

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



SOPHIA
scopio EDITIONS

volume 10, issue 1 | publication year: 2025

issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]

isbn: 978-989-36273-2-7

DOI: 10.24840/2183-8976_2025_0010_0001_13

homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

Documenting and Staging Alternative Urban Living: Miyamoto Ryūji's Cardboard Houses and its Materiality

Mengfei Pan

Abstract

This paper focuses on the Japanese photographer Miyamoto Ryūji (b. 1947) and his *Cardboard Houses* series (photographed between 1983 and 1996, and published collectively in 2003), examining how this body of work documents and presents an alternative form of human dwelling amid a rapidly changing urban landscape. It argues that the series illuminates possibilities for alternative ways of living that emerge in the interstices of urban space and underscores the cyclical nature of the city itself. By staging meticulously details of these houses and employing specific installation methods, *Cardboard Houses* invites viewers to reflect on the materiality and spatial experience of photography, as well as the impermanence of the subject matter. Situating the series within both Miyamoto's broader oeuvre—which consistently pursues and captures the transience of architecture and the city—and a wider body of postwar Japanese works that express an enthusiasm for small-scale urban structures, this paper demonstrates how the series constitutes an aesthetically inflected and critical documentary of human dwelling, one that actively engages with the material conditions of the urban environment.

Keywords: self-built houses of homeless, impermanence of city, architectural photography, Japanese photography, Tokyo

Mengfei Pan is an assistant professor at Faculty of Tourism and Community Development, Kokugakuin University, Japan. She earned her PhD degree with a thesis on the art networks in Ueno area in the Meiji period from the University of Tokyo. Her primary research interests lie in the relationship between art and place, and cross-cultural negotiations and exchanges, with a particular focus on Japan and the East Asian region.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the Japanese photographer Miyamoto Ryūji (b. 1947) and his *Cardboard Houses* series (photographed between 1983 and 1996, and published collectively in 2003), examining how this body of work documents and presents an alternative form of human dwelling amid a rapidly changing urban landscape. It argues that the series illuminates possibilities for alternative ways of living that emerge in the interstices of urban space and suggests the cyclical nature of the city itself. By staging meticulously detailed images of these houses and employing specific installation methods, *Cardboard Houses* invites viewers to reflect on the materiality and spatial experience of photography, as well as the impermanence of both the medium and its subject matter.

This paper situates the series both within Miyamoto's oeuvre, which consistently pursues and captures the transience of architecture and the city, and within a broader body of Japanese works from the past half-century that reflect an enthusiasm for small-scale urban structures. By contextualizing *Cardboard Houses*, this paper demonstrates how the series challenges conventional architectural photography, offers an aesthetically inflected and critical documentary of human dwelling that actively engages with the material conditions of the urban environment, and stages an alternative way of living through the spaces of exhibition.

"Ruin Photographer" and His Projects on City Transience

Miyamoto began his professional life as a photographer and editor for a few publications including the architectural journal *Toshi Jūtaku* (*Urban Housing*) from the early 1970s. His first works with *Toshi Jūtaku* was of the vernacular architecture in the Yanaka neighborhood of Tokyo, an area survived the natural disasters and wars and showed a mix of old and modern buildings. At *Toshi Jūtaku*, he was also involved in a project documenting the slums in central Hiroshima, known as *genbaku suramu* (atomic bomb slum), where he first encountered with "hand-built architecture (*tedukuri kenchiku*)" (Cushman 2018, 95).

After establishing himself as an independent photographer in 1975, Miyamoto's observant eye on the changing urban landscape and his persistent questioning of architectural permanence became increasingly apparent. As he later recalled, he turned his camera toward the drastically transforming Tokyo during the collapse of the economic bubble (Miyamoto 2021, 17). One major subject during this period was the demolition of buildings such as prisons, cinemas, factories, and other aging structures. This series was collected in the celebrated photobook *Architectural Apocalypse* (Miyamoto 1988b), which earned him the Kimura Ihei award, a prestigious Japanese photography prize established in 1975, and led to his popular reputation as a "ruins photographer." The foreword in *Architectural Apocalypse* by architect Isozaki Arata (1931–2022) discusses ruins as a vision of the future city and remarks that Miyamoto's photographs visualize the very principles of ruination (Isozaki 1988).

