

Designing After Disaster: Barrack Decoration and the Great Kantō Earthquake

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On 1 September 1923 the Great Kantō Earthquake (*Kantō daishinsai*) devastated Tokyo and its environs. Registering nearly 7.9 on the Richter scale, the quake and the ensuing fires killed upward of 100,000 people in the Tokyo and Yokohama areas, injuring an additional 50,000. More than 70% of the two million people who lived in metropolitan Tokyo had their homes damaged or destroyed.¹ With communications cut off, public utilities not functioning, and the government in chaos, a newly formed cabinet under Yamamoto Gonnohyōe declared martial law. Unsubstantiated rumors began to circulate that Koreans and communists were detonating bombs and poisoning well water in an effort to sabotage Japan. A rampage of vigilante violence ensued leaving thousands dead.² This savagery confirmed the Japanese state's worst fear of social dissolution into anarchy and by mid September nearly 50,000 troops had been brought in to restore order.

In spite of the physical and psychological trauma of the disaster and its aftermath, a range of artists immediately threw themselves into the reconstruction effort with the rallying cry, 'from the atelier to the streets' (*atorie kara gairo e*). They declared that 'the first step toward reconstruction was to relieve the damaged spirit [of the city and the people in the city] through art.'³ The most active of these groups was the Barrack Decoration Company (*Barakku Sōshokusha*), an enterprise started by the Waseda University architecture professor Kon Wajirō (1887–1973), together with the Forefront Company (*Sentōsha*), a group of designers who had graduated from the design department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (*Tōkyō Bijutsu Gakkō*, presently *Tōkyō Geijutsu Daigaku*) and artists from the group Action (*Akushon*). Although it soon grew to include several others, the Company's initial membership was listed as: Nakagawa Kigen (1892–1972), Kambara Tai (1898–1997), Asano Mōfu (1900–1984), Yokoyama Junnosuke (1903–1971), Yoshida Kenkichi (1897–1982), Yoshimura Jirō (1899–1942), Ōtsubo Shigechika (1899–?), Asuka Tetsuo (1895–?), Tōyama Shizuo (1895–1986) and Kon. Active from September 1923 until around June 1924, the Barrack Decoration Company was formed for the purpose of decorating the interiors and exteriors of temporary residential and commercial structures known as 'barracks'

¹ Detailed statistical information on earthquake related fatalities, land damage, and military and police deployment are listed in Mainichi gurafu, *Kantō daishinsai 69-nen (69th Anniversary of the Great Kantō Earthquake)*, Mainichi gurafu besshi, Yamada Kunio (Ed.), (Tokyo, Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1992), pp. 154–157; Ishizuka Hiromichi and Narita Ryūchi, *Tōkyōto no hyakumen* (Tokyo, Yamakawa Shuppan, 1986), pp. 157, 165.

² For further consideration of these events and issues see Tokusan Kan, *Kantō daishinsai (The Great Kantō Earthquake)*, no. 414 (Tokyo, Chūō Shinsho, 1975; reprint, Tokyo, Chūō Kōron, 1994).

³ 'Shinsaigo no shinshokugyō: Ude o furō zekkō no kikai' (New Occupations After the Earthquake: They Skillfully Display Their Abilities, the Best Machine), *Chūō shinbun*, 6 March 1924, Morning edition, p. 3.

(*barakku*) that were erected in the wake of the earthquake. The Company issued a public statement on October 2:

We have become the avant-garde of the imperial reconstruction. In an effort to create beautiful buildings distinct from convention, we have taken to working in the streets. We believe that Tokyo in the age of barracks has afforded a good opportunity to experiment with our art.⁴

For the members, the exigencies of the post-earthquake period offered an unprecedented opportunity to tie their work more closely to the real conditions of daily life. They viewed barrack decoration as a means to shape people's perceptions of the urban environment. The low cost and ephemeral nature of the structures provided a chance to design in a more free-form manner. And as examples of a new architectural type generated directly out of the living conditions after the disaster, the barracks were seen by the group as sites to invest art with social significance. Already since the late Meiji period Japanese artists and writers were becoming increasingly concerned about the seemingly ineffectual social role of the intellectual and the need for artistic production to incorporate more of a social consciousness. The urgency of this conviction was amplified by the ever-increasing manifestations of social strife through the interwar period. Large-scale urban strikes and public protests precipitated an aggressive incursion of the concept of 'society' into Japanese public discourse and further contributed to the formation of a social consciousness among the intelligentsia.⁵ By the 1920s many Japanese artists saw themselves as part of a worldwide movement to invest the arts with an explicit cultural and social purpose. Leftist political thought acted as a significant stimulus in this development, particularly in Weimar Germany, Eastern Europe, and post-revolutionary Russia. 'Art into the street' was an expression commonly heard among artists during the first anniversary celebration of the October Revolution in 1918.⁶

Kon and other Company members saw barrack decoration not only as a service to society and a means to achieve the spiritual renovation of Tokyo, but also as the first step toward revivifying the arts. As art designed daily life, daily life would revive the arts (*geijutsu fukkō*).⁷ The theme of 'revival,' often iterated in the expression '*teito fukkō*' (revival of the imperial capital) in the post-earthquake reconstruction period, referred to both physical and spiritual matters. Traditionally earthquakes were viewed in Japan as profoundly transformative events. This prompted a variety of intellectuals to compare their situation with the turmoil and subsequent social and cultural reordering brought on by the First World War and the Russian socialist revolution. The barracks were emblematic of this moment of change.

The term *barakku* was used broadly after the quake to refer to a diversity of structures

⁴ 'Gaitō ni deru gakkatachi: Akushonsha to dōjinsha ga' (Artists Out on the Street: Action and Dōjinsha), *Asahi shinbun*, 2 October 1923, Afternoon edition, p. 3; 'Atoric kara gairo e' (From the Atelier to the Streets), *Miyako shinbun*, 9 October 1923, Morning edition, p. 5.

⁵ Andrew Barshay, *State and Intellectual in Imperial Japan: The Public Man in Crisis* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), p. 21.

