-reel tape decks and really big calculators (the future!). Inadvertently fulfilling Isozaki's prophecy of Utopian ruination, the Nakagin Capsule Tower currently lies in a decrepit state, and was controversially slated for demolition in 2007. There has been widespread support for the building's preservation from the international architecture community, but given that Kurokawa was particularly vocal about the impermanence of Japanese architecture (and even proposed buildings be made with dynamite in their walls so they would auto-destruct after 30 years, since no building should last longer than that), there might be some irony here. In any case, while the building has been completely evacuated, the current financial malaise in Japan has created ambiguity about its fate. A refurbished unplugged capsule was presented in the Mori Art Museum exhibition, though no clear indication of the tower's future was offered.

Metabolism has often been compared to the London-based group Archigram, who

proposed megastructures and hypothetically adjustable urbanism around the same time, but the Metabolists' futurism always borrowed heavily from their cultural past: as they set out to construct and define Japanese-ness, they turned to selected aspects of Japan's architectural legacy that coincided with their emphasis on material transience and periodic regeneration. Particularly important for them was Ise Jingu, the shrine that has been completely dismantled, burnt and rebuilt from scratch every 20 years for over a millennium. In 1960, the year the Metabolists published their manifesto, Kenzo Tange and Noboru Kawazoe (editor of *Japan Architect* and founding member of Metabolism) published a book on the Ise shrine, enthralled by the idea that through a predetermined cycle of destruction and reconstruction this ancient Shinto site remains perpetually new.

It was fitting that the Mori exhibition expressed a number of temporal paradoxes as audiences navigated their way through largely unrealized past visions of the future – visions that were very consciously informed by imagined traditions of Japanese architecture from the past. As with Isozaki's wry superimposition of future ruins onto the present, multiple times and chronologies were built up and woven in and out of each other throughout the retrospective. And, in a way, it is precisely by virtue of their having never been manifested that these retro-proposals are most relevant today: as unbuilt, speculative futures, they can interrogate our present with a sense of untainted potentiality.

Amelia Groom