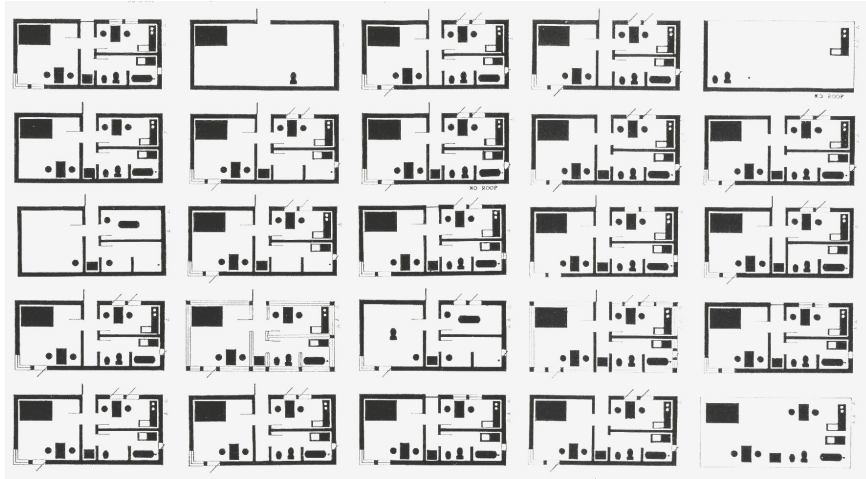


Unbearable Lightness

‘House with No Style’ and Blank Architecture in Japan

Brendon Carlin



Detail of winning entry by Yosuke Fujiki. Yosuke Fujiki, “Winners in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition,” *The Japan Architect*, no. Spring (1993): 8–11.

Titled ‘House with No Style,’ the 1992 edition of *Shinkenchiku* architecture magazine’s by-then renowned residential design competition brief reads like a rant about architecture’s inability to produce new ideas. The invited author and judge of entrants, Rem Koolhaas, lamented how a total excess of style, taste, the “frivolous,” and the “decorative” was masking and perpetuating architecture’s inability to produce any new content.⁰¹ By then, Koolhaas was one in a long line of a who’s who of influential Japanese and foreign architects and theorists who were invited to judge the competition, stretching back to 1965, when the competition was launched in an attempt to rejuvenate the otherwise conservative journal with fresh ideas and to attract young architects and students.⁰²

Shinkenchiku’s residential design competition became influential in the architecture culture of the seventies and eighties as a platform for known Japanese and international architect-judges to make polemical observations about architecture and society, soliciting hundreds of responses (there were 732 entries in 1992) and interpretations from international participants, including some from the Eastern Bloc. When flipping through the winning entries or honorable mentions of the competition from the seventies to the two-thousands, it is surprising to see so many names before they became well known. Following a review of entries, the invited judge would give a concluding response and remarks that usually further articulated and elaborated the theme. On one hand, the competition’s popularity helped spread Japan’s architecture culture and provided a platform for influential Japanese architects to promote their practices and their positions in an English-language publication for international audiences. On the other, the Japanese-language edition of the publication became central to Japan’s absorption of trending themes, styles, and ideas from abroad.⁰³

01 Rem Koolhaas, “The Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition 1992,” *The Japan Architect III* (1992): 2–3.

02 Cathelijne Nuijsink, “‘Disprogramming,’ ‘Plan-Less,’ ‘Non-Movement,’ ‘No Style’: Dialectic Strategies in the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition (1965–2019),” *Critic|all, IV International Conference on Architectural Design & Criticism, Sao Paulo 25–26 March 2021* (2021): 2.

03 Ibid.



The Shinkenichiku residential design competition brief by Rem Koolhaas. From Rem Koolhaas, “The *Shinkenichiku* Residential Design Competition 1992,” *The Japan Architect* III (1992): 2–3.

Koolhaas’s use of a negation (aka the ‘no’ in No Style) dialectically for the 1992 competition brief was not new in the context of the competition’s themes. For example, other editions had been themed “disprogramming” (Bernard Tschumi, 1989), “simplicity/complexity” (Jean Nouvel 1995), “... non-movement” (Kazuyo Sejima 1996), and “plan-less...” (Kengo Kuma 2006).⁰⁴ But the negative theme runs contrary to the majority of briefs, which often call for solutions, whether to problems like sustainability (2020, Christoph Ingenhoven and 2005, Tadao Ando and Richard Rogers) or to housing for a certain type of individual or family, for example, the white collar worker (1965, Kiyoshi Seike) or the “average family” (1966, Kenzō Tange).

“Positive” design solutions are always grounded in negation, too, however. This is nowhere clearer than in *Shinkenichiku*’s first housing competitions from 1947 to 1949, which solicited innovative, efficient, low-cost minimum housing solutions for the crisis of homelessness amid cities reduced to rubble following the war. Beyond simply soliciting solutions for efficient mass housing, entrants endlessly puzzled with configurations of interior subdivisions, furniture, and appliances to increase the efficiency of atomized housework, of raising children, the “rationalization of tidying up,” and to negotiate clashes in family member roles.⁰⁵ In order to realize new habits, the competition called for the elimination of what were derided as “feudal” and ritualized aspects and elements like entry vestibules and altars. The task of clearing away previous modes and forms and relentlessly puzzling over variations on the plan and styles, often heavily influenced by models from abroad, has defined Japanese architecture since the introduction of the modern profession in the late nineteenth century.

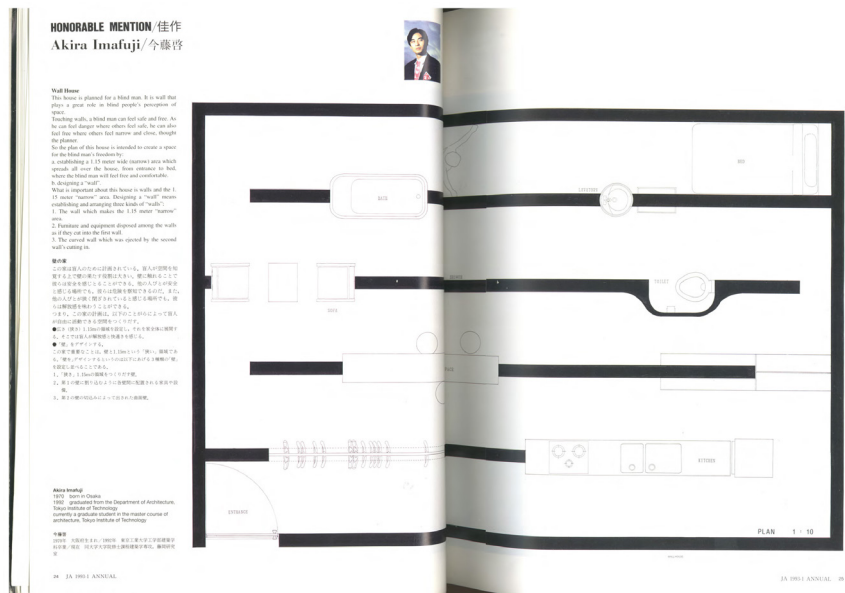
Versions of the competition from the sixties and seventies produced entries that were somewhat consistent from one entry to another, and from one year to the next, in the kinds of problems they addressed, their “school,” their styles, and in representation. But since the late eighties, themes and entries became increasingly varied, and sporadic, often seemingly obsessed with novelty for novelties sake. Koolhaas seems to have addressed this when, in the 1992 brief, he wrote that architects and students

⁰⁴ See the online archive of the competition curated by Dr. Cethelijne Nuijsink at Shinkenichiku Residential Design Competition ARCHIVE, <https://callforlostentries.com>.

