Spring 2019

The PostModer Hermits

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[ABSTRACT]

Metropolitan cities to grow at unfathomable rates, forming a new scale of geography known as Megaregions. As these settlements continue to develop with the principal focus on the consequences of economy and environment, the psychological, mental health of the inhabitants becomes neglected.

Japan, the archetypal example of a highly developed country, despite its economic and technological advantages, has been plagued by social isolation, suicides, and mental health issues among its people. With 541,000 young Japanese labeled as hikikomori, a term describing young people who isolate themselves in their rooms for months or years at a time, their memories of the city begs stimulation and their stories need attention.

The Post-modern Hermits is the project that seeks to redefine the relationship between people, architecture and time within the context of Japan. Using openness as a conceptual design strategy to form a memorial park which rejects the absolute completion. I intend to develop my project to share similar characteristics and features of Hejduk's work adapted through the chosen site of Aokigahara forest. Within the Aokigahara forest, follies will take shape according to the existing morphologies. With hybrid as the principal design formula, proposed follies seek to combine basic tectonics of found urban fabrics, collective memory fragments of Tokyo and the stories of Hikikomori to present facts as a way to call attention to the stories of the victims and to rethink how such social issues are dealt with.
[The Postmodern Hermits]
From Stories to Follies

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Architecture Thesis
Spring 2019
Xuechen Li
"I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to do anything. I don't even have the will to pick up the phone. Just what am I supposed to do?"
Living in a city means rubbing shoulders with millions of people every day – on public transport, in apartment buildings and on the streets. That might at first glance seem like an antidote to loneliness. Yet cities can be isolating, solitary places where many of us live entirely anonymously – never knowing who are neighbours are or who lives in the flat downstairs.

With the development of big cities, stressful and loneliness Life brings more and more pressure to people. Everyone wants to retreat from the world sometimes, some Japanese people find themselves spending months—sometimes years—of their lives in their bedrooms, only slipping out for midnight treks to the nearest convenience store. Usually male and usually in their twenties, these are Japan’s “missing million,” otherwise known as hikikomori.

This thesis is primarily based on the social phenomenon of hikikomori throughout Japan. It specifically examines such an urban phenomenon in the context Tokyo to derive a set of design approach to raise awareness for the psychological, emotional issues of the hikikomori.
Hikikomori are reclusive adolescents or adults who withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement. Hikikomori refers to both the phenomenon in general and the recluses themselves. Hikikomori have been described as loners or modern-day hermits. Estimates suggest that nearly half a million Japanese youth have become social recluses.\(^3\)

"I started to blame myself and my parents also blamed me for not going to school. The pressure started to build up\(^3\)"

"IT'S LIKE BEING IN A SELF-IMPOSED JAIL\(^4\)"

Fig.4-Hikikomori in Japan

Fig.5-Hikikomori depressed life

Fig.6-Hikikomori

Fig.7-Hikikomori messed up

Fig.4-Hikikomori in Japan

Fig.5-Hikikomori depressed life

Fig.6-Hikikomori

Fig.7-Hikikomori messed up
THE SUBJECT

In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare established the following criteria for hikikomori:

- A lifestyle centered at home
- No interest or willingness to attend school or work
- Symptom duration of at least 6 months
- Among those with no interest or willingness to attend school or work, those who maintain personal relationships have been excluded.
- Mental disorders have been excluded.

Hikikomori is a coping strategy activated in response to the excessive pressure of social realization typical of modern individualistic societies.

Some News about hikikomori:

- In 2002, the BBC documentary "Mystery of the Missing Million" brought the plight of Japan’s social recluses, the hikikomori, to mainstream English-language media.
- In 2003, some News about hikikomori:
  - A lifestyle centered at home
  - No interest or willingness to attend school or work
  - Symptom duration of at least 6 months
  - Among those with no interest or willingness to attend school or work, those who maintain personal relationships have been excluded.
  - Mental disorders have been excluded.

