

KONBINI

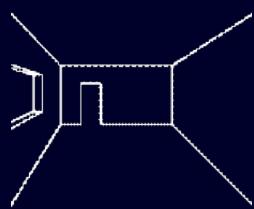
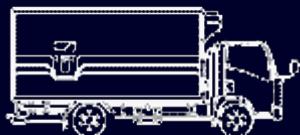


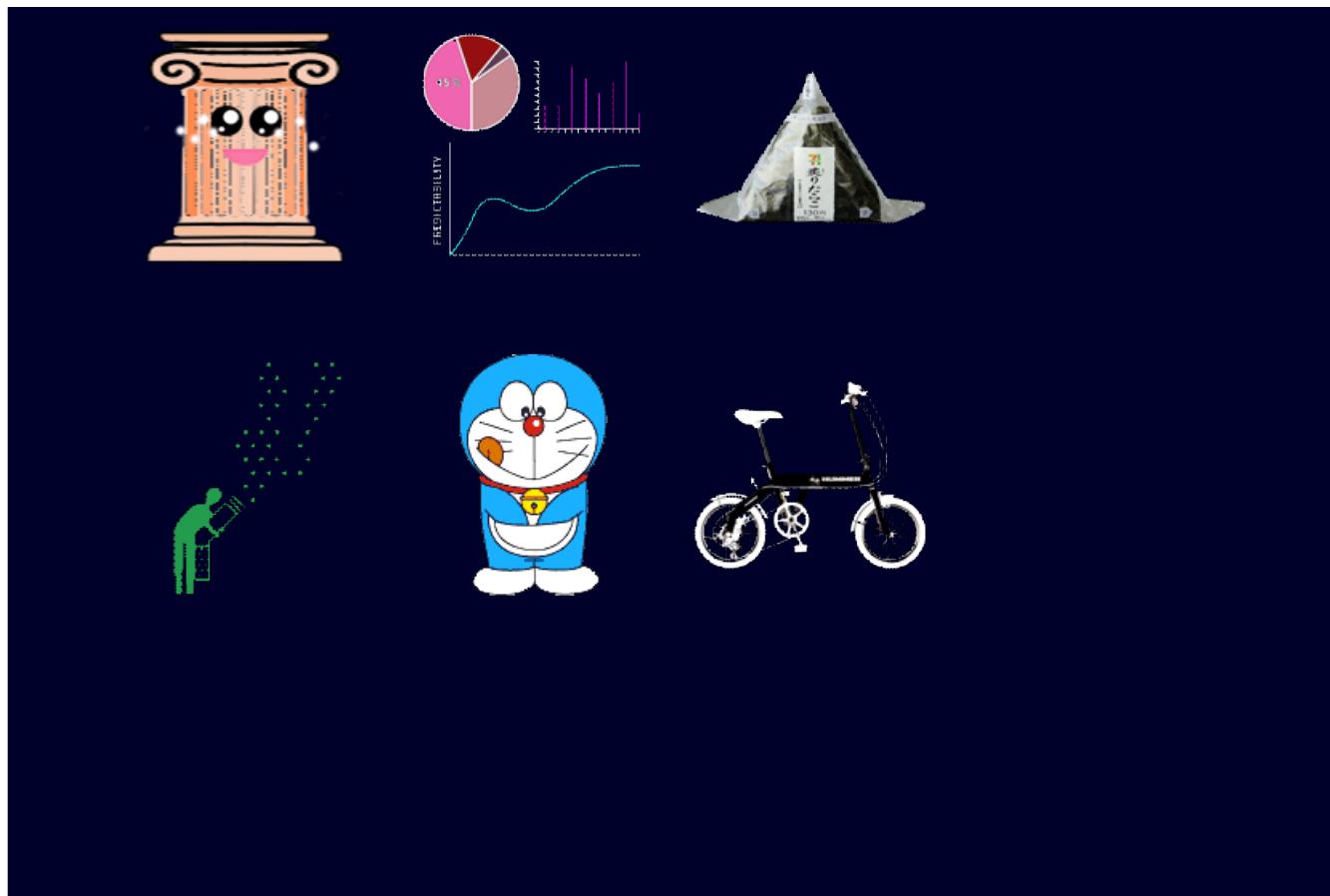
コンビニ KONBINI

thoughts and comments on convinient architecture

[ENTER]

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KONBINI**FamilyMart**



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KONBINI



2017-01-01

Japan

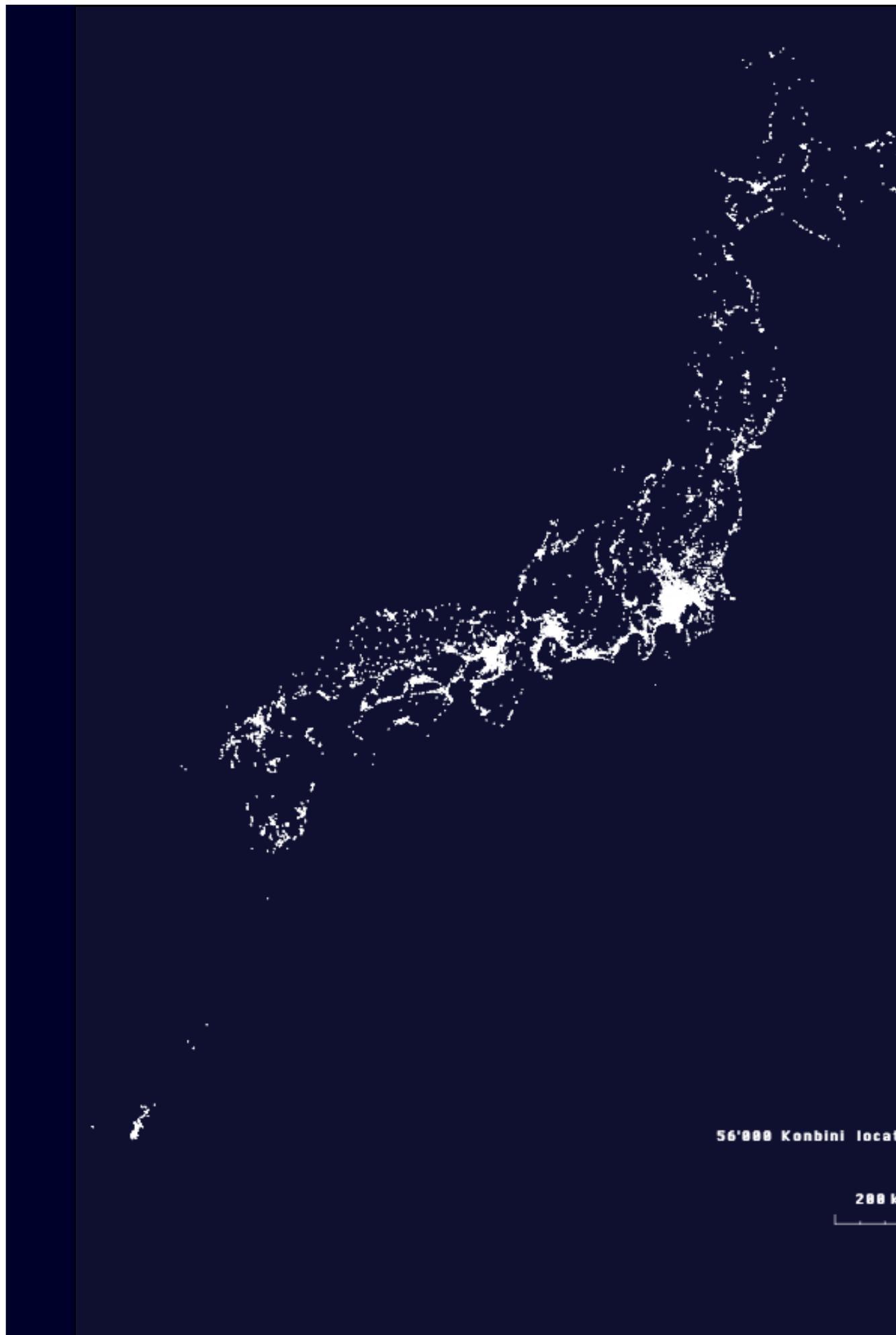


fig.1

Japan's 56000 Konbini

The konbini locations gives you an accurate portrait of how activity is distributed throughout the country. Seeking essentially for nearby customers, they settle where people are. You find them everywhere in cities but also in suburban or rural environment. From 100m² to 120m², those tiny stores can parasite the built infrastructure in every corner and provide in exchange a large range of services¹.

Since 1974, when the convenience store franchised system was brought from the USA, Konbini have grown exponentially. In 2016, Seven-Eleven's² operating income has reached 235 billion yen with 18,572 stores³, which places it as the leader of Japan's retail industry as a whole.

This phenomenon is the result of combined factors such as the development of digital information systems⁴, cultural issues⁵, lifestyle acceleration, or the scale of the country and its cities. Konbini program perfectly supports the modern Japanese lifestyle.

In «Architecture without architects»⁶, the potential of granaries and vernacular constructions is revealed; the form is an answer to the use, to the local environment and its culture. Consider the Konbini as the Japanese granaries of the 21st century. The beauty in this architecture of the ordinary is not formal but rather an intrinsic quality that makes it essential in Japanese's society.

Even if it has poor aesthetic values, people love them. Konbini are very popular in Japan. On average, almost one third of Japan's population will pass by a konbini everyday⁷. « It's not home, work or school. Rather, it has been adjusted to maintain a position between such points of commitment. »⁸

¹<http://www.japan-talk.com/jt/new/konbini> (12-11-2016)

²Seven Eleven is the leader of the convenience store industry. It is owned by Seven & I Holdings.

³http://www.sej.co.jp/company/en/c_profile.html (20-11-2016)

⁴More about this topic in article: Data

⁵More about this topic in article: Onigiri

6Bernard Rudofsky, «Architecture without architects », Doubleday & Company, 1964

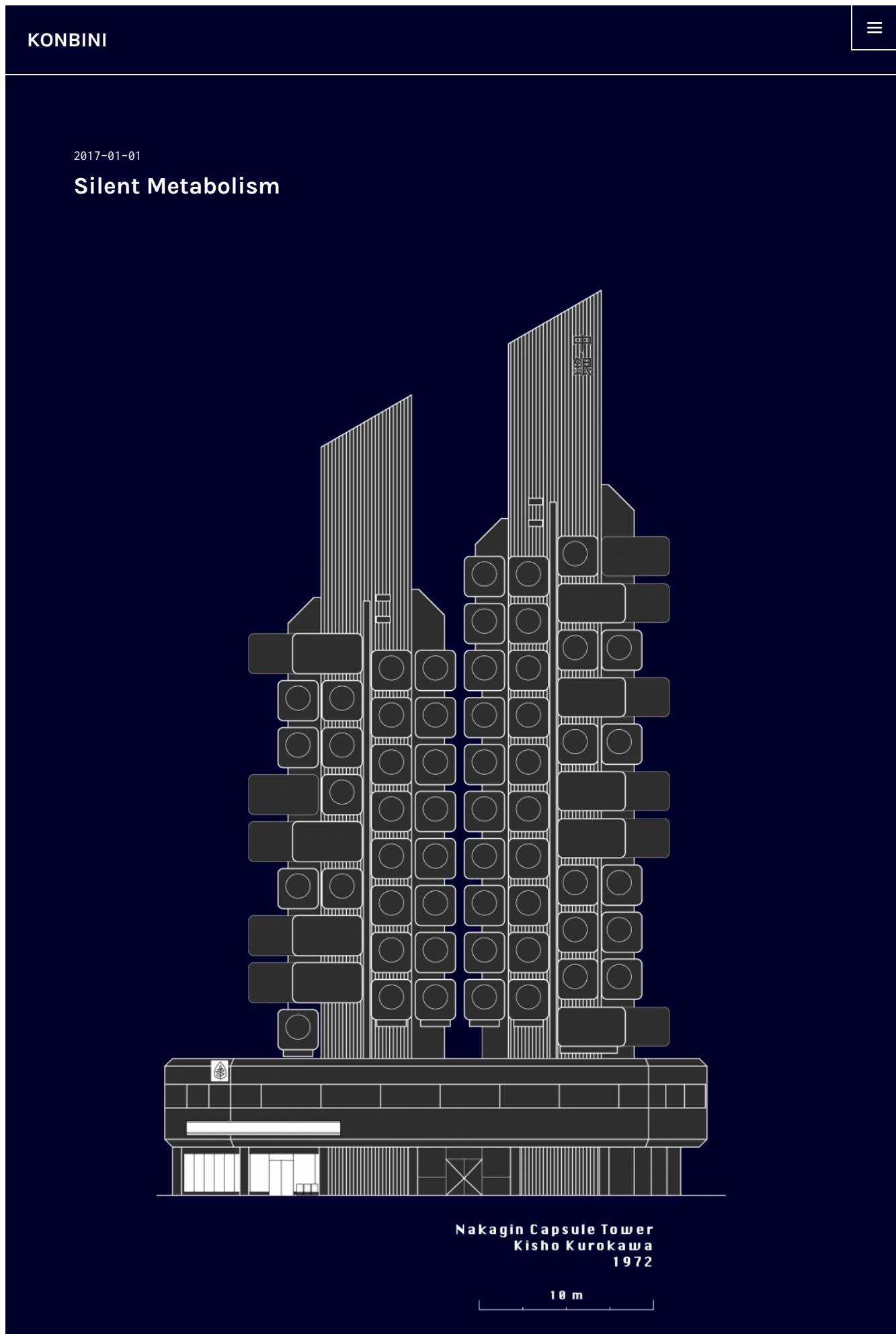
7<http://www.fu-hd.com/english/ir/library/annual/document/fm/fm2016.pdf> (12-11-2016) and

