

The Architecture of Postmodernism in Japan: the Main Features*

Nina Konovalova

Scientific Research Institute of the Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning
 Branch of the Central Scientific-Research and Project Institute of the Construction Ministry of Russia
 Moscow, Russia
 E-mail: phuekirjuko@mail.ru

Abstract—The architecture of postmodernism, as a western invention, was received with great interest in Japan. Of the huge number of materials, creative means, images and symbols that could be seen in the postmodern works by Western architects, Japanese masters did not take any interest in a particular school or trend. The Japanese met the new movement from the West as an image of the new epoch in general — the epoch of play and experiments, free from any rules. Changing socio-economic conditions resulted in the emergence of popular architecture and the play with styles and trends. That is why among the researchers the following question remains open: Was postmodernism an independent stylistic movement in Japanese architecture? Or alternatively, were they separate bold experiments by Japanese architects with no unifying theory or school — a phenomenon that could be more precisely called “pluralism”?

Keywords—*the architecture of postmodernism in Japan; the Japanese architecture of the 1980-1990s; pluralism in architecture*

I. INTRODUCTION

The architecture of postmodernism, as a western invention, was received with great interest in Japan. Such attention to a new phenomenon was quite justified. The process was seemingly explained by the entire history of Japanese culture. The Japanese demonstrate an activity interest in everything new and cutting-edge that they see in the world. They adopt the most interesting and relevant into their culture, adjust and sometimes changing it unrecognizably.

However, the interest in European postmodernism architecture did not make it fashionable in Japan. There was no full-fledged wave of postmodern architecture in this country, neither there was a time period in the history of Japanese architecture development, which could with full confidence be called the “architecture of postmodernism”. Andrei Vladimirovich Ikonnikov characterized this period in

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the architecture of Japan as “a phenomenon whose originality did not fall within the international context of professional culture” [1].

II. REVISITING THE DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

Not only some of the Japanese specialists (in various creative fields) studied Western texts, but they also were personally acquainted with French structuralists, poststructuralists, and deconstructionists. J. Derrida wrote several works in collaboration with Japanese authors, one of them entitled “Society of Super consumption and the Role of Intelligentsia” was published in Japanese in 1984. The ideas of J. Derrida appeared to be unusually close to the Japanese, which can be proved by the fact that all the works by the French philosopher were translated into Japanese.

Kojin Karatani, philosopher and literary critic, a well-known Japanese theorist, who analyzed Japanese postmodernism and its originality, came to the following conclusion: “The character of the Japanese postmodernity is different from the Western. Even though, it is based on the same fundamental process as in the West, the Japanese postmodernity does not imply “opposition” peculiar to the Western world”. [2]

Of the huge number of materials, creative means, images and symbols that could be seen in the postmodern works by Western architects, Japanese masters did not take interest in a certain trend and did not follow any particular school. Such a situation would have been logical if it had characterized the entire Japanese culture of that time, where postmodernism simply did not take root. Nevertheless, postmodernism had a tremendous development and popularity in Japanese literature. Thus, the works by Haruki Murakami, Ryū Murakami, and Banana Yoshimoto, well known and read all over the world can be taken as an example. It was in literature exactly, where the concept of postmodernism in Japan originated [3]. Even nowadays, most research in Japanese postmodernism focus mainly on literature.

Eclecticism and caricature, the use of any opportunity for play, the tendency to visual representation of information are some of the essential features of postmodernism, which can be found in various works by Japanese writers. Each master could draw something from the arsenal of postmodernism.

According to the critic Matthew Strecher, Haruki Murakami found the potential for developing new free world views and forms of self-expression in postmodernism [4]. However, even with the seemingly commonly accepted development of postmodernism, specifically in Japanese literature, there are researchers who question the applicability of the concept “postmodernism” even in this area. Thus, Rebecca Suter defines creative activity of H. Murakami as “paramodernism” [5]. This point of view can also be considered possible, taking into account the specificity of the issue of postmodernism in Japan.

