CHAPTER THREE:

In Praise of the "Coffin":
Urban Sociality in the Japanese Capsule Hotels
Non Arkaraprasertkul

Introduction: Roland Barthes in Tokyo

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse)—isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features (a term employed by linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan (Barthes, 1983: 2).

To many, Japanese cities are full of surprise. In his famous essays later compiled and published as Empire of Signs (1983), the renowned French semiologist Roland Barthes wrote about how much Japan fascinated him when he first visited in the late 1960s. Barthes raised questions such as “Why do Japanese people write from right to left—and top to bottom?” “Why do they bow; and who bows to whom?” Among the most famous questions he posed was “Why is the center of Tokyo empty?” These questions were indeed exciting to Western audiences, especially in the late 1960s when Japan had just hosted the Olympics, projecting again its influence to the world at large. These questions,
if they were to be asked of the Japanese both then and now, would probably be met with equally puzzling answers: “How else should we read if not from right to left—and top to bottom?” “Why shouldn’t we bow?” And, of course, “Why shouldn’t the center of Tokyo be empty—that’s where the Imperial Palace is.” We can only take Barthes’ questions only moderately seriously as he neither claimed to be an expert in Japanese culture, nor wanted to say that his view was absolute. In 1970, when Empire of Signs was originally published, it was the champion of cultural studies during an age of post-structuralism. His thesis about Japanese society was meant to reinforce the fashionable post-structuralist notion of semiotic instability; that is, there is no such thing as concrete meaning. His aim was to create a dialogue about the ways in which we could understand the systems of signs differently. His achievement in doing so was unquestionable: his comparison was based on the Western notion of things, which was why Empire of Signs was well received, because it spoke to the basic “common sense” of the majority who read it.

The Capsule Hotels

Had Barthes not died an untimely death about a decade after Empire of Signs was published, no doubt he would have returned to Tokyo many times. Although he did not admit that he loved Tokyo, anyone reading the book would know that he was deeply fascinated by the city. If he were to go back today, he would certainly not be able to avoid or overlook the significant role of the _kapuseru koteru_, literally the “capsule hotels,” in the city today. On average about seven feet long, four feet wide, and three feet tall, these coffin-like boxes stacked on top of one another are in fact spaces where people must crawl in to sleep. There is nothing more than just that space with some basic amenities such as a small, built-in television and an electronic alarm clock, and a bonus: some air inside to breathe. Once you are in the capsule, you cannot do anything but sleep. The height of the capsule is just enough that you cannot sit up straight. The width of it is just small enough that you would not be able to rotate your body full-circle. You will be cut off from the world, at least visually, because all three sides around you will be walls that are less than two feet away your face. The capsules have been designed to maximize utility, vis-à-vis saving space.

and, according to my own experience, the most comfortable sleeping position in one of them is to lie on one’s back.

Although seemingly cut off from the world, this does not mean that clients will actually be in aural peace. In these hotels, each capsule has only a thin bamboo shutter in the front (through which you would crawl into your capsule), and thin plastic panels on both sides that separate your body from the corridor and your neighbors’ capsules. If you are really unfortunate, you will hear snores all night long (or at least until you fall asleep). This is why newer capsule hotels provide pre-installed noise-cancelling earphones. If Barthes would visit a capsule hotel today, he may ask questions like, “Why would anyone sleep in a coffin?” “Why would anyone pay for the lack of privacy?” “Why would anyone do this to themselves?” My guess is that, for a celebrated French theorist like him, the quest to find answers to these questions would certainly not include his staying in a capsule hotel. Moreover, I imagine that he would be disgusted with it, and would come to a conclusion similar to his conclusions for all the things that shook his understanding of a semiotic system when he previously visited Japan. As many critics have said, he probably would “invent his fictive Japan” to explain why the Japanese did what he thought they did.