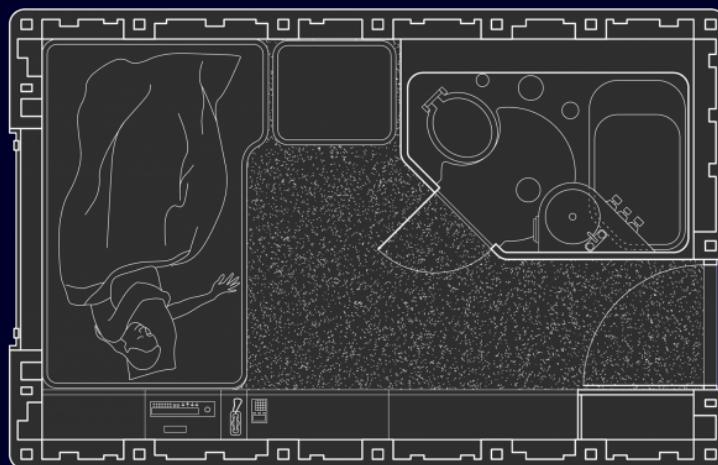
http://lawson.jp/en/ir/library/pdf/annual_report/ar_2016_e_5.pdf (20-11-2016)

8Monnik, *Tokyo Totem*, flick studio, 2011, p.285

Metabolism

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Nakagin Capsule Detail

1 m

fig 2

Metabolism is the major Japanese post-war architectural movement. Inspired by Marxist theories and biologic processes, their manifesto states: « We regard human society as a vital process - a continuous development from atom to nebula. The reason why we use such a biological word, metabolism, is because we believe design and technology should be a denotation of human society. We are not going to accept metabolism as a natural process, but try to encourage active metabolic development of our society through our proposals. »¹

They have created innovative designs, exploring visionary forms of living. Their formal experiments and design research reached the climax with the 1970 Osaka Expo. They showcased the range of possibilities that modern technology could bring to architecture and design.

Unfortunately, their ambition was brutally stopped with the recession of the 1973 oil crisis. From that point, spatial constraints combined with economical limitations forced them to implement their projects elsewhere. The Japanese cities can't provide vacant space for a possible organic growth of new megastructures; the proposal of expanding the on water turned out irrational². This slap of realism shut down the euphoria. This paradigm shift coincided with the opening of the first 7-eleven franchise in Tokyo, in 1974.

Nakagin tower is the metabolist's iconic vestige. It literally stages the individual living through capsules. The entity is build up from an aggregate of identical minimal units along a vertical core. Each cell is independent but they all participate to the whole. This monument is an allegory to the Japanese postindustrial society, the home of Shibuya's salary men.

Capsules integrate technological devices as an architectural element. Television, radio, alarm clock, phone and calculator are integrated in the walls. Their ornamental value is enhanced by the minimalist interior; white and abstract. A futuristic space age aura exudes from the capsule. Using cheap elements to allow industrial production at lower costs, this capsule is also an ode to standardization. Standardization and integration of technology produces here a very strong aesthetic. In the konbini, this aesthetic is muted.

The base of the tower is now colonized by a Konbini. This ironical collage is not a coincidence. A foreigner living in Tokyo writes: « The konbini is both the cellar, the attic, the closet, the pharmacy and the freezer that I do not have. »³. The konbini is the inseparable complement to Tokyo's minimal housing. It is the extension of your home that you share with your neighborhood⁴.

It is not only a storage but also your second address, as packages can be delivered in your closest konbini. They are open 24/7, you can pick it up whenever it suits you and it is never far away. This intermediary is like your own receptionist, you are not assigned at home anymore.

The konbini is the illegitimate heir of metabolist principles. Furthermore, konbini must be understood as a silent achievement of organic growth and adaptability theories. Their scope is certainly not spatially visible, therefore it lacks the monumentality of metabolist's proposals. If Kikutake's utopian projects suggested a home for 500'000 people, the konbini however answers to the food and services supply with 56'000 stores over the whole country⁵. It didn't succeed in imposing a totalitarian new structure to the existing city. It rather took an informal, highly adaptive shape to evolve with the existing metabolism of the city. The organic expansion was achieved by colonizing every profitable spot in the city chaos,

with the lowest built impact. The konbini also proved that mass-consumption is the driving force of growth rather than marxist ideology.

1N. Kawazoe, K. Kikutake, M. Otaka, F. Maki, K. Kurokawa, *Metabolism: The Proposals for New Urbanism*, Bijutsu Shuppansha 1960

2Tange's project for Tokyo bay and Kikutake's Ocean city (both 1960)

3Jonas Pulver, Konbini, *Le Temps*, 26.10.16

4More about this topic in article: [Generic plan](#).

5More about this topic in article: [Perfused Stores](#)

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KONBINI

2017-01-01

Congestion

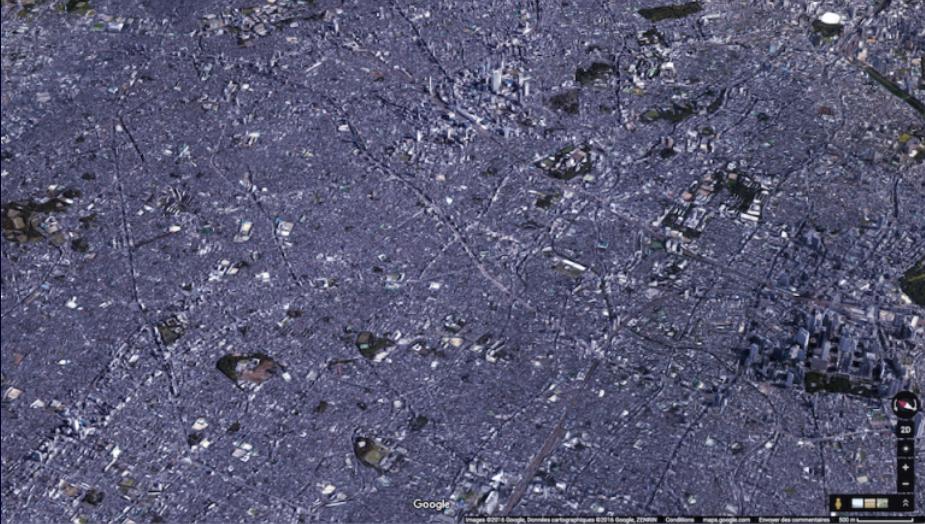


fig. 3

Tokyo's satellite portrait is an overall build pattern. The cityscape is an aggregate of different textures where nothing is left untouched. From within, only skyscrapers have enough space to express their singularity. Walking around in Tokyo is like wandering in an abstract fractal geometry made of tiles, electric cables and neon signs repeated endlessly.

The urban space in Japan is quite paradoxical. On one hand, cities like Osaka are based on a very rigid grid. This strict spatial organization applies to a very mathematical address system. On the other hand, the general scale of things is very domestic. The two-story buildings, the narrow streets and some friendly details like balcony plants bring comfort. This duality in highly dense Japanese cities is very important. It turns something planned to be ordinary and boring into a cozy place.

Konbini, for example, reflect well this use of minimal space and the constructive economy of means. Between chaos and order, something surprisingly friendly comes out. Urban saturation makes road traffic more complex¹. So even if congestion erased singularity of buildings in a big urban soup, it's an opportunity to reconnect to the human scale².

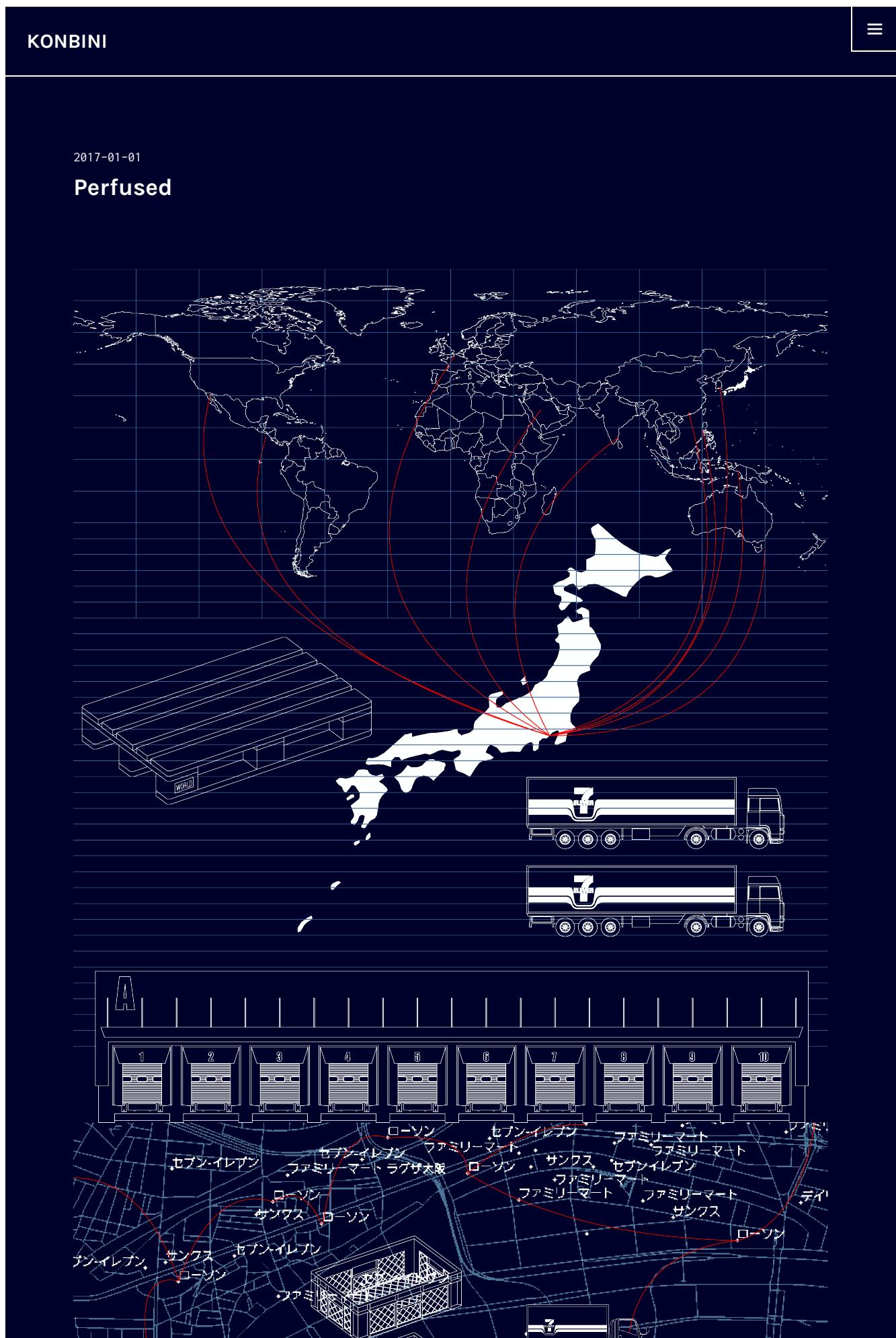
¹More about this topic in article: [Inconvenient Cars](#)