⁰⁵ Nuijsink, “Dialectic Strategies,” 10.

are “so desperate for exposure and recognition that, at the slightest provocation, [they] produce stupendous quantities of work, representing enormous investments of energy, ingenuity, [and] money. It’s sad that there is an overwhelming addiction to form, style, aesthetics, that in itself really represents a disease.”⁰⁶ How might “style” be shed, and a “narcissistic automatism of form-making be interrupted,” and how might new explorations of content be injected into an exhausted profession? For Koolhaas, architects were apparently producing simulacra of the new, or else tirelessly reproducing variations on themes with no real historical, developmental, or “progressive” effects whatsoever.

“[Is it] utopian,” asked Koolhaas in the House with No Style brief, “to imagine a ‘designer-free’ zone?” “It would be an enormous relief,” he wrote, if architecture could negate everything ‘frivolous,’ ‘decorative,’ and ‘showy’ from angles and curves to colors and palm trees. Koolhaas wanted participants to imagine a scenario in which even the demands, intentions, and intimidation were gone. He demanded that “massive constraints” be imposed and that the entries, which would be “severely judged,” should emphasize a commitment to the most “contemporary conditions” in a “characterless” way.⁰⁷



Plan of *Shinkenchiku* competition honorable mention Wall House for a Blind Man by Akira Fujiki. From Akira Imafuji, “Winners in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition,” *The Japan Architect* (Spring 1993): 24–25.

Though Koolhaas complained of the same “disease” of style when reviewing the 732 *Shinkenchiku* entries a year later, he thought that some were good. These developed into research exploring how new “content could be injected into an exhausted profession.” Let’s briefly review the awarded entries.

Third prize was given to an anonymous entry that dealt with an orphan wandering the war-torn fabric and destroyed buildings of Sarajevo with only a simple and basic set of items necessary for living for twenty-four hours. The orphan would find shelter in “anonymous” remnants of buildings and other urban objects that no longer functioned. Koolhaas praised the entry for its anonymity: it had no name, rejected authorship, and was thus, as he said, discreet and silent, “shaming all of us.”⁰⁸

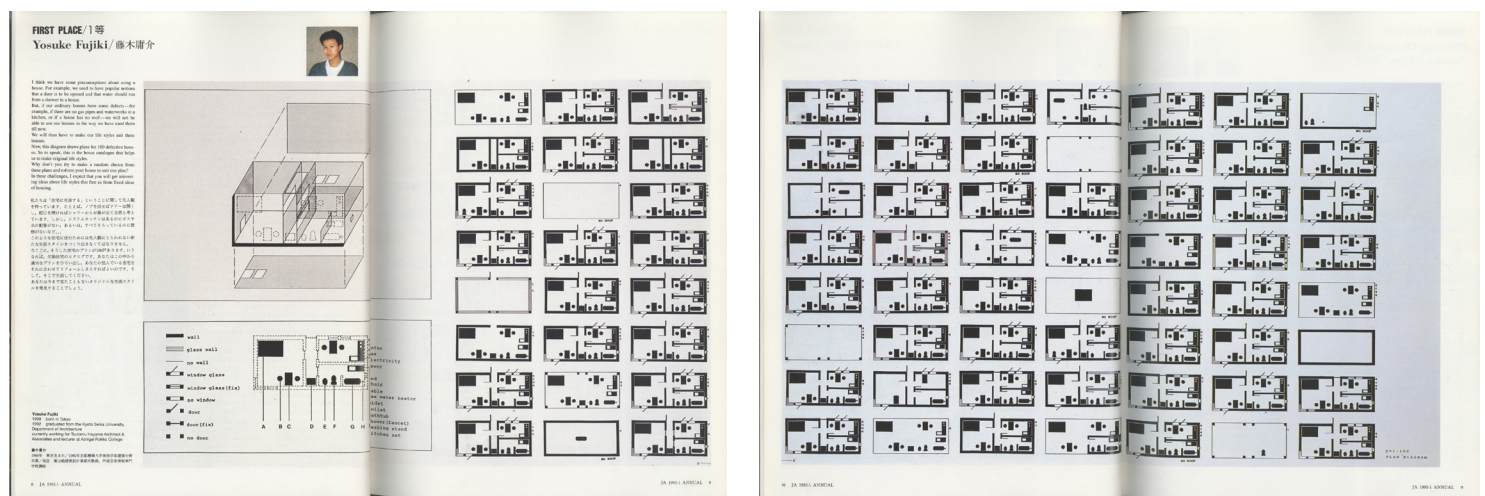
06 Rem Koolhaas, “About the Results,” *The Japan Architect* (Spring 1993): 6–7.

07 Koolhaas, “The Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition 1992.”

08 Koolhaas, “About the Results.”

The second prize was given to a project that addressed what the authors Mitsugu Okagawa and Yutaka Kinjo called the exhausting, non-stop circulation and trap of styles in Tokyo, and described the AIDS virus as a way out. Its storyboard is full of biblical references. It situated the emergence of architecture with No Style in 1919 and with Mies's Glass Skyscraper project and then represented the growth of this No Style architecture into a giant floating Superstudio-like grid over Tokyo's districts. Koolhaas wrote that the entry was manipulative, confused, and intellectually chaotic, yet nonetheless beautiful, and introduced the dangerous subject of disease into a "notoriously immune and 'clean' profession."^{09 10}

In one of the most intriguing "honorable mentions," Akira Imafuji presented the plan for Wall House, a dwelling for a blind man. In this house, the latter's typical furniture and fixtures were arranged in a linear, zigzagging sequence along a one-point-five-meter corridor that could only be entered at the tail. The plan of this house was conceived as a snaking sequence of functions starting at the house's single-entry door. The furniture is often centered in the wall and therefore embedded into or cut out from it. The door leads to a closet or clothing rack, then a kitchen "unit" and, around the first switchback, one encounters cabinets, then a dining table, sofa, toilet, bath, lavatory, and finally, at the dead end of the corridor, a bed. Imafuji wrote that the blind man—in this tight and deterministic space—would feel free where others felt confined, assuming that he would feel fear in the open where others might feel free.¹¹



Winning entry by Yosuke Fujiki. Yosuke Fujiki, "Winners in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition," *The Japan Architect* (Spring 1993): 8–11.

In the winning entry, Yosuke Fujiki developed one hundred plans of what he called "defective houses" because they did not have some of the features or functions of houses that we take for granted. All the plans are based on a single person's or couple's dwelling, many consisting of a single room, others with separated functions. All the houses' floor plans used the same simple starting conditions—floor area, boundary, and typical elements and utilities—which included a wall, door, window, floor, toilet, bathtub, bed, table, some chairs, a "kitchen set," a water heater, and entry and exit points for services like water, gas, electricity, and sewage. In the different proposals, Fujiki tested different configurations of the elements or left them out completely, resulting in plans that range from those we

09 And we could add, presumably into architecture's obligation to be optimistic about the narrative of progress and increasing liberation when, in many senses, the case appeared to increasingly be the opposite.

