

# An Attempt to Search for the Origin of Architecture in Japanese Peasant Houses

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A Japanese architect Wajiro Kon started his architectural works from his research on peasant houses in 1917, and continued the study through his entire life. In this study Kon was motivated by the same consciousness about the crisis of modernity related to the discussions of the origin of architecture in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, and looked for the origin of Japanese architecture in the peasant house by trying to construct a cultural identity of Japanese architecture based on reality. He learned various theories in other fields such as anthropology and geography, and tried to apply Western theories to the Japanese cultural situation. In his empirical fieldwork, he developed ideas of architecture to find that architectural forms and distributions represented the social ethos, and argued that in them the essence of the relationship between man and architecture are observed. However, he gradually learned the limitations of the paradigms of the Western theories which tend to generalize human and nature, and the authoritative standpoint of architect and scholar. Finally, he arrived at the idea of ethnographic viewpoint of an architecture. In the following paper, I am going to explain his ideas and how the problems he confronted are critical for ourselves.

## IDEA OF ORIGIN OF ARCHITECTURE IN 19TH-CENTURY EUROPE AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY OF PEASANT HOUSES IN JAPAN

From the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, the social background of art and architecture dramatically changed, and the idea of origin in architecture, which had been a myth of architecture, and the superiority of professional architect as artist, came to be the focus in social, scientific, and international contexts. Besides the common nationalistic tendency in all architectural treatises in this period, there were several different attitudes in dealing with the idea of origin of architecture. In his *On Adam's House in Paradise*,<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rykwert explains that in that period there were three attitudes about the idea of origin; positivism function, paleontologist, symbolical naturalism. These three characteristics coexisted and interrelated in each treatise to

form the foundation of the reasons for the ideas of architectural history, technology and form. One of the most influential treatises in this period regarding this theme was by Gottfried Semper. In *The Four Elements of Architecture* (1851)<sup>2</sup> after criticizing academic ideas of history and style, Semper reinterpreted the primitive conditions (Urzustände) of human society in order to propose his theory based on the four elements and the four techniques of architecture. In order to explain the historical reasons for architectural development in its function, technology and styles, Semper used the knowledge of cultural anthropology. However, Semper divided the "actual" primitive hut as a symbol which represents the unity of artifact with nature beyond the difference of culture and reality from "true" architecture connected to the historical monument in Europe. Even the idea of origin of architecture was crucial to expand the concepts of architecture into wider social, anthropological and international spheres at the end of the nineteenth century, architects conceived those theories as intellects and authority standing on idealistic view points.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese architectural scholars hastily kept absorbing ideas, technologies and designs from Europe all at once as practical methods, and they did not try to understand the theoretical background behind them. Along with the modernization of technology and design, they kept the idea of style and function as the foundation of theory, and continued discussions to define the Japanese distinctive architectural style as formal expression.<sup>3</sup> The first objectives for the historian were to find a connection to the trees of architectural style evolution by Fletcher and to raise Japanese architecture from its secondary status.

On the other hand, from the end of the nineteenth century within society there was a prolonged conflict in the change of the social structure from agricultural to industrial, because there had been a symbolization of agriculture not only as natural industry but as social archetype, there was a movement to preserve the peasant house as symbols of traditional regional culture and of the authentic idea of house, organized mainly by Japanese politicians, anthropologists and other social scientists. As they were conscious about the situation of Japan in the world, they avoided nationalistic tendencies

