

Summaries in English

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Summaries in English

Japan, the frenetic country

(See page 1037)

The visitor to Japan, as it is today, is in for a real shock. He is given a shocking vision of the future. The Japanese were isolated for centuries from all Western influences, and by doubling what would have been a normal pace of development they have caught up with the West.

Thirty years ago Japan was only a good pupil; it has now become not only a master, but a colossus. Having barely emerged from feudalism, Japan rushed furiously into the economic liberalism imported by the Americans after their victory in 1945. Since then, Japan has been a country of effervescence, dynamism, a fantastic boom, a country launched on one of the most violent and dizzying courses of development in the 20th century.

Japan is already waking up to find itself the 3rd greatest industrial power in the world. It is at the top in the field of electronics, optics, machine tools. It is a formidable competitor both of the USA and of Germany and Europe in general.

However, the explosion is most astonishing inside Japan itself. Within three decades the islands have become covered with buildings, port installations, airports, highways, railway lines. To serve the immense agglomeration of Tokyo – Osaka, a veritable megalopolis of the 21st century, extending for 500 km and having a population of more than 24 millions, there has been created the fastest train in the world, the Tokaido, so named in commemoration of the old merchant road connecting Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto, and immortalized by the prints of Hiroshige (1831).

The large island of Honshu has been swamped by a deluge of concrete and steel. For hundreds of kilometers the splendid shores of the Inland Sea are desecrated by motorways and elevated railways which cut off towns from all contact with the sea, which sterilize the landscape.

An enormous city like Osaka, for example, does not possess a single real town-planning project. Everywhere one is "nowhere": there is no centre, no business district, no periphery, no harbour. Any given place is always everything at once: a gigantic chaos where there are jammed together four traditional timber houses, a 25-storey skyscraper, a car park for 2000 vehicles, an express highway intersection, railways (express lines, metropolitan lines, suburban lines), warehouses, shipyards and vacant lots mingled with factories belching smoke and with old two-storey houses, with tiny shops on streets as wide as highways, or as narrow as neighbourhood lanes, along with, here and there, one last rice field among modern blocks, which has somehow survived in the storm of business...

Any kind of planning is outlawed by the rules of free enterprise, here operative in their most brutal form. One single super highway for the whole country, and medieval roads, more or less kept up, on which one is happy to move at an average speed of 25 km/h and where thousands of heavy trucks surge. The air pollution is so unbearable that traffic policemen at intersections cannot function for more than one hour continuously. There are traffic jams more gigantic than anything experienced in the West. And in the midst of this infernal stress of everyday life there lives a people that has remained smiling, patient and disciplined. They are so disciplined that the big confrontations between demon-

strating students an helmeted policemen do not begin until the local television reporters have set up their cameras to film the operations...

In short, we Westerners constantly experience surprise, despair or incomprehension. Despite the ultra-modern buildings, constructed in the American style, all steel and glass, totally air-conditioned, despite the private car, exalted to the status of a cult object, despite television and its multiple colour networks, despite the computers, the refrigerators, the washing-machines, the strictly Western style of dress and the streets lined with luxurious display windows, Japan is more confusing than any other country in the world.

That is why an Issue like this, devoted to the face of Japan as expressed by its architecture, is risky. It can offer merely a picture that is partial, in both senses of the word.

H. St.

Buildings and People in Tokyo

(See page 1038)

Aspects of a metropolis

Tokyo, an unplanned, uncoordinated, unorganized agglomeration of great masses of human beings and material, may be the largest city in the world. The area of Greater Tokyo amounts to 2000 km² (the approximate size of the Canton of Zurich). In this area there live around 12 million people. An almost perpetual traffic jam is caused by 1.5 million cars. The size of the city (which was already the largest in the world at the end of the 18th century) derives from the fact that Tokyo is the chief nerve centre of Japan. It is the political capital of the country, as well as the seat of the leading universities, research institutes, press centres, the publishing industry. It is also an industrial and commercial centre, for which reason practically all big firms and banks have their head offices in Tokyo.

The city has been twice almost totally destroyed in this century: in 1923 by the great earthquake and fires, and in the Second World War by aerial bombardment. Tokyo, with a long tradition behind it, is actually less than 50 years old! (The culture of Japan cannot be studied from historic monuments in Tokyo.)

Tokyo grows without any concerted planning. The decisive factor is real estate prices, which are mainly oriented to distance from the centre and to transportation facilities. In addition to autonomous New Towns in the outlying environs, there are being erected on the periphery innumerable dormitory towns on the Western "model". Each year more than 1.5 million houses are put up. Ground prices are soaring. In the centre, ever more housing is being sacrificed to domestic and foreign office premises.