Who stays in capsule hotels? There is a serious dearth of academic research and publishing about the capsule hotels. The available literature touches upon the capsule hotels slightly, usually only to illuminate points about other topics (e.g., Chaplin, 2007; Leslie, 2006; MacDonald, 2000; McNeill, 2008). According to popular perception, the majority of the clients are those who miss the last train, which is around midnight, to go home. Given that a taxi ride back to many satellite towns where most office workers could only afford to rent cost around US$100, many who miss the trains, of course, choose to sleep in the city instead of paying a large taxi fare to drag themselves home just to come back again in a few hours in the morning. The second group of clients is the un- or temporarily-employed; for them, capsule hotels are often the cheapest housing option available (as they can rent by the month for about 1,000 yen, or about US$10, per night). It is also important to note that there seems to be an interesting gender dimension inside these capsule hotels. As I will show in my observations and interviews, most people I met were male, at least the customers. That said, some receptionists of the newer
capsules I visited were women in their early 20s. According to the managers of the capsule whom I interviewed, it seems to be a trend to make the capsule hotel “more welcoming” by having women at the reception. When being asked why there were no women in capsule hotels, the popular responses from the customers were “because women have to go home to take care of the house, the child (or the children).” What this type of statement implies is that “men like us are those who have to work hard to pay the bills, including working overtime and staying in a capsule hotel.” Although this highly masculinistic and solipsistic view expressed by the male customers might hold some truth, I will show in this paper that there are also other reasons why customers choose to stay in the hotels. Capsule hotels are not de jure exclusive to men, yet, de facto, they only serve men as there are no separate facilities for women (and by law women and men cannot share space in a public bathtub). In this paper I will intentionally disregard this specific point about gender and sociality due to insufficient research on the capsule hotels for women, and only focus on the typical capsule hotels for men.

Before I began my study of capsule hotels, all I heard about them from the media and those who have rented one is that “it’s horrible.” It is not surprising that all of these sources were friends, students, colleagues, and relatives who, in their entire lives, had never experienced anything smaller than a standard twin-bed hotel room prior to their encounters with the capsule hotels. The popular explanation for why the Japanese invented the capsule hotels is commonly rooted in the nation’s unequal economic development, which I will later try to demystify.

Through ethnographic methods, I argue that the capsule hotel is not just a place of necessity. In fact, it is a very dynamic social space, as the main spaces in capsule hotels are not the coffins in which one sleeps, but the bathhouse, lounge, TV room, massage chairs, and so on. It is these elements alongside the playing with the boundaries that make it a dynamic social space—clients seek comfort from this space where the boundary between the private and public sphere is most unclear. My fieldwork consists of multiple and intermittent stays in these hotels in Japanese cities since my first stay at a capsule hotel in 2006. I will focus on three capsule hotels with which I am most familiar in two busy districts of Tokyo: Shinbashi and Kabukichō. Each has its own unique selling point, and the price for each also varies (the one in Shinbashi being the most expensive and the one in Kabukichō the cheapest).

A Brief History

The creator of the first capsule hotel was one of Japan’s most renowned architects of the twentieth century, Kisho Kurokawa (1934-2007), who, throughout his life, was known for his ability to “peep into the future” to derive his creative energy (Koolhaas and Obrist, 2011; Ourousoff, 2009). His designs and approach to architectural problem-solving were often future-oriented; 1979 was the peak of a new movement to reinvent architecture, based on the biological function of the building to grow, known as the “metabolism movement.” Kurokawa proposed a series of “capsule projects” or buildings that consisted of temporary housing units that would, in his own words, serve “the salaried men or international businessmen who work late and would need only a small area to rest and rejuvenate before heading to their next destination” (as cited in Koolhaas and Obrist, 2011). The most famous capsule building, the Nakagin Capsule Tower in the bustling Ginza district in Tokyo, consists of decent sized rooms (7.5 feet x 12 feet x 6.9 feet), and is still standing today (Lin, 2011). Hints of the coffin-sized capsule hotels that he later developed can be seen through his earlier designs of furniture: all in white, all built-in, and all extremely economical.
Kurokawa's "Capsule Inn" opened in Osaka in 1979 and is still in operation—the prototype of coffin-sized capsule hotels today. Some believe that Kurokawa got the idea for the coffin-sized capsule boxes from cardboard and plastic box shelters that the homeless and day laborers in the rundown Nishihari district of Osaka used as housing. These cardboard huts were pretty much the same size as his original capsule hotels, as both were designed for fundamental necessities, and hence just large enough for the size of the body. However, since the Nishihari cardboard huts did not really come into use until after the economic crisis of the late 1980s, the arguments that Kurokawa's designs of his first coffin-sized capsule hotel in 1979 were inspired from Nishihari does not really hold water. Consequently, I believe that it was Kurokawa's vision for the future lifestyle that brought to life the capsule hotels that we know today.

