

The Future That Never Happened

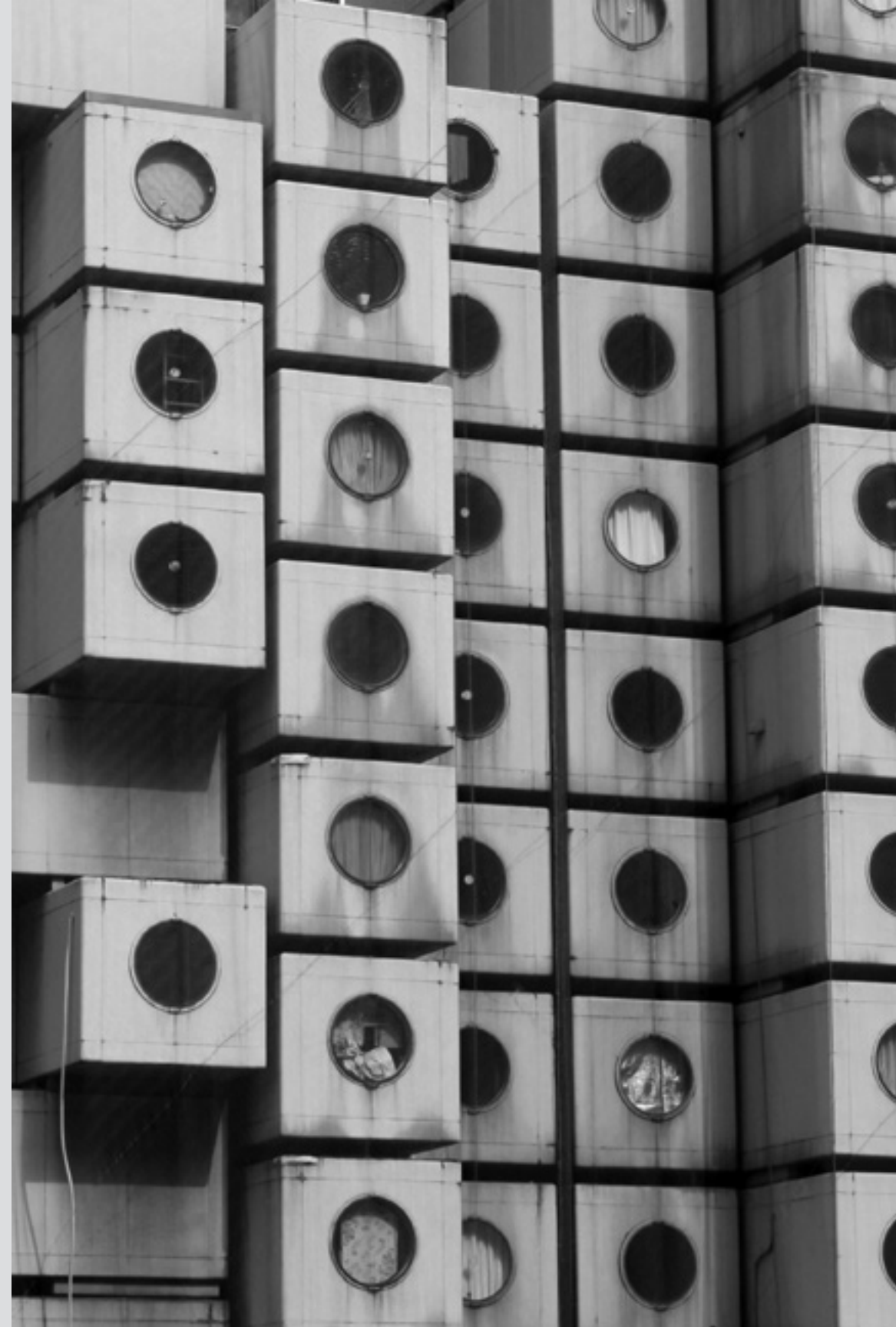
by Filipe Magalhães and Ana Luisa Soares (Fala Atelier)

Introduction

In 1972, Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower was advertised in the media as signalling “the dawn of the capsule age.” The building was a sum of individual, “plug-in” capsules, promoting exchangeability and modifications to the structure over time, and theoretically improving its capacity to adjust to the rapidly changing conditions of post-industrial society. The tower represented the future of housing. The irony behind the story of the Nakagin Capsule Tower is the fact that it became the last building of its kind to be completed in the world. Today, it stands as a poignant reminder of a path ultimately not taken.

A New Urban Condition

Forty years ago, this fallen hero was the tallest building in the neighbourhood. It was visible from far away, and with its sci-fi look seemed to be a strange machine from the future. Today the tower is blocked out, hidden in the shadows of other skyscrapers. It looks old and abandoned. Contrary to what was predicted, the capsules were never replaced. Materials did not resist the passage of time—nor were they intended to—and the problems increased: rust, corrosion, and leaks are everywhere. There is no maintenance; the building was recently covered with a safety net because small parts started falling off. It is literally crumbling to pieces. The few capsules that light up at night reveal the few people who still live here, although tourists still try to visit the building every day.





