

Modern Architecture and Architectural Photo Modern in 1930s Japan

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Introduction

After the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the seismic concrete construction became conspicuous, replacing wooden and brick structures in urban areas. Architectural historians generally refer to the architecture of this period as *Kindai kenchiku*, which translates as modern architecture. As Kasahara Kazuto defined, modern architecture possesses an abstract form without decoration; based on functionalism and rationalism, made by steel, glass and concrete.¹⁾ Such types of buildings emerged in early twentieth century Europe, and from there such images and discourses were imported to Japan through magazines and photographs. In considering the modern movement of architecture in Japan, however, terminology continues to be a problem. Use of the term, *Kindai* usually refers to the modern period in Japanese history, the time since late nineteenth century, particularly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. However, in architectural history, the modern movement in architecture, particularly high modernism, usually refers to things beginning in the twentieth century. Thus there is an unresolved gap between *Kindai kenchiku* which refers to the construction style of buildings after 1868, and “modern architecture,” which indicates a twentieth-century design.

Looking back to the terminology of early twentieth century, there were several terms for the modern architecture, including *Kokusai kenchiku* or *Shin kenchiku*. The former term translates literally as “international architecture,” possession both global and local implications. As architectural historian, Ken Tadashi Oshima puts it, “the use of the term *international* relative to things modern, particularly architecture, was far from unusual during the 1920s and 1930s in Japan as well as in Europe and North America. In the broadest sense, the use of *international* was an implicit criticism of nationalist policies, both cultural and political, after World War 1.”²⁾ Indeed, instead of using term *kokusai*, the word, *shin* that translated as “new,” was more usual in architecture. The word “new” symbolized the sensibilities of the twentieth century. Moreover, these terms became also titles of architectural magazines.

One of these new sensibilities is the relationship between architecture and photography, during late 1920s and 1930s in Japan, the subject of this article. We will focus on three changes in architectural culture: 1) the appearance of new magazines, 2) new expressions in photography, and 3) new interpretations of Japanese traditional architecture.

The Photography closely connected with architectural representations. A photo-

graph mostly forms our first impression of building, and the photographer helps us to see even the seemingly familiar structures with a fresh eye. As Jonathan M. Reynolds described in his article of Ise Shrine, the relationship between architecture and photography sometimes became a field of struggling the cultural identity.³⁾

Appearance of New Magazines: Visualizing *Shin kenchiku*

Given the acceptance and development of a modernist movement in architecture in prewar and wartime Japan, it is impossible to overlook the contribution of the two Japanese architectural magazines: *Kokusai Kenchiku* [International Architecture Journal] and *Shin Kenchiku* [New Architecture Magazine]. To be sure, before those magazines appeared, there were various media on architectural studies; for example, *Kenchiku zasshi*, Journal of Architecture and Building Science, the oldest academic architectural journal in Japan, was published from 1887; *Kenchiku Sekai* [Architectural World], the first commercial architectural magazine was published between 1907 and 1944 by Kenchiku-sekai-sha. Architectural journals served as windows into the great variety of the “architectural world”—the literal translation of the title *Kenchiku Sekai*.⁴⁾

Kokusai Kenchiku and *Shin Kenchiku* are also important historical resources helping us to understand how Japanese architects recognized and accepted modernist architecture, particularly in the 1930s. They focused on spreading architectural information from overseas, often using photographs. The internationality and newness of *Kokusai Kenchiku* and *Shin Kenchiku* is clearly seen in their design. Traditionally, Japanese is read vertically from right to left whereas Western texts read horizontally from left to right. The texts in both of the new journals were printed left to right. Both were issued monthly since 1925, but their contents differed. The title of magazine represents its character. *Kokusai Kenchiku* was originally titled *Kokusai Kenchiku Jiron*, which translates to International Architectural Review. Its role was to spread the discourse of modernist architects such as Walter Gropius (1883–1969) or Le Corbusier (1887–1965). *Kokusai Kenchiku* mainly consisted in text-based page layout introducing the ideas of modern architecture to Japanese architects. On the other hand, *Shin Kenchiku* concentrated on spreading architectural information to the outside world as it related to the construction of buildings in modern Japan. In focusing on newly completed buildings, it attempted to show to the world architectural developments in prewar Japan to the outside world.