10 Koolhaas, "About the Results."

11 Akira Imafuji, "Winners in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition," *The Japan Architect*, (Spring 1993): 24–25.

could deem “working” or pragmatic vis-à-vis “normal” dwelling habits to absurd configurations. Some examples, in their blankness or use of one simple element like a wall enclosure with no roof, bordered on the nihilistic or mystical. The only words found in the catalog of his plans to describe such unconventional features are labels like “no roof,” because such omissions cannot be represented within the conventions of the architectural plan. These atypical arrangements or omissions, Fujiki argued, might help us “to make original lifestyles.”

I think we have some preconceptions about using a house. For example, we used to have popular notions that a door is to be opened and that water should run from a shower in a house. But if our ordinary houses have some defects—for example, if there are no gas pipes and waterworks in a kitchen, or if a house has no roof—we will not be able to use our houses in the way we have used them till now. We will then have to make our lifestyles suit these houses. Now, this diagram draws plans for 100 defective houses. So, to speak, this is the house catalog that helps us to make original lifestyles. Why don’t you try to make a random choice from these plans and reform your house to suit one plan? In these challenges, I expect that you will get interesting ideas about lifestyles that free us from fixed ideas of housing.¹²

The reference plan Fujiki included at the beginning of his catalogue closely resembles a typical 1DK (one bedroom or room, dining, and kitchen) in contemporary Japan. The 1DK is already “defective” in the sense that the typology and its elements emerged out of a project (as was so visible in the themes of the first *Shinkenchiku* competitions) to dissolve Japanese traditional dwelling habits, and institute new ones according to the imposition of abstract rationality about better, more desirable, or more efficient forms of domestic space and relationships. The larger political-economic project was so radical that its ultimate consequence was not only to dissolve extended families, but to encourage the collapse of the nuclear family and the romantic couple, and hence, the birthrate. Of course, now Japan, famously, has the fastest declining population of any country. Given this context, Fujiki’s House with No Style is not an idiosyncratic exercise or a juvenile provocation, but could be understood as a sort of synecdoche of a much larger architecture milieu: housing in modern Japan.

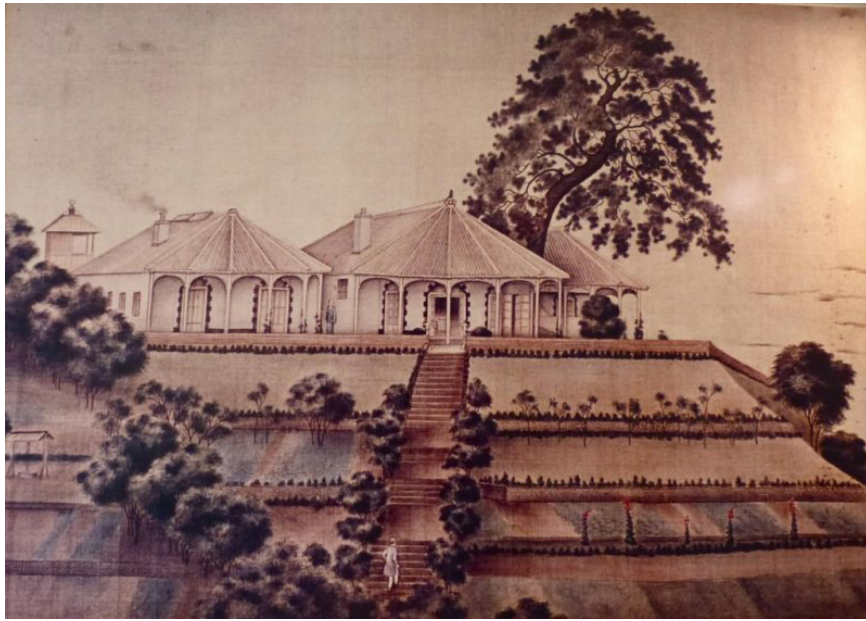
BLANKNESS: HOUSING IN MODERN JAPAN

The Japanese experience of industrialization and its economic rationalization of housing and everyday life was so rapid and jolting because models that had emerged out of long periods of conflict around industrialization were transplanted and adapted from England and the West. Despite intrusive imperial cadastral, corvée military, and taxation systems being over twelve-hundred years old by 1880, village, rural, everyday life, and the house remained to a great degree autonomous of any central control and planning until the mid-nineteenth-century threat of colonization from the West.¹³ Policies, taxation, land reforms, and so on were designed to uproot old modes of life and relationships. The foundation of the project and the core concern of the Meiji regime was the legal, symbolic, and spatial reform of the family and housing to promote industry, the military, and the economy.¹⁴

12 Yosuke Fujiki, “Winners in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition,” *The Japan Architect*, (Spring 1993): 8–11.

13 Mitsusada Inoue and D.M. Brown, “The Century of Reform,” *The Cambridge History of Japan 1* (1993): 163–220.

14 Sukehiro Hirakawa, “Japan’s Turn to the West,” *The Cambridge History of Japan 5* (1989): 432–98; Jordan Sand, *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space, and Bourgeois Culture, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005).



Glover House, also known as Ipponmatsu (Single Pine Tree), from a drawing of 1863.
Image in public domain.

In 1879 the first group of modern Japanese architects graduated under the tutelage of the English “foreign expert” architect, and graduate of London’s Architectural Association, Josiah Conder.¹⁵ Early houses for British adventure engineers and architects, like the 1863 Glover House in Nagasaki by Kyama Hidenoshin, would go to great lengths to achieve Western-style elements, ornament, layouts, fixtures, and furniture, but achieved these with traditional methods and locally available materials like wood, clay, mud, and seaweed.¹⁶

The introduction of “Western” architecture in Japan was driven by speculative interests in the design and construction industries, which first introduced glass, brick, metals, concrete, fixings like nails and hinges, and other building components to bolster import business and then constructed the first centers for their manufacture in Japan. As early as 1877, a large development of 1,400 neo-classical style houses were constructed of imported brick and glass in Tokyo’s Ginza district under the supervision of British engineers.¹⁷ In 1879, the *daiku* Tachikawa Tomokata prophesized that if Japan were built in modern materials imported from the West “all the country may become an empty field.”¹⁸

Design, which in the case of housing used to be undertaken by communities or happen on site with builders and future inhabitants, became the purview of cultural reformers and the architect, increasingly patronized by banks and private financing, corporations, and the state throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁹ The architect’s design became a plan to be followed faithfully by newly emerged construction crews, the first of which was assembled by the architect Itō Tamekichi from orphans living in the ruins and “empty fields” of the 1891 Nobi earthquake.²⁰ Builders, therefore, were increasingly deskilled and specialized relative

15 Edward Bottoms, “The AA Reaches Japan, 1877... Josiah Conder,” Architectural Association Collections, <http://collectionsblog.aaschool.ac.uk/the-aa-reaches-japan-1877-josiah-conder/>.

16 Jonathan M. Reynolds, *The Formation of a Japanese Architectural Profession*, ed. M. Takeuchi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 182–83.

17 Hiromichi Ishizuka, “The Slum Dwellings and the Urban Renewal Scheme in Tokyo, 1868–1923,” *The Developing Economies* 19, no. 2 (1981): 171; Meg Vivers, “The Role of British Agents and Engineers in the Early Westernization of Japan with a Focus on the Robinson and Waters Brothers,” *The International Journal for the History of Engineering & Technology* 85, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 115–39.