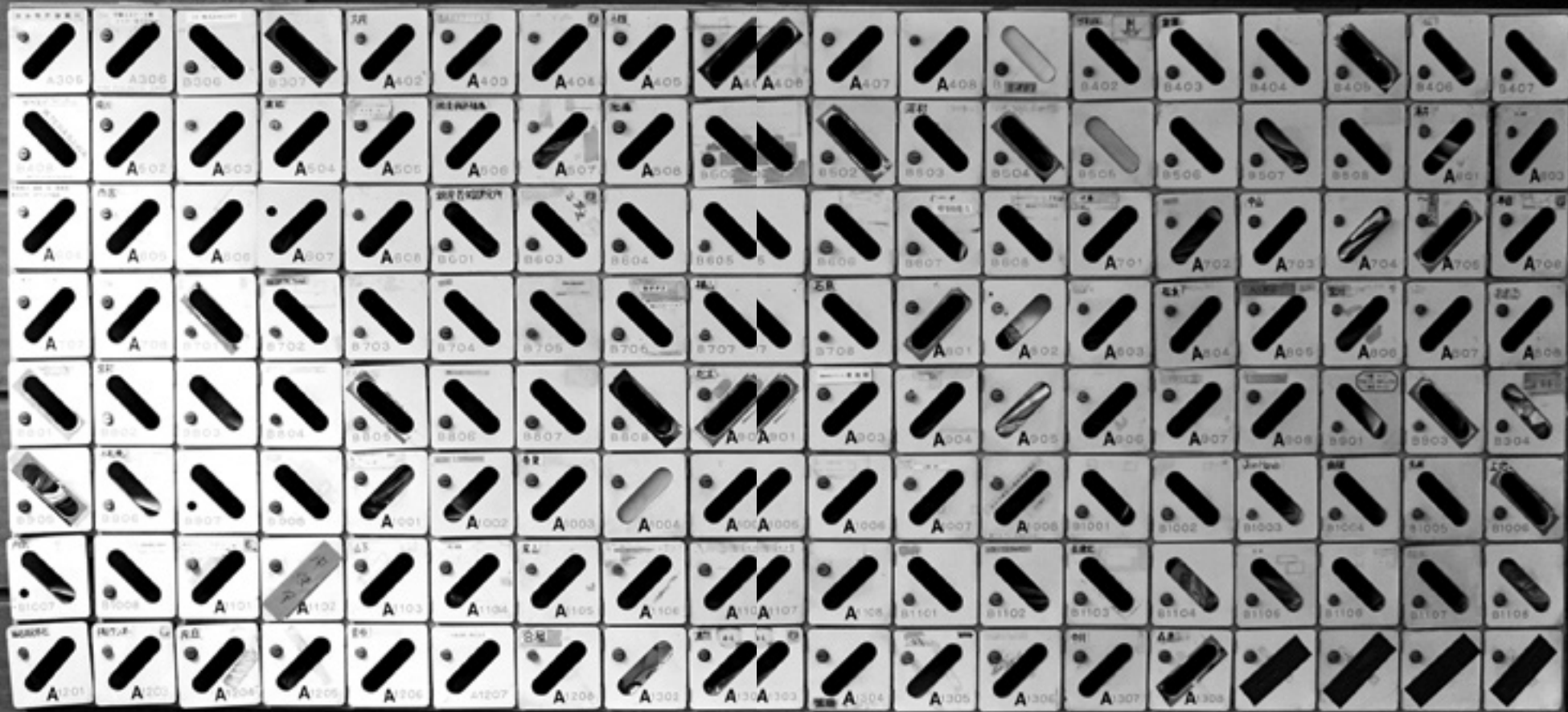
Common Spaces, Common Problems

It is a typical practice for inhabitants of the tower to appropriate common spaces as extensions of their capsules. Down the staircases one can find clotheslines, shoe lockers, or boxes filled with books and personal objects. The original pipes were never replaced and eventually became unusable. New pipes (for cold water only) were placed in the corridors, and the capsule doors were sawn to bring them inside. There is no hot water; a common shower on the entrance floor is the only place to bathe. Cracks and humidity damage can be seen everywhere. The atrium serves the entire building and is occasionally used as a meeting room by those who use capsules as offices. A doorman is there during the day, but at night the door is left open. The elevators still work.

Different Inhabitants, Different Opinions

Only a few people inhabit the tower; the vast majority of the units are abandoned. The corridors are quiet. The few residents who remain have different opinions regarding the future of the building: some believe in rehabilitation, others want demolition; some even talk about the replacement of the capsules with new ones. The lack of consensus is one of the main reasons for the current condition of the building. Several capsules have rotted from the inside and are now covered with moss and mildew; the inhabited capsules, however, are usually in good condition. Most of the owners have performed all kinds of interventions in their units—something that the Metabolists would perhaps be proud of. Some residents live in other cities and only use the building on the weekends; others live and work here full-time. Overall, everyone is worried about the future of the former icon, but in conversation with some inhabitants, it is easy for us to understand the reasons for the different opinions about what should be done.







A Capsule As A House

Time has shown that the assumed perfection of the typology was spoiled by the unrealistic idea of replacing the capsules every 20 years. Although the futuristic look generated by the capsules distinguishes the building, this mutant condition proved to be fatal. The capsules are small (8 metres sq.), but the space is enough and adjusted to the needs of day-to-day life. Every detail of the original project contributes to the success of the interior—the versatile and integrated furniture, the ergonomic bathroom, the large window. And, although living in the capsule alters the inhabitants' perception of scale, the typology is a perfect answer for Tokyo's urbanism. More than 40 years after the opening of the building, the lifestyle of the city and the local culture continue to suggest that capsular space is an ideal solution; even if the future imagined by Kurokawa followed a different path, today, while living inside one of the capsules, it is still easy for us to understand why the Nakagin Tower captivated the Metabolist imagination.✕



Bios

Fala Atelier was founded by Filipe Magalhães and Ana Luisa Soares.

Filipe Magalhães graduated in architecture at Faculdade de Arquitectura do Porto, Portugal, and at Fakulteta za Arhitekturo v Ljubljani, Slovenia. In 2011, he completed a thesis titled "Between the Abstract and the Figurative." He has worked with Harry Guggen in Basel, and SANAA and Sou Fujimoto in Tokyo.

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