

The real reason why Nakagin Capsule Tower was never metabolized

The first part of this two-part essay is about the Nakagin Capsule Tower restoration and preservation project and discusses the low awareness of the current situation of the building. In part two Showcase Tokyo Architecture tours share survey responses from enthusiastic capsule tower fans on the future of the building.

Nakagin Capsule Tower and The Metabolist Movement

The Nakagin Capsule Tower – completed in 1972 – is a well-known example of Metabolist architecture designed by Kisho Kurokawa (1934–2007). It is very popular in Japan and enjoys a high level of recognition overseas thanks to references in architecture, design, and videos. Before COVID-19, there was a time when the total number of non-Japanese guests participating in the tours was greater than that of Japanese ones.

Externally it appears to be a single building, but it is in fact two towers: Tower A has 13 floors while Tower B has 11 floors, and 140 capsules are attached to a spiral staircase in each tower respectively.

The external dimensions of a single capsule are 2.5 x 4 meters (m) making an area of 10 square meters (m²). This was governed by the size of an object that may be legally transported on a road in Japan. Each capsule was actually transported by truck to Tokyo from a container factory in Shiga, lifted into position by crane and attached to the tower.

At the time, the tower's capsules were designed and marketed as “business capsules.” The interiors featured built-in storage shelves including various integrated devices: a unit bathroom with toilet, sink, and bathtub, and a bed. A desk, a refrigerator, an air-conditioner, and lights were incorporated into the storage unit as a standard specification. Buyers could then choose options such as a telephone, TV, a digital a clock, audio system, and an electronic calculator (quite a pricey option in those days). As they were not designed for permanent



01 Kisho Kurokawa, Nakagin Capsule Tower Building, Tokyo, Japan, 1972. Full view of the Nakagin Capsule Tower. © Tatsuyuki Maeda, 2020.

occupancy, neither cooking nor laundry facilities were included. In lieu of the latter, a concierge service provided room cleaning or laundry. The tower even had special staff providing business support services for residents, which was a very advanced concept for the time.

Popularity grew as it was an easily grasped expression of Metabolist theory, where old capsules could be swapped for new. It was intended at first that the change would happen after about 25 years, but to date – 48 years later, none have ever been changed.

Why were the capsules never changed?

One of the reasons was structural. The idea that each capsule could be changed is one of the most interesting ideas for people visiting the building. However, few people realize that the capsules cannot be taken out horizontally. The underside of each capsule is fixed to brackets extending from the tower core and the upper part of the capsule is fixed with four bolts to the tower. There is about a 30 centimeters (cm) vertical gap between capsules, so they cannot be detached from the brackets as the space above each capsule is too narrow. In fact, to remove a single capsule each capsule above it would also have to be removed.

Another reason preventing capsule replacement is that each capsule was sold to individual owners, meaning that an agreement would have to be obtained from 140 owners: 100% agreement would be necessary since refurbishment would include not just their capsule but the communal space as well. Owners are obliged to pay a monthly fee for maintenance, but they would still have to cover the approximately additional 10 million yen (at 2007 prices) for the exchange of a capsule. This prohibitively high cost meant it would not be possible to obtain agreement from all owners.

In addition, the Nakagin Capsule Tower sits on leased land, with the landowner at the time (Nakagin group) favoring a more effective use of the land.

The accumulation of various negative arguments resulted in the 2007 decision to redevelop the capsules as studio apartments. How is it then that building still stands?

The construction company in charge of the redevelopment failed in the 2008 global financial crisis, and the redevelopment planning began again from scratch.

Preservation activity

There had previously been several preservation attempts undertaken by individuals, but the whole flow changed in 2014 when the *Nakagin Capsule Tower Preservation and Restoration Project* was formed.

Firstly, the team crowd-sourced funds and published *White ark of Ginza, Nakagin Capsule Tower Building* in October 2015 to raise awareness of the situation. The building itself had been covered extensively by architectural books, but this was the first time in Japan a book had been published for the reader with a personal affection for the capsule tower and which included interviews with residents and renovation examples.

A new book *Nakagin Capsule style - 20 stories* with the latest collection of interviews and photos has been released recently. It is a documentation of those capsules that have been used as homes, as well as other various applications such as office space and as second homes. Of particular interest are those capsules that have been renovated as traditional Japanese or antique-style rooms, as well as those that have been restored to the original specification.

It was felt that a good understanding was



02 Kisho Kurokawa, Nakagin Capsule Tower Building, Tokyo, Japan, 1972. Two capsule rooms. © *Nakagin Capsule Style*, Tatsuyuki Maeda, 2020.



