MATERIA ARQUITECTURA #12 | SANTIAGO | 2015 | págs. 20-27 ISSN: 0718-7033 Interview

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto: We have to avoid treating people just like numbers

Reception Date: November 27th 2015

Acceptance Date: November 30th 2015

KEYWORDS city | behaviorology | ethnography | common life | public space

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto: We have to avoid treating people just like numbers

Interview by Juan Pablo Urrutia

Skype interview, 26th November 2015

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, established Atelier Bow-Wow together with Momoyo Kaijima in 1992 in Tokyo. This architecture Studio has been worldwide recognized by its work focused on domestic practices, cultural issues and idiosyncratic forms, also by its strong academic performance with a rigorous research practice, which has allowed them to explore micro-architecture conditions in the city reflecting the complexity of urban life and how architecture is involved in it. Atelier Bow-Wow has released more than a dozen publications, among them *Pet Architecture Guidebook* (2001), *Made in Tokyo* (2001), *Graphic Anatomy Atelier Bow-Wow* (2007), *Behaviorology* (2010), and *Commonalities* (2014).

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto is Professor of Tokyo Institute of Technology. He has taught at Harvard GSD, UCLA, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Barcelona Institute of Architecture, Kyoto Seika University, Cornell University, and Rice University.

According to your ideas about the city and architecture as a result of a super industrialized and capitalist model which promotes individualism instead of a community lifestyle, could we say that we are living in an environment shaped by conflict? To what extent do you think our cities are just a consequence of different kinds of conflict?

Cities are a consequence of different kinds of conditions, within conditions there are several conflicts but not everything should be called conflict. For example, some social problems are produced by the cities, so cities are not produced by conflicts in that sense.

If cities depict our society, and we do not feel sufficiently happy living there, should we not try to change our society first? Or, how to change that condition through architecture?

It is like a chicken and egg situation, if the city is produced by society and the society is caused by conditions of the city, it is hard to say that we can simply change society and then architecture, so the whole city (including inhabitants) is a kind of chicken and egg relationship.

All your work is recognized by the behaviorology approach you have stated. According to that, could we say that people know better than architects how to solve their problems or that they just know better than us the problems they have?

It depends, behavior is produced by the encounter of the body and the surrounding conditions. Conditions are always produced through time, history and, in most of the cases, they are based on the resources people have, and accessibility to resources is sometimes limited for some people. All of these conditions are also produced by chance, so the important thing now is that the city is full of objects in space produced by chance, so through time. But there is a modern theory of planning that does not have perspective, does not have the ability to understand this chance. How much of the city is produced by chance? Now we are working on a project on the subway of Tokyo focussed on how much Tokyo is produced by chance.

For a long time in the past, cities were shaped by strong centrality brought by different political institutions or economical forces, but nowadays those centralities are quite hard to grasp, they are so fragmented that it is quite difficult to predict the future of the city and what is going to happen in the sense of centrality. But if we can understand the patterns of how the city is formed by chance, by the relationship between different forces or different actors in them, it can be possible to use knowledge about chance and to have other tools that drive the creation of cities.

The important thing now is that the city is full of objects in space produced by chance, so through time.

★ Behaviorology: Non-official English word used as a hypothesis by Atelier Bow-Wow. It suggests that understanding behavior could be central to comprehending the links between human life, nature, and the built environment. It is also the title of an Atelier Bow-Wow's book published in 2010.

★ The Tokyo Metro began operating in 1927. It has 9 lines and 179 stations. The average number of passengers per day is 6.84 million. Source: www.tokyometro.jp/en/

According to the need you describe about how to identify people's behavior, should we, architects, study and learn methodologies from other disciplines like sociology or psychology, for example?

Yes, today architectural design is very close to ethnography. We need more knowledge, more ethnographic understanding of the city and people's life and how much and what kind of resources we have in each place, finding out how they are and what kind of life is constructed with these resources. Those understandings and this kind of discussions are more common in ethnography than in architectural design, but now we really need to discuss this kind of things through architectural design.

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Ethnography is the systematic study of people and cultures. Its methodology is different from other ways of conducting social science since it requires, for example, two or more data collection techniques, field-based studies, and daily face-to-face contact between researcher and people in the long term. Source: www.americanethnography.com

In your case, did you get some consultancy or some help from other professionals in those areas?

Not specifically, but I keep discussing with a philosopher and a sociologist for certain issues.

I am asking this because in your books Graphic Anatomy you state clearly how important methodology is to represent architecture; so do you think new representation technologies like parametric and digital design have led architects away from the observation or contemplation process? I mean, the new technologies have moved us away from the traditional technics which allow us to do on-site observations.

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Graphic Anatomy (Toto Publishing, 2007) and *Graphic Anatomy 2* (Toto Publishing, 2012) are two books by Atelier Bow-Wow that contain technical drawings with significant level of detail, diversity, and spatial depth. The first book catalogues 24 designs and the second one more than 40 recent projects. Source: www.amazon.com

Drawing as a representation of architecture is quite important, particularly in terms of integration of different constellations through architectural design, so it is a kind of map to show in which kind of constellation we are, and then also how much we pay attention. This kind of discussion should be fixed on architectural design. Drawing and representation are very important to integrate all interrelations in one single map. Graphically, it is a very different kind of map; it is a map of different constellations.