All these facts suggest impressive scales, problems and complexities; however, what instills life into Tokyo is people, the human beings who live there. They have made Tokyo – they are making Tokyo – they are Tokyo.

Buildings

The opening of Japan to the West at the end of the 19th century suddenly exposed the country to a wide range of influences, which help to determine the present appearance of Tokyo and gave rise to the emergence of different types of architecture. The prevailing house type is the 1- or 2-storey timber house, plastered grey, and ugly, jammed together in

long rows, separated from the street by a narrow strip of garden and a wall. The dimensions of the construction, of the windows and doors are determined by a uniform module: the Japanese tatami (straw mats). These houses are for the most part put up by the local carpenter, who keeps in stock the beams and supports ready-cut for different types of houses. Thus the houses are cheap, and erected within one or two months. They all look alike, but no two are exactly identical.

Owing to mounting ground prices and to the need for larger utility areas, governmental, semi-governmental and private housing organizations are putting up on the outskirts and in the suburbs monotonous rows of concrete apartment blocks in order to accommodate the great influx of new residents. The buildings average 1.7 stories in height and they sprawl densely; accents in the monotony are furnished by department stores, office buildings and apartment high-rises with up to 15 floors for people with higher incomes and for foreigners. The markedly metropolitan zones are characterized by the greatest possible variety of architectures. They vary with regard to materials, technical installations, utilization, design. They are often difficult to distinguish behind the garish advertising covering their façades whose often fascinating light shows at night make them monuments to the dynamic outlook.

Many new complexes testify to the ambition of the architects to realize ever better, ever more original application potentialities in steel, reinforced concrete, concrete, curtain-wall elevations, capsule constructions. The engineers are furnishing ever more earthquake-proof computations and structural proposals in order to maintain the race for "more height". They have contributed to the realization of the 47-storey Keio Plaza Hotel and the Makagin Tower supporting 140 capsules. For some time now there have been gleaming forth out of the chaotic, grey concrete desert brightly coloured, sometimes graphically articulated buildings.

This is what it looks like from the outside: the unbeautiful, "uncultured" and yet fascinating hodgepodge of the great metropolis.

Structures

Who hesitate to call Tokyo a city, for in its character it is not a city, but rather a conglomeration of big cities, towns, villages and neighbourhoods which have, to be sure, grown together but have retained their distinctive natures. There has remained an intense interweaving of all functions, cultural, industrial and service trades. The reason why the life of these individual cells is so manifold and intensive is to be found in the mental outlook of the Japanese, the Asiatics. The public areas (as in southern European countries) are the actual living areas, that is to say, they are not intended merely as plazas or parks serving to articulate aesthetically the compact mass of the city. For this reason, they also change in keeping with the passage of the seasons. The streets and squares look different in spring, summer, autumn and winter. Also there is clearly apparent daily rhythm. It is astonishing what changes in atmosphere the individual neighbourhoods are capable of; specific odours and sounds contribute greatly to these changes in mood. And everywhere people work, do things, eat, play, read, converse, for these public areas have no clear-cut, single function assigned to them.

The structures of the individual "towns" are, to be sure, identical, but they have become accentuated partly in keeping with tradition, partly in keeping with modern development. The sophisticated Ginza district has become a by-word for elegance and luxury with its world-renowned shops and stores. When one hears the word "Kanda", one thinks of endless lines of bookshops and antique shops, of student cafés and demonstrations. Between the

principal centres of the younger generation, Shibuya and Shinjuku, the fashion creators and designers have established themselves. The old temple district of Asakusa is enlivened by the surrounding popular recreation and shopping centre, which is especially lively during festivals. Only the business and banking district of Marunouchi is Western in character. In contrast to the other centres, it becomes dead after working hours, with consequent metropolitan problems (deterioration of working morale, increase in crime, etc.).

A typical feature of the main centres is the intensive stacking of functions, this applying to street systems, shopping, recreation, public buildings, restaurants and hotels. The basement levels, which are directly connected with the underground and elevated railway lines, are no less attractively designed than the roof terraces of the department stores that have been developed as zoos, beer gardens, amusement parks and golf links. In this respect the concepts of up and down have blended into a homogeneous structure of utilizable space, of which free use is made.

Planning

Building is done, with but few exceptions, without any far-reaching planning. Seemingly arbitrarily and at top speed houses are pulled down, renovated, rebuilt. Just an arm's length from a one-storey house there is put up a big apartment-house or office building; a garage is adjoined to a temple, etc. Nevertheless, everything is created on the basis of specific norms which to a high degree integrate new buildings and neighbourhoods and make them usable. These norms, this feeling for the adaptation of buildings to human requirements, stem from an unconscious, almost instinctive procedure. The basis is the traditional, rootedness of the Japanese in the things that come into being under his hands. He is less concerned with an end product than with the process that leads to it. Applied to architecture, this approach means that what is created is not solutions that realize space programs but solutions that correspond to the entire spectrum of human behaviour.