Miyamoto later explains that these subjects are not “classical ruins” (Miyamoto 2021, 16), which are typically associated with past civilizations and experiences of the sublime, but rather ordinary buildings that have been abandoned or are in the process of being demolished. The theme of change has long attracted the attention of photographers, as exemplified by Charles Marville (1813–1879)’s mid-nineteenth-century survey of Paris during Haussmann’s reconstruction of the city (McQuire 2008). In this respect, Miyamoto appears to align himself with a long-standing photographic tradition.

However, his *Cardboard Houses* series—photographed on the same roll of film as *Architectural Apocalypse*—clearly reflects his focus on modest-scale structures and their diverse, improvised yet functional designs, distinguishing them from the works of Marville and others that emphasize large-scale architectural and urban transformations. These houses, made from cardboard and other readily available urban materials, present a different facet of the city—one that does not necessarily signify progress or growth.

Cardboard Houses also inspired his later project *Pinhole House*, in which he constructs temporary “camera obscura” houses on the street and uses these self-built structures to photograph and record the city outside. To produce these works, Miyamoto enters the house, waits for the exposure to finish, and the resulting images often contain faint silhouettes of his own body.

The *Cardboard Houses* series occupies a position between projects that focus on massive, abandoned structures and those that involve the photographer’s body in documenting the city. It aligns with *Architectural Apocalypse* in its concern with the impermanence of architecture, but shifts attention to much smaller, improvised, site-specific structures. Whereas the *Pinhole House* project incorporates Miyamoto’s own body and actions as a means of mediating between the photographic work and the city it represents, *Cardboard Houses* maintains a certain distance.

This distance was initially quite close when Miyamoto first published several photographs in the weekly graphic magazine *Asahi Graph* in 1984. All ten photos included were in color: one showed the inside of a house, another depicted a group of homeless dwellers—likely “neighbors,” and another portrayed a house’s “owner” sitting at its entrance. The accompanying essay by Miyamoto introduced these dwellers’ previous occupations and current ways of living, and quoted their words about how they built their houses and how they enjoyed inhabiting them (Miyamoto 1984). As Miyamoto reflects, while photographing, he directly interacted with the homeless individuals, offering alcohol, cigarettes, and other items as gestures of goodwill in exchange for permission to photograph them (*SPA!* 1994, 27; Sanada and Miyamoto 1995).

This human presence and attempt at storytelling about these people's lives would be eliminated in Miyamoto's later publication of *CARDBOARD HOUSES* as a photobook in 2003. As critic Iizawa Kōtarō puts it, Miyamoto shifted away from his early "reportage" approach toward "a highly refined style" (Iizawa 1995, 186). This "highly refined style" is characterized by the absence of human beings, monochrome rendering, and brilliant handling of light and shadow, which together further accentuate the visual presence of the houses and the ingenuity of their construction. In addition, in contrast to the glossy paper of the weekly magazines where these photographs first appeared, the thicker matte paper used for the 2003 photobook—with the place and date printed on the left page and a single photograph on the right—adds a solemn atmosphere to the images (Fig. 1).



[Fig. 1]

© Miyamoto Ryuji / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

The book consists of 67 photographs of self-made dwellings by homeless individuals, primarily constructed from cardboard (Miyamoto 2003). The photographs were taken between 1983 and 1996, with most captured in Tokyo (46 works), and the rest in Osaka (7), Kawasaki (6), London (5), New York (1), Paris (1), and Hong Kong (1). In this photobook, Miyamoto recalls his first encounter with these "pockets of makeshift dwelling" as follows:

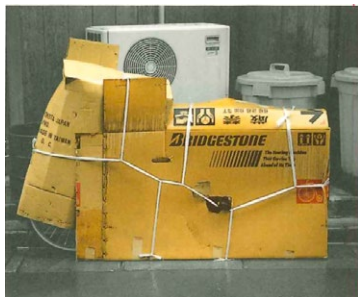
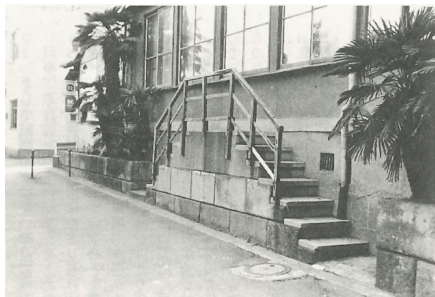
My first sightings of cardboard houses were in 1983. Underneath a bridge over a filled-in canal by Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market, around the disused Shiodome railway freight station, near the old Akihabara Fresh Produce Market, along the Nihonbashi River in the vicinity of the Tokiwa Bridge, little shelters that somebody had made for himself to live in. These were built as separate isolated single dwellings, not collective settlements nothing like the squatter slums one sees in the great cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. No, these had none of the boisterous energy of family life that overflows those slums; these were quiet, solitary retreats. As if someone had sought out hidden seams and buffer zones in the constructed urban fabric in which to stake individual claims and hide away unseen (Miyamoto 2003, 3).

