

Press release

## The Umbrella House by Kazuo Shinohara A new building on the Vitra Campus

17 November 2022, Vitra Campus

**Kazuo Shinohara (1925–2006) is considered one of the most important Japanese architects from the latter half of the twentieth century, along with Kenzo Tange. His work subsequently influenced architects such as Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima, but is still little known internationally. A masterpiece from Shinohara's so-called First Style is the Umbrella House built in Tokyo in 1961, which has now been reconstructed on the Vitra Campus in Weil am Rhein.**

The wooden house with its square layout offered sufficient space for a small family under its namesake roof – the “umbrella”. In designing the house, Shinohara drew on the traditional vernacular architecture of Japanese homes as well as temples, transferring various motifs to residential construction for the first time. For example, the pyramid-shaped roof form used in the Umbrella House had previously only been seen in temple complexes. When building the Umbrella House, Shinohara deliberately employed simple and inexpensive materials, such as the cement fibre boards on the façade. The Umbrella House made a novel and inspirational contribution to the architectural discourse of 1960s Japan.

Against the background of various circumstances in Japan, Vitra decided to acquire the house and safeguard it for posterity. Built using a wooden post-and-beam construction method, the house was carefully dismantled in the summer of 2020 and separated into its individual parts. The wooden structure made of Japanese cypress, Japanese pine and Oregon cedar was securely packed along with the other components and shipped to Weil am Rhein. Reconstruction on the Vitra Campus, led by the architectural office Dehli Grolimund, commenced in September 2021 under full support of Tokyo Institute of Technology and was completed in summer 2022.

Shinohara himself divided his work into four styles, each addressing different issues and challenges. The Umbrella House built in 1961 in Nerima, a residential neighbourhood of Tokyo, is the smallest and one of the last remaining residences from his First Style. The 55m<sup>2</sup> floor area accommodates a kitchen and dining table, a living room, a bathroom and a traditional tatami room with 15 half-size tatami mats, which provided living and sleeping quarters for the whole family. Slightly raised with a flat ceiling, the tatami room can be separated from the living room via five sliding doors (fusuma). The prints by Japanese artist Setsu Asakura on the sliding doors were also executed to Shinohara's specifications. The visible umbrella structure of the roof spans the interior volume at 4 metres in height, which makes the small floor area appear larger. A ladder provides access to the half-height area above the tatami room, which served as storage space. The furniture was designed by Kazuo Shinohara himself as well as by designer Katsuhiko Shiraishi. Today, the house is furnished with a mix of replicas and original pieces.

The building will serve as a venue for small gatherings on the Vitra Campus, providing visitors with insights into a prominent example of modern Japanese architecture. After the geodesic dome by Buckminster Fuller / T.C. Howard (1975) and a petrol station by Jean Prouvé (1953), it is the third historic building to take root on the Vitra Campus. All three extend the chronological horizon of the campus and invite comparison with the buildings by contemporary architects.

Rolf Fehlbaum, Chairman Emeritus of Vitra:

»It can make sense to move a building if its construction easily allows this, and of course it must fit into the context of the new location. The Umbrella House meets both criteria: it is relatively simple to relocate and it connects with the strong Japanese presence – Tadao Ando, SANAA and soon Tsuyoshi Tane – on the Vitra Campus.

Kazuo Shinohara was born in Shizuoka prefecture in 1925. After majoring in mathematics at the Tokyo School of Physics (now Tokyo University of Science), he turned to architecture and studied under Kiyoshi Seike at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. Following his graduation in 1953, he went on to teach at the Tokyo Institute of Technology while also working as an architect. His avant-garde designs for residential projects gained international acclaim, and he was soon recognized as one of the leaders of post-war Japanese architecture. His influence on national and international architectural design was considerable, not least through his writings on housing theory and urban theory. Kazuo Shinohara was professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology as well as visiting professor at Yale University and Vienna University of Technology. In addition to the many awards he received throughout his career, he was posthumously awarded the Golden Lion at the 2010 Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Kazuo Shinohara on the Umbrella House:

»The strength of my conviction that ›A House is a Work of Art‹ was born of the struggle with this small house. I wished to express the force of space contained in the doma (earthen-floor room) of an old Japanese farmhouse, this time by means of the geometric structural design of a karakasa (oiled-paper Japanese umbrella).«

Text on the Umbrella House, *Shinkenchiku*, vol. 37, no. 10, Tokyo, October 1962 (first published in English in *The Japan Architect*, vol. 38, Tokyo, February 1963).

## **General information**

Project: Reconstruction of Umbrella House (1961) by Kazuo Shinohara

Tokyo Tech Team

Architectural Direction:

Project Architect:

Prof. Shin-ichi Okuyama / Professor  
Masaru Otsuka / Research Associate

assisted by Koshiro Ogura and Yutaro Honshuku

Heritage Consultant:

Surveying and conservation:

Heritage Houses Trust and Prof. David B. Stewart, Tokyo

Taisuke Yamazaki / Professor

assisted by Naoto Kizu

Dismantling and Repair:

Hidemitsu Ogura and Yusuke Fuchita / Fuhki Construction

Vitra Team

Reconstruction Co-architects:

Christian Dehli, Andrea Grolimund,  
DEHLI GROLIMUND, Zurich

Site Project Manager:

Christian Germadnik, Logad GmbH

Location:

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Hashtag:

#UmbrellaHouse

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