

# Kenkichi Yoshida and His Tiny 12-Tsubo House; Secrets of Dramatic Space Design

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## Foreword

A cute house with a shed roof and red board walls accented with white window trim—the residence that Kenkichi Yoshida (1897-1982) built for himself after the war at age 52. Yoshida, while known as a stage designer, was active in many fields including book design, literature, and research in “modernology” (the study of modern social phenomena). His tiny 12-tsubo (39.7m<sup>2</sup>) house began as a place for his family of three to live in. Its principal feature—a small stage with an audience hall—reflected his mind and spirit as a stage designer. What kind of living space did he create in this tiny house with its own theater stage? This exhibition explores the secrets of Kenkichi Yoshida’s unique spatial design style, overflowing with novel ideas and humor. To do so, it traces—through some 140 historical materials—the lineages of thought and experience that led Yoshida to its development. The exhibition venue is arranged like a stage set guiding visitors around “backstage” in his tiny 12-tsubo house. Through Yoshida’s house, which shows his many facets as a creator, we can know Yoshida the man—a person with great zest for living who liked bringing people enjoyment, and who fostered a creative new vision during a time of hardship in Japan.

We wish to extend our deep gratitude to Kenkichi Yoshida’s family, especially his wife Kanoko and daughter Tamae Shiozawa, and everyone whose efforts have made this exhibition possible.

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## A 12-Tsubo House with a Stage

Tamae Shiozawa (Kenkichi Yoshida’s elder daughter / proprietor of Gallery Toki no Kaze)

Born in 1897, Kenkichi Yoshida’s activities were wide ranging. They included the avant-garde art movement, Tanka (traditional “short poems”), modern poetry, stage design, movie production design, barrack decoration, “modernology,” photography, shop & inn interior design, proposing ideas for living, book design, ink painting, travel (Japan and abroad) and travel essays, spreading the popularity of pantomime, and more.

When still in his late teens, Kenkichi’s parents and aunt died, leaving him alone in the world. Although reticent, he liked people and plays and backstage work. He liked traveling. He liked being different from others. He liked making people happy.

When Japan surrendered, he was living in Zhangjiakou, Inner Mongolia with his family (wife Kanoko and 3-year old Tamae). He thereafter spent 7 months in a detention camp in Tianjin, China. While there, he gathered people having stage experience, created a theater group, and entertained the detainees while they waited to return to Japan. The following year, he was shipped home. In 1949 at the age of 52, he built his 12-tsubo house in Ikura 1-chome, Minato ward, Tokyo. Thinking that “just as an artist has a studio, a stage designer should have a stage,” he constructed a small stage in his house and made it his work place. Wajiro Kon, the father of “modernology,” saw the drawings for

the house and commented, “What a delightful house.” No actual plays were ever performed on the stage. More than wanting to perform plays in his house, I think he wanted a symbol of his spirit as a theater person and propman. After all, if you have a stage, you can always feel close to the theater production world.

People of all kinds gathered—friends, painters, writers, editors, and research students hopeful of becoming stage designers. Though small as a house, it felt like a plaza. It was a studio for drawing stage prop designs, creating costumes, masks, and models of stages, taking photos, and writing and painting.

There was even a goat, a gift he received for painting a picture on a recycled two-wheeled hand cart. As the family grew to seven members, he added two rooms, but the added rooms burned down and he had to rebuild them.

Kenkichi, who acquired a love for the stage from Yoshi Hijikata, an eye for observing from Wajiro Kon, and a heart for poetry from Zenmaro Toki, dreamed of creating an encyclopedia of thoughts and essays using pictures, photos, and text. Ware bangaku ni kui nashi ( “Education Late in Life with No Regrets” ) he called it, but it remained unfinished.

It was way of life without family trips or even New Years celebrations, but to compare it to weaving, the 12-tsubo house was our family’s warp.

## ■ About the 12-Tsubo House

After World War II, laws and regulations were promulgated with the aim of securing enough housing for war survivors and repatriates. In 1947, Japan promulgated the second “special restrictions on buildings,” which limited the floor areas of new houses nationwide to 12 tsubo (39.7m<sup>2</sup>). These restrictions remained in effect until 1950. Kenkichi having constructed his “12-Tsubo House” in 1949, clearly his choice of a “12 tsubo” design owed to this restrictions.

After their repatriation from Inner Mongolia in 1946, the Yoshida family (Kenkichi, wife Kanoko, and daughter Tamae) resided temporarily in Kamakura then built this house in Ikura 1-chome, Minato ward (present-day Azabudai), Tokyo.

Each space of the house had dual functions—a hall-cum-living room, stage-cum-studio, and so on. The house’s main feature was its “stage.” Kenkichi explained the presence of a stage in this tiny house by saying, if an artist could have a studio, then a stage designer should be able to have a stage.

Kenkichi’s house was early in introducing elements of the new postwar culture, such as an American-style lawn and fluorescent lighting. Until

its demolition in 1987, it was a community space ever the scene of activities, with people working inside and outside, constructing models of stage props and holding flea markets and rakugo shows.





## The 12-Tsubo House—Lineage I

## A Creative New Vision ~From the Barrack Decoration Company to Modernology

In September 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake reduced Tokyo to ashes. The Barrack Decoration Company was founded to impart cheer to the stark atmosphere of the ruined city. Kenkichi was deeply influenced by the group’ s activities and their creative new vision founded on accepting and observing the changes occurring in the world around them.

