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Title: ‘White Light White Heat, spectres from the post-bubble city’

Date: 2007

Source: 'scape, international magazine for landscape architecture and urbanism, 1, pp. 38-42.

ISSN: 1389-742x
Japan is one of the world’s significant architecture and design cultures, with the vast horizontal urban landscape of Tokyo at its centre. The moments when one is able to look across this landscape are striking for the beautiful ever-changing patterns of light, form and movement they reveal. The architecture practice Atelier Bow-wow, embedded as it is in that culture and in that city, has been remarkably active researching, experimenting and testing its ideas about ways of engaging with the flux of city life.

Engaging with the flux
Andrew Wilson

White Light White Heat, a song by the Velvet Underground released in 1968, descends into noise and feedback that could stand for the flux of the contemporary city. At times this excess is on display in Tokyo, with its giant cinematic digital screens and neon lights providing a backdrop as its inhabitants negotiate their way on mass through city spaces. This spectacle encapsulates the themes that engage Atelier Bow-wow’s thinking.

Motonori Kajima and Yoshihiro Tsukamoto established Atelier Bow-wow in Tokyo in 1992 after the crash of the Japanese bubble economy in 1990. From its inception they have undertaken research in collaboration with their students, published the outcomes of this research, exhibited their work in architecture and art contexts, as well as running their office. The most notable outcomes of this impressive collaborative research activity are Made in Tokyo, 1998–2001, selected for the 2000 Venice Architecture Biennale and the Pet Architecture Guide Book, 2001. They position themselves as a post-bubble practice, harnessing the relative slowdown of economic activity in Japan as the impetus for generating approaches to architecture and the city as a critique of bubble economy architecture.

Whereas a previous generation of architects in Japan turned their backs on the city, Kajima and Tsukamoto take the fact of the city as their starting point. Atelier Bow-wow has developed an interesting approach to architecture and urban life that considers the body, the individual, daily life, community, cultural conventions, social space, repetition of behaviors and the city in a constant feedback loop. While their focus is Tokyo, and in particular Shinjuku, what makes their approach particularly interesting is their willingness to test their observations in other locations.

I visited the Atelier Bow-wow home office, located in Shinjuku prefecture and completed at the beginning of February 2005, using an emailed office map for directions. I had seen the project in a lecture given by Motonori Kajima in Australia late last year. Even though I had attended the lecture, actually arriving at the office was a surprise. I knew that it was embedded in the centre of the block, shaped by the pressures and opportunities on the site. Entry is...
'Public space is dull without the heat emitted by individuals'

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto

...gained by walking through a gap between buildings in the narrow side street. We arrived just after dark and the approach toward the front door allowed a view into different levels of the office at once. Because of the setback from the street, the casual passersby, might in fact not even notice it. Internally, the boundary between the office and private house is negotiable. This was proven during preparations we witnessed for the exhibition Practice of Livable Space. Gioco Detached House and Micro Public Space, which opened at Gallery Ma on 5 March. Half-finished 1:20-scale models of detached house projects filled the office basement and invaded the dining area platform above the office space. The ramp layout connected by an ever changing staircase sets up a complex set of spaces embedded in the truncated form. The stairs lead visually to extend the spaces through an inclined internal structural screen or into an embedded atrium revealed from the bedroom. The result is an unfolding variety of experiences as one moves from the office to the home, heightened by carefully framed views to the surrounding buildings and gaps. The roof garden above the third floor, accessed via the house, provides a 360 degree panoramic view of the city.

At the end of last year, Atelier Bow-wow published Bow-wow from Post Bubble City. This book reveals another important aspect of Atelier Bow-wow’s approach: the constant dialogue between Monoyo Kajima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto. It is worth listing the dialogues around which they chose to structure the book as they are very revealing. Depth, built form, site, smallness, view, conventional elements, combined orientation, micro public space, flux, management, gap space, hybrid and occupance. These themes constitute a set of parallel interrelated investigations.

**Gap space**

'The question is, starting with the GAP SPACE distributed throughout the Japanese city, how to invent principles for new urban phenomena.'

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto
Most of the projects completed by Atelier Bow-wow are detached houses, the house type that forms a large component of Tokyo’s housing stock. Their ambition is that these small detached houses might generate new residential conditions. The Gao House (2005), to name just one, does this at one level via an enlargement of an everyday or burial thing, with its leg roof and horizontal windows. That Atelier Bow-wow generate an approach to urban form out of their observations of these narrow lower-class spaces is remarkable, although as Masayo Kajimoto is keen to emphasize in Post Bubble City, Atelier Bow-wow does not have a ‘GAP SPACE fetish’.