²More about this topic in article: [Contextual Adaptability](#)

Metabolism

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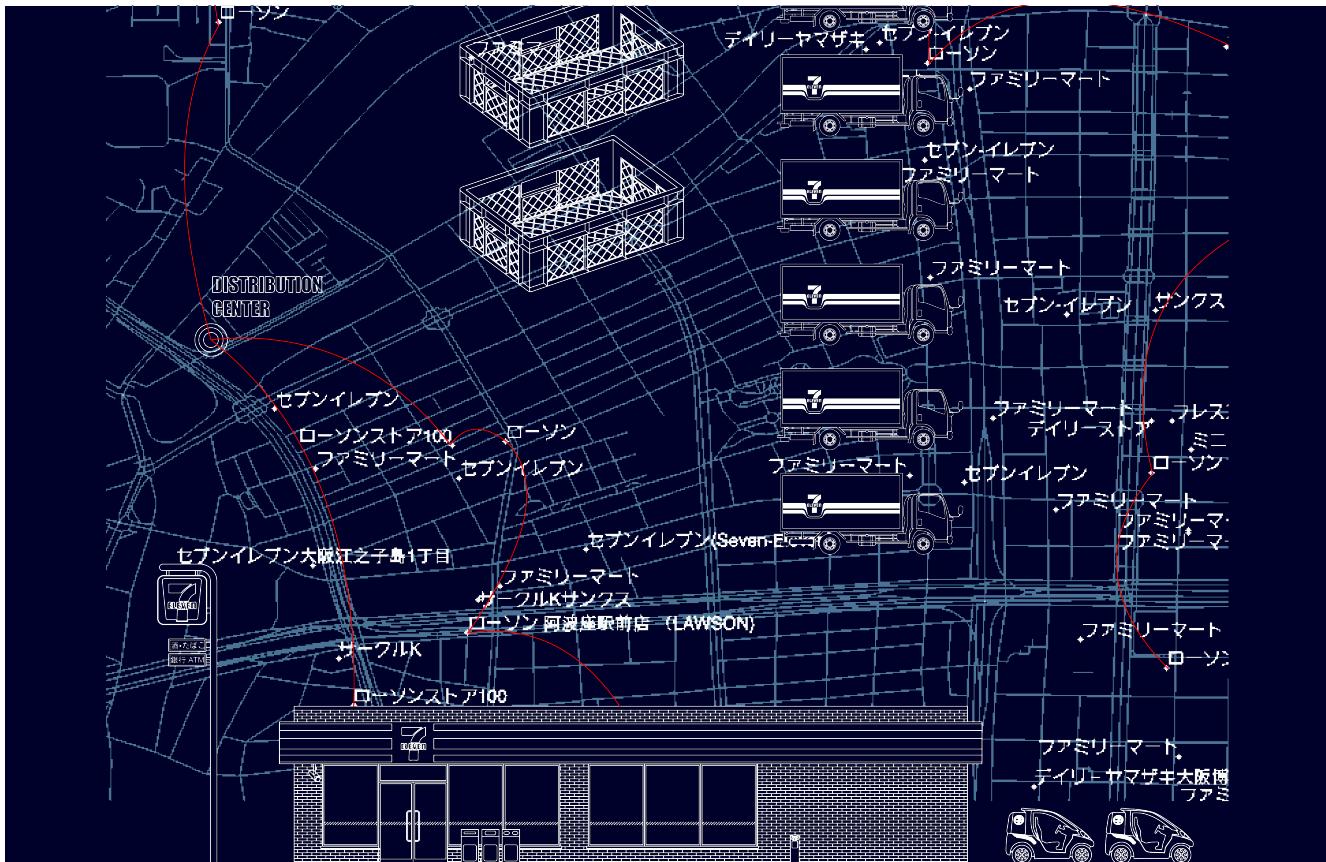


fig. 4

Konbini can be seen as perfused constructions. With minimal footprint, most of them do not have a back-shop storage and need constant refills instead. Immobile products are a waste of space and by consequence a waste of money. Only fast moving items are delivered daily and directly placed on the shelves. A long and elaborated supply chain brings food from producers to any local shop. The infrastructure needed to distribute this items is mostly hidden, so it transforms the konbini into some kind of Cornucopia.

Behind the scenes, a total of 290 dedicated manufacturing plants in Japan produce food for 7-eleven stores (preparing rice meals, bento boxes, onigiri,...). Then, around the same amount of Distribution Centers (DCs) collect all the finished goods.¹ It's the last intermediate between the producers and the konbini. Those huge warehouses embody the scale of konbini companies and the infrastructure it needs to supply the country with food. DCs are functional open spaces dedicated to merchandises and an optimized flow of goods. Warehouses are hidden in industrial areas, somewhere isolated enough to expand but still well-connected to be reached from city centers. To ensure the last connection, an army of white little trucks (labeled like the stores, with the corporate ribbon) link the DC to the Konbini. Deliveries are way more frequent in a konbini than in a regular supermarket. Indeed, four different trucks deliver goods every day. Each truck brings one category of food: frozen foods, chilled foods, room-temperature-processed foods and finally, warm foods. Deliveries are made during off-peak hours; the clerk collects the merchandise and discreetly places the fresh new products directly on the shelves. In time like in space, konbini's strategy favor multiple small interventions instead of few large ones.

In addition, Toyota developed a lightweight electric car called COMS for 7-eleven Japan. It offers a home delivery service for the elderly or for people who don't have time to buy groceries. This optional link in the supply chain connects the firm directly to people's homes. The company covers every scale, from the multinational to the individual.

One of the world largest Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) connects each step of the chain. For example, the Konbini communicates product sales information to the head office and orders directly to the DC. Without the digital² progress developed at the same period as the convenience store was imported to Japan, the konbini would not have expanded as it did. Digitization and data collection synchronize and optimize each actor of the supply chain.

Mobility is a crucial element to optimize the functioning of food supply. Things are no longer to be consumed where they are produced. This model is in opposition with Ron Herron's walking city, who imagined the city as a compact entity seeking for resources. Nowadays every part of the supply chain is at its most profitable place and small shuttles connect one organ to the other. The result of such an organization is a hysterical but invisible network. Instead of monumental monoliths on legs pursuing resources, each organ of the system is exploited and its complexity is masked³. The konbini is the tip of the iceberg which people interact with.

[1Kellogg School of Management, case: Seven-Eleven Japan Co., 2005, p.7](#)

[2More about this topic in article: Data](#)

[3More about this topic in article: Contextual Adaptability](#)

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sed architecture

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KONBINI



2017-01-01

Franchised architecture

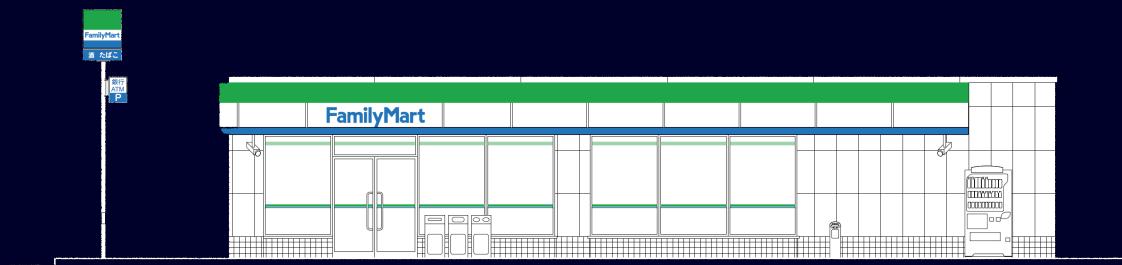


fig. 5-7

What's the architecture of neoliberalism?

Based on a copy paste, Convenience store companies bring their packaging to wrap the store. The label expresses the guarantee of the oasis.

Architectural contract is no longer a client and an architect. It is replaced by a 10 - 15 year contract between the owner of a store and multinational corporations. The building is author-less.

The owner provides the location and labor when the firm brings the architectural elements, the technological support and the goods. Part of the agreement is a budget of ~500'000¥ to one million ¥ dedicated to the store preparation. This is what it costs to transform the spot into a firm's landmark. From the inside, it now creates a port to implement its information system and collect information about the neighborhood's consumption.

It's a magic recipe able to adapt a system to any profitable location: a big digital infrastructure support lower local investment + systematic codes for a high visibility = a multitude of services provided¹, almost everywhere.

Nevertheless, some fragments of an architectural language remain to express the store's appearance:

-totem

-neon signs²

-tiles pattern³

-ribbon (present on the facade, windows and interior walls)

[1](#)More about this topic in article: [Generic Plan](#)

[2](#)More about this topic in article: [Glow](#)

[3](#)More about this topic in article: [Jam](#)

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plan

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Generic plan

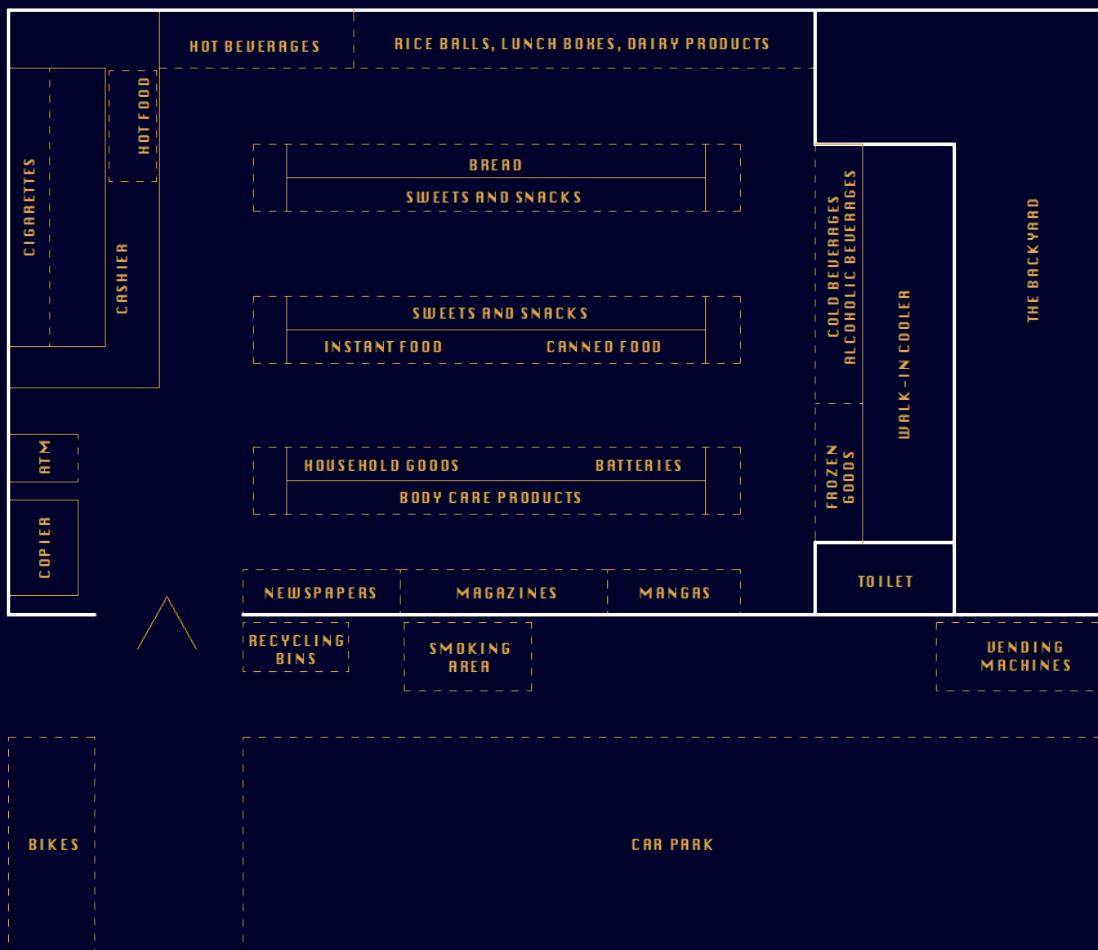


fig. 8

The spatial organization of konbini can only be explained by a diagram. As an invasive organism, it can adopt any shape¹.