However, *Shin Kenchiku* drastically changed its page layout after 1931. One of the editors of *Shin Kenchiku*, wrote, “a complete reform of the magazine...has been undertaken. Pages are basically composed of photographs with appropriate explanation, inserting English captions in order to introduce Japanese modern architecture overseas.”⁵⁾ In so doing, the size of the magazine doubled and the contents changed from text-based to photo-based. Another editor, Oba Haruo (1914–2000) also explained that “we suggested new works to readers with appropriate photographs and compact comments, trying to keep an aesthetically refined layout, and, if possible, to avoid long essays.”⁶⁾ Photographs and drawings, increased, and essays were less critical. As a result of these changes, readers read horizontally. Using the visual language of architectural photography and drawings, the layout of *Shin Kenchiku* be-



Front Cover of *Shin Kenchiku*, 1925



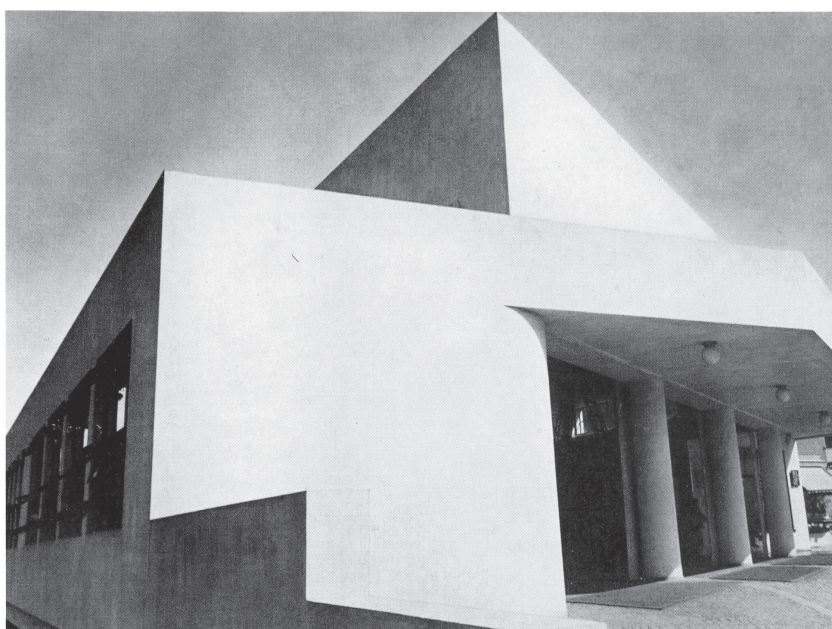
Front Cover of *Kokusai Kenchiku*, 1925.

came similar to the photo-journalist periodicals like *Life* magazine in the 1930s. Most readers could interpret the photographs with short explanatory texts. Even if the readers could not understand the language or the precise contents of text, they could still easily grasp the character of building portrayed. *Shin Kenchiku* continues even today to contribute to global trends in Japanese modern and contemporary works. The evolution of magazine's layout paralleled trends in architectural design to become more photogenic.

In the beginning, constructions were important objects in the history of photography. Since the twentieth century and the growing the importance of photography in the acceptance of architectural design, photogenicity becomes more important for architecture. That is echoed in the transformation of the layout of *Shin Kenchiku*.