Miyamoto points out the distinctive quietness and sense of solidarity embodied in these houses, in contrast to the slums depicted in another of his projects, *Kowloon Walled City* (Miyamoto 1988a). He himself uses terms such as "castle," "salon," and "masterpiece" to describe and evaluate their forms (Miyamoto 1984).

A Lineage of Interest in Forgotten Urban Objects

Miyamoto's fascination with these improvised dwellings can be understood within a broader cultural context in Japan, including writer Abe Kōbō's (1924–1993) novel *Box Man* (*Hako otoko*) (1973), the Street Observation (*Rojō kansatsu*) art movement from the 1980s, architect Suzuki Ryōji's (b. 1944) barrack studies, and installation artist Kawamata Tadashi's (b. 1953) *Field Work* projects from the late 1980s to early 1990s. These examples share an aestheticization of small structures—such as homeless dwellings, defunct architecture, and constructions made from abandoned materials—as well as a critical inquiry into urban redevelopment and the relationship between human and the city.

Abe's *Box Man* is a literary work that portrays a marginalized, homeless figure living in the city. It depicts a vagrant residing in a cardboard box, maintaining his anonymity and absence while continuously gazing out at the city through a narrow slit of the box. The cardboard box becomes a symbol of urban life, marked by isolation and a persistent desire to gaze. Miyamoto himself cites *Box Man* as an inspiration for his later *Pinhole House* series, which seeks to observe details in a flat, unprejudiced manner—mirroring the gaze of the box man (Miyamoto 2021, 19–20). *Cardboard Houses* appears to have served as a first step, with Miyamoto's position remaining outside the houses.



The collective art movement known as "Street Observation" approaches the city in a humorous way. Formed by a group of architects, illustrators, and editors in the late 1980s, it was led by Akasegawa Genpei (1937–2014), a prolific artist and writer. Akasegawa challenged conventional definitions of art and, in the 1980s, coined the notion of "Hyperart Thomasson," referring to architectural remnants that have lost their original function but are still maintained as if they served a purpose. The term "Thomasson" comes from Gary Thomasson, a highly paid American baseball player for the Yomiuri Giants who spent much of his contract sitting on the bench due to poor performance. Akasegawa adopted his name as a metaphor for structures that remain visible but serve almost no purpose. For example, in 1972, he found a staircase outside a hotel building in central Tokyo that had once connected to another structure. As that structure no longer existed, the staircase now leading nowhere had become useless. Akasegawa later named it a "pure staircase (*junsui kaidan*)" and published its photograph (Fig. 2), along with other "Hyperart Thomasson" art, in a book accompanied by his theoretical writing (Akasegawa 1987).

Akasegawa himself also showed an interest in the accidental encounter between the materiality of cardboard and the space of the street. A reprint edition of his book *Principles of Art (Geijutsu Genron)* (first published in 1991) features on its cover a photograph taken by Akasegawa, depicting a bicycle on the street wrapped in cardboard (Fig. 3). Akasegawa titled this photograph "Armored Bicycle (*Sōkō jitensha*)," but in a way, its form also resembles a small elephant. This symbolic photo reveals Akasegawa's vision, which sees the universe in wrapped objects and blurs the boundary between accidental, mundane life and the deliberate creation of art.

[Fig. 2]
Akasegawa Genpei. 1987. *Pure Yotsuya Staircase (Junsui kaidan)*, 1972, photography.

[Fig. 3]
Akasegawa Genpei. 2006. *Armored Bicycle (Sōkō jitensha)*, 1986, photography.

"Hyperart Thomasson" later became part of the broader Street Observation movement, which expressed a shared interest in ordinary, yet somehow humorous or oddly out-of-place structures found on the street. One member, dentist Ichiki Tsutomu (n.d.), for example, devoted himself to collecting fragments of demolished buildings (Ichiki 1985), offering another example that illuminates the impermanence of architecture and how abandoned materials can mediate between personal memory and the collective memory of buildings and cities.

