

Aftershocks: Metabolism and Japan's postwar dreams of the future

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THE DAYS AND MONTHS FOLLOWING THE MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE that struck off Japan's north-east coast on 11 March 2011 have been filled with almost innumerable aftershocks, ranging in intensity from barely perceptible disturbances to jarring tremors. The Japan Meteorological Agency's official count for aftershocks between 11 March and 31 December 2011 is 6757, although from the subjective position of experiencing these daily recurrences while sleeping, showering, cooking, shopping or doing any other activity, it sometimes feels as though the earth were simply continually shaking, and indeed there have been reports of people who, imagining phantom earthquakes, can no longer distinguish between what is real and imaginary.

Coupled with this has been the concern over radioactive fallout from the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and mistrust of government transparency, which plays out in the political arena through protests and petitions, but also in the market, adding an existential dimension to choosing between a bunch of potentially contaminated spinach from Chiba at 150 yen versus a bunch of spinach from Kyoto for 480 yen versus no spinach at all. Living under such conditions, one is constantly reminded of the fundamental materiality of one's being and any expression of that being, but not in a vital or invigorating way – often in a vaguely threatening or dispiriting way.

So it was that, encountering a laminated facsimile of *Metabolism 1960*, the publication that launched the fluid group of architectural collaborators, peers and rivals known as Metabolism, on display in the recent retrospective at the Mori Art Museum, one could readily identify with what the critic and editor Noboru Kawazoe describes in the essay 'Material and Man'. Writing that 'radioactivity harms people's mind [sic] before it affects their bodies', Kawazoe conscientiously rooted the group's ethos in the context of the post-nuclear Cold War reality. He understood that pervasive anxiety over the potential annihilation of material

civilisation was eating away at the spirit of humanity, or 'belief in moral civilization'. For Kawazoe, the mission for architects and designers 'who give hope and form to all the things men make', would be to resolve the schism between morality and materiality; only they could lead the world in optimism.

The slim square-format volume was but one among an impressive and dense array of models, sketches, plans, photographs, videos and other documentation assembled for 'Metabolism, City of the Future', which chronologically charted the development of Metabolism from antecedents and birth to maturation and global prominence, beginning with the 'Master Plan for Hiroshima' (1949) and Hiroshima Peace Center spearheaded by the group's mentor, Kenzo Tange, and completed in 1955. In fact, so extensive was the material that to thoroughly review it all would have required multiple visits: the exhibition as emergency library rather than narrative device as such.

This density was in part necessary to corral the sheer diversity and breadth of the activities of the individual members, who celebrated the additive, algorithmic properties of biological growth, regeneration and evolution. This is most apparent in a series of unrealised proposals reimagining the organisation of urban space as a kind of post-industrial mega-kibbutz, brought to life through newly commissioned animated digital renderings as well as original sketches and models. Working in a country where mountains comprise an estimated 73 per cent of the terrain, and at a time when postwar economic recovery had led to rapid population growth, the Metabolists were acutely conscious of the physical constraints on the social environment. By 1958 Kiyonori Kikutake had already come up with proposals for 'Tower Shape Community', with a cylindrical core that would simultaneously produce and support housing attached to its exterior and allow for continued growth on a fixed structural footprint, and a 'Marine City' concept shifting this idea to lily-pad-like settlements that

would float on water – this latter sketched out in confident and economic strokes of brown pastel on paper, with the orange orb of a setting sun in the background conjuring a sci-fi pastoral. Similarly, in his 1960 'Plan for Tokyo', Tange proposed projecting a spine-like 'civic axis' of interwoven transport networks across Tokyo Bay, from which smaller waterborne communities would extend with living, work and recreation functionality; while in his 'Shibuya Project: City in the Air' (1962), Arata Isozaki envisioned gargantuan vertical trunks shooting up from the city floor, able to support branches of dwellings cantilevered above the existing buildings below.

The concepts of artificial ground, vertical core and axial extension evolved into an almost sculptural language of prop, rack, suspension and torque when applied at a more conventional scale, combining modern materials such as reinforced concrete and steel with compositional strategies borrowed from traditional Japanese architecture. Represented together in a large gallery of models, plans, photographs and video documentation, completed projects such as Satani Ochio's Kyoto International Conference Hall (1966), with its alternating upright and inverted trapezoidal supports, Kikutake's Hotel Tokoen (1964) in Tottori, with its post-and-beam framework of concrete columns holding up an elevated 'floor', and Masato Otaka's Chiba Prefectural Central Library (1968), with its modules of elongated cross-shaped columns, show the architects playing with the physical relations between interchangeable parts rather than synthesising a self-contained whole. The radical generosity of these designs is that they are fundamentally open to modification and amplification by anyone, any time, as the need arises.

