

Domestic Forms

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House in Uehara (Kazuo Shinohara)

The Architecture of the City and the Beauty of Chaos

“I am of the opinion that the contemporary Japanese city which emerged in the half-century after World War II should be recognized as the newest element of any legitimate Japanese [architectural] tradition, whose quiet beauty had persisted from ancient times down to one hundred years or so ago [...] There is no reason to deny, or nullify, this gigantic collective, which is the product of tremendous human time and energy. My view of our cities is not limited to Tokyo, for even in smaller and less affluent cities I perceive beauty but never ugliness”¹

1 K. Shinohara, *Toward a Super-Big Numbers Set City and a Small House Beyond*, in: 2G N.58/59, Kazuo Shinohara Houses, Barcelona, 2011 (p.279).

When I first entered Tokyo Institute of Technology I didn't expect to recognise that many students had among their books a fully translated Japanese version of “The Architecture of the City”. This fact made me consider how far the legacy of Rossi had reached and also question how the latter could be received in such diverse urban environment. At the time most of the non-Japanese students just enrolled were focusing on gaining an overview of Kazuo Shinohara's oeuvre of residential masterpieces. While setting in the new urban environment, to catch my attention was his statement toward the urban space, better known as the theory of the “Beauty of Chaos”. His affirmative recognition of the

2 S. Okuyama, *Words and Spaces: How Kazuo Shinohara's Thought spans between Residential and Urban Theory*, in: 2G N.58/59, Kazuo Shinohara Houses, Barcelona, 2011.

chaotic form of the city offered me a sort of comforting perspective. It was able in fact to legitimate a kind of irrational positive reaction that emerged in me while observing the scenario of Tokyo's neighborhoods and the daily life arising from the streets, so seductive that it was easily putting into question any notion of the European city learned so far.

Through the House, Towards the City

The theory of the “Beauty of Chaos” was also very revealing to highlight a link between the individual building and the city. The houses of Kazuo Shinohara appear in fact with a certain degree of autonomy and abstraction, so that a connection between his spatial research and the urban space may not be predictable. Yet, the roots of Shinohara's urban theory did arise exactly through the experiences with his earliest house designs, as Shin-Ichi Okuyama points out: *“And we must take seriously his youthful intuition that, in the Japanese post-war era, the only way to transform the design of private houses into an essentially architectural issue was to confront the city and its implication for society head on.”²* At the same time we are also warned from misunderstanding that the two stand to each other in a direct and straightforward relation: *“any purely linear relationship between house and city meant little to him [...] any real*



House in Kyodo (Go Hasegawa)



Setagaya-ku



Small House (Kazuyo Sejima)



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3 see previous reference.

4 K. Kitayama, Y. Tsukamoto, R. Nishizawa, Tokyo Metabolizing, TOTO Shuppan, Tokyo, 2010; (p.11).

5 B. Taut, Houses and People of Japan.

6 see reference n.4 (p.129).

recovery could never spring from a single ideal logic but rather from a far more complex collective desire resulting, in turn, from a multitude of individual contexts.”³

Decades later another enlightening interpretation of the Japanese city develops within the framework of the individual building, offering a key to understand the possible role of the dwelling in the future of the contemporary city. “Tokyo Metabolizing”, presented by Koh Kitayama, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Ryue Nishizawa at the Japanese Pavilion of Venice Biennale in 2010, starting again from a lucid observation of the peculiar character of the Japanese city, reveals the potential of an initiative taken at the micro-scale of the single-family house: “Unlike the urban structures one finds in Europe that were created with a series of walls, Tokyo consist of an assemblage of independent buildings (grains). In other words, constant change is an inherent part of the system. In examining the unique aspects of this unceasing change, one realizes that the city of Tokyo is an incubator for new forms of architecture and urban architectural theories [...] Tokyo has the potential to create change in the city through the quiet accumulation of urban elements rooted in daily life.”⁴ Through the gaze on the contemporary urban environment, the house is revealed as an active architectural form of the Japanese city.

On the other hand, the Japanese House is a well-known “object” of interest, which earned great attention internationally. The popularity and fascination for the Japanese dwelling goes back to the early modern period and extends until today. Instead of architects returning us careful surveys of these houses embedded in a culture of people performing completely unknown lifestyles⁵, nowadays contemporary architectural medias are mainly reporting to us the latest house designs. Yet running the risk that by omitting contextual implications – as if the global standards have flattened cultural differences and lifestyles to a certain extent that we feel confident to bypass them – the Japanese contemporary dwelling detached from its history and specific

environment might appear merely as a collection of eccentric forms.

Again, only by locating the house within the framework of the city – which means to position it within the physical and social context that has produced it - we can return its significance, not only as catalyst element of the urban environment, but also as key to access and understand an entire culture. Since the reconstruction of the modern city, Japanese architects have committed themselves in seeking a form of architecture for the life in the contemporary city through the design of the individual dwelling. In doing so they have been re-defining spatial hierarchies, relations between domestic and public sphere, between interior and exterior space; they have expressed their position between tradition and modernity, investigating the use of materials and construction techniques. The modern Japanese house thus assumes the value *collective* element of the city, carrying the legacy of the post-war Japanese society.

A parallel city of domestic uniqueness

Through the individual collaboration between the architect and the client – or by the architect as client himself – the diverse combination of the above-mentioned themes has resulted in a rich architectural production of distinct dwellings, where perhaps the sole aspect truly shared among all of these houses is exactly their character of *uniqueness*. Certain houses came to represent some of the most known masterpieces of Japanese modern architecture. Since Japan is no longer the far and unreachable country it used to be, today many architects undergo an architectural pilgrimage to these houses. Yet, spread along a territory divided by 1.8 millions of owners⁶ these domestic architectures are nothing more than a rarefied constellation of small fragments that sums up to the vast chaotic landscape of the city. The encounter of one of these dwellings is mostly likely to be an accidental and fortuitous discovery of the urban *flâneur* that wonders around Tokyo’s



House & Atelier Bow-Wow
(Atelier Bow-Wow)

7,8 With reference to the definition of urban artifacts, primary elements and dwelling areas, in: A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, the MIT Press, New York, 1982.



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9 see reference n.2.

10 A. Rossi, *The Urban Artifact as a Work of Art* in: A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, the MIT Press, New York, 1982.



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neighborhoods. Far from constituting an accumulation that could be examined as a *dwelling* area or manifesting any recognizable typology, the Japanese house designed by the architect is an *unicum* distinguished by its form and unique character within the urban environment.⁷ Only in our minds all these houses form a parallel city of housing uniqueness.

Punctual and exceptional element of the city, the House, with its active and collective character, may be understood as a kind of scattered *urban artifact*⁸ hidden in the urban fabric of the Japanese city.

Epilogue

Both Shinohara and Rossi define respectively the House and the Urban Artifact as *work of art*. “The House is a Work of Art” is among Shinohara’s most recognised statements that together with the “Beauty of Chaos” have conveyed his criticism toward the architectural scene of his time.⁹ For Rossi the status of “The Urban artifact as a Work of art” is bind with the collective and unique character of the urban artifacts as well as a fundamental theme raised by several theorists¹⁰. Nevertheless both definitions are embedded with their own specific reasoning, this fortuitous analogy provide the hint to recognize that both European and Japanese understandings of the city may coexist with their resonances and diversities to grasp aspects of our living environment.

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