New Expressions in Photography and Aesthetics of Mechanical Production

The word "new" came to be used in reference to modernist photography and photographers in the 1930s. Some photographers promoted an avant-garde movement inspired by German modernist photography, *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity. In Japan, the new direction was called *Shinkō-shashin* [New Photography]. It emerged from techno-industrial developments in the early twentieth century and emphasized the mechanical nature of photography or of straightforward recording. According to David Bates, "New Objectivity had originally referred to a small group of painters in Germany but was taken up to refer to photography, and the representation of objects. The newfound use of photography was useful in its ability to represent "objectness"...Technology, the industry of commodity objects and the aes-



Watanabe Yoshio, *Ochanomizu Station* (1933)
Source: *Nihon no Shashinka*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997).

thetic developments within the arts contributed to a new objectivity, where objects could be enlarged.”⁷⁾ It aimed to eliminate expressions of subjectivity. It often focused on mechanical objects as symbols of technology.

One of the most famous works of the *Shinkō-shashin* movement is *Ochanomizu Station* (1933), a photograph by Watanabe Yoshio (1907–2000). Ochanomizu Station designed by Itō Shigeru, was completed in 1932; the plain walls of this reinforced concrete structure were seen as typical of architectural modernism. Watanabe’s photograph cut this building from a very low position, so-called “a worm’s eye view.” The white walls emphasized the volume and mass of building. No people are to be seen; instead it was presented as a geometrical composition.

Watanabe recalled that Itagaki Takao (1894–1966) had proposed the newly completed railway station near Hijiri-bashi Bridge as a subject for photography. Itagaki was a famous art critic in prewar Japan, and a key person in the popularization of machine aesthetics. He was interested in ships, airplanes, and motorcars as aesthetic objects as well as in geometrical abstract art. He edited and published the book *Kikai to Geijutsu no Kōryū* [Interaction between Machine and Art] in 1929. This book challenged the cultural relationship between mechanical construction and contemporary artworks in a period of expanding capitalism. Itagaki believed that contemporary material art explicitly reflected industrial civilization.⁸⁾

Industrial production affects an architect’s recognition of the contemporary world. In the June 1931 issue of *Shin Kenchiku*, the cargo passenger ship *Yūsen Chichibu Maru* was introduced in the photogravure section. With a beam of 22m, 178m in length and a tonnage of 17,498, this ship was the biggest one of its kind at that

time. Why, one might ask, did an architectural magazine feature a cargo passenger ship? One of reason derives from the so-called *kikai bi* or machine aesthetic. The machine was not only valued for its service, but for its beauty in the context of function. Such aesthetics fascinated Japanese modernist architects in the 1930s. The editor of *Shin Kenchiku* magazine also believed that the aesthetics of man-made products represented the architectural expression of the machine age. According to the editor's column:

This beautiful ship's influence on modern architecture is far-reaching. The fineness of function is shown by its mechanism, and the modernized clarity or simplicity attracts the architects' modern gaze. In architectural studies, the effect of this elegant ship places priority on mechanical beauty.⁹⁾

Machine aesthetic were fashionable in 1930s Japan. As Le Corbusier noted in his famous book *Ver une Architecture*, ships airplanes and automobiles represented functionalism, the editor also believed that functionalism and rationalism must be the ideological foundation of modernism in architecture.¹⁰⁾ The ship symbolized the industrial world, mass production and engineering in contemporary culture.

The Photographic Re-appropriation of the Past

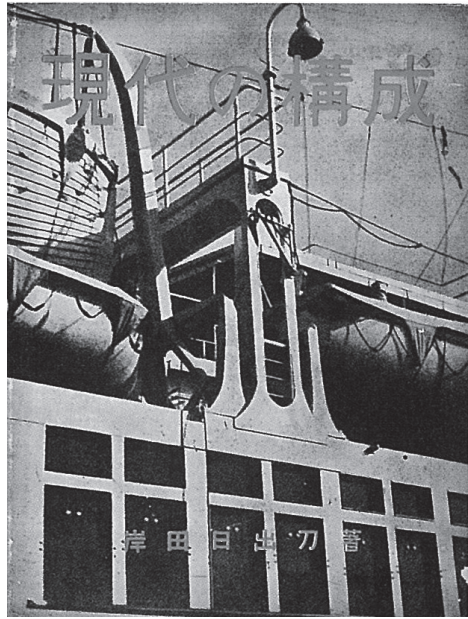
The machine aesthetic, especially in architecture, connected with Japanese cultural identity in 1930s Japan. Kishida Hideto (1899–1966), a professor at the University of Tokyo from 1930 to 1959, was one of the leaders in introducing the machine aesthetics steering its ideological influence in prewar Japanese architecture. Kishida is best known as the designer of the University of Tokyo's Yasuda Auditorium. He taught a course of architectural planning and design and is also noted as the mentor of the prominent architect Tange Kenzo (1913–2005). Kishida published a photo books entitled *Kako no Kōsei* [Composition of the Past] in 1929 and *Gendai no Kōsei* [Composition of Today] in 1930. *Kako no Kōsei* includes photographs of Japanese traditional architecture with detailed captions. *Gendai no Kōsei* consists of photographs, taken by Kishida, of industrial structures connected to mass production such as radio towers and river bridges.

