

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-4  
"From Space to Environment" - II  
Motivation for the Exhibition

28 Uguisudani-machi  
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo  
Japan

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Dear Dick:

"Today, in many fields of art, a serious inner-collapse is occurring; that is, the discipline by which these fields have defined themselves is collapsing. Many artists still seem to be satisfied with the conventional rules and distinctions, and cater to the public's stereotyped concept of art. But how can the old art categories ignore the drastic fluctuations which human beings suffer in their social situations, consciousness of time and distance, personal ethics, and aesthetic outlooks? The inner-collapse seems absolutely necessary if the different fields of art are to be reorganized under the newly woven fabric of life."

The manifesto prepared by the "Group for Environmental Art" began with these words, and continued in a similar vein of hopefully persuasive comment. It didn't call for the destruction of values and methods, but rather pointed to the facts and proffered a rather positive evaluation of them. Pivoting on the observation that most of the collisions of media within the art world - whether intended as syntheses or affronts - produce "boring addition," the statement goes on to suggest that, having broken through the weakening partitions of their disciplines, artists may find themselves in a space between - a new field of potential. (The Japanese word for this "field-space-place," ba, is used, for example, in describing magnetic fields. It is, I believe, somewhat more subtle in implication than Dick Higgins' useful word "intermedia.") The exhibition, "From Space to Environment," attempted a demonstration, or at least a suggestion, of what such freshly oriented efforts might produce. Its attempt was avowedly based on the broad significance of the term "environment" (as it is used in architecture and city planning), rather than the circumscribed "total art" constructions produced by some New York artists during the past decade.

Neither the tone nor the content of the manifesto is unusually arresting, but, for all its familiar international

surface, there are implicit in it several meaningful parallels between the espoused view of art and Japanese society itself. If life in any country prods one into an awareness of collision - old with new, East with West, fender with fender - it is in Japan. To the point of cliché. Yet their country has certainly profited from confrontations, and it is therefore not entirely surprising that the Japanese should look upon the present state of Western art with less alarm and more optimism than most of our critics. They may be for historical reasons more impassive, more accustomed, if vicariously, to the exhilaration and challenge of the relatively sudden confrontations which their island isolation has brought about. Unlike the world's other stable societies, most of which have also received strong doses of sudden intervention, the Japanese have remained free of the continuous pressures and adjustments, expectations and accommodations that accessible land frontiers often necessitate. They have, as a people, a remarkable way with assimilation. One which allows the coexistence of preservation and invention, and seems to demonstrate quite convincingly the advantages of juxtaposition - of existence in a "space between." It might be objected that my parallel between the stance of the manifesto and the facts of Japanese society is on soft ground when it comes to the matter of "inner-collapse," but, stripped of the emotionalism which is appropriate to its use in the manifesto, there may be something relevant in the term "inner-collapse" as well.

Later in the manifesto, the following passage occurs:

"The exhibition... was conceived with the intent of breaking down the conventional barriers between art fields, and of seeking the chaotic, fertile place (ba) of conflict beyond. We believe our works, far from being self-sufficient, can be realized only by the integration of the observer with his environment, and that they (the observers) must always be receptive."

If "inner-collapse" is not taken to imply, as we might easily suppose, rampant destruction and confusion, but rather the dissolution of formalized (and therefore only temporarily useful) barriers, then it can be seen as related to receptiveness. And the observant and receptive attitude (Zen meditation) is a common feature of many Japanese situations, a feature which has been evinced, classically, in such disparate phenomena as the tea ceremony and architecture. At one time in the island's history, Zen mediated the poverty and oppressiveness of peasant life by teaching a new outlook. It held that the way to happiness and spiritual fulfillment could be found in almost any simple daily act, provided it was performed with proper care and observation. The people were encouraged to seek a stable relation with the features of their lives by learning to see them from a different perspective or in a new spirit (to prize highly, for instance, the simple features of the few possessions

which poverty allowed). Acceptance, according to Zen, was preferable to altering the facts. This precept - that it is better to refine one's sensitivity to what exists, rather than to make something new - is still operative, and it may relate to the more general question of imitateness and originality in Japan.

As mentioned above, receptivity was essential to full participation in the tea ceremony, which arose in the 13th century as an aid to Zen meditation. In its purest, purist form, the ceremony consisted of a quiet though elaborate procedure for brewing and serving tea to a group of four or five persons, seated in a small room reserved for this purpose. While the beverage was drunk, aesthetic discussions were carried on, and adepts reported that the whole universe could be sensed through the performance. The universal analogy was not something aggressively sought, but was rather subtly encouraged by attention and openness.

