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Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement

By Zhongjie Lin

Routledge, 2010

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Japan is now firmly linked with the catastrophic failure of human technology vis-à-vis natural disasters. Zhongjie Lin's book reminds its readers that not too long ago this was very different. The 1960s were not only a period of seemingly limitless confidence in man's capacity to dominate his environment (the Fukushima Power Plant was among the many outcomes of this hubris), but also one of growing dissatisfaction with an overly technicised world, which gave rise to a strange synthesis of technophilia and back-to-nature values. The proposals of the Japanese Metabolists—a group of architects who stepped into the international limelight in 1960—are among the most famous examples. It is Lin's merit to present the first comprehensive history of this movement, which so far has been much described and contextualised, but never properly historicised.¹

Lin's book is a well-written and insightful account of the architectural and urban design projects of Kenzo Tange (1913–2005) and the architects he mentored, who in 1960 were mostly in their thirties, and who soon became known as 'the Metabolists': Kisho Kurokawa, Fumihiko Maki, Masato Otaka, Kiyonori Kikutake, Arata Isozaki and the critic Noboru Kawazoe. They proposed urban

mega-structures that would 'grow' and 'wither' like biological organisms through the addition and replacement of parts, allowing for a flexibility that was thought to be missing in many modernist city plans. Most famously, Tange and his protégés in 1961 presented their Tokyo Plan, proposing a linear extension of the existing city across Tokyo Bay. Built on 50-metre-high stilts above the sea and connected with multi-lane suspension-bridge motorways, this new city was to provide residential, commercial and leisure space for two million people on enormous multi-level platforms towering above the water.

At the time, the bizarre blend of bucolic technocriticism and technocratic megalomania inherent in the Metabolists' tree-shaped skyscrapers and parks above the sea was also palpable in the works of Peter Cook, Frei Otto or Reynier Banham. It was an era when architects and engineers planned to colonise the pristine landscape of the moon, or to convert the North Pole into a glass-covered green house, and simultaneously aimed at improving the 'rigidity' of technology-based functionalism through even greater technological display. Most of these projects never left the ivory tower of architectural imagination and thus influenced the aspect of contemporary cities to a much smaller extent than, for example, the functionalist vision of a tower in the park had done a few decades earlier. In retrospect, however, one is baffled that these visions of an allegedly free and spontaneous life in a man-made techno-world in most cases completely ignore the gargantuan resources needed to guarantee its maintenance and flawless functioning.



Fuji Television Building,
Odaiba, Tokyo, by
Kenzo Tange (image by
Zhongjie Lin).

For the Japanese context, Lin brings forth an explanation for the attempt to improve rational planning through even more rational planning. Tange was convinced that technology's destructive potential, which he had experienced in the Hiroshima bombing, could only be kept at bay if man retained complete control over technological development (p. 173). This would necessarily come with an even greater reliance on technology and organisation.

In Lin's account, the Metabolist movement relates, on the one hand, to European modernism, as exemplified in the ideas of Le Corbusier and other CIAM protagonists, and on the other hand to Japan's social and economic upheaval in the post-war years. In this context, Lin interprets Tange's famous Tokyo plan as resulting from the architect's initiative and not from government support (p. 146)—however neatly it fits into the

country's official modernisation policy. The author draws from an extensive array of materials, which includes both English and Japanese primary sources as well as interviews with nearly all surviving Metabolists. The amount of sources he draws upon allows him to retrace both the development of Metabolist ideas and the—rather limited—influence they had on actual cities.

Particularly telling is his account of one of the few Metabolist projects that was actually built (p. 233–242): Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo (1973), a residential building consisting of vertical shafts and 144 mini-flats in capsules that are connected to these shafts. Kurokawa's vision that these capsules were to be exchanged whenever required—an axiom of the Metabolist doctrine about architectural flexibility—was made ridiculous in a preposterous debate in the early 2000s: the owners' association wanted to demolish the building, while a group of conservationists supported by Docomomo aimed at preserving it for its architectural significance.