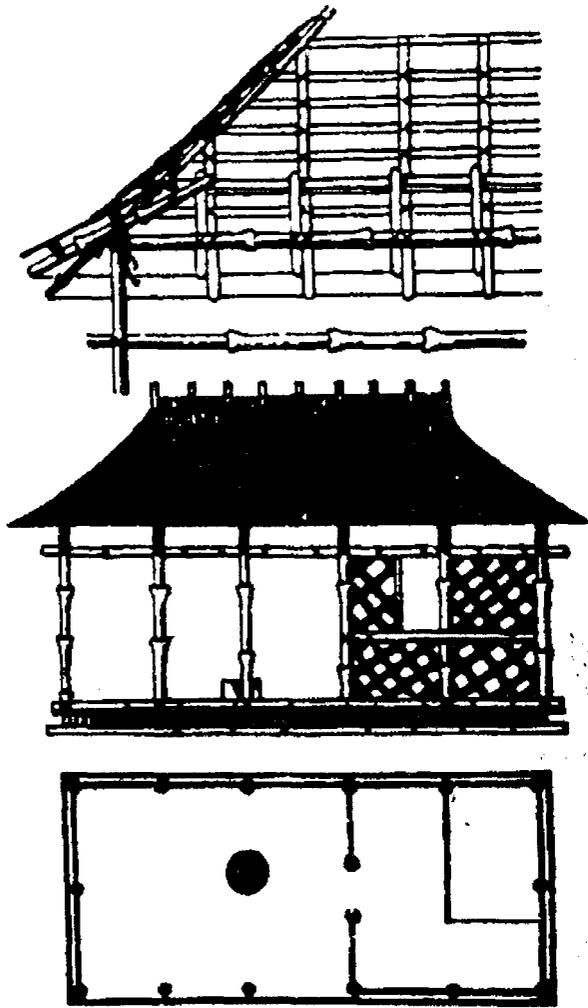


Fig. 1. The Indian hut in De Stil.

and tried to study the way of life in farm areas with their own eyes to confirm how Japanese people and their society were different from those in the West, and how the ideas of modernization were applicable to Japan. Thus, in the first motivation of the study of peasant houses, there were dual purposes: seeking cultural identity in the symbolic image of the peasant house reflecting the ethos of Japanese traditional society, and objectively analyzing the reality of its problem in the modernization. The ideas of "truth" in the life of the peasant and of "origin" in primitive hut, both of which are conceived in Western theories based on Christian ideas of the primal condition between man and nature, were interpreted in the Japanese context and applied to and examined by the real structure of peasant life, society and houses in these studies with more realistic and cross-cultural viewpoint.

### STUDIES ON PEASANT HOUSES

In 1917 Hakubokai conducted a study of peasant culture and houses in Kanagawa prefecture. Hakubokai, which was organized by an anthropologist Yanagida, an architect Koichi Sato, a geographer Michitoshi Odauchi, who learned and