The store develops on one floor, in one open space, that must be read as a series of sequences. Products are displayed in the space in order to create a chain of desire along a deliberate *parcours*. Inside, apart from the generic display of products, some spots are clearly defined as specific moments.

First of all, the row under the front window is used as a reading area. Blessed with natural light, it's also a good observatory to discreetly watch the street's activity. Used as a waiting room, standing up people consume magazines, newspapers and manga. At this moment, the reader is in a particular position. It is a mashup of three different dimensions. The window frames the real life nearby, the konbini point of view has its own abstract and neutral reality; finally, the texts and manga are the narrative prism that opens on every other social interest.

Along the walls, refrigerators stand and stoves are displaying hot and cold goods. They are the hidden backyard for the staff. From the walk-in cooler, they restock the racks from behind. This backstage eventually allows a sneaky look at the customers through the products without being seen.

The space next to the exit is dedicated to diverse electronic terminals. An ATM gives you access to your bank account and cash, of course. The copier allows you to print digital pictures and photocopy, but you can also purchase tickets for baseball games, concerts and other events.

The corner is the fundamental dimension of convenience: free-access toilets for everyone. This concession is the « last hiccup of humanism »², or a slight sense of obligation to consume. Sometimes, a schoolboy and a schoolgirl with their uniforms use it as a changing room.

Finally, the counter stages the main social interaction in the konbini between the clerk and the customers. Besides, it is where the data³ about your purchases are collected. From there it's also possible to pay your gas and electricity bills.

Concretely, the konbini plan an aggregate of programs. It's the swiss army knife to support your everyday life. It serves as lunch counters, liquor stores, tobacconists, drug stores, bookstores, newspaper shops, printing and telecommunications kiosks, banks, shipping centres, post office, bill-collection services, late night taxi stands, local recycling centres, a branch of the city hall and disaster relief stations.⁴

¹See [Contextual Adaptability](#) to understand better the plasticity of convenience stores.

²Rem Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, Quodlibet, 2006, p.180

³About data and mass information, refer to [Data](#)

⁴Monnik, *Tokyo Totem*, 2011, p.285

sed architecture

ctual adaptability

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KONBINI

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Contextual adaptability

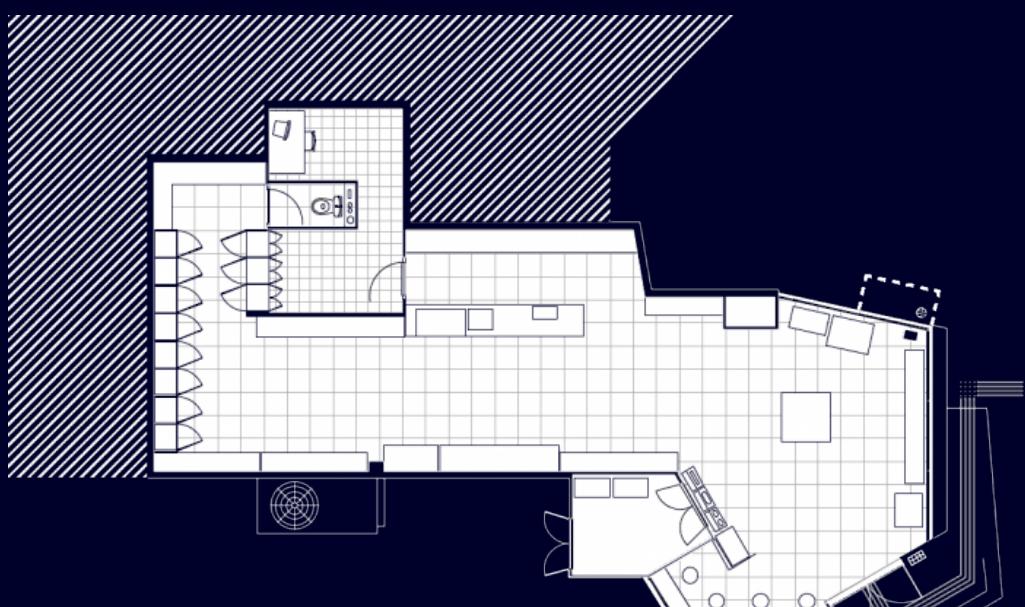
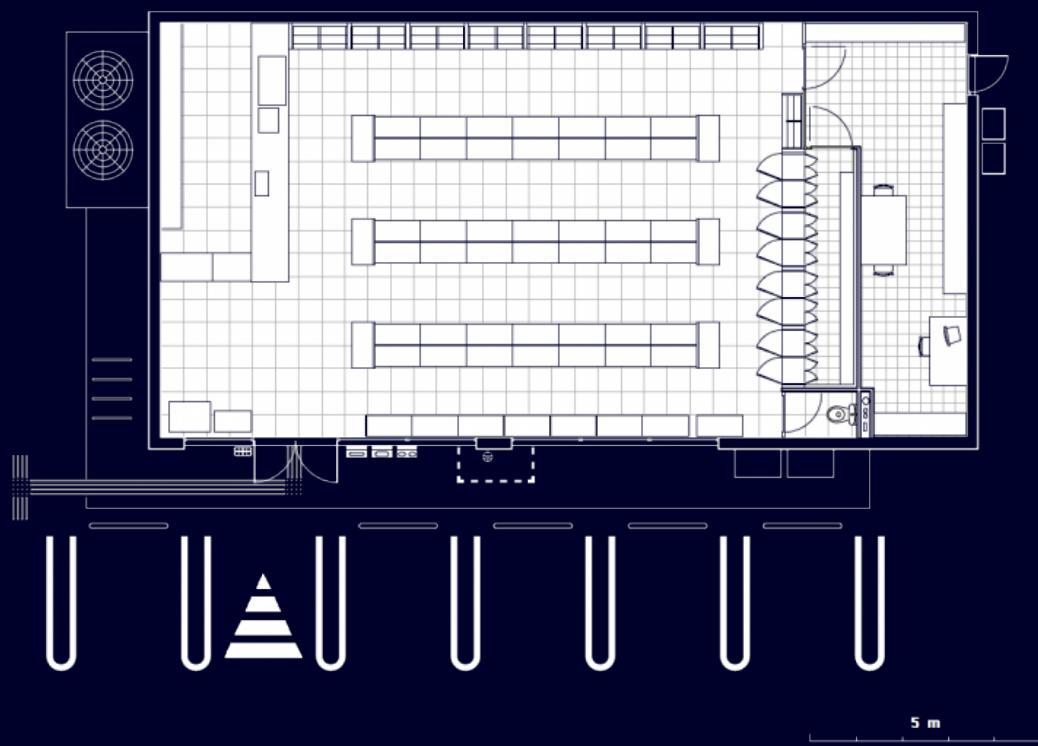




fig. 9 - 10

Out of 56'000 stores¹ spread over the Japanese landscape² none is equal to the other. There are, of course, main organizational plans and architectural directives³. But no actual konbini, completely corresponds to the idealized plan that is presented to the consumer; each store responds to and is shaped by local realities.

The closest realization to the conceptual idea of konbini is to be found in the countryside. When space is not a luxury anymore, convenience stores can stretch along the road without their form being in any way dictated by their environment⁴.

In urban areas, where every square meter has high value⁵, konbini need to adapt to the environment. The plan is squeezed and thorn (fig 9-10). In the mean time, the prototypical coating, which defines the brand identity, is adjusted to fit each location without degrading the experience offered by the brand.

The Konbini concept has to be understood in this extreme plurality. They digest local features, deal with it and make it their own. This is done so well, that those uniquenesses literary vanish: the Lawson in Okinawa will be the same as the Lawson in Hokkaido. If you could tele-transportate yourself from one to the other, you would barely notice the difference. The feeling of entering in the same shop, no matter your actual location, is possible thanks to a few artifices. A color palette that you will find every time, repeated choice of material, same songs played and even the same perfume which will be there to recall the feeling of entering a familiar environment where you feel at home⁶. It is by accepting and integrating the specific circumstances that they are erased, this for the profit of a more global experience.

Ironically, if topical spaces disappear under a general skin and distribution, the products displayed vary from one konbini to the other. Out of a range of 6000 items, only an average of 3000 can be found in a store. The selection process of the goods to be displayed depends on the location of a store: a konbini close to a train station will have a bigger range of bento boxes than one located in a residential neighborhood. If some items are always available, like onigiri⁷ or Kit-Kats, their taste differs from one area to the other (fig 11), depending on the local preferences of the consumers. To achieve this, possible needs are constantly analyzed through a complex

system of data compilation⁸. Thanks to the compiled data, these new products are highly adapted; and will fit the customers expectations before they enters the shop. This is coupled with the ability to renew the offer constantly with unsold items being instantly replaced by new ones.

There is therefore an apparent paradox: while the kombini provides the consumer with a familiar surrounding and allows him to feel comfortable in a known environment, the products it sells are under constant reconfiguration. The success of the kombini resides here: combining the predictability of a shop that is in appearance a clone of any other while providing a constantly changing offer which does not disorientate the consumer as it always foresees his very needs.



fig. 11

¹Family Mart annual report, 2015

²About number and statistics on konbini, refer to [Japan](#).

³For a general overview of konbini internal and external organization, see [Generic Plan](#).

⁴Convenience stores were born in america and where always attached to tanking stations, in the Japanese landscape this association with car vanished, see the article [Inconvinienc cars](#) for a better understanding.

⁵Exploitable surface is considered by the equation $[(m^2 \div \text{time}) \div \$]$.

6Consider the articles Raw, Ornament or Jam for a more specific analysis of the materials.

7The importance of Onigiri to the convenience stores is crucial for the implantation of the store's implementation.

8The Data article Analysing people's everything to forecast their need.

plan

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KONBINI



2017-01-01

data

read right to left





fig.12

«Show me the konbini you go to and I will tell you who you are»¹.

Konbini are the reflection of their social surrounding. In a rich area of Osaka like Shinpoinchō, champagne and Belgian beer will be easily found while in a workers' neighborhood, a large choice hoppōshō² adorns the shelves. This is made possible thanks to data collection. A single shop offers an average of 3'000 items out of a catalogue of 6'000. To have the best selection of articles -i.e. goods that will remain in the store as little time as possible- the choice is depends on an extremely accurate adaptation³ to the needs of the surrounding customers. When a product is sold, its name, price, quantity, code bar and location are registered. Simultaneously, the clerk will insert information about the purchaser directly into the till. Therefore, personal information such as gender and age are always linked to a specific sale. The collected data is sent for analysis to the headquarters of the franchise. Instantly, the processed data is available for all konbini. The latter then carefully adapt to a social radius of 500 meters. Funnily enough, personal data is taken on individuals who are not considered for their distinctiveness, but as sample taking part in a larger cross section of trends.

This way, a store can be sure to offer to its customers what they want when they want it. This is a benefit for the neighbourhood's consumption needs but it is an even bigger one for the shop, which keeps its stock to a minimum and as a consequence needs far less storage space⁴. This system gives the shop manager more than a view of its customer's needs; it provides him with a knowledge on their future needs!

Konbini are therefore highly responsive to their parcel and, on a smaller scale, to every fluctuation of trends. They are the nose of the city.

¹After the aphorism by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in La Physiologie du Goût, 1825.

²Hoppōshō (発泡酒) is a low malted beer, on which the alcohol tax is lower. In consequence, the price of the beer diminishes considerably.

³Contextual Adaptability explores further the chameleon properties of konbini.

⁴The relationship of konbini to the backstage is analysed in Perfused stores.

Actual adaptability

Morphosis

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KONBINI

2017-01-01

Metamorphosis



0. Signboard shop

fig. 13 – 16

The Konbini is a chunk of Koolhaasian Junkspace, it adapts to any built environment. It can grow as an independent entity on the side of the road or nest inside any megastructure (malls, train stations, airport, hospitals, college campus, high-rises...). Following the ever-changing metabolism of the city, the Konbini can go through different stages¹.

Before the Konbini boom, Japanese retail industry was dominated by Mom-and-Pop stores. Small family businesses taking place in

traditional constructions called Signboard shops (kanban kenchiku machiya). This specific typology combines working and living in the same architectural unit. On the ground floor, the front room is dedicated to business activity. Meanwhile, the family lives on the second floor. We can still find many of those in the Japanese cityscape.