Kako no Kōsei had a huge impact on Japanese modernist architects. In his posthumous book, *Kishida Hideto*, Horiguchi Sutemi (1895–1984) said that Kishida's photo books made him suddenly understand Japanese architectural tradition.¹¹⁾ Kishida's photo montages also influenced Itagaki Takaho. In the introduction of the book, *Kikai to Geijutsu no Kōryū*, Itagaki expressed his gratitude to Kishida.¹²⁾ *Kako no Kōsei* was republished in 1938 and later, after the war, in 1951. Before, during and even after the war, this book influenced many artists and architects toward a popular understanding of Japanese traditional architecture. Isozaki Arata (1931–), known as an early proponent of metabolist architecture, also expressed his debt to Kishida and his prewar experiments in architectural photography.

Kishida was nonetheless able to promote the idea of Japanese design. ...It was a pioneering work praised in the photographic field as “Japanese beauty of



Front Cover of *Kako no Kōsei*
(Kōseisha Shobō, 1929)

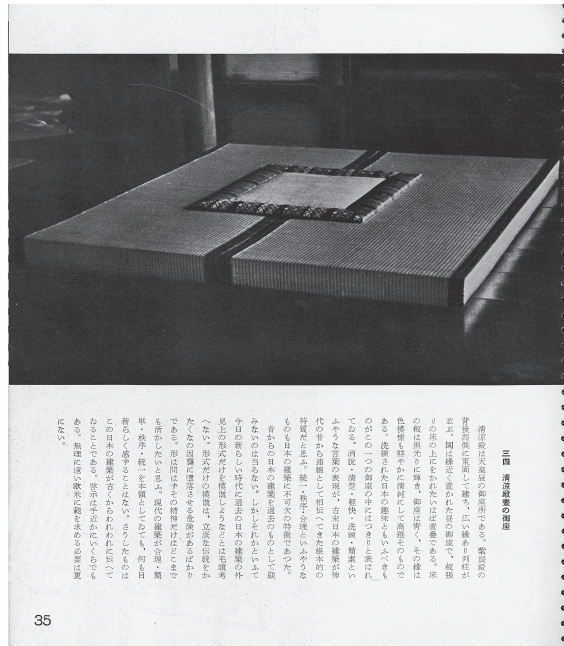


Front Cover of *Gendai no Kōsei*
(Kōseisha Shobō, 1930)

composition.” Kishida pioneered a method by which to frame past architectural artifacts through a modernist gaze, suppressing, in other words, all temporal distance.¹³⁾

An advertisement for *Kako no Kōsei* also noted that: “This book is a new interpretation of Japanese traditional architecture through the eye of the camera, a method that provides the most practical form of observation, not relying on literature or historical studies.”¹⁴⁾ For example, Kishida photographed *Hi no Omashi* in *Seiryō-den*, which is the place the emperor would conduct formal affairs, within the Kyoto Imperial Palace. In the photo, there are two tatami mats with a square cushion in the center. Photographs of *Seiryō-den* usually included *Michō-dai*, the space of the emperor’s taking a short break, in the back with pillars in the corner. But Kishida cropped the picture in order to show the composition of the square inside the square formed by tatami and cushion. The concept is very clear. It was presenting a new interpretation of Japanese tradition using a modernist way of seeing. But the weight of the new interpretation is placed on the composition as geometric abstract art, rather than on Japanese architecture itself.