Today architectural design is very close to ethnography. We need more knowledge, more ethnographic understanding of the city and people's life.

For example, behaviorology perspective it is not only about the human being who behaves around architecture, it is also about natural elements like wind, heat, and lights, because they also behave and some parametric design is also dealing with these natural elements, simulating and then trying to graph them into resources to design. But the most important aspect of these different behaviors is ecology, not just focusing on one specific behavior which can guide architectural design into new styles. The relevant thing is ecology, how this natural behavior, human behavior and objects behavior create a kind of sustainable ecology where all of these different actors can allow an actor to perform in a better way. So parametric design is anyway focusing on form and then some of it is focusing on tracking natural elements, and then it is quite important to think about starting architectural design from understanding the ecosystem

or ecology of all these different behaviors. In that sense, ethnography is quite relevant and meaningful since it is a narrative about a very sophisticated balance between all these different behaviors of different actors.

According to your view about the average family and the empty bodies as inhabitants you do not know but you have to design for, let's say the Government needs to build collective housing, for low income families, and you will be the responsible architect to do that as in the Logements Sociaux Rue Rebiere*. Would it be possible to design proper housing and common places if we do not know the user? Is there another way to do it? What would it be?*

I cannot be so specific on each inhabitant, we cannot really focus on that, and we cannot really address the difference of the individuals who are going to live in that housing. But architecture is not good focusing on totally different individualities, it is much better focusing on communality. So, for example in the case of Paris, people who live there know how to behave with French windows and balconies because they are part of the common knowledge about a Parisian Apartment. So, in that sense we can say that we are imagining people who have certain notion or ability to behave in a certain way with certain architectural devices, so it is not so accurate on each individual difference.

On the other hand, for the individual house or single family house you are able to meet the clients before the construction, you can be more precise and accurate, and then you can also imagine other scenes than just an average family. We must avoid treating people just like numbers, as empty bodies, so, of course, this number of quantitative aspects are quite important to establish a scheme, but they are not enough, so we should also think about another possibility for the people.

For example, in the case of those Parisian apartments we also imagined amazing inhabitants of apartments, people who like to grow flowers in their balcony or someone who likes to have a dinner or drink on the balcony. And then, imagining all these different behaviors of people, or possible behaviors of people, we prepared different and adequate sizes for balconies. Then, as a result, they are fully utilised by people in a very unique way by each family. For instance, an old lady has a green thumb, she is really good at growing flowers, so she visits many different apartments to put flowers in the balconies and people really like that. We can imagine those small things, which are already being done in daily life.

Considering what you say suggests there was knowledge transference in architecture, from people's hands to specialists' hands, so would it be necessary just to observe people, their needs, and behavior? Or do you think it would be better a co-creation process instead of a participative one? What do you think about that, is it necessary just to observe the ecosystem or you also have to incorporate it into your project?

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Logements Sociaux Rue Rebière is part of nine projects commissioned by the Office for Public Housing (Paris Habitat OPH). As Atelier Bow-Wow, each team had to realize 20 housing units along Rue Rebière.To implement a variety of housing typologies in a qualitative environment, the Paris Office for Public Housing (Paris Habitat OPH) set up a collective workshop, ran by Périphériques Architectes. Construction of the 180 housing units in Rue Rebière took place from 2008 to 2009. Source: www.peripheriques-architectes.com

The relevant thing is ecology, how this natural behaviour, human behaviour and objects behaviour create a kind of sustainable ecology where all of these different actors can allow an actor to perform in a better way.

Architectural activities are not just about construction, but also about creating a kind of discussion, discourses, talking and succeeding in that. All those things can be also part of the architectural activities, so in that sense architectural education should be reorganized.

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The renovation project for West Square of Kitamoto Station aims to revitalize the shopping street through public involvement. Source: www.g-mark.org

It depends, it is nice to bring people back to the construction culture, because now people are somehow deprived from this knowledge and construction skills since industry took most of them, so they were forgotten by people. It is quite important to bring people back to this kind of process of making architecture. I am also very interested in this kind of approach and it depends on the cases, it is not always necessary, it depends on the framework. For example, a community building like a small community centre can be built with assistance from all the people and then also the designing process can be shared with those views, but the architect can integrate many different considerations in one physical entity. People who have not received training in architectural design cannot integrate many things in one physical entity, so we have, as architects, more knowledge about architecture, different places, and the history of architecture. We can also show them different approaches, different ways to solve spatial problems, but of course it is also important to learn how people are doing architecture, managing the space in each place. So, in summary, it is a combination between the knowledge of architects and the knowledge of the people, this is the ideal.

