

# The Role of Social Commentary and Its Criticism for Contemporary Japanese Architects

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Aim

Following World War II Japan regained momentum in housing design and construction. Meanwhile, Japanese architects began addressing and criticizing the evolution of new societal models.

The twenty-first century has seen renewed discussion about the role of criticism itself in architecture. The architect Toyo Ito (born 1941) believes that architectural criticism must strive to clarify social concerns in the broadest sense and not be distracted by an architect's individual style. This research aims to clarify present-day criticism of the social aspects of architectural design as professed by thirty Japanese architects of the new generation. This is followed by an analysis of publications by ten well known Japanese architects of the early generation in order to track changes in conceptual semantics between the earlier and new generation of Japanese practitioners.

### 1.2 Material Establishment : Interviews

For architects born in 1970-80s, i.e. the new generation, live interviews were conducted to determine the interdependence of the pursuit of architecture and society they embody (Table 1). The new generation began practicing architecture

following the burst of the Economic Bubble (1992), Great Hanshin Earthquake (1995), Global Financial Crisis (2008), and Tohoku Earthquake (2011).

### 2. Japanese architecture and society after 1945

Japanese architecture has evolved amid cycles of drastic transformation in urban, social, and environmental structures alongside the bubble economy, pollution, and natural disasters (Fig.1). This chapter discusses the main events that shaped society, architecture, and these architects, in five phases: 1) Utopian visions after WWII recovery, 2) 1964 Olympics and renewed confidence, 3) Bubble era, 4) Post-Bubble era, and 5) Lead-up to 2020 Olympics.

### 3. Social commentary and its criticism: New generation

#### 3.1 Subject of Social commentary

Thirty architects were asked the following questions in a semi structured format A.) How would you define the word "criticism" in residential architecture? B.) What role does criticism play in residential architecture regarding its contribution to redefining societal roles? C.) What role does criticism play in residential architecture when there is no desire to redefine social roles? Followed by D.) How was the criticism embodied into two to three selected works? E.) Can you explain the achieved values especially after

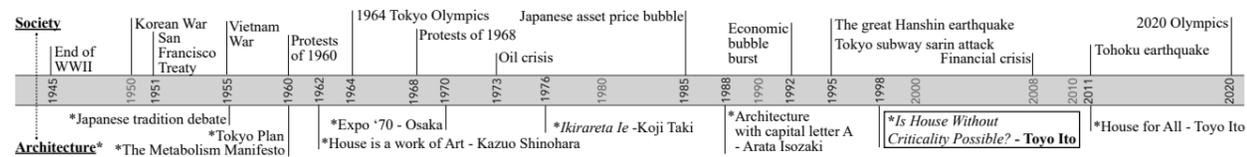


Fig.1 Timeline of the major events in Japan since 1945

Table 1. List of 30 interviewees

no	Architect name	4	8	12	16	20	24	28
1	Kentaro Ishida 石田 健太郎	Yuko Nagayama 永山 祐子	Erika Nakagawa 中川 エリカ	Hiroki Tominaga 富永 大毅	Yusuke Karasawa 橋沢 祐輔	Yasutaka Yoshimura 吉村 靖孝	Taishin Shiozaki 塩崎 太伸	Inagaki Junya-Sano Satoshi 稲垣 淳哉・佐野 晋史
2	Takuto Sando 山道 拓人	Akihisa Hirata 平田 晃久	Koji Aoki 青木 弘司	Norihisa Kawashima 川島 範久	Junpei Nousaku 能作 淳平	Teppi Fujiwara 藤原 徹平	Masahiro Harada 原田 真宏	Takei Makoto * 武井 誠*
3	Ryuji Fujimura 藤村 龍至	Jun Inokuma 猪熊 純	Takahashi Ipei 高橋 一平	Hosaka Takeshi 保坂 猛	Ryo Murata 村田 涼	Chie Konno-Rie Allison 金野千恵 - アリソン理恵	Hideyuki Nakayama 中山 英之	* Mail based interview

**Fuminori Nousaku** FN: "What architecture can do for people and for life [...] is [greatly] connected to social criticism"

Thought on criticism Architect no.16

"We can connect ecology [by using] architectural design, this is totally a control system but I want to criticize that this kind of big power [...] for example American wood is imported and also Chinese workers come to Japan to make architecture- it is a very long network, however [it is used] because it is cheap. But energy consumption is not good, so we try to change the local network."

**Row House with Piano Room** 2018 "we use an inclined heat solar collector that makes hot water, and [is utilized] for under floor heating. This is also a [heat storage][...] so many factors are networking in architecture."