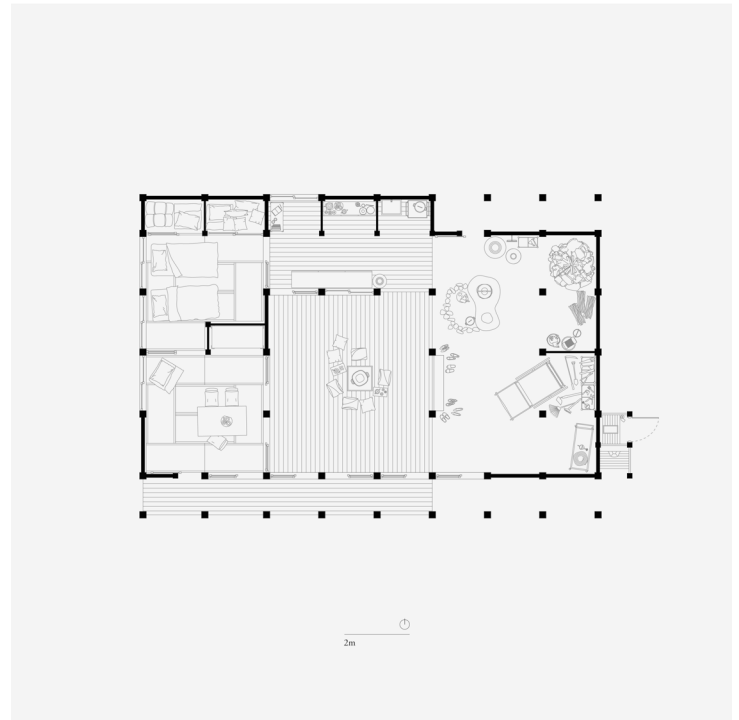
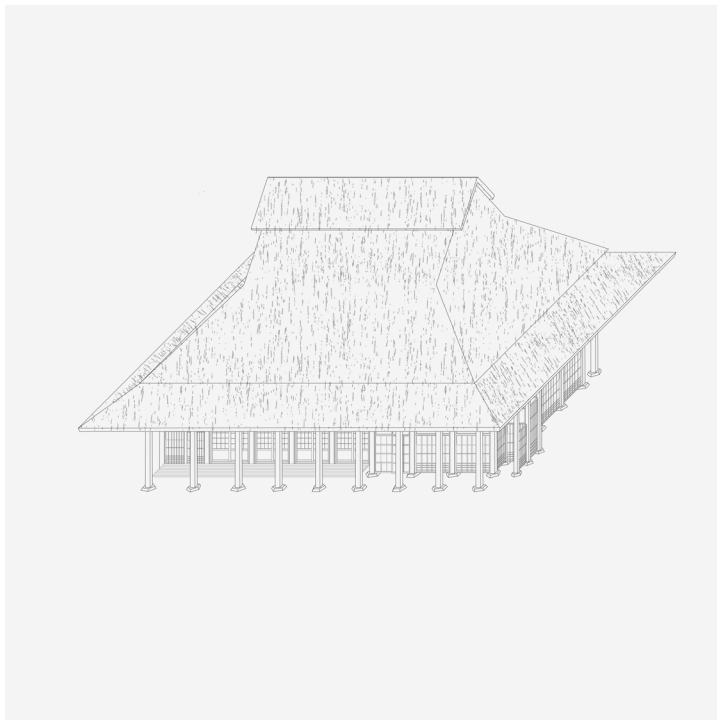
18 Greg Clancey, *Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868–1930* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006), 56.

19 Brendon Carlin, *Non-Typological Architecture: Deterritorialising Interiors in Contemporary Japan* (Milton Keynes: Open University (United Kingdom), 2022), 17–19.

20 Clancey, 194–96.

to the pre-modern village *daiku*, who was a designer, carpenter, builder, artisan and, in many cases, also a priest who worked on site with future residents.²¹

Despite the housing ideals that were promoted and adopted, to different degrees, by the wealthy and managerial classes, planning and housing reforms for poor workers would not fully be implemented until severe losses in productivity made them essential. In the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries land reforms forced people to rationalize their lives according to the demands of the market and to abandon rural Japanese life or starve, thus fueling dramatic growth of urban slums and of wage labor for factories and services in cities. The urban poor lived in small, bare, poorly built, profit-driven, landlord-constructed, one-room *nagaya* (rowhouses) or in cramped *kichin-yado* (boarding houses) with dozens of unrelated people often sharing one room, with communal toilets, wells for water, and with washing and cooking areas in alleys.²² *Nagayas* were basic social units that formed wider communities clustered around communal bathhouses and barbers, bustling with chaotic urban life.²³ The *hin-minkutsu* (slums) were often a source of major fires and a ready breeding ground for epidemics, afflictions to which they were always vulnerable.²⁴ They became bastions of lower-class agitation which converged with popular social movements and culminated in the riots of 1918. The 1918 Urban Planning Act and City Building Act legislated improvements along the lines of Western urbanization.²⁵



Drawing Based on eighteenth-century Minka rural house. Drawn by author and Cheryl Wan-Xuan Cheah.

21 Clancey, 73–78.

22 The writer Natsume Sōseki noted these homes proliferated rapidly and were a testament to survival in a system where profit-driven landlords thrived by offering substandard living conditions.

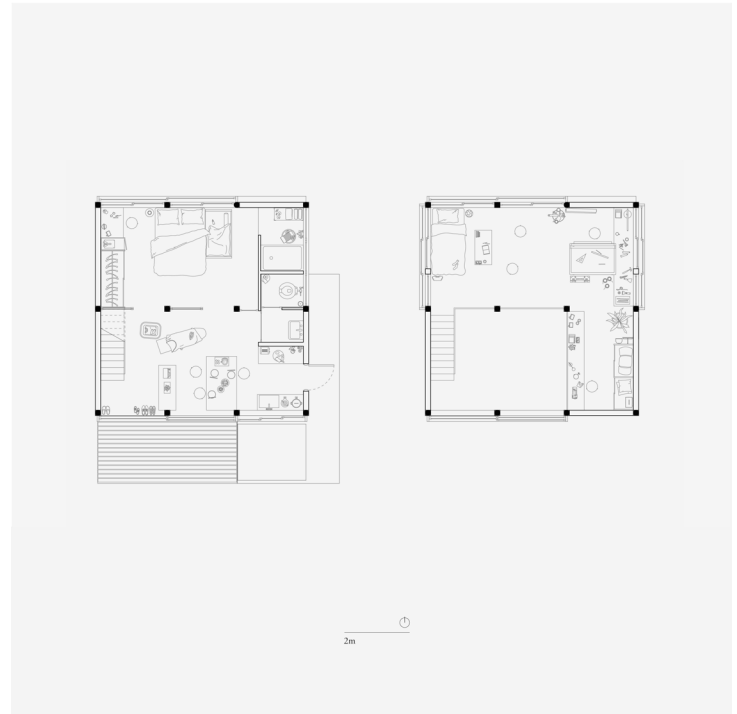
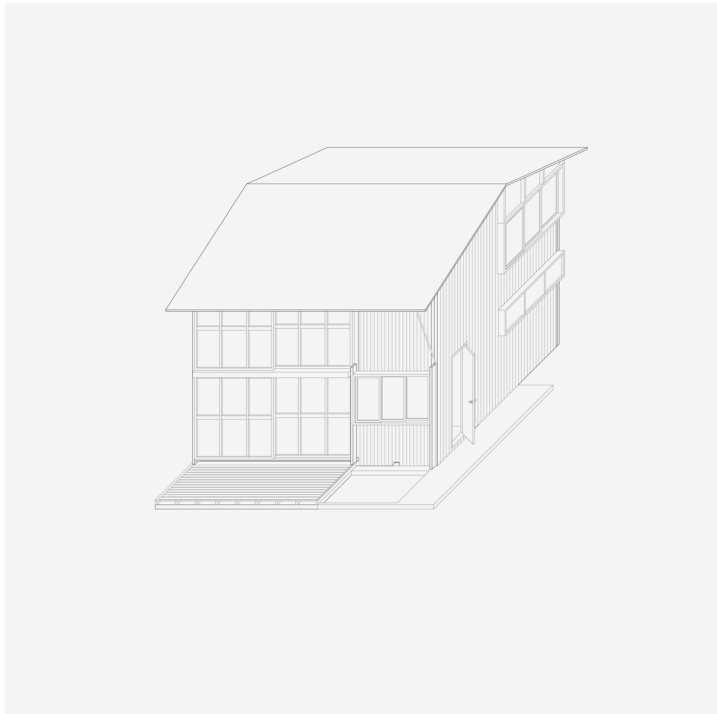
23 Ishizuka, “The Slum Dwellings and the Urban Renewal Scheme in Tokyo, 1868–1923,” 177–79.