Although the subjects of *Street Observation* and *Cardboard Houses* differ—with the former focusing on accidental architectural remnants or functionless street objects, and the latter on fragile purpose-built shelters—the two share a method of framing specific structures in ways that aestheticize them. This aestheticizing impulse is most clearly articulated in Miyamoto's own words: "The 'builders' knew that their houses were to be destroyed, but I often found 'art' in their works" (Miyamoto 1994, 50). This framing reflects a shared interest in often-overlooked street corners and a keen awareness of the rapidly changing city that gave rise to both forgotten urban structures and their dwellers.

Miyamoto's act of collecting and valuing cardboard houses also resonates with architect Suzuki Ryōji's fascination with barracks—simple, temporary, and often poorly constructed buildings typically erected in times of emergency, poverty, or displacement, such as after earthquakes (Suzuki 1988). Indeed, the *Cardboard Houses* series evokes the aftermath of earthquakes and wars that have struck the country (Iizawa 1995, 190–191; Cushman 2018). While Suzuki collects examples and elevates the barrack to a form of architecture, Miyamoto's photography offers an aesthetic attempt to set them apart from the everyday gaze that tends to overlook them, while also presenting a vision of the city's duality: the deconstruction of huge, massive structures and the construction carried out by marginalized groups using resources discarded by a growing city.

While the previous cases are either literary or photographic, Kawamata, by contrast, turned to material expression, installing small structures in urban environments (see Kawamata 1991). His *Field Work* project collected abandoned wood scraps and garbage on-site, assembled structures in various urban corners without permission, and allowed them to naturally collapse over time (Fig. 4). Isozaki Arata noted that Kawamata's installations were intriguing because they invited viewers to imagine the conflicts, confrontations, accidents, and even the homeless occupants inside (Kawamata 2001, 13). Kawamata's practice presents an art of building the ephemeral—an approach in which both the site and the materiality contribute to the meaning of the works. Art critic Murata Makoto also linked Miyamoto's *Cardboard Houses* with Kawamata's *People's Garden* at Documenta IX in 1992 and Krzysztof Wodiczko's (b. 1943) *Homeless Vehicle* (1988–1989) (Murata 1994). Although their works stem from different artistic intentions, Murata's comparison affirms the positioning of Miyamoto's work within the field of art rather than as a humanitarian endeavor.



While Kawamata creates new structures as part of his artistic practice/experiment, Miyamoto abstracts form by employing an unemotive photographic framing and emphasizing the urban setting. In contrast to photographers Sakokawa Naoko (n.d.) Takamatsu Hideaki (b. 1970), and Noguchi Kengo (b. 1984), whose works depict street people (Sakokawa 2004, 2013; Takamatsu 2009; Noguchi 2025), and architect-writer Sakaguchi Kyōhei (b. 1978), who produced a manual focusing on the forms and building processes of such houses (Sakaguchi 2004), Miyamoto's more thorough erasure of human figures, especially after the 2000s, redirects attention to the locations of these structures, offering a stark visual contrast between the shelters and the cities that produced them.

[Fig. 4]

Kawamata Tadashi, *People's Garden*, 1992
Courtesy of MISA SHIN GALLERY.

Documenting the Informal Urban Structures

Miyamoto's photography has often been described as carrying a strong documentary tone. In discussing Miyamoto's photographs of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, journalist Mikami Kimio states that they present the "bare facts" of the event (Mikami 2004, 2). Art critic Hayashi Michio compares him to a "surveyor" inspecting his subjects (Hayashi 2004, 197). Iizawa Kōtarō likewise notes that Miyamoto's photographs consistently compel viewers to interpret them as documents (Iizawa 1995, 188).

This documentary character first emerged from the collective presentation of the works: Miyamoto was not particularly concerned with arranging the houses geographically or chronologically.¹ The order of the works published in the monthly magazine *Asahi Camera* in 1994—Osaka 1993, New York 1991, Hong Kong 1993, and Tokyo 1994—and in the weekly magazine *SPA!* in the same year—Hong Kong 1993, New York 1991, Osaka 1994, and two from Osaka 1993—appears rather arbitrary. In the *CARDBOARD HOUSES* photobook, the 67 photographs follow a chronological order but shift back and forth between locations. Rather than suggesting geographic differences or a linear progression over time, the photographs collectively articulate a sense of objectivity through encyclopedic documentation, akin to the approach advocated by the pioneering Japanese photographer Nakahira Takuma (1938–2015) (see Cushman 2018, 48–51).

