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Author	平塚, 裕子(Hiratsuka, Yuko)
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The attractiveness and diverse expressions of cities

Almazán says he was interested in cities from an early age. He has crossed national borders to visit and research various cities. He began to develop a strong admiration for Japanese architectural design and came to Japan as a research student 15 years ago. He has been shedding new light on Japanese urban research from a global perspective and is now attracting attention by creating unique spaces in regional towns.

What kind of childhood did you have?

I loved to draw and read. I was a boy who liked art, and I even made a movie (short film). I wanted to draw every day, and I did think about a career as an artist, but I also had a strong desire to be involved with society and people, so in the end I chose architecture.

What did you study at university?

I studied at the Technical University of Madrid, which was established in 1971 when 2 technical schools originating in the 18th century that specialized in engineering and architecture merged. It has a long history in the field of architecture. Unlike in the Japanese system, the university has 7- or 8-year degree programs, and you are a certified architect when you graduate. I thoroughly learned the basics of architecture here.

While at the Technical University of Madrid, I studied abroad for a year at Technische Universität Darmstadt in Germany. Darmstadt is a city famous for Jugendstil architecture, known as Germany's Art Nouveau.

Then you came to Japan.

I learned about German architecture and cities at Darmstadt, but I also wanted to learn about non-European architecture. Japanese architects are popular internationally. Many young architects around the world have learned from works such as those by Kenzo Tange, Kisho Kurokawa, Tadao Ando, Toyo Ito,

and Kazuyo Sejima. I don't know how much the Japanese people are aware of this, but Japanese architectural design is top-class in the world.

What impressions do you have of Japanese cities?

What surprised me the most was the lack of public spaces. There are no benches or urban squares. When I asked Japanese researchers why there are no urban squares in Japan, most of them said "cultural difference." They say that "interior spaces are more suitable for Japanese people than expansive outdoor spaces," but if you look at ukiyo-e pictures of Nihonbashi during the Edo period, isn't it bustling with people? People have also said "because there are mosquitoes," but there are mosquitoes in Spain and Italy too (laughs).

Japanese tourists sightseeing around European towns seem to enjoy open cafes and relaxing in town squares. I think that the lack of open spaces in Japan is not a cultural issue, and this led to an experiment at the plaza in front of the Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse (see introduction of research).

In a series of projects in regional towns that you have been working on recently, I feel that you have been incorporating open-space activities into the design of public spaces.

There is a concept called "glocal" that tries to realize localness through global means, but I like the word "translocal" in the sense of learning from many localities.

In the "Former Futabaya Sake Brewery" project, I introduced the localness of spaces like plazas in my hometown of Alicante that I had learned while growing up there to a different locale in Yamanashi Prefecture (see introduction of research). In Yamanashi Prefecture, they have their own materials and craftspeople. So, we have to come up with a concept that makes use of these materials and skills. But more than that, by thinking about things with an attitude of learning from the two locales, you will be able to get "translocal" inspirations.

We used traditional Japanese materials for the building, but a Mediterranean mindset can be seen in the program being developed there. I think it's okay to open up various possibilities in a space rather than being narrow-minded, saying it must be this way because it's in Japan, or it must be that way because it's in Spain.

What are your impressions of Keio University as a faculty member?

The Faculty of Science and Technology seems to have a warm culture. Again, it's all about human relationships. The administrative staff and other faculty members are all very kind. Without such relationships, I think it would be very difficult for





foreign faculty members to get by.

In addition, what I feel while carrying out research is the good reputation that Keio University has in society. Even when you meet people for the first time, including public and civic organizations, they are willing to talk to you when they hear the name of the university.

Please give some advice to young students aiming to become architects.

Developing your passion is very important. If you like something, please spend time to get better at it. From there, you will be able to find your research theme or discover your design style.

Architecture has a clearer social orientation than art. It also costs money. So, even students have to be aware that they are members of society and act responsibly. I would like to see all of them become architects who passionately contribute to society.



◎ **Some words from students** . . . ◎

● I was very surprised when I first met him because he knew more about Japanese history and urban planning than Japanese people. He brings to light things we would tend to overlook because it just feels so normal, from a fresh, international perspective, so that we can make new discoveries. His explanations when comparing various cities around the world are easy to understand, and he has encouraged me to think about Japanese cities from a much broader perspective. (3rd-year doctoral student)

(Interview and text writer : Yuko Hiratsuka)

For the full text of this interview

<http://www.st.keio.ac.jp/kyurizukai>



Develop your passion while being a part of society.

Jorge Almazán

Graduated from the School of Architecture of the Technical University of Madrid in 2003. In 2001, he studied abroad at the Technische Universität Darmstadt. He obtained his doctoral degree from Tokyo Institute of Technology. In 2008, he held the position of Invited Professor of Architectural Design at the University of Seoul. Since 2009, he has taught at Keio University, where he is currently an associate professor. He operates "Studiolab," an architectural design laboratory, and carries out both architectural work and research.