Judging Tokyo's buildings individually gets us nowhere, because they can be understood not in isolation but only in the context of an environment that is constantly changing and thus altering the buildings in it.

The working procedure in planning and architecture offices is oriented to a knowledge of these processes and is based on the evaluation of sociological knowledge, sociological experiences and intuitions. Therefore a project is often drawn up not merely by one architect: Designs are swapped and the synthesis of different solutions is further developed. Such practices mean that the projects no doubt lack architectural brilliance but gain in social substance.

Many architecture groups are working on environmental planning projects. Concepts like conception, tradition, process, transformation are more current than form and architectural expression. The Metabolists are an important group, who attach great emphasis to the idea that in planning the laws of transformation have to be taken into account, especially with regard to biological growth.

Japanese architects, being pronounced aesthetes, are disenchanted by the ugliness of their city; however, they understand the image of Tokyo as merely the present stage of a gigantic urban development.

Whatever architects create in Tokyo loses significance when the people set about using the buildings, living in them: Façades are ruthlessly altered, use is at any time adapted freely to new needs, and, above all, the face of the great city is constantly transformed by religious festivals and observances.

If, for example, the owner of a shop (one of those family shops that are jammed together as in a country village) dies, his shop remains open to the street as usual along its entire width. The goods are covered with black-and-white striped cloths, and in the background there is erected to the memory of the deceased an altar. On the street there are lined up against the house wreaths of bright paper flowers. The house front, the house itself and the adjoining public area become emblems of transformation, of death, out of which emerge a new birth and a fresh beginning.

These are all highlights of an architecture, moments in its development, which cannot be characterized by an aesthetic theory, a technique, a function, but have to be understood as the direct expression of the instincts of the people. Time in Tokyo is made up of such moments.

Some examples of contemporary Japanese architecture

(See page 1054)

It is obvious that the limited space at our disposal here makes it impossible for us to present a complete picture of present-day Japanese architecture. On the other hand, we have decided that it would be interesting to survey the main projects serving public functions: a university faculty, an apartment-house complex, a kindergarten, a Buddhist temple, a young people's club, a dental clinic.

In fact, it is such public projects that best characterize the architectural production of a country. We should like to extend our thanks to the editors of «The Japan Architect» in Tokyo, who have given us permission to present a number of works selected from their rich material devoted to the most striking architectural projects in Japan.

The Editors ■

Japan: the lessons of the past

(See page 1083)

In a country that is drawn and quartered between its native traditions and its futurist present, it is only natural that people should turn to the past in an attempt to discover their roots, their constant values, the key to their existence. Indeed, does not the history of Japan give us the explanation we expect? Opinions are divided. No one believes that the Japanese has resolutely cut all his ties with the past. He has plunged into the world of the year 2000 keeping within reach of the moorings capable of binding him to his ancestral customs. Indeed, it is easy to prove that customs have not changed as much as might seem at first glance. The Shinto cult persists alive in the hearts of the Japanese, just as feudal discipline survives in the midst of the economic battle. The fundamental conceptions of time and space which prevailed centuries ago have not been obscured by the dynamism of capitalism. The old outlook persists behind the Westernized life style. Now then, what are these permanent traits of the Japanese soul? This is the definition attempted in the articles devoted to the past of the country, to its arts, to its forms of expression.

It should be recalled merely that the Japanese is endowed with an exceptional receptivity. He has known how to assimilate the influences of successive invaders, above all, the culture of China, via Korea. But he has always assimilated foreign influences by way of a selective appropriation. His manual dexterity has permitted him to master easily foreign techniques, while at the same time he has remodeled ideas in accordance with his own way of thinking. The application is often baffling, the approach original. Just as the Japanese mentality reflects structures that have preserved certain archaic features, the modern Japanese building always has rooms provided with tatamis, polyvalent areas which permit a considerable reduction of the dimensions of apartments. The Japanese has emerged from his past and installed himself in the present without casting off his ancestral customs. His life style is perpetuated, despite a virulent Americanization. His system of references and his logic function on different premises from ours. To the extent that all this is not levelled by the international civilization being established in all the industrialized countries, it will remain necessary to go into the past in order to understand another life style.

This probe into the past is, in the last analysis, only a quest for a better understanding of man in his rich diversity, before this diversity disappears, like those plants and animals killed off by levelling technology, monoculture, production at all costs, super-consumption, by that vast process of entropy that obliterates all distinctions.

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