⁶ Japanese artists responding to the Kantō earthquake were clearly aware of this trend in artistic social activism, having heard about it from the press and Japanese travelers abroad. John Milner, *Russian Revolutionary Art* (London, Bloomsbury Books, 1987), pp. 15, 20.

⁷ Ōgura Uichirō (1881–1962), who joined the Company soon after its formation, is quoted in 'Botsubotsu arawareru geijutsuteki no barakku' (The Artistic Barracks That Are Appearing Little by Little), *Miyako shinbun*, 14 October 1923, Morning edition, p. 7.



FIGURE 1. Earthquake refugee settlement on the grounds of the Imperial Palace, Tokyo, 1 September 1923. The palace looms in the far distance on the right (Kon Wajirō Archive).

that included ephemeral tent-like shelters and huts of iron sheet metal for refugees and businesses, as well as sturdier, sometimes elaborately decorated wooden edifices designed to stand for several years until permanent reconstruction could be completed. After previous fires and earthquakes similar makeshift structures had been erected but they were generally referred to as ‘temporary architecture’ (*kari kenchiku*) or ‘temporary small huts’ (*karigoya*), and these terms continued to be used in 1923 as well. Architectural historian Fujimori Terunobu has noted that the word ‘*barakku*’ only came into currency after the Kantō quake and surmises that the term’s popularity derived from its Western origins, which in the Japanese mind connoted modern, stylish structures akin to the new fashionable businesses of the age such as cafés and beer halls.⁸ While this may explain a portion of the barrack structures, it does not, however, illuminate why the same term was also used to refer to the ramshackle rows of tents and shacks that served as temporary dwellings and businesses (see Figure 1).

In his private notes, Kon copied several definitions of the word ‘barrack’ in English from what he terms a ‘standard dictionary,’ demonstrating his inclusive understanding of the term.⁹ The definitions read:

1. A permanent structure for the lodgement of soldiers, as distinguished from a hut or tent; generally in the plural;
2. A temporary or rough building or a number of huts in an enclosure, serving as a shelter for a company of laborers or the like;
3. A light adjustable roof supported at the corners by four posts, for sheltering hay, etc.; also, a barn for such storage.

Undoubtedly, the unprecedented number of like structures assembled in long repeti-

⁸ Fujimori Terunobu, ‘Kon Wajirō to Barakku Sōshokusha’ (Kon Wajirō and the Barrack Decoration Company), *Quarterly Column* 88 (1983), p. 59.

⁹ Kon Wajirō, private notes, unpaginated. Kon Wajirō Archive, Kōgakuin University.



FIGURE 2. Temporary wooden barrack structure used as a pharmacy. An example of *'kanban kenchiku'* (signboard architecture). The sign reads 'medicine' (*kusuri*) (Kon Wajirō Archive).

tive rows was visually reminiscent of military and workers' barracks and was most likely the first inspiration for the appearance of the term. It was used thereafter to refer to a broad array of structures. The work of the Decoration Company spanned all of these barrack permutations, ranging from 'signboard architecture' (*kanban kenchiku*—see Figure 2), which consisted of creating placards and painting facades for advertising purposes, to elaborately decorated, semi-permanent buildings like the Café Kirin, with a spectrum of building types sandwiched in between.

The organizer and leader of the Decoration Company, Kon was a graduate of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where he concentrated his studies on design, while at the same time also pursuing a course in architecture under the prominent architect Okada Shinichirō. After graduating in 1912, Kon was hired to teach at Waseda University's newly founded architecture department run by Satō Kōichi, where he stayed for most of his academic career. Prior to the earthquake, Kon and his partner, the Action artist Yoshida Kenkichi, were both developing strong interests in the documentation of the changing practices of daily life (*seikatsu*) which served as a major motivation for bringing their art work to the streets with the Barrack Decoration Company.¹⁰ In fact,

¹⁰ Kon's tremendous interest in the study of daily life was fueled by his participation in Yanagita Kunio's folklore study (*minzokugaku*) group, which examined everything from fables to dwellings. For his part, Kon engaged in extensive documentary field work, particularly related to rural Japanese houses (*minka*) and produced numerous detailed sketches of his findings. Fujimori Terunobu, *Ginza no toshi ishō to kenchikukatachi* (*The Urban Design of Tokyo and Architects*), (Tokyo, Shiseidō Gyārarii, 1993), p. 19. For more information on Yoshida's career see Yoshida Kenkichi, *Tsukiji Shōgekijō no jūdai* (*The Era of the Tsukiji Little Theater*), (Tokyo, Yaedake Shobō, 1971).

an important component of Kon's barrack related work was the preparation and publication of detailed field notes on the location, condition, population, and specific construction designs of various barrack settlements throughout the city.¹¹ Yoshida was a multi-talented artist, graphic designer, and stage designer who graduated from the design section of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. In addition to his work with Action and the Barrack Decoration Company, he was a founding member of the Tsukiji Little Theater (*Tsukiji Shōgekijō*) with Osanai Kaoru and Hijikata Yoshi, where he produced highly acclaimed stage designs for Japan's modern theater (*shingeki*) particularly the proletarian theater movement. Kon and Yoshida also later became well known for their ethnographic studies of Japanese modern life, alternatively termed *kōgengaku* or 'modernology,' in which they documented the changing daily practices and material conditions in urban Tokyo from the mid 1920s into the early 1930s. They developed an elaborate and distinctive style of pictorial notation to record their data and attempted to quantify and qualify the cultural ramifications of capitalism and industrialization.¹² Kon and Yoshida's activities in the immediate post-earthquake period reinforced their interests in documenting daily life and can be considered a galvanizing experience for the succeeding *kōgengaku* work.¹³