In the manifesto, the exhibitors stated that their works could "be realized only by the integration of the observer with his environment" (emphasis supplied). This is quite different from the position which thrusts "objects" of one sort or another at us, objects which are to be "understood and appreciated" by means of respectful study. Another point of interest in the same passage is the use of the word "barriers." (The English translation was done by critic Yoshiaki Tono, a central figure in planning the exhibition.) Firstly, the word is not applied to "art and life," but to "art and art," where cumbersome barriers unquestionably do exist. Secondly, "barriers" again raises the subject of Japanese architecture and the manner in which it has de-emphasized obstruction with the aim, at least in part, of promoting receptivity.

There was, I understand, considerable difficulty in settling on a proper name for the show. Though there are several words in Japanese which relate to the English "space," there is no direct equivalent (the transliteration supeisu is increasingly used by scientists and architects). Kankyo ("environment") is a concept borrowed from the West relatively recently, and implies an interaction with some aspect of one's surroundings. As a term, its vitality has faded through common usage. For similar reasons, kukan (associated with physics and, recently, with astronauts) was used somewhat grudgingly. Since so much has been said with reference to "space" in Japanese architecture, it provides a good foil for discussing some other relevant terms and outlooks. Such clarification, in turn, may help one to understand the following speculation on motivation for the exhibition.

The traditional Japanese sense of "space" is complex and implies more than physical dimension or relative emptiness. The idea of dimension relates to the Western notion of bounded

volume, and it is precisely the intrusion of the Western notion of boundary on their freely felt space which has led them to an interest in "environment" in the contemporary Western sense.

Before the fifteenth century, Japanese residences were more or less open throughout their entire volume, and moveable screens, or shoji (meaning, literally, "interceptor"), were used to set off various parts of the house when needed. Shoji evolved some time ago into translucent sliding doors, and are still used when light transmission is desired (between rooms or directly from out-of-doors). They are formed by fixing stiff paper over a system of rectangular bracing slats (the configuration of which varies widely), and the geometry of the frames adds not only stability but an abstract visual appeal. Physical barriers as such, however, were scarce, and were reserved for storms or protection at night in the form of portable wooden shutters. It might be mentioned that, in early times, men spoke to women on social occasions only from opposite sides of the moveable screens, which were, it would seem, called upon to intercept a variety of stimuli.

The house normally was opened to the elements, even when the areas within its compass came to be defined by means of shoji or the more substantial and opaque fusuma. Both forms of lightweight screening were slid back and forth as required, revealing various lines of sight to the outer world from positions within the house. These views or perspectives are nagame, from the verb nagameru ("to look at and contemplate"). On reflection, we realize that our attitudes toward either the windows or the doors of Western architecture have little to do with interception and contemplation (a continuity from "in" to "out"), and rather more to do with access. The Japanese habit suggests a sheltering, defining function for architecture as opposed to the massive confinement that Occidental temperaments and climates have evolved.

A quote from Heinrich Engle's "The Japanese House" elaborates the nature of the traditional house and its undemanding, unobtrusive qualities:

'All living rooms, regardless of their size and function, are controlled by the same material, same treatment, same scale... (This) allows for both addition and fusion of rooms of different sizes without affecting the static quality of their space. ... There is no physical accentuation of space that could manifest a beginning or end. Thus, opening room to room is but setting equal to equal so that they either fuse completely, or, if they remain separate, do not compete with each other; space, in spite of all flexibility of the partitions, remains in balance and static. It does not flow.'

Since the concept of wall was relatively unimportant to the traditional house structure (as are the floor to ceiling windows

- "non-bearing walls" - of contemporary slab-lift architecture), roofs assumed greater significance, and were sometimes overbearing. Furthermore, spaciousness or openness in rooms is expressed by the word hiroi (meaning "wide"), the significance of which is confined to two dimensions. The area over which a roof presides is more to the point, here, than the volume which the house "encloses." But, for the feeling of enormity which broad, high halls, or more probably landscapes, can give, the root "width" is doubled (to show exceeding degree) to give hirobiroshite iru.

The Japanese house, then, provided an area from which one could observe (and in which one could be observed by the watchful patriarch). If the peasant had little in the way of possessions, his religions (Zen Buddhism and Shintoism) counseled communion with those realities which are within everyone's reach - natural phenomena; and his buildings allowed, almost required it.

