

## **FOUR HOUSES BY KAZUO SHINOHARA SYMMETRY AND TOPOLOGY FILIPE MAGALHÃES**

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***Abstract:** The article analyses topological issues of symmetry in the form of four “meaning spaces” within residential buildings designed by the Japanese Architect Kazuo Shinohara between 1970 and 1971, together with general reflections on its architectural creativity and the implications of those meaning spaces in the generation that followed in Japan.*

Keywords: Shinohara; Japan; house; 1970; 1971.

### **INTRODUCTION: HOUSES AS ART**

Kazuo Shinohara<sup>1</sup> produced extraordinary houses with tangible rigor. Based on the self-proclaimed motto of "a house is a work of art" (Shinohara, 1962, p.24), the intellectual framework (Shinohara, 1964, p.32), behind his production shifted the landscape of Japanese architectural thought and reformed the contemporary concept and meaning of dwelling. He became the father figure for the generation<sup>2</sup> that exploded in Japan from the mid 70's onwards. Departing from the House of White (1966), and shaping his second style<sup>3</sup>, between 1970 and 1971 Shinohara explored a fresh and depurated expressionism where a conceptualized reductive spatiality overcame concrete thinking. Although resulting from autonomous commissions, four single family houses<sup>4</sup> of clear symmetrical disposition were designed in this period. By designing them as a series, Shinohara asserted his position as an author beyond the individual response each house represented. Through the exact geometric consummation of the four “meaning spaces” as incisions within these houses, and their careful photographic depiction, symmetry became a disciplinary device and was explored through its physical and graphical qualities.

### **SYMMETRY AND TOPOLOGY**

The rigorous geometry established by Shinohara in the beginning of his second style resulted in sequences of voids that were choreographed with an almost religious attitude. Narrow, perfectly

symmetrical, double-height passages leading into light-filled rooms, cut those houses with serene violence. The “fissure spaces”<sup>5</sup> became the *raison d’être* for the series where the remaining aspects of the houses were almost neglected. Were such spaces the actual project, and the houses an excuse for their existence?

The “fissures” had no real use or definitive function; it could be argued that they even compromised the normal domestic routines of the users, forcing the duplication of stairs and circulations. Nevertheless, in the carefully curated articles published at the time, those symmetrical rooms were central to the architect’s discourse. Rare photos were published of any of the other rooms, and if so, they would be depicting the relations other programs had with the hallways. Koji Taki’s<sup>6</sup> photos and texts, the main source of architectural criticism for those houses, focused near solely on the fissures.

*“The architect is perhaps concerned only with the meaning-giving structure of architecture, that is, its rhetoric. (...) Through rhetoric, architecture creates new registers to be read. If people find in them new languages with many meanings, then that is as it should be.”* (Taki, 1975, p. 14)

This inflection in Shinohara’s career was reinforced by the reinvention of his representational tools, with an important emphasis on dry axonometric drawings<sup>7</sup>, and a harsh exploration of architectural photography (namely via the collaboration with Koji Taki). After several years developing wood constructions, Shinohara was now obsessed with abstract concrete constructions.

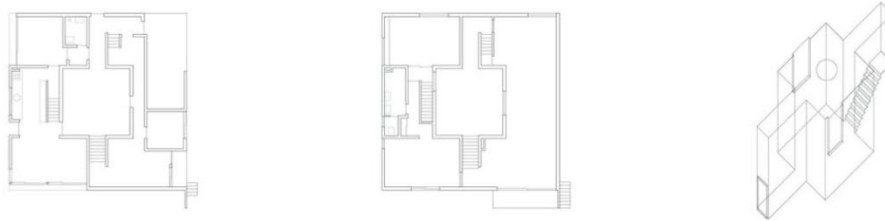
The series of four houses impacted a whole generation that would produce continuous explorations and derivations of the same idea in the following years: Takefumi Aida’s Nirvana House (1972), Hiroshi Hara’s own house (1973), Yuzuru Tominaga’s Aoyamaminamicho House (1973) or Toyo Ito’s House in Sakurajosui (1975) are just a few examples of a longlist of significant experiments. Hironori Shirasawa’s House in Kitaiama (1974) or Toyo Ito’s Houses in Kamiwada and Nakano (both from 1976), took the experiment further, disrupting the geometrical stiffness of Shinohara’s fissures and granting precise programmatic functions to those rooms, leading, in the following years, Hiroshi Hara, Itsuko Hasegawa, Kazunari Sakamoto and Atsushi Kitagawara, among others, to bend the spatial type Shinohara crafted to the limits of its own topology.

For nearly a decade, the symmetrical meaning spaces became the playground for a generation that, unable to reach other commissions, would see in small houses and in their communication the opportunity to create their own cosmos. Thriving as a group, with their work floating in magazines they could find monthly laying around in convenience stores and gas stations, their houses were difficult to grasp and wouldn’t last long; yet the images and articles they printed would prevail and impact Japan until today. Their discourse grew in unison, and Shinohara’s spatial invention became

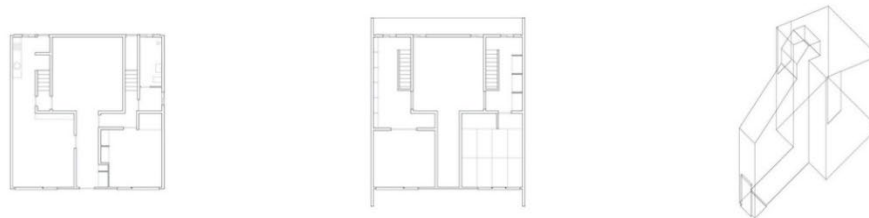
the perfect excuse to endless investigations by other authors on the meaning of the domestic space. Symmetry became a trope, a tool for meaning, a disciplinary obsession for a whole generation.

