Learning from Akihabara: The birth of a personapolis

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I would like to introduce you to my home ground, in Japan, in Tokyo, a little district called Akihabara. Unlike Paris, Tokyo does not have a centre, nor any axis. It takes a clustured structure, with subcentres located along a circular line. Akihabara is one of those subcentres (fig. 1).

This place was known for its unprecedented concentration of electronics stores. It was nick-named the "electric town". From the '50s to the end of the '80s, this was a place visited by the families, when the husband got his bonus, to buy their household electronics—washing machines, refrigerators, televisions, stereos, videos, Walkmans —those kind of things which were once futuristic.

In a way, Akihabara was a place where people came to buy symbols and idols of the future. But this position of Akihabara as an "electric town" drastically declined when the age of progressionism and futurism came to a hault.

Now, before I go into the change which followed, I would like to revise what architecture was all about during the age of progressionism and futurism, in an era which was called modernism. The central themes were technology, function, and 'public space'.

The notion of 'public' denotes a state where all kinds of people—young, old, rich, poor, anglo, afro, asian—share a democratic space, especially in an urban conditon.
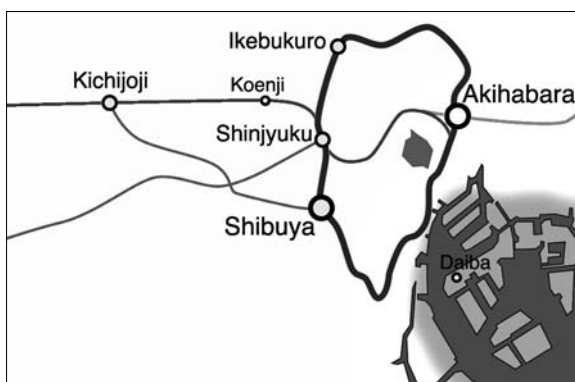
As we all know, the architects invented this style called modernism, or International Style. Some called it "universal space". Although studies have revealed this style to be highly eurocentric, this was concealed by its title; 'international' and 'universal'. Under this doctrine, the prototypical design by Mies was copied by all the urban firms in the world, and modern cities were filled with xerox copies of the Seagram Building. In those days, all an architectural theorist had to do to predict future cities was to look at the works of leading architects.

But things changed when Mr. Venturi started saying "Less is bore" and went learning from Las Vegas. The architects started to copy from Disney-land, and theorists now had to study themeparks. This phenomenon was called post-modernism by the architects and the theorists. This notion—POST-modernism—is still bound to the faith in progressionism, and is also just a disguising title, as was International Style. What post-modernism truly was, was a style of capitalism. The architects needed a disguising theory to become practitioners of *kitsch* and popular culture.

Now, back to Akihabara. When household electronics lost their futuristic appeal, the market was dispersed to roadside stores in the suburbs. Stores in Akihabara were, thus, forced to specialize in personal computers. That is, in the years before Windows and the internet, when we had no mouse and had to type commands via keyboards, and computers were for either the specialist or the hobbyist.

This shift, in turn, caused an unusual geographic concentration of computer nerd personality in Akihabara. These nerds, who are called 'otakus' in Japanese, were a new kind of personality that had emerged as a reaction to the loss of "future." The term evokes a stereotyped image of an unfashionable wimp, preoccupied with games and anime even after his adolescence (fig. 2).

Otakus were, by nature, once-ambitious boys, who were particularly affected by the loss of faith in science and technology. They used to adore science, and technology, but when America had to shift their resoures from space exploration to the Vietnam War, and scientific future abruptly started to fade, their worship shifted from science to

Fig. 1: Tokyo map

Fig. 2: Otaku icons

science fiction, and then onto sci-fi anime, and onto anime characters and icons. It was this peculiar parallelism between a personality and place that has united the otaku with Akihabara.

Otakus have strong tendencies to cherish affection towards anime characters, evidence that the streets of Akihabara became flooded with anime icons after the shift to personal computers. The icons are substitutes for the "*future*", the loss of which both the otaku and Akihabara have suffered. The facades became filled with otaku icons, as well as the skyline (fig. 3).

From an architectural stand point, this may seem like it had only to do with the content of posters and such advertisements. Not so. To show you in comparison, we shall now take a look at another subcentre in Tokyo; Shibuya, which is located on the opposite side of the circle line. Shibuya, as opposed to Akihabara, is more a general commercial district, with department stores, boutiques, and restaurants. And when we look at these commercial buildings, we notice that they are becoming more and more transparent. This is an extension of modernism. A eurocentric, *global* trend in architecture.

As opposed to this trend, when we look back to Akihabara, we notice that the commercial buildings there are becoming more and more opaque. An architect might guess that this has something to do with function. On the contrary, this differentiation has more to do with the personalities of the people who go there, rather than function in the classic sense of the term (fig. 4).

The people who tend to go to Shibuya, want to feel cosmopolitan. They like to show off to the streets that they are the type of people who belong to transparent buildings. On the other hand, the otakus who go to Akihabara do not want to display themselves shopping comics and games. Rather, they want to confine themselves in their hobbies and icons. These opposing attitudes are being reflected in the building facades of the two places, thus differentiating the cityscape. This differentiation is structured by the geographic concentration of certain personalities (fig. 5).

These two photos are just unintentional snapshots—we didn't collect these people—one taken in Shibuya and the other in Akihabara. Both groups are Japanese, from similar age groups, similar social class, but you can make out an apparent difference between these people—the difference in their personalities. Here, you can see that the classic notion of 'public' is invalid. Akihabara has come to be more an extention of private space, an otaku rooms blown up into the city.

The exodus of the otakus into Akihabara is comparable to the formation of ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown or Little Italy, with a critical difference that the otaku is a tendency in personality and taste, unrelated to any ethnic race or social class (fig. 6).

This now, is not just a phenomenon local to Akihabara. In Seoul in Korea, there is an electric town by the name of Yongsan. We see there the same kind of culture collecting, as well as otaku persona-

Fig. 3: Otaku icons

Fig. 4: Shibuya department store (left) and Akihabara equivalent

Fig. 5: Shibuya people (left) and Akihabara equivalent

lities. When we contrast them with the people in Myongdon, the central commercial area, we see the same differentiation that we saw in Tokyo occuring in Seoul (fig. 7).

Now, in 2004, I had the chance of presenting this research of Akihabara, in Venice, at the Venice Biennale of Architecture. Akihabara, which is an otaku room inside-out, was re-inverted into the interior of the exhibition room (fig. 8).

We made a give-away figurine to accompany the catalogue. It depicts Akihabara in the form of a souvenir miniature. At the show we displayed this with souvenirs from other cities. Usually, these kind of miniatures cannot be made to depict modern cities; they are all from historic cities, with distinguished architectural styles of their own. Akihabara is made out of boring modern architecture. Nothing historic nor symbolic whatsoever. But the concentration of otaku personality has made Akihabara acquire a distiguishable streetscape, enabling it to be depictable in the form of a souvenir miniature. This is a totally new channel by which a city acquires such character, which until then were derived from history and traditions.

"Community of interest" has taken an urban form in Akihabara. This could be a prophetic phenomenon in which a city is simulating cyberspace, as opposed to the conventional notion of cyberspace simulating a city.

Taste and personality are becoming a geographical phenomenon. This is not just a "matter of taste" anymore.

Fig. 8: Otaku figurine, Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2004

Fig. 6: Myongdon people (left) and Yongsan equivalent

Fig. 7: Otaku exhibition, Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2004