Lin refrains from savouring the historical irony that in retrospect any random nineteenth-century warehouse or tenement whose façades, roofs and interior walls have been adapted to new uses has to be deemed more flexible than Kurokawa's Tower, which had been explicitly designed for change and adaptation, but which is now grid-locked in a discussion that apparently leaves room only for two alternatives, destruction or musealisation. Rather, Lin interprets the Nakagin Capsule Tower as 'a new prototype of architecture responding to the transformation of modern society' (p. 243). In this context, he praises the influence of Metabolist ideas on the post-1960s conception of

the city as process and evolution as opposed to the rigid functionalist model. But he also takes a critical perspective on their megalomaniac proposals, pointing out that the way Tange approached challenges such as population growth, increasing motorisation and infrastructural deficiencies 'was more symbolic than practical' and 'had limited influence on physical planning' (p. 166).

Lin stresses nevertheless that certain aspects of Tange's Tokyo Plan were indeed realised, although in a quite different way than Tange had envisioned. This includes the city's growth patterns in the following decades, which take up some of the Plan's principles: the linear urban cluster that grew around the Tokyo-Yokohama axis, the developments next to the Shinkansen railway line or the post-1980s reclamation projects in Tokyo Bay (Tokyo Teleport Town, Minato Mirai and others). Lin also points to the formal similarity of many post-1990s mega-projects in other East Asian countries to some of the Metabolists' proposals.

The author's intimate familiarity with the architects and their works, which is the great merit of the book, nevertheless occasionally obfuscates his critical view. In particular, the presentation of Kenzo Tange's pre-war projects exclusively in formal terms leaves the reader uneasy. This applies also to Tange's town planning work in occupied Manchuria in the late 1930s, which the author merely interprets as a source of 'primary knowledge of modern city design' (p. 48) in the same way as his 1942 prize-winning proposal for a memorial to the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prospereity Sphere' (a Second World War euphemism for the subjugation of the Far East under Japanese dominion). The latter, for the author, is just a vision for 'reforming the country's rampant urban growth'

(p. 51). After all, these early projects were carried out in the service of an aggressive regime responsible for ineffable suffering and countless war crimes in the countries its army invaded.

Hence one would expect a discussion of the relationship between architecture and the oppressive nationalist ideology of this regime, similar to the questions historians habitually ask in the context of architects who worked under Hitler, Stalin or Mussolini, and subsequently attempted to justify or conceal their actions: was the young Tange an opportunist courtier of ruthless totalitarian rulers or rather an apolitical dreamer with a soft spot for big plans? And how does his stance during the war relate to his architectural projects of the post-war era, not only to his Hiroshima Peace Memorial, but rather his megalomaniac Tokyo Plan, which—as the author correctly points out (p. 166)—retains an implicit totalitarian potential? Given that the author aspired to situate the Metabolist project ‘in the context of Japan’s ... socio-political reorientation’ (book-flap text), this omission is unsatisfactory and does not fit with his otherwise very well researched book.

It is also regrettable that the author only occasionally pays attention to the transfer of concepts and ideas across language borders. Given the Japanese government’s restrictions on overseas travel during the 1960s (p. 16) and the widespread mutual ignorance of Japanese and Westerners about each other at the time, the question remains whether the transfer and adaptation of architectural concepts was not severely obstructed by mistranslations and misunderstandings. Lin convincingly explains the genesis of the word ‘Metabolism’ from the Japanese *shinchin taisha*, which next to a metabolic exchange also

carries the idiomatic meaning of ‘out with the old, in with the new’ (p. 22). Did such losses in translation not happen all over? And is it therefore safe to interpret the English terms by which the Japanese architects presented their projects to a Western audience as having the same connotations as these terms when used in Europe or North America? Along these lines, Lin frequently draws conclusions from both Japanese and English texts irrespective of their designated audience (Japanese or Western). One would have hoped for a context-based perspective particularly when his sources attempt to define ‘Japanese tradition’ (p. 39–45).

In the overall context of the book these shortcomings are rather minor, and in spite of them Lin’s book is an intriguing account of a not too chronologically distant approach to the challenges of modern dwelling. It is an inspiring piece of scholarship about a remarkable facet of modern architecture, and a must-read for anyone interested in the ambivalent manifestations of the historical discourse on technology and progress.

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Note

1. See, for example, Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (New York, Rizzoli, 1977), Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture—A Critical History* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1980) or Botond Bogner, *Japanese Architecture* (London, Academy Editions, 1992).