

Above: The Hotakubo apartment complex incorporates a design feature rare in Japan: collective space. Below: Architect Toyo Ito won an award for this museum, in the town of Yatsushiro.

In 1988, four years before he founded the Japan New Party and ended up as Japan's prime minister, Morihiro Hosokawa was already challenging the political and bureaucratic status quo of the country. As governor of Kyushu's Kumamoto Prefecture, he set up an unusual kind of regional development plan called Kumamoto Artpolis that involved the promotion of innovative forms of public architecture and the gradual creation of an alternative public landscape. This, Hosokawa argued, would revitalize the region by improving the quality of local culture and of local people's lives.

Hosokawa's project promised developments radically different from the top-down, Tokyo clone-style architecture that has characterized so much of regional development in Japan. But was true change really possible? Most public architecture in Japan is bland, elitist, and patronizing in its definition of the public interest. (The response of local governments to the eighties' obsession with internationalization, for example, was to build huge, anonymous international centers of little benefit to the average citizen.)

There is one simple reason for this: the

Public Works Bidding System (PWBS) itself is fundamentally flawed. Until very recently, the PWBS was manipulated by the so-called iron triangle—bureaucrats, politicians, and construction company officials who frequently colluded to se-

rewarding struggle. The PWBS was left open to manipulation and monopolization by powerful construction companies, and, as certain allegations have recently made clear, bribery and corruption have thrived.

STRUCTURAL

By outflanking a bidding system exposed as cliquish and corrupt, Kumamoto Prefecture's Artpolis regional development plan is infusing relevancy and flair in structures built for public use



Yasuhiko Kiyoshima

cure mutually beneficial public works contracts. Such activities were facilitated by the subjective nature of the PWBS selection process, which saw construction companies and associated architects

The Hosokawa government is now considering reforms to the system, but in 1988 the failings of the PWBS had not yet come under public scrutiny and this kind of widescale reform was not an option. Prompted by Project Commissioner Arata Isozaki's insistence that Artpolis could not work unless the method of government orders itself changed, though, Hosokawa boldly agreed to bypass the PWBS. While such a move was not illegal, nobody had done it before on such a

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Seiwa Village's Bunraku puppet theater boasts a striking rotunda constructed of wood beams that create an impression of whirling motion.



ing design. The architects operated within basic planning restrictions, but no design specifications were introduced. The prefectural government, local authorities, and private companies who forwarded their project proposals to Artpolis had very little influence over the final result.

But the *laissez-faire* approach was favored by Isozaki and Yatsuka because they felt that since the Artpolis projects were to be located throughout the prefecture, the sites, programs, and clients involved were simply too diverse to be incorporated into a single masterplan.

Besides, they argued, Western-style urban planning had never really caught on in the free-for-all of the Japanese city, and during the eighties it had become fashionable for Japanese architects to describe their designs as isolated points in the chaotic urban landscape. Artpolis

could at once acknowledge this situation and turn it into a positive statement about Japanese urban planning if the Artpolis buildings were viewed as individual points in a network that would span the rural-urban

IMPERATIVE

by Jane Hughes

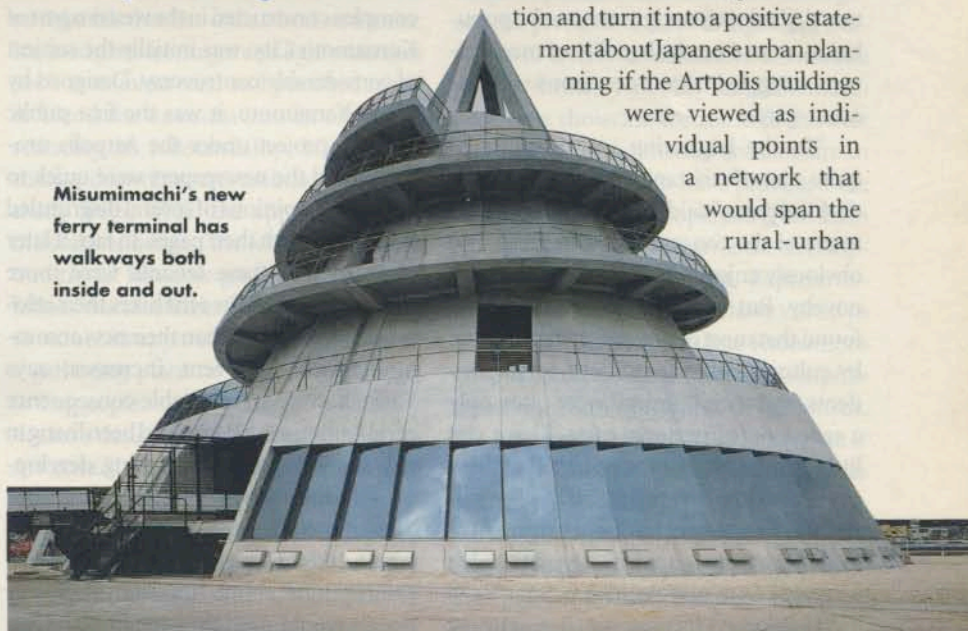
comprehensive scale.