That said, it could well be the case that the capsule hotel entrepreneurs were inspired by the cardboard huts in Nishihari as a way of supplying cheap housing after the economic downturn of the late 1980s, which was precisely the time when the market for the capsule hotels began (Tanaka and Yamada, 2007). In Nishihari there were multiple "flohshauses" for the day laborers to rent cheaply. Those capsule hotel entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to extend the existing market by offering cheap accommodation for the large number of commuters. The success of the first capsule hotel gave rise to the next, and now they are almost ubiquitous in all business areas in big cities in Japan (Boonbanjerdsri, 2012; Leslie, 2006). Since the late 1980s, Tokyo and Osaka have been two of the most expensive cities in the world. Like any other cities whose primary mode of production is tertiary, real estate is at the center of all forms of investment (Sassen, 2001). Unless they already owned a house or an apartment before the economy took off in the late 1980s, middle-class Tokyo residents would find it almost impossible to afford to buy or rent a room in the center of the city near their workplaces (Cybriwsky, 1991), hence the capsule hotels have since then become a popular choice among urban workers.

According to the geographer Roman Cybriwsky (1991), the suburbanization process of the 1980s combined with, what he calls, the "squeeze on inner neighborhood(s)" gave rise to many urban innovations such as the capsule hotels, love hotels (also see Chaplin, 2007; Jacob, 2008), and urban coffee shops (also see White, 2012), among others. With the advent of a modern train system, the local government of Tokyo decided to push residential neighborhoods to the outer rings of the city. While there were many benefits to such ideas—for example, larger open spaces for people, much more affordable "4LDK" houses (a house with four bedrooms plus living room, dining room, and kitchen) and "2LDK apartment" for the lower-middle-class, and so on—the suburbanization process has since created a clear spatialization of class (Freedman, 2011). Although the famous modernist architect Yoshinobu Ashihara (1986) is, by and large, quite optimistic about this concept of "bed towns," he was also skeptical about the concept when it comes to the matter of equal access to resources and facilities. Such resources and facilities seemed to be made only for those who could afford to live in the city's center. Because the main business area is still in the center of the city, the white-collar, middle-class urban workers have to commute from the suburbs and outskirts, as well as from nearby prefectures to the city center to work. Sometimes, the length of commute could be as much as two to three hours, one way. Those who have traveled by train from the suburbs to the city center will be quite familiar with the scene of the morning train with everybody sleeping. The journalist Amy Chavez (2013) even calls it "a rite of passage into Japanese society."
Many *sarariman* (literally "salarymen"), the ubiquitous suit-and-tie white-collar workers whose lifestyle revolves entirely around work at the office, usually work around the clock (Vogel, 1963). Many of these workers live in the suburbs or in nearby vicinities of Tokyo as they cannot afford to rent anywhere within the city; this explains the appeal of these hotels, which allow the workers to eliminate an otherwise long commute after a late night of working. Further, the capsule hotels, as I was first told by a colleague who was researching Japanese history at the time, is a "retrofitting mechanism" that was invented by an opportunistic entrepreneur precisely to solve this problem (Arkarraprasertkul, 2010). Imagine this: if you live three hours away from the city center, going to work and returning home takes six hours, which is one-fourth of your day. Why should you go home just to have two to three hours of sleep and then get back on the train again? The idea behind the capsule hotels is: Why not just give people what they need—enough place to sleep, because that's all they need? In contemporary Japan, the structure of urban employment in Japanese major cities leaves little room for those who are not salarymen since big corporations are running the major part of the economy (The World Bank, 2013). In fact, many capsule hotel clients arrive at the hotel late at night, put their belongings in a personal locker, take a shower in a shared bathroom, with an option to hang out afterwards in a room full of massage chairs, before climbing into their personal capsules and going to bed.

Hence, from the historical perspective, capsule hotels are nothing more than, simply put, coffins for temporary sleeping. The hotels only provide what an unconscious body needs, and unconscious bodies do not mind if they are stacked on top of each other. The questions here are: first, just because we are so used to larger rooms does not mean that spaces in the capsule hotels are too small, does it? In other words, how do we understand the capsule hotels in their own terms? Second, are the capsule hotels simply affordable private spaces in the city? Apart from the capsules themselves, the majority of spaces in the building that house a capsule hotel are public areas, such as the bathhouse, locker room, massage room, and so on. These public spaces serve about one hundred to two hundred clients every night. How then, is it possible that the capsule hotels are just simply space for individual isolation? Do they have any social functions?