24 James L. Huffman, “Poverty in Late Meiji Japan: It Mattered Where You Live,” *Education About ASIA* 23, no. 2 (2018): 19–20.

25 Ishizuka, “The Slum Dwellings and the Urban Renewal Scheme in Tokyo, 1868–1923,” 187–88.

Jordan Sand has demonstrated how during the early twentieth century, cultural reformers and professional architects took on the instrumental task of rethinking the distribution of rooms, circulation, furniture, and utilities for the modernization, efficiency, and enjoyment of the private nuclear family.²⁶ On one hand, nuclear family housing (designated nLDK, which eventually became the reference for Fujiki's 'House with No-Style') was a realm for the practice of compositional rationality to achieve hygiene, efficiency, and the functionality of the housewife's labor relative to schedules and conflicts with the rhythms of the school, office, supermarket, and factory. On the other hand, by equal and opposite countermeasure to the deep rationalization imposed on private life, housing was also composed stylistically, rhetorically, ideologically, and architecturally, as a frictionless private realm of voluntary, egalitarian care and relations, romantic and parental love, continuity with origins and/or progress, and individually bounded space in the private room.

The abstract imposition of the logic of this division, categorization, and redistribution of activities and symbolism stands in stark contrast to what was a both more fluid, yet-tightly ritually ordered, pre-modern Japanese house in examples like the *Minka*. Varying regionally and individually, they had correlations with phases of life, from birth to death and afterlife, and the house's use and maintenance was entangled with an immediate and tangible reproduction of the order of the cosmos.²⁷ In pre-modern Japan we could say that there were at least as many types of house as there were villages, reminding us of Rafael Moneo's question in his famous essay "On Typology": Moneo recognized that when typology became a project for the instrumental rationalization of life coordinated by the state and industry, situated form-types of life and architecture were forever lost.²⁸



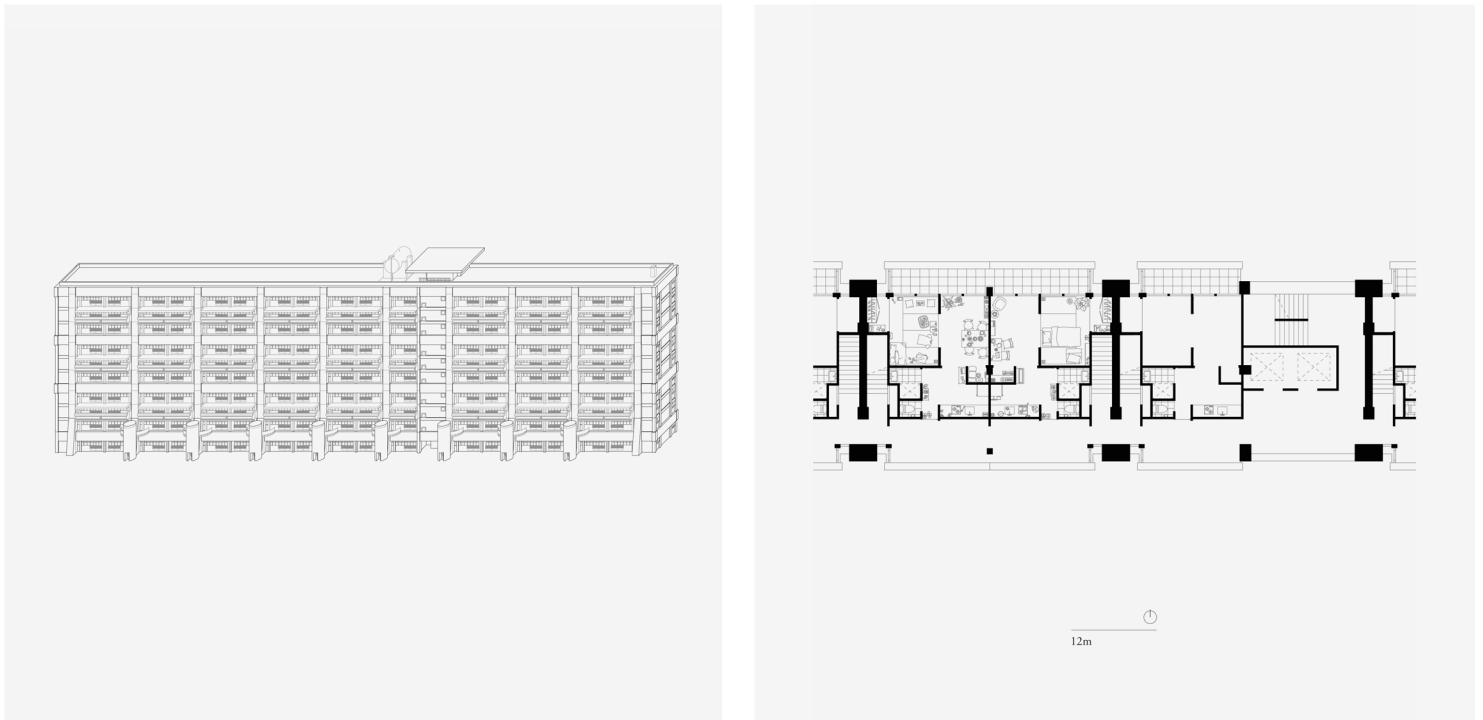
9-Square Tsubo House by Makoto Masuzawa, 1953. Drawing by Author and Shanna Sim Ler Chung.

²⁶ Sand, *House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space, and Bourgeois Culture, 1880-1930*.

²⁷ Chris Fawcett, *The New Japanese House: Ritual and Anti-Ritual Patterns of Dwelling* (Icon, 1980).

²⁸ Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions* 13 (1978): 61.

As a response to the scarcity and “blank page” of annihilated cities after World War II and the consequent total loss of faith in both past and future, architects designed bare housing that tended toward the abstraction of Fujiki’s plans. This abstraction was consistent with the lack of symbolism, rituality, or even functional subdivision of the house into separate rooms. Examples like Residence No. 3 (1950) by Kiyoshi Ikebe, My House (1953) by Kiyoshi Seike (the author of the 1965 residential design competition brief), and Nine Square Tsubo House (1953) by Makoto Masuzawa can all be interpreted to have nearly blank interiors. In the case of Ikebe’s Residence No. 3, there were no rooms but only tiny closet nooks with a single bed and desk for children. However, the re-emergence of a Japanese aesthetic to be patronized by the state, capital, and nationalists could already be seen in the otherwise Mies-influenced space of the 1953 house by Kenzō Tange, himself author of the 1966 residential design competition. He sought to imbue its distinct blank modernism (and industrial production) with stylized elements that evoked Japanese roots, which he “found” in the ancient Japanese “modernism” of examples like the sixteenth-century Katsura Imperial Villa.



