

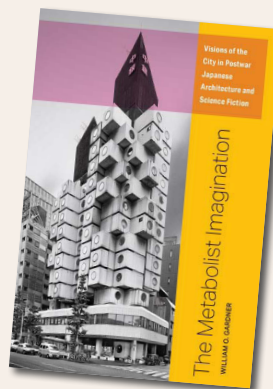
BOOK REVIEW

The Metabolist Imagination: Visions of the City in Postwar Japanese Architecture and Science Fiction

By William O. Gardner

University of Minnesota Press, 2020
232 pages.

Reviewed by Raffaele PERNICE



The Metabolist Imagination is a timely and valuable addition to a series of recent high-quality scholarly titles that have heralded renewed interest in the futuristic projects and legacy of the design philosophy of Metabolism, the influential Japanese avant-garde group which presented its manifesto at the Tokyo World Design Conference in 1960.¹ The book explores both direct and more subtle connections between the architectural invention and imagination associated with Metabolism and the world of science fiction. It specifically examines the creativity behind the utopian/dystopian visions of the city characteristic of disaster movies, apocalyptic literature, and the peculiar world of Japanese anime and manga between the 1950s and 1980s.

The author, a Japanese studies scholar rather than an architect or architectural historian, grounds his work in recent research and an innovative use of original sources in order to explain the development and characteristics of the architectural and urban design of the Metabolist group. The result is a comprehensive and appealing showcase of their main ideas and key projects, summarized through a rich and persuasive narrative that, nevertheless, largely adheres to established interpretations.

Three major themes are set out in the introduction, which collectively link architecture and science fiction and provide the overarching framework for the book and its six chapters. These are megastructures over land and sea; capsules (as architectural form); and apocalyptic cities, or ruins as architecture. The early chapters revisit the story of Metabolism and introduce its key members, projects, and design proposals. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Metabolist group and their key megastructure projects, with references to capsule architectures. Tange Kenzō's "Tokyo Plan 1960" is drawn upon to demonstrate the Metabolists' emphasis on new technology and large-scale prefabrication as the engines which would foster the rapid modernization and urbanization of a defeated Japan. Chapter 2, focussing on Isozaki Arata and Komatsu Sakyō, and chapter 3, on Komatsu's disaster fiction, both examine ruins and the destruction of cities by either natural disaster or human intervention. A recurrent discourse is the destruction of Tokyo, which ultimately represents the larger destiny of urban civilization, leaving its ruins behind. For Isozaki and Komatsu,

¹ See Pernice 2022, Mack 2022, and Jacquet and Souteyrat 2020.

these stand for the loss of memory and decadence of human values and cities, but are more optimistically read by the likes of Kikutake Kiyonori and Kurokawa Kishō as opportunities for reconstruction, rebirth, and regeneration.

Chapter 4 hones in on the 1970 Osaka Expo and various government sponsored think-tanks, such as the “Society of the Future,” which advocated for the use of technology as a catalyst to enhance society and promote the structural transformation of Japan. Chapter 5, which contains a series of reflections that were produced in the period 1950s–1990s on the future of the city as a cybernetic environment, and chapter 6, which discusses the impact of Metabolist concepts on three anime films produced in Japan in the late-Bubble years, are both highly original. However, the former appears at times to be a patchwork of ideas that do not quite cohere (the author admits it is a “rough sketch,” p. 141). The latter effectively links themes of continuous destruction and rebirth and the development and ruin of Tokyo to a critique of various political agendas that privilege economic profits over the loss of old neighborhoods filled with social memories. However, this final chapter should have been refined and extended beyond the three films in question, *Akira* and *Patlabor 1 & 2*. The author is here writing for a North American readership less familiar with the influence and diffusion of Japanese sci-fi, anime, and manga than their European counterparts. Writing for the latter would necessitate expanding the list of references to include at least *Gundam* and 1970s and 1980s popular *mecha* (piloted robot) stories like *Grandizer*, *Mazinger*, or *Macross/Robotech*.

The book provides a sound historical background for the thriving of Metabolism, introducing key elements of its futuristic architecture, and detailing its influence on anime, literature, and the broader cultural milieu both at the time and in the years since. The documenting and references to the historical and cultural context in which Metabolism developed are really valuable here. Rapid economic growth and social transformation in the postwar decades resulted in intensive urbanization, and fostered the rediscovery of traditional architecture and art—part of the search for new architectural and urban spatial concepts able to negotiate the retention of the past in the future. Reflection on the dualities of old/new, change/stability, and tradition/modernity of architecture and cities are at the root of Metabolist thinking, as they were for Japanese architecture more broadly.²

While full of insights, the various chapters of the book are only loosely connected with one another. Given many of the chapters were first published as stand-alone articles, this is perhaps to be expected. More disappointing is the limited number of images, which is a severe constraint in a study documenting the highly visual and distinctive “Metabolist Imaginations,” as well as the “Visions of the City” in architecture, sci-fi, and anime to which they gave birth. On the other hand, the primary strength of the text is its documentation of the cultural milieu within which Metabolism’s influence expanded, and its accentuation of the frequently neglected links between architectural planning, urban visions, and science fiction culture during these turbulent but transformative years in Japan’s modern history.

2 See for instance Kawazoe and Tange 1965, Inoue 1985, Ashihara 1983.

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