Moreover, there is broad representation of postmodernism in other areas of modern culture and art, beside literature. In this regard, the creative activity of a contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, whose works are regularly exhibited in the largest exhibition halls over the world, is worth mentioning. Another example is a well-known contemporary Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, whose creative activity can be interpreted due to the use of numerous postmodern strategies, represented as deconstruction, collage, mimicry, textuality, play, etc.

III. POSTMODERNISM AND JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

Despite all the facts mentioned above, the movement that could be directly characterized as postmodernism with the laws of its development and its creators, could not be observed in architecture. The Japanese met the new movement from the West as an image of the new epoch in general — the epoch of play and experiments, free from any rules. Changing socio-economic conditions resulted in the emergence of popular architecture and the play with styles and trends.

In the mid-1970s, a collapse of the globalist conception took place in architecture; the idea of the ideal city was running its course. Metabolism in architecture started to lose its influence. The focus on local tasks — the projects of single construction units appeared to replace the grand urban planning programs and global design of “floating” cities. Individual movements, collectively referred to as “postmetabolism”, were replacing metabolism.

The economic boom of the 1980s resulted in competition between Japanese corporations, in which architecture was actively involved. Large companies were competing for the greater status of their representative offices. Each company tried to demonstrate its weight in the country's economy, its power and sustainable development by constructing a brighter and higher building than others had. Even smaller companies were involved in the race, ordering unusual and even weird offices.

Pharoah Dental Clinic (architect Shin Takamatsu) (“Fig.1”) was built in Kyoto in 1984, and occupied a site at the intersection of two busy streets of the city. The architect took unprecedented architectural risk, as required by the customer. The dental clinic acquired expressive forms on the border of the frightening intensity of the artistic image of the building. The architect resorted to the language of overloaded technology. The building produces a hard, even cruel effect, high tension. Takamatsu himself described his

work as follows: “space that is menacing, the parts menacing the whole, the whole menacing the parts, and even the parts menacing each other, just as the whole menaces itself” [6].



Fig. 1. Shin Takamatsu. Pharoah Dental Clinic (1984).

The famous Japanese architect Arata Isozaki got fascinated by postmodernism in the late 1970s, when he became close to many European architects, such as James Stirling, Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman. Since the early 1980s, his works were mainly characterized by manipulating classical forms easily, combined with simple geometric scope and the general idea, provided by the purpose of the future building, its landscape and architectural environment. Isozaki used historical associations and geometric perfection in his architectural design [7]. Kitakyushu International Conference Hall Center (“Fig. 2”), built by Arata Isozaki in 1987-1990, became one of his most significant works, demonstrating the features of postmodernism. The conference hall is a combination of several geometric ideas of different colors and materials. What is more, the striking details of the building are no longer the elements of play for the architect, but the natural part of the overall structure of the work.



Fig. 2. Arata Isozaki. Kitakyushu International Conference Hall Center (1987-1990).

Details are exceptionally significant for any work of art. Fumihiko Maki is renowned for his interest in detail; he

never used details just to produce an aesthetic effect. Being ironic, he challenges the audience to a sophisticated game of images and associations. The TEPIA Science Pavilion, constructed in the Minato area of Tokyo in 1989, can be considered an example of Maki's ultimate or even extreme attitude to detail. Since the 1980s, Fumihiko Maki took up a more directly eclectic approach to design, and his projects of that period appear to be even more in harmony with the modern world, and with the nature of the modern city in particular. In his works, Maki always tried to avoid the postmodern approach. However, the TEPIA Science Pavilion possesses some prominent postmodern features ("Fig. 3"). Open joints were used for each aluminum panel. The artful mixture of different surfaces created the effect of dematerialization. The thickness, thinness, heaviness and lightness of the analyzed object are expressed through the features of the building materials themselves, as a result, the building acquires the accuracy of an artefact. The work of Fumihiko Maki shows a controversial combination of anxiety and optimism. Unlike most of his contemporaries, in his practice Maki combined two discordant positions: "on the one hand an ethical commitment to the provision of architecture that is both rational and appropriate, on the other, an ironic disposition capable of acknowledging the aporias of the modern world and of confronting the ever-escalating implosion of information and development" [8].



