since the schools were effectively written out of the leading architectural histories of twentieth-century Cuba. One of the most comprehensive histories of the Cuban built environment, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (2002), coauthored by Coyula, Segre, and the American Joseph Scarpace, does not mention the schools at all; Scarpace and Armando H. Portela’s *Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place* (2009) notes them only in passing. Interest in the schools was awakened through the research of the American architect John Loomis in his book *Revolution of Forms: Cuba’s Forgotten Art Schools* (1999), and the attention of the World Monuments Fund, but there has yet to be a Cuban monograph on the schools. Only Eduardo Luis Rodríguez’s *The Havana Guide: Modern Architecture 1925–1965* (2000; first published in 1998 as *Havana: Arquitectura del siglo XX* in Spain) situates the schools within the history of Cuban modernism, recuperating the prerevolutionary and early revolutionary periods. This is a particularly significant volume and signals an encouraging trend. Pre-revolutionary arts and culture were devalued and ignored in the decades following the revolution, and their study by architectural historians, students, and historical preservationists on the island was discouraged, but this is changing as interest in the repressed prerevolutionary past (no doubt inspired in part by the interest of tourists and other visitors) has risen. In recent years, Cuban scholars have been able to study the work of previously disavowed artists and intellectuals without sanction.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 forced Cuba to gradually open the island to foreign economic interventions (particularly through the tourist sector), and thus enabled greater international visibility for the nation. As a perhaps inadvertent result, the steady stream of international tourists since the late 1990s has fetishized the ruined state of Havana’s infrastructure (along with the iconic 1950s American automobiles) as a zone of ahistorical nostalgia—imagine a dystopian Disneyland. Like these tourists, artists, writers, photographers, and filmmakers from the island and abroad have also taken note of the condition of the built environment and have contributed to a burgeoning global discourse on the ruins of modernity. Robert Polidori’s gorgeous photographs of ravaged houses, Carlos Garaicoa’s imaginary reconstructions of collapsed Belle Époque buildings, and Antonio José Ponte’s stories of life in the ruins attempt to account for the absurdity and dignity of daily life in postmodern precarity. Several recent films, most notably Fernando Pérez’s *Suite Habana* (2003) and Matthias Hentschler and Florian Borchmeyer’s *Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins* (2006) have eulogized Havana, one poetically and the other critically, while emphasizing the lived experience of those who “resuelven” (make do) among the ruins of modernity.

In contrast to these earlier films, *Unfinished Spaces* focuses less on the use of the schools (which, despite their unfinished state, has been constant if ad hoc). Instead, it artfully weaves the history of the revolution—from its initial optimism through the debacle of subsequent ideological rigidity and on to the precarious present—through the story of the schools. Loomis’s work brought national and international attention to the plight of the buildings in the 1990s, after they had languished uncompleted and nearly forgotten for decades, and as a result of this interest the World Monuments Fund sought to fund their restoration and completion, but once again politics foreclosed on its fruition: the Cuban government did not want to accept foreign financial aid for the project, and although Cuban-funded restoration efforts began, they were later halted due to yet another economic downturn.

In a typically Cuban return of the repressed, golf courses, designated for exclusive use of tourists, have been cropping up around the island in recent years. In 2009, in the wake of two powerful hurricanes and the global economic collapse, the Cuban government set aside its commitment to restore the National Schools of Art, and once more they remain unfinished, suspended between the over-determined past and the uncertain future.

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Rima Yamazaki, director

**Nakagin Capsule Tower: Japanese Metabolist Landmark on the Edge of Destruction**


Since the announcement of its impending demolition in 2007 (an act that has yet to be realized, though appears ever present on the horizon), Kisho Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower has proved a conundrum. Is the building history, or theory? Postwar exemplar, or failed mission? Worth the expense of renovation, or long past its expiration date?

None of these questions allow for easy answers, and it is a credit to Rima Yamazaki’s short documentary film *Nakagin Capsule Tower: Japanese Metabolist Landmark on the Edge of Destruction* that it does not try to answer them. Not providing an answer, however, does not imply that the film remains unbiased in its assessment (as its subtitle clearly shows): we are meant to view this structure as a unique and irreplaceable piece of history. But is that enough to save it?