**3.1 Subject extraction**  
"social criticism"

**3.2 Types and semantics**  
Semantic: **Bureaucratic domination**  
Group: [Society]  
Type: (Politics)  
○ Redefining a societal role

**3.3 Criteria**  
Physical criteria: (Device)  
Nonphysical criteria: Activity  
"Networking" [Research]

Fig.2 An example of analysis

publishing of said projects? Social commentary, as extracted from the interviews, was observed through the role of the architects to society, architecture, and the relationship between the two. Answers from each interview respectively were condensed and analyzed as shown in the example of the analysis (Fig.2).

### 3.2 Social commentary : Types and semantics

Mapping analysis via KJ METHOD was applied. Commentary types are divided into three major groups; **Society, City, and Architecture**, as illustrated in Fig.3. Society (S) objectifies [Social structure] and [Industry] with subcategories: (Politics) - (Technology) - (Energy) - and (Economy). Shared points in both (Technology) and (Energy) are placed within a category named [Human interaction]. City (C) compromises [Surrounding context] and [Urban structure]. Architecture (A) is defined as [Media] - [Architecture community], [Expression], [Spatial concept], and [Modernism] which includes both [Spatial concept] and the [Expression]. Inside each defined type is a semantic. Semantic tone is classified into two categories: Possibility or Challenge based. Possibility, shown with a white background in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, is defined as comments that do not challenge an objective, but instead explore it.

Challenge, shown with a gray background, is defined as an opposition or change. Table 2 shows the summary of architects' comments in terms of the role of criticism; [redefining a societal role] and [not redefining a societal role]. Societal role is defined as a statement, and/or stance that is explicitly serving society. While a Non-societal role focuses on the performance of architecture itself.

### 3.3 Criteria of Social commentary in architectural work

The representation of social commentary (verbally expressed) is exemplified in architectural works (symbolically expressed). The comments are represented in two modes: Physical criteria and Non-physical criteria.

#### 3.3.1 Physical criteria

Physical representation is divided into three: **Composition, Space, and Element**. Composition (Co) includes Arrangement (Ag), Volume (V), Shape (Sh), Scale (Sc), Materiality (Ma), and Detail (De) - the latter involves details in construction such as making customized joints or applying a paint color. Space (Sp) comprehends space inside (Sp-i) and space outside (Sp-o). Element (E) includes: Wall (Wl), Opening (Op), Roof (Ro), Structure (St), and Device (De). Device contains small objects such as furniture, systems, or mechanical objects. The relationship between the three modes is arrayed in Fig.5.