Very little is known about the members of the Forefront Company: Asuka, Ōtsubo, and Tōyama. Their collegial relationship with Kon through art school was the basis for their association with the Company. Tōyama is recorded to have been a specialist in lighting design working for the Imperial Theater (*Teikoku gekijō*).¹⁴ Following his involvement with the Company, Asuka was active in magazine design, taught Western-style painting in Ishikawa prefecture, and from the beginning of the 1930s until 1951 worked in the advertising section of the Kao soap company.¹⁵ Action, on the other hand, was a well-publicized splinter group of the prominent Western-style artists' association, the Nika-kai (Association of the Second Section). Banding together in October 1922, Action artists vociferously advocated a broad range of new stylistic trends associated with post-impressionism and expressionism, producing fauvist, cu-

¹¹ Kon's field notes are still extant in the Kon Wajirō Archive at Kōgakuin University. The studies were published in a variety of magazines at the time. Some of his sketches of barrack constructions are reproduced in Mie Prefectural Museum, *20 seiki Nihon bijutsu saiken II: 1920 nendai* (Tsu, Mie Kenritsu Bijutsukan, 1996), p. 136. Yoshida Kenkichi also actively published his sketches of the post-earthquake situation. He was particularly taken with the assortment of 'signboard architecture' produced at this time. He documented and commented on numerous signboards produced by amateurs that were visible throughout the Tokyo landscape, advising artists involved with barrack decoration to learn from the ingenuity, wit, and playfulness of these examples. Yoshida Kenkichi, 'Barakku Tōkyō no kanbanbi' (The Beauty of Signs in the Barracks of Tokyo), *Kenchiku shinchō* 5:1 (1924), pp. 21–25.

¹² Kon Wajirō and Yoshida Kenkichi (Eds), *Modernologio (Kōgengaku), (Modernology)*, (Tokyo, Shunyōdō, 1930). For analyses of Kon and Yoshida's modernology see Miriam Silverberg, 'Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity', *Journal of Asian Studies* 51:1 (1992); Kawagoe Noboru, *Kon Wajirō: Sono Kōgengaku (Kon Wajirō: His Modernology)*, Minkan Nihon gakusha, no. 9 (Tokyo, Liburopōto, 1987); Fujimori Terunobu (Ed.), *Yoshida Kenkichi collection I: Kōgengaku no tanjō (Yoshida Kenkichi Collection I: The Birth of Modernology)*, (Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō, 1986).

¹³ Based on Yoshida's reminiscences; Kawagoe comes to a similar conclusion: Kawagoe, *Kon Wajirō* 9, pp. 7–11

¹⁴ This information is briefly mentioned in 'Barakku no bijutsuka 3', *Miyako shinbun*, 29 October 1923, p. 1. Tōyama wrote an in-depth analysis of the design considerations for lighting barrack architecture in Tōyama Shizuo, 'Oboegaki' (A Note), *Mizue* 226 (December 1923), p. 26.

¹⁵ Asuka's real family name was Takahashi. Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, *1920 nendai Nihon-ten (The 1920s in Japan)*, (Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, 1988), p. 306.

bist, and futurist-style works.¹⁶ The group's name was supposedly chosen to allude to its activist posture. The original membership consisted of Nakagawa Kigen, Yabe Tomoe, Koga Harue, Kambara Tai, Yoshimura Jirō, Yokoyama Junnosuke, Iida Sango, Izumi Jisaku, Yoshida Kenkichi, Nanba Keiji, Yamamoto Yukio and Asano Mōfu. Yoshida Kenkichi, also concurrently a member of the Forefront Company, was the most active in the Decoration Company's work.¹⁷

Action artists set out with a revolutionary mission to reform art, the Japanese art establishment, and society in general, optimistic about the potential for art to influence and shape modern experience. They brought this zeal, and an intense desire to create art that would give people pleasure, to the barrack projects.¹⁸ Action's first exhibition, sponsored by the Asahi Shinbun, was shown at the Nihonbashi branch of Mitsukoshi department store in April 1923. The exhibition catalogue presented the "Action" Coterie Manifesto' (*Akushon' dōjin sengensho*) penned by Kambara Tai, one of the most vocal members of the group. The manifesto clearly articulated the group's belief in its avant-garde position:

We are young men who lead with a clear conscience and a rigorous conviction, who want to walk on the front line of art with free and sure steps—with audacity and gaiety ... We are not slaves of the history of art ... We are young men who do not hesitate to take the cross and follow the way of difficulty according to our own opinions and the freedom of our lives ... We know we are but beginners. But if we do not stand up here and now, the birth of the new era will be even more painful ... up until now artists have sat in silence, suffering from a false humility where they say that it is enough to just move forward along their own paths. They have hesitated for much too long. But now the time has come for us to arise. We bravely stand up according to our own beliefs.¹⁹

The Barrack Decoration Company concentrated its activities in the areas of the capital most heavily damaged by the earthquake, known as the low city (*shitamachi*), which encompassed the commercial center of Tokyo prior to the disaster and several working class residential neighborhoods that were adjacent to sizeable industrial developments. This included Hibiya, Ginza, Kyōbashi, Nihonbashi, Kanda, Asakusa, Fukagawa, and Honjo, where many large barrack towns were subsequently erected.²⁰ The Company advertised for 'young' clients who were willing to take a chance with

¹⁶ After an irreparable rift, Action eventually disbanded in October 1924. A number of the members then went on to form the proletarian art group Zōkei (Plastic Arts). The history of Action and photographs of surviving exhibition materials are found in Yūrakuchō Asahi Gyararii, Hokkaidō-ritsu Hakodate Bijutsukan and Nagano-ken Tatsuno-chō Kyōdo Bijutsukan (Eds), *Taishō shinkō bijutsu no ibuki: Akushon-ten (The Youthful Energy of the New Art of the Taishō Period: Action Exhibition)*, (Tokyo, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1989); *Nakagawa Kigen 1892-1972* (Tokyo, Shoto Museum of Art, 1992); Honma Masayoshi (Ed.), *Nihon no zenei bijutsu (Japanese Avant-Garde Art)*, Kindai no bijutsu, no. 3 (Tokyo, Ibundō, 1971), p. 20.

¹⁷ Other Action artists only assisted on the Kaishin restaurant (Kaishin shokudō) and Café Kirin projects, quickly returning to their usual exhibition practices.