- I imagine this way of making few relationships might be originated somehow from the first prototypical one between mother and child, whether their mother-child relationship superficially looks good or bad.

- In 2002, the first edition of the Hikikomori Shimbun newspaper, published in November 2016. The contents, written by hikikomori and others involved with the issue, include interviews, columns, and information about self-help groups and counseling.

- Angry teens playing video games in isolation, ashamed parents speaking off-camera about physical abuse from their withdrawn offspring, and news reports of mentally ill hikikomori as kidnappers and murderers created a wildly imbalanced portrait of the million or more Japanese who live in self-confinement.
You basically shut yourself in your room and never come out. You even have your own fridge. All you need is a PS4 and you are happy. You are anti-social, and do not like people putting their nose into your business. You weren’t like that before, though. You used to be quite the sweet child. Try going outside and experiencing the world and your friendliness will come back.
The social phenomenon of people who experience loneliness and mental health issues is not only present in Japan. In fact, it has been a rising issue across the globe, with nations such as US, UK, and Japan recognizing loneliness as a public health issue. In Japan, specifically, loneliness has become a pressing concern within the society.

The social group of people who experience this type of prolonged loneliness and isolation is referred to as a Hikikomori. As this form of social group continued to receive no attention on the society, people end their lives as a result.

Secondary Hikikomori
Primary Hikikomori
SUICIDE

Posibility of medical treatment

People in the U.K. and Japan More Often Say Loneliness is a Public Health Problem than an Individual Problem

United States
47% 45%

United Kingdom
66% 27%

Japan
52% 41%

Most People In Japan View Hikikomori as Serious Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very serious</th>
<th>Somewhat serious</th>
<th>Not too serious</th>
<th>Not all serious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among those reporting loneliness or social isolation</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The social group of people who experience this type of prolonged loneliness and isolation is referred to as a Hikikomori. As this form of social group continued to receive no attention on the society, people end their lives as a result.
THE SUBJECT

A SIGN OUTSIDE MUSEUM IN JAPAN READS "THESE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM DECLINED TO ENTER THE MUSEUM"

Rising isolation and loneliness are global problems, and are reflected by the demographics of the largest cities in the developed world. It is really dangerous for a country that people feel strong isolation in their home, it could cause a lot of urban issues. High suicide rate is one of them.

Data taken and processed from: Word Values Survey wave 4 (1999-2004)

Suicides, 2010 or Most Recent Year (Number per 100,000 population)

Data taken and processed from: World Health Organization (Updated 2015)
"Groups of lonely young people meet online, organising group suicides in a forest at the foot of Mount Fuji."

In the absence of immediate social networks and friendship groups Tokyo’s isolated youth often turn to the impersonal anonymity of the online world. The emergence of online communities dedicated to suicide—often populated by hikikomori—has been a disturbing manifestation of this sense of isolation. Groups of lonely young people meet online, organising group suicides in a forest at the foot of Mount Fuji known as the ‘Sea of Trees’.

Source: https://medium.com/the-megacities-issue/lonely-in-tokyo-e4d0b89c17f
Aokigahara is a dense forest at the base of Mount Fuji in Japan. The foliage here is so thick that it has come to be known as ‘Sea of Trees’. The forest thrives on 20 sq. km of volcanic land and is just around 2-hour journey from Tokyo city. The Aokigahara forest in Japan has the unfortunate distinction of being the world’s second most popular place to end one’s life. Japanese authorities no longer release exact numbers of the people who commit suicide in Aokigahara. Some estimates claim that as many as 100 people a year successfully kill themselves here.
Called “the perfect place to die,” the Aokigahara forest in Japan has the unfortunate distinction of being the world’s third most popular place to die by suicide.
The Aokigahara forest has been featured in several bestselling novels and movies, like The Forest and The Sea of Trees.

The Forest is a 2016 American supernatural horror film directed by Jason Zada and written by Ben Ketai, Nick Antosca, and Sarah Cornwell. Starring Natalie Dormer and Taylor Kinney, it follows a young woman who travels to Aokigahara (the suicide forest) to find her sister.

