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Project Japan
Metabolism Talks...

TASCHEN

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April 2011 "The fragile state of things." Ito observes the ruins of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami.



Postscript

The reported scene of a fishing village in Sanriku* devoured in seconds by the tsunami struck me and made me wonder what Japan's 60 years of modernization since the war was all about. Back in the Edo period, fishing villages disappeared in tsunamis; now it has happened again.

The Tohoku Shinkansen bullet train is still closed and the Fukushima nuclear plant continues to be in a tightrope crisis. I am amazed by the fragile state of things despite all the economic and technological "strength" Japan has been so proud of. If the disaster had happened in Tokyo, the situation would no doubt be even more devastating. Was our achievement of the past several decades a house of cards?

The media often uses the phrase "beyond assumption" for the disaster, meaning that its force was beyond architectural requirements. But I can't help sensing a more fundamental disruption between our norm and the reality. I think we design things in a mechanical manner as a "complete machine," complying with nature defined in quantities or abstract definitions; we do not engage with the natural environment as something constantly affected by the varying forces of ground, sea, or wind. Public architecture or private house, we design strictly within an abstract framework.

I think our task now is to rethink how we "assume" design conditions, rather than reviewing the conditions. We need to start by questioning the way we relate to nature. The people or community which we always argue for in our architecture—aren't they just an abstracted scheme?

Any proposal for tackling this issue, however visionary, should be an encouragement for the towns and villages reconstructing with the possibility of natural disaster always looming. And we architects should find it an invaluable opportunity to work on such a proposal, where we can question the norm of modernism that is so embedded in us.

Being an architect from outside, I had a hesitation in getting involved in reconstruction planning for towns and villages washed away on the coast.

But after visiting the area and witnessing the devastating condition, my mind is changing. I feel I should be involved in various issues on various levels.

Since around the time I set up my own office in 1971, urban proposals such as those made by the Metabolists are rarely seen. We are still in the mode of introversion and abstraction. I think now is a good moment for us architects to break away from this mode and regain a viable relationship with nature.

Tokyo, July 2011

* Sanriku: Northern coast of the Tohoku region facing the Pacific Ocean.