¹⁸ See Kambara Tai, 'Barakku Sōshokusha no shimei to watashi no kibō' (The Mission of the Barrack Decoration Company and My Hopes), *Mizue* 225 (November 1923).

¹⁹ Original reproduced in Yūrakuchō Asahi Gyararii et al. (Eds), *Taishō shinkō bijutsu no ibuki*, p. 52.

²⁰ There were also large barrack communities in Ueno park, Hibiya park, around the Imperial Palace, and on the grounds of the Hama Detached Imperial Palace (Hama rikyō) near Shinbashi.



FIGURE 3. Exterior view, Tōjō Bookstore (Tōjō Shoten), Jimbochō, ca. November 1923. Facade and sign decoration by the Barrack Decoration Company. On the center pillar hangs a sign displaying the Company's manifesto. Signed self-portrait of Kon Wajirō in pen and ink in the lower right-hand corner (Kon Wajirō Archive).

experimental projects. They offered their services for cost, without any commission, adding that they were willing to do any kind of structure including stores, factories, restaurants, cafés, residences, and storage sheds.

Barrack construction provided the Company artists with many new opportunities to design for everyday life. Newspapers reported that after just a week the Company had already begun three projects: Meidi-ya, a store specializing in imported foodstuffs in Ginza; business offices for Hori (Hori shōten), a company in Hongo that specialized in metal fittings (*kanamono*); and a residence commissioned by a private patron.²¹ No visual record of this project survives. Immediately after completion the Company was forced by the owner of Meidi-ya to paint over their designs because he felt that they were not fitting for a Ginza store. Other projects were: Kaishin restaurant (Kaishin shokudō) in Hibiya Park, which was the first project completed; Tōjō Bookstore (Tōjō shoten) in Jimbochō (see Figure 3); Café Kirin in Ginza; Imashiro Hotel (Imashiro ryokan) at Kandabashi, which was designed by Kon's colleague at Waseda University, architecture professor Imai Kenji; and the Tokyo Imperial University Settlement (Tōkyō Teidai Setsurumento), residential buildings in Fukagawa. Several of these and numerous other barrack projects were photographed for the two-volume book *Barrack Architecture* (*Barakku kenchiku*) published in 1923–1924.²²

Publicity of the artists' magnanimous assistance in the reconstruction effort fit well within the literary category of '*bidan*' (stories of noble deeds) that emphasized the

²¹ *Miyako Shinbun*, 'Botsubotsu', p. 7.

²² *Barakku kenchiku* (*Barrack Architecture*) in *Kenchiku shashin ruijū* (Tokyo, Kōyōsha, 1923), Vol. 4:12:1; *Barakku kenchiku* (*Barrack Architecture*) in *Kenchiku shashin ruijū* (Tokyo, Kōyōsha, 1924), Vol. 4:12:2.



FIGURE 4. Barrack Decoration Company members shown on a ladder painting the facade of the Tōjō Bookstore, Jimbochō. Reproduced in a montage of photographs entitled 'Fukkō tojō teito 1' (The Imperial Capital in the Process of Rebuilding 1), *Asahigraph* 1:1, 14 November 1923, p. 4.

virtuous individual and communal outpouring of support during and after the disaster, which soared in popularity among the Japanese readership.²³ The Japanese press and other print media were greatly taken with the image of artists working in the streets. The Kaishin restaurant was covered by no less than three major newspapers and other Company projects received extensive coverage in both specialty and general interest magazines. The Tōjō Bookstore project was immortalized by a dramatic photograph in the *Asahigraph* showing three members on a ladder painting the front of the building (see Figure 4).

Asuka Tetsuo stated 'our job is really like an oasis in the middle of the desert because we have to bring each beautiful thing to life on the rough, burnt earth.' He was one of several members who saw the Company's mission in largely aesthetic and

²³ For a historiographical study of the recording and signification of the Kantō earthquake, see Narita Ryūchi, 'Kantō daishinsai no metahisutorii no tame ni' (A Metahistory of the Great Kantō Earthquake), *Shisō* 866 (August 1996).

spiritual terms. For Asuka, beauty (*bi*) was an indispensable part of life and reflective of one's cultivation (*kyōyō*). He could only view the barracks as repulsive and pathetically devoid of 'civilization,' and this conviction compelled him to intervene in order to restore a bit of humanity and culture to the barren landscape. While acknowledging that the group's efforts were grossly insufficient to the task, Asuka expressed hope that they could perhaps help remedy at least some of the spiritual despair among the disaster refugees.²⁴

Kon and Kambara, on the other hand, were inspired by the austerity of the barracks to rhapsodize about the beauty of the 'simple life' (*sobokuna seikatsu*).²⁵ Kon attributed a profound spiritual meaning to the stripped-down state of the barracks, idealizing the simplicity of poverty and affirming the sublimity of a subsistence-level existence. Unlike Asuka, he saw great beauty in the crude environment of the barracks that he associated with the dignity of rural poverty. This prompted Kon to call for a return to basics and to remind his readers to differentiate between the necessities of existence and the material desires of modern life.²⁶ His attitude concurred with a host of new 'prescriptions for a healthy middle-class domesticity,' which Jordan Sand has located around the ideal of 'the simple life' (more commonly translated into Japanese as '*kan'i seikatsu*') that began to appear in Japan soon after the Russo-Japanese war. According to Sand, the simple life was envisioned as a means 'to strip away the encrustations of formality that seemed to smother genuine domestic happiness.' It implied a radical abandonment of social conventions that translated into equally radical transformations in the design of the domestic interior. These notions were inspired by European reformers who extolled the virtues of '*la vie simple*.' Kon's conception seems particularly indebted to major design theorists like William Morris and Henry Van de Velde, active in the arts and crafts movement, who endeavored to simulate the mental state and rustic surroundings of country life in their designed environments. Kon's invocation of the simple life in regard to the barracks was also rooted in his idealization of communal living, which accorded with the socialist political values infused into a large portion of simple life philosophy.²⁷

Out of necessity, construction and decoration of the barracks took place rapidly using whatever materials were available. Detailed accounts of the Kaishin restaurant project provide an invaluable window into the Company's working process.²⁸ The job was estimated to cost around 80 yen and eventually took three days and 10 people to complete.²⁹ Decoration began on 20 October and continued through the opening of the

²⁴ Asuka Tetsuo, 'Shigoto no ato de kanjita koto' (What I Felt After the [Barrack] Job), *Mizue* 226 (December 1923), p. 22.