When the family decides to stop its business activity or, if an interesting parcel is unexploited at a strategic location, a Konbini firm will try to implant a franchise there.

The owner of the former shop signs a 10-15-year contract to transform his signboard store into a generic space for mass-consumption. This turning point will provide the neighborhood with access to the 24h masquerade. A peaceful neighborhood suddenly changes its face with the establishment of a convenience store. Sleepy nights are awoken with the irruption of gloomy salary men eating nato² on the street at 2 a.m. If a konbini implies an expanded activation of the surrounding activities, it also increases the real estate value.

On average, a store like 7-eleven can raise 647'000¥³ (6000\$) a day. It's like harvesting magical crops providing 50\$/m²/day. But if the store suffers from commercial stagnation and cannot guarantee enough productivity, it gets relocated. It's called a « scrap and build » policy. In 2011, 3610 new stores opened for 2130 that closed down⁴. « Forms search function like hermit crabs looking for a vacant shell... Junkspace sheds architecture like a reptile sheds skin, it is reborn every Monday morning. »⁵ The hardware (microwave, refrigerators, shelves...) of the closing store can then be sent to another franchise. Slimmer margins on products and a fierce competition of the firms make owning a konbini a difficult job. Any store in a 500m radius is a potential competitor. However, in the dense urban jungle there is often enough activity to sustain two or more konbini in front of each other.

A konbini will eventually survive the metamorphosis and resurrect under a different configuration. To live on, a convenience store needs customers, and a bigger real estate project can bring the activity needed. From an independent entity, it will colonize a larger building in a symbiotic mutualistic relationship.

In the meantime, the parcel is potentially turned into a pay-by-the-hour parking while the property owner waits and weighs various options. Letting the land lie fallow, ensuring even a small revenue. Nevertheless, vending machines⁶ will stand still in the temporary void, like a shrine commemorating the lost konbini.

¹To understand more about this topic, read [Contextual Adaptability](#).

²Nato is a traditional Japanese meal composed of smelling and slimy fermented beans.

³Kellogg School of Management, case: Seven-Eleven Japan Co., 2005, p.2

4Monnik, Tokyo Totem, flick studio, 2011, p.129

5Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, Quodlibet, 2006, p.178

6Consult the article [Metakonbini](#) to learn about the relationship between konbini and vending machines.

nbini

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2017-01-01

Metakonbini





fig. 17

Even less investment and therefore more prolific than the konbini, vending machines are ubiquitous in the Japanese environment. Like spores, they proliferate under the eaves or simply on the side or the street. Vending machines provide refreshments everywhere and at any time in the urban wilderness. At night, the illuminated display of products glows intensely at every street corner. Vending machines are always escorted by their sponsored trash can. This shameful half embodies their last duty to public space. Together they supply the new Ice Tea ceremony. Vending machines have one simple program: they offer access to refreshments, anywhere, anytime. They are the facade of a konbini in which you can put your hand, get a product and leave. As simple as it sounds. But the formal aspect is a bit trickier to get. When you are about to select your good, the machine is not displaying any drinks for you to choose. A small window presents reproductions of real bottles on plastic paper, carefully cut out to fit a two-dimension projection of reality. Most of the time you will be surprised with your order.

Fundamentally, they are some kind of micro konbini. The only difference is that they are non-architectural. It only contains the hardware so it is free of the built envelope. They offer the service but not the shelter. The result would be like having a coffee shop on every street where you remain silent and wait outside. The question is: how do we conceive spaces of consumption? In the Japanese tradition, the tea ceremony takes place in a dedicated tea-house or tea-room (chashitsu). The rite is challenged. Vending machines break the formal frame; here you consume your goods on-the-go. Any vacant spaces are turned into a place of consumption.

Signs inform you how to access the goods and there is no human interaction in the process. It is interesting to note that every konbini (already open 24/7) has a vending machine at the entrance. Apparently, some people are more comfortable to interact with machines than with fellow human beings. When architecture is dismantled only vending machines remain. Halfway between konbini debris or a shrine to mass consumption, those fresh soda, ice coffee and cigarettes dealers are the last artifacts standing¹.

¹For the more curious one: the web page of the Vending Machines Association is page you should look out. There is also the possibility of visiting virtually their museum [here](#). If you still thirsty, their [facebook](#) will provide you with a flow of amazing images!

orphosis

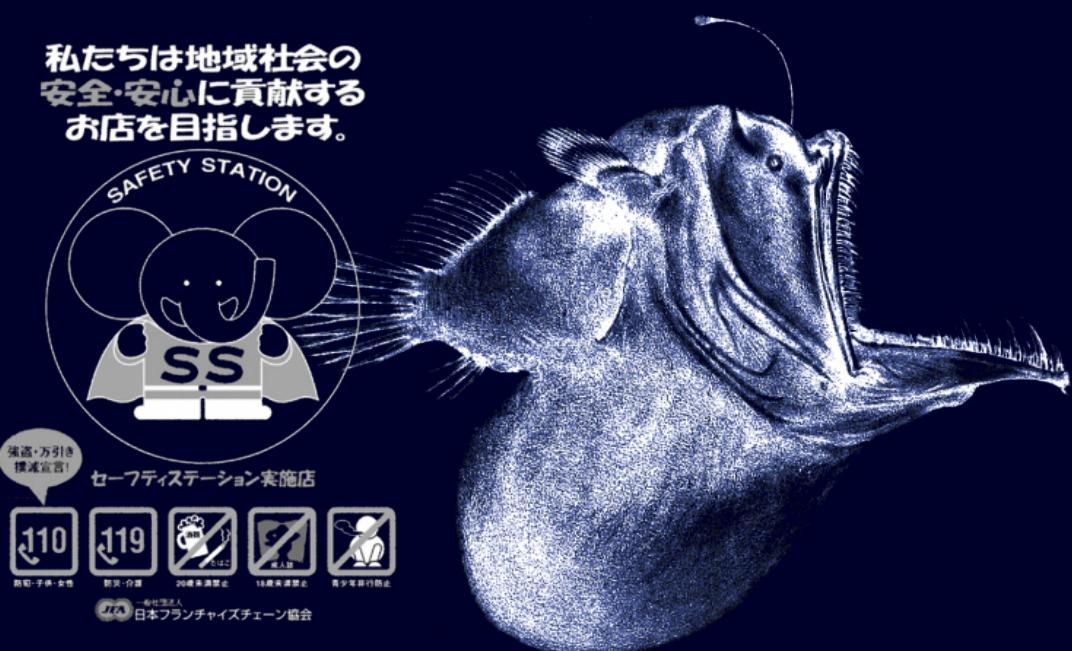
the night

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KONBINI

2017-01-01

Glow in the night



私たちには地域社会の
安全・安心に貢献する
お店を目指します。

緊急・万引き撲滅宣言!
セーフティステーション実施店

110 119 禁火・介護 20歳未満喫煙止
大人入店 青少年非行禁止

日本フランチャイズチェーン協会

fig. 18

« Compared to the franchise as a whole, single stores are just the tips of fiber-optic cables, glowing heavy with light and data »¹. Konbini are part of a large system of invisible infrastructure². Convenience stores are the tip of the iceberg. It's supported by a large-scale supply chain and complex computerized mechanisms³. So, the Konbini is the artifact associated to a multinational company. Even if those constructions morph in the cityscape⁴, it fully manifests its presence at night with neon signs when the rest of the city is sleeping.

The bright neon signs are an advertisement for its own presence in the public space. Seven eleven's franchise initially was named "Tote'm Stores" back in Texas.

The totem works as a label, it's like a supply base you will be happy

to see when you walk alone in the night. A totally reliable support that always appears on time at the right spot even if you're not endangered. That glowing shelter is comforting. You will suddenly feel hungry and thirsty when you pass by. In most cases, you end up with a delicacy you didn't expect. Like a humpback anglerfish, the konbini will catch you in its trap.

Behind the totem, what remains on the façade is pure iconography. It displays a panoply of stickers, posters and advertisements. A fusion of kanjis, numbers and cute pictograms⁵.

Out of thousands different images on the konbini's facade, there is one particularly interesting. It's an elephant wearing the letters SS, standing for Safety Station. This sign means that the clerk is trained to react to all kind of dangerous situation. Like police stations, they offer a refuge for threatened people.

Now that this franchised bases are implanted everywhere, they benefit from this situation to serve other purposes. As it is open 24/7 and easily recognizable, konbini and their totems can be seen as a network of watchtowers.

¹Hiromi Hosoya and Markus Schaefer, *Tokyo metabolism* (2001)

²Refer to [Perfused Stores](#) to understand the hidden infrastructure system.

³Have a look at the [Data](#) article to learn more about the technologies behind konbini.

⁴Read [Contextual Adaptability](#) to understand how konbini are constantly morphing with the city

nbini

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KONBINI



2017-01-01

Smoking Area

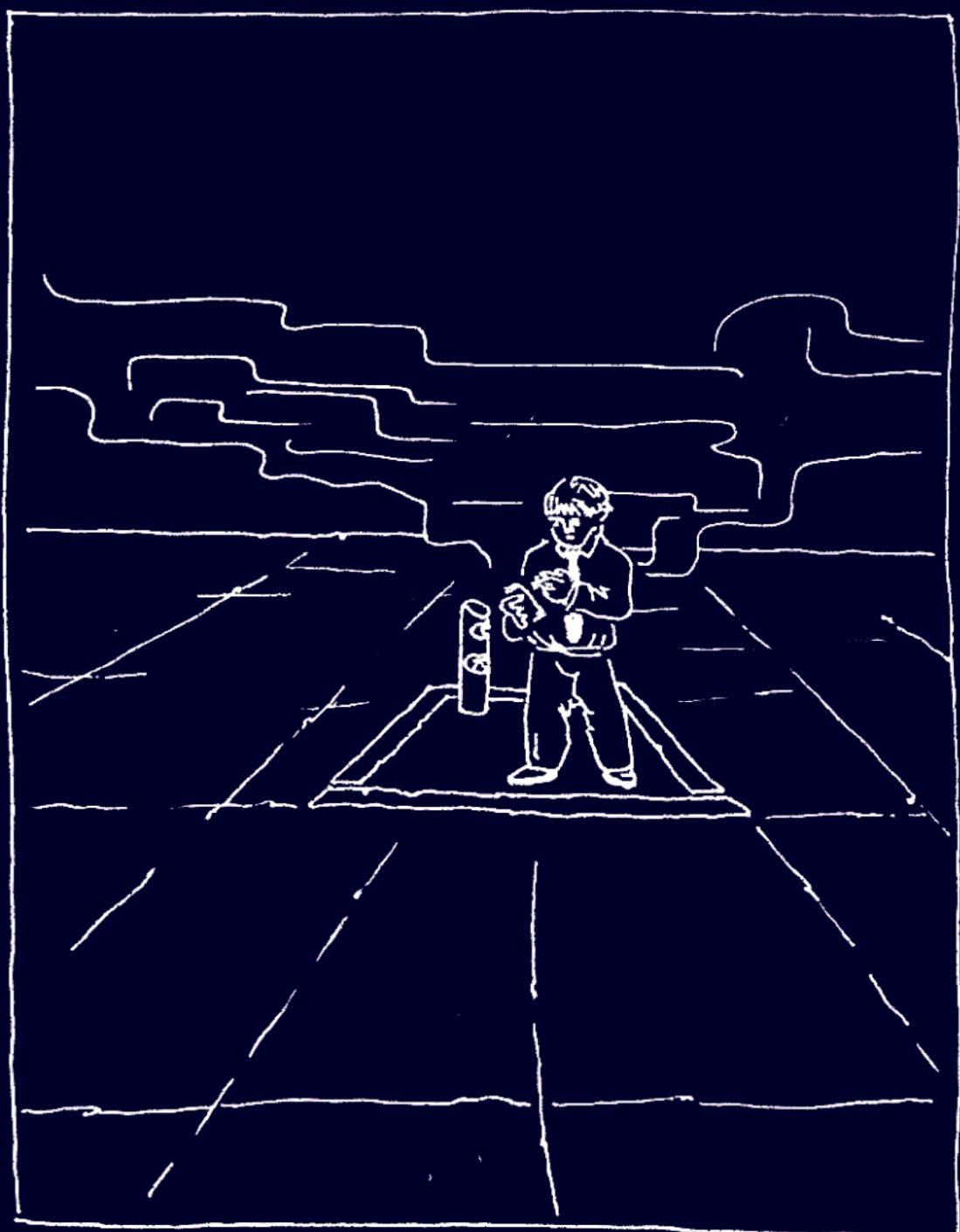


fig. 19

In a country where smoking in public areas (streets, squares, bus stops,...) is reprehended, tobacco lovers desperately seek places to enjoy their addictive companion.