Harumi Apartments, Kunio Maekawa, 1958. Drawn by author and Shanna Sim Ler Chung.

By the mid-fifties, a wave of architects, patronized by private finance and investment and by the mass building projects of the Japanese state—especially in the newly founded Japanese Housing Corporation (JHC)—sought to transition, de-, and re-territorialize the working classes into modern housing and the type of status quo ideas of housing and “lifestyle” that Fujiki referred to in his plan. On one hand, this meant a frictionless separation and total privatization of “functions” like eating, bathing, sleeping, and leisure but also meant a separation of activities from the floor and tatami mats, a mix of sliding panels and swinging doors, with the broad introduction of furniture like tables and chairs loaned to families by the JHC. As a part of efforts to break old habits that were often labelled “feudal” and backwards, and to create new efficient ones, the private, efficient kitchen for the atomized housewife and then the shower and bath were increasingly introduced to individual units, accelerating the decline of the

public cooking and bathing that had been the norm in pre-Meiji Japan.²⁹ In the Harumi apartments (1958), kitchen units and appliances, television stands, tables, desks, and sofas required that hard floors of concrete, wood, or tile be introduced next to the tatami. The architects spoke of a need to create a sense of frictionless continuity with the past and origins while transitioning newly urbanized residents to new lifestyles off the ground. Thus, “Japanese-style” wood frames, tatami mats, and fusuma panels (all mass produced industrially unlike their historical counterparts) were hung in a megastructural reinforced-concrete structure.³⁰

HEAVY STYLE, LIGHT STYLE, AND NO STYLE

In his early work, the young architect Toyo Itō experimented with an often intensely blank, yet heavy, machinic architecture. He opened his first practice, URBOT, after abandoning Tokyo University’s graduate school in 1968–1969 due to its occupation by militant student movements like the Zengakuren, who rejected the continued bureaucratization and rationalization of work and education to bring up production and consumption as “the joys of living.”³¹ Itō’s practice read as a kind of satire of the sixties Metabolist movement—itsself later the subject of Koolhaas’s fascination in his book *Project Japan*.³² As most famously exemplified in projects like Kisho Kurokawa’s capsule hotel and Tange’s Tokyo Bay project, Metabolism celebrated and stylized the city as megastructure, network, flows, mobility, and technology which could liberate the individual.

Against the excesses and optimism of Metabolist architecture, Itō’s White U-House (1976)—built for his sister, who had just lost her husband to cancer, a disease on the rise in an increasingly industrially-polluted Japan—appears to turn its back to Tokyo, confronting the street with a completely bare and windowless fair-faced concrete façade, using sparse skylights to bring light into the interior.³³ At a time when the nLDK housing typology was becoming ubiquitous in Japan, Itō forced a nuclear family-type into a U that surrounded an empty courtyard.³⁴ The defective character of both the nLDK typology and the political project to which it was integral is especially visible in the renovation of housing projects like the giant JHC Takashimadaira with counter-suicide screens with flower patterns on upper floors.³⁵ Many examples of housing in seventies echoed the nihilism described by the philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who argued that Japan’s blind drive to emulate the West had stripped out any ability to transcend the uncertainties inherent in being, “nihility...has become [Japan’s] historical actuality.”³⁶

29 Miho Hamaguchi, *Nihon Jūtaku No Hōkensei (The Feudalism of Japanese Housing)* (Tokyo: Sagami Shobō, 1958).

30 Masato Otaka and Ichiro Kawahara, “Harumi Apartments,” *Shinkenchiku (New Architecture)* (1957): 24.

31 William M. Tsutsui, *Manufacturing Ideology: Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 145. Eiji Oguma, “Nihon No 1968 Konran-Ki No Kōdo Seichō e No Kyōdōtaiteki Han’nō - Japan’s 1968: A Collective Reaction to Rapid Economic Growth in an Age of Turmoil,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 11 (2015).

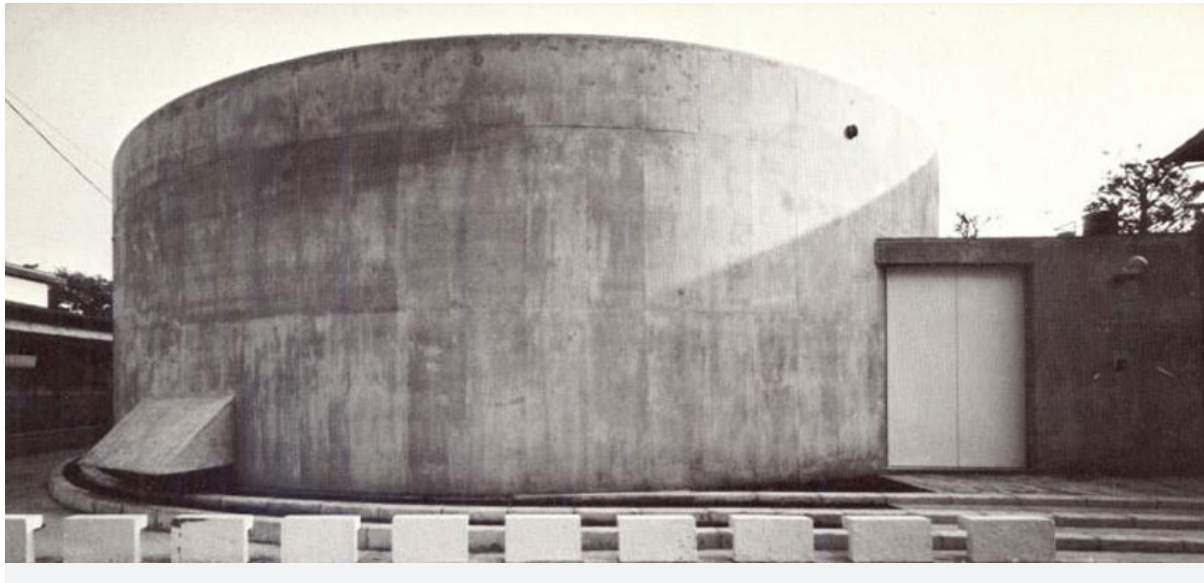
32 Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (Cologne: Taschen, 2011).

33 Arata Isozaki, “Essay: Sei Shonagon, or Ariadne-Architecture in the Metropolis,” *JA*, no. 99 (2015): 10.

34 Toyo Ito and Thomas Daniell, *Tarzans in the Media Forest* (London: Architectural Association, 2011), 3.

35 Itabashi Ward Regional Archives Museum, “Takashimadaira Sono Shizen Rekishi Hito (Takashimadaira: Its Nature, History, People)” (Itabashi-ku kyōdo shiryōkan-hen, 1998); Japan Development Institute Research Institute, “Takashimadaira Danchi Tōshin Jisatsu Bōshi Taisaku No Kenkyū (Takashimadaira Complex Study on Suicide Prevention Measures)” (Japan Development Institute Research Institute, 1975).

36 K. Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 178.



U-House Toyo Itō, 1958. Photograph by Koji Taki.

