

# domus

## The Metabolist Epic

This volume by Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist and numerous collaborators charts the trajectory of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most remarkable yet least understood movements.

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**Project Japan. Metabolism Talks...**, Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist, edited by Kayoko Ota with James Westcott, Taschen, Köln 2011 (pp. 720, €39,90)

## Thought Movements

"We put off going to Japan for many years, despite the fact that we are Modern architects—or perhaps because of the ways Modern architects, from Bruno Taut to Wright, Gropius, and others, promoted the classic architecture of Kyoto. Each generation of Western architects has seen in Japan what it wanted to see."

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown

*Due "naif" in Giappone* (1996), 2000

The time lapse between the end of the CIAM and the success of what was called post-modern architecture is one of the most fascinating "free zones" of the last century. Modernism seemed to have collapsed in the West as a result of a pincer movement enacted by Team 10, on the one hand, and the New Formalists (Venturi, Rossi, Ungers, the early Eisenman), on the other, while populist (Rudofsky, De Carlo), pop (Archigram) and radical (Superstudio, Haus Rucker-Co, etc.) enticements were also (re)appearing. However, at the same time in other parts of the planet, modernism was raising its head again with a force similar to that experienced in Europe only at the beginning of the short 20th century, i.e. during the birth of the avant-gardes in the "heroic period of modern architecture".

It may be mere coincidence but one of the most comprehensive texts of the few that have recently sought to explain this entangled period, Dominique Rouillard's *Superarchitecture* [1], ends with Rem Koolhaas. It is not an especially original choice, to be honest, since the Dutch architect's central position is undeniable and enduring. For him, the decade that has just passed began with the Pritzker Prize (in 2000) and finished with a Golden Lion at the Architecture Biennale, without mentioning the ascent of his professional and academic career— from Harvard to Strelka in Moscow. However, in last year's acceptance speech, Koolhaas declared it an honour to receive the prize in Venice and from that particular director (Kazuyo Sejima) because the two national cultures to which he feels most closely bound are those of Italy and Japan.

Now, *Project Japan* shows that these were not just empty words. Despite its focus on the Metabolists, the book (commenced in 2005) analyses the cultural context and events in Japan between 1940 and 1985, with a strong emphasis on the decade between 1960 and 1970—the period that, roughly speaking, saw the rise and fall of the Metabolist Movement. Seen here as the last avant-garde movement, its manifesto should also be considered the last modernist one, after which came only the

neoavanguardia, the radicals and the neo-rationalists, but no more modernists—a theory shared by Isozaki, who was also never officially a Metabolist.

Why would such an established and busy architect dedicate six years to a 700-page study? It is, of course, a collective work and Koolhaas has chosen an exceptional co-author in the form of Hans Ulrich Obrist (his own Guattari) plus almost as many collaborators as for a symphony orchestra: the editors Kayoko Ota and James Westcott, photographers and researchers, amo, as well as contributions from Toyo Ito, Hajime Yatsuka, Charles Jencks and more. I believe the reason for such an extensive study—which reveals to Western eyes a deluge of documents and projects, most of which previously unseen largely due to the language barrier—can be found in the prologue written by Koolhaas last year for an essay titled *Singapore Songlines*, published first in Italian and then in Spanish. The passage reads: "In 1995 I began to teach at Harvard... I particularly wanted to study the waning of Western influence on the formulation of the city, and begin to hypothesise on the nature of the non-Western modernities emerging in Africa, the Arab world and Asia that will obviously define this century." [2] After his book on Lagos (announced on Amazon but not yet distributed) and three on the Persian Gulf [3], *Project Japan* now ends this remarkable trilogy that takes a look at the future of the 21st-century city. The Metabolist Movement was certainly anxious to lead Japan into the future, starting with Kenzo Tange who played a primary role in constructing the image and infrastructures of modern Japan (then Kurokawa started lecturing on futurology at regular intervals).

Koolhaas's other collective books are all constructed along the lines of *S,M,L,XL* and *Content*, i.e. more printed hypertexts than texts, provocative assemblies of documents, interviews and brief thoughts, interspersed with projects and all sorts of illustrations (sourced from news stories, advertising and popular culture plus graphs, layouts, synoptic tables and diagrams). This book on Japan is far more orderly and clearly structured, thanks in part to Irma Boom's graphic design, with the authors' two prefaces followed by nine interviews and as many themed analyses. The only failing is the regrettably illegible reprint of all the pages of the book selfproduced<sup>4</sup> for the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo, when the Metabolists presented themselves to a highly respectable international audience, expertly organised by Tange and his trusted assistant Takashi Asada; the Italians notably included Munari, Maldonado and Alberto Rosselli. [5]