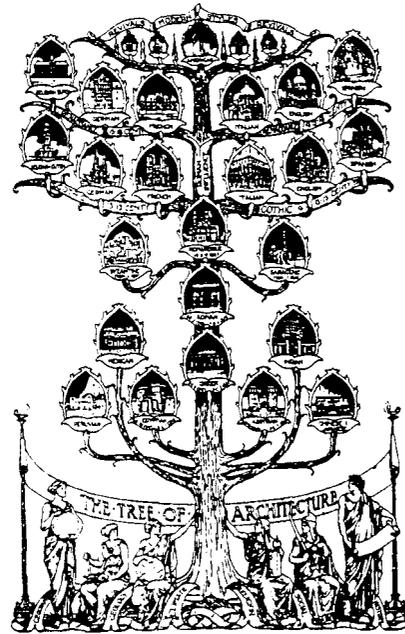


Fig. 2. The Tree of Architecture by Fletcher

introduced French *Human Geography in Japan*, and Kon as an assistant. This study was based on ideas to study the real life and cultural entity in peasant houses with interdisciplinary scholarship. Koichi Sato was one of Kon's architectural teachers, and guided Kon to consider the origin of the Japanese house in peasant houses. Sato was familiar with European theories including Semper's. Thus, Kon's initial interests and ideas of the origin of architecture regarding peasant houses are also based on Semper's ideas. However, as he was involved in the interdisciplinary study with cultural consciousness, Kon studied other theories by John Ruskin, Patric Geddes, Louis Brunhes, and other social science theories. He gradually reinterpreted all of them adapting to the Japanese situation. Kon's first treatise on peasant houses published in 1922 named *Nippon no Minka* shows deep influence from Patric Geddes's *Cities in Evolution*.<sup>4</sup> Besides the garden suburb ideas quoted in his articles, Kon learned two more important ideas from Geddes; First, Geddes stressed the importance of a knowledge of the origins, not for its own sake, but as an essential basis for action. Second, Geddes suggested that it is necessary to have a synoptic view, for an awareness of the city as a real, concrete entirety. This synoptic viewpoint in the study of phenomena stresses experiencing and observing the situation by the scholar himself sympathizing with the people and being sensitive about trivial details in everyday activities. Geddes argues that only through the synoptic viewpoint and inductive reasoning can we understand the organic relationships between environmental, historical and social contexts in human life and the process of the change of society.

The report, which Kon mainly organized, shows the collaborations between them: and how Kon learned the actual notable points and speculative logic in the phenomenon

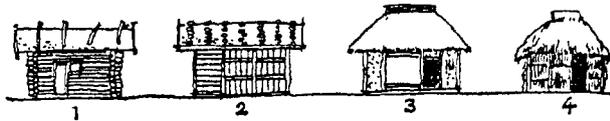


Fig. 3. Types of wooden houses, from *Human Geography* by Kon.

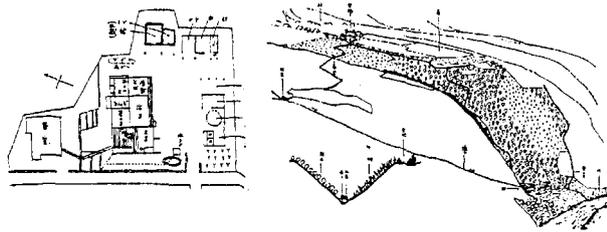


Fig. 4. Kon's plan and location of a peasant house.

bridging his philosophies of architecture to the reality of peasant house. The report is organized in four sections; about the style of the grouping of houses in the village, the arrangement of houses in each sites and characteristics of house forms and emotional characteristics of the people in the houses, and communal facilities in the village, such as wells and tombs. Along with those drawings and diagrams, Kon analyzed the geographical relationships between woods, vegetable areas, yards, rivers, roads, and house, detailed planning of the house, quantitative proportion between areas and functional relationships between them, and wrote about how they are arranged harmonizing with each other, and how people have been fundamentally influenced by their environment. Kon's manners of the analysis and the idea of environment show clear influence from French Human Geography. In *Human Geography*<sup>5</sup> by Jean Brunhes, which Kon several times quoted in his writings, Brunhes set the categorization of the natural phenomenon in three groups of "facts" in order to make them as objective as possible and to establish the science of geography, and argued for the ideas of the interrelationship between the three groups. Brunhes explains that rural house is the most obvious example to see the relationship between human habitation and nature with the idea of "type," and that rural houses correspond to a period of human history, and geographical environment reflect to people's moral and social habits.

In Kon's drawings and diagrams there is obviously a strong intention to describe how geographical features, roads, wells, houses and farm areas are compensating each other to maintain the life in the village, and form an organic unity. The idea of "labor" Brunhes described in his book, which connects human effort to the natural cycles and individual's environmental condition creating an active relation between them, and supports Kon and Odauchi's ideas of the organic cyclical unity between peasant life, society and nature. Another important idea of "type," which Brunhes presented in his book, is obviously derived from Cuvier's idea of the evolution of animal form, helped Kon to theorize peasant houses which are built with the available material and

adapting to the environment, and to the human needs. Thus, the archetype of house-site plan in this study, which Kon and Odauchi tried to abstract from this study is topographical and not functional. However, for the quantitative interest of the research, Yanagida criticized Kon that his study did not contain "life" of people.