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**Ethnographic Encounter: A “VIP Suite” in Shimbashi**

In the following three stories a window is opened onto a space that is rarely discussed by academics relative to capsule hotels. It is this space that I experienced through my ethnographic study. At about ten o’clock at night, I checked into a capsule hotel in Shimbashi, a major interchange station on the east side of Tokyo and a ten-minute walk from the famous retail district of Ginza. It was my Japanese colleague who recommended this hotel because it was new and very close to the Shimbashi train station. “So, you can’t miss it,” said this friend, and like he said, I encountered the hotel after leaving the station and walking only about five minutes through a small lane full of cafés, bars, and noodle stools. The capsule hotel “Peace” (pseudonym) was located in a seven-story building that, from the exterior appearance, must have been a typical 1960s’ concrete tower before it was turned into a capsule hotel.

![Figure 2: The author in a typical "coffin" capsule. Photo: Ken Takahashi](image)

Automatic glass doors slid open, and an instantaneous blast of cold air from the air-conditioners hit my face. Upon entering, I was welcomed by walls of shoe lockers that stood directly in front of me and a sign that the no-shoe zone
started here. I put my shoes in one of the small lockers, closed it, and took the key to the counter where two male receptionists greeted me. I was fortunate to have with me Nobu, a recent graduate from a college in Tokyo, whom I knew through a good friend of mine; Nobu assisted me with translation. In his early twenties, Nobu himself had never stayed in a capsule hotel. He grew up in the suburbs of Tokyo before coming to the city for college, where he stayed in a college dorm for the last four years (in fact, in the same room all the way through!). His comment (which I will return to) was rather interesting. "I am not a salaryman; why would I ever stay at a capsule hotel?" Translating for me, Nobu told me to give the shoe-locker key to the receptionist in exchange for an actual room key, which was attached to a watchband-style bracelet for safe-keeping around my wrist (because I would need it to get in and out of the capsule compound to go to the bathroom and so on). The shoe-locker key would be kept for me until checkout. I gave one of the receptionists my credit card in exchange for a receipt (4,800 yen per night), and a brochure showing what was available to me: the amenities of the "VIP suite," for which I paid a premium.

I was pointed to the locker in which I would put all my belongings. In the locker, there was a towel, a green and white shirt, and three-quarter pajamas with the logo of the hotel on both pieces of the garment. I changed to that uniform pajamas uniform, put all my clothes and belongings in the locker, closed and locked it, and walked to the elevator with an electronic key to my room around my wrist. Though very curious, Nobu decided not to stay for a capsule hotel experience that night because there was still enough time for him to get on the train home. Yet, before he rushed to catch the last train, he translated for me the brochure that showed the amenities in the hotel:

"An elevator is the only way to go up and down the building. The sentō (public bath) is in the B2 basement—that's where you'd go first for a bath (shampoo, rinse, and body wash were provided). Then, you'd go to B1 for a lounge area, where there were massage chairs, and "cubes" in which you could use Internet, watch TV, or listen to music that you like. There you'll find a vending machine from which you can get all kinds of free drinks. Once you're done, you'll go up to the fifth floor—the VIP suite—and find your capsule. Remember, make sure the number of the capsule is the same as the number on your key. I'll see you in the morning!"

Surprisingly, although the majority of spaces in the capsule hotel are public, clients treat it as a home both practically and ritualistically. As Ashihara writes in The Hidden Order, the sequence of activities is exactly the same: beginning with one taking off one's footwear before entering the house, leaving the dust and dirt at the gate. Then, one would go take a ritualistic bath and move on to the bedroom, the most private and least seen part of the house. Although people did not converse in the public bath or sentō, which was always relatively quiet, they did when they came out of the public bath area to the communal basin where they brushed their teeth, cleaned their ears, and shaved. In many capsule hotels, the locker and the sentō are on the same floor, so that you do not have to put on the clean pajamas just to take them off again when you enter the sentō. It could be that this particular hotel was originally an office building that was recently renovated and modified to serve as a capsule hotel, so the infrastructure was not designed properly to be one. Once I came out of the sentō, I took an elevator just one floor up to the lounge area, in which, to my surprise, I found people in the hotel's green and white hotel pajamas watching TV, surfing the Internet, reading Japanese comic books of manga, playing video games, playing chess, and sitting in massage chairs.

