1, 9, 7, 2, 1, 9, 7, 2, 1, 9…

Ken Yoshida

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The Nakagin Capsule Tower was completed in 1972, the year that, with the arrest of Japanese Red Army members, marked the end of the New Left's political legitimacy.[1] People began to shun the Left not only for its violent tactics, but also because its utopian goals had arguably been accomplished through other means. After the financially successful Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and the Osaka World Exposition Fair in 1970, a nation that had been in tatters less than thirty years ago seemed to have reached its economic endgame. The disparity between rich and poor was replaced by the myth that the "postwar" had ended in 1956, and the dialectics of East and West that occupied the core of Japanese modernism appeared to have evened out. Some intellectuals began to disengage from persisting socioeconomic contradictions that the war had managed to obfuscate and attended instead more closely to yet another means of managing the national population: peace and economic growth.

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As class struggle was replaced by unstoppable economic growth that ostensibly benefitted every member of the society, the location of political agency shifted to consumers and businessmen. This shift in worldview would prompt the architect Kisho Kurokawa to imagine that these detachable, mobile, and renewable capsules would accommodate the nomadic urban dwellers, or *homo movens,* who no longer required a stable living space. Displacing the conventional idea that buildings are meant to last, Kurokawa proposed that a person's living space ought to be easily swapped out at the first signs of wear and tear. Single individuals unbound from the older

familial structure were instead embedded in a network of colleagues and friends. And this emerging demographic required only basic amenities that fit into an abstract and smooth space: a twin bed, a television, a shelf, a window, a bathroom, and a foldout desk. Other needs, assumed the architect, would be provided by the city of Tokyo.

But this notion of living space was merely a projected image, a very specific ideological portrayal of human psychology. [9] Upon entering one of the units, a visitor would quickly notice that the cabinets and foldout desk are made of mere plywood painted white. After all, these were products aimed for mass production, fabricated as cheaply and simply as possible using the Keynesian industrial model. Perhaps, these units were meant to function more as images for the media. And one has to wonder – a point that Noritaka Minami makes – whether the rectangular rooms with a lens-like circular window were meant to be inhabited or to be photographed.

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Perhaps every age presents humanity with a shape that perfectly embodies its worldview, or at the very least, an architectural metaphor that captures its imagination in retrospect. In the case of these pods, the corresponding form turns out not to be the perfect circle that Leonardo Da Vinci once drew around his Vitruvian Man. Instead, the form is a rectangular capsule within which the user reproduces the means of labor, albeit merely as an image mediated by the media. The architect did not dare venture into a dark and unknown territory of thought beyond the marketplace of knowledge and settled on illuminating a separate yet uniform space. Dreams dreamt here did not fulfill or expand on an individual's aspiration, but advanced an interior design that stabilized a subject among an array of products and superficial options. Ambitious imagination belonged not to man but to commerce, state, economy, and architecture, while each

person was set to a specific psychological rhythm maintained and kept through an adequate amount of stimuli. Cozy, protective, yet claustrophobic, the complexity of affect the building evokes has an origin in a troubling past.

Metabolism, an architectural collective to which Kurokawa belonged, was partly founded on a need for a more effective means of sheltering people. Earlier in the 1950s, the architect Sei'ichi Shirai proposed an inward and subterranean monument to the ground zero in Hiroshima (the bid eventually went to Kenzo Tange). The ensuing Cold War led Noboru Kawazoe, another member of Metabolism, to posit a sanctuary that would shield the population from a nuclear disaster.[7] And a few more mnemonic strands may be added here: capsules were initially designed in the 1930s to house arctic explorers in inclement weather[2]; and in Manchuria during the war, a similar architectural model functioned as a weapon to displace the locals by quickly settling the Japanese. [1] These ostensibly antithetical values of sheltering and aggression constitute the ambivalent history that stands behind the tower.