A few meters away from the entrance, convenience stores systematically provide with a defined area, in front of the shop, where one can freely light a cigarette within a square meter delimited by a thick white line. An inelegant ashtray is erected on the borders of the plot, waiting for its next local smoker resident. The users, who generally remain silent for the three or four minutes of allowed pleasure, will eventually come back to the allotted smoking area during the day. This enclosed zone works for the urban space exactly like a park: it provides the population with a circumscribed territory for leisure. Paradoxically, while the trees found in parks recall of nature, driving one away from the urban, the smoking areas are precisely urban. Their essence is inert and needs to be activated; they speak the language of effectiveness, located far enough from the entrance of the convenience to avoid disturbance, but close enough to be seen, while being in a spatial «in-between» both on the public space and part of the shop itself.

A last interesting paradox about the smoking area: everything is done to define clearly the inside and the outside, the tolerated and the not-tolerated. Still: smoke disregards these virtual boundaries and rules! These strict parcels are annihilated by their own purpose: containing the uncontrollable.

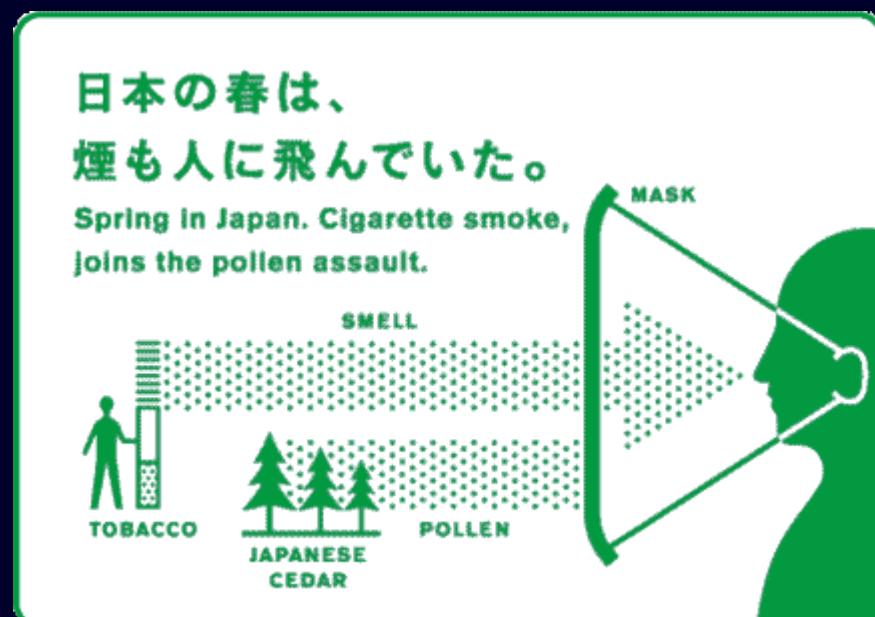


fig. 20

the night

nient cars

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2017-01-01

Inconvenient cars

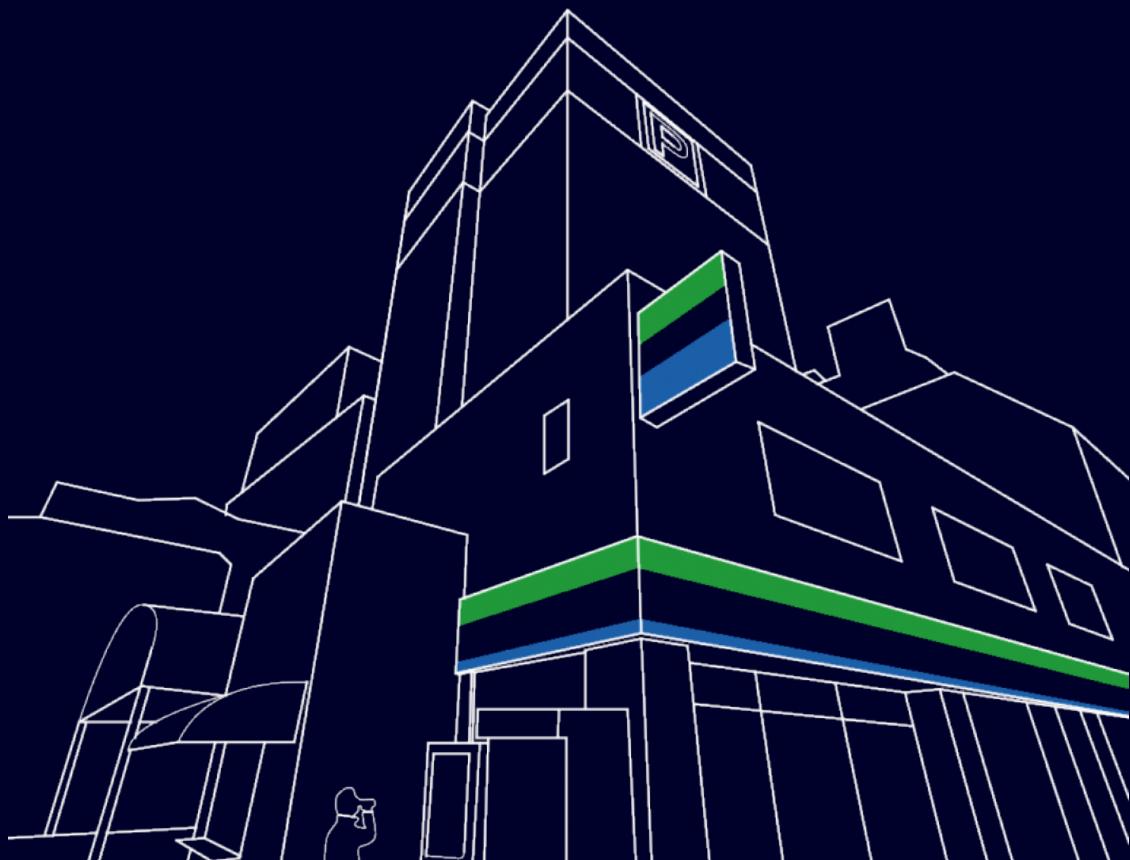


fig. 21

In America, the mall is the retail form adapted to urban sprawl. It is the result of a system based on the individual car, free to expend in an untouched territory. By definition, the mall is surrounded by its vast parking and erects in the middle of nowhere.

The issue of car in Japan reveals a very different approach to land value and retail: congestion is the adapted environment for convenience store proliferation. Very small and flexible in their format, Konbini can grow in any vacant space¹. If convenience stores were initially attached to a gas station. Coming to Japan, they got rid of petrol pumps and their wide shed. Imagining Edward Ruscha's «standard stations» without neither the pumps nor the cover gives a

preview of what remains in the konbini!

In cities, there will always be a konbini at a walking distance from your location. Anywhere you put it, it creates an urban bubble for pedestrians in a 500m radius. It is linked to the pedestrian and the public transportation network, not to parkings. Even if Japanese cars are smaller than the North-American ones, they are still too big for the structure of the city. Having a parking place is some kind of luxury. However, from this condition graceful sculptures result. The land value is high enough to justify vertical parking spaces. Those huge blind towers are maybe the Japanese equivalent to the cover of the American gas station.

¹Read [Contextual Adaptability](#) to understand how konbini are constantly morphing with the city



fig. 22

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2017-01-01

Wrinkles

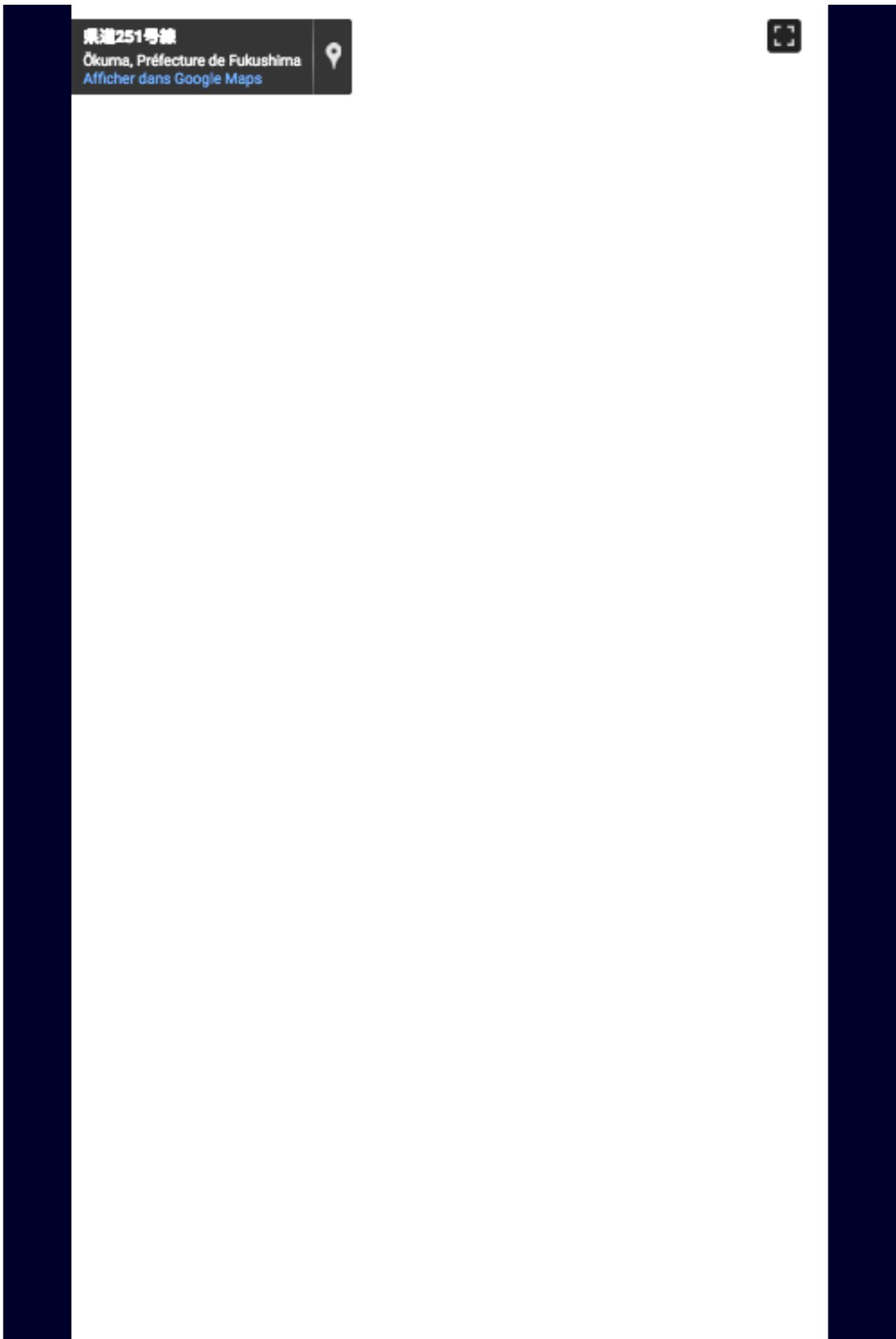


fig. 23

West and East have a very different approach and understanding towards the old, the ageing and the new. Europe has been crystalizing its evolution. Look at a caricature of its cities: a clear medieval centre, a 19th century re-birth, industrial revolution surroundings; all of them kept and preserved. Europe looks respectfully backwards, overly afraid of losing a single piece of its history. It would not be possible at all to destroy St. Peters of Rome or the Sixtine chapel to build a perfect replica right aside without rising a deep controversy. The reaction to the earthquake of Verdone illustrates quite well this strong relationship between bending material and history. In the late seventies, when the campanile felt down, Italians enumerated all of the crumbled stones and played a giant 3D puzzle game. At the end, the bell tower was standing again and each stone found its former place. Another good example is the stacking of the Parthenon... But would it still make sense at the beginning of the 21st century? In Japan, rebuilding a temple using new material does not affect its essence nor authenticity.