Yamazaki’s film operates primarily through interviews and quiet pan shots, interspersed with a select number of archival film clips detailing the tower’s construction and initial presentation. Completed in 1972, Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower arrived in Tokyo on the wave of the enticing display, at Expo ’70 in Osaka, of Metabolism’s techno-utopianism and the capacities of a war-destroyed cityscape to envision not only a new future for itself but also a new future for architecture. Arata Isozaki, interviewed in the documentary, places Metabolism as the “first Japanese movement which succeeded [in showing] originality after the war,” as opposed to simply “absorbing and applying the concepts of Western architecture.” Hiyori Suzuki, an architectural historian also interviewed by Yamazaki in the film, posits Metabolism as a defining moment in postwar architectural thought and the space where Japanese architecture enters the international context on its own terms. Both Isozaki and Suzuki operate...
within the film as the building’s—and Metabolism’s—strongest supporters, displaying a zeal for preservation grounded in the importance of recognizing the cultural legacy at stake in the Nakagin Capsule Tower’s potential destruction.

The residents interviewed in the film, and indeed the initial voices used to situate the importance of the structure, speak about the Nakagin Capsule Tower in far more banal terms. “I like anything that is small,” reports Takayuki Sekine, a resident in the tower, who admits later in the film to purchasing his capsule in hopes of being able to vote to save it from demolition. Another resident, Seibee Yamashita, comments on his more than twenty-year tenure in the building with a far more nuanced appraisal by recognizing the powerful appeal of the design alongside its worrying list of deficiencies: sky-high water bills, unfeasible economic prospects of renovation compared to reconstruction, and the bureaucratic inefficiencies of a structure with over a hundred individual owners trying to come to a conclusive consensus.

Such a division—between the fan and the sage—provides a primary tension to Yamazaki’s documentary, especially when she posits a counterweight to Isozaki in the figure of Toyo Ito. While not exactly squaring off, these two giants of twentieth-century architecture outline the well-measured responses to the conundrum of Nakagin and its possible future. Placing the building within the broader legacy of Metabolism, Isozaki remarks that the movement began “as a theory of architecture and planning. At the time, the theory was simply about engineering. As it was realized, the architecture then turned into art.” Ito, in contrast, views the building within the context of a contemporary architecture culture beholden to economic activity, the necessities of habitation, and the potential for continued functionality: “I do not appreciate the idea of keeping a building once it becomes a carcass.”

Their contrary points of view revolve around an approach to postwar building culture in Japan and the idea of legacy, but on a more abstract level about the idea of “culture” in general. This appears most clearly in a small—though perhaps telling—sleight of hand in the documentary’s subtitled translation. In his brief comment above, Isozaki calls attention to the point at which “the architecture then turned into art.” At this moment, however, Isozaki does not use the word bijutsu (art) but rather bunka (culture). The shift may seem only a matter of semantics, but it has telling consequences. Figuring the structure as “art” lends a greater moral component to its undecided future, as the destruction of an art object invokes a more readily accepted derision. Culture, especially building culture, appears far more malleable though also far harder to defend, as the building culture of Tokyo in particular has proved over the past fifty years to be almost manically focused on a process of constant reinvention, especially in a district as dense and desirable as the Ginza.

Such desires, oddly enough, proved a driving force behind Metabolism as a movement in the first place. The significance of Kurokawa’s initial design and conception of the Nakagin Capsule Tower, and indeed of the idea of a “capsule” to begin with, was that it could capitalize on improved technologies and changing situations to renew and reinvent itself, denying any kind of “permanence” or calcification that a city like Tokyo—already twice-destroyed in the fifty years leading up to the Nagakum Capsule Tower’s completion, first by the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923 and later by Allied firebombs in 1945—was almost hardwired to avoid. Ironically, Tokyo appears to embody the Metabolist dream in practice if not in form, a reality that now threatens to consume its most famous and longest-lasting example. The structures of Expo ’70 have all long since been dismantled, and the enormous infrastructural fantasies of Metabolism’s heyday in the 1960s remain exactly that. The Nakagin Capsule Tower stands—precipitously—as the last of its kind.

Despite the attention, the tower remains on the edge of an uncertain future. Nakagin can now be seen shrouded in a construction net, signaling either impending salvation or imminent demolition; neither is clear. Yamazaki’s documentary puts forth a similarly murky position, one that lays out the positions of the debate without making a truly strong case for either one. Financial dithering aside (as the global economic downturn renders either conclusion infeasible at present), the Nakagin Capsule Tower remains a pressing question, though one slated to produce other works like Yamazaki’s documentary that more fully present, though are unlikely to solve, its potential future.

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