



Otaku architecture

Description



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Otaku is a Japanese word for a category of individual, typically a youth, who is

obsessed with *anime* (Japanese animations), *manga* (comics), and other pop culture forms. He or she prefers to be alone, may be lonely, lacks social skills and stays at home. The *otaku* keeps unsociable hours: staying up for 40 hours then sleeping for 12. The category predates the widespread adoption of social networks, but it now extends to those who might restrict their socialising to Internet contacts.

The word *otaku* has two connections relevant to architecture. According to a classic paper from the 1990s by Volker Grassmuck, *otaku* is an everyday word meaning “your home,” which references the house-bound aspects of the *otaku* individual. But the word also connotes the polite form for “you.” Apparently Japanese individuals identify strongly with their places of residence. So “your home” reduces to “you.” The polite form implies distance. *Otaku* individuals keep their distance.

So *otaku* is meant sarcastically, as when (or if) teenagers might address each other as “sir.” If we lived in a different age then the association would reside with “Thou,” the polite [actually “informal” – corrected 18 Nov 2016] term in Old English for “you,” now reserved for addressing a throne or a deity in religious contexts. In sum, this complex word, *otaku*, is applied to individuals who say “otaku,” which here equates to “stay away from me.”

Much has been written about the social circumstances of *otaku* individuals, and their target as a consumer category. There are countless YouTube videos and websites poking fun at *otaku* characteristics, fantasies and subcultures (eg *hikikomori*). But there are spatial implications of *otaku*, or at least the *otaku* category says something about spatiality.

No doubt there is an *otaku* architecture: the exaggerated perspectives of simplified buildings in cartoons and comics. Perhaps something made from Lego's themed [Ninjago](#) construction kit qualifies, or the architecture of love hotels, or the patterns of spatial segregation in the home that encourage isolation (Chaplin, 2007, p.97).



Otaku architecture may be evident in the corner of an *otaku*'s living quarters or den, populated by racks of DVDs, comics, old games consoles, plastic models of fantasy characters, and with the detritus of a lifestyle that pays little regard for personal grooming, health and sociability.

The sarcastically polite connotation of *otaku* as sir or Thou also has architectural connotations. Architecture is redolent with references that are the opposite to what they suggest. We think of gigantic staircases, over-scaled porticoes, and machine production masquerading as craft, as pretentious, if not ironic: an architecture of Thou, cathedralesque, sacrilegious, mockingly indifferent. This is the architecture of fantasy computer games, fakery and illusion. We can add to the vocabulary of architectural irony the category *otaku*.

But *otakus* are sometimes designated as "maniacs" or high-tech, geeky obsessives slaves to their own arbitrary routines. If *otaku* is about obsession then there is an *otaku* in each of us. People who dwell, who live in houses, are *inhabitants*, ie house-bound creatures, occupying habitats, that are places for the exercise of habits. Habits, such as arising from bed every morning, cleaning teeth, eating, watching television, updating FaceBook pages and living to schedules are prosaic and everyday obsessions, exercised in the home (see [The Tuning of Place](#)).

It is just that *otaku* practices operate on different cycles. Any home can promote the cycles of routine and repetitive patterns of excessive media consumption (see earlier [post](#) on media schedules). In this respect every home with a television or a computer is the place of *otaku*, or perhaps entry into civil society requires that we mask our *otaku* natures.

References

- Chaplin, Sarah. 2007. *Japanese Love Hotels: A Cultural History*. London: Routledge.
- Grassmuck, Volker. 1990. "I'm alone, but not lonely": Japanese Otaku-Kids colonize the Realm of Information and Media, A Tale of Sex and Crime from a faraway Place. [Link](#)
- Student animation project documentation: [work in progress](#)

With special thanks to Cheng Cheng.

Also see

Martin Parker's sound and multimedia work [Songs for an airless room](#) which

evolved from reports of the Japanese *Hikikomori*, a form of loner or "shut-in". While particularities of the Hikikomori are unique to Japan's youth, the theme of deliberate personal isolation is more universal, accelerated by the relentless presence of digital media and technology. The Internet is immersive, computer games addictive and behaviours tracked both on and offline, optimising the pull of the flickering screen.

Category

1. Play

Tags

1. architecture
2. critical theory
3. generation Y
4. hikikomori
5. home life
6. household
7. mass media consumption
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