Though in the heavy U-House Itō had earlier “turned his back” on the city, by the eighties, his writings and design for the Tokyo Silver Hut (1984) reflected his attitude that we must open up and “swim across” a sea of consumerism. In the project, a series of seven arched roofs made of metal, triangulated structures float on a field of columns and free up the plan and façade of the house to become more flexible and transparent to challenge the inhabitants with its degree of transparency to the vegetation and the city outside. The house was centered around an empty courtyard, rather than a dining or living room because he argued that the city had displaced many of the functions that the house used to fulfill. Itō and Sejima’s famous Pao for the Tokyo Nomad Girl (1985) proposes the house as a mobile space with a single bed for sleeping, dressing, and displaying taste in consumer choices. A light metal space-frame structure, it was clad in light translucent materials that absorbed the energy and information of the city while reflecting the increasingly ephemeral nature of life. As the project description states, “The nomad girl does not act or pressure the environment, but rather is prepared to be the object herself of the actions and offers proposed by consumerism.”³⁷

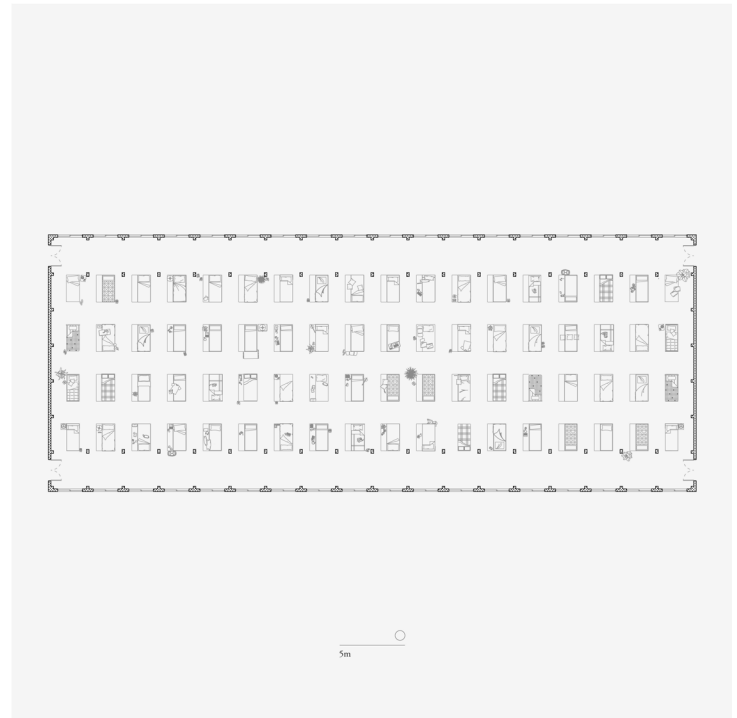
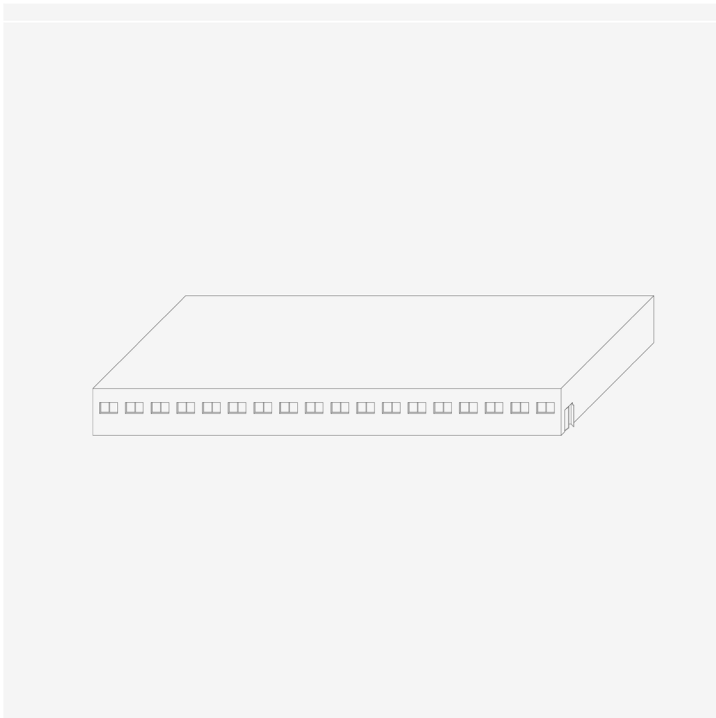
In his essay “Tokyo the Proud,” Félix Guattari described 1980s Japanese subjectivity as a mutation propelled by virtual machines, with information as a key factor of labor and immaterial production.³⁸ Configurations of automation, computers and gaming technology, work, and consumerism were the result of intense struggles directly acknowledged and strategized over by corporate and state management to both put people back to work who had been reduced to nihilistic instruments of production and, at the same time, counter the loss of social relations and other values or meaning with a restoration of a sense of creativity, autonomy, and humanity.³⁹

37 Toyo Ito, *Toyo Ito, 1986-1995 El Croquis* (El Croquis, 1995).

38 Félix Guattari, “Tokyo, the Proud,” *Deleuze Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): 94–98.

39 The state and corporations faced losses in productivity due to the political suppression of workers and middle-class youth alienation, and nihilism in the face of being reduced to instruments of production. A Japan federation of managers wrote that “[o]ne of the most serious problems facing modern industry is how the prosperity of the company and human satisfaction of the workers can be made compatible. These seemingly contradictory requirements—higher efficiency and regained humanity, must be met simultaneously. The solution is to create a system that links together the hearts and minds of workers as human beings and helps them to display their respective capacity and creativity to the fullest.” By the early seventies one former unionist noticed that workers who used to become great public speakers at political events now became virtuosos in production improvements and quality control meetings. The period saw a vast deskilling and automation of work and move to general social abilities as central to production. Similar quality control programmes were organized for wives to manage the household, and reproduce the labour force, but also to save money to finance Japanese corporate growth without needing foreign loans. Y. Sugimoto and G. McCormack, *Democracy in Contemporary Japan* (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 127.

In Sejima's conceptual drawings of her Platform Houses I (1988) and II (1991), she rejected the idea that an architect can or should preconfigure the inhabitant's life through the compositional subdivision of the plan. She wanted inhabitants to pass through easily, being even more liberated than in Itō's Pao project, which she saw as "patronizing."⁴⁰ Sejima's conceptual drawing excluded rooms and walls, corridors and doors, but negated the façade and any enclosure, leaving only two blank planes: floor and roof.⁴¹ Like some of Fujiki's plans, though, Sejima's houses included a bath, table and chairs, and a kitchen unit. The house was realized as a private company retreat to reward workers and team-build. Its ephemeral aesthetic only constituted one level of the house that sat atop another level with many otherwise typical contents of the nLDK nuclear family type, complete with a hybridized Japanese tatami room.⁴²



Author's drawing of an initial 1990 sketch for the Saishunkan Seiyaku Women's Dormitory project by Kazuyo Sejima, who wrote that she wanted to depict the reality of life at the time.