The Sea of trees is a 2015 film directed by Gus Van Sant. It is about a suicidal American man who loses a Japanese man in a forest near Mt. Fuji and the two search for a way out.
THE SITE

Suicide victims found in the forest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998-74</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-78</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-100</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-108</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-70</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1998's main suicide motives:

Health: 27%
Economic: 16%
Family: 8%
Employment: 7%
Others: 7%
Unknown: 8%
The Aokigahara forest is a 10 square miles site densely populated by trees. The whole has 2 main bus routes connecting the access points. It is also defined by two zones, with one populated (18%), and the other unpopulated (82%). As it has been a site where suicides often take place, the yearly average of suicides in the forest is 54, with 23 on the north side, and 31 on the south, a place where entry is prohibited. Given that there are 23 victims, 23 follies will be conceived in the site.

Within the designated site in the populated zone of the forest, 9 points of attraction are chosen. According to the existing programmatic context of the attraction points, the follies will have programmes that best adapt to, and complement the existing programmes.
AMBITION

Metropolitan  Social issue  Hikikomori  Suicide Forest

CALL ATTENTION
AMBITION

- Deal with the urban phenomenon
- Send a dark message to the audience
- Memorial to the Victims of Hikikomori
- Call attention

THE POSTMODERN HERMITS

- Monument
- Record history
- Send a message
- Call attention
- Social issue
- Victims
- Record history
CASE STUDY 1

Green Archipelago 1977
Oswald Mathias Ungers

Given the post-war condition of Berlin, Unger's proposal envisions Berlin as a green archipelago. As debris of the bombed-out areas are gradually cleared, it is apparent that there exists a hyper vastness in some destroyed areas, which starkly contrasts the density. By selecting existing urban morphology, Ungers dismantle and infill. He sees these urban fabrics, which are culturally significant, as found objects, off of which the rest of the city could pasturage. By breaking the whole, each individual part is under a process of analysis.

While architecture has been preoccupied with growth, the primary focus of this project is to plan the denouement for the city. In the act of cancellation, erasure, can the frictions between programme and containment be suspended. Urban context understood as an aggregation of fragments.

**CASE STUDY 2**

La Defense 1991

OMA

What would happen if, even in Europe – especially Europe – we declare every buildings in the zone that is older than 25 years worthless – null and void- or at least potentially removable?

How does such a question change the parameters and interpretation of this project.—We analysed this question in numeral terms and discovered that if we laundered the site in five-year increments by simply erasing all buildings over the age of 25, vast areas would gradually be liberated. Thirteen

We would preserve buildings of merit, of buildings of sentimental value – Nanterre, a very beautiful court house, a park, a station- and of course we would keep the Grande Arche, the CNIT, and the Tour Fiat as a kind of 20th century acropolis.’ Rem Koolhaas.

By the erasure of buildings older than 25 years old, the intention was to re-interpretable pieces of architecture and placing them on a pedestal. The imposition of the grid.


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Xuechen Li
The primary design logic was to make clear a vision of an era and to project into the future the economic and cultural progression of Paris. Inspired by ideas of deconstructivism, Tschumi's vision aimed to encourage movements, freedom, and exploration of the space, as activities themselves will become a part of the architecture.

Hosting a catalogue of 10 gardens installment, with each one created as a different representation of deconstructivism. Furthermore, there are a total of 35 red folly installments, which follows the order of a grid, helping the users in circulating through the park. What is the most interesting, though, is that Tscumi deliberately creates two intersecting grids, one of the follies and other of the surfaces and lines. The intersection serves as a disruption to the rationality of the grid, allowing sporadic spatial qualities.

CASE STUDY 4

Exodus 1972
Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis

Taking the Berlin wall as inspiration, the primary design logic of this project was to reinforce the boundaries between different parts of the city. And by clearly demarcating a strip of metropolitan desirability, people make themselves the voluntary prisoner of the architecture.  