As mentioned before, *Gendai no Kōsei* is the collection of photographs featuring industrial structures or objects of mass productions. The photos lacked captions. Kishida explained the reason in the preface: “This book was designed to be looked at, not to be read.”¹⁵⁾ He called *Gendai no Kōsei* a companion to his *Kako no Kōsei*. Kishida believed that his visual strategies could encourage a reinterpretation and revitalization of Japanese traditional architecture. He was also aware that his book



Hi no Omashi in Seiryō-den from Kako no Kōsei (Sagami Shobō, 1951)

shared much in common with the special issue of *Kokusai Kenchiku*, noting that the camera-eye revealed the abstract geometric aesthetics embedded in the anonymous industrial structures and objects of mass production. *Kokusai Kenchiku* produced a special issue in January 1934, entitled “Nihon kenchiku saiken [The Inspection of Japanese Architecture].” The chief editor of the 1934 special issue of *Kokusai Kenchiku*, Koyama Masakazu (1892–1970), wrote that Kishida’s *Kako no Kōsei* inspired him to edit this special issue. Comments in that special issue reveals the new sensibility.

When I look at Japanese traditional architecture, I am surprised how obviously modern it is.¹⁶⁾

A new Japanese architecture will appear when Japanese architects design straightforward and make the buildings rationally with their innate feelings for composition.¹⁷⁾

What we study from Japanese architectural inheritance should be the principle and spirit [of modern architecture].¹⁸⁾

All of these critics argued, similar to Kishida, that Japanese traditional architecture shares some characteristics with modern architecture, or indeed contains modernity within itself. They asserted that the machine production or the mechanical aesthetic constituted the contemporary aesthetic and enlisted it in reinterpreting Japanese traditional architecture. As Ken Tadashi Oshima wrote, “The unifying medium of black-and-white photography emphasized the abstraction of elements. For many architects in Japan, their abstract forms held the potential to be truly international

through their multiplicity of meanings, which were connected simultaneously to their Western and Japanese contexts.”¹⁹⁾ Kishida used photographs of architecture as a means to propose abstract images relating to Japanese tradition. In so doing, for Kishida, Japanese architecture could co-habit western architectural contexts.

The Architectural “Photo-Modern”

As suggested by the saying, “a picture is worth a thousands words.” A photograph imparts information to the mind in a non-linguistic way. Similarly, architectural design imparts information in non-linguistic way. Visual representations of modern architecture re-appropriate Japanese tradition due to a display of modernity that may be called the architectural “photo modern.” This term was invented by Tony Fry which mean that a fusion between architecture and modernity in which everything, man and machines, are reduced to aesthetics. In 1987, for example, he wrote that:

The architectural photo-modern is neither fully fixed in one discourse or the other, although it has a representational interface with both. As an aesthetic, the architectural photo-modern became constructed and deployed, in various media, to aid the ‘new way of seeing.’ The aim here was to win people, inside and outside the architectural profession, to the cause of modern movement.²⁰⁾

This definition might be useful to understand changing visual representations in different areas in 1930s Japan. In this age, there were three issues surrounding modern architecture. the first was media. As we have seen, the *Shin Kenchiku* changed its page layout from text-based to image-based. This change marked the point at which Japanese modern architecture began to follow global trends. The second was visual representation. New Photography or *Shinkō Shashin* influenced by European modernist photographers focused on mechanical production by using the camera eye. Third, new interpretations of Japanese traditional architecture were based on a modernist gaze, allowing modernist architects to “discover” a modernity existing within “traditional” Japan.

