

# Good Screenplay, Architecture & Activities? Architectural Planner's Job

By *Yasuaki ONODA*

## Architectural Planner ?

**THIS** writer is engaged in a profession somehow called an "architectural planner." I take pains to explain this job, which is unfamiliar not only in foreign countries but even in Japan. Most people come to relatively understand what I do when I liken it to moviemaking. Involved in architectural designing are people of various professions, like architects, structural experts, equipment specialists, landscape designers, consultants on various themes such as lighting and acoustic effects, and manufacturing engineers. But the final decision rests with the chief architect. In moviemaking, too, people of various professions are involved, including the director, playwrights, artists, cameramen, lighting technicians, audio engineers and wardrobe supervisors. But power on the job site is concentrated in the director.

Both architectural designing and moviemaking involve people of various professions because they require professionalism in a wide range of spheres. But power is centralized to secure uniformity in what is created. Put another way, the compatibility of burden sharing and centralization is sought. It can be said that if the job of the architect and the movie director is to ensure centralization, then the architectural planner, who is responsible for architectural planning, the selection of an architect, designing and support for project management, may be compared to a playwright who takes the lead in showing the view of the world to be realized by the project. I have been involved in several projects in conjunction with competent architects. From the viewpoint of such a stagehand, I report below on how these projects were implemented.

## Thinking from Program

The Sendai Mediatheque (*Photo 1*) is perhaps what has impressed me most so far. The project, which propelled architect Toyo Ito to international stardom, has been added to a permanent collection in Centre Georges Pompidou, the French national center for art and culture. The project has won various awards in Japan and abroad, and is one of the most famous contemporary architectural works. But in its early stage, in which I was involved, the project was nothing but an ordinary public works project planned by a core provincial city. It was aimed at replacing and integrating the decrepit Municipal Public Library and the Municipal Gallery housed in a private building, the lease of which was expiring. There was little mettle then to realize first-class architecture or social capital by enlisting top-rate talent from various quarters. But the project suddenly took a new turn when the then mayor was forced to resign after being implicated in a political scandal. In a bid to clean the city's image tarnished by the scandal, the city office decided to hold an open tender to adopt a new model for the project and nominated us as consultants.

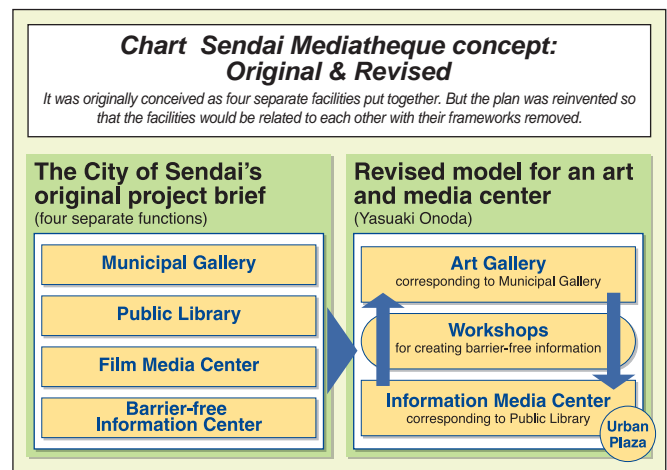


Photo: Sendai Mediatheque

*Photo 1: Sendai Mediatheque's characteristic structure can be easily seen from outside as well. The building's thin floorboard is supported by 13 structural elements called "tubes" instead of pillars.*

In the first place, we reviewed the functions of the project. We rewrote the original model conceived by the city office, which envisaged separate functions according to the facilities, so that the two main functions of art and information would be dynamically coordinated (*Chart*). We thus paved the way for the architect to display his skill. At the same time, we endeavored to create a highly professional screening committee led by Arata Isozaki, an internationally famous architect. In any country, the quality of design competition is always influenced by the quality of members of a screening committee.

After Ito's model was adopted, we participated in various