

Metabolism Talks The Talk

Last night the New York Public Library hosted a sold-out talk between pioneering contemporary architect Rem Koolhaas and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist on the topic of their tome, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*. (Picture a line around the block, and a Tweet cloud generated by architects, architecture students, and the insatiably curious who can't resist such a klieg-lit occasion at the NYPL.) Paul Holdenraber, director of the library's lecture programming, engaged the two in a chat about the first non-Western avant-garde movement in architecture. In their book, published by Taschen, Koolhaas and Ulrich Obrist provide insight into a little known part of architectural history, the Metabolists, who sought to create buildings in post-war Japan capable of morphing as needed. It came as little surprise, then, that a conversation about this topic should do the same.

Photo by Jori Klein for NYPL.

In 1959, Kenzo Tange, de facto leader of the group, brought together a "mixing chamber" of artists, architects and even writers to form the Metabolists. Reflecting the expandable buildings they were to create, the metabolists formed a cohesive group but maintained their individualism while working in the movement. It is this unity that piqued Koolhaas's interest, who laments that today architects are "all lonely operators." Born out of necessity to rebuild housing in Japan after World War II, Koolhaas sees Metabolism as one of the last movements where the state and creative sector came together to plan a country's future. Admitting it isn't a popular concept, he celebrates the bureaucracy serving as a creative force during this time. Perhaps in part to this connection, Metabolists respected their past, creating an aesthetic that combined tradition with modern ideals.

The conversation became playful at moments, usually due to Koolhaas' approach to Holdenraber's challenges. Asked to explain his interpretation of the death of Metabolism in a "bonfire of neoliberalism," Koolhaas modestly declared he "doesn't feel one should explain a rhetorical sentence," to the amusement of many in the audience. When Holdenraber commented on Koolhaas setting the tone of the interview by rearranging the chair set-up prior to beginning, Ulrich Obrist revealed this is a habit of Mr. Koolhaas.

This anecdote set the men, all serial interview subjects, into a back-and-forth on the interview process in which Holdenraber profoundly declared the interviewer a "curator of public curiosity." The men praised interviewing for providing a constant education, and the lessons extolled from nearly 2,000 hours of interviews with Metabolists in *Project Japan* speak to Metabolism's relevancy today. On a global level, the focus on sustainable living long ago emphasized by the Japanese movement has now been brought to the forefront of architecture.

It would appear Ulrich Obrist and Koolhaas became Metabolists of their own sort during the process of writing the book. Hans shared the duo's ironic mimicry of the movement—several times they believed they had finished, only to discover new information and thus the need to expand and transform. Their 7-year construction of *Project Japan* gifted readers a "matryoshka doll," according to Ulrich Obrist, as the book ultimately became several within one.