Our relationship to ageing has changed, especially with electronic devices. Your new mobile phone has a life span of one to two years, and when it dies, a newer, better and overall more desirable item will be there, awaiting to replace it. Panned obsolescence is a cycle of consumption and tiredness. New is better.

Konbini don't wrinkle. They are always young and fresh. There is no need for remembering by staying in the past; by sticking to defunct walls or used materials. Like anti-wrinkle cream applied to a face, convenience stores are modified every week, not to say every day, to fit the trends of the instant. The defective and used elements are changed or patched. The construction doesn't reveal any information about the period it was build. From both the inside and outside, the store is a timeless shell. However, there is a big difference between a daily beauty product and the permanent lifting process suffered by the tiny shops: one is only hiding death and organic decline, when the other reflects adaptation.

Konbini constantly adapt¹. They are updated in order to survive in a hostile and competitive environment. Like a computer program, they evolve internally along with technology. Who would go into a konbini that takes you back to the early eighties? Old neon lights get replaced by new LEDs, broken or used pavements are directly replaced, the roof is equipped with solar panels... Technological devices like the fridge, the coffee machines,..., are to be considered part of the shop's ornamentation². But this ornamentation is not fixed in time.

Konbini do not age. Like the Ise-Jingū temple, they renew themselves endlessly³. But unlike the temple, they are not enclosed by restrictive rules or patterns. Konbini improve, they are refined,

rearranged. This constant mutation to be attractive pushes them to be the response before the question. They alter their form, their skin and their content over time to fit the needs of the fluxes. Timeless, they witness the notion of presentism. Konbini do not stick to the past, they are both in the present and in the future. A ruined Konbini is not possible.

[1](#)For further understanding about the local adaptability of Konbini, refer to the article [Contextual Adaptability](#).

[2](#)Articles like [Ornament](#), [Raw](#) or [Jam](#) give a more profound understanding of the question.

[3](#)Read more about the tradition question is the article [Onigiri](#).

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KONBINI



2017-01-01

Doraemon

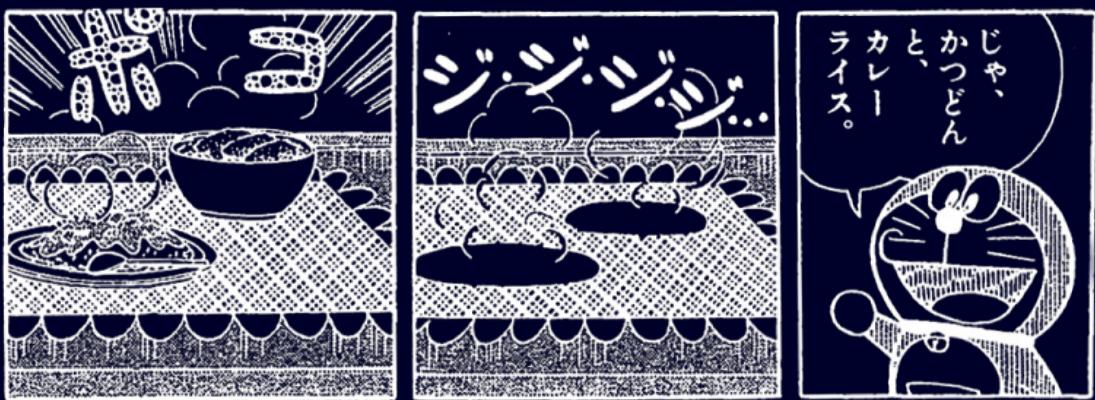


fig. 24

The manga culture reflects the Japanese society in many ways. In 1969, Fujiko F. Fujio created the comic Doraemon. It narrates the story of a young unlucky middle-class boy called Nobita. His best friend is a blue robotic cat sent from the future by Nobita's great-great-grandson. Hundreds of individual stories relate their adventures with the basic plot being always very simple: Nobita has an urgent need; Doraemon will meet the boy's expectations by pulling futuristic gadget out of his magic pocket which Nobita always misuses and ends punished.

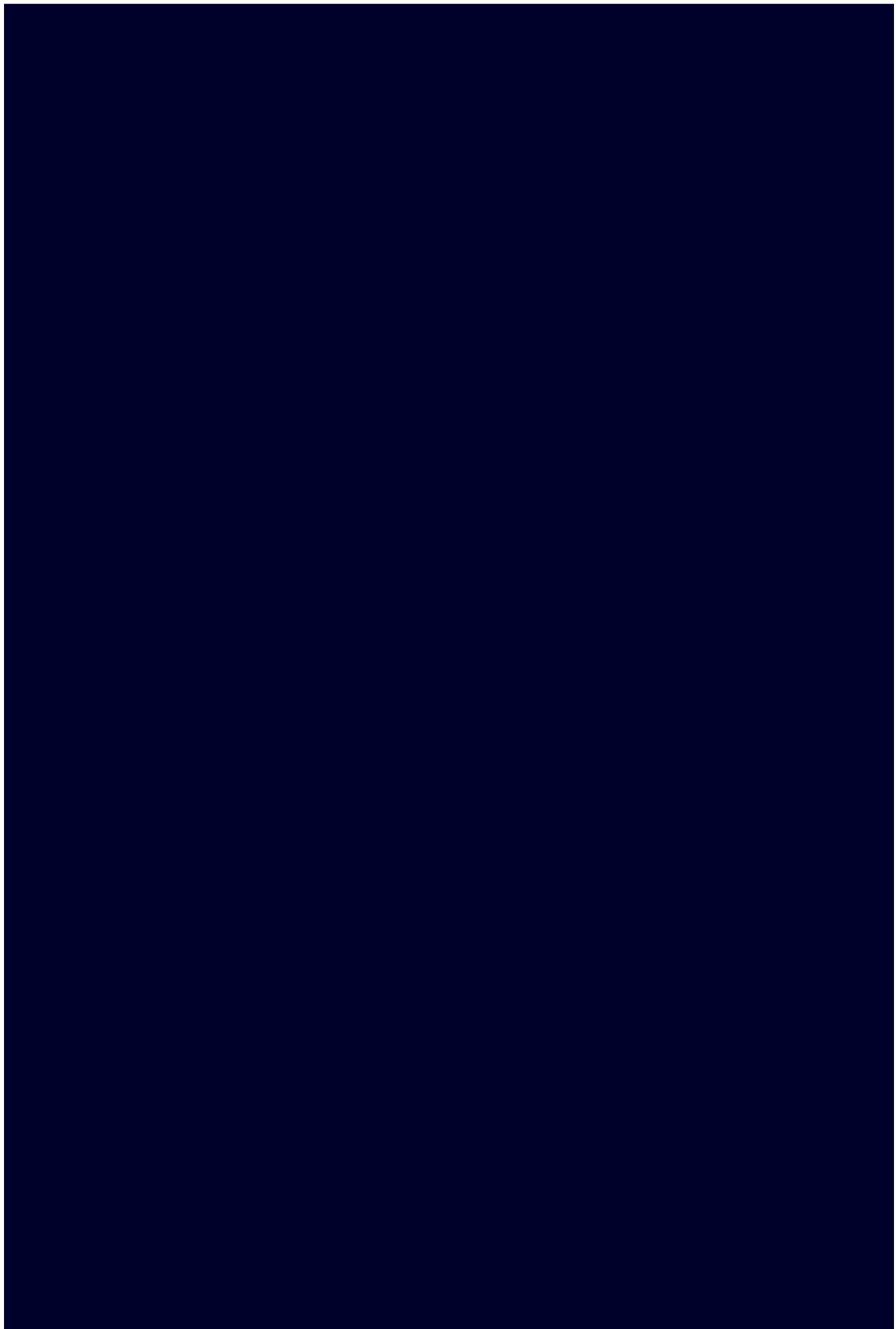
Konbini can be related to Doraemon in many ways. Both appeared in the 70s and have risen significantly in the 80's; both portray a very particular moment of a Japanese society trying to overcome the consequences the oil crisis. Doraemon and Nobita represent the suffering of a country that has to struggle on national and international levels; they dream together of innovative solutions popping out of the future to resolve their current problems. In a way, konbini also embody this same dream. But these small shops that appeared all over Japan do not only aim to address the needs of one single boy or consumer but instead wish to fulfill the dreams and needs of all the population. It is as if in a few years the whole country had its personal robot-cat fulfilling their material desires. Konbini are the realization of « The Gourmet Table Cloth» (fig1): Are you hungry? Dispose the « The Gourmet Table Cloth» and order! Dishes will be provided. If everyone does not have a « The Gourmet Table

Cloth», konbini are just around the corner and they do not only offer food! Like with the «Whether You like it or not Compulsory Eating Machine» (fig.2), you will always leave a konbini having purchased an initially unwanted item. Konbini are «Obtain Bags» (取り寄せバッグ), out of which you can obtain whatever you want !¹

¹For a better understanding of this point, read the article [Data](#).



fig. 25



KONBINI



2017-01-01

Onigiri



fig. 26

Onigiri¹ (おにぎり) are rice balls with a filling, folded in crispy algae² (のり). This small snacks are known on the island of japan for centuries, not to say millennia³. A good onigiri is not simply made of agglutinated rice stuffed with some added flavour. The complexity of manually wrapping an umeboshi⁴ (梅干) inside of the rice provides to this light meal all its delicacy. Applying the right pressure on the rice -not to have a too compressed onigiri, nor one which falls apart- is an art.

For ages, onigiri were considered as a home snack. Made by beloved housewives or sold on the streets, they were made by an artisanal know-how. In the 80's, when the first industrial onigiri arrived to the market in the convenience stores, consumers were extremely sceptical. «The process could only be done by hand». They were right, the first mechanic produced onigiri were disastrous: instead of wrapping the rice around the filling, the flavour was added through a hole on the back; this process was hidden tanks to the nori seaweed; but after a while, the nori became viscous. No one believed in the success of adapting a household's heritage to a mass production product. New manufacturing techniques allowed the nori not to be in contact with the rice, avoiding the algae to become humid and gluey. Not to mention that the manufacturing process of adding the aroma inside of the casted onigiri, opened the path to bigger varieties of taste.

Tradition as *Know-how Tradition* cannot compete in a globalised society. It is antonymic to convenience. The requirements imposed by a culture of accelerated and technocratic mutations threaten elaborate traditions. Time and space are the present issues. It is too convenient to go to the nearest konbini and have the meal heated and ready-to-eat. Convenience stores found an answer by offering yet-digested tradition. Be aware, it is not tradition as “transmitted artisanal know-how” who subsist through konbini, but tradition as a percept, denuded -or independent- of all concrete material bonds. On one side, there is a *Know-how Tradition*, attached to materiality and to the repetition of a method to reach a finality. On the other, there is a *Perceptual Tradition*, which focuses on the finality, regardless of process, and which bears the updates of new technologies. Japan found an equilibrium within both extremes. There is a spatial cohabitation. Konbini, heralds of the updated tradition, are essential and practical. Erected right aside, there are the temples, keepers of history, memory and *savoir-faire*. Both cohabit in balance.

Nowadays if there is a need for a quick snack, the first address will be the nearest konbini who has been able to phagocytise culture to make it its own. Konbini won the battle by trying and improving mass consumption techniques until they tamed tradition.

¹Onigiri is the generic name for the traditional Japanese rice balls. More specific appellations

exist, they define the type, the shape or the taste of the rice balls.

2The wrapping algae, called nori, is added not to have sticky fingers. But the seaweed has to be applied just before consumption, otherwise the rice glue penetrates the algae. The more you wait the more it become viscous. –Not only is seaweed used to cover onigiri, also vine-leaves can be used, for example.

3A carbonised fossile of a rice ball, dated back to the Yayoi period (300 B.C.-A.D. 300), is kept at the Ishikawa Archaeological Foundation.

4Umeboshi are salt-dried prunes, they are one of the most common and appreciated ingredients consumed inside of onigiri.