²⁵ Often invoking Christian themes and ethics in his work, Kambara praised the simplicity of the barracks, likening the conditions to the divine asceticism of Saint Francis. Kambara, 'Barakku Sōshokusha no shimei', p. 25.

²⁶ Kon Wajirō, 'Soboku to iroiro no bi' (Simplicity and Various Aesthetics), *Mizue* 225 (November 1923).

²⁷ Jordan Sand, 'House and Home in Modern Japan, 1880s-1920s', PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1996, pp. 213-215, 221.

²⁸ Ōtsubo's diary-like account of the day-to-day progress clarifies the number of people necessary for each aspect of the job and what the various difficulties were in obtaining proper tools and materials; Ōtsubo Shigechika, 'Shigoto no nikki' (Diary of a Job), *Mizue* 226 (December 1923).

²⁹ In 1926, 10 kilograms of white rice cost around 3 yen, 20 sen, and in 1924 monthly rent for a detached house (*ikkodate*) or tenement house (*nagaya*), which would generally have included three rooms between three and six tatami mats in size with a kitchen and bathroom, was around 10 yen. Shūkan Asahi (Ed.), *Nedanshi nenpyō: Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa* (*A Chronological History of Prices: Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa*), (Tokyo, Asahi shinbunsha, 1988), pp. 161, 198.

establishment, slated for the next day. In light of the imminent opening, the Company began their work with the interior decorations. Yoshida was responsible for the building design and the overall decorative program. He produced numerous still life designs for the interior sliding doors and wainscoting that represented foodstuffs such as dried sardines (*mezashi*), turnips (*kabu*) and sweet potatoes (*satsumaimo*) which he hoped would conjure up associations with pleasant aromas. Yoshida also designed the menus. Kon painted small floral patterns on the interior pillars. The exterior of the structure was painted in green with an ivy motif winding exuberantly over the surface. The building was capped off by a tall sign flag poking out into the sky among the congregation of barracks accenting the skyline.³⁰

The Decoration Company members envisioned the barracks as monumental canvases on which to express themselves freely, experimenting with a variety of playful and expressionistic designs. One possible inspiration for this interest in painted building facades has been identified as the German architect Bruno Taut, director of municipal construction (1921–1923) for the city of Magdeburg. Taut was dedicated to the notion of bringing art into contact with the people and, when faced with severe budgetary constraints, commissioned modern artists to paint existing buildings as a practical alternative. These projects were well publicized throughout Germany and abroad, becoming a popular trend in housing development design thereafter.³¹

The Company's decoration work at the Café Kirin in Ginza, a structure designed by the Takenaka Construction Company (Takenaka Kōmuten), was even more elaborate and on a grander scale than the Kaishin restaurant.³² Photographs and verbal descriptions of the exterior indicate that the front doors were pushed off to the side with a large series of windows inserted in the center. This distinctive design prompted one reviewer to speculate that it might have been a mechanism to engage the viewer in the bold colors of the facade. The lower portion of the facade was painted an earth-like black hue, but the areas around the window panes were rendered in a mixture of colors that became increasingly more intense as one looked up the building, eventually climaxing in what another reviewer termed a 'rococo-style' signboard at the top emblazoned with the words 'Kirin Beer' and 'Café Kirin' in roman capital letters.³³ The sign displayed

³⁰ Ōtsubo, 'Shigoto no nikki', p. 24; Yoshida Kenkichi, 'Kyatatsu no ue de' (On the Top of the Ladder), *Mizue* 226 (December 1923), p. 22; 'Barakku no sōshoku ga mirairashii moyō' (Barrack Decoration Has Futuristic Design), *Jiji shinpō*, 25 October 1923, morning edition. Another article on the same project that ran in the *Chūgai shōgyō shinbun* presented a slightly different account. Kon is quoted as saying that while the designs were largely by Yoshida, the lights were by Tōyama, the banners were based on designs by Kambara, the outdoor still lifes were by Asuka, and the indoor arabesques by Ōtsubo. In this instance, Kon himself was only responsible for apportioning out the work. It is unclear which account is more reliable. Quoted in Omuka Toshiharu, *Taishōki shinkō bijutsu undō no kenkyū* (Tokyo, Skydoor, 1995), pp. 295, 298.

³¹ On Taut, see Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918–1945* (1968; reprint, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 41–42, 63. On the reception of architectural expressionism and Taut in Japan, see Sōga Takaaki, 'Taishō makki ni okeru shinkō geijutsu undō no kōsatsu: Zōkei bijutsu to kenchiku no kakawari o megutte' (Thoughts on the New Art Movement of the Late Taishō Period: On the Relationship Between the Plastic Arts and Architecture), Master's thesis, Waseda University, 1990, pp. 53, 64–66, illustrations pp. 23–24; Omuka, *Taishōki shinkō bijutsu*, pp. 491–499.

³² The café was directly across from Meidi-ya, where Itōya is currently located.

³³ Saitō Sogan and Hinako Jitsuzō, 'Barakku kenbutsu: Kasō no Ginza to Asakusa (6)' (Barrack Sightseeing: The Disguise of Ginza and Asakusa), *Yomiuri shinbun*, 11 March 1924, Morning edition, p. 7. A full frontal illustration of the café Kirin and interior shot is included in *Barakku kenchiku* (Barrack Architecture) in *Kenchiku shashin ruijū*, Vol. 4: 12: 1, illustrations pp. 35, 36.

two crouching bestial figures in profile glaring mischievously from their corner perches, renditions of the eponymous mythological Chinese animal that served as Kirin's emblem. The multiple contorted appendages of each beast were easily confused with its craggy fur, mouth, and head also projecting wildly in all directions. The figures were confined by two embellished borders, presenting a series of exuberant abstract patterns that appeared to leap from one side of the structure to the other.