Secondly, the "bare factness" of *Cardboard Houses* is emphasized through a calm representation of their materiality and setting. Philosopher and writer Kobayashi Yasuo states that Miyamoto's photographs consistently express the "materiality of space (*kūkan no bushitsukan*)" (Kobayashi 1997, 82). This materiality is conveyed through minute details. Miyamoto uses a large-format 4×5 camera that captures these fine details (Sanada and Miyamoto 1995, 64). The materials of these houses, as Miyamoto himself lists— "cardboard, scraps of wood, Styrofoam, mattresses, plastic sheets"—originate from logistic circulation and are discarded by the city (Miyamoto 1997, 61). A careful observer might also notice corrugated metal sheets, umbrellas, duct tape, and plastic strings—all items that can be gathered in the city and assembled to sustain a sheltering structure.

As Iizawa has already pointed out, among all the materials, cardboard is the most symbolic, as it was mass-produced and discarded during Japan's industrial transition from production and processing to distribution and services (Iizawa 1995, 188–189). The materiality of cardboard resonates with the condition of the homeless, who are likewise discarded by society and excluded from the circulatory flows of capitalism.

¹Miyamoto. 1999. notes certain cultural differences, such as the practice in Japan of leaving shoes outside the house and how the proliferation of plastic bottles in the 1990s brought some changes. However, he primarily emphasizes the universality of the houses he observed across major cities around the world.

The series also consistently identifies city names and visualizes the locations of these shelters—under bridges, inside underground passages, or adjacent to trees, roadside guardrails, expressway columns, and breakwaters. The photographs reveal the unexpected nature of these locations—what Miyamoto refers to as the “gaps (*sukima*),” “blind spots (*shikaku*),” or “empty spaces (*kūhaku no basho*)” of the city (Miyamoto 1997, 61; Miyamoto 1999, 107). They underscore the builders’ resourceful use of existing urban infrastructure to stabilize their shelters, stay dry, and remain out of sight from passing pedestrians.

The locations—often situated in city centers—are noteworthy. These areas not only provide materials for housebuilding, food, and access to public lavatory these people need, but also create zones of anomie, allowing for deviation from social norms and enabling alternative ways of living. It is no coincidence that Miyamoto first encountered these houses near logistic centers, where cardboard was discarded in great quantities.

Some of the locations are immediately identifiable. One can see Miyamoto’s intention to deliberately juxtapose these self-built, anonymous, and ephemeral structures with monumental buildings and urban infrastructure. For example, the first photograph in the photobook *CARDBOARD HOUSES*, depicting a house standing in front of the massive Bank of Japan building, is especially telling (Fig. 1). As Hayashi Michio has already noted, the Bank of Japan is “a veritable heart pump in the circulatory system of capital,” while the cardboard house was “a small, stagnant pool left behind the main current” (Hayashi 2004, 200). In an early “reportage” article, Miyamoto himself specifically mentions the architect and completion date of the building—Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919) and 1896. He further satirized the building’s imposing atmosphere as embodying the prestige of the Japanese Empire and overwhelming the surrounding buildings. The only structure that could stand against this imposing presence was the cardboard castle of the free people (Miyamoto 1984).

Another photograph taken in front of the Umeda Sky Building in Osaka clearly demonstrates Miyamoto’s attention to the contrast between two types of architecture (Fig. 5). Designed by the world-renowned architect Hara Hiroshi (1936–2025) and completed in 1993, the Umeda Sky Building, located in the heart of the city near major transport hubs, has long served as a symbol of Osaka. Yet the informal dwelling that Miyamoto captures shortly after the completion of the Umeda Sky Building shows no sense of intimidation; rather, it humorously echoes the massive structure in the background, as both feature rooftops elevated from their main bodies. While the Umeda Sky Building is defined by a void beneath its rooftop, the homeless person’s improvised shelter, by contrast, piles boxes at the front. This playful angle and juxtaposition underscore the vitality of these “small, stagnant pools.”



Staging at Exhibition Spaces

In addition to publications, the series has been featured in exhibitions. A few photographs titled *Tokyo's Cardboard Houses* (*Tokyo no danbōru no ie*) were first shown in the group exhibition *Tokyo* at the Seibu Department Store in Yurakuchō, Tokyo, in 1990. This was followed by the solo exhibition *Cardboard Houses* (*Danbōru no ie*) at Yokohama Portside Gallery in 1994; a major retrospective, *Ryuji Miyamoto Retrospective*, at Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, in 2004; the third Berlin Biennial in 2004; and *Time of Box* (*Hako no jikan*) at the Museum of Tohoku University of Art and Design in Yamagata in 2005.