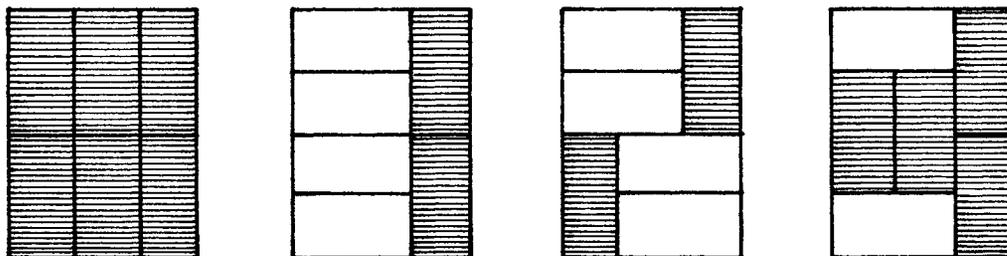
Not so directly relevant to architecture is the term ma, oldest and most interesting of the words concerning space. Ma describes the "interval" existing between two things (objects, persons, points in time, etc.) which could, potentially, interact. It is distinct from nagame, which is concerned with the process of observation, in that it focuses on an awareness of the possibility of interaction with them. Normally, we tend to associate the Orient with quiescence - at least until recently - but the Japanese sense of relation in space and time has long had a dynamic component: ma.

The foregoing, hopefully, illuminates Japanese attitudes, though it is by no means exhaustive. Architecture is, of course, only one facet of their cultural history, but its implications are accurate, I think. In a fuller sense, as well, the interplay between man and nature, and the deliberated contentment with simplicity and sparseness, have come about naturally from geographical, religious, and economic factors. And, although the position of traditional architectural concepts is being relentlessly eroded by the requirements and means of modernization (more than two-thirds of Japan's present population lives in cities of 30,000 or more), the word meanings and many of the phenomena described remain apparent and influential.

Though Japan is saturated with tradition, it is a curious circumstance that disasters - fires, earthquakes, and wars - have done a remarkably thorough job of obliterating history's physical monuments. This situation has come about partly because of a somewhat disinterested attitude towards permanence. While, on the one hand, the island's craftsmen have produced enormous cast bronze Buddhas with a very long implied life (The "Great Buddha" of Kamakura, executed in the mid-thirteenth century, is over 42 feet in height.), buildings for daily use are quite obviously perishable. Planned obsolescence is not new here. In at least one case, that of the Ise Grand Shrine,

demolition and construction on an alternate site is undertaken every twenty years. Basic elements of common architecture, shoji and fusuma, as well as tatami mats, evidently fragile, are regularly replaced. Wooden buildings are left unpainted, and are repaired when necessary by fresh unweathered wood.

Tatami mats are interesting in another sense, as well. They are locally made in a more or less standard size (approximately 3 x 6 feet), thickness, and construction, so that the floor area in all traditional houses and, by extension, most other buildings is expressed in terms of this unit. For over five hundred years the mats have, in a variety of geometrical configurations, comprised the standard flooring. The reflecting properties of their delicate, woven straw surfaces reverse depending on orientation, and this, too, adds pleasing visual variety to room space, as can be seen from the diagram:



(Various geometrical patterns for a six-mat room under matching incident light.)

The custom of removing shoes upon entering a Japanese house helps to preserve the tatami, and their clean rectilinearity is extended - by the sliding papered panels (which have the same dimensions) and dark beam-light wall construction - over the remainder of the house's surface. Though the pervasively rectangular image is both satisfying and apparently economical, it is not scientifically modular. Its abstract reduplication contributes in another way to the sense of openness, though, in that one's surroundings seem more a collection of interchangeable and humanly scaled units than an artificially extended continuity (the long, blank, uninter-