The interior decorations consisted of wall paintings and sculptural reliefs. Certain elements of the decorative program were clearly indebted to the Art Nouveau and expressionism-inspired work of Saitō Kazō (1887–1955) a well-known designer who had traveled to Germany around 1912. Saitō's designs were greatly influenced by musical rhythms, and the same expressive rhythmicity is evident in the Decoration Company's work. Moreover, Saitō's advocacy of a totally designed environment and a 'synthetic' or 'comprehensive' art (*sōgō geijutsu*) may also have been influential for Company members.³⁴ At the Café Kirin, an undulating, irregular line was employed to define a lyrical, pastoral cornice around the top of the room that was further delineated by a differentiation in color used for the lower and upper portions of the wall. Periodically a bold abstract design would appear, extending down to the height of the café tables, almost as if the cornice were being unzipped and a barrage of abstracted foliate and geometrical forms were falling out of the wall. At the bottom of this zipper motif was a small sculpted nude figure protruding from the wall (see Figures 5 and 6).

Intermittently, there were also oblong, irregularly shaped decorative patches placed slightly above the eye-level of viewers seated at the tables. Some were figurative scenes, such as two roughly rendered characters seated in a blurry landscape, while others were bold, abstract, expressionistic compositions comprised of dynamically pulsating lines and shapes. These swathes read as paintings hanging on the wall, or like oddly shaped windows peering out onto a dreamscape.³⁵ Running down the middle of the establishment from front to back were two rows of support columns with ornately decorated box-shaped light fixtures designed by Tōyama Shizuo mounted overhead, serving to guide the viewer's eye toward a large-scale composition on the wall behind the bar area. This work consisted of a painted scene with sculptural elements in low relief displaying two classical, seemingly Greco-Roman, figures, one standing and the other seated, in an abstract landscape under an arch with a fountain between them.³⁶ In general, the café interior exuded a gay and cosmopolitan ambiance meant to provide earthquake

³⁴ Saitō was also a graduate of the design section of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and began teaching design there in 1919. It is likely that many of the Forefront Company artists studied with him. Around the time of the earthquake, Saitō published numerous articles on his concept of a synthetic art that would encompass all areas of design. For more on Saitō, see Yūrakuchō Asahi Gyararii, *Sōgō geijutsu no yume: Saitō Kazo-ten (Dream of a 'Synthetic Art': Saitō Kazo Exhibition)* (Tokyo, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1990), pp. 38–41, 48.

³⁵ Kambara Tai claims that he designed these *trompe l'oeil* decorations and had another Action member, Nanba Keiji, execute them on the walls of the café. Kambara is interviewed in Asano Tōru and Omuka Toshiharu, 'Kambara Tai: Oitachi to taishōki shinkō bijutsu undō o kataru', in Yūrakuchō Asahi Gyararii *et al.* (Eds), *Taishō shinkō bijutsu no ibuki*, p. 9.

³⁶ Omuka, *Taishōki shinkō bijutsu*, pp. 295, 298. A photograph of the café facade appears with a brief description of the structure and interior atmosphere in Saitō and Hinako, 'Barakku kenbutsu 6', p. 7. Several photographs of the project still survive in the Kon Wajirō Archive, Kōgakuin University.



FIGURE 5. Partial exterior view, Café Kirin, Ginza, ca. 1923. Detail shows crouching 'kirin' figure (mythological Chinese animal that serves as the beer company's emblem) in the right corner of the signboard (Kon Wajirō Archive).

survivors a welcome temporary refuge from the grim and laborious task of reconstruction³⁷ (see Figure 7).

The Company's decorative program on the Tōjō Bookstore consisted of a playful and expressionistic accentuation of the architectural members with several scattered paintings applied to the surface of the building unrelated to specific structural elements. The triangular area of the facade defined by the gabled roof (*kiritsuma*) displayed two fire-breathing dragon-like creatures facing inward from the corners, bracketing the name of the shop in the center. Abstract decorative patterns reminiscent of hieroglyphics detailed the edges of the eaves (*nokisaki*) as well as a horizontal beam across the width of the structure.

Kon's design for the exterior of the Hori store, employing a series of decorative panels alternating with windows on the facade, harks back to the Company's work at Café Kirin, as it consisted of largely abstract arabesque motifs (*karakusa*) playfully

³⁷ Unfortunately, the morning after Café Kirin was completed, half of it was destroyed in a fire ignited by sparks from an adjacent building.



FIGURE 6. Interior detail, Café Kirin. Decorative cornice and wall paintings displaying abstracted foliate and geometrical designs. A small sculpted nude figure is affixed to the wall below the painting (Kon Wajirō Archive).

zigzagging back and forth as they floated on a flat, undelineated background. The only remaining photograph of the Imashiro Hotel suggests that the decorations were much more subdued and circumscribed than on previous projects. Wavy strands of color were interwoven to create ribbon-like patterns flowing across the upper edge of the front porch. Another decorative band adorned the lip of the roof. Nothing, however, is known about interior designs in the building (see Figure 8).

Decoration Company artists and many of their architect colleagues saw the barrack as a new building type not beholden to any previous architectural conventions. The collaboration of artist–designers with architects and engineers on the barrack projects contributed to a major shift in architectural practice in the post-earthquake period away from stalwart, institutional structures toward more individualized, expressive forms with playful facade and interior ornamentation. Fujimori has argued that the barracks offered a new generation of architects the opportunity to indulge in and enjoy design, something the previous generation would not countenance, producing a great sense of liberation after the earthquake.³⁸

³⁸ Fujimori, 'Kon Wajirō to barakku', p. 60.



FIGURE 7. Interior detail of bar and back wall decoration, Café Kirin. Painted scene with sculptural elements in low relief displaying two classical figures, one standing and the other seated, in an abstract landscape under an arch with a fountain between them (Kon Wajirō Archive).