In a related but perhaps more opportunistic way, the Metabolists were also at the forefront of exploring prefabricated construction, initially through Takashi Asada's involvement in designing Japan's Antarctic Syowa Station (1957), and iconically

demonstrated by Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972) on the edge of Tokyo's Ginza district, made of capsule-shaped domiciles plugged into a standing core. In an archival video, Kurokawa explains that he sees the capsule, with its minimal comforts, as part of a new '24-hour lifestyle', and that the 'mass-production approach [complements] the idea of a vacation cabin or pied-à-terre in the city center'.

The Metabolists reached their apotheosis with the 'Expo '70' World's Fair in Osaka, a high-water mark for the intersection of Japanese design, culture, technology, industry and policy for which Tange was appointed co-producer of the master plan. Held up by a frame structure of steel ball joints linked together with pipes, the massive 'Grand Roof' designed by Tange and others provided a locus for ceremonies and events, while Isozaki contributed giant mobile robots that could do everything from transporting sets to adjusting lighting, and Kurokawa was visible through futuristic designs for the corporate-sponsored 'Toshiba IHI Pavilion' and 'Takara Beautilion'. Recreating a sense of the expo's architectural hedonism and pageantry through a colourful multimedia installation, the exhibition climaxed here, before concluding with a section on Metabolist projects overseas, spanning Tange's historic 'Plan for Skopje' (1965–66) to Kurokawa and Isozaki's 'Zhengdong New Town Zhengzhou City' in China, begun in 2003 and still under construction.

Almost hagiographic, 'City of the Future' marshalled diverse elements in elucidating the expression of Metabolism, but stopped short of commenting on the group's ideological subtext and motivations. A multimedia contextual timeline at the exhibition entrance, for example, described a 1942 plan by Tange for a 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere Monument' as 'a magnificent concept worthy of a national project ... an archetype for Japanese architecture appropriate for a new era'. Setting aside the politics of speaking about Japan's imperial past, the issue of


how the Metabolists related to the postwar national agenda – albeit self-evident in the scale of their collective imagination, and through projects such as ‘Expo ’70’ – becomes overwhelmed in the sensory barrage of displays.

It is on this point that the exhibition is admirably supplemented by the independent publication, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks ...* (2011), an oral history of the movement by the architect Rem Koolhaas and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Seeking to understand Metabolism as the last manifestation of a nation-building avant-garde before the onset of neoliberalism, Koolhaas and Obrist began their project in 2005, eventually interviewing all the group’s major exponents except Tange, who died in March of that year (joined by Kurokawa in 2007 and Kikutake in late 2011). In true Metabolist fashion, these interviews, nine altogether, constitute a structural spine through the book’s 700-odd pages, from which extend numerous illustrations, capsules of supporting information and commentary by contemporary peers such as Hajime Yatsuka and Toyo Ito, and passages of historical analysis that reframe the group’s ideas and activities from a critical perspective.

Essential as they are for justifying the book, the interviews themselves tend towards the perfunctory. There are too few instances in which the interlocutors put forward their own personal stakes, a notable exception being an exchange in which, on hearing that Kikutake, the scion of provincial landlords, conceived his ‘Tower Shaped Community’ and ‘Marine City’ proposals as a protest against democratic land reforms, Koolhaas relates his own youthful admiration for what he had perceived as Metabolism’s democratic sympathies, and pushes Kikutake to explain further.

It is in the secondary material that Koolhaas and his team are at their most intelligent, polemical and ironic, recombining elements from the interviews into new modules of information to

be paired with or transformed into images and graphics. In the attention they lavish on Tange and Kurokawa in particular, one can appreciate their attraction to the outsized personalities of public intellectuals who appeared regularly on television and in the popular press. And it is through such material that Koolhaas and his team convincingly sculpt a narrative of Metabolism as being formed by a unique confluence of national pride and support from the highest levels of government, largely directed by Atsushi Shimokobe, a Tange protégé who joined the postwar bureaucracy and rose to become vice-minister of the National Land Agency, among other positions.

Certainly there is a self-regarding undertone to the book, which inevitably reflects the personal concerns of Koolhaas more than the assiduity of rigorous scholarship per se. Yet, eminently readable given its considerable volume, *Project Japan* is an incisive introduction to a transitional historical moment. It also disabuses any idealisation of parallels between then and now. If the nuclear anxiety remains familiar, the specificity of Metabolism is a reminder that it is up to society as a whole to give shape to its own optimism; as for the capricious future, we just have to wait. 

Metabolism, The City of the Future: Dreams and Visions of Reconstruction in Postwar and Present-Day Japan, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 17 September 2011 – 15 January 2012; **Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Project Japan: Metabolism Talks ...**, Taschen, Cologne, 2011, softcover, 720 pp., \$79.99.