Portrait of a Building

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Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower has always been haunted by images, its physical existence as a building repeatedly overshadowed by its currency as the icon of an architectural avant-garde and its power as an avatar of history. As one of the few built examples of Metabolism, the tower occupies a strange ground between imagined proposal and constructed reality. The Metabolist movement, after all, became famous largely for producing staggeringly ambitious images of the city of the future—visualizations of an urban landscape transformed through a heady combination of powerful new building technologies with organic models of growth and flexibly. Kurokawa and his fellow Metabolists were also the most media-savvy architects the world had ever seen, not merely creating such representations in their studios but strategically engaging popular television and print outlets to disseminate them to an unprecedentedly broad public audience.

By the time the Capsule Tower was constructed in 1972, Kurokawa and his colleagues had been an influential presence in both the international architecture circuit and the Japanese mass media for over a decade, producing a steady stream of drawings, photo-collages, and architectural models that depicted a series of so-called megastructures—from Kenzo Tange's 1960 Plan for Tokyo, which called for projecting a colossal new network of buildings and highways across miles of water in Tokyo Bay, to Kurokawa's own 1961 Helix City Plan, a series of monumental spirals soaring high into the sky over Tokyo, each consisting of thousands of apartments and joined to its neighbors by an integrated roadway. The Nakagin building, in which individual housing "capsules" spiral around two vertical structural and circulation cores, follows a similar logic of aggregation, but at a scale so much smaller that the building seems almost like a maquette for one of these other massive urban visions. When photographs of the completed Capsule Tower, which was just thirteen stories at its highest point and contained only 140 dwelling units, were published, they joined a host of far grander Metabolist images already in wide distribution. And even as the tower was under construction, Kurokawa

publicized plans for a vast Capsule Village, which he envisioned as a kind of resort landscape in the countryside near Tokyo, suggesting that his building should be read more as a sign of things to come—a symbol of the Metabolist future—than as a fully realized work of architecture in its own right.

Today, four decades after an oil crisis and shifting political currents stopped Metabolism's momentum cold, the Capsule Tower has taken on a distinctly different meaning, paradoxically evoking both Japan's postwar past and a future that never arrived. Yet the building's reception is still driven primarily by both its status as a symbol and its circulation as an image in the media. The tower has been poorly maintained for years, and as photographs of its famous façade, now dirt-streaked and corroding, and of capsule interiors, some in shocking states of disrepair, make their way through academic journals, architecture blogs, and the popular press, they play a key role in debates about the appropriate fate of the building. Advocates for the tower's preservation project a sense of profound loss onto these images of decay, seeing the tower as a nostalgic glimpse into a world of unrealized possibilities, the token of a crucial chapter in twentieth-century architectural history that has been all but forgotten. Advocates for its demolition see a manifestly failed proposal for a now-obsolete model of urban living, a relic whose time has come. But in either case, the tangible complexities of the Capsule Tower as space and structure are flattened out by its weighty representational role.

It might seem paradoxical, then, that a series of photographs would have the power to reveal the architecture obscured by this flood of images, but that is precisely what Noritaka Minami's project *1972* has accomplished. Over the course of more than four years, beginning in August 2010, Minami undertook an intimate photographic study of the Capsule Tower. On repeated visits, the artist spent many hours speaking to the building's inhabitants and exploring and documenting the idiosyncrasies of its capsules and corridors, producing what he describes as a series of "portraits of the space."[1]

Indeed, Minami's photographs are portraits in a dual sense. They offer a vivid, almost personal, encounter with Kurokawa's architecture as a physical body and visual

environment, from the dappled texture of the stairwell walls to the graceful plays of light produced within each capsule by its single circular window. The photographs reveal, too, an incredible variety in the current state of the capsules: one is in near-total decay, with a crumbling ceiling and clouds of dark mold blooming on its walls; another appears newly renovated, pristine and empty; a succession of inhabited capsules are stuffed with a seemingly endless variety of furniture and belongings. And it is here that the second sense of *portrait* emerges. For although the residents themselves are conspicuously absent, Minami's photos offer a detailed examination of the complex patterns of everyday life within the Capsule Tower—the modes of interaction and use that describe not only the identity of the residents but their relationship to the building.