One year before the 'House with No Style' competition, the New Wave architect Hiromi Fujii discussed Sejima and referred to wider tendencies. He wrote that architecture had begun to display "lightness, softness, frailty [or delicateness (*yawa na mono*)]; sensations instead of ideas, parts and fragments instead of the whole, the natural instead of the artificial, and absence instead of presence."⁴³ While discussing Sejima's Gifu Kitagata housing, the architect Arata Isozaki explained that during the post-bubble years the nuclear family was effectively "dismantled, leaving a collection of individual entities." SANAA thus ignored the LDK type, cut the housing project directly from the "infinitely continuing three-dimensional grid," and left no center for convergence or orientation.⁴⁴ The individual here now belongs to an interconnected, generic, and infinite space and because of this, must rely completely on themselves and their

40 Kazuyo Sejima, *El Croquis 77 (I)*, El Croquis (Cristina Poveda y Yolanda Muela, 1996), 9.

41 Kazuyo Sejima, "Platform House I, II and III," *The Japan Architect*, no. April (1990).

42 T. Daniell et al., *An Anatomy of Influence* (Architectural Association, 2018), 277.

43 Hiromi Fujii, "A Japanese Architectural Scene, 1991," *Japan Architect* (Winter 1992): 73.

44 Isozaki, "Essay: Sei Shonagon, or Ariadne-Architecture in the Metropolis," 71.

most generic faculties to protect themselves from the blows of chance. But while the early projects of Sejima and SANAA played on a DIY aesthetic fashion using often off-the-shelf components as in Fujiki's catalogue, her office increasingly worked with sophisticated customized systems and materials. This is clearest in Itō, Sejima, and Ishigami's collaboration with the magician engineers Mutsuro Sasaki and Jun Sato. The critic Taro Igarashi described how SANAA's spaces conceal masterful feats of structural engineering, technological sophistication, computer modelling and calculation, and so on behind an openness and transparency.⁴⁵ Junya Ishigami took the interests of his former mentors to such extremes as to almost "transcend" materiality completely in an "evocation of invisibility and lightness" that very few people recognize as being the result of extreme structural precision and innovation.⁴⁶ Reflecting wider tendencies in architecture at the time, to achieve such lightness, blurriness, transparency, and invisibility Sejima and SANAA's Toledo Glass Pavilion uses sophisticated detailing, advanced Teflon, silicon, and adhesives, striving to make the connection between materials and the enclosure disappear; it needed custom-built machinery to create and install parts, and uses technologies such as small flakes of aluminum inside large glass layers to reflect heat and sunlight—all, of course, requiring obscene amounts of architectural work; extensive divisions of design, manufacturing, and assembly labor; computer manufacturing; and networks of communication and transportation that organize forms of work and life on every continent, from a *distance, where the form of life and social relationships they produce, cannot be seen.*⁴⁷



Shigeru Ban's 1997 Wall-Less House. Photograph by Hiroyuki Hirai

⁴⁵ Pedro Gadanho et al., *A Japanese Constellation: Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, SANAA, Ryue Nishizawa, Sou Fujimoto, Akihisa Hirata, Junya Ishigami*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 191.

⁴⁶ Ishigami later developed beautiful, incredibly heavy projects like the house and restaurant for Motonori Hirata from 2017–22 which required an even more enormous investment of time, unpaid labour, and machinery to develop. See "House & Restaurant / junya ishigami + associates," <https://www.archdaily.com/987227/house-and-restaurant-junya-ishigami-plus-associates>.

⁴⁷ See "Toledo Museum of Art Glass Pavilion – Verdict Designbuild," accessed 11 February 2019, <https://www.designbuild-network.com/projects/toledo/>; "Glass Pavilion in Toledo," Detail-online.com, n.d.; and Ben Davis, "The Museum Bubble," *Artnet Magazine*,

LIVING IN A DEFECTIVE HOUSE

Fujiki's entry to the 'House with No Style' competition came at a time that the dissolution of stable forms of housing and living were accelerating due to Japanese neoliberalization. The deregulation of finance, property, and housing and a dramatic increase in the asymmetry of the distribution of wealth put enormous pressures on the family and housing, accelerating a dissolution of even the typologies of the earlier industrialization project. The dissolution of the family, and even the couple, as well as financial security has contributed to the rise of people sleeping in transient forms—one room, no room, or blank architectures like net cafes, capsule hotels, bath houses, and other typologies like boarding and share houses that increasingly resemble many aspects of the early industrial *hinminkutsu* (urban slums). A large proportion of nuclear-family and extended-family housing has been converted to tiny micro apartments whose dimensions and arrangements are so precise that they are patented, or in other cases, one-room apartments called nDKs that resemble the one that Fujiki used for his catalog in 1991.

Considering the longer historical perspective outlined above, Fujiki's catalogue of plans becomes both prophetic and a kind of synecdoche for the history of the *Shinkenchiku* competition and, by extension, architecture in Japan since it emerged there as a modern profession. After such an intense history of the imposition of thousands of variations on the plan, and of abstraction on housing and life, architecture increasingly revealed its *sine qua non* in a destructive character, in its clearing out and enclosure of blank space. His collection of plans becomes a glaring manifestation of an *unbearable lightness and blankness of architecture* at the turn of the twenty-first century—a condition that is either constantly obscured by attempts at the reinstitution of archaic typology, drowned out by the noise of fresh or ancient appearances. On the other hand, it could be argued that this unbearable lightness was given a perfectly frank and sublime representation in the architecture of Sejima, Itō, and their collaborators at the end of the twentieth century.

In response to the challenge posed by Koolhaas's brief, Fujiki's schizophrenic array of plans both embraced and negated an attempt to represent or sublimate this blankness and unbearable lightness. But he embraced these conditions in a barbaric way by shifting the focus of architectural composition to the most banal, commonplace components of architecture, the ones that we all have: the bed, bath, kitchen, tap, cooktop, toilet, shower, table, desk, sofa, wall, and windows. Furthermore, and just as tellingly, he includes those features of infrastructure that are part of a network that connects and separates us: water, electric supply, telecommunications and, now, the internet. As the history and typological reading of housing in Japan since industrialization teaches us, these typical components of housing are, in fact, themselves contingent, historical, invented, unstable, and the result of the destruction of other types of architecture and forms of life.

Fujiki's catalog makes the claim, or rather makes visible the fact, that after a dramatic history of uprooting and reconfiguration of life ultimately these components are inessential and have no proper way of being used or organized: they are but one very specific mode of architecture, living, work, and built reality. Thus, he only changes them slightly from their expected representations, or otherwise plays with them, or gets rid of them entirely. In fact, Fujiki's plans could be sorted in order of an increasing negation of familiar configurations and components, down to an example that, in fact, includes nothing but a bed enclosed in glass, and down further to a plan that stops at a blank slab with the words "no roof" written beneath it. His simultaneous inclusion and suppression of even the most banal and subconsciously expected norms of a building's performance opens up spectacular panoramas of use.

Fujiki's use of the term defective—which can be defined as not working, as *inoperative*—reminds us that the foundations of any possibility for

new content or idea rests in our ability to unbind ourselves from the any closed determinism in a set of values, codes, functions, specializations, and norms. As is so clear when considering the longer history of architecture, this essential defectiveness or inoperativity has for so long been veiled by positivist construction of roles, tasks, composition, styles, and expressions. But an increasing saturation and blankness in architecture and absence of tasks to which it must commit itself entails its coming to the foreground of social life. Architecture lacks any essential, proper or destined forms, configuration, or tasks. And while the definition of inoperativity suggests defective, out-of-order, invalid or, on the other hand, an absence of utility (inoperative as useless, unworkable, out of service, etc.), Fujiki does not advocate inactivity nor the destruction or total nullification of architecture. Instead, while working with what we all have, Fujiki shows us one way to carry defectiveness and inoperativity into practice.

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