The lounge was not big. The center of the room was a table, around which there were a few very comfortable chairs. Above the table was a big, flat-screen TV where, at almost all times, a baseball match was on. Next to the table were three gigantic vending machines: one for unlimited free soda, hot and iced coffee, and tea; one for instant noodles; and one for beer (the last two were not free but coin and banknote-operated). Around the periphery of the lounge were about a dozen "cubes," personal cubicles around three by five feet in length and width and about four feet tall, in which one would find a personal massage chair equipped with a fifteen-inch personal TV, a computer screen where one can get on the Internet, and headphones. In one corner of the lounge there was a small space for a personal massage, separately partitioned by floor-to-ceiling curtains. This personal massage area was open until 3:00 a.m., and there was always someone in there having a massage from a professional masseuse.
The lounge area was always full of people. I stayed up until 6:00 a.m. with strangers who flowed through the same space in the lounge area continually from when I first arrived around midnight. A couple of people left around 2:00 a.m., leaving me with about a dozen people until the sun came up. It was precisely this lounge area that got me thinking about the sociality of capsule hotels. If a capsule hotel is just a place for businessmen working or partying late who missed the last train home and needed a place to crash, what were these people doing in the lounge? Shouldn’t they be sleeping in their personal capsules?

Hiro: A Salaryman

Hiro was a married salaryman in his early forties. His hair was half grey, but it was just enough to make him look graceful and respectable. Because he walked tall and dressed neatly, I thought he was a CEO of a company until the minute I saw him checking into the Capsule Hotel Dream. He told me that he had a house in the suburbs about two hours away from Shimbashi. Every day he had to change the train three times to get to the station closest to his home, where he would pick up his bicycle and ride about twenty minutes to reach home. After working eight to ten hours, plus about five hours of commuting time every day, he was always extremely exhausted when he got home, and was still very tired when the alarm clock went off, usually only about four hours after he closed his eyes at night. It was not that late at night when I talked to Hiro—about 11:00 p.m.—so I asked him why he did not go home since the train was still running. Because I was expecting a simple answer, such as "It doesn’t make sense to go home just to get up four hours later," I was surprised when he shared his somewhat personal rationale, "I don’t want to go home. Sometimes my wife doesn’t really understand me," said Hiro.

It seemed to me that he was not comfortable with his socioeconomic status, and was frustrated with all kinds of pressure from his wife and daughter. "I have a teenage daughter who will demand more from my very little income, and my wife who doesn’t like what I do very much," said Hiro. "Whenever I go home, we have nothing else to talk about except how she ‘thinks’ I should try to earn more money for the family." This was a striking comment about the current state of Japanese familial affairs.

From our conversation, it seemed to me that Hiro knew that he would not be able to fulfill the needs of his family—almost as if he was ashamed of himself—and for that reason, "a very long-hour workday, train schedule, and capsule hotel" were three perfect excuses for him not to go back home and face his wife and daughter. According to the anthropologist Merry White (2002), in a typical Japanese nuclear family, the role of the father has changed from the "thunder father," who exerts a strong sense of authority and makes all decisions, to that of an individual who sometimes only has limited authority (perhaps primarily economic?) due to the effects of occupational structure. The story that Hiro told exemplifies such change, as he believed that his wife and daughter did not really respect him because of his low income. He stayed in the capsule hotel about two or three times a week. Although it was quite cheap (about 3,000 yen per night), it was still cheaper to go home with a monthly train pass. "A night here is cheap but it does add up," he said, "but I’d like to live here forever if I have the money…why not?" Hiro always stayed at the Capsule Hotel Dream because of its "Stay ten nights get a free night" loyalty program. When staying at a capsule hotel, he usually spent half an hour in the hot tub and a full hour “hanging out” in the bathhouse, devoting about forty-five minutes cleaning every part of his body. He always stayed up late watching TV in the lounge. "It’s good to be alone…I couldn’t watch anything at home because our house is too small and my wife and daughter are usually annoyed by the noise," said Hiro. He enjoyed watching TV and drinking free, hot tea. I did not see him socializing with anyone in the lounge; he was basically just enjoying himself. He usually did not go to bed until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. When I asked him whether he felt comfortable sleeping in such a small space, Hiro replied, "I have no problem with it at all, I actually like it because it is small. It’s good to be alone. I feel at home here." The need to be alone was central to Hiro’s affection for capsule hotel life. It seems counterintuitive to think that someone would feel at home in a capsule hotel, especially when that person did have a real home to which he could go. He got up around 8:00 a.m., which gave him enough time to brush his teeth, get dressed, and walk about eight minutes to his office.
Ken: "In the Cocoon I feel I was myself again"