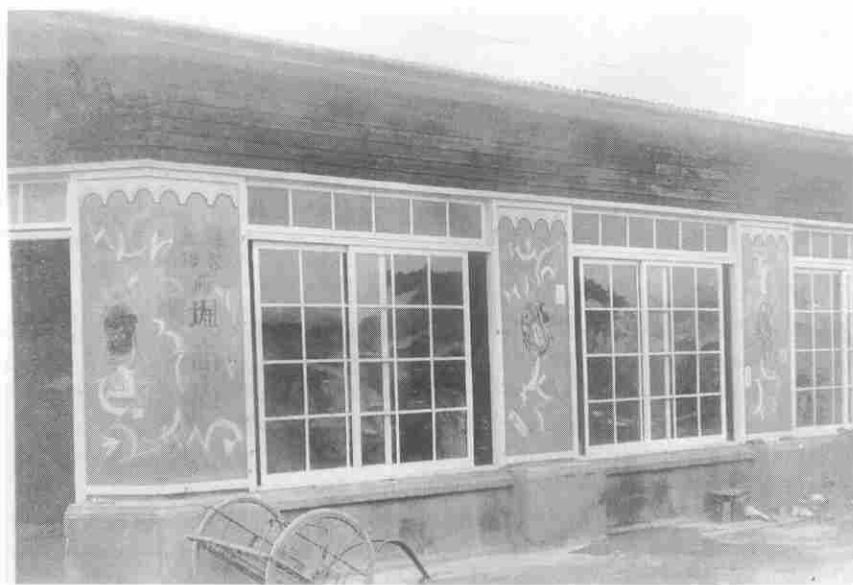


FIGURE 8. Hori store, Hongo, c. late 1923–early 1924. Facade and sign decoration by the Barrack Decoration Company. Decorative panels alternating with windows on the facade to the right of the front entrance (Kon Wajirō Archive).

But not everyone appreciated the Decoration Company's work or warmly welcomed artists who entered the realm of architecture. Some even harshly criticized their activities. By December 1923, a debate had begun in the popular press over the value

of barrack decoration done largely by non-architects.³⁹ Supporters hailed the 'beautification' and 'artification' of the city, and detractors flatly rejected these solutions as being structurally impractical and overly concerned with subjective expression. Endō Arata, for example, one of the most active barrack architects who designed at least eight different structures, was not amenable to the idea and roundly criticized Kon for the meaninglessness of the decoration company's work.⁴⁰

Architects in the Bunriha Kenchikukai (Secessionist Architecture Association) opposed the Decoration Company's work most adamantly. Takizawa Mayumi, in particular, pronounced that those who disregarded the true nature of architecture had to be considered enemies of the field. He and Kon engaged in a protracted public debate on the merits of artist-designers involved in architecture. In the end, the disputation hinged on their disparate definitions of architecture itself. For Takizawa and the Secessionists, architectural structures were meant to express the true spirit of the individual architect and a universal spirit of human beings, an attitude that resonated with the aesthetic theories of the White Birch Society (*Shirakaba-ha*) a standard bearer of the Taishō period movement of subjective individualism. Takizawa called for a 'naïve,' intuitive response to the structure. He argued that bringing out the richness and beauty of a wall could not be achieved by merely decorating it with paintings. He concluded that, 'When bohemian geniuses, under the good name of art, but not knowing the pure borders of architecture, rampantly spread madness and selfishness, all that appears is a pointless chimeric world.'⁴¹

Kon responded by arguing that architecture was more complex than merely a material expression of the human spirit. It was equally as related to real life and the modern social condition. Thus, man's everyday environment needed to be incorporated as well. He stated that the Company's animated designs were often chance effects produced during emotional surges of excitement in response to the space itself. Kon felt that this playful, effervescent aesthetic was a legitimate response to the liberated space of the barracks.⁴²

Numerous other critical responses to barrack decoration reveal a repeated equation of this kind of spontaneous and somewhat anarchic expressionism with immorality. The metaphor of drunkenness was often used to describe the projects as if the works were created in an alcohol-induced revelry. Yada Shigeru, another member of the Secessionist group, echoed Takizawa's sentiments in his published response to barrack architecture, 'Concerning the Bad Trends in Expression.' He wrote,

When I walk on the streets these days, somehow I can't relax, I become irritated. What reflects in my eyes is an endorsement for administering cheap make-up to temporary architecture. I want to say to young architects, 'Look deeply! Think calmly!' I would like to see them express rhythms and compositions from nature as it is, with a clear head like one would have the morning

³⁹ Based on the work of Fujimori Terunobu, Omuka reconstructs this debate, adding full reference citations missing in Fujimori's study. Omuka, *Taishōki shinkō bijutsu*, pp. 292–293, 299.

⁴⁰ Endō was a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright. His works are illustrated in *Barakku kenchiku* in *Kenchiku shashin ruijū*, Vol. 4:12:1, illustrations pp. 5, 38–44; *Barakku kenchiku* in *Kenchiku shashin ruijū*, Vol. 4:12:2, illustrations pp. 68–73; Omuka, *Taishōki shinkō bijutsu*, pp. 301–302.

⁴¹ Quoted in Fujimori, 'Kon Wajirō to barakku', p. 64.

⁴² For a somewhat murky elaboration on Kon's attitude, see Kon Wajirō, 'Sōshoku geijutsu no kaimēi' (Clarification of Decoration Art), *Kenchiku shinchō* 5:2 (1924).

after a sound sleep. I do not want them to make architecture that looks like it has been forced into an excited state through whiskey like [the feeling] in one's head after staying up all night.⁴³

Tokyo Imperial University architecture professor Kishida Hideto, one of the founding members of the architecture group called Meteor, similarly chided artist-designers working in a free-form manner for violating architectural morality by 'abusing intense curved lines' (*kōdokyokusen*). Anyone can experience the beauty of curved lines, 'once,' he admitted, but like alcohol, 'it will become a drug.' 'Like sleepwalkers and sexual pervers, architecture is something that anyone can think is a little interesting,' he continued, 'however, what is necessary in Japan now is not that kind of "temporary gratification" (*shunkan kōfun*) architecture. I think a forceful primitivism (*chikaratsuyoki genshisei*) is lacking in Japanese architecture now.' He concluded, 'Cursing polish and running away to intense curved lines and toystore architecture is the same as being fed up with the princess and running to a prostitute.'⁴⁴