*I believe the world flows ceaselessly through the small spaces of the house.*

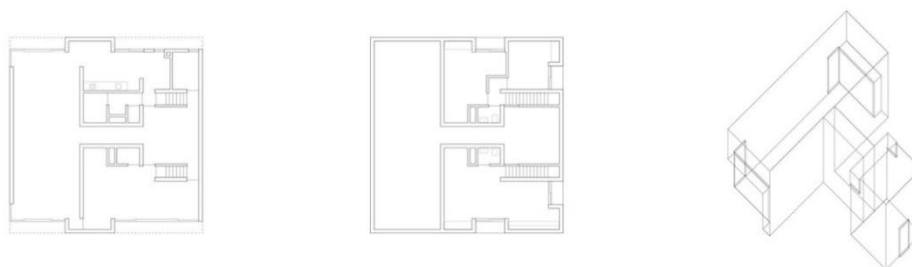
(Kazuo Shinohara, 1971, 82)



*Figure 1* Uncompleted House 1970. Drawings by Kazuo Shinohara (redrawn by the author).



*Figure 2* Shino House 1970. Drawings by Kazuo Shinohara (redrawn by the author).



*Figure 3* Cubic Forest 1971. Drawings by Kazuo Shinohara (redrawn by the author).



*Figure 4* Repeating Crevice 1971. Drawings by Kazuo Shinohara (redrawn by the author).

## CONCLUSION: MEANING THROUGH SYMMETRY

In recent years, the work of Kazuo Shinohara has been rediscovered<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, the four enigmatic fissure spaces remain a mystery in many ways. Perfectly symmetrical in their form, they exist as spaces where meaning is generated through a naked yet reserved relationship between the inhabitant and the void. The geometrical thoroughness of such spaces, through their precise symmetry, is the leitmotif for this investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Shinohara (Tokyo, 1925) was one of the most important Japanese architects of the last century. Studying architecture at the Tokyo Institute of Technology after graduating in mathematics, Shinohara built more than 50 projects along his career, the majority of which single family houses.

<sup>2</sup> The “Shinohara school” informally linked the works of architects such as Toyo Ito, Itsuko Hasegawa and Kazunari Sakamoto to the practical and theoretical production of Shinohara, suggesting the idea of a family tree; Shinohara himself flirted with the expression. The term was first published in *SD: Space Design*, January 1979

<sup>3</sup> Kazuo Shinohara divided his Works in four main phases, which he named “styles” (1st style, 2nd style, etc); each of these styles had very clear tropes and themes. Although interconnected, the works of each style can be easily identified and grouped.

<sup>4</sup> The four houses of the series were the Uncompleted House and the Shino House both from 1970 and the Repeating Crevice and the Cubic Forest from 1971.

<sup>5</sup> The “fissure spaces” were central hallway spaces profoundly documented and theorized by Shinohara; in some publications they are also referred as “meaning spaces”.

<sup>6</sup> Koji Taki was a philosopher, founder of *Provoque* magazine and architectural critic; he developed a close relationship with Shinohara and for almost a decade wrote about and photographed his works with what he called the “anti-architectural expression” of Shinohara’s buildings. Taki theorized the idea of a “second language” of architecture (in “The Language of the House”, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> With the series of four houses, Shinohara inaugurated a sequence of single line axonometric drawings representing exclusively the void of the “fissure spaces”; these drawings were highly influential for the “Shinohara School” and defined a new representation standard of the period.

<sup>8</sup> Interest in Shinohara’s work has been in steady ascendance in recent years, especially since his death in 2006 and the posthumous awarding of a Golden Lion at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale, which took him from being a cult figure for initiated connoisseurs to an architect who is now widely taught in schools around the world.

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Filipe Magalhães (Porto, 1987), Masters in Architecture by FAUP, Faculdade de Arquitectura do Porto (2011). PHD candidate at FAUP, researching the relation between the author, the work of architecture and its representation. Visiting professor in ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon and Politecnico di Milano. Regularly invited as a teacher, guest critic and lecturer at the Architectural Association and the RIBA in London, the GSAPP in New York, the Graham Foundation in Chicago and at the faculties of architecture in Toronto, Zurich, and Munich, among others. Collaborated professionally, among others, with Harry Gugger in Basel and SANAA in Tokyo. Established the architecture practice FALA with Ana Luisa Soares and Ahmed Belkhodja in Porto (2013). FALA's work has been exhibited and published in widely, namely at the architecture biennials in Venice and Chicago, at the Serralves Foundation and the Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris, and in single exhibitions in Panama, Italy, France, and Portugal, and printed in 2G, AV, Domus, l'AA, Abitare and the Architectural Review.