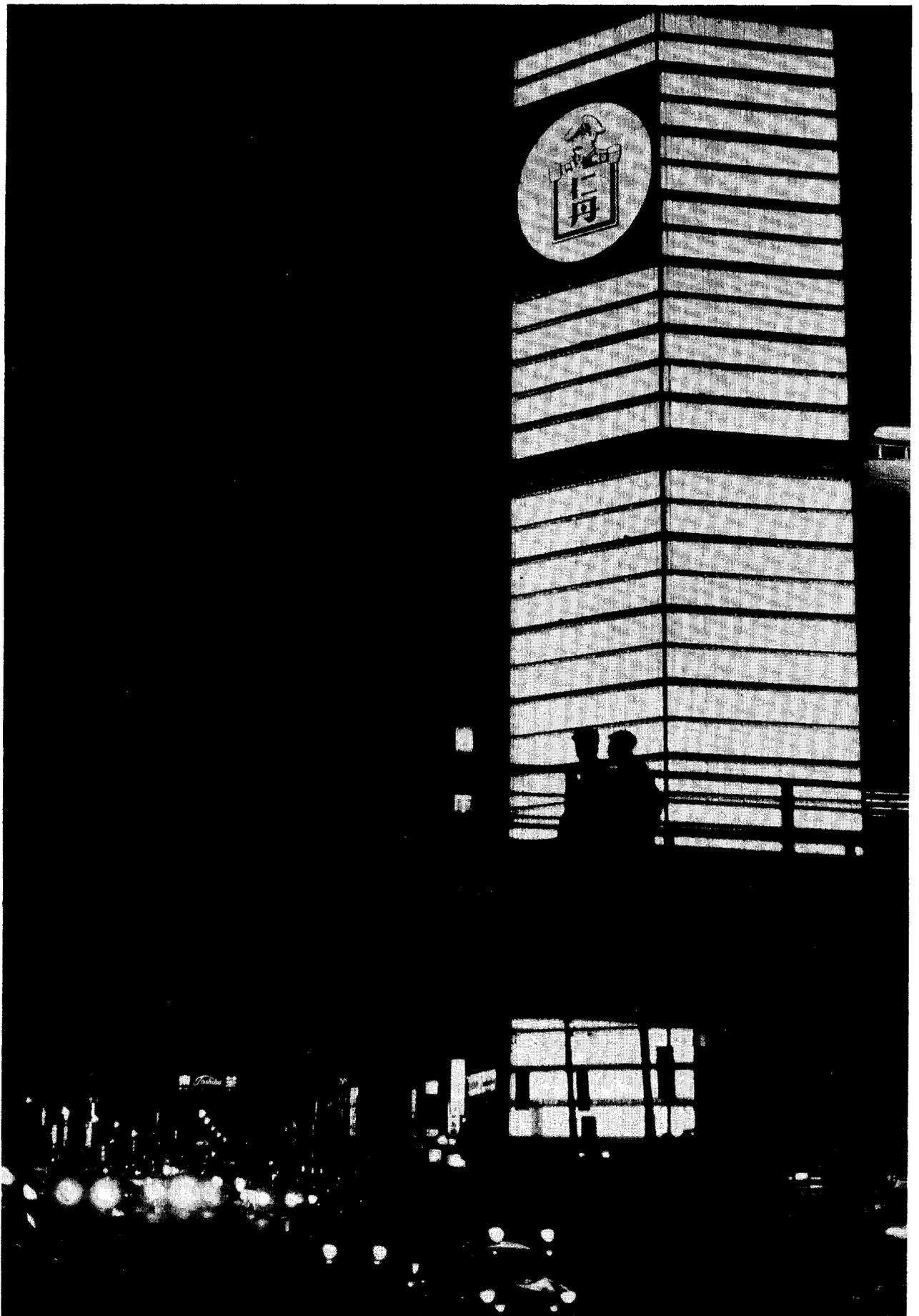
rupted Western wall). Duplication (proliferation) of the heterogeneous urban buildings is another matter, however.

Tokyo embodies, with disturbing insensibility, many of the points in the present discussion: impermanence, the negative aspects of incoherent proliferation, and the dominance of economic over aesthetic and humane criteria for the use of space. Though it has had several unsolicited opportunities for reform, most recently after the World War II bombings, it has remained carelessly unzoned and undisciplined. The architectural foliage seems to grow back, after each leveling, much as before. Tokyo has no image. Only building height has been limited, though more for fear of earthquakes than for aesthetic joy. Weathered, drab wooden shelters exist side by side with reinforced concrete masses which may display for example, a ten-story wall of solid, blazing white, neon tubing. Almost no large street is without sections of the corrugated metal plating which signals excavation, while no district is without its complement of either air compressor trucks, I-beams, and yellow-helmeted workers or the more modestly equipped carpenters, and their piles of the pre-cut, standard length timbers used in all traditional construction, no matter what the building's ultimate shape. Change is everywhere evident, and there is little thought, as in most large cities, for whether the results are better or worse in human terms. All this is bound to generate intense reactions, and the question is, what form will they take?

On the hopeful side, it is true that the Japanese have always been adept at building miniature models of grand subjects, and they have used both poetic imagination and technical skill in overcoming the scale and space restrictions of populous island life. Perhaps this quality will come into play against the strictures of city life.

Gardens - which exist in a profusion of distinct types, each with its own techniques - have traditionally served as convenient models of nature, and modulated from house to natural setting. The man, not within the confines but under cover of his house, looks out into a garden which is contrived so as to gradually bridge the discontinuity between architectural formality and the informality of nature. Roughly rectangular stone blocks at a terrace edge may suggest tatami and lead the eye as well as the foot across progressively less regular shapes, away from the house and into the less functional, but no less rigorous, order of the garden. The trees in the distance, however, a mountain or the moon, are also part of a garden. Though unplanned, they may be planned for, and are included, along with sounds and smells, as integral elements in the garden's make-up.

