

Statement
on
The Demolition of the Nakagin Capsule Tower, Tokyo

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

The Nakagin Capsule Tower, Tokyo, built in 1972 in Tokyo's Ginza neighborhood to the Metabolist designs of architect Kisho Kurokawa, is now under demolition. The building consists of two interconnected concrete towers containing the functional core of the building, onto which 140 prefabricated steel capsules were attached. The units were marketed to single businessmen looking for an efficient living environment located in a conveniently sited building. The units were designed around a large, round window offering a view into the surrounding neighborhood. Each capsule was designed to be a small residence, containing built-in kitchens, bathrooms, and furniture, all with the goal of efficient use of space. Demolition is expected to be completed by the end of 2022.

Metabolist architecture, pioneered by Kurokawa and fellow architects Kiyonori and Fumihiko Maki, advocated for the idea that buildings were adaptable and replaceable. They envisioned a world where the environment was increasingly damaged by short-sighted acts of people, and designed buildings that could be repaired and adapted to changing environments and settings. The Nakagin Capsule Tower was designed with future repair and refurbishment in mind: capsules were designed to be rotated out and repaired or replaced every twenty-five years, with the concrete structural and functional cores remaining intact. This never happened, and the declining conditions of the capsules led to the decision to demolish the entirety of the tower.

Its owners decided that the aging building required too great an investment to rehabilitate, and rising land values pointed to a new building as having the greater economic return. In response to the demolition, the local Nakagin Capsule Tower A606 Project has acquired one of the capsules, which it intends to restore, and has recorded the rest of the building with 3D scans, measured drawings, photographs, and videos, as is standard preservation practice.

The demolition of the Nakagin Capsule Tower points out the fragility of the architecture of the recent past, with numerous examples of Brutalist, Postmodern, and other recent architectural iterations falling before the wrecking ball of progress. The loss of so many of these buildings points out the difficulty of recent buildings reaching the fifty-year threshold that is the requirement for preservation protection, in the localities where that is even an option. It illustrates the challenges of achieving significance quickly, before the cost of expected repairs and refurbishment are presented as arguments for demolition and replacement. It also points out the environmental load presented by demolition and replacement, when no consideration is given to the embodied energy of the lost building while extolling the energy efficiency of its replacement. This irony is particularly pointed in the case of the Nakagin Capsule Tower's demolition, as the building was actually designed with future repair and refurbishment in mind.

All of this raises the question: is documentation – however thorough - enough? Should we be doing more? Is accepting recordation in exchange for demolition too easy? This is in no way meant to criticize the effort of the Nakagin Capsule Tower A606 Project. Without their laudable efforts, nothing would remain of the Tower, and documentation of it would not exist. Rather, the intent is to ask the question:

should recordation be an exchange, as it has so often become, or just one part of a larger mitigation effort?

The Society of Architectural Historians understands that the Nakagin Capsule Tower will be demolished, but its loss should not be without some impact upon our thinking about the stewardship of old and historic buildings and our collective responsibilities as stewards of our increasingly fragile environment. We should use this unfortunate undertaking as an opportunity to ask ourselves foundational questions about what we do. Does the 50-year threshold for preservation protection, where it is available, allow enough time for the architecture of the recent past to achieve significance? Or is a shorter period, such as the 35-year threshold used by the New York Landmarks Commission, more appropriate? As buildings are being designed and permits issued, should we not be asking questions about the best ways to design accommodations for future repair and refurbishment into the building? Is demolition of the old and substitution of the new necessarily an equal environmental exchange? The fate of the Nakagin Capsule Tower is sealed, but we should use this as an opportunity to ask ourselves questions about what we choose to preserve, and how we choose to preserve, in the hopes of doing better.

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