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The strong desire to draw a line between inside and outside would likely position the tower building squarely within the domain of modernism, but the story of residential architecture in Japan would more closely take to the interior. Metabolism's legacy appears clearly evident in those who have followed in its wake. The architect Tadao Ando's buildings – or rather, enclosures – often exhibit an extreme form of interiority that only let in highly selective views of the outside world while shutting out undesirable elements that would perturb the modern soul in need of rest and tranquility. Toyo Ito's first residential house, designed for his sister who had recently lost her husband, existed as a monument to their mourning within which no walls were

erected to allow the family to live in a continuous, intimate space. The measure within that space was less about inside and outside and more about distance and proximity expressed through a play of light and sound that held no secrecy. Must these architects be faulted for turning inward, a tendency that only seems to reinforce the *topos* of modern bourgeois subject? But isn't architecture also a narrative of the inside, the projection of an internal dream? And doesn't this domestic imagination forge its own rhythm and spatial logic, as Gaston Bachelard suggests in *The Poetics of Space*, eventually venturing out into the world, perhaps to change it? But Ito and Ando's buildings, conceived and constructed after the economic bubble had burst in the 1990s, seem to suggest a less confident interior that has recoiled from the ambitious historical scope of Metabolism. Ito's almost-transparent Sendai Mediatheque, completed in 2001, is daringly modest compared to the monumental shelters of Tange or Kurokawa, and it offers a highly intelligent understanding of informational flow that ostensibly foregoes solid interiority. Still, the porosity envisioned throughout the structure assumes a subjective model already hinted in the earlier Metabolist discourse. Divisions are not conceived as walls made of hard and opaque materials – they are imagined as synthetic and gossamer membranes that symbolize transparency. Translucence that commands both enclosure and expansion reduces anxiety. This aesthetic of interiority possesses a far greater pervasiveness and power precisely because of the greater empirical access to the structural totality – an accessibility that for earlier planners could only be theoretical. For instance, one can look to the Nakagin Capsule Tower, whose entirety is only comprehended intellectually while rendering the everyday experience of the structure highly fragmented.

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It was prior to the building of the tower in Ginza, one of the more prestigious commercial districts in Tokyo at the time, that *shotokubaizō*, or the increase in the living standard, was employed as a powerful argument of the state. Yet ironically, the very promise of a better life represented an extension of the economic system that was initially put in place to fund Japan's total war in the 1930s and the 1940s.[9] Nor was this all. To establish a more economically robust country, the state centralized its power, enervating local governments' ability to deal with their immediate needs. Ecological disturbances sprang up everywhere throughout the 1970s, an overt manifestation of administrative and socioeconomic disparity. Needless to say, the nuclear power plant in Fukushima was a result of this general subservience. As Kurokawa celebrated *homo movens*, the rights of those who lived and occupied their land (mainly farmers) were constantly being undermined. In the 1970s, the people of Sanrizuka found themselves displaced to make room for Narita Airport. To move (and to fly) represented the new virtue; thus, choosing to stay became a criminal act.[7]

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If the immediate postwar was a moment of potential revolution after years of political pressure from the militarist state, then from the perspective of capital, it was a fulfillment of Japan's financial destiny. And this Capsule Tower was partly an expression of emancipation and capitalism, accommodation and exploitation, awkwardly waltzing to a strange political tune called architecture. Hence, a peculiar yet familiar construction of logic became possible: urban planning that required massive financial backing would usher in a classless society prophesied as the end of history. This building was a temporal loop of present and future. Constantly updating

itself, the tower discarded the past. Composed of countable and interchangeable segments like the modern clock, the architectural design was emblematic of pure time-management.[2] But despite the ambitious task Kurokawa set for the building, his appropriation of the deterritorialized flows of information and money served not as a catalyst, but rather as a reflection of a society that had already made *homo economicus* the ideal representative of the liberal order.

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Walter Benjamin called the extreme formalization of time in sequential order the "empty time" of capital or modern development. Gone was the time that pushed a growing past against the future and offered a present that constantly altered the implication of the past for the future.[1] Unfastening the historical weight of its belligerent past, Japan latched onto a tempting offer that securely pushed it toward a gentle stupor underscored by extreme fatigue after years of interminable labor. However, the city of Tokyo did not comport with Kurokawa's proposition. The tower is now more an anomaly than a prototype, a curiosity more than a norm. It failed to achieve success partly because the very notion of freedom ultimately proved to be disingenuous, too controlling. Or it can be read this way: unable to decide between socialism and liberalism, Kurokawa's theory of Metabolism proved to be inadequate. Either way, it now perpetually occupies that transitional space of obsolescence and novelty, oscillating between the future that has yet to arrive and the future that never arrived. Perhaps the only movement it manages to trace now is its own disappearance, which is not at all different from other forms of life and man-made facilities that eventually fall apart. His art ultimately sank back into the entropic destiny of matter from which it was designed to escape.