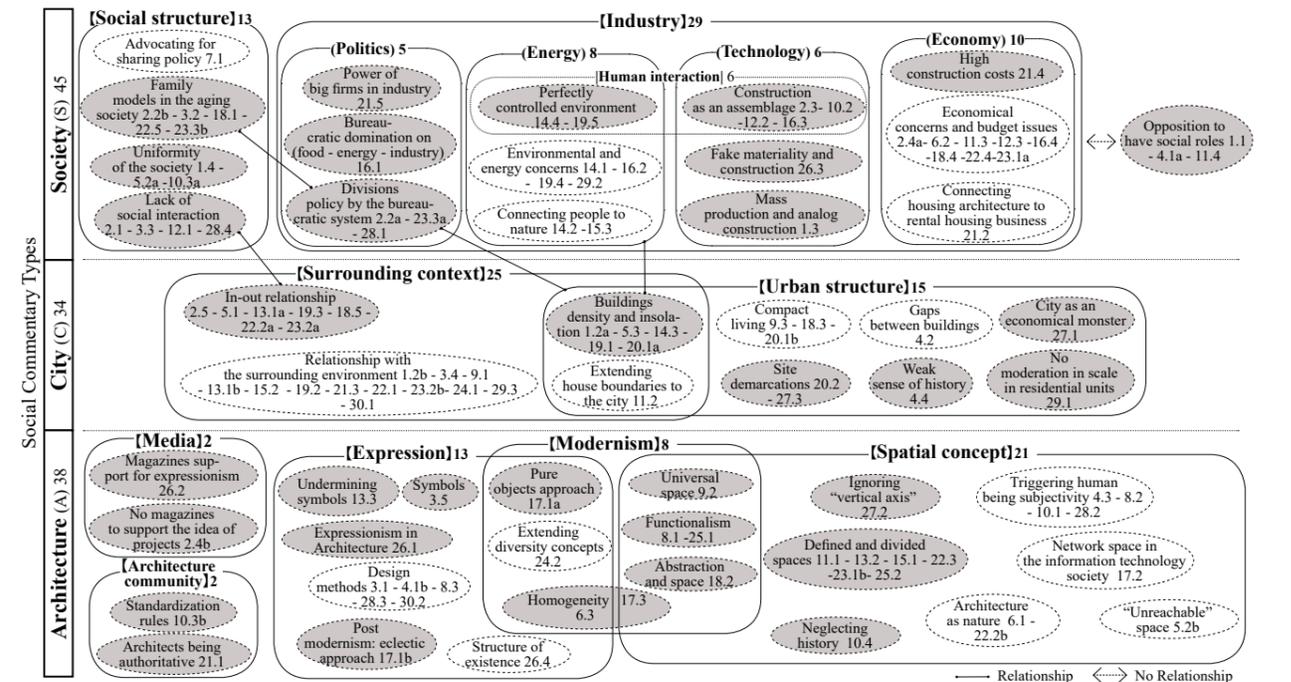


Fig.3 Social commentary types and semantics

	21.3	9.1	12.1	27.2
<b>Possibility based</b>	"I think that's kind of criticism ... but it's a positive side of criticism"	"after the research... social criticism appears in a way it manifests itself"		
<b>Challenge based</b>			"but having no relationship with society ... that it's very inefficient"	"but recently architecture is ignoring the vertical relationship"

Fig.4 Examples of different commentary tones in semantics

Table 2. Architects stance towards redefining societal roles

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30			
<b>S</b>	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○		
<b>C</b>	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
<b>A</b>	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Opposition to have a Societal role ★    Non-societal role ●    Societal role ○

**3.3.2 Non-physical criteria** The non-physical representation of the criticism is categorized into two: Meaning and Activity. **Meaning (Mg)** category consists of metaphors and symbols. Metaphor (Me) is achieved through the means of **communicating a subject** that is not directly expressed. Symbol which is identified either as a direct representation of an object or meaning. **Activity (Ac)** is when the architect pursues an approach to the object of criticism through a medium of actions. This has been identified in five forms: **Research, Workshops, Event space, Construction and Engagement.** Research (Re) includes field and theoretical studies that the architect stressed as a key to solve the problem. Workshops (Wo) is the idea of users participation in design process. Event space (Ev) is when the architect describes the solution as a place for activities. Construction (Ct) is the actions concerning building. Engagement (En) is the designs that provide the users the chance to change their environment after completion per their needs.

**3.3.3 Combination of physical and non-physical criteria** The relationship between physical and nonphysical criteria is studied (Fig.6). Through combining the modes, four approaches emerged: **I (M-Ph)** Meaning and physical component, **II (A-Ph)** Activity and physical component, **III (NPh)** Non-physical only, and **IV (Ph)** Physical only.

**4. Social commentary and its criticism: Early generation** Table 3 shows a list of ten selected architects of an earlier generation along with their respective publications. Criticism towards society in their architecture is extracted. However, the same methodology of the new generation in chapter 3 is also applied. Social commentary types and semantics (in relation to the three groups : Society - City - Architecture) and their criteria in architectural works (Physical and Nonphysical criteria) are analyzed.

**5. Social commentary scenario and the sense of time** In order to trace the shift in this discourse, the contents of both generations' analysis are compared from the tendency of social commentary types, and the criteria of social commentary in architectural works. As shown in Fig. 7, the comparison of the Early Generation (EG), and the New Generation (NG) allows for the emergence of new types: **[Identity], [Consumerism], and [Post modernism].** The **[Identity]** tendency aka "Japan-ness" in (EG) was an especially hot topic in the 1950s and 60s after the devastation of WWII followed by the frenetic urban sprawl in the time of economic growth. Even though the sole point stated by Go Hasegawa (NG) could be identified as **[Identity]**, it has not emerged as a tendency. **[Consumerism]**, which is shown in both the (Politics) and (Technology) types in **[Industry]**

Physical Criteria (Ph)		Non-physical Criteria (NPh)	
Composition (Co) 93	Co (49)	Meaning (Mg) 18	Activity (Ac) 34
Arrangement (Ag) 27		Metaphor (Me) 8	Research (Re) 12
Volume (Vo) 15	Co-E (22)	Symbol (Sm) 10	Workshops (Wo) 3
Shape (Sh) 13		Erika Nakagawa 9.1	Event space (Es) 8
Scale (Sc) 14	Sp (13)	Momoyama House	Construction (Ct) 8
Materiality (Mt) 11		2016	Engagement (En) 3
Detail (De) 13	Co-Sp (22)	EN 04: 01 "...When constructing architecture, we research the surrounding environment considerably. In the case of Momoyama House, we drew the context and made diagrams of the town."	
Space (Sp) 38			
Space-in (Sp-i) 24	E (16)		
Space-out (Sp-o) 14			
Element (E) 40	E-Sp (3)		
Wall (Wl) 3			
Opening (Op) 6			
Roof (Ro) 7			
Structure (St) 11			
Device (De) 13			

