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Seeking the Design of System “After the March 11, 2011 Earthquake” (*Shingo no seido sekkei ga motomerareteiru*)

I received many get-well e-mails from friends, in particular, architects, from all over the world after the March 11 [2011] earthquake in Japan. I had formed these deep friendships during discussions at international meetings, participation in international design competitions, and collaborations on large projects. They know my work, including the montage “Re-Ruined Hiroshima” (1968), and “Fracture” (1996), an installation of the rubble from the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, presented at the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

The same friends also know that for the last fifty years I have posited that a city emerges in a new form after it is destroyed in a war or a natural disaster, and that I have always maintained the position of an anti-architect. I guess that they, having seen the disastrous conditions after the earthquake in media reports, were concerned about Japan and thought about me, who had repeatedly mentioned Hiroshima and Kobe.

As a matter of fact, the theme I chose for the occasion of the Venice Biennial fifteen years ago was “the Architect as Seismograph.” In China, there is a professional classification of “internationally

renowned architects,” and a majority of the architects who wrote to me are included in this classification. Since the beginning of the 21st century, I have felt that the power of architecture that has formed this type of framework has weakened, and I have called it the syndrome for imperfect architecture (*Kenchiku fuzen shōkōgun*). It seems that my friends have felt that. I wrote an e-mail, thanking them, as follows:

With the triple unimaginable disasters of a huge earthquake of 9.0 in magnitude, a tsunami of 20 meters in height, and radiation leaks from a nuclear power plant, Japan is now in a huge distress. I am moved by your get-well emails, and would like to thank you most for your kind words. There is a Japanese proverb [similar to the English expression] “that’s what friends are for.” I am having flashbacks of various scenes of discussions as well as collaborations [with you] over projects at various occasions around the world.... When the earthquake hit, I was in a remote location in China, not having been able to get telephone calls through to Japan for two days. I finally learned of the safety of my family members and friends through

Internet. Although we were able to avoid almost completely any physical damage in Tokyo where I have my design office, we were bogged down by the dysfunction of the city for ten days. I managed to get back to Tokyo, moving from place to place like a nomad, tracking down close friends in Shanghai, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, and Kyoto, unable to keep to a schedule. Staying at home to escape from the radiation is now described as being “a refugee confined to your own home” (*jitaku nanmin*). However, I could not help but give a bitter smile about being an international nomad. No one could really guess what would come next in Japan, but I am aware that unless there would be a reform of the design of system in Japanese society, Japan would fall into a sinking state. Designing a system should be the job of architects. However, it would be different from the design of buildings as previously done. We should consider it as a design of architecture in a different dimension. But, at the very least, it would be an extension of designing architecture. I would like to consider creating a model [for such a design].

1. Arata Isozaki (Japanese, b. 1931), Re-ruined Hiroshima, Project, Hiroshima, Japan, Perspective, 1968. By permission of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Howard Gilman Foundation.



Arata Isozaki '68



2. Arata Isozaki (Japanese, b. 1931), Tsukuba Center Building in Ruins, 1985. The Deutsches Architektur Museum.

The spectacle of the tsunami's trace overlaps with the images of burnt-out areas (*yakeato*) in cities immediately after World War II. At that time, charred roof tiles (*kawara*) would rest on top of broken timber pieces scattered on the foundation of a house. Some sixty years later, this scene has re-occurred. Yet, it has moved into another dimension. Postwar Japan rearranged itself into a new societal system without restoring itself. This social system became the driving force for the nation's economic growth. As I wrote in

the month issue of *Bunshun*, the city of Kobe was physically restored after the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, but the life of the city's social system stagnated for twenty years because of the extension of the life of the city's old system.

In 1995, the world electric brain [computer] network was established. Japan turned away from an ideal opportunity to lead the world [in terms of] reforming the system [of design]. Other than inventing and carrying out a new design of system, there would be no possibility

for a loophole. At one time [in Japan], "architecture-city-nation" was planned as one form. It was believed that anything could be achieved with a "plan." In the Archipelago of Japan, this system ended in or around 1970. Now, it is necessary to carry out designing the system of society ([a] system of society that could be called "soft architecture.") Who would accomplish this, and how? At least, certainly it will not be the architects of a preexisting conventional type.