"Within the void created by the walls would be eleven autonomous squares into which various monuments could be relocated from elsehwere. Divested of their original content and removed from their former context, these monuments would serve as the focus of collective meditation, 'social condensers'"  

As a competition entry to a memorial park in Berlin, the victims is a project which imposes an intervention developed over time.\textsuperscript{17}

The primary design intention was that of an “openess”. By utilizing each architectural masques as a tool to revive the collective figures that inhabited a place by putting them in direct relation with the citizens of today. It serves as a reminder of the terror of the site, and its former function.(Gestapo torture chamber)

The self-contained quality of the project is borrowed from Ungers notion of islands within islands. It is challenging the relationship between autonomouns infrastructures, nature grids, and time sequences and memories.\textsuperscript{18}

The fact that the citizens of Berlin take part in building the project places emphasis on the action. The action of building makes the users take part in remebering and re-remebering the horror of the past.

According to the case studies, I found one of them has high similarity with my intention, which is Hejduk’s Victims 1984. From the statement of PAP competition, it also want to propose a memorial park for the victims of the war. Therefore, I would choose Victims 1984 as my main case study, and adapted his openness strategy and design formula to my design.

The Post-modern Hermits is using openness as a conceptual design strategy to form a memorial park which rejects the absolute completion. This unstable future will imply a continual process of unfolding and unveiling over time by other people taking part in realizing the design. Used to be quite the sweet child. Try going outside and experiencing the worldhaps your friendliness will come back.

I intend to develop my project to share similar characteristics and features of Hejduk’s work adapted through the chosen site of Aokigahara forest. Within the Aokigahara forest, follies will take shape according to the existing morphologies.
My proposal is aim to create a memorial park which has two stages. In the first stage, 9 chosen follies (out of 23) of varying programme will be constructed according to existing points of attraction. From there, as people receive the message, they are to partake in realizing the rest of the follies. Their physical participation, as a form of conversation between the body and the monument, will call attention to Hikikomori. And for the next stage, it is a strategy to make people involved in the construction, these activities will reinforce people’s memory and at the same time further call people’s attention. Since the stories are still happening in our daily life, the total number of Follies is also keep increasing with time. The intention of this growing Follies is to make people be aware of this social issue and it can’t be ignore anymore.
From Hejduk’s Victims, I learned his design strategy is aimed to create a new architectural language. So he is using rational structural form and combined irrational emotional story as a formula to generate a series of Follies.

With hybrid as the principal design formula, proposed follies seek to combine basic tectonics of found urban fabrics, collective memory fragments of Tokyo and the stories of Hikikomori to present facts as a way to call attention.

**DESIGN STRATEGY**

Rational structure form + Irrational emotional story = Follies

Basic structural form from urban fabric + The story of Hikikomori from their personal statement + site morphology reshape the design = Send a message as a way to call attention
DESIGN STRATEGY