It is fitting that this relationship should emerge as one of the primary themes of *1972*, because it was undeniably the obsession of the building's designer. Although at first glance the capsule might seem to be a standardized, homogenizing unit of space, Kurokawa viewed it precisely as a revolt against standardization, arguing that it was a celebration of the individual and an architectural device for constructing new social relationships and even new forms of subjectivity: "The capsule expresses the individuality of an individual—his challenge to an organization and his revolt against unification."[2] The capsule tower, then, was the architecture most conducive to achieving his goal of "a diversified society."[3] Nor was this passion for individualization merely rhetorical; it was expressed in concrete terms by the composition of the building. Although all the capsules were constructed to the same overall dimensions (approximately eight by eight by twelve feet), they were not identical. A number of basic variations in characteristics such as the placement of the door and window (on the short or long side of the capsule), the location of the built-in furnishings (along the left or right wall), and the quality of the amenities included ("standard," "deluxe," or "super-deluxe") resulted in literally hundreds of possible permutations. In fact, Kurokawa pointed out, "since there are only 140 capsules in the building, some of the possible varieties are not used."[4]

Kurokawa's method of aggregating the capsules also emphasized their individuality. Most of all in a literal, structural sense: the capsules are not stacked one on top of the other, but each is cantilevered individually off of the tower cores (and attached with an ingenious system of only four high-tension bolts, so that each could be removed without disturbing any of the other capsules). Further, they are staggered in a spiraling arrangement around a central elevator shaft and stairwell, which not only lends them a quintessentially Metabolist effect of continuous motion, hinting at the possibility of continued growth into the sky, but means that many of the capsules are staggered vertically in relation to their neighbors, with adjacent units often not even sharing a floor plane, but located half a level up or down. The cumulative result of this approach was a profound disruption of the modernist tower typology, which was based on the unified expanse of space and material created by open, continuous floor plates that were enclosed by a uniform curtain wall. With the Capsule Tower, Kurokawa replaced this already ubiquitous type with what he described as "a building… dissolved into parts."[5]

Yet for all this emphasis on the capsule as a space for the isolated individual, Kurokawa did not envision his tower as a totally self-contained, solipsistic world devoid of all social interaction. He understood the tower's relationship to what the Metabolists praised as "the fluidity of the city" as a crucial component of the lifestyle of its occupants.[6] As Kurokawa put it, the capsules "must not be closed units within a uniform society. On the contrary, they must have systems that are ecologically open to the larger environment of the city."[7] Doubtless the tower would exist in a completely different state today if a Metabolist fluidity had spread throughout Tokyo, but as it is, Kurokawa's building remains isolated within its surroundings. One of Minami's photographs depicts the building from a distance, against the backdrop of the looming glass structures that have become ubiquitous in the neighborhood in recent decades, seeming to show a building that has been betrayed by its city. If historical photos from 1972 show the Capsule Tower rising from a context of low-rise, largely traditional timber buildings, seeming to radiate potential for a new kind of urban architecture, Minami shows it hemmed in on all sides by grimly striated glass curtain walls and relentlessly stacked floor plates, surrounded by

the mundane, contemporary corporate version of the modernist tower it so neatly exploded.

But Minami's images of the Capsule Tower also seem to reveal a fundamental miscalculation by its architect. Kurokawa's notion of individualism may have been complemented by an imagined connection to a dynamic city, but his capsule was still a device for isolation. For Kurokawa, this was a necessary response to the rapid evolution not only of the urban environment but of information technology, both of which were making more demands on the individual's attention than ever before. While the city provided a welcome space for social interaction, it was also a hectic environment from which the individual needed refuge. As Kurokawa put it, "The capsule is defined as a space which guarantees complete privacy.… Individuals should be protected by capsules in which they are sheltered from information they do not want, thereby allowing an individual to recover his subjectivity and independence."[8] But the smartphones visible in several of Minami's photographs of capsule interiors are a reminder of how much the nature of technology has changed in the intervening decades. Today, it is all too clear that neither privacy nor flows of information are dictated by spatial boundaries. In our wireless age, the idea that architecture could provide protection from information seems almost quaint, as does the notion that privacy is simply a matter of physical isolation. As cities themselves are becoming less fluid and ever more homogenous, with one global metropolis increasingly like another, it might be more useful for architecture to push in the opposite direction by providing shared space for (physical) social interaction, which is entirely absent from Kurokawa's building. As Minami's photos demonstrate, the tower consists only of capsules and stairwells, with the minimal landings on each level the closest thing to communal space that exists within the building.