In effect, Artpolis became a test case. It was an attempt to create a credible alternative based on those old Hosokawa favorites: decentralization and deregulation. Other prefectures watched the development with interest.

Isozaki and Project Director Hajime Yatsuka were given carte blanche to commission independent, avant-garde architects on a best fit, project-by-project basis. In a sense, this was more like positive discrimination than a move to freer competition: most of the architects had been prevented from getting anywhere near the public sector by the restrictive mechanisms of the PWBS and the tendency of public officials to play it safe.

In fact, the commissioning procedure mirrored that of the private sector, where the choice of architect determines build-

Misumimachi's new ferry terminal has walkways both inside and out.



Seiji Tomishige

divides of the prefecture. The focus would be on the power of the point to influence its surroundings. Each would also attempt to take into account the double layering of modernism and traditionalism in the area. Beyond that, even those involved could not predict how the scheme would evolve.

Five years on, with 25 projects realized and 20 more under construction, a clearer picture of Artpolis has emerged. Art critic Koji Taki described the Artpolis landscape recently as one of “gradually increasing diversity.” Many of the architects involved have commented on the camaraderie that emerged within and beyond their ranks. Surprisingly, construction companies were often prepared to treat their profit considerations as secondary to the prestige they gained from being involved in Artpolis. Being able to appoint the companies of their choice also gave architects an obvious advantage in terms of quality control.

But convincing the public of the benefits of Artpolis was not always easy, although both architects and bureaucrats made themselves unusually accessible through public discussions and popular events. Double layering or otherwise, there was bound to be a certain amount of friction as a traditional, predominantly conservative population, reared on the banality of mass culture, struggled to come to terms with the avant-garde.

“In the beginning we encountered quite a lot of resistance, particularly from the local press,” said Yatsuka. “They found many of the concepts hard to grasp and obviously enjoyed criticizing any form of novelty. But when we looked into it we found that most of the stories were written by cultural rather than social correspondents, and their opinions were often only a reflection of personal taste. There was little examination of the potential of these projects to improve people’s lives. The stories also focused on the disenchantment of a small minority, when in fact most people’s reactions were very positive.”

Hotakubo Housing, a 110-apartment



Top: Tamana City’s observatory possesses an otherworldly shape perfectly in keeping with its purpose. **Above:** The award-winning police headquarters of Kumamoto City.

complex constructed in the western part of Kumamoto City, was initially the subject of considerable controversy. Designed by Riken Yamamoto, it was the first public housing project under the Artpolis umbrella, and the newspapers were quick to parade the opinions of several disgruntled tenants through their pages. In fact, it later emerged that these tenants were more concerned about the rent hikes their relocation would incur than their new accommodations. The rent increases, says Yatsuka, were an inevitable consequence of relocating people who had been living in old and deteriorating housing developments and paying fixed rents. But Yamamoto’s design was new and very different, and challenged many conventional assumptions about housing; obviously people would need time to adjust.

The most experimental aspect of the project was Yamamoto’s incorporation of collective space. Three blocks of apartments and a small assembly hall surround, and provide the only means of access to, a central plaza. All focal lines are directed toward this plaza, which every family room and terrace opens onto or overlooks. Sleeping quarters face an outer ring road.

Reworking and refining structures he’d pioneered in the private sector, Yamamoto used arched, hangar-style roofs to emphasize the sense of several families living together under a shared roof. This design also allowed for efficient summer ventilation and winter insulation. In the inner courtyards (second floor) and covered bridges (upper floors) that connect the sleeping and living quarters of each apartment, he replicated the semi-enclosed spaces of traditional southern Japanese dwellings, particularly the garden passages of Kyoto and Osaka. The press criticized the bridges as being too exposed, but Yamamoto, whose own home in Tokyo also possesses semi-enclosed space, believes this is not a problem in the

warm Kumamoto climate.

“Perhaps in the beginning we did not have enough meetings with tenants, and the change was quite abrupt for some,” admits Yamamoto, “but after a year or so of living in the project they became much more positive.” One of the most gratifying things for him, he says, was that as relationships between the tenants strengthened, they began to interpret his design in ways that even he had not foreseen.

