



The economic bubble period of the 1980s was a time for post-modern architecture. Architects keen to assert their individuality created buildings with extravagant ornamentation, flashy colors, and strange shapes. Many original and unusual public facilities appeared during these years – Shin Takamatsu's Kirin Plaza Osaka and Atsushi Kitagawara's Shibuya Rise are both products of this era.

The Post-Bubble Architects

BY TARO IGARASHI

When the bubble collapsed in the early 1990s, the architectural world shifted away from strange complexities towards a more minimalist, simple approach. The young architects who came onto the scene during this time were born during the 1960s, and their casual dress style contrasted sharply with the prevailing, stiff-collar image of architects. They preferred working in teams rather than operating on their own. Two of the best known of these teams are Atelier Bow-Wow and Mikan.

Atelier Bow-Wow takes small plots of land and turns them to advantage by delivering a new type of small-sized living quarters. One example is the Mini House (1998), where the architects used each floor of a building for a single, open-plan

room. For the Moca House (2000), they used a small, urban plot of land – this would usually be a poor location from an architect's point of view – and used the small distance between the surrounding buildings to positive effect.

For their Made in Tokyo project, Atelier Bow-Wow studied buildings that looked a total mess but were actually completely functional. An example is the Ready-Mix Concrete Apartment, a strange amalgamation of a ready-mix concrete factory, company apartments, and a parking lot for concrete mixing trucks. The Pet Architecture project researched the structures that arise out of very tiny spaces, with results of uncertain size, somewhere between architecture and furniture.

The architects of the Mikan group took the name from the kindergarten class attended by the children of some of their members. Architects even a generation ago would not have even considered such a light-hearted title. Mikan hold in-depth discussions with landowners to ensure that as many of the customers' wishes are included in the design as possible. The finished buildings are notable for their advocacy of a design with no author, rather than any clear concept. Mikan sees architecture not as the realm of the privileged,



Right/Above:
KH-2

Left:
Mini House



but something on the same level as automobiles.

For example, their KH-2 (2001), an Internet café, was created by joining six cylindrical trailers side by side together. Another work, Shibuya-AX (2000), is a live music venue in Tokyo's Shibuya district. It is decorated with showy blue and silver stripes, which leave a bold impression, bringing to mind the bright sign of a convenience store. The exterior exposes a cross section of the building composition: foyer, seating, stage, and backstage. No changes were made to the building's configuration, and the decoration is kept to a minimum. The Shibuya-AX has a rather blank, unassuming look to it, fitting for a temporary building. The Mikan group architects grew up in an era when high-density housing developments were a normal part of the scenery. They have published a collection of ideas for renovating these complexes, which rather than simply criticizing these often ugly complexes looks at ways to preserve them.

Atelier Bow Wow and Mikan are known as unit architects, implying standardization and a lack of authoritative concepts to their work. Opinions regarding their architecture are divided. Architectural commentator Yoichi Iijima criticizes their lack of strong vision, and attention to only small differences, saying they have abandoned all expressive intent. For him, their lack of inclination to aggressively create is a type of nihilism.

I am from the same generation as the unit architects, and for me these young architects have a new perspective and a positive outlook on cities. They have formed a type of organization necessary to survive in today's networked society. And revolutions don't just happen, they are always born out of the smallest of things.

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