Perhaps ultimately more problematic than the lack of common space is the assumption underlying the design of the capsules themselves: that the patterns of an individual's occupation can be directly mapped onto a specific architectural configuration. Kurokawa's capsules were flexible in the sense that they were (at least theoretically) movable, but they were quite rigid in the sense that they tried to anticipate and fulfill

every imaginable need of their occupants—each capsule not only included built-in furniture and appliances, for example, but even came with its own toothbrush. In trying to provide a pre-established solution for every want, the capsules inevitably foreclose unanticipated possibilities.

Again and again, Minami's photographs show the inability of Kurokawa's architecture to fully anticipate or contain the activities of its inhabitants, suggesting a misfit between the capsule as a unit of space and a unit of life, and, perhaps more broadly, the inevitability of a loose fit between architectural boundaries and the complex patterns of movement and behavior that constitute inhabitation and use. All this is demonstrated most literally by the piles of personal belongings that have accumulated outside the doorways of many of the currently inhabited capsules: here several pairs of shoes and a pile of books, there a flat screen television or a bicycle. Beyond reflecting a simple lack of storage space, these images attest to a mismatch between the hard spatial boundaries dictated by the architecture and the more fluid boundaries of the residents' inhabitation of the building. Another common subversion of the capsules' limits is the tendency for residents to prop their doors open (for ventilation, several of them told Minami, and, one assumes, perhaps also for a slightly more continuous sense of space). This leads to a hilarious range of jury-rigged curtains that prevent passersby from looking through the open doors into the apartments: here what appears to be a large towel emblazoned with the logo of a local baseball team, there a garish, coral-reef-themed shower curtain.

Inside the capsules, an overwhelming variety of ad-hoc renovations demonstrates that the units are in fact quite architecturally flexible, although not in the sense that Kurokawa originally intended. Many of them feature cuts in their walls to accommodate a wide range of ventilation systems or wall-mounted air conditioners; in some cases additional, operable, windows have been added to allow airflow and extra light into the units (the original circular windows were designed only to be opened from the outside by the fire department in case of emergency). The interiors feature endlessly varying configurations of furniture as well, ranging from slight modifications of the original built-ins to wholesale refittings. And while some units are clearly used solely as offices, or seem to

serve for only occasional overnight stays, others are clearly lived in full-time, packed with what seems to be the entirety of their owner's worldly possessions. In a sense, Kurokawa's original notion of capsule permutations was a kind of digital solution to the idea of variability, with occupants expected to choose one of a given set of discrete options. Minami's photographs are a powerful reminder of the inherently analog, unpredictable nature of the daily business of inhabiting space. Indeed, they suggest that architecture does not so much need to be literally dynamic as it needs to provide an open framework for the already inherently dynamic interaction between subject and space.

But perhaps the most striking quality of these photographs is that they do not only depict such interaction; they actually embody it. Minami used a combination of large and medium format cameras to shoot *1972*. Both formats necessitated the use of a tripod (particularly given the slow shutter speeds he required to photograph using only natural light), which transformed the camera into another kind of body standing in the room. And so, while Minami's general approach to photographing each capsule was a consistent one of finding a central location from which to shoot a sequence of frontal views of each wall, subtle differences emerged between each series because the different configurations he found within each capsule dictated a slightly different camera placement. This is most visible in the appearance of the capsules' iconic circular windows; tracking these discs across the pages of this book, we see delicate shifts as they migrate around the frame. The circles grow or shrink slightly, or inch to the left or right, their positioning indexing Minami's engagement with the unique organization of each individual capsule. In this way, Minami reminds us that photography is not only a tool for transforming architecture into image, but another means of inhabiting space and testing its limitations and potentials.

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[1] In conversation with the author, November 20, 2014.
[2] Kisho Kurokawa, "Capsule Declaration" in *Metabolism in Architecture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 79. Originally published in *Space Design*, March 1969.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Kisho Kurokawa, "Nakagin Capsule Tower Building," *The Japan Architect* 47, no. 190 (October 1972): 24. Although the range of options rendered it theoretically possible for each capsule to be unique, for practical purposes the capsules were divided into general types, with the building including twenty of each.

[5] Kurokawa, "Capsule Declaration," 84.
[6] Kisho Kurokawa, "Will the Future Suddenly Arrive?" in *Metabolism, The City of the Future*, ed. Hirose Mami et. al. (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2011), 255. Originally published in *Design Review*, no. 3 (June 1967).
[7] Kisho Kurokawa, "Challenge to the Capsule," *The Japan Architect* 47, no. 190 (October 1972): 17.
[8] Kurokawa, "Capsule Declaration," 82.