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Ornament



fig. 27

Imagine a gothic cathedral. There it rises in all its splendor. Now, take away the statues of the saints; take away all the carved-out allegories; get rid of the ribs; leave no figurative element. Do not forget to erase the organ, the pulpit, the benches, the paintings, the candles, ... What is left? An empty shell that is not to be called gothic cathedral anymore. Convenience stores are like gothic cathedrals. They cannot be thought cleaned out of their content. In both of them, ornaments are ubiquitous and inherent to their container. They are the opposite from an empty and aseptic space. Their architecture is not to be thought as *vide* but as *plein*.

As soon as you enter a konbini, an assault of polychrome smells and noisy colors hits you. Every single part is covered with items, fridges, posters... are there walls at all? There is a first feeling of chaos. But this overflow of information is mastered from the individual scale to the overall organization. Each product has its singular logic and rules. It is auto-sufficient and does not need any context. Together with other goods of the same family, it competes in a seduction parade. Like the *Cicinnurus respublica* male, it will try to get the customers attention to become their choice. The superposition, adjunction, assemblage of those co-related products into a gondola or a cooled shelf, dressing up the space. This explosion of transitional rainbows disturbs the customer out of his primary need. Even the glass facades are covered with advertising stickers. Enhanced by daylight, they are the rose-windows of the 21st century. The overall result of this heavily charged ornamentation is detachment: our attention is not taken by this aggression to our senses. Hence, it becomes a part of the environment and therefore, of the architecture.

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Jam



fig. 28

Big firms' policy about profit and expansion is hard to combine with elaborate interiors. Architecture tends to dissolve when it faces neoliberalism violent rules. What is left then to define the space?

« The secret of corporate aesthetics was the power of elimination, the celebration of the efficient, the eradication of excess: Abstraction as camouflage, the search for a Corporate Sublime. »¹ The materiality inside the store is silent. From the floor to the ceiling everything has a white and aseptic aspect. There is still one exception. On the unreachable part of the walls, above the shelves and refrigerators, one vestige of architectural ornament stands. Proclaiming the brand identity of the store, a color-coded frieze circles the room.²

The white shiny tiles abstract the space. The flooring reflects the even whiter neon or LED lights of the ceiling. « The shiniest surfaces in the history of mankind reflect humanity at its most casual »³

Indeed, dairy products in the spotlight shine in every corner of the room. The non-architectural elements dominate the space. Mirrors even emphasize this confusion. They blur the limit of space and create the illusion of abundance. If a desolate column wanders in the middle of the open space, it is directly wrapped with mirrors. Furthermore, on the extremity of the shelves, the reflection magnifies the goods. Shelves and products cover every available surface, so the walls are hidden behind the goods. However, this ordered abundance is oddly satisfying for the mind.

The space is so pure that goods become accidentally ornamental. Rhetorically, the Konbini's interior can be seen as the bastard child of the villa Savoye and the strip of Las Vegas. From the food and products, the space acquires all kinds of textures, colors, smells and flavors. Seeking for attention, the crazy packages use all kinds of graphic effects to catch the eye.

The architecture of franchised stores is nonfigurative and bland⁴ but the products displayed hijack the substance to intensely stage the senses. The prowess of marketing is to create exaggerate affect from ordinary substance. Indeed, cheap packages and posters show off all the states of matter: crunchy, shiny, glossy, silky, frosty, slimy, crackling, flowing, tender... The wide panorama of textures challenges our relation to physical elements. If design is absent in the konbini interior, the design is however intensified at the scale of the bottle.

1Rem Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, Quodlibet, 2006, p.185

2Blue is Lawson, green is Family Mart and red is 7-eleven.

3Rem Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, Quodlibet, 2006, p.177

4Read Contextual Adaptability and Generic Plan to understand the architectural aptitude of konbini.

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Raw



fig. 29

As crude as it might seem, convenience stores are deeply pornographic. Their aesthetic belongs to an intrusive sexual offer rather than to a poetic seduction. In the darkness of the night, they await customers on the street's corner, luring them to their neon light. Direct messages of consumption cover every inch. There is no space left for the imagination¹.

This condition has to be understood as an opposition. Konbini are pornographic because of their lack of eroticism. They do not play the game of allurement. The sensuality of a silk covering enlightened by a *chiaroscuro* is appealing because it leaves space for interpretation. Preserving intimacy means that some things remain hidden under the

appearances. Even in a performance of nudity some parts remain owned and are not shown; essential elements are impenetrable to the analysis. None of this has a place in convenience stores. The whole shop is visible to anyone from anywhere. When it is not, incurved mirrors distort reality exposing it to the eyes of all. There are no mystic shadows where thoughts can get lost. On the same level, with no hierarchy, boxes of chicken nuggets, dildos, umbrellas, rice balls are displayed, together with whatever else you might need. There is no filter. Obscenity is everywhere, in the overbid images glued on the walls and windows; in the translucent packages; in the boosted, artificial smell around the coffee machine; in the everlasting welcome of the clerks (いらしゃいませ); in the reflection of the white light on the shiny cleaned surfaces;... There is a continuous deliberate intention of provoking excitation and desire.



There will be no surprise when passing the sliding doors of a konbini, you will be facing lewd voyeurism. Nothing is hidden, everything is displayed, the *promenade* is predictable. Will you yield to temptation?

!Read the article [Ornament](#) to understand the intricacy between displayed products and architecture.

KONBINI



2017-01-01

Icons

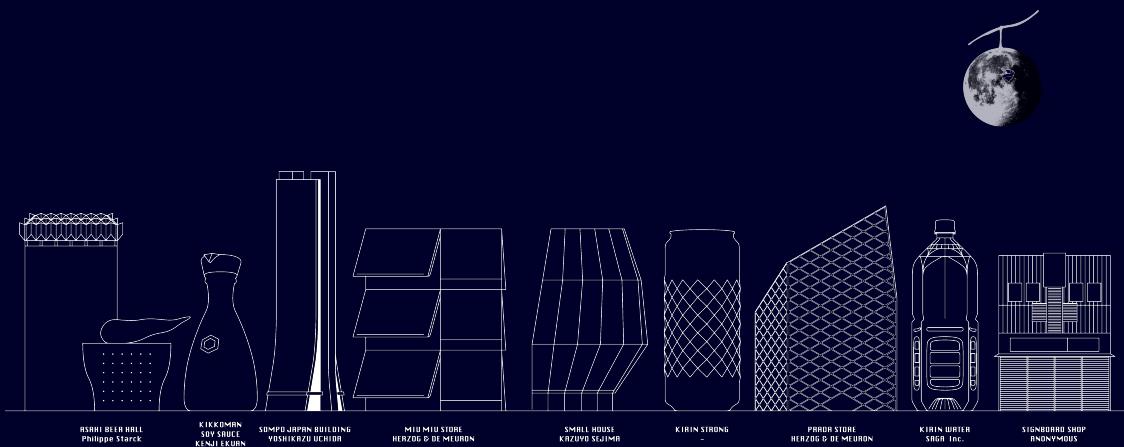


fig. 30

Building icons stands along the strip of Las Vegas. Venturi, Brown and Izenour divided them in two families. Each family indicates its program differently: the *big sign*, *little building* family, uses a glowing signboard to claim the program clear and loud while the *building sign* family takes the form of its program to express its use. Both families parade along the mainroad. You experience them as a linear sequence. Konbini belong to the big sign, smallest building type¹

The 21st century saw a different expression of icons blooming. Buildings do not necessarily express their function anymore. Instead, they perform. *Form expresses form* replaces *form -or sign board-expresses content*. Relation between inside activity and form does not take place anymore². Instead, there is an inside reality which faces programmatic issues and an outside wrapping which faces marketing issues. Some buildings try to claim an exclusive identity to stand out

from the masses³. The more the icon acquires plastic singularities, the more it becomes an object. *Architecture* could be renamed as *Product Design*. A good example of this new monumentality takes place on Omotesandō, an avenue of Shibuya where chic brands stage buildings as sculptures in a clash of egos. Which one of them is the most appealing? Same aesthetic criteria apply to a façade and a Louis-Vuitton purse. Scale does not matter.

In the konbini, the strip is an interior. Architectural language can be perceived along an inside *promenade*. The daily confrontation with ordinary but skilfully designed objects is the background soundtrack of consumption. Japan has an irrational passion for food which differs in many ways to the western one. The personification of good is in every single thing⁴.

This link between design and goods of consumption is a source of inspiration for iconic architecture. Within the Venturian parallel, the Konbini is a decorated shed filled with miniature ducks. At a smaller scale, adventurous objects can freely experiment shapes, textures and iconography.

Back to architecture, designed buildings become products. The headquarters of the beer company Asahi look like a gigantic pint, with crystal beer froth on top. The Louis Vuitton buildings are wrapped uniformly with different weft like their bags. A particular design can be produced to give singularity to a building, like for the Prada shop of Shibuya; the same design could be applied to an aluminium can, there would be no difference. External appearance of products is not the only influence designed good have on architecture, they can also be considered for their content. Konbini offer a large range of soft, sweet, viscous and milky drinks in which solid nutriments float. In Sanaa's projects or Toyo Ito's Sendai mediatheque, the spatial notion of *milieu* could originally be a subconscious translation of self-sufficient products packaged with neutral wrapping.

The scale gap between product and architecture can be achieved through three different levels:

- (1) the architectural form can result of the scaling either of an entire product either of a detail ;
- (2) the architectural form can be given by a singular design;
- (3) the architectural form can be translated as the enlightenment of its content by a neutral wrapping.





fig. 31

1The Las Vegas strip is to be experienced linearly by car. Konbini have an automobile dimension; in most cases they are associated to another scale, they are adapted to the roaming of walking; they are diffused in the city and therefore the journey is not linear anymore. Read the article Inconvenient Cars to understand the relationship with vehicles.

2Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p.81

3Lone building where the form does not express the content but is proper to itself can be understood looking to the new Philharmonic of Hamburg; to the Onyx Theatre in St-Herbain; to the Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne; or to the Casa della Musica in Porto.

4 i.e. Do not be surprised to find advertisements where even our blue planet –or the moon itself– is the personification of big juicy melon.

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KONBINI

2017-01-01

Post-scriptum

This website is the Énoncé théorique of T. Revel and A. Wolhoff. It concludes the third semester of EPFL's Master of Science in Architecture.

Professor Roberto Gargiani is the supervisor of the Énoncé théorique while professor Dieter Dietz is the pedagogic Director of the Énoncé. Raffael Baur is the Maître EPFL. Robert Fiechter is the expert to the PDM.

We believe that the study of konbini addresses contemporary issues. This website does not only contains our thoughts but it represents our vision of konbini. The Web offers wide range of diffusion; it is accessible everywhere; it has no definitive format, it can be adapted anytime;...

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2017-01-15

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2017-01-15

Credits

We would like to thank Sophie our special agent on site; Irene for her support; Aziel for the proofreading and Raffael for the tutoring.

Image credits

fig. 1 : Qgis map of Japan (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 2 : Nakagin Tower elevation and detail (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 3 : Google Maps axonometric view (12.2016)

fig. 4 : Distribution diagram (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 5-7 : Konbini facades (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 8 : Diagrammatic plan (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 9-10 : Plans (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 11 : picture by Elida Arrizza: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/elidr/13956710334/in/album-72157630389462392/> (11.2016)

fig. 12 :Project X Challengers, Seven Eleven, Digital Manga Publishing, 2006, p.153

fig. 13-16 : building facades (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 17 : Vending machines from Google Maps street view (12.2016)

fig. 18 : collage (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 19 : hand drawing (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 20 : smoking manners signs, <https://dontsmokeorhowilearnedtostopworryingandlove-japan.wordpress.com/category/japan-anti-smoking-signs/page/6/> (01.2017)

fig. 21 : vector perspective (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 22 : Google Maps – Street view (novembre 2016)

fig. 23 : Google Maps street view: 県道251号線, Ōkuma, Fukushima prefecture, (June 2013)

fig. 24 : Doraemon, <http://wannabees.hatenablog.com/> (12.2016)

fig. 25 : Doraemon, http://doraemon.wikia.com/wiki/Whether_You_Like_It_Or_Not_Compulsory_Eating_Machine (12.2016)

fig. 26 : Sophie Heini, 2017

fig. 27 : collage from Sophie Heini, 2017 (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 28 : collage, 2017 (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 29 : collage, 2017 (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 30 : cityscape (T.R./A.W.)

fig. 31 : axonometric drawing <http://lawson.jp/en/store/>

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