I met Ken, a struggling musician in his late twenties, at the Capsule Hotel Orange in Kabukichō, Tokyo's red light district close to the world's busiest train station of Shinjuku. The Capsule Hotel Orange had been around for twenty years. It opened in the early 1990s, and had been making a profit ever since. The location was the main factor why it had been so successful: it was close to the business area of Shinjuku where many salarymen work, and it was in Kabukichō where they all came to get drunk after work. Most of the Capsule Hotel Orange clients were the drunk salarymen who partied so late that they missed the last train. Beyond the shoe locker area where I took off my shoes and put them in the locker, there was a front desk. "You need to buy a ticket first?" said the receptionist who then sent me back to the "ticket machine," a small machine with multiple buttons saying "short stay: one hour," "short stay: three hours," "overnight: checkout 8am," "shower only," and a few more. I put money in the machine and tapped "overnight: checkout 8am." A small piece of paper with the details of the reservation came out of the machine. I walked back to the front desk and gave the ticket and the key to my shoe locker to the receptionist, who in exchange gave me a towel and a set of sleepwear.

I usually call him Ken-Kun, instead of just Ken. (Kun is an honorific that the Japanese use to address a younger man denoting some familiarity between the two speakers. By calling him Ken-Kun, I felt that we were not complete strangers.) Ken-Kun thought of himself as a rebellious youth. You could see this from his dyed "Japanese punk" hairstyle and his clothing (jeans jacket and ripped jeans), which looked like he just came out of Woodstock in 1969. He obviously did not want to follow the societal norms, and did not continue on to college after he graduated from high school. Consequently, his parents, who lived in the suburbs of Tokyo, had been worried about him ever since. "I didn't want to bother them, and I love playing guitar, so I left home to do my own thing," said Ken-Kun. Unlike in other East Asian countries such as Korea, Taiwan, and China, university education is available to everyone in Japan because there are many colleges of different ranks. But because Japanese college students take college as "moratorium space" between the entrance examination and the company life, graduates view college education as the area of the least study in Japan's education system (Goodman and Phillips, 2003). No matter how hard they worked in college, graduates will have to be trained again by the company for which they will be working upon graduation. Hence, higher education is usually viewed as the "four years to have fun." Ken-Kun did not see the point in going to college. "I could have fun every day being out here. Look at (Japan's most famous novelist today Haruki) Murakami, he went to college and hated it." Ken-Kun resented the system.

A capsule hotel's "room" is usually long but narrow to save space. Ken's slim guitar case fit perfectly into the narrow locker, but then he was not able to hang anything else; hence, he piled other things on top of his guitar case and reorganized upon checking out. Through a network of fellow young musicians, he would get phone calls from a pub, bar, or event, to go play about three or four nights a week; and given that his earnings were minimal, he could only stay in a capsule hotel. Ken-Kun was also talented with the piano, keyboard, and drums, thanks to his parents who could afford a private tutor to teach him music when he was growing up in the late 1980s. He had a true passion for music and thought that he could have done well in a music school. Of course, Japan's economy went downhill from the early 1990s onwards, so
his parents could no longer afford his private lessons and, therefore, began to encourage him to think about the future in a big corporation where his social stability was guaranteed. This could be the reason why he rebelled against the system: it was almost that he felt “betrayed” by the system and his parents for not letting him pursue his dream.

The lounge area of the Capsule Hotel Orange was more vibrant than that of the Capsule Hotel Dream because the neighborhood was full of pubs and karaoke bars. The hotel was located on the seventh, eighth, and ninth floors of a commercial building, so many clients, after they were done with their meals and usual after-work party with their colleagues, came up to the hotel to continue drinking with their close friends. The lounge was right next to the public bath, so many came out from the bath and walked directly to the lounge for a bottle of sake. Kei and I chatted there from around midnight until 5:00 a.m. There were more than twenty people in the lounge when we came in around midnight. By the time we left, there were about half a dozen people still chatting, another half a dozen of them fast asleep at the massage chairs, and about a dozen who had just come up for a cup of morning coffee. When we saw the sun come up behind the rows of tall buildings visible from the hotel’s windows, both of us decided it was about time to “call it a night.”

Ken-Kun did not always stay at the Capsule Hotel Orange, as he moved around the city to play music, but mostly the venues were around Shinjuku and the nearby areas. Like Hiro, he cared about the loyalty program that the hotel offered (“Stay eight nights get one free night,” suggesting more competition in this area). But unlike Hiro, the only reason Ken-Kun stayed at the capsule hotel was because it was the only place he could afford. It was true that he could have gone home and stayed at his parents’ home, yet the fact that he did not fulfill his parents’ expectations and the role of a good child by going to college in order to “get a good job in a corporation, bank, or major conglomerate,” just like both of his parents, made him socially vulnerable. He did not tell me much about his family life, but he said he would try to see his parents once a month. They usually wanted him to stay overnight whenever he visited, and he wanted to stay with them, but usually he would get a call to go play somewhere; and for a struggling musician in his financial situation, he could not turn down an offer even to play children’s songs at a kid’s birthday party. When I asked him how much he enjoyed staying in the capsule hotel,
he replied, “It is nothing like home, and I would never call it a home. One day, I want a home where I have shelves for all of my records and a good stereo system. But there is one thing about the capsule hotel: the small space just for me. Whenever I crawl inside the “cocoon” (his personal nickname for the capsule), I feel protected. I have always been driven by other people; they push me around. It’s noisy out there. But in the cocoon, I feel like I was myself again.”

