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The Research

This issue introduces Associate Professor Jorge Almazán
who is contributing to the formation of communities through architectural design.

Revitalizing regional towns through the power of architectural design
Deploying research methods for practical action research

Currently, various town development projects in various forms are being set up by the residents of regional Japanese towns. In order to restore the liveliness of aging towns with a declining population, having a "place" that acts as a center to foster a sense of community is important. Almazán, who has studied cities around the world, is contributing to new developments in these towns through architectural design.

Designing for activities

Almazán believes that there are 3 important factors in architectural design. These are "form," "environment," and the "activities" of people. Originally, the main focus of architectural design was "form," but since the 1970s, sustainability has become a major social issue, and a need has appeared for architecture that takes the "environment" into consideration.

However, it is hard to say that the "activities" factor has been given enough attention up to now. "I often hear stories of people paying famous architects to design a building, which turns out looking cool, but is difficult to use. This is something we architectural designers must improve on."

Almazán uses Japanese "engawa" (traditional-style verandas) as an example of an ideal space that successfully incorporates the 3 factors. "All types of engawa are really beautiful, and because of the design of the eaves, they are cool in summer and warm in winter." In addition, because they are located between the exterior and interior of the building, they function well to connect the activities taking place on both sides without dividing the two. "Different activities are performed depending on the engawa, such as greeting a neighbor who walks by or relaxing with someone while enjoying the view of the garden."

Designing a space for such activities will not be successful through theoretical considerations alone. It is important to actually set the activities in motion and hold a series of reviews of the outcomes.

To carry out such research, Almazán has adopted a research technique called "action research (activity + theory)" that was proposed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (see figure on next page). Almazán says that while continuously reviewing the outcomes, one may also notice a deeper theoretical issue hiding behind the scenes.

Experimenting to create liveliness in urban spaces

"I think there will be a lot of demand to design for activities from now on" says Almazán. For projects in regional towns in particular, there is a need for public spaces that foster a sense of community and help revitalize the region. What kinds of designs will realize this?

In urban research up to now, it has been said that in order for public spaces to attract people and create liveliness, the design has to invite people to sit and stay. However, there are few public spaces where one can stay outside sitting in public space in Japan. Almazán attempted to observe the activities of Japanese people on site when they were provided with a public space where they could sit and spend time.

The Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse (Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture), a popular tourist spot, was selected as the location to carry out the experiment. There are shops and restaurants inside the building and it is bustling with people, but the central plaza outside is not used and is often empty. So, 300 moveable chairs were placed in this space. These were chairs used in schools that were no longer needed, colorfully painted at a workshop in which the public could participate to give these pieces of furniture a second life. Unique and attractive chairs were made on a low budget, and these were allowed to be placed anywhere in the plaza (see left photo).

This experiment was conducted in January 2016, and even though it was in the middle of winter, many people sat on the chairs as they wished to enjoy their time, and the space bustled with people. Video recordings of the day were made and the activities of the people were analyzed in detail.

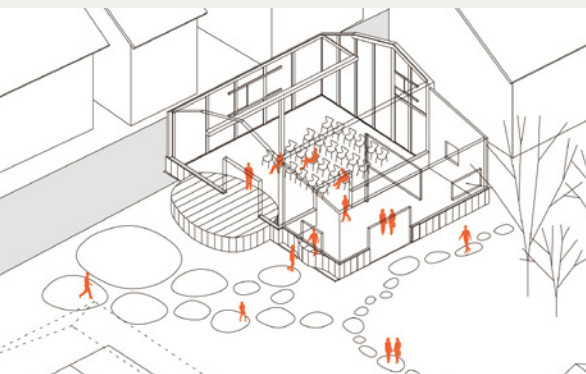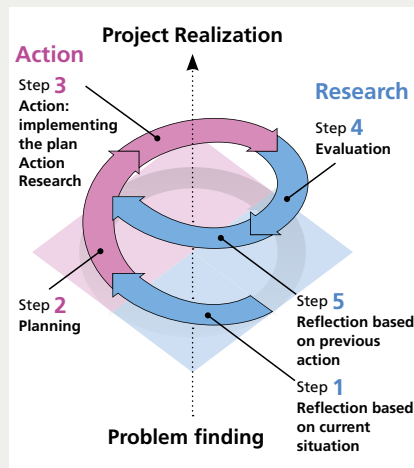Event held at the plaza in front of Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse

Old sake brewery before renovation

The sake brewery and stage can be enjoyed in various ways

Drawing for examining the flow of people

Problem-solving by action research

The sake brewery on the grounds of the "Former Futabaya Sake Brewery" renovated into a gallery

Almazán uses the findings from his research, including those from this experiment, in the designs of actual projects. We will now introduce one of his representative town development projects.

Using research outcomes in town development projects

The above photo and drawing are those of the sake brewery on the grounds of the "Former Futabaya Sake Brewery," a tangible cultural property in the town of Ichikawamisato in Yamanashi Prefecture, which was repaired and converted into a gallery. It was jointly designed with "Ichikawa map no kai," a local town development organization, with the aim of creating a base for revitalizing the region. Stepping stones are placed between the main building and the stage of the gallery to connect them and allow a variety of activities to take place inside and outside the gallery.

"The chosen site was an old sake brewery from the Edo period, but it was structurally sound and there were no dangers or problems. We could have demolished and constructed a new building, but demolition cost is also high, so we recommended that they renovate and use the original building." He says that he showed various proposals through models and worked with the townspeople on the design.

The most distinctive feature of this project is the stage that extends from the inside of the brewery to its exterior, but this was not originally planned. It came about from the discussions that took place. After the opening of the facility, various events such as noh plays have frequently been held. It is also popular as a wedding party venue. "I am very happy to have contributed to the region. I can feel the power of architecture," says Almazán with a smile.

The role of architects is changing

Currently, in Europe and Japan, more importance is placed on renovation, including maintaining and restoring buildings, than on new constructions. Almazán says that this is expanding the role of architects. "I feel that we need to play a role similar to that of social activists, being involved in the operation and management of communities and proposing solutions to regional issues after examining these by ourselves."

For this reason, Almazán is developing activities at his own laboratory under the 3 pillars of "social action," "research," and "learning."

In particular, Almazán emphasizes the importance of "learning." "There are many people who think about research and educational programs separately, but I think about them together. This is why I use the word 'learning' instead of 'education.'"

It is my hope that students learn many things while working on actual projects. The efforts made by architects open to learning and not bound by outdated architectural frameworks, will produce energetic projects and lead them to success.

(Interview and text writer : Yuko Hiratsuka)