Effects of huge conceptual or imaginative scale may be



achieved through the asceticism of stone, as in the highly abstract garden of the Ryoanji Zen Buddhist Temple in Kyoto. Here, an area approximately 30 x 120 feet is covered with white gravel, broken only by five groups of irregularly shaped, dark rocks with their moss markings. The gravel is carefully raked each day in prescribed and flowing patterns with broad toothed implements, and the whole has remained virtually unchanged for over 500 years. The garden is a powerful visual allegory, the subject of which depends upon the viewer.

At the other practical extreme, is the reduction of nature to manageable size through miniaturization. Bonsai, dwarfed trees, are stunted by careful root pruning, and given artful shape through the weighting of branches. They are often part of miniature landscapes, another art in itself and distinct from gardens, and are reputed to attain well over one hundred years in age.

Though I have consciously succumbed to a kind of observer's euphoria, it is willingly done. This attitude toward gardens is natural and commonplace in Japan, and is implemented on a scale unimaginable elsewhere. Though the reasons for these and related phenomena and their actual significance to the Japanese is surely far less exotic than many commentators have suggested, they are, nonetheless, facts known to everyone here.

Realistically, one doubts that any traditional balances can counter present trends; and, though loyal to progress as exemplified in the brass, blare, and pollution of the megapolous, the Japanese, with the cultural background I have briefly sketched, must suffer more uneasiness than the majority of their fellow city dwellers in other parts of the world.

Even so apparently basic a requirement as the fast and accurate designation of addresses in Tokyo has been frustrated, so far, by the people's unwillingness to relinquish traditional ways of thinking. Only the large streets have names, a very small fraction of the total, and the grid is extremely irregular. During the occupation, American authorities tried, unsuccessfully, to enforce the use of names, and posted thousands of signs. These were simply ignored. Even assuming that streets were uniformly labeled, the problem of numbering would remain. Buildings within one machi, or "neighborhood," (these do have names) are numbered according to the order in which they were constructed. But the word for "house" is identical to that for "lot," so that as new buildings are put up on the same piece of land there is numerical duplication. Also, when an older structure is demolished, its number can be taken by the next to be put up. Addresses are hopelessly vague, even though they may consume three or four lines; maps are indispensable, and are hand drawn to suit the situation as a matter of course.

Traditionally, "space" requires the presence of man to

acquire significance. Ma demands the possibility of inter-relation, of exchange between two things. When the number of possible outside references proliferates so drastically, it becomes exhausting to discriminately and meaningfully relate the self to the environment. As for contemplation, the organic surroundings of nature were far less aggressive, normally, and more amenable than the inorganic constructions of the urban present. The atmosphere of the city - particularly Tokyo - is sense demanding in the extreme. Longing for breadth, or spaciousness, is anachronistic. There is no chance to penetrate the modest surface of things in quest of concealed beauty (though this - however quaint - was once the accepted Japanese orientation towards its proper expression). Everything is on the surface now, in neon. One has no choice but to retreat, to insulate. Noise is probably the most abrasive feature of this urban life, though visual chaos and air pollution may not be far behind.

However, these comments are not meant to deny the city's obvious compensations, nor to advocate refuge in nature (if one can locate some) for the Japanese or anyone else. Not even equipped with station wagon, portable radio, folding chair, and packaged lunch. Rather, they aim to indicate the weight of motivational factors in Japanese society, to estimate the potential strength of the Japanese response to the urban present. If it has already become clear in the efforts of younger artists, musicians, and architects, I expect that, through growing familiarity with affluence - coming to know and take for granted the prosperity cushion, now only newly acquired - it can only become more widespread and intense.

How directly, how consciously, the factors discussed here entered into the deliberation over the exhibition at Matsuya I do not know. Very little, I would suppose, since the Japanese we have met are unstinting in their efforts to assure us that Tokyo is interchangeable with the other great cities of the world. Without in any way disparaging the very impressive achievements of the nation and its vital cities, one cannot credit the equivalence. One doesn't wish to. Geneticists have apprised us of the importance which a large gene-pool has to prospects of diversity and evolvement. No less true in the case of cities and countries, I imagine. It appears that now, within a few segments of Japanese society, the enthusiasm for progress is not entirely obscuring the need for selective conservation. The exhibition "From Space to Environment" and the work of several younger artists to be described later seem to be healthy, if unconscious, by-products of an incipient concern. Healthy because they are neither overly rationalized nor parochial.

Sincerely yours,



Roger Reynolds