Form Follows Fantasy: Japanese Kawaii (cute) Architecture

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Japanese kawaii (“cute”) culture has swept the globe through art, anime, fashion, and more. Which raises the question: is kawaii a trendsetter in architecture? But what modes of agency are possible for solid buildings to operate within an aesthetic generally characterized by vulnerability and passivity? Drawing on the burgeoning “cute studies,” my research identifies three types of kawaii architecture – feral-but-cute, primitive-but-cute, and chic-but-kawaii – as exemplified by the works of Atelier ZO (elephant), Rakuda (camel), Terunobu Fujimori, Sou Fujimori, Hideyuki Nakayama, and Taira Nishizawa, among others. Playing with different layers of reality, kawaii buildings entice one into a magical, fairytale-like world, and with a mix of innocence and sincerity they move from aesthetics to affect, breaking the dichotomy of the powerful (the power to charm, to enchant, etc.) and the powerless (being docile, vulnerable, etc.). Through kawaii, my project charts a distinct discourse of feminine architecture as a gentle countermeasure against masculine architecture’s dominance in contemporary Japanese architecture.

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