

## Fractures

Plan for the 1996 Venice Biennale Japanese Pavilion

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At 5:45AM, 17 January 1995, the Osaka-Kobe-Awaji Region of West Central Japan was struck by an earthquake of unprecedented intensity, leaving a reported 6,300 deaths, 210 thousand houses destroyed, and 320 thousand persons forced to seek temporary refuge.

The instant the earthquake struck, fractures raced across the world.

Surface roads cracked, elevated roads collapsed.

Faultlines ruptured up through the ground. Skyscrapers crazed and tipped over, whole storeys were crushed.

Communications networks were severed. Mass transport systems were disrupted, passenger movement came to a total halt. Seawalls broke, port facilities ceased to function.

Gas, water, electricity and other lifelines failed.

Households who took refuge in public buildings lost their privacy.

Families fragmented.

Psychological scars remained.

Seismograph needles simply went off the scale and did not register, so strong were the tremors.

All urban constructs, buildings, social structures, the hearts and minds of local residents, everything was shot through with "cracks." Immediately after the seismic shock, the disaster-stricken city was covered by various media, typically in the form of news reports on the damages. Photographer Ryuji Miyamoto had previously registered on film any number of derelict and disintegrating buildings in progressive states of destruction: unique revelations of that "pathos" shown by man-made structures upon their long-last breath and ultimate demise, often bearing witness to architecture at its most naked. Naturally, Miyamoto photodocumented Kobe, urban site of the initial shock and on-going aftermath of destruction. Herein I see visions of my once-undoubted faith in "construction" now strangely humbled, now resurfacing.

To residents familiar with what was, the

mounds of rubble here both hold traces of their former lives and figure as monstrous objects that continually reawaken memories of the horrific instant the disaster struck. The government has undertaken works to dispose of this rubble as quickly as possible and rid the earth of all debris. Architect Katsuhiro Miyamoto, who experienced the earthquake firsthand, as well as the destruction of his own home, has submitted a counter-proposal: to pile up rubble in the city center so as to create a monument to this unprecedented earthquake. The intent is to take the relationships between the urban residents and the built structures in which they lived and transpose them from the explicit utilitarian level to the level of matter and memory itself.

Underlying the sights and sounds of the city, background "lifeline" energy-supply systems and electronic communications systems such as telephone and computer links weave unseen networks that support urban life. Earthquakes directly attack not only recognizable landmark structures, but also affect these pipe and wire networks. If there is any lesson to be learned from the earthquake, it is this: incapacitated energy-supply systems put extreme pressures upon urban life; crippled communications aggravate psychological anxieties. Architect Osamu Ishiyama has long been involved with studies and proposals on alternative schemes for self-sufficient living, and in recent years he has worked up designs to help improve camp conditions for the increasing numbers of refugees worldwide. Addressing himself as an architect to the chaos of telecommunications after the earthquake, he began to doubt the efficacy of existing on-line data transmissions and to consider the need for constructing micro-switching systems for when the giant macro-networks broke down.

As Commissioner of the Japanese Pavilion, I feel this focus on the ravages of this severely afflicted city rather than on some optimistic architectural proposal to be a more accurate expression of the state of Japanese architecture today. The 1995 Kobe Earthquake betrayed all predictions. Particularly noteworthy is that none of the linear ideals so systematically laid out, so carefully constructed proved of any use, suggesting that the realities will never be anything like conditions planned for under ordinary peaceful circumstances. Thus, here at the Japanese Pavilion, we have covered all walls with Ryuji Miyamoto's photographs; we have realised Katsuhiro Miyamoto's rubble deposits, having shipped over debris from the

actual disaster site and enlisted the help of architectural student volunteers to heap it up onto the floor. We should also acknowledge the voluntary efforts of the many citizens who responded in the wake of the disaster. To these we have added an installation including communications and safety support system simulations by architect Osamu Ishiyama. Hopefully, this will provide yet another perspective on some of the invisible systems underwriting the city.

At present, Japan's cities are utterly buried under the superficial semiotics of circumstances that came to be known as the "bubble economy" of the 1980s. The Kobe Earthquake taught us once again, very concretely, that it was all just buildings, configured material forms. This paradigm shift, then, is the main theme of this exhibition featuring the collaborative efforts of two architects and a photographer. And I might add, it also accords with my own current thinking.

(Translated by Alfred Birnbaum)