These exhibitions encouraged bodily interaction, inviting viewers to engage with the “private space” of homeless individuals and complicating their experience by blending the original context of the street with that of the art spaces. For the 1990 group show, Miyamoto used nearly one ton of cardboard to create four square mounds, onto which he attached his *Cardboard Houses* photographs (Cushman 2008, 104). At the 1994 exhibition, with the help of Yokohama residents, he collected approximately 3,000 cardboard boxes from the port area near the gallery and constructed a cardboard enclosure from floor to ceiling (Masuda 1994). A one-meter-square opening was left for visitors to pass through in order to view approximately 40 photographs displayed inside (Fujiwara 1994; Cushman 2008, 104).

[Fig. 5]

© Miyamoto Ryuji / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery Photography / Film

The installation evoked a vicarious experience of encountering an actual cardboard house on the street (Masuda 1994). A reporter from the art magazine *Geijutsu Shinchō* wrote that he experienced a sudden warmth, as if he had stepped into his own home (*Geijutsu Shinchō* 1994). Another reporter from the magazine *BRUTUS* noted that she perceived these works as imprints of life within the urban mirage (Fujiwara 1994). Art historian Hayashi Yōko described them as so mysteriously bright and warm that one could not help but fall into the illusion that a utopia from another world existed there (Hayashi 1994). The small opening resembled a *nijiriguchi*, the entrance to a traditional Japanese teahouse, requiring visitors to crouch and squeeze their bodies in—thus creating both a spatial and psychological contrast between the inside and outside of the installation.

At the 2004 exhibition *Ryuji Miyamoto Retrospective* at the Setagaya Art Museum, the cardboard house photographs were displayed close to the floor, recreating the pedestrian's view from above and inviting museum visitors to lower themselves to examine the dwellings. These installation methods—including the creation of massive cardboard enclosures and the placement of photographs on the inner walls of the enclosures or near the floor—were employed again in Berlin in 2004 and in Yamagata in 2005. As Hayashi Michio observes with regard to the Setagaya Art Museum exhibition, this positioning of the photographs “disturbs the comfortable state of mind that we usually enter when viewing ‘works of art,’ partially reconstructing our lost memories of the city inside the white cube” (Hayashi 2004, 203). Notably, the photographs were never framed in these exhibitions, reflecting a deliberate intention to return them to their original context. The exhibition methods thus disrupted the conventional museum experience, encouraging viewers to re-engage their senses as they would on the city streets, within the gallery setting.

Miyamoto has consistently experimented with installation methods. For the Japan Pavilion at the 1996 Venice Architecture Biennale, he divided a photograph of ruins in Kobe—devastated by the 1995 Great Hanshin–Awaji Earthquake—into four panels with zigzagging cuts and contours, reinstalling them as murals to emphasize the fragmentation and debris caused by the disaster. He later exhibited them in a further deteriorated state at his show at the Setagaya Art Museum, where the materiality of the photographic installations evoked the fading memory of the event. In this way, Miyamoto's exhibited works transcend conventional photography: they adopt a three-dimensional scale, invite physical interaction from viewers, engage with their own materiality, and pose questions about the materiality of their subjects—architecture and cities.

Critiquing the Progressive City

Through documenting the small stagnancy by unusual ways at exhibition spaces, Miyamoto critiques the city that linearly grows is telling as he eulogizes the cardboard houses. He remarks his experience inside one that they are like veils, wrapping human bodies, and that he felt strangely comforted, even cozy in a way (Miyamoto 2021, 48). This comment resonates with that of poet Sasaki Mikirō, who depicted a homeless couple gradually expanding their cardboard house along the Sumida River, one of Tokyo's major waterways (Sasaki 2003, 36–38). Observing their peaceful life, Sasaki saw the cardboard house as a prototype for the dwellings of migrants who had come to Tokyo from other regions (Sasaki 2003, 38). Sasaki even drew a parallel with the shrines along the Bagmati River in Nepal, which served as shelters for traveling monks, suggesting that the cardboard houses in Tokyo could likewise be seen as a kind of shrine (Sasaki 2003, 39).