Fig. 3. Fumihiko Maki. TEPIA (1989).

The M2 building ("Fig. 4") was constructed by Kengo Kuma in the Setagaya district of Tokyo in 1991 as a large trading space for selling Mazda cars; the building embodied all the principles of postmodern architecture, dominating the world at that time [9]. The ironic eclecticism became a distinctive feature of postmodernism; though exaggerated, with the grotesque simplification of classical forms, it was expressed in the monumental building design by Kuma. The architect launched this project in 1987, in the times of financial bubble in Japan. According to Kuma, M2 is primarily a product of time and the customer's request.



Fig. 4. Kengo Kuma. M2 building (1991).

In order to attract the spectator, to catch their eye, architects create fantastic buildings and worlds. The building of the Kihoku Observatory (architect T. Masaharu), erected in 1995 in Kanoya ("Fig. 5"), is an example of such a construction. Takasaki's designs combine the natural and the mythological. This work is so dynamically expressive that it provokes associations of both a spacecraft and a giant insect. The Kihoku Observatory still remains one of the most intriguing buildings in the country. After the construction of the observatory, they started to call T. Masaharu the "architect of space". He describes his architecture as an "ecological creature" that connects humanity with space [10]. His philosophy is manifested through oviform shapes and diffused light to create mystical interiors, as well as bent columns and plans.



Fig. 5. Takasaki Masaharu. Kihoku Observatory (1995).

IV. CONCLUSION

Numerous researchers, both Western and Japanese, express reasonable doubts about the transition of the Japanese culture and society to postmodernism entirely. Moreover, the desire of Japan to "overcome modernism" is to a large extent connected to the search for its national identity. Postmodernism implies the ideas on the absence of the only true and commonly accepted center and periphery,

the ideas on the value and unique character of each unit. It strives for pluralism and peaceful coexistence of the different and even the opposite.

That is exactly why among the researchers the following question remains open: Was postmodernism an independent stylistic movement in Japanese architecture? Or alternatively, were they separate bold experiments by Japanese architects with no unifying theory or school — a phenomenon that could be more precisely called “pluralism”?

In the wake of the extensive economic growth of the 1980s — the first half of the 1990s, Japanese cities experienced unprecedented wave of new construction. Japan was one of the most economically advanced countries in the world. Japanese companies became important participants of the global economy. Commercial architecture at that time moved to the forefront. Large amounts of money available and customers’ active imagination sometimes resulted in ingenious experiments with shapes and search for a new language of architecture, and sometimes in a complete loss of meaning. The financial resources of Japanese corporations at that time allowed constructing giant buildings, the architectural appearance of which was designed to break into the urban space, attracting maximum attention. The buildings with the prominent postmodern features by Japanese architects were designed to create a hyper-reality, to shock and bring discord into urban space. Such features were not characteristic of Japanese architecture in any other period.

The development of Japanese architecture after the 1970s “was a continuation of the neo-modern movements like structuralism, metabolism, contextualism, and symbolism. Thus, postmodernism in Japan appears to be less a stylistic movement and more a change in socio-economic conditions that fundamentally affected modernism.” [11] The emerged phenomenon could be more accurately called “pluralism”. This definition, in contrast to “postmodernism”, more precisely describes the entire mosaic of the search and experiments by Japanese architects of that time. As defined by the famous historian of Japanese architecture Botond Bogнар, “pluralism is a synthesis of responses sensitive to a wide range of complex issues inherent in architecture” [12]. Thus, pluralism combined various trends, allowed them to spread far and wide [13] and substituted for the battle of different trends.

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