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THE MIRROR MAN

JH Engström reflects on his most important work since Trying to Dance

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Retro futurism

Noritaka Minami and Laurent Kronental combine portraits of people and their environments to provide a different take on once-revolutionary building projects, finds Rob Alderson

In December 2005, the would-be prime minister David Cameron faced down Tony Blair in the House of Commons, telling him: "You were the future once." Because it was true, it stung as a criticism and it stuck as a soundbite. But it also contained something deeper – the inescapable truth that, no matter how shiny with promise the future may seem, the lustre will probably fade with time.

Both Noritaka Minami and Laurent Kronental are interested in this tarnishing process and both have undertaken long-term projects documenting buildings that once stood for hope and progress. Minami's *1972*, which has just been published as a book, focuses on the Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo's Shimbashi district. Designed by the Metabolist architect Kisho Kurokawa, it symbolised a future in which design would stimulate social change, based around efficiency and equality. It had 140 dwellings arranged on 13 floors; each home measured just 2.3m × 3.8m × 2.1m and came equipped with built-in furniture (including a toothbrush).

Minami hadn't originally intended to shoot the Nakagin tower. He first went to see it in 2010 as part of a planned project on the lost technological promise of the 1970 World Expo, which was held in his hometown of Osaka. But touring the tower during one of the hottest summers of recent years, he found himself entranced. "It was very intense," he remembers.

"I was blown away in terms of the atmosphere of the first room that I saw, and just how loaded in history it was. Beyond the window you see the latest skyscrapers designed by

Image © Noritaka Minami

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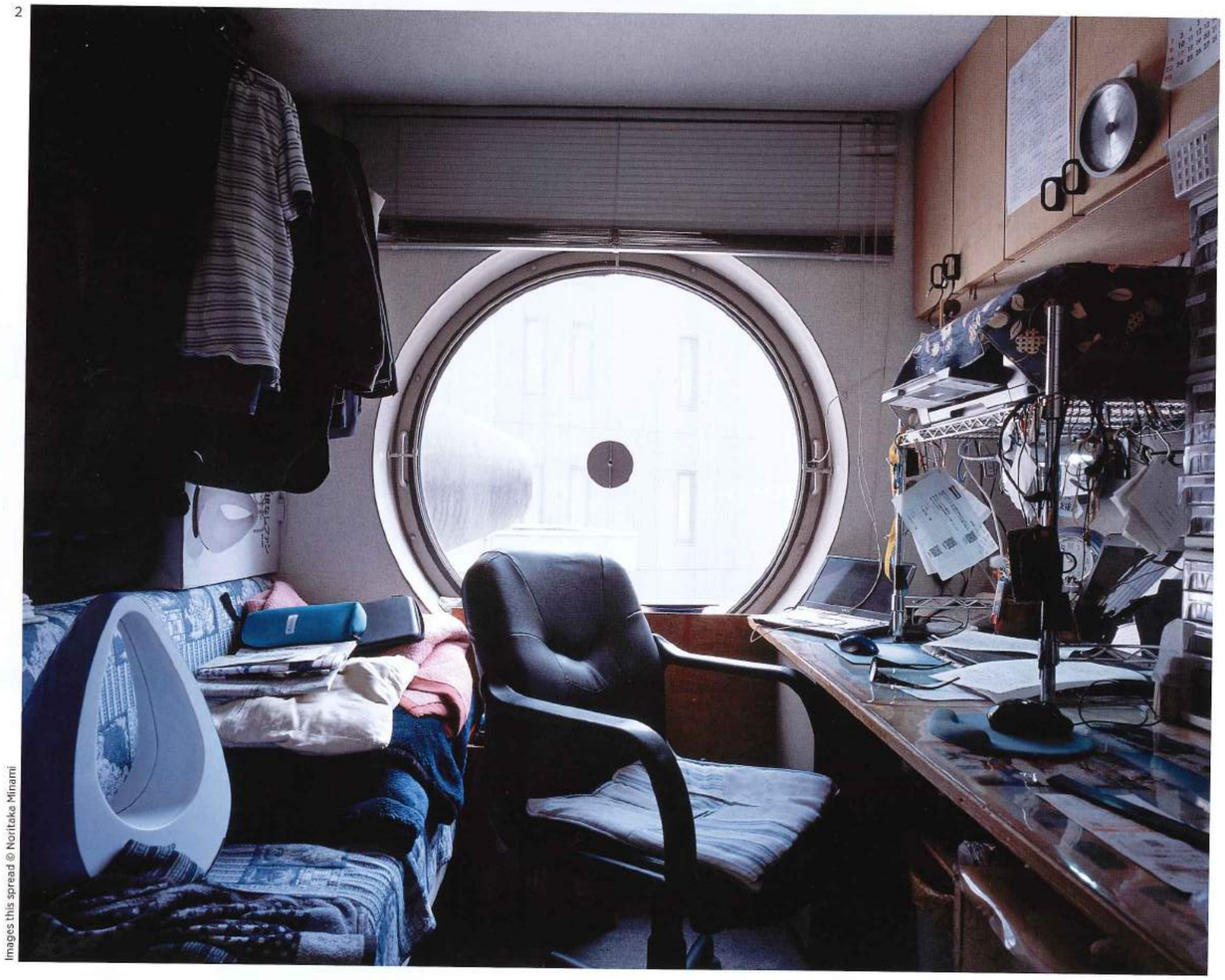

Images this spread © Noritake Minami

Richard Rogers and Jean Nouvel, but inside you see this retro futurism, which is very interesting."