Fig.5 Physical and Non-physical criteria of social commentary

Non-physical (NPh)	Physical (Ph)	Physical (Ph)						
		None	Co (49)	Sp (13)	E (16)	Co-E (22)	Co-Sp (22)	E-Sp (3)
(Mg)	Metaphor (8)	-	2	4	-	-	-	1
	Symbol (10)	-	4	1	3	-	2	-
(Ac)	Research (12)	2	1	2	3	2	1	1
	Workshop (3)	-	3	-	1	-	-	-
	Event space (8)	1	-	2	-	-	4	1
	Construction (8)	2	2	-	2	2	-	-
	Engagement (3)	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
	None (68)	-	36	4	4	16	15	-

Fig.6 Combination of physical and non physical criteria

Table 3. List of architects of an earlier generation \* Only main references are mentioned

no	Architect name	YOB	Source/s*
31	Kenzo Tange	1913	Kenzo Tange, 1946-1996: architecture and urban design 1996
32	Kazuo Shinohara	1925	Kazuo Shinohara: casas = houses 2011 (2G 58-59)
33	Fumihiko Maki	1928	Fumihiko Maki 2009/ Pritzker Prize acceptance speech 1993
34	Arata Isozaki	1931	GA 6 Arata Isozaki V1:1959-1978, 1991/ Japan-ness in architecture 2011
35	Toyo Ito	1941	Toyo Ito 1 1971-2001, 2013/ Ito Toyo: Sendai mediateku 1995-2000,2001
36	Tadao Ando	1941	GA Document Extra 1 Tadao Ando 1995
37	Kazunari Sakamoto	1943	House: poetics in the ordinary 2001/ Lecture 2015
38	Riken Yamamoto	1945	Riken Yamamoto 2012
39	Koh Kitayama	1950	Tokyo metabolizing = 2010
40	Yoshiharu Tsukamoto	1965	Tokyo metabolizing = 2010/ Behaviorology 2010

category in (EG), has no echo in (NG) regardless of the shift from an industrial to a media consumer society. However, (NG) responses to industry are observed through concerns towards **(Politics), (Energy), (Technology), and (Economy)**, the latter having no presence in (EG). This paradigm shift between (EG) and (NG) emerged especially after the 2011 earthquake off the Pacific coast of Tohoku. In addition, the tendency of **[Post modernism]** has a dull presence with two mentions in (EG), furthermore there is only one mention of **[Postmodernism]** in (NG). It was observed that the tendency of **[Modernism]** in (EG) extends from the **Architecture** group, to the **City**, and the **Society**. While the tendency of **[Modernism]** is limited to the Architecture level in (NG), they instead tend to focus on fragmentary issues of architecture. City topics such as **[Urban structure]** are prevalent in (EG). In contrast, (NG) architects stress on **[Surrounding context]** over **[Urban structure]**. In looking at the criteria of social commentary in architectural works, the Meaning approach (M-Ph) has a strong presence in (EG). Whereas (NG) architects' modes are more concrete; this is observed especially in the City group which consists of a Physical only (Ph) majority. In addition, (NG) depends more on the Activity approach (A-Ph) when

the rhetoric is social. Extracted quotes from both generations are included in (Fig.7).

## 6. Conclusion

Thirty younger architects were interviewed about social commentary and its criticism, and compared with ten from an earlier generation whose work was analyzed through publications. It is clear that the word society itself differs from one architect to another and from one period to another. It was noticed that there was a general resistance by the new generation of architects to take a clear stance with society, especially when it comes to expressing their own thoughts and opinions. The new generation also seems to focus on the details of architecture instead of the prob-

lems that society faces or broader architectural discourses such as modernism and consumerism. However, the new generation of architects tend to deal with society in more concrete, less metaphorical terms when compared with the earlier generation. On the other hand, the early generation of architects envision explicitly societal models, and are expressive regarding their role as architects within society.

Notes

1) The interviews touch mainly on social commentary and criticism in residential architecture. Points mentioned by the interviewees in projects that were not residential were not counted, unless there was a clear statement made by the architect that residential and non-residential architecture is one and the same. In the latter case, non-residential projects are considered.