When Japan’s most revered modern novelist Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1977) talks about the beauty in the absence of the excess, he refers to the methods of meditation, which enable one to see one’s real need. I think it was reasonable to see the absence of spaciousness here as meditation. Because once you are in the capsule, and the bamboo shutter has been pulled down, all you see is blank white space no matter which way you roll your body. There were just blank walls (this would be where Barthes’ quote “...nothing more, nothing else, nothing” is most appropriate! [1983: 50-1]). You are lying in a space that provides nothing that you do not need: it was a space for meditation. Cut off from the world and from the expectations of society, the young Ken-Kun could feel like he was himself: this was what Tanizaki views as the beauty of the absence. Yoshinobu Ashihara also made a similar comment: the Japanese sense of aesthetics is all about the appreciation of the interior, as opposed to the exterior (1986: 100). The underlying structure of the capsule room, from this perspective, is very similar to a typical Japanese bedroom space, which is usually an empty tatami (traditional mat) floor, walled-in from all sides by plain paper walls.

Unlike Western-style bedrooms in which there are many objects, such as side tables, a powder table, a television, bookshelves, and sometimes even working desk, Japanese bedrooms are just a space for sleep. There are storage spaces for linen and blankets built in to the walls of the bedrooms and concealed by sliding panels. However, when it comes to bedtime, all sliding panels would close, turning the walls of all sides of the room into simply solid, clean, and blank vertical plains, enclosing the space for sleep—nothing more, nothing less. It is the space for sleep as meditation.

Another aspect that was rather intriguing about Ken-Kun’s comment is that he felt he was “protected” when he was inside the capsule. One of the major concerns that non-Japanese tourists have when they stay in the capsule hotel is security. There is no door; all capsules are separated from the corridor by only a vertical bamboo shutter. One of my colleagues posed the question, “How do you know that there won’t be any crazy person invading your capsule when you sleep, robbing or even killing you?” This was a legitimate question: how do you know the person sleeping next to you is not a mentally unstable person? You wouldn’t go to bed without having locked your door, hence why would you sleep among complete strangers without having any door at all?

The capsule hotel’s security system is both active and a system built on trust. By law, every floor has a closed-circuit TV, and inside the capsule there is an emergency button. Yet, as Ken-Kun told me, “What the clients really need to know is that in the capsule hotel, people watch out for each other.” Ken-Kun shared with me that although he never encountered anything untoward in the capsule hotel, he would always keep his eyes open for any unusual activities. In my own experience, apart from the lounge and public bath areas, I barely saw anyone. Once in the capsule compound, I knew that there were people staying in most of the capsules because most of the capsule’s bamboo shutters were down, but I did not see them. I had no idea who they were or how long they had been in the capsule. There were noises (mostly snores), but otherwise the capsule compound was a rather quiet place. I had to walk very softly because walking loudly was considered inconsiderate, let alone making noise or talking on the phone (I had to go to the elevator hall to do so).

Frameworks for Analysis

To prevent myself from oversimplifying Japan—as Barthes did—I resort to two cultural frameworks to help me build my argument about the unique forms of urban sociality found in a place where one would not necessarily expect it. The first framework is Tanizaki’s In Praise of Shadows (1977 [1933]). Tanizaki is one of Japan’s master novelists whose profound sensitivity toward the, broadly defined, “Western and Japanese cultures” enables him to offer critical comments about the different ways of thinking about aesthetics among the Japanese and others. Aesthetics, for Tanizaki, is not simply a matter of beauty, but efficiency and functionality. In fact, one can conceive of In Praise of Shadows as an antithesis to Empire of Signs: unlike Barthes, who
made instantaneous remarks about what he saw as unique in Japan, Tanizaki
meditated on those differences. In *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki shows
us that there is also a socio-temporal element in the semiotics of aesthetics: “We
(Easterners) will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own
particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined always to better
his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light—
his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even
the minutest shadow.”

