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Architecture and urban design

from Keio's the Faculty of Science and Technology

Designing spaces that create encounters and liveliness



Jorge Almazán

Associate Professor
Department of
System Design Engineering

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

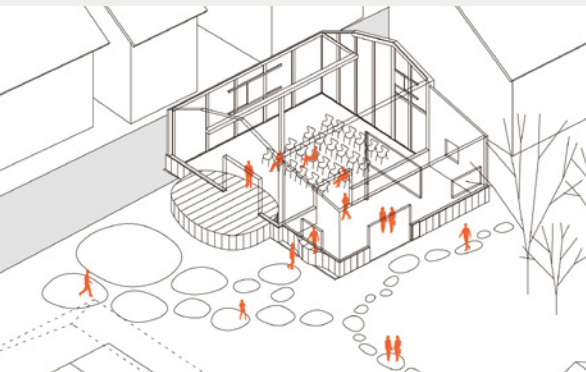




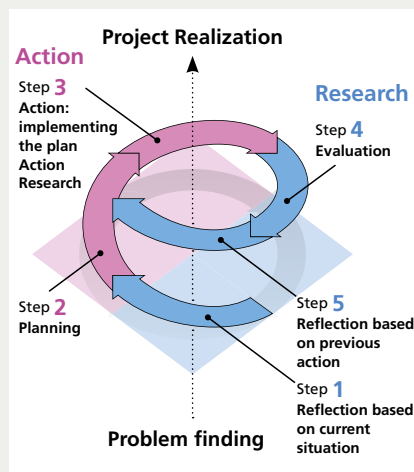
Old sake brewery before renovation



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)



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.



Jorge Almazán's views on Japanese cities and architecture

Nageiredo Hall of Sanbutsuji Temple (Tottori)

After navigating steep and narrow paths and climbing rocks by using chain links, one finally arrives at Nageiredo Hall. Perched on the edge of a precipice, this delicate and small hall is supported by slender stilts precariously standing on the rock. Its gracious fragility seems to remind us that its physical presence is less important than the experience of climbing Mount Mitoku and admiring its perfectly preserved beauty.



Entsūji Temple (Kyoto)

Sitting on the wooden floor of Entsūji Temple's *engawa*, one can see the *shakkei* or 'borrowed landscape' of Mount Hiei framed between the tree trunks and leaves. The vertical, straight, dark-colored cedar trunks break the horizontality of the garden shrub and get confused with the pillars of the temple. The simple disposition of the small number of elements (trees, columns, leaves, shrubs) creates a rich spatial experience of a garden that seems to expand inward and outward, horizontally and vertically.



Nōryōyuka along the Kamo River (Kyoto)

The raised platforms built on the banks of the Kamo River – the *nōryōyuka*, literally meaning "floors for storing the cool" – are an example of how one architectural configuration can integrate formal, environmental, and behavioral qualities. While creating a vibrant urban façade, these platforms afford a comfortable natural thermal environment by taking advantage of the river's cooling breeze. They are connected to restaurants, whose customers can enjoy views of the sky and the river. People's presence along the river contributes to creating a lively and festive atmosphere during Kyoto's summers.



Zakkyo building urban façade along Yasukuni-dōri (Tokyo)

Although considered unsightly by many, this urban façade is one of the most iconic views of Tokyo. Municipal brochures tend to depict Tokyo Tower or Tokyo Sky Tree as Tokyo's symbol, but most foreign guidebooks and magazines select this stretch of Yasukuni-dōri for its distinct character. The narrow and deep land plots along the avenue create a rhythmic façade of slender buildings that strive to advertise their contents to the street, creating a combined effect of unique spectacularity.



Anonymous low-rise residential area (23 wards of Tokyo)

This photograph was taken in a street in Setagaya ward, but the specific place does not matter since almost any low-rise residential area within the 23 wards of Tokyo demonstrates the same character. In the midst of a large metropolis, it is surprising to find these quiet neighborhoods reminiscent of a village, where small school children walk safely unaccompanied by adults. Streets are narrow, and land plots are modest, but neighbors strive to create an overall pleasant atmosphere embellishing the street by cultivating micro-gardens at the edges of their land plots.



Rainy Tokyo

The urban landscape of signboards and screens that characterizes most of Tokyo's train station commercial districts becomes especially striking after the rain. When it rains, even lightly, many Tokyoites tend to avoid going out, and the streets are less crowded than usual. With fewer people outside, it is the perfect time to enjoy views where the street itself becomes a reflecting surface that mirrors the surrounding light and creates a sensation of floating in the city.