03 Kisho Kurokawa, Nakagin Capsule Tower Building, Tokyo, Japan, 1972. Two types of events held in the Nakagin Capsule Tower. © Tatsuyuki Maeda, 2019.

a prerequisite for the preservation of this building, and so in 2015 weekend tours of the building were commenced. The tours were originally in Japanese only, but with the cooperation of Showcase Tokyo,³ who run various architecture tours of Tokyo, English and Chinese speaking tours are now offered. Around 1,500 people join the Japanese tours, and English/Chinese tours welcome around 800 per year, which has helped to create many more fans of the Capsule Towers. Tour participants purchasing or renting the capsules has reinvigorated the use of the building and so the tours have become directly connected with the preservation activity.

The visits can only last around one hour, but the best way to create a fan might be to have them actually use a capsule on a daily basis. To do this, a “monthly capsule” rental system is operated, allowing people to stay for a month at a time. Guests post descriptions of their experience on social media and this has significantly amplified the interest that people have for the Capsule Tower.

The project also promotes coverage in domestic and foreign media. Primarily news and architecture magazines, but also the requests from variety and game shows have been growing. The retro-futuristic interiors are also in demand from movie, music video, and fashion shoot producers, notably appear-

ing as a hotel in the Hollywood X-MEN movie *The Wolverine*.

Though small at only 10 m², the acoustic insulation from surrounding rooms is surprisingly good as each capsule is an independent structure. One tenant even uses a capsule as a bump-in studio with musical instruments and a DJ booth. Art and music events were held in these spaces that leverage the sense of unity, which is the strength of these rooms. The number of people in the rooms is limited due to the small space, but by live streaming, a greater virtual presence is possible and the charm of the round window can be emphasized to a broader audience.

The project has played a major part in forming the community supporting the Nakagin Capsule Tower. Of the 140 capsules, 20 are occupied by residents, 30 are used as office space, with another 30 used as small workshops. There are around 60 capsules that are not usable or not being used. Sadly, use falls year by year with the natural deterioration of the building, but the community is still very active. On weekends, people might gather from nowhere in a vacant capsule for an impromptu banquet. Often more than ten people fill this 10 m² space to enjoy chatting about architecture, design, or other common topics. There is a strong camaraderie aroused amongst occupants of diverse backgrounds

and age groups through their connection with this building. This may be the reason this building is loved by so many people.

The current situation and the future

At the same time, the redevelopment plans were forced back to the drawing board in 2007, the preservation activity saw renewed life. There was even a chance to suggest a capsule exchange plan at the building management union general meeting held at the end of 2017. However, the building's greatest crisis came in June the following year. The Nakagin group, which owned 17 capsules, the street-level store, offices on the second floor, and the plot on which the building stands, sold all proprietary rights to the CTB CK company, an investment group. The company pushed forward to purchase the capsules and, as of 1st November 2020, they have acquired 80% or more of the voting rights and are trying to complete this purchase in order to demolish the building.

Over the past two years, the *Nakagin Capsule Tower Preservation and Restoration Project* has considered several measures, such as a plan to actually renew capsules, a renovation plan, leaving some part of the capsule tower or buildings intact, or the construction of a mini-capsule tower. It is unknown how our project will advance, but it must be seriously thought about how to pass on the legacy of the Nakagin Capsule Tower metabolism to the future.

There is little time left!

What if the Nakagin Capsule Tower becomes metabolized?

Showcase Tokyo has been offering English/Chinese speaking Nakagin Capsule Tower tours for three years and has hosted about 2,200 guests.

Guests are encouraged to experience these 10 m² microcosms, get an explanation of what the building is about, why it is so special, and a description about the current situation with regard to the preservation activity.

The tours are also excellent opportunities for passionate fans of Nakagin Capsule Tower to engage in lively debate and exchange opinions about the future of the building. In Winter they get so excited that the windows fog up.

Before writing this essay, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted among enthusiastic capsule tower fans all over the world who had previously joined one of the

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tours (including the virtual tour). They were able to tell in their own words what kind of exciting future they would like to see in the case that the present critical situation is successfully overcome.

The concept of this building is Metabolism.

It is a unique building designed on the premise that the building itself would make continual change possible. That being the case, would it not also be possible to incorporate the ideas of people enthusiastic about the design philosophy into discussions about faithful preservation of the original building?