#### *Nippon no Minka*

After five years, Kon published *Nippon no Minka*,<sup>6</sup> which shows the development of his idea as evoked by Ruskin and Yanagida's ideas. Kon also quotes a sentence from John Ruskin's *Poetry of Architecture*,<sup>7</sup> "Our object, let it always be remembered, is not the attainment of architectural data, but the formation of taste," and Kon stresses that when an architect tries to design a "truly good and effective house" for people, he always has to wonder about the taste in life and what the people's life really is. The idea of good taste by Ruskin is based on both formal and ethical harmony between man and nature. For Ruskin, such beauty in the rusty and ruined forms of cottages created in people's daily life adapting to nature is not merely nostalgic, but is connected to the fundamental principle of art, which an artist has to consciously observe. In the sketches of peasant houses after the first study by Hakubokai, Kon always depicts outlines of mountains, hills and woods behind the houses, detailed figures of different kind of trees and other vegetables around the houses, and shows how these lines and forms contrast and assimilate with the lines and forms of houses expressing the beauty of a harmonized microcosm. In Kon's study of peasant house, the idea of the origin of house is thus naturally and fundamentally connected to his architectural understandings of peasant houses in its process of creation, material, form harmonized with and derived from nature, and represents psychological, social and economical aspects of human being in nature.

The theory of the peasant house in this book is divided in to three parts; his general theoretical standpoint, structure and planning. In the first part he explains that the most important considerations for peasant houses are their conditions of geography and history, because they have to build houses with the available materials in the area and use the technologies with their own body, and argues that natural environment defines the characteristics of people's life and industry, which appears in the form of houses. Then, he analyzes the characteristics of the arrangement and forms of houses according to their geographical features and labors by explaining how people's psychological aspect is influenced by these factors, and how historically their general regional characteristics have been formulated. In the section of the structure of peasant houses, he starts with the beginning of a house with a description of how a settler builds his hut. and argued, "These skillful usages of the material truly satisfy the principle of pure craft. We have to invent the techniques to make good use of the given geographical condition and enrich our own life." Next, he talks about the distribution and development of wooden structure according to geographical conditions and vegetation around the world quoting Brunhes'

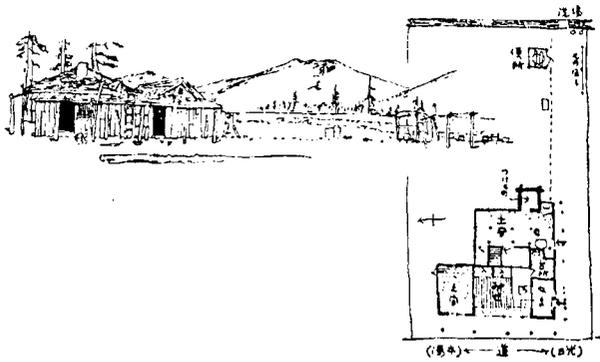


Fig. 5. Kon's peasant house drawing 1922.

book, and suggests that we should think building architecture is a kind of craft. He rather tried to think about the idea of the origin of building in its practical, anthropomorphic and geographical aspects.

The most important part of his theory of peasant houses is about the planning of rooms. Firstly Kon clearly rejects the other historians' popular reasoning that the origin of Japanese house is a pit dwelling called Tenchi Kongen Miya-zukuri, and assumes that the primitive hut in antiquity must be similar with the settler's hut he described before, and that house must have started from one room and developed gradually with various factors. The first factor he was interested in is setting dividing walls to make private space. He used Izumo shrine as the oldest historical example resembling the houses at that period, and argues that the cross division in the current common peasant house in Japan is the later development of the Izumo shrine, and that in rural areas old types remained while houses in urban areas changed continuously, influenced by foreign examples. Then, he explains about how later warriors' house plans were developed and related to the plan of peasant houses, and how they were politically controlled in each period.