This of course would be a problem when you have to design public spaces, as the Kitamoto Station Square. In that case you organized people first, as if they were the software, and then the architectural design, as the project's hardware to support that software. So could you explain how architects can develop the software when we were educated just for the hardware? Should we change the system of education in architecture? How?

Actually, most of the schools of architecture were established during the 20th century or late 19th century, so their curriculum was conceived and articulated in the century of construction. Considering that there was an explosion of the building industry in the 20th century, architectural education is very much making or construction oriented, so the position of the architect is also considered as a kind of person who organizes those things, making and building. But this was a very special moment of the human being. Now, I really think about another way to confront our reality, our work as an architect, because, especially in Japan, we are not in the century of construction anymore. We already built almost every public facility and too many houses, too many infrastructures, so we have to take other directions. Nowadays, one direction is, as I said, ethnographical. Architectural activities are not just about construction, but also about creating a kind of discussion, discourses, talking and succeeding in that. All those things can be also part of the architectural activities, so in that sense architectural education should be reorganized.

For example, the Kitamoto Station Square design, the shape of the square and then the roof above the sidewalks and architectural elements were done by Bow-Wow, but we always kept showing our schemes to the citizens and then always get feedback also from them. The more important thing is that we asked them

to imagine how to utilize the new public space in front of the Station because the first generation of that square was built in 1970, so its design is already 40 years old. At that moment, in the 70s, the planning trend of the Station Square was totally motorisation oriented, so there was no place for people to go and spend time there.

We produced an open space for people by shrinking traffic space. But people do not know how to use it because they never used this open space in front of the Station, so we asked people how to use it. But these people are not just general public, we found many interesting people who have unique activities in the city, like people who are maintaining trees, or who are growing very good tomatoes, or who are running a kind of open market in the city, and a young group of designers or photographers who want to do something for the city. We met all these people and we asked them how they utilize space with those skills. The process of design in the square was also a process of discovering those human resources which we can utilize. Our role was to let people think about resources, or ecology or all those different skills, which already exist in the city, brought some, got marriage, and then created a nice chemical reaction in front of the station. It was a very interesting process for us.

It is very interesting because it is an example of how to empower people to take a place and conquer available spaces. In that way you say the contemporary society is losing public space. When you visited Santiago de Chile, what did you think about our public spaces in comparison with Tokyo? How do you see the relationship and prevalence between public and private space in our city?

I did not spend so much time in Santiago, but I found sidewalks that can be much better because there are so many parts that are damaged, and they are not fixed, and then there is a lot of garbage in the streets. It is not necessary to make something new. Instead, maintenance is needed and extremely important in Santiago. I had these discussions with professors in the Universidad Católica de Chile. For example, maintenance is also quite important to create better quality for the public space, because maintenance and cleaning are a pattern of daily life, and also really affect people's behavior. People in Santiago are very indifferent about those aspects of the city and public spaces. For instance, it is also difficult to start doing something by themselves. It means the public space is deprived from the people´s natural wish to make it clean.

In Japan, the streets are very clean and people try to maintain the environment as best as possible. We still have a very strong sense of public space, it is still capturing a kind of certain level, but Japanese people can do more, I tried to encourage people to think more about the public space, how to use their skills to enrich it more. It is not about the design of beautiful parks or spaces, it is more about sensitivity of their environment, to what extent are they aware of the need to keep the environment comfortable by themselves. Most public space is

organized and managed by public authorities and then people are deprived of the possibility of taking care of it by themselves, so people are kept away from the practice of public space. This is one of those big issues a big city has in a contemporary society.

The city is a consequence of decisions taken by national authorities or big companies, they shape our cities in some way, so what changes do you think the political world should promote since not everything is in the hands of architects? What public policies should change to transform our cities?

For example, in the reconstruction of the devastated area of Tōhoku ★, architects could not do so many things. Everything was mainly about infrastructure and a new residential area that was built by a series of engineering consultancies and big construction companies under decisions from the central government. Big building companies constructed houses, so there was very little room for architects to participate in the reconstruction of the Tōhoku area. It is a pity, but not only for architects, it is a pity for society, so there is a barrier between architects and society, which is produced by the 20th century, the industrialization process and construction culture.

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Tōhoku is both a region and a town in the northeast corner of the Japanese main island. On 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami inflicted massive damage along the east coast of this region. More than 15,000 people were killed. Fukushima nuclear disaster was a consequence of this catastrophe.
Source: wikipedia.org

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Now we really have to think about how to break this barrier because in Japan we have many good architects, but these processes of reconstruction have not used those human resources. It means that society had very limited access to the architect. These barriers were produced by central government decisions and also by a system that is established by the industrialisation of society. Architects can create a statement about these, how many possibilities they lose. Politicians have a very short time perspective; maybe they are thinking about the next elections. Big companies think with short time perspectives also in order to gain profits. These trends bring people into unhappy conditions. We have the resources in the society to change this: people who can give much longer time scale perspective to the society and we, as architects, can say something and raise our voice. It is more about discourses, resources and design practices.

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