In other words, it is the shadow that allows us to see the “depth” of things,
and it is always in the depth of things where the true beauty of life lies. While
Western semiotics focus on the system of signs only as they are to be viewed
in clear light, the Japanese sense of aesthetics is determined by the interplay of
light and shadow, absence and presence, darkness and lightness, and so on. For
instance, when Barthes looked at the interior design of a traditional Japanese
house, he made the comment, “Turn the image upside down: nothing more,
nothing else, nothing” (1983: 50-1). The panoramic photo of the interior view
on which he comments is a typical corridor; on one side there is a paper wall
that separates the interior from the exterior; and on the other side there is a
series of sliding doors leading to the inner living room and the alcove of the
house. The photo was taken in broad daylight in which you could barely see
the depth of field. It was also composed symmetrically, hence the corridor in
the middle looks particularly flat, overwhelmingly repetitive, and simplistic
(i.e., per Barthes’ comment; “nothing more, nothing else, nothing”). It was
Barthes’ choice to use such an image to discuss his view of a Japanese interior,
which would receive a completely similar take from Tanizaki:

Whenever I see the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room,
I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our
sensitive use of shadow and light... The “mysterious Orient” of
which Westerners speak probably refers to the uncanny silence of
these dark places. And even we as children would feel an
inexpressible chill as we peered into the depths of an alcove to
which the sunlight had never penetrated. Where lies the key to
this mystery? Ultimately it is the magic of shadows.

We can see here that the two logics are different. What I think best
summarizes the essence of Japanese aesthetics in Tanizaki’s eye is the architect
Louis Kahn’s comment, “The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it
fell on the wall of a building” (Tanizaki, 1977). What *In Praise of Shadows*
demonstrates, both literally and metaphorically, is that in evaluating the
Japaneseness of the capsule hotel, we must take into account the absence as
much as the presence of its physical elements. It might lack spaciousness, but
in such absence there is a profound gain. After only a few nights, I could feel
the beauty of this small space.

Secondly, the architectural theorist Yoshinobu Ashihara sets out *The
Hidden Order* (1986). Ashihara’s analysis reveals the deeper structure—hidden
order—of modern Japanese aesthetics in all scales from an object to a house,
from a house to a garden, and from a garden to a city, which essentially lies in
its simplicity despite the complex appearance. Moreover, it is the flexibility of
Japanese socio-urban infrastructure that enables its cities, such as Tokyo, to
expand, morph, and change over time according to urbanization’s demand.
Hence, as much as one would love to think that the capsule hotels are an ad
hoc mechanism for a city that urbanized too rapidly in the past three decades,
it might well be the case that the capsule hotels were fundamentally Japanese.
That is, Ashihara is astute to point out, perhaps if we strip down all forms of
the contemporary urban—the capsule hotels, for example—we would see the
same basic structure of Japanese dwelling culture, which never changes.

The capsule hotels are rather cheap, which has to do with the high demand
rather than marketing strategy, as there are also other types of hotels. For
instance, the business hotels (a small room with a private bathroom) are
equally cheap, but they do not give you the social experience. The capsule
hotels provide clients with meditative as well as social spaces. I show in my
ethnography that sleeping is not always the only goal of the clients of the
capsule hotels. Just like modern cafés, clients see the lounge space of capsule
hotels as the place where they can see and be seen, but not be required to
have any interaction with anyone. There is a need to get away from personal
difficulties, and the physical facilities of the hotels, such as the public bath
and lounge, provide the clients with both ritual and mental emancipation.
The economic and social pressure makes their actual home feel unlike
home; hence, the capsule hotels serve as a temporary home for those who
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to understand the capsule hotels in the context of contemporary Japanese society. I began by referencing Roland Barthes, whose etic view (general, non-structural, and objective in its perspective) of Japan had for decades shaped the impression of the non-Japanese. I aim to contrast his view with an emic perspective—or the understanding of a particular phenomenon in terms of its internal elements and functioning—by using frameworks provided by two well-known Japanese cultural theorists, combined with research on modern Japanese society. Through my own experience and the personal stories of several individuals staying in these hotels I show how these spaces can challenge; I show how unique the capsule hotel is as an institution. If we look beyond its appearance (form) into its actual use (function), the capsule hotel exemplifies the essence of Japanese architecture that not only serves the changing purpose of urban life, but also adapts to the new forms of urban social change. Tokyoites treat the capsule hotels as their urban oasis; a space of hiatus in the city where everything is moving at a breakneck pace.

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