The second factor is the manner in which visitors were greeted. Kon argues that at first the division of the space in a one-room structure was signified by the difference of flooring, and in each period the house plan types changed according to the manner of greeting visitors controlled by the ethos of each society and created the hierarchy between rooms in a house. The third factor is the hierarchy among family members represented in the order of the seats around the hearth. Then, he suggests that the most serious problem in this peasant house plan is that it is soconventionally regulated that it lacks the humanistic sense of comfort and health. In this section Kon again starts with the description of the idea of the origin of the house, and tried to argue that the origin should be assimilated to the common and natural way of building a house with minimum material and techniques satisfying the basic living condition as a human in a society. The division of rooms, the greeting manner of visitors and the hierarchy of the seats around the hearth are the physical representation of the relationships between peoples in different phases. Thus, even though the study is not fully organized and theorized, Kon

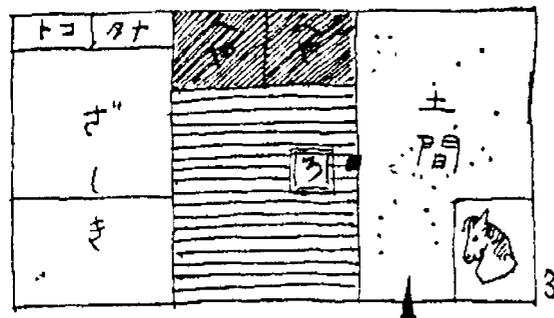
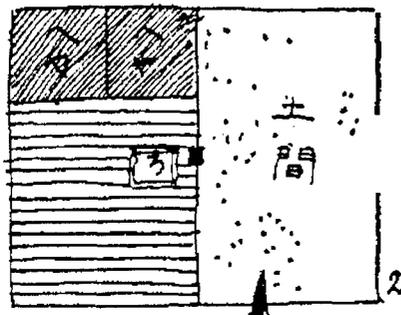
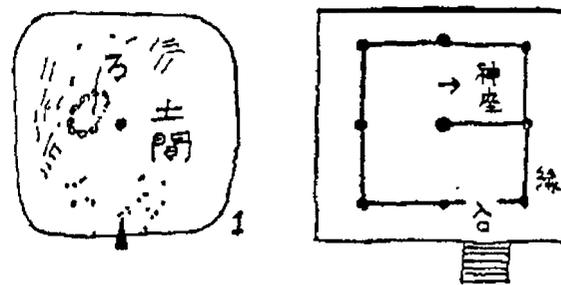


Fig. 6. Plan evolution from primitive to contemporary peasant house by Kon.

tried to examine how the invisible social structures are made visible in architecture, with dispositions of architectural elements, directional orientation of space and symbolical meanings of places.

### Anthropology and architecture

These viewpoints were produced from the collaboration between Kon's architectural and Yanagida's anthropological viewpoint. Yanagida tried to revive the disappearing traditional Japanese culture on naturalism viewpoint, and to establish its identity in Westernized modern world. He tried to encourage peasants to have their confident subjectivity and economic independence based on the mutual aid in their local community. Thus, he used Flazer's theoretical framework introducing myth and folklore as the hidden structure of actual human society, and at the same time, he criticized Flazer's idea of anthropology as Occidental oriented and too generalized and simplified, and asked why each country cannot have its own ideas of anthropology according to their

own social framework. He tried to establish a Japanese "anthropology," which is based not on the idea of man as "universal" but as Japanese-specific and topographical. Yanagida also conducted a comparative study of each area's folklore and lifestyle and analyzed social phenomena, trying to clarify the relationships between different factors, and present the society as a multiple complex of different logic and influences. He believed in that in order to solve the current problems of peasant life one hand to study people's life with empirical and materialistic research and suggests the utmost objectives of his "anthropology" is to study the ways of peasants' living, working and thinking; the ethos of the Japanese peasant.<sup>8</sup>

