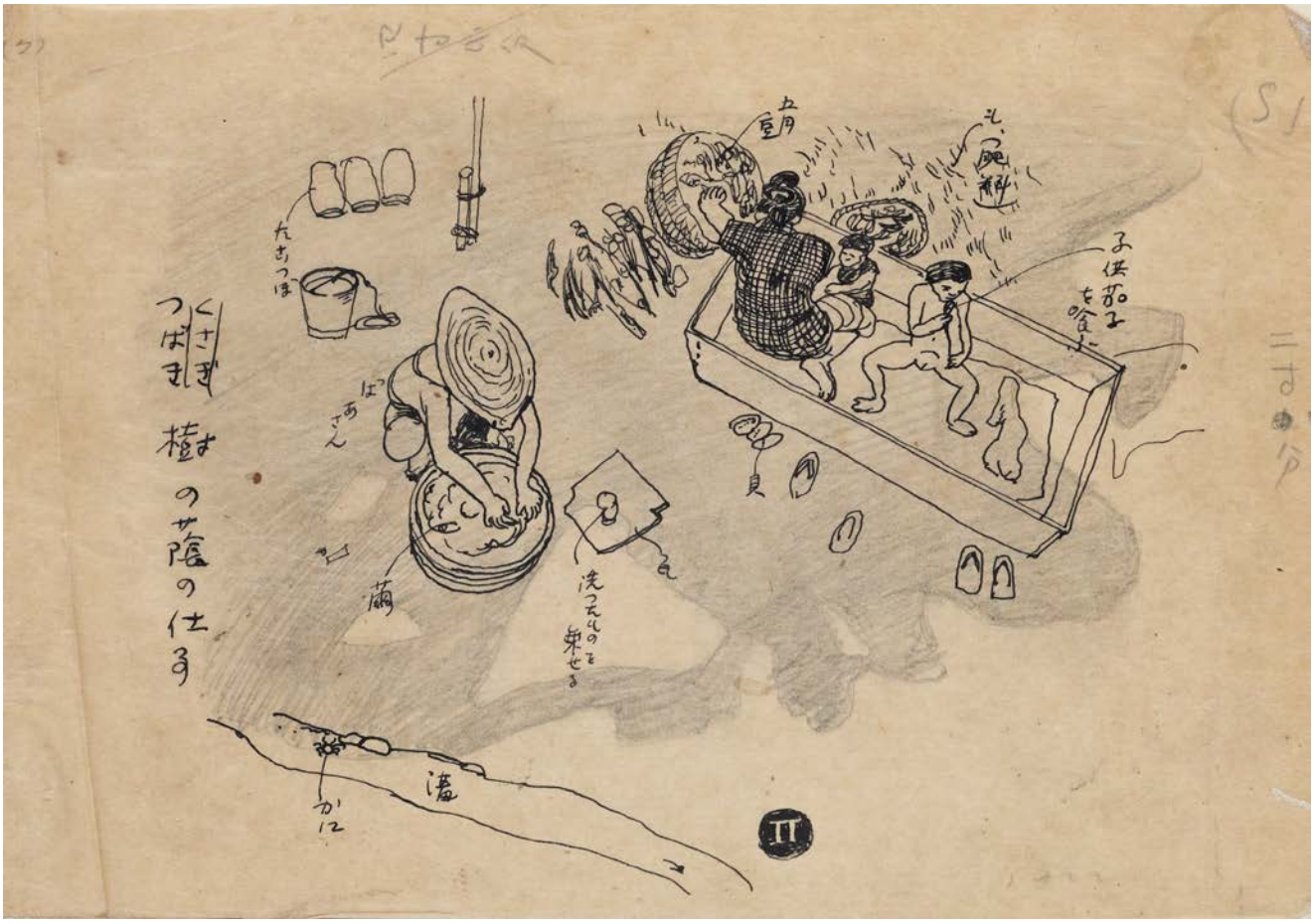
From Architectural Ethnography to Planning: Kon Wajiro and Nishiyama Uzō's participatory research of everyday space in Japan from the 1910s to the 1970s



This exhibition features the achievements of two architects, Kon Wajiro (1888–1973) and Nishiyama Uzō (1911–1994). Both worked outside of the prevalent architectural trends of the first half of the twentieth century. They documented the everyday living conditions of ordinary people and proposed new forms of housing for people on low incomes. In Japan, these two architects have long been understood as a scholar of ethnography and a planning scholar respectively, rather than as practicing architects. Foreign observers rarely examined the design and lifestyle of ordinary people's housing, therewith ignoring most of Japanese architecture.

Kon and Nishiyama's on-site surveys of living space, objects, people's behaviors and surrounding environments, and their analysis of the relationships between houses, people and society, all led to proposals of urban and house planning. They sought a return to the basics of architectural creation, considering "design" as a comprehensive activity to create a new way of living rather than as a pure art, and they argued that new forms had to be derived from an understanding of the real problems of society.

The sketches exhibited here are organized according to several themes: They show the organic relationship between housing in rural villages and their environment, lifestyles and human behavior in buildings and cities, the public and private nature of urban dwelling and neighboring communities, proposals for minimal size houses for less privileged people in overcrowded cities, wartime production of housing, social control on housing, and the impact of consumer economies on housing.

Kon and Nishiyama's inquiry into the everyday life practices of ordinary people, on social space and participation as a foundation for design, reconfirms the importance of sketching in architectural studies even in our age of advanced digitization in architectural design. Together, these sketches ask the viewer to carefully study housing and everyday practices as a foundation for architectural and urban design.

Curated by Izumi Kuroishi and Carola Hein