The figure of Tange towers over all the others as a non-authoritarian father whose great talents as a builder and thinker are visible in the sensational 1960 Tokyo Plan but also and principally in his clever choice of collaborators. As an ancient Japanese proverb says, "If there is a strong general, there will be no weak soldiers." Tange died in 2005, just as the study was starting, so there are interviews with his two wives and his son Noritaka (who has taken over his practice), because quite rightly "no Tange, no Metabolism", which include anthropological questions and some psychological probing. The same applies to the interviews with Isozaki, Kikutake, Kawazoe, Maki, Kurokawa, Ekuo and Shimokobe, and it seems almost as if Koolhaas wanted to reconstruct mentally the Metabolist adventure as if it were a film and not just the parabola of an avant-garde movement. The sometimes ironical tone of the conversations may remind some readers of the dialogue-type books that certain film directors have written on their masters, such as Truffaut's on Hitchcock and Bogdanovich's on Orson Welles, although here it is interviewing a whole movement. Regret remains for the lack of an interview with Masato Otake, a key theorist and architect, a link with Europe, a friend of Yona Friedman and of the "puparium" Shimokobe, the Metabolist who promoted his former fellows from within the mighty Japanese administrative machine—one of the most important discoveries in the book. The questions Koolhaas asks those approached, like him nearly all architects, are often autobiographical, almost as if he is asking

himself.

When, with regard to his lengthy project for the Hillside Terrace Complex in Tokyo, he asks Maki, "What I like about the Hillside Terrace is that here the ambitions are so subtle that any kind of spectacle disappears. Would you say that's true of your work in general, that you're trying to get more and more subtle in terms of the effect—or not?"; and when he asks Kurokawa, "If we look at your career now and the way you expanded the architectural field in the 1960s with television appearances, exhibitions and events, and becoming a public figure, was that all part of including life within architecture?", they are questions on perhaps contradictory subjects but inherent to the complex Koolhaas personality. You only have to think of the immeasurable difference between oma's neo-Metabolist project for a Hyperbuilding in Bangkok (compared in the book to one by Kurokawa for Tokyo in 1997, see page 694) and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, under construction, that by contrast seems drawn straight from the pages of Hilberseimer's *Groszstadt Architektur*.

Koolhaas's interest in the Metabolists must be genuine because the themes they explored are, objectively speaking, the same as those that have always cropped up in the Dutch architect's thoughts and work: the tabula rasa, congestion, Bigness, "fuck the context" [6], the movement [7] etc., as well as the fact that, following the fame gained with the 1970 Expo in Osaka (which put into practice what Friedman and his team and Price and Archigram could only dream of), it was indeed Tange & Co. that ventured into those little-known waters where oma and all the major Western practices have swum in recent years, which are Africa, the Middle East and the rest of Asia. A splendid photograph of the everimpeccable Tange dressed as a Bedouin in Saudi Arabia appears on page 592. So wide-ranging and successful was the professional diaspora that, in 1985, Reyner Banham even spoke of a "Japonisation"<sup>8</sup> of world architecture, Italy included as he worked there on several occasions, in Bologna, Catania, Naples, Milan and then on the plan for Jesolo until the end of his days.

Koolhaas had already focused on this in 1995, when it was no longer fashionable, in his essay on Singapore where the theories of Maki, in particular, were inadvertently applied by some local followers (William Lee and Tay Kheng Soon), and with such size and speed that Maki was forced to admit, "We theorised and you people are getting it built..." (pages 636-637).

If *Project Japan* is not a history book, as it states here and there, and if it is not a catalogue, then what is it? At a time when architectural studies fall into the historical, which tend towards philological and self-referential (for the historians) delirium, and the measly instant-books by architects happy to be self-celebratory and superficial, it is perhaps time to retrieve the practical critical tool of which *Project Japan* is an undeniable and excellent example, as well as being a description of movements of architectural thought the likes of which has not been seen for years.

#### NOTES:

1. Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l'architecture 1950-1970*, Éditions de la Villette, Paris 2004.
2. Rem Koolhaas, *Singapore Songlines. Ritratto di una metropoli alla Potemkin... o trent'anni di tabula rasa*, edited by Manfredo di Robilant, Quodlibet, Macerata 2010, p. 7. Spanish edition: *Sendas oníricas de Singapur. Retrato de una metrópolis potemkin... o treinta años de tabla rasa*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2011.
3. *The Gulf*, Lars Müller 2006; *Al Manakh*, Columbia University gsapp 2007; *Al Manakh Cont'd*, Volume no. 23, 2010.

4. Various authors, *Metabolism 1960: Proposals for a New Urbanism*, 1960.
5. The son-in-law and partner of Gio Ponti as well as a technology and design expert, Rosselli was probably an incognito ambassador for Domus on that occasion.
6. Rem Koolhaas, interviewing Isozaki, p. 51.
7. Kisho Kurokawa, p. 383.
8. Reyner Banham, *The Japonization of World Architecture, in various authors, Contemporary Architecture of Japan 1958-1984*, edited by R. Banham and Hiroyuki Suzuki, Rizzoli International, New York 1985, p. 18 & fol.

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<http://www.domusweb.it/en/reviews/2011/10/13/the-metabolist-epic.html>