From Yanagida, Kon learned to see the hidden historical and social logic behind people's unconscious everyday activities, and how those are connected to nature, how foreign and outside cultural influence came and remained in rural society, how the history of political and religious regulations remained, accumulated and interrelated with each other, and how people configured them into the forms of their houses and environment by selecting and creating a logic between them with his own will and his community's ethos. The idea of distribution, which Kon found in the planning of rooms in peasant and common people's houses; arrangement of dividing walls, the way to greet visitors, hierarchical orders between seats around the hearth, and places for various religions' gods combined with the direction and related to the locus point of the area, became the keys for him to understand the structure of the architectural space for dwelling in its full meaning connected to the idea of origin.

After publishing his *Nipponno Minka* in 1922, Kon joined the study of peasant houses in Korea by Odauchi. In the study of Korean peasant houses Kon developed a comparative study of peasant houses not only in Japan but extending to Korea, China and other areas in the world, and suggested that it is impossible to define "original and distinctive" characteristics for houses avoiding cross-cultural influences. He declares that his historical argument about the origin of house plans in Japan might be wrong. Also, he started to question the attitude in observing the reality of peasant life expecting the harmonizing and unifying figures and lines between nature and human artifacts, and for the nostalgic images of community and social ethos, both of which are fundamental standpoints of Ruskin and Yanagida. The problem of aesthetic attitude and distance from the reality of peasant life in Yanagida's standpoint is derived from his status as a bureaucrat and an authority, which forced him to detach himself from the object, which is also a contradictory problem inherited in anthropology itself, which is summarized in following three points: 1. Both the ideas of "common people" by Yanagida and "peasant as natural man" by Ruskin are created as opposed to the elite intellect, who is to guide the anonymous mass. Thus, there is a prejudice against the ability of the mass to reach truth. 2. The communal ethos in the society, which Yanagida and Ruskin looked for, tends to be based on the ideal condition which rejects each individual's unreason-

able and unorganized will. and unstable fluidity of the current ongoing reality. 3. The "distinctiveness" of culture, which Yanagida and Ruskin also looked for, causes a contradiction in their idea of "truth," for the "distinctiveness" is only measured by comparison with other different cultures, and implies that each culture is influenced by others, and furthermore, signifies that the "distinctiveness" has been created in the process of imitating each other in history.

Especially for Kon, the idea of individuality, subjective will in one's expression, has been one of the problems which he had been exploring since he was in Tokyo Geijyutu Daigaku, and which has to be connected to the meaning of one's presence itself. Besides the popularity of the philosophy of life by Henri Bergson around 1920's in Japan, at the end of the Brunhes' book there are several descriptions of "intermediary" as one's psychological factor, or direction, which Kon must have studied as well. Thus, Kon developed his theoretical standpoint and framework based on Yanagida's "anthropology," but, after becoming conscious about its limitation, and for Kon's own inquiries as an architect, he began to look at the shortage of the ideas of origin of architecture in Western theories and of Yanagida's, and became conscious about the presence of the subjective individuality in "common people," and recognized cultural characteristics not as distinctive but as the way to absorb and alter itself in the exchange of influences.

### Study on Barracks

In September 1923 Tokyo was almost completely destroyed by a huge earthquake. This unexpected catastrophe gave him the occasion to confirm his beliefs in the idea of the origin of architecture and of other related themes, which emerged in his study of peasant houses, in studying actual architectural examples. In several articles he wrote on the barracks, he explained an idea of the development process of houses. Then, he defines the meaning of barrack compared with hut as, "hut is built self-sufficiently, passively, and conservatively in the society with natural economy, and in simple environment. On the other hand, barrack is built as a temporal base for activity in circulating economy." Next, he compares between settler's hut and common city merchant's house, and between earthquake victim's barrack and peasant's hut, and argues that even though they look similar, the difference in people's economical capacities and professions affects on their measurement of space and the development process.