1. Horticulturalist
   - Trees/Shrubs/Flowers
2. Gardener
   - Garden
3. Rosewoman
   - Rose Arbor
4. Metalman
   - Wall of metal flowers
5. Park Attendees
   - Park/Entry Gate-House
6. Inhabitants
   - House
7. Drawbridge man
   - Drawbridge
8. Trolley man
   - Trolley
9. Mechanics
   - Box car parts
10. Operator
    - Moving star
11. Children JJ
    - Jungle Jim
12. Children SP
    - Sliding pond
13. Children SB
    - Sand box
14. Children S
    - Swings
15. Children MGR
    - Merry-Go-Round
16. Children SP2
    - Spinner
17. Children SS
    - See-saw
18. Children PT
    - Picnic table
19. Physician
    - Office tower
20. Nurse
    - Dispensary
21. Optometrist
    - Spectacles
22. Painter
    - Studio A
23. Musicians
    - Studio B
24. Poet
    - Studio C
25. Soloist
    - Labyrinth
26. Musicians
    - Music hall units
27. Dancer
    - Dance platform
28. Librarian
    - Book tower
29. Typewritter
    - Typewriter
30. Poem
    - No more
31. Mask repairman
    - Mask shop
32. Watch repairman
    - Watch shop
33. Paper restom
    - Work shop
34. Carpenter
    - Wood shop
35. Plumber
    - Water house
36. Shoemaker
    - Type house
37. Clothman
    - Shop of clothes
38. Crochet lady
    - Crochet chair
39. Shade woman
    - Shades of light
40. Security
    - Structure
41. Researcher
    - Office 1
42. Identity card
    - Identity card unit
43. Stampman
    - Stamp place
44. Accountant
    - Office 2
45. Keeper of the records
    - Record hall
46, 47. Gear of the keys/Taker of the keys
    - Key place/key storage
48. Scissors/Shears
    - Ice house
49. Fireman
    - Fire place
50. Zoologist
    - Copies of recaptured creatures
51. Butterfly collector
    - Collecting place
52. Catfish
    - Catfish pond
53. Peacocks
    - Peacock’s walk
54. People
    - Park
55. Child
    - Playhouse
56. Judge
    - Stair
57. Room for thought
    - Room A
58. Room of the innocent
    - Room B
59. Room of the innocent
    - Room C
60. Passengers
    - Sidewalk
61. Toll taker
    - Bridge removed
62. Time-keeper
    - Ferris wheel clock
63. The dead
    - The dead cry
64. The travellers
    - Bus
65. The exiles
    - Attached units
66. The disappeared
    - Unreconcilable numbers
67. The application
    - Passport building
Upon investigating Victim’s programmes, Hejduk conceives of a general programme set for the memorial park. This project learns by applying the same general programme, but also attempts to adapt to existing local morphologies presented on the site.

Try going outside and experiencing the worldhaps your friendliness will come back.

Upon investigating Victim’s programmes, Hejduk conceives of a general programme set for the memorial park. This project learns by applying the same general programme, but also attempts to adapt to existing local morphologies presented on the site.

Existing attractive points

1. Minshuku guest houses
2. Gyonimso hotel
3. Rok cave entrance
4. Minshuku village
5. Ryugu cave entrance
6. Wind cave
7. Ice cave
8. Niwak Trail
9. Wind bird park

Adapt to the site morphologies
DESIGN STRATEGY

STORIES

Reviewed personal stories from Online or Video to generate 9 topic titles:

1. Hospital
2. Shrine
3. Classroom
4. Bus station
5. Chapel
6. Double side cabin
7. Stair tower
8. Blloon house
9. Twin house

Bus station  
Shrine  
Double side cabin
Classroom  
Hospital  
Chapel
Twin house  
Blloon house  
Stair tower
STORIES

DOUBLE SIDE CABIN

Take one as example, the story is about travel: a young Japanese boy move from countryside to Tokyo, but he can not get with the fast tempo of life and feel a strong segregation and isolation in the big city. I use a wall to divided a cabin to express the sense of isolation, and use different material to provide different feeling of city. Tnd because it located in a lake as a meditation room in the big city. After he got several failures in his life, he become a hikikomori. I make it higher and also has four columns.

MEDITATION ROOM
FOLLIES - Double side cabin / Meditation room

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FOLLIES-Twin house/Shops

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FOLLIES-Chapel/Memorial hall

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FOLLIES-Balloon house/Botanic garden

FOLLIES-Bus station/Visitor center
FOLLIES-Stair tower/Playstructure

FOLLIES-Hospital/Gallery
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Synthesis

List of Figure

Fig.1 All That’s Interesting. “Suicide Forest: Japan’s Eerie, Heartbreaking Graveyard Of Thousands.” All That’s Interesting. October 09, 2018. Accessed May 08, 2019. https://allthatinteresting.com/suicide-forest-aokigahara.


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Analysis
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Synthesis