Miyamoto did not see the religiousness as Sasaki does, but he likens their acts to those of primeval times (Miyamoto 2003, 3). Miyamoto compares them to the behaviors of animals and birds that gather materials and select sites for their homes on their own (Miyamoto 2021, 48) and refers to these self-builders as "hunter-gatherers of the contemporary city (*gendai toshi no shuryō saishu min*)" (Miyamoto 2003, 3). This also echoes with Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage" that works with whatever materials are at hand, assembling and reassembling fragments in creative and improvisational ways, rather than following predetermined plan (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

This bricolage highlights the *terrain vague*, defined by architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales to encompass three intertwined meanings: movement and oscillation; void and absence, yet also potential; and vagueness and uncertainty (Solà-Morales 1995, 119–120). By capturing a specific form of *terrain vague* associated with the homelessness, seeking their space in the city, Miyamoto reveals how the city materially produces the conditions—particularly the resource of cardboard, and a zone where this social group can wield their creativity to build their "quiet, solitary retreats."

The potential of the *terrain vague* of the cardboard houses lies in presenting a "freedom from the norm of the city" (Yonezawa 1997, 41) and "reformulating notions of property and ownership" (Vij 2012, 35; Cushman 2018, 115). The *Cardboard Houses* series exemplifies what Igarashi Tarō (2000) describes as "urban recycling," or what Cushman and Risteen (2020) term a "logic of reconstruction"—an adaptive practice that adopts a pre-modern or animal-like approach to gathering materials, claiming space, and dwelling within a city caught in a constant cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The *terrain vague* are ephemeral. As Miyamoto writes, "in the urban spaces left after the removal of barracks, cardboard houses, and ruins, eerily new buildings, which know nothing of the slow ripening of time, merely glitter against a bleak skyline" (Miyamoto 1986, 55). He explains that photography was the only means of recording the ephemeral houses, which could change every few days (Miyamoto 1999, 101). He further notes that the reason for publishing *CARDBOARD HOUSES* in 2003 was that "the interesting cardboard houses had ended" (*Bijutsu Techō* 2003, 23). Like the subjects of his other projects—the *genbaku suramu* in Hiroshima, the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, and the ruins in Kobe after the earthquake—the cardboard houses have been replaced by parks and new buildings. They have disappeared due to forced evictions by police, the redesign of public spaces that expelled the homeless, and urban management efforts aimed at clearing them from the streets. Their materiality has also changed: with the distribution of blue vinyl sheets by public authorities, the appearance of these dwellings has become increasingly uniform (Shirasaka 2003, 64). The era of diverse cardboard houses has come to an end.

This series registers a bygone era while also reflecting a persistent condition of the city—its continual production of *terrain vague*, the nooks and crannies that emerge between processes of deconstruction and construction. Miyamoto captures this urban dynamism and challenges prevailing notions of monumentality, permanence, and the linear progression of architecture and the city. *Cardboard Houses* and its exhibitions broaden the scope of architectural photography, positioning themselves as both aesthetic and critical documents of a form of urban life that originates from the city itself, yet gestures toward its demise and cyclical regeneration.

Bibliography

- Abe, Kōbō. 1973. *Hako otoko*. Shinchōsha.
- Akasegawa, Genpei. 1987. *Chōgeijutsu tomason*. Chikuma shobō.
- Akasegawa, Genpei. 2006. *Geijutsu genron*. Iwanami shoten.
- Bijutsu Techō*. 2003. "Kantō Taidan Miyamoto Ryūji × Tsukamoto Yoshiharu — Pinhōru Hausu to 'Chisana ie' kara no nagame." 841: 17–26.
- Cushman, Carrie. 2018. "Temporary Ruins: Miyamoto Ryūji's Architectural Photography in Postmodern Japan." PhD diss., Columbia University.
- Cushman, Carrie, and Nicholas Risteen. 2020. "The Efficient Ruin of Infrastructure." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 6 (2), 1–26.
- Fujiwara, Erimi. 1994. "Toshi no shuryō saishūmin no ie wo ou: shashinka Miyamoto Ryūji no manazashi." *BRUTUS* 321: 17.
- Geijutsu shinchō*. 1994. "Sumeba Miyako!? Miyamoto Ryūji no 'danbo-ru no ie'." 536: 100.
- Hayashi, Michio. 2004. "An Eye Open to Traces of Light: Thoughts on Ryūji Miyamoto." In *Miyamoto Ryūji shashinten: Kowareyuku mono umareizuru mono*, edited by Miyamoto Ryūji and Endo Nozomi. Translated by Stanley N. Anderson.

Setagaya Art Museum, 198–208.

Hayashi, Yōko. 1994. "Miyamoto Ryūji: Yokohama po-to saido gyarari-." *Bijutsu Techō* 693: 147–149.