In this description of the development of house, he combined various ideas of the origin of architecture as reference. In another article he again treated the idea of primitive shelter and hut, but was more focused on the description of the characteristics of the beauty of those huts. He explains that settler and peasant's huts were built only with their intuitions adapting to the geographical features to create a simple and unaffected beauty, and the interest in the study of them is in their multiple differences of form derived from each conditions. Then, along with the sketches of various barracks of earthquake victims, Kon explains that how victims built their barracks intuitively like the huts of the first settlers in the

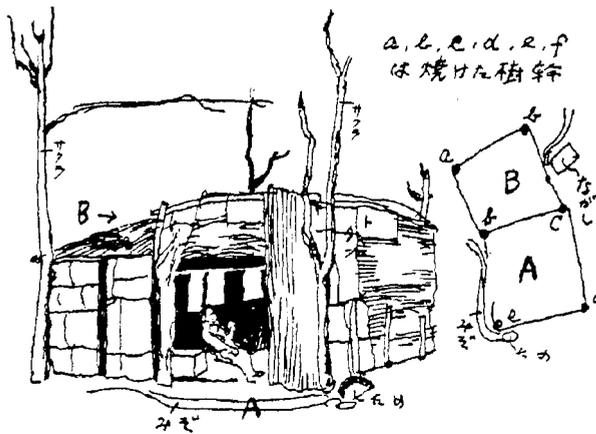


Fig. 7. Kon's sketch of a Barrack.

wilderness, and analyzed their ways of building roofs, columns, materials and sites, and about their crafts in details to stop the draining of rain, to create openings and to hang their signs, which people had to learn empirically after the earthquake. He argues that they expressed the possibilities of the multiple differences of architectural forms created by victims' sudden tactility, which is observed in peasant houses as well. He collects diverse sketches of those tactile forms, details and combination of materials admiring people's unconscious and unintentional creativity which produces accidental ornament and beauty.

In the articles on earthquake barracks described above, he reveals that he is not so interested in the reasoning of the idea of origin of architecture but rather in the people's unaffected motives of creations; tactical and diverse creations adapting to nature and catastrophe circumstances. Most importantly, the sketches suggest that Kon was so surprised with the creativity of people and recovered power of the natural intuitive desires of self expression in those forms situating to each place. Encouraged by this experience, he declares that, "The poetry exists in nakedness. It exists where everything is revealed." Thus, through the study of earthquake barracks, Kon found the way out from his puzzles in the study of peasant houses, confirmed his directions, and proceeded in founding his paradigms of architecture based on anthropological reasoning of the origin of architecture based on a generalized idea of man, to expanding the ideas of architectural beauty and expression by observing common people's individual creativity in each place.

#### Dozokugaku-teki idea of architecture and the idea of origin of architecture

In 1923 Kon proposed an idea of Dozokugaku-teki theory of architecture. He compared etymological meaning of anthropology and ethnography (he called it Dozokugaku). Then he argued that, "The architectural historians have been mainly studying old buildings based on old ruins and materials (or on philological study of old manuscripts)." On the other hand, Kon defines Ethnography as "the field of study about the