Golden Gai or almost any other of Tokyo's *yokochō* alleyways

Golden Gai is probably the world's densest bar district. Many of the bars can only accommodate 5 or 6 customers, but owners and customers see this smallness as an advantage. In these intimate spaces, it is easy to communicate and start a conversation, and only one bartender is needed to manage the whole space from the counter. Despite *jiage* practices to force owners into selling their plots, the area has miraculously survived until now and has become a core of informal public space and increasingly, a tourist attraction.



Ameyoko (Ueno, Tokyo)

Viaducts and elevated infrastructure create unwelcoming undertrack spaces that segregate the two sides of the tracks. However, in Ameyoko in Ueno, it does not create a barrier – quite the opposite. It is an agglomeration of small shops that have managed to colonize the undertrack space, creating a hub for commercial activity.



The photographs of Ameyoko and Golden Gai were taken by students of the Almazán Lab. The rest of the photographs were taken by Jorge Almazán.

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My favorite books

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● The Death and Life of Great American Cities

In the 1950s, many urban renewal projects in the US were already showing their negative impact on the city. Jacobs criticizes these renewals for oversimplifying the complexity of urban life, and famously advocated for mixtures of uses, short blocks, diversity of building ages, and a relatively high population density. Almost 60 years have passed since its publication, but even today, this book helps us to understand why so many of Tokyo's new urban redevelopments end up creating a "dead" city. I hope that all future developers, planners, and architects read this book to learn how our lives are affected by urban design, and how to keep our cities "alive."

● A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity

When we try to understand societies, we tend to oversimplify them, either thinking of particular individuals or thinking of abstract and broad entities like "the nation" or "the culture." This book helps us to look beyond these oversimplifications by explaining different social entities, from small communities to large nation-states, as the result of interactions and networks of multiple elements, such as people, buildings, or institutions. The author connects philosophy and science and offers conceptual tools to grapple with social complexity.

● Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand Tokyo. In a city where historical buildings have almost disappeared, Jinnai shows us the continuities of Edo to Tokyo, teaching how to find remnants of the past in today's Tokyo. Instead of trying to transplant European-style orderly plazas and boulevards, Jinnai argues that we should restore "Japanese urban spaces" by enhancing their historical character based on contact with water, topography, and the small scale. I feel that the urban qualities defended by Jinnai, a historian of Italian cities and an enthusiast of the lively public spaces found in Mediterranean cities, apply to more than just Japanese cities. They are, in fact, qualities that any city in the world, East or West, should aim to develop – namely, vibrant, human-scale urbanism.

● A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction

This book is a design manual and a critique of Modern architecture. From towns and buildings to construction details, the authors offer a comprehensive catalog of spatial configurations or "patterns" that afford visual pleasure and enhance social encounters and psychological well-being. However, their insistence on explaining these patterns as the true and objective ways to build "good" architecture, seems inflexible and somewhat authoritarian. Therefore, I recommend using the book as a rich catalog of possibilities open to reinterpretation. More than forty years after its publication, this book is still a powerful guide for inspiration and helps us to think beyond the design ideologies inherited from Modernism that are still dominant today.

● Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo

Every urban scholar needs to understand not only urban forms, but also the societies that produce those forms. In my attempts to understand aspects of Japanese society, I am often confronted with explanations of how "Japanese culture" differs from "Western culture." Conflicts in Western societies are explained as a result of Western individualism and tendency to protest, while Japanese society is often presented as less conflictive because their residents naturally tend to achieve consensus and group harmony. However, this book suggests that many aspects of current Japanese society do not originate from ancient cultural traditions, nor natural ethnic proclivities. They originate instead from struggles around 1960, a year that saw the largest protests in modern Japanese history, with millions participating in protest activities of some kind. This book explains many of the current social, artistic, and urban patterns in Japan, resulting from the 1960 demonstrations, which culminated in a series of social compromises that are still active in Japan today.

● Learning from Las Vegas

Las Vegas is the last city architects would visit for inspiration. However, this book presents late 1960s Las Vegas as a place from which architects can extract design principles. The book praises the richness, liveliness, and inclusiveness of Las Vegas' urban landscape, and criticizes the empty monumentality of the Modern architecture of the 1960s. Short, fun, and easy to read, this book is a must for all architects to learn how to observe the city in a nonjudgemental way to appreciate the everyday sceneries of cities.

Ota Art Garden Abandoned Rice Warehouses Get New Life as Art Spaces

Jorge Almazán

For years, a group of old wooden houses and warehouses, formerly used to sell and store rice, remained abandoned in the industrial city of Ota, Gunma Prefecture. Like most vacant and derelict sites in provincial Japan, the most probable fate for these buildings was demolition followed by the construction of the generic prefabricated houses that have homogenized Japan's regional landscape. The owner, a designer and advertising art director, wanted to give new life to the compound and contacted us to conceive a different future in which art and creativity would play a central role. We transformed the existing structures – two houses and three warehouses – into spaces to accommodate both exhibition and production of artwork. The project creates a new focus of activity in the neighborhood and demonstrates an alternative approach to urbanism.

