

Japan as seen from architecture (3)

Thinking & Making by Oneself

‘Day-to-dayness’ & Human Imagination

By *Sogabe Masashi*

Thinking & Making by Oneself: What It Means

Architects' work is to translate the lifestyle of their age into the form of architecture. People lead their lives in various types of architectural structures and cities, and ways of life differ from person to person. Accordingly, architects' translation work is diversified to a considerable extent.

And lifestyles change as times change. In our age especially, the pace of lifestyle change sometimes becomes very fast, affected by technological innovations in various realms. Media technology, in particular, is deceitful and infinitely blurs distinction between real and imaginary lifestyles. Contemporary values ingeniously overlap in various ways people's lives that unfold on television or in magazines. It is not surprising that the lifestyle one should pursue is strongly influenced by media-presented images transcending one's personal circumstances. In such an age, the most important thing is no other than to think and make things by ourselves.

Architecture with Human Involvement

When we look at primitive dwellings in various parts of the world, we find that houses and other places where humans lead their lives were essentially made by the people who perform activities there. It can be said that through the process of thinking and making, people reflect their perception based on

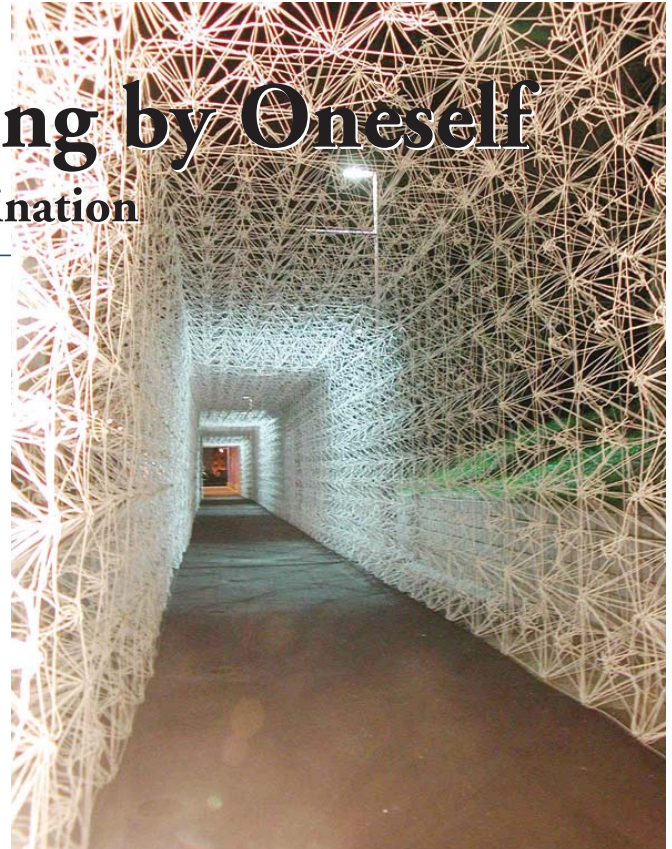


Photo: MIKAN

A hanger tunnel: Wire hangers ordinarily used at dry-cleaning shops are combined into an amazing structure.

their experiences and memories in their houses on the basis of the culture and community they belong to. People thus have created places with diversified affluence at various levels.

In our living environment today, how can we obtain such affluence? It is taken for granted that people no longer make with their hands the houses they live in. Furthermore, not a few people think it a special thing even to conceive a house they would live in. As a matter of course, it is possible to add things based on one's own philosophy to the ready-made house one lives in. Before taking it for granted, however, I would like call attention to reasons why we shy away from "making houses."

Contemporary society is based on the adoption of modern thinking. As our population increases so much and various things get intertwined in a complicated manner, social confusion may be inevitable without adopting modern thinking. But this "modern thinking" is deceitful. In the world of architecture, there is a style called "modern architecture," under which lies modern thinking. The concept of "building type" is one example. There is a way of thinking in the world of architecture that when an architect thinks of designing a house, he will get the best result if he identifies problems on the assumption of building an imaginary prototype and comes up with the best solutions to the problems. Such thinking can be called quite modern and reductionist. As long as the basic concept is reductionist, there

Photo: MIKAN



A Yokohama Triennale mobile stage: The stage, made of a great many colored cones often used at building sites, becomes a table when the cones of the side walls are removed.

appear to be limitations to the affluence gained from a completed house, whatever ingenuity is added to it later.

In my view, human involvement in the process of architectural design is a strong means to overcome such reductionist limitations. That belief underlies what I am now going to show along with specific examples.

Affinity Produced by Ordinary Feeling

Since materials used for architectural structures are strictly governed by law these days, it is extremely difficult to build structures with legally unauthorized materials. As an architect, I co-manage a design office named “MIKAN.” From time to time, the design office intentionally uses materials not intended for architectural purposes though I am well aware of the difficulties involved.

For example, the office once used wire hangers ordinarily used at dry-cleaning shops in making the approach space of an art gallery. We combined some 20,000 wire hangers in a truss-like structure to make a tunnel of slightly less than 40 meters for the approach. The design was in response to a request from the client that the structure should be made in such a way as to catch the public eye and that the structure should be open and can be seen through. The structure could have been made with ordinary industrial materials, but we used the wire hangers for the special reason of responding to the customer’s expectations.

For the gallery’s pub, we used 700 antibacterial chopping boards made of polypropylene. The walls, counters, benches and all other parts of the pub were covered with the cooking boards piled on top of each other like the roofs of old *Shinto* shrines thatched by skins of Japanese cypress. Polypropylene, the cutting board material, is quite attractive with its unique translucency. We had previously used for furniture polypropylene plates not yet processed into chopping boards.



Manaita house: A gallery pub with its walls and tables made of white cutting boards (manaita) ordinarily used in Japanese houses. When taken out, they can be used as normal chopping boards.

Here is another example. On the occasion of the *Yokohama Triennale* held in the autumn of 2006, we made a mobile broadcasting stage for popular radio personality Oenoki Atsushi. The stage was made of a great many colored cones often used at building sites in Japan. It was made in such a way as to appear as if the colored cones jut out into the air because organizers of the *Yokohama Triennale* sought to produce an atmosphere in which the event as a whole looked like a place “under construction.”

Our team has also used in other architectural projects various materials ordinarily seen in our daily lives: chairs made of used exhibition posters, tables made of chunks of solid salt, ceilings covered with music CDs, etc.

What did we expect in using such materials in architecture?

One purpose of such designs is to make relations between people and things closer by using the power of “day-to-dayness.” In this context, it is very important and effective to use materials familiar to people. When people see familiar materials, they can imagine how they should use them because the characteristics of these materials are recorded in their memory. I think the power to think out something is enhanced by the use of familiar materials. When such materials are used in architecture, users themselves basically should do the handwork required. One reaches deeper memory and imagination when one’s head is linked with one’s hands. In other words, handwork using familiar materials stimulates human capability to bring out the affluence of a place that is hidden in the depth of memory. The place thus created could have the possibility of high-level activity far beyond imagination. It can be said that the MIKAN group is designing a scheme in which users think and create themselves. In other words, MIKAN may be reshaping the value of space: from a space as a functional noun to a space as an aggregate of deeds.

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Photos: MIKAN

Used-paper chair: A unique chair made of scores of sheets of paper such as exhibition posters disposed of after use

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