**Micro public space**

I have been trying to think how the social and personal, or the global and local, may be concealed in the city. The attraction of urban life is in being able to attain a sort of coexistence and comfort similar to those we observe in a room even while outside, through an olive of infrastructure. Even while enjoying this level of coexistence, how will we emerge.’

Masayo Kajimoto

Another important aspect of Atelier Bow-wow’s practice is the observation and interest in Micro Public Space. Like the multiple interventions at the front of Shibuya Station that create a loose threedimensional public space in a constant state of flux, Public Kitchen Operation, 1999 was a speculative infrastructure project proposal to cultivate places in Japanese public parks for various community groups to congregate. It picked up on an observation prior to the bursting of the bubble economy of foreign guest workers gathering on their days off in Tokyo’s Yoyogi Park, where they would set up shish kebab and karaoke stalls as a sort of instant Little Tokyo. More recently, Atelier Bow-wow has tested this proposition in Fumicyle (2002), undertaken for the Urban Creation theme of the Shanghai Biennale of 2002. Atelier Bow-wow was inspired by the way people in Shanghai made living space in the street by appropriating it with furniture, and the consumed bicycles used for moving goods through the city. They desired a flexible set of chair, table and beds-cycles as a proposition about interpenetrating in this observed flux condition. They tested this proposition by deploying them at the corner of a street in Shanghai as a makeshift tea house in the street.

**Flux management**

We research the city because we want to organically perceive the relationships between architecture and urban space or scenery, as well as to find the ‘making life’ that is the point of contact between them.’

Yuushi Tsubone

The World Cup Flex DVD that accompanies Post Bubble City shows crowds wanting to celebrate Japan’s victory over Tunisia on 14 June 2002 using the Roppongi Crossing as the space for their celebration. It reveals something particular about Tokyo and the way the people use the city. The video shows crowds surge across the Roppongi Crossing in both directions, high freewheeling as they pass, only to be interrupted at regular intervals by police trying to control the surge and let traffic through. Atelier Bow-wow argue that this behaviour demonstrates a particular fact of the social space of Tokyo.

**Hybrid**

‘The attraction of the urban phenomena of Tokyo is the way the physical order, known as the first order, and overlaid with a second order due to range, but this second order exceeds the hypothesis of the first order.’

Yuushi Tsubone

Made in Tokyo was a catalogue of urban hybrid infrastructure, landscape, architecture and urban space types evolving as kind of ‘ecosystems’ in Tokyo. An outcome of work undertaken in collaboration with students at Tokyo Institute of Technology it reveals a range of urban conditions when the physical order is overlaid
with a second order of use. It contains banal hyperbolic Vampire Park, where a blood bank pavilion rubs shoulders with a skateboard facility in a formal public space, surrounded by two perpendicular railway lines, roads and a wall of buildings covered in billboard signs, and Golf Taxi Building, a fusion of a typical Japanese netted golf driving range with office space and a taxi garage.

The Hansamidori Cultural Centre (2005) located in Showa Memorial Park in Tachikawa, Tokyo, is the first collaborative project to reflect the scale of this research. A facility for the dissemination of information and exchange associated with the Green Cultural Zone, it is "park-intensive": architecture fused with landscape driven by the ambition 'for a space as comfortable as in the shade of a tree'. An unifying, covered roof park floats on top of fifteen individually programmed cylinders connected by a spider's web of structure. The glazed walls give the interior space the quality of loosely organised urban space. It is visually linked to the park outside and can be opened up to physically connect with the park.

Even though the Tokyo stock exchange has virtually stood still over the last seventeen years, the city remains remarkably lively. On my visit I saw the recent commercial buildings for Prada by Herzog and de Meuron, for Dior by Sanaa, and Toys R Us's Ted Building, among others, consolidating a new kind of public building and legibility for the city along and in the vicinity of Omotesando, the fashionable street laid out along the path the sun follows at the equinox leading to the Meiji Shrine and Yoyogi Park.

Since the bubble burst, Atelier Bow-Wow have developed, tested and refined an impressive trajectory in their thinking about the city and urban life, through both and unbuilt projects starting with the detached house.

Andrew Wilson is an architect, lecturer in architecture at the School of Design, QUT, Brisbane, Australia and principal of RAMM (Queensland Office). In 2015 he edited the book Imprint: Post war house published by the University of Queensland Press.