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Should Nakagin Capsule Tower Be Preserved?

The Nakagin Capsule Tower, designed by Kisho Kurokawa and constructed in 1972, is an emblem of the Metabolism movement. With built-in features such as telephones, reel-to-reel tape players, and televisions, the Capsule Tower provided a visionary view of how urban dwellers might live in a denser future. Today, the tower is in a state of limbo. Its residents' association proposed the demolition of the tower due to conditions resulting from poor maintenance. As we focus this issue on the history of the Japanese high-rise, we ask, "Should the Nakagin Capsule Tower be preserved?"

YES

Erez Golani Solomon

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Nakagin Capsule Tower should be preserved for its architectural and historical value. The building captures the defining spirit of the Japanese post-World War II architectural avant-garde, and is the clearest existing built manifestation of its thoughts. It embodied a precise and audacious reaction, in architectural terms, to a multi-layered context marked by the rise of a distinct social class – the single salaryman. It was borne of a once-prevalent faith in technological advancement, extensive urban development and economic growth, and the traumatic reminiscences of cities obliterated by war.

In this charged and demanding environment, Kisho Kurokawa developed a commitment to "principles of life," or "Metabolism." The tower expresses ideas about dynamic structures, biodynamic building systems, impermanence, change, renewal, and motion. It is the strongest contribution in Japanese architectural history to the emancipation of the Modern building in relation to the ground.

To date, the tower still reminds us how to speak about processes at the scale of details, buildings, and cities. Its cultural prominence dictates that public interest supersede private ones, and confronts the established priority of ownership. Nakagin belongs to the select category of built things worthy of accumulation, marks the need for a regulatory regime and secure public funding for firmer protection of buildings in Japan, and should become a central component in a growing discourse about heritage preservation in the years before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

The architect's point of view is significant. Kurokawa strongly advocated the preservation of the building and did everything within his influence to pursue that end. In doing so, he reversed earlier declarations about the primacy of non-physical matter, such as text, over physical matter, such as buildings. He saw adaptation to the program and recent re-uses of capsules as required developments. In its current state of neglect, the tower also marks the possibility of architecture as ruin, independent of renovation plans. Desirable as it is, the modernization of the building need not be a condition of its preservation. Tokyo is again remaking itself as part of Japan's hesitant economic recovery. The danger that the material traces of an idealized Modernist ethos will be lost from the very place that was its crucible must be confronted.

NO

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As an intellectual exercise, the most valid argument against preserving the Nakagin Capsule Tower could come from the original concept of the architect Kurokawa himself. The Metabolism movement's very name was

meant to imply that change was the only constant, even in the solid world of built objects. The Nakagin capsules were meant to change with their owners, and be replaced as technology and society metabolized and moved forward. If we accept this premise, then freezing the Capsule Tower in the eight-track era would actually run counter to its original mission.

There are many ways in which the tower could be deconstructed, serve the needs of its existing population, and continue to inspire and educate future generations of architects and urban dwellers. Some of these have already been hinted at. In 2011, the Mori Art Museum displayed one of the capsules at the Roppongi Hills development in Tokyo. This brought a much-photographed example of capsule living down to ground level, where many more people could experience it directly than would have been possible through visiting the Capsule Tower itself. How many more people could learn about the tower if a number of its 140 capsules were distributed around the world, not just as museum pieces, but as alternative housing – a particular need in developing countries?

We are now entering an era in which there is renewed and serious interest around prefabricated and modular construction in high-rises. The expense of urban housing and the rising generational interest in small dwellings and dense urban living are creating the conditions that Kurokawa had the foresight to imagine more than 40 years ago.

So even if the Capsule Tower is disassembled and dispersed around the world in the name of education, its mission will still have been fulfilled.