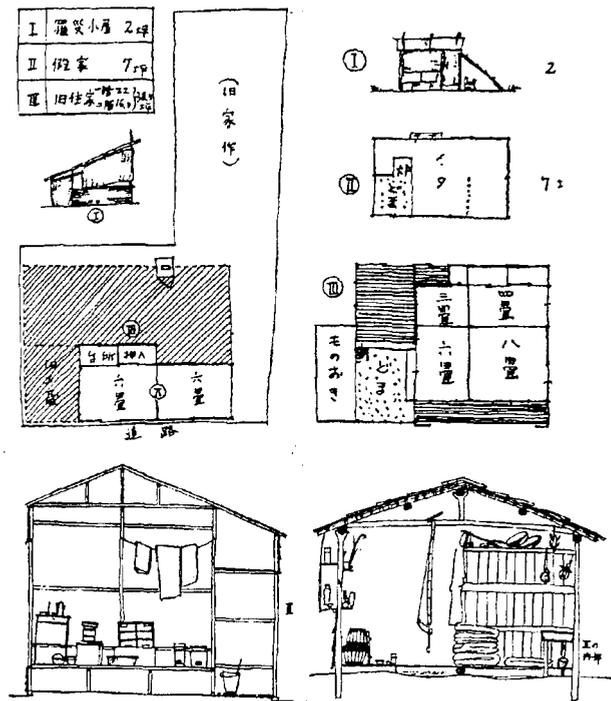


Fig. 8. comparison of the process of the development of barrack in farm area and city.

division and transformation of races, regional characteristics, nature and their customs related to the observations of current phenomena." Then, he explains his understanding of its meaning and relationship with architecture:

"Ethnography is a field of study about the origin of the customs and habits in the regions based on empirical observations of phenomenon, and speculation of their unknown past.... Not only in archaic ruins but also in our current life we can find remains of old traditions. We can find materials and origins in some race or region's unconscious customs and habits. The architectural styles and methods of construction may result from geographical necessity, accidental and sudden creative modifications, or, we also have to imagine influences from old cultures... It analyzes current ongoing phenomena from every direction, and simultaneously, considers the relationships between them and old traditions... It requires more imagination, which... enables us to reach beyond the limit of archaeological study as well."

Kon further argued that in current architectural thinking the study of technology is missing, and that it has to belong to anthropology and studies how man creates facilities and devices to live on the earth.

As Michel Foucault discusses in his books, anthropology, geography and ethnography were created as political instruments to fix the epistemological paradigms since the eighteenth century. With critical consciousness about the cultural identity and alienation of man in nature, Yanagida and Kon reinterpreted Western theories of anthropology, geography and ethnography according to their contemporary Japanese situation, and used their naive viewpoints to understand Japanese people and the ethos of the society. In the empirical and materialistic research of common people's house, thus, Kon kept seeking the hidden structure of the relationship between man's life and architecture based on the idea of origin of architecture. However, his synoptic understandings of people's life from his interdisciplinary and cross-cultural viewpoint revealed the limitation in looking for the reasons of architecture based on the ideas of the origin of architecture, which accompanies abstracting laws based on generalized idea of man and nature. At the same time, he noticed the problems in authoritative standpoints of architecture and scholars recognizing common people's knowledge as intuitive and natural, and avoiding the dynamic creativity in their habit and cross-cultural activities, which Kon recognized as the reality of architectural creation. Thus, he finally proposed an "ethnographic" idea of architecture. In the study of barracks based on this idea Kon clarified another aspect of man's

"intuition"; individuality, fluidity, multiplicity, imitative and cunning nature, in order to extend the notions of beauty, creativity in architectural expression. Kon argued that the poetry of architecture is in the nakedness consisting of both multiplicity and simplicity, which, he believed, is the nature of man, and is derived by imaginative study of the reality referring to the idea of origin as well.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Rykwert. *On Adam's House in Paradise*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).
- <sup>2</sup> Gottfried Semper. *The Four Elements of Architecture and other writings*. edited and translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- Eizo Inagaki. *Nippon Kindai Kenckiku*. (Tokyo: Kajima publication, 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> Patric Geddes. *Cities in Evolution*. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1915).
- <sup>5</sup> Jean Brunhes. *Human Geography*, translated by I. C. LeCompte. (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> Kon Wajiro. *Nippon no Minka*. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1922).
- <sup>7</sup> John Ruskin. *Poetry of Architecture*. (Philadelphia: University Library Association).
- <sup>8</sup> Takashi Fujii. *Yanagida Kunio: Keisei Saimin no gaku*. (Tokyo: Nagoya University Press, 1995).