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The building has deteriorated considerably since 1972, and it has accrued the marks of passing time it once sought to banish. Minami explores the temporality of its life as an object and demonstrates that the tower, like everything else, is subject to entropy. Immobilized as photographic prints, the obsolete dreams and hopes acquire material dimensions as the structure ruminates on the uncertain future of a possible demolition that it was never supposed to face. Ironically, what the building has lost in reality, it has gained in theoretical existence. Minami exchanges the mobility that Kurokawa promised for the dialectical movement between past and future that photography captures so effectively. In these still images, the Nakagin Capsule Tower waits for legibility in a different historical moment. The photographer has filled the empty time of the structure with a delayed "that which will have arrived," a qualitatively different future than the one the architect envisioned.

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This building has no future, yet it retains a futurity that doubles as underfunded preservation. These vessels are filled with everyday objects that do not comport with the homogeneous time that fills our calendars. Each pod collects time on its own terms, projecting and simulating different futures and pasts. The uniform sense of time and space may still remain visible in the regulative aesthetics of the structure, but the separate lives inhabiting these spaces sound distinct rhythms. These swerves of everyday traces are evidence of time's unpredictable behavior that the tower strangely left out of its calculations. The folds of a bed sheet; a suit worn everyday to work hanging by a circular window; overstuffed cabinets, a disheveled desk; rooms filled to the brim with things; objects stacked up in the hallway; empty rooms, gutted rooms, moldy rooms,

crowded rooms. There is also a room with a projector, perhaps used as a private viewing station to take a break from Tokyo's incessant commotion. The neatly organized units of time appear to be completely occupied by personal things gathered there through a series of decisions and micro-decisions that may or may not align with what is deemed economically rational. Subjects are missing from these photographs, yet objects prove to be effective markings of daily imaginations and aspirations. Though the rate of decay varies from room to room, a single entropic horizon is assumed. This consistency of decay cannot be made analogous to the homogenous sense of time Kurokawa championed.

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Shot: a coming world that is neatly organized. Counter shot: a chaotic mess, a world inundated with trash. Shot: a coming world in which the past is forgotten. Counter shot: a world in which the past becomes more threatening by the day. There is one particular photograph that embodies this ambivalent splicing. The tower stands in the center of the composition as the city continues to grow around it. The building is left behind by the very city that gave it its logic. Yet these photographs induce a different and truer movement that oscillates between imaginative projection into the future and obstinate accumulation of the past, rendering false the economic and psychological mobility the tower was designed to demonstrate. These emulsified things are signs of repetitive and intensive time that the city of Tokyo utilizes and combats through architecture. Separating these objects from time by embedding them in their immediate environment, M, i, n, a, m, i photographs the here-and-now that subsists in between countable units – 1, 9, 7, 2, 1, 9, 7, 2, 1, 9…

[1] Fujihata Yuriko, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 184-188.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Picador, 2010).

[7] Kawazoe Noboru, "Busshitsu to ningen," 45-47, *Metabolism/1969* (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppan-sha, 1960).

[2] Toyokawa Saikatsu, "Kanreichi kyojū kenkyū to nankyoku shōwa kichi: Asada Takashi no kapuseru kenchiku genron," 235-241, *Metaborizumu no mirai toshi* (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2011).

[1] Yatsuka Hajime, *Metaborizumu nekusasu* (Tokyo: Ohmsha, 2012), 31.

[9] Yoshimi Shunya, *Banpaku to sengo nihon* (Tokyo: Kōdansha gakujutsu bunko, 2011), 33-38.

[7] Markus Nornes, *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shunsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[2] Benedict Anderson, *The Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006).

[1] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 389-400, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings volume 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 2003).