Rather than focusing on these charges, however, Kon, chose to emphasize the artisanal character of the decoration work, implying an honorable moral position in the transformation of the artist into a laborer. The manual labor of painting barracks temporarily recast artist-intellectuals as members of the working class, an identity they tried to express through their informal work outfits consisting of cut-off pants and gaiters.⁴⁵ While sheepishly admitting that he felt more like an actor playing the role of a laborer than an actual laborer, Kon still expressed great delight in having had the chance to experience this blue collar lifestyle. He even joined a labor union of craftsmen to get a better understanding of the profession.⁴⁶

Mary Beard, an American historian residing in Japan, noted the prominent role the working class took in disaster relief in her *Shūkan asahi* (*Weekly Asahi*) article entitled, 'The Supreme Test of the Japanese Nation.' She wrote,

On all sides we hear tales of the daring, resourcefulness, and unselfishness that the laboring class exhibited when the crash came and the fire spread. Certainly they have earned by their sacrifice at this time the most sincere consideration and the best possible treatment in the plans for the city that is to be. It sometimes takes a catastrophe on an immense scale to teach us true values. In normal times we are so apt to be engrossed in our personal enterprises and immediate circle of acquaintances that we forget or ignore the problems presented to our fellow citizens whose fate is really so closely bound up with our own.⁴⁷

The sudden catapulting of the working class onto center stage in the popular press and the momentary leveling of Japanese society in the ashes of the earthquake inspired many idealistic expressions of a classless brotherhood and further fueled the mythicization of the manual laborer. This sentiment also came to the fore in accounts of the

⁴³ Quoted in Fujimori, 'Kon Wajirō to barakku', p. 64.

⁴⁴ Kishida Hideto, 'Sōanten shokan (kenchiku)' (Impressions of the Exhibition of Plans [for the Reconstruction of the Imperial City] (Architecture), *Kenchiku shinchō* 5:6 (1924), p. 2.

⁴⁵ Many of their contemporaries inclined toward socialism were already similarly demonstrating their sense of collegiality with the working class by wearing overalls.

⁴⁶ Kon Wajirō, 'Poketto no naka no ni en yon jū hachi sen' (The Two Yen and Forty-Eight Sen in My Pocket), *Mizue* 226 (December 1923), pp. 25–26. In several articles, Kon mentions that Company work earned the admiration of 'real craftsmen', and that a young carpenter even asked to join the group.

⁴⁷ Mary Beard, 'The Supreme Test of the Japanese Nation', *Shūkan asahi* 4:25 (1923), p. 20.

Company's last project, the Tokyo Imperial University Settlement (Teidai Setsurumento), which was planned around October 1923 and completed in June 1924 after three months of construction. Unlike previous commissions, the settlement building was both designed and decorated by the Company. It was a simple two-storey structure with minimal decoration on the exterior except for the use of red triangular windows protruding three-dimensionally out of the facade. All together the building had 10 rooms, each approximately 4 *tsubo* (13.2 square meters) in area, and each containing a bed, a cupboard, and a bookcase.⁴⁸ Inspired by the project name, residents, predominantly students from the Tokyo Imperial University, came to refer to themselves as 'settlers.' According to Naitō Sadako, a reporter for *Fujin no tomo* (*Women's Companion*) magazine, after the earthquake the settlers had come to feel strongly about their social responsibility to share their knowledge with workers with whom they had struggled side-by-side in the reconstruction effort, since workers were still excluded from the benefits of higher education under the current system. At the time of Naitō's visit, they were planning to open a school in the settlement and about eighty people were already attending classes there.⁴⁹

Despite the dynamic flurry of creative activity following the disaster, the period of barrack construction began to come to an end about five months after the quake in early 1924 as the Japanese state and Tokyo municipal government began planning for permanent reconstruction of the city. The Home Minister, Gotō Shinpei, formerly mayor of Tokyo, was the self-appointed chairman of the newly established Imperial Capital Reconstruction Agency (Teito Fukkō-in), the principal organization in charge of reconstruction efforts.⁵⁰ Consequently, demand for barrack decoration decreased, eventually prompting Kon and his colleagues to disband the Decoration Company officially on 22 March 1924.

While the Barrack Decoration Company's work was ephemeral and only survives in photographs and verbal accounts, the group's 'art of the streets' had an enduring legacy for Japanese artistic and architectural production. Barrack decoration connected art with daily life in new and innovative ways, affirming art's social nature and an important role for the artist in shaping perception of everyday experience. This new activist role was valorized by the press and mass media along with other noble deeds, and manifested the increasing sympathy of the intelligentsia for the working class. It is no coincidence that a number of the Company's members, most prominently Yoshida Kenkichi, soon after joined the proletarian arts movement, politically allying themselves with the working class and dedicating their work to social activism. Stylistically and philosophically, in spite of the protestations of certain sectors of the architectural community, the free-form and exuberant manner of the barrack decorations, which championed unfettered expression, was a profoundly liberating moment for the development of Japanese architecture. With unequivocal audacity and gaiety, the Barrack Decoration Company walked on the front line of the arts, leaving its mark on the city of Tokyo.

⁴⁸ Naitō Sadako, 'Teidai setorumento o miru' (Looking At the Tokyo Imperial University Settlement), *Fujin no tomo* 18:8 (1924), pp. 96–99. The ground plan and elevation for the project are reproduced in Fujimori Terunobu, *Ginza no toshi ishō to kenchikukatachi* (*The Urban Design of Tokyo and Architects*), (Tokyo, Shiscidō Gyārui, 1993), p. 24.

⁴⁹ Naitō, 'Teidai setorumento', pp. 96–99.

⁵⁰ Koshizawa Akira, *Tōkyō no toshi keikaku* (*Urban Planning of Tokyo*), Iwanami Shinsho, no. 200 (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1991), pp. 11–86.

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