2) In some cases, criteria of architectural work are the result of two or more points of criticism. If multiple points of criticism are in the same group (Architecture, City, Society), then the criteria is counted as one. In few cases, the criteria may refer to multiple points of criticism that are in different groups. Then, for each group: one point is counted.

3) In (Fig.3), social commentary semantics may include more than one comment. However, the tone of possibility-based (gray background) or challenge-based (white background) is determined with regard to the principal tendency of the content of each.

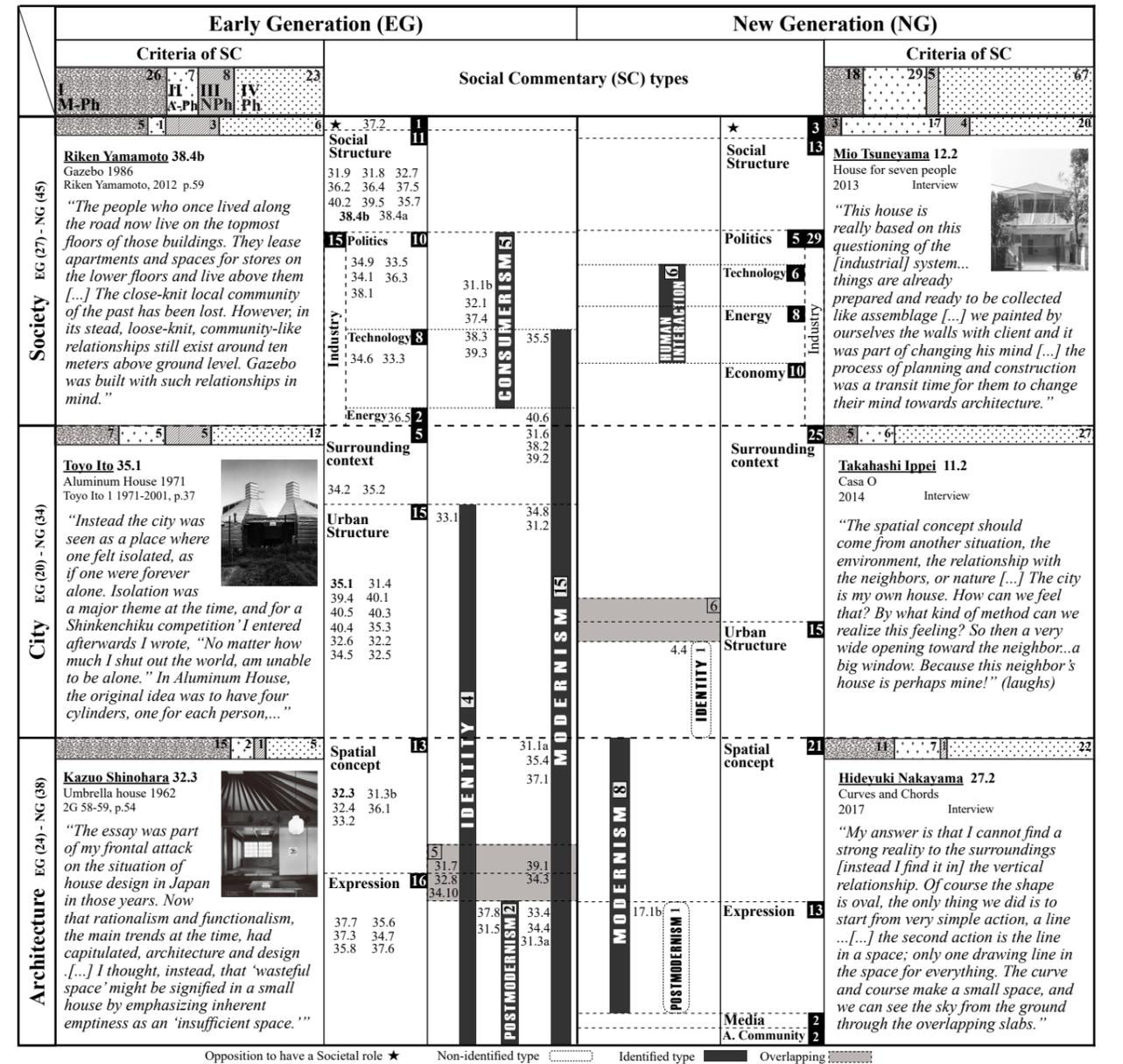


Fig.7 Social commentary types and symbolics, and the level of difference between early and new generation