The survey had 25 respondents from 12 different countries (Australia, Belgium, Chile, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States), with ages between the 20s and 60s. About 30% of the respondents have a professional interest in architecture.

The survey consisted of five questions:

Q1. How did come to know of the Nakagin Capsule Tower? Do you have any personal memories of the building?

The most common answer from those working in architecture was “I learned about it at University” and “it was a study theme in the studio where I did my internship.” Many of the answers from laypeople were that they had come across the building in the media, fell in love with it, and decided to go see the building on their next visit to Tokyo. Some had an interest in Brutalist architecture or tiny house, and that led them to find this example of Metabolist architecture...

Some of the memories associated with the capsule tower were “Unable to gain entry I loitered fretfully in front of the building,” “I participated in a tour, and finally got into the building (and got a photo of the round window!),” “my future husband got interested in this building as well as I did when we visited the site,” “I actually got a tattoo of the capsule tower on my arm as a memory of the trip,” “I actually lived there several years later,” “I had a trip to the building as a birthday present” and “it was a surprise present from my partner.”

Q2. What is the charm of the capsule tower?

It has not asked about the significance of the building seriously here, more talking

about what it is about the capsule tower that appeals to them on a personal level.

“Minimalistic and carefully considered space,” “original design of the stunning facade, the round windows, and the furniture,” “parallel world feeling of futuristic space” – these got the most votes.

Some of the other opinions were: “the idea that the tower is actually alive rather than static and that it can grow over time with its inhabitants,” “the idea and courage to build this extraordinary building back in the 1970s and how the design still remains,” “embodying the businessman culture of Tokyo and it feels like living part of history.”

It can be said that the guests were attracted by the character and the story that the building tells.

Q3. If you were to own a capsule room, and utilize it with no restriction, including refurbishment or otherwise, what would you like to do?

Seeing many people commenting that they would like to use the space as a “weekend villa” and “hobby space,” can be concluded that many would like to experience the idea of the second house, which was the original concept of the project.

However, many had pointed out that it is actually a bit inconvenient to use with the capsules in their current condition and that refurbishment would therefore be necessary, but said “in the case of refurbishment, we would need to stick to the original design faithfully and minimize the changes” and “change the technology part discreetly so that the changes were not apparent.”

In addition, there were opinions like: “I would use it as an artist’s studio since the logic of the building fits creative activity perfectly.”

Q4. Imagine that the tower remained, and all the capsules were upgraded and metabolized to new ones. If you have a chance to change the tower and create something fun by adding something new to the original design or concept, what would you like to add (or take away)?

The most common response was to “create a terrace/rooftop garden and plant trees” to the inorganic building facade texture.

The following ideas were about connecting the building and the public more closely: “cre-

ating a community space for both residents and nonresidents,” “make one huge capsule connecting more than two units” and “shop capsule” (small convenience store, bar).

Other interesting ideas were “to make the tower elevator transparent so that you can see the tower core,” “to change into a hotel,” “to make the whole building like a Ferris wheel looking like a three-dimensional parking lot!”

Q5. If there is anything you could do to help to save this building in any way, by profession or skill, what would that be?

Most of the responses involved publicizing the tower, and to express its value, and spread awareness in various media.

On top of that, there were ideas such as “launching international crowdfunding project,” “bringing in a hotel project team,” “support financially,” “convincing the Tokyo authorities” and “participate in the competition.”

The responses indicate that this building is an object of interest and affection for people all over the world. Its future remains uncertain, but we do hope you come to experience the current capsule tower before any major changes, which could happen very soon.

Tatsuyuki Maeda and Yuka Yoshida

Notes

- 1 Metabolism was a post-war Japanese architectural movement from the 1960s by a group of Japanese architects who envisioned a new direction for future Japanese architecture and urbanism. The term “Metabolism” refers to the replacement of the old with the new and the group further interpreted this to be equivalent to the continuous renewal and organic growth of the city.
- 2 See more online at: <https://showcase-tokyo.com>.

Tatsuyuki Maeda

(Tokyo, Japan, 1967). Graduated in Marketing from Nihon University in Tokyo in 1991. After working in an advertising company consulting client branding and promotion for 27 years, he founded the *Nakagin Capsule Tower Preservation and Restoration Project* and has been a representative of the project since 2014.

Yuka Yoshida

(Shizuoka, Japan, 1981). Graduated in Japanese culture and folklore at Musashi University in 2004. After working for an Australian tour company for seven years as a tour guide and the director of the Japan Management Team, she founded the agency Showcase Tokyo Architecture Tour, with nationally licensed tour guides since 2014.