The site is located in front of Niragawa Station. Unlike many other areas of provincial Japan, this neighborhood is not shrinking as the manufacturing industry attracts new residents. However, it suffers the *suburbanization* of many other Japanese municipalities, as it is increasingly becoming a car-dependent bed-town. Newly opened large-scale shopping malls have provoked

a commercial hollow-out of the former *shōtengai* or “shopping street,” with the few remaining shops scattered about. The vast majority of the population use cars in their everyday lives for even small distances, and trains are mostly used by school children. The spaces around the stations, formerly a prime urban location, are now in decay as new neighbors prefer to live in the outskirts with better access to malls and highways. Although land plots are large and generous, most space is dedicated to parking the two or three cars that most households own. This car-dominated urban landscape is rapidly becoming an asphalt desert. Can our project reverse this process? Can we offer an example to the community of how to do things differently?

We demolished some unused structures and opened space for greenery: the new project would become an art garden. One of the old houses, located in front of the station, was reconverted into an *exhibition gallery*. The other house, located in the middle of the site, was transformed into a residence for artists and students. The warehouses were renovated as workshop spaces. We moved the parking spaces, previously located in front of the station, to the back of the site, so that the most visible and public area became more open and pleasant for passersby.

We also removed the existing shutters and concrete block walls that surrounded the site. Instead, we designed a bench facing the station covered by a canopy. This canopy invites passersby to sit down, take a rest, start a conversation,



and visit the art garden. The garden not only contributes visually, but it is also intended to ameliorate Ota's harsh summers, known for being some of the hottest in Japan with temperatures reaching 40°C. We substituted asphalt and concrete surfaces with greenery, and provided a series of shades – overhangs and canopies – to create a microclimate that allows people to enjoy the garden even in summer.

We reduced waste and the need for new building supplies by reusing and repurposing materials as much as possible. Taking advantage of Japanese modular wooden construction, we were able to reuse wooden strips, scraped structural members, doors, and windows in the new constructions. The existing pallets, formerly used in the warehouses, were repurposed as fences and garden decks. Old roof tiles, concrete blocks, and stones were repurposed as pavement materials.

With people moving from their air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned shopping centers, Japanese provincial outdoor spaces are becoming deserted. Ota Art Garden offers a vision of an alternative future, where traditional structures coexist with the new, and a green urban microclimate offers opportunities for people to meet and engage with art.

理 工 学 Information

KEIO TECHNO-MALL 2019 20th Keio Science and Technology Exhibition “beyond imagination: encouraging advances to the future”

KEIO TECHNO-MALL (Keio Science and Technology Exhibition) is an event that showcases the research results of Keio University's Faculty and Graduate School of Science and Technology, and serves as a forum to encounter future collaboration partners in government, industry, and academia for joint research, technology transfer, and more.

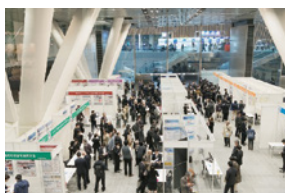
Date and time: December 13, 2019 (Fri.) 10:00–18:00

Venue: Tokyo International Forum, B2F (Hall E2)

Content: An attractive exhibition that emphasizes demonstrations and displays of actual products is planned

Admission is free ※ Advance registration is not required.

Details: www.kll.keio.ac.jp/ktm/



Symposium sessions, special talks (planned)

1 Symposium session I

Mr. Masato Okuma (Member of the board of directors, Digital Garage; COO, DG Lab; President and CEO, Crypto Garage, Inc.), others

2 Symposium session II

Kohei Itoh (Professor, Department of Applied Physics and Physico-Informatics)

3 Symposium session III

Masato Yasui (Professor, School of Medicine), others

4 Special talk

Dr. Toshiharu Furukawa (PhD [medicine]; lawyer; member of the House of Councillors; professor, Keio University Law School; TMI Associates)



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For inquiries (on “New Kyurizukai” in general):
kyurizukai@info.keio.ac.jp

For inquiries (on industry-academia collaboration):
kll-liaison@adst.keio.ac.jp

Website version:

<https://www.st.keio.ac.jp/education/kyurizukai/>

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Editor's postscript

Born and raised overseas, Associate Professor Jorge Almazán has been living in Japan for about 10 years. I was interested to hear the impressions on Japan by such an individual. In this issue, we introduced his views in “ON hours, OFF hours.” I hope you enjoyed it. I also hope that there will be some among our readers who discover the merits of the landscape and buildings in Japan, which they may not have realized having become accustomed to their surroundings as local residents.

(Izumi Hagiwara)