The last photograph in the book shows the tower surrounded by the gleaming edifices of modern-day Tokyo, but the majority of the pictures show the building's interior, up the stairwells, through the hallways and into the tiny apartments themselves. Some have fallen into disrepair, a couple have been preserved in their original state, the rest are still lived in, crammed full of possessions that often spill out into the halls. The focal point of many of the images is the circular window at one end of the capsule, which acts as a consistent reference point and a link between the unusual atmosphere in the tower and the city outside.

Trace elements

Minami spent four years forging relationships with the building's inhabitants ("a question of access and ethics"), but his photographs show no people. "It became a balancing act between being conscious of the architecture and the residents," he says. "These capsules were built on an assembly line and there's a certain amount of repetition in terms of the layout and the configuration of the original furnishings. That set the stage for the fact that each of these rooms is occupied by different individuals and they have experienced different histories over the past 43 years.

"I am interested in the idea of portraiture but I wanted to explore another way of showing people's presence without showing their faces. I am interested in the capsules as containers of people's worldly possessions, and the traces of history that have been accumulated in that time."

The photographs of the capsules are full of these traces, which the viewer can use as clues to speculate about the person left unseen – cacti and fishtanks, coat hangers and laptops, an empty glass bottle propping open a cupboard or a gaudy towel strung over an open door. As Minami points out, architectural photography is often taken when a building first opens, creating "pristine" shots that dominate the public perception for decades. He wanted to take a different approach, celebrating the way Nakagin had changed – but also to look with a sympathetic eye, not the sweaty lust of a ruin pornographer. "I am just not interested in that," he says.

Minami hopes his work will help in the ongoing fight to save the building from the long-looming threat of demolition. As Julian Rose writes in one of the book's essays, Nakagin "has always been haunted by images... its physical existence as a building repeatedly overshadowed by its currency as the icon of an architectural avant-garde and its power as an avatar of history". By humanising it, Minami refuses to let us separate residence and residents.

Ancient moderns

Similarly, in *Souvenir d'un Futur*, Laurent Kronental hopes to capture a once forward-looking architectural environment in a very human way. He has spent the past four years wandering the Grands Ensembles housing estates in the Paris suburbs, photographing both the unusual buildings and the elderly people who call them home. Built in the 1970s and 1980s, the Tours Aillaud, the Espaces d'Abraxas, the Orgues de Flandre and the Arcades du Lac were designed to house an eclectic mix of people seeking a new life in the city. This was the architecture of change, progress and opportunity, but it's now faded, and Kronental found the contrast fascinating. "For their illustrious creators they embodied modernity, but their controversial urban planning now evokes a vanished social utopia," he says. "There is an unsettling paradox of life and void."

Forgotten by many and ridiculed by the rest, the eye-catching estates' days are numbered as modern town planners look to impose their own visions on the Paris suburbs. For Kronental it was "essential" to create a record not only of the architecture of the estates but also of their elderly residents, drawing parallels between the little-loved buildings and the people living inside them.

"By switching from portraits to landscapes, in which the person is lost in the vast neighbourhood, I wanted to stress the scale ratio between the individual and his city," Kronental says. "As I met the senior citizens, I realised most of them were not aware of their relationship to their surroundings. They had not seen themselves ageing and had not foreseen their current difficulties resulting from a lack of care services and society's disregard of them."

Like Minami, Kronental had to build trust with the locals, though his initial visits tended to take place before 6am, "in the blue hours of the morning", as he calls them. "I needed to immerse myself in the character and the atmosphere of the location," he says. "It was an amazing feeling: the deserted estates, the silence of the sleeping city, the scattered apartment lights glittering in the dark."

He gave talks in community centres, me residents' groups and approached people ir street. "It took some boldness, dedication a diplomacy to convince the tenants," he rem "and also time, patience and perseverance."

Again like Minami, Kronental does not the faded glory of the Grands Ensembles. pictures are taut and respectful; his subjec – whether built or breathing – do not seek pity and Kronental is not trying to impose Instead he wants to create an interlocking study, "a human and an urban genealogy".

Both the Nakagin Capsule Tower and th Grands Ensembles embody a future that never arrived, but Minami and Kronental's projects prove it's possible to tell these stories in a dignified way – by refusing to separate the buildings from the people wh presence ultimately defines them. *BJP*

1972 is published by Kehrer (www.artbooksheidelberg.de), pri

www.noritakaminami.com

www.laurentkronental.com