

The Exhibitionist Expo

Osaka's is the most exhibitionist exposition ever. Perhaps that is because it came so soon after Montreal, and Expo 67's complex image was still so fresh in all designers' minds: Fuller's sphere sitting like a clean scoop of ice-cream on an over-flavoured fruit-salad of shapes. Many of the architects who were invited once more on an ego trip took it too far this time—beyond the last charted point of structure in search of some new shape to excite attention. The worst offenders, with a few international exceptions, were the Japanese industrialists.

The atmosphere of Japan encourages exhibitionism. No country has a greater divergence between the taste of its sophisticated architects and that of the unsophisticated mass led by American orientated ad men. Sci-fi design spills out of the Japanese movie and television screens to shape much of the pop scene with spheres, stripes, and chrome-plated craziness. Whatever the cause, most of the conspicuous exhibition buildings at Expo 70 fall into two quite distinct categories, sophisticated or naive, but each in its way looks as if it has been calculated to please the mad scientist. (The exceptions—which may, with difficulty, be ignored—are the symbolic or historical clowns, and the few serious buildings which often seem too serious for the unreal, fun world of an Expo.)

The pattern created by the schizophrenic professor is set right at the beginning in the giant central Festival Plaza. Kenzo Tange's stupendous space-frame, with its pneumatic plastic roof and random plug-ins, makes one statement. Then the huge hollow display sculpture, which is called the Tower of the Sun and rears one of its two heads through a hole in Tange's roof, contradicts it. The plot of Expo 70 immediately becomes apparent. It is a conflict between the order of monolithic sculptural concepts and the calculated confusion of semi-pseudo scientific systems—a visual conflict, in short, between the mad scientist's monstrous end-product and the uncomprehensible laboratory equipment with which he made it.

The conflict flares up all over the Expo site. Among the most notable closed visual concepts are the Japan Government pavilion (the biggest of all), the Rainbow Tower, and the pavilions of the Gas, Chemical, and Automobile industries respectively. In the opposite class of laboratory equipment are the Landmark Tower and the pavilions of Sumitomo, Mitsui, and Takara. The last is by the Brilliant young architect Noriaki Kurokawa. Another pavilion by him, the Toshiba Ihi, is itself a Jekyll and Hyde: it is a smooth sculpture supported by a jagged space-frame system of aggressive open-endedness.

Viewed from the outside only, as many visitors do view most pavilions, the closed end-product concepts are popular successes and critical failures, while the lab bench solutions are often critical successes and nearly always popular failures. For instance, Expo publicity montage pictures feature the sculptured forms (and the historical clowns) almost exclusively. However, since the proportion of the pavilions in either category whose external images bear any relation whatsoever to their exhibition contents is just about equally low, it is difficult to say which category is, overall, less exhibitionist and more sensible as exhibition architecture.

An architect expects the highly sculptured end-product designs like the Gas Pavilion to be phoney, and he is not surprised to find that confirmed on entering its irrelevant interiors. The disappointments are in the laboratory equipment category, and three samples may be selected to give an idea of the whole range.

The Mitsui Pavilion, by Takamitsu Azuma, provides the biggest letdown of all. Externally it looks like the mad professor's lab after a long night of unsuccessful experiments. It is wrapped loosely in fat, twisted tubes painted harsh red, yellow, or blue. Some of these are pneumatic. It is surmounted by a giant tapered blue and yellow cone, red tipped, which regularly withdraws and then re-erects itself in a most questionable way—symbolising, one likes to think, nothing more than the arrival of the pneumatic age. Yet when one enters this incredible technological tangle half the tubes turn out to be empty decoration and, at the heart of it all, its reason for being, there is just one more huge, bland hall presenting a moderately exciting light and sound show that could have been held in a plain dome-topped cylinder.

The Sumitomo Pavilion, by the eminent young architect of the remarkable Kyoto Conference Hall, Sachio Otani, falls in the middle of the range. It is less grotesque; its exterior of flying saucers caught between tall vertical masts is strong and promising, and could easily fool an architect into believing there was a reason behind it. Yet its interior provides the second most incongruous contrast of Expo 70 (the first is the "Computopia" housed in the Furukawa Group's pagoda). The Sumitomo's silver saucers are found to contain totally unrelated, cosy fairytale models for children.

The Takara Pavilion is by far the most imaginative, with Kurokawa's clever space-frame system as evident inside as it is outside. Despite the most inscrutable flow pattern in all Expo—with visitors tangling as some enter and others leave the same doorways—its exhibitionism is related to exhibiting and to a feasible future for construction. It makes the other look almost as cheaply exhibitionist as one of Colonel Sanders' Kentucky Fried Chicken stands—which, if you can believe it, is present on the site.

World expositions are expected to present some sort of view of the future, and one in Japan might have been expected to present the well-publicised view that the younger Japanese Metabolists have been sketching and modelling throughout the 1970s. Instead, in all the above buildings, the exhibitionism is more of the Archigram kind, which of course, is closely related, but untidier in every sense. However, when one climbs actually into Archigram territory--into some red and yellow capsules hanging on to Tange's giant space-frame over the Festival Plaza in which Archigram presents an exhibition of tomorrow's living--one discovers an unexpected tranquility. Here is little more than some sensible, quite square, wordy, unread admonition warning of recognised evils of modern urban life, plus one or two nostalgic reproductions of early Archigram images--the images which are being parodied, with or without understanding, by many of the pavilions on the ground.

Towards the end of the enormous exhibition in the Japan Pavilion there is another overt exhibit of architectural ideas, as distinct from the many covert exhibitions of architects' ideas. It gives a view of tomorrow featuring an intricate model of an Archigram/Metabolist style "megametropolis" presented by Yoshizaka Ryusei of Waseda University. Those two displays--the Archigrams' and Ryusei's--have enough in common to indicate a concensus of world architecture's vision for today (or "tomorrow" in Expo language). It is not exhibitionist like the mass of Expo buildings outside, and it is not popular. Yoshizaka Ryusei's model displays an orderly but free grouping of vertical service towers and horizontal working or living planes, reminiscent of numerous schemes by leaders of the new Japan Style: Tange, Kikutake, Shibuya, and others. The Japanese girl attendant, whose job and inclination were not to denigrate the displays, commented on behalf of her pavilion's staff: "We do not think it would be nice place to live. We call it the City of Sorrow."