“Many of the tenants are pensioners or single-parent families who have said they feel the amount of open space—the terraces, courtyards, and bridges—makes them feel very safe because it’s easy for neighbors to look out for them. Some have even asked to have the dividing walls between their courtyards removed.”

Initially, tenants tended to put cup-

boards on their terraces and use them as storage space as they might a regular balcony. Yamamoto's suggestion that the terraces could also be used as additional living space, where people could sit and eat outside overlooking the plaza, was greeted with some surprise, but the idea quickly caught on.

Tenants also became very protective of their communal space, especially after holding several one-day events in the plaza area, and there was some tension when residents from the surrounding area asked for permission to use it. Eventually a compromise was reached and outside residents were given limited access on a time-share basis.

The interface between the architect, client, and users of Hotakubo housing has proved invaluable to the success of the project, but these factions do not always see eye to eye. One project that local people have yet to fully accept is the Ubuyama Community Center designed by Workshop. The 1,900 residents of this small mountain village near Mount Aso, in the northeast part of the prefecture, had wanted their new community center to be part of Artpolis because of the status attached, but somehow they'd imagined that only the label would change.

"I think," says Koh Kitayama of Workshop, "that the local people—who are mostly older farmers dependent on government subsidies—had a fixed idea of what modernization was about. What they really seemed to want was a conservative wood affair with vending machines, where they could sell the kind of mass-produced souvenirs that you can get anywhere. The problem is tourists just wouldn't come all the way to Ubuyama to do what they can do anywhere in semirural Japan."

Workshop's answer was a design that maximized the use of natural features and materials, including an ecological heating and cooling system powered by solar energy and natural hot-spring water. The beautifully simple, reinforced-glass structure was inspired by the large greenhouses that are a prominent part of the local landscape, and allows users to enjoy the surrounding scenery. Inside are a restaurant and "flexible" sales areas that can be opened

up or partitioned by the use of screens and platforms; outside is a rather stunning hot-spring bath.

"We believed that to invigorate the local economy it was important to emphasize what was special and attractive about the place," says Kitayama. "We suggested that the villagers sell local products like the excellent mineral water and herbs, or perhaps develop a natural body-care range of products. So far, however, they've rejected our ideas and seem very resistant to change." Despite a series of consultations, the local people still feel the architects' "Tokyo mentality" is inappropriate.

Architect Toyo Ito had an easier time of things in Yatsushiro, a historic coastal town of 100,000 people situated to the southwest of Kumamoto City. His design for the Yatsushiro Municipal Museum had

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to take the town's extremely flat landscape into account, as well as the historic villa and garden that had once stood on the site. Ito used glass frontages and light materials such as stainless steel and punched metal to blend the museum into its setting by reducing its substantiality. His vaulted roofs with awnings are reminiscent of high, shady trees, while the approach to the museum alludes to the winding path of a traditional Japanese garden. An artificial hillock was created in front of the museum to reduce its apparent height and to act as a gathering place or focal point for the townspeople.

Ito's design won a Mainichi Shimbun Art Award, and local shopkeepers were very enthusiastic about the new stimulus businesses have received. "I developed a very good relationship with local tradespeople and council officers," he says. "We were always going out drinking together.

"I began to realize there were actually a lot of younger people in the city government who wanted to do new things but weren't sure how, or who had been frustrated in their efforts in the past," Ito continues. "That we were able to communicate directly and work together constructively on several projects gave them quite a lot of encouragement. Projects like Artpolis have a lot of potential for encouraging more young people to stay in the area."

After this first success, the town council commissioned Ito to design new street lights and a gallery for one of the main shopping streets. More recently he has been working on two new projects in Yatsushiro: a fire station and a retirement home. Both these buildings are envisaged as being part of the local community. The fire station's training ground is open to the public, while invited visitors will be able to frequent the garden, hot-spring bath, and meeting rooms at the retirement home. Since many of the home's residents will be from the local area, this policy of shared facilities will enable them to keep in contact with friends. In Ito's case, consulting with different sectors of the community has been an extremely effective way of incorporating local needs into his design, and at the same time the people of Yatsushiro have been receptive to new ideas.

Artpolis now encompasses a whole range of public works scattered throughout the prefecture, from bridges and museums to a ferry terminal and a Bunraku puppet theater. Not only has Kumamoto become a showcase for some of the best examples of experimental architecture in Japan, but it seems to have provoked the imagination of local people and given them a greater sense of power over the development of their environment. Representatives from other prefectures have visited to see how it's done, and as one Kumamoto government official commented, "Artpolis is just one form of regional development. We may find others that are better, but it has given people a sense of the possibilities of change." ●

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