### ■ Barrack Decoration Company

In September of 1923, the year of the Great Kanto Earthquake, Wajiro Kon\* gathered with Kenkichi, Tetsuo Asuka (an upperclassman at Tokyo School of Fine Arts) and the young artists Kigen Nakagawa, Tai Kanbara, and Junnoosuke Kanda, and founded the Barrack Decoration Company. Undertaking “all work related to beautifying barracks\*,” the artists painted brightly colorful decorations to enliven the drab interiors and exteriors of cafeterias, shops, factories, and houses. One artist individually handled the decorative design

\* Wajiro Kon: a lifelong friend and teacher whom Kenkichi met in the design department at Tokyo School of Fine Arts (today’ s Tokyo University of the Arts).

\* “Barrack” : A foundationless temporary shelter constructed using available materials.

for each building. Kenkichi took charge of decorating their first job, the “Kaishin Shokudo” built at the time in Hibiya Park. They undertook ten buildings in all, others of which were the “Tojo Shoten” in Nakagawa, Tai Kanbara, and Junnoosuke Kanda, which was decorated with a Dadaist pattern, and the “Café Kirin” in Ginza, whose signboard received a picture of a giraffe. The activities of the Barrack Decoration Company, which continued until June 1924, contributed vitality to the town after the earthquake’ s devastation.

### ■ Modernology

After the Great Kanto Earthquake, Wajiro Kon and Kenkichi strolled about Tokyo sketching the temporary barrack buildings built by survivors. Even as a new city emerged, they remained focused on the importance of “recording the situation as it develops” and pounded the pavement researching the conditions of ordinary people’ s lives. This activity they called “gathering.” Their methods including drafting tables on the basis of research, statistics, and observation, as well as more simple actions of sketching their subject and jotting down

notes.

Kon named this research “Modernology” in October 1927 when holding an exhibition on Modernology at Kinokuniya Bookstore in Shinjuku. Under this name, it would become widely known.

The numerous records that Kenkichi gathered and compiled reflect his thoroughly objective perspective. At the same time, they display a hand-drawn warmth that evokes the actual people depicted and their lifestyles.

## The 12-Tsubo House—Lineage II

## Creating Spaces That Delight and Entertain ~Stage Design & Store Design

In parallel with his career as a stage designer, launched prior to the war, Kenkichi also undertook store design for bars and coffee shops. His spatial creations clearly reflect the thinking common to stage and store design—that if one simply has ideas, a comfortable, fun place can be created, even in a space of limited size.

### ■ Tsukiji Small Theater and Stage Art

Kenkichi Yoshida began his career as a stage designer working for “Tsukiji Small Theater,” the first theater company devoted to shingeki ( “New Drama” ) in Japan to possess its own theater. This was in the year following the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923). Tsukiji Small Theater was the brainchild of Yoshi Hijikata, who after studying stage direction in Berlin desired to create an experimental theater group. Prominent stage director Osanai Kaoru joined Hijikata in founding the company. In the same year, a theater was constructed in the temporary “barrack” style in Tsukiji, Kyobashi ward

(today’ s Chuo ward). Kenkichi joined as a prop man and promoter soon after the company’ s founding. He immediately drew attention with his stage sets for the company’ s first performance, “Sea War” (Kaisen). In 1929, following the death of Osanai, the company disbanded but Kenkichi continued receiving work from theater groups and remained active as a stage designer. The training Kenkichi obtained from Hijikata and Osanai, both of whom deeply respected actors’ performances and valued audiences, imparted a profound influence on his stage design philosophy.

### ■ Store Design

Kenkichi also undertook the interior design of bars, coffee shops, restaurants, and inns. Just as he had handled both stage and poster design for Tsukiji Small Theater, in his store design work he not only designed interiors but matchbooks and coasters, as

well, and undertook the overall design of a fun space enjoyable for people. Here, we look at his realized designs for the bars “Kikansha” and “Chiisana-ie” along with two design proposals never realized.

### Epilogue

## Ideas for Enjoying Your Home ~Kenkichi Yoshida’ s Ideas for Living

In the years after the war, people worked hard simply to get by, and they forgot about the enjoyment of living. Kenkichi, himself a husband and father, was deeply involved in his own family’ s residential life. His ideas for living, arising from his own experiences of hardship, were full of hope, freedom, and fun.

### ■ Ideas for Enjoying Your Home

Through his many activities, Kenkichi articles providing useful information for endeavored to foster new ways of viewing living, and women’ s needs for such lifestyle. This endeavor he had begun in continued after the war, as well. The the pre-war years in Japan by actively informational articles Kenkichi wrote contributing articles to newspapers and around when he built his 12-Tsubo House magazines on the theme of “ideas for after the war, nevertheless, hardly show living.” The 1920s and 1930s were a time any interest on his part in the image of the that saw women’ s magazines quickly good wife and wise mother. To the grow in circulation. By promoting the ideal contrary, he skillfully adapted article of the “good wife and wise mother,” such content to the needs of each medium’ s magazines indirectly helped construct the reader. Sometimes, he even wrote for image of women advocated by the modern men in what were intended to be Japanese state. Especially popular were informational articles for women.