

Toward the Creation of a New “Keitai City”

Envisioning a new keitai worldview from the side of the real

Kiyohito Nagata: One of our keywords is “lifestyle infrastructure”. We want to propose a new type of lifestyle created by the interaction between keitai and humans. Various aspects of the functionality of everyday life are beginning to coalesce around the keitai. People already use it for phone calls and mail. Soon they will be able to use it for shopping as well, in place of a wallet.

Instead of some new phenomenon emerging from the keitai, I think it is entirely possible that we will see developments in the opposite vector, with things in the environment exerting an influence on the keitai. I suspect that these developments are deeply related to actual architecture and space.

Kengo Kuma: By now the keitai has come to play an absolutely central role in everyday life. You can even view soccer matches on it. This phenomenon reminds me of the vision of the city of the future which Archigram had in the 1960s. Ideas like “Plug-in City” and “Walking City” suggested an image of a flexible city with detachable urban functions. The keitai has gone a long way toward actually making this vision a reality. Against this background, I think we need to step back and reconsider the significance of the keitai within the city as a whole. Looking back over the past decade, the keitai has been the catalyst for some of the most optimistic aspirations in the city.

Nagata: Architecture is something real. You can see it and touch it. But communications is a virtual world where the things that are really going on cannot be made visible. There are communities in this virtual world, so in that sense it might be possible to call it a city. If that is true, then there are points of contact between the real and the virtual. It is these points of contact which offer the greatest possibilities.

Kuma: I think there is a whole new domain for design in those points of contact. Design for the keitai is usually thought to be the province of industrial designers, but I think that is shortsighted. These contact points constitute an extremely vast domain which could transform urban planning. For example, in the urban style of communications, when you want to meet your friend you get on a train and go see him. But you can also communicate by connecting through your keitai. If the rail network is an infrastructure, then you could also call the keitai an infrastructure. In the 1960s, it was thought that cities should be approached in terms of their infrastructure. Since the 1970s there has been a reaction to that in architecture – an

atmosphere of nihilism stemming from a feeling of powerless and the difficulty as an architect to make any progress with large urban plans. The dominant feeling has been that to discover where you should be going as an architect you should concentrate on designing small-scale architecture. The keitai has changed all that. Now seems to be our chance to change cities from their infrastructure. Of course is a different kind of infrastructure. But it all depends on how we take advantage of that chance. I hope we architects realize that now is the time to act and, as it were, invite ourselves in. In that sense, I think this competition is a very timely and ambitious experiment.

Nagata: Actually, from our perspective as makers of the keitai, the direction in which we should be going is something no one understands. My feeling is that building up the network and achieving the kinds of things that you read about in science fiction is not the right story. When you look at real spaces, they have something that makes people feel relaxed and happy. I think the keitai needs that sort of feeling, something you feel in situations in everyday life.

Can we build a new world that departs from accepted keitai assumptions?

Kuma: With all of its new and evolving functionality, the virtual world is on the offensive against the real world. The question is how people on the architectural side will react to that. I think it is important to be receptive to sensations from everyday life. Something is real because it is targeted at real people, not because it uses physical materials. I think this competition is about the ability to observe people in their daily lives and come up with specific ideas. This is something we take for granted in architecture, although recently more people seem to have a hard time understanding it. I hope this competition encourages more people to think about what our body is feeling and about how we should respond. I think one reason why the keitai has become so popular is simply that it feels good as a tool that operates directly on our bodies.

Nagata: Whether it is a PC or a telephone, it is hard to do what you really want if you have to share your environment with other people. A keitai is private, so it can easily become something very important to you personally, something you can't do without. You might say that the keitai gave form to the thoughts in peoples' minds, together with part of the contents of their pockets.

Kuma: Sometimes I wonder whether it is really fortunate that phone calls can get through to anywhere. We have all have encountered the excuse that “I must have been out of range.” I feel there is something very important there. Up to now, both architecture and the keitai have developed in the direction of the modernist concept of transparent space, picking up speed as they go. But once it actually becomes possible for radio waves to reach every point in the world, people may find that it’s not at all what they want.

Nagata: We have been so trying so hard to make everything more convenient and to take care of the parts that were lacking that we may have overlooked something very important for humans.

Recently there has been a great deal of discussion about how to prevent leaks of personal information. If you drop your keitai, then you lose an enormous amount of personal information. This is the kind of problem that might be solved if we changed our ways of thinking, including our thinking about cities and space.

Kuma: What seemed to be a functional flaw actually turns out to be very important when viewed from the viewpoint of the system as a whole. I think it is possible for technology to proceed in a direction different from the direction we are taking now. Just as in architecture, there may be a keitai that, although it uses the latest technology, is anti-modern and semi-transparent. There may be a large hint there.

Bodily behavior opens the way to a new world

Nagata: As it stands today, you have the choice of participating in the direction we are going now, or not participating. It’s too bad that you have to choose one or the other. If you look at the keitai as something that blends in together with people and spaces, then spaces will become more attractive and new spaces and systems will emerge to make life more enjoyable

Kuma: Stepping into a city square where people are actually coming together, you find that most of them are talking with their friends over their keitai, or sending mail, or surfing the Internet. A place that was planned as a community space has become a place for individuals to freely do their own thing. The modern age was an era of in which the community was dismantled for the sake of enabling the individual. There have been many architects who resisted that trend by designing squares and houses as devices to reinforce the sense of community, but that never led to genuinely rich spaces. The keitai represents the final stage of the dissolution of the individual. It seems to give us more freedom, but in fact we are becoming hostages to technology. Anyone who wants to get in touch with us can do so immediately. With GPS they even know where we are. We thought we were gaining unlimited freedom, but it may be that everyone is being shut into a gigantic glass case. People have begun to notice this, but the important thing is to think about what should happen next. Whether it is squares or houses, we have to think about a new kind of shelter. In the end, globalism also turned out to be constraining, not liberating. Some people may take refuge from those fears by retreating into the shell of old-fashioned regionalism. But there may be different kind of local, and a different kind of shelter.

Nagata: I think people have the freedom to react to different situations in different ways. In itself this kind of behavior is quite interesting. On the basis of the ideas submitted in this competition, we would like to create a visual projection of the near future. One of the points in that video would be how people behave. Visual information is easy for people to understand, and as a company we could share the image of the world depicted there and use it in our development work. What I would like to see is ideas about new lifestyles for people, including keitai, however you want to define it, plus hints for the future. I look forward to seeing proposals about the kinds of things important to those who create architecture, and how they relate to people.

Kuma: It’s not easy to depict systems in still images, or new kinds of bodily behavior. But expression through video may be possible. That is one of the interesting features of this competition, so I think we can ask participants to keep that in mind. I would like to see this competition transcend the framework of conventional architectural competitions with their focus on images.

Translated by Thomas Donahue

Below left: Kiyohito Nagata, Vice President of NTT DoCoMo, Inc. Managing Director, Product Department.

Below right: Kengo Kuma, Architect, Professor of Keio University, Department of Science and Engineering.

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