Igarashi, Tarō. 2000. "Sabaibaru toshiten Tokyo risaikuru," 10+121: 161–168.

Ichigi, Tsutomu. 1985. *Kenchiku no wasure gatami*. INAX.

Kawamata, Tadashi. 1991. *KAWAMATA Field Work*. Kaneko Art Gallery.

Kawamata, Tadashi. 2001. *Book in Progress, Kawamata Tadashi Daily News*. INAX.

Kobayashi, Yasuo, 1997. *Sōzōsha-tachi: Gendai geijutsu no genba*. Kōdansha.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press.

Masuda, Minoru. 1994. "Miyamoto Ryūji shashinten 'danbo-ru no ie'." *Kenchiku bunka* 49 (575): 12.

McQuire, Scott. 2008. *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space*. Sage.

Mikami, Kimio, 2004. "Shashinka Miyamoto Ryūji-san, Shinsai chokugo no sanjō kiroku / 'Chinmoku no hūkei' ni atara na imi sagaru." *Asahi Shinbun*, June 19.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1984. "Ojisan no shiro ha danbōru dazoo." *Asahi Graph* 3194: 108–113.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1986. "Tsuka no ma no haikyo." *Toshō* 443: 54–55.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1988a. *Kau Lung Shing Chai*. Peyotl Kōbō.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1988b. *Architectural Apocalypse*. Heibonsha.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1994. "CARDBOARD HOUSES." *Asahi Camera* 798: 44–51.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1997. "Cardboard Houses." 10+18: 45–61.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 1999. "Toshi no muishiki=Danbōru no ie: Utsuro na machi ni futo... arawareru, hōmuresu ga nemuru basho." In "Futo..." no *Geijutsu Kōgaku*, Kobe Design University Lecture series, edited by Kōhei Sugiyama. Kousakusha, 83–112.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 2003. *Cardboard Houses*. Berlin.

Miyamoto, Ryūji. 2021. *Inochi ha sasou: Miyamoto Ryūji shashin zuisō*. Heibonsha.uisō. Heibonsha.

Murata, Makoto. 1994. "A-to wo koeta ienaki hito no 'ie'." *BRUTUS* 317: 112.

Noguchi, Kengo. 2025. *Iori no hitobito*. AKAART Art Publishing.

Iizawa, Kōtarō. 1995. *Tōkyō shashin*. INAX.

Isozaki, Arata. 1988. "Ruins." In Ryūji Miyamoto, *Architectural Apocalypse*. Heibonsha.

Sakaguchi, Kyōhei. 2004. *Zero Yen House*. Little More.

Sakakawa, Naoko. 2004. *Hibakari: Shinjuku, day after day*. Shinjuku shōbō.

Sakakawa, Naoko. 2013. *Shinjuku danbōru mura Sakagawa Naoko shashinshū 1996–1998*. DU BOOKS.

Sanada, Reiko, and Ryūji Miyamoto. 1995. "Danbōru no ie o satsuei suru hito: Miyamoto Ryūji." *Shitsunai* 482: 60–64.

Sasaki, Mikirō. 2003. *Yawarakaku, kowareru: Toshi no horobikata nitsuite*. Misuzu shōbō.

Setagaya Art Museum. 2004. *Ryūji Miyamoto Retrospective*. DVD.

Shirasaka, Yuri. 2003. "CARDBOARD HOUSES." *Art iT fall/ winter*: 60–66.

Solà-Morales, Ignasi de. 1995. "Terrain Vague." In *Anyplace*, edited by Cynthia C. Davidson. MIT Press, 118–123.

SPA! 1994. "Tokyo, Osaka, New York, Hong Kong: Toshi no kūkan ni shutsugen suru kiseki no toride: shuryō-saishūmin / hōmuresu no "danbōru no ie" jūnenshi." 2398: 26–29.

Suzuki, Ryōji. 1988. *Hi kenchiku teki kōsatsu*. Chikuma shōbō, 69–85.

Takamatsu, Hideaki. 2009. *STREET PEOPLE: Takamatsu Hideaki shashinshū – Rojō ni ikiru 85-nin*. Taro Jirosha Editus.

Vij, Ritu. 2012. "Time, Politics and Homelessness in Contemporary Japan." *ProtoSociology* 29.

Yonezawa, Kei. 1997. "Ho-muresu gunkyo. Hifuka suru jūkyō wo megutte." 10+18.