This paper has tried to show how the architectural “photo modern” served to promote an abstract image of modern architecture in Japan from late 1920s to early 1930s through a emerging confluence between photography and architecture. From the late 1930s, that trend would be appropriated for propaganda purposes.²¹⁾ Prominent examples include the *Shashin Shūhō* (the Photographic Weekly Report, published 1938 to 1945); NIPPON (1934 to 1944); and FRONT (1942 to 1945). These magazines continued right up to the time of Japan’s surrender, despite wartime shortages of paper and ink. The editors were able to call on the talents of Japan’s leading photographers and graphic designers such as Kimura Ihei (1901–1974), Domon Ken (1909–1990), and Hara Hiromu (1903–1986) and consciously sought to take advantage of the emotional impact of photographs and their power to shape public opinion. The selection, layout, cropping, and captioning of photographs and other images had obvious political implications.

Some architects, under the influence of nationalism and militarism, adopted ab-

stract images of architectural forms in order to essentialize the modernity of Japanese cultural tradition. They found in Japanese tradition what they needed to find. However, Japanese modernist architecture, and furthermore, what we have introduced as the modern understanding of Japanese architectural tradition were not employed in wartime propaganda. As such, they was untainted by the war experience and could continue as dominant trends in the postwar era.

Notes

- 1) Kasahara Kazuto, “1930–1940 nendai no Kenchiku ni okeru ‘Nihontekinamono’ to Kōi Gainen [‘Japaneseness’ in Architecture and Conception of Acting in 1930–1940s Japan],” in Ito Toru ed., *Tsukurukoto no Nihon Kindai* [Modern Japan in Making Things], (Kyoto: Sekai Shiso Sha, 2010).
- 2) Ken Tadashi Oshima, *International Architecture in Interwar Japan*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 6.
- 3) Jonathan M. Reynolds, *Allegories of Time and Space: Japanese identity in photography and architecture*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015).
- 4) Ken Tadashi Oshima, *ibid*, 20–22.
- 5) Yasuda Kiyoshi, “Watashi to Shin Kenchiku [Shin Kenchiku magazine and me],” *Shin Kenchiku special issue: Nihon kindai kenchikushi saikou* [Rethinking the History of Japanese Modern Architecture], Oct. 1974, 9.
- 6) Oba Haruo, “Shin Kenchiku to Yoshioka san [Shin Kenchiku and Mr. Yoshioka],” *ibid*, 10.
- 7) David Bates, *Photography: The Key Concepts (Second Edition)*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 142.
- 8) Itagaki Takaho, *Kikai to Geijutsu no Koryu*, (Tokyo: Tenjin Sha, 1929), 116.
- 9) “Television,” *Shin Kenchiku*, June, 1931, 220.
- 10) Itagaki Takaho, *Yushusen no Geijutsu Shakaigaku teki Bunseki*, (Tokyo: Tenjin-sha: 1930).
- 11) Comments of Horiguchi Sutemi, *Kishida Hideto*, (Tokyo: Sagami Shobo: 1966), 206.
- 12) Itagaki Takaho, *Kikai to Geijutsu no Kōryū*, (Tokyo: Tenjin Sha: 1929), 3.
- 13) Isozaki Arata, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 15.
- 14) “Advertise,” *Kenchiku Kigen*, vol. 3, no. 1.
- 15) Kishida Hideto, *Kako no Kōsei*, (Tokyo: Kosei Sha Shobo, 1929).
- 16) Kutara Chikatada, “Nihon kenchiku no kokusai sei [The Internationality of Japanese Architecture],” *Kokusai Kenchiku*, Jan. 1934, 6.
- 17) Fujishima Gaijiro “Junsei nihon kenchiku [Pure Japanese Architecture],” *Ibid*, Jan., 1934, 21.
- 18) Sato Takeo, “Kura no naka no sofū [Grandfathers in the thesaurus],” *Ibid*, 27.
- 19) Ken Tadashi Oshima, *ibid*, 23.
- 20) Tony Fry, “The Photo-Modern,” *Transition* (Melbourne: 1987).
- 21) David, Earhart, *Certain Victory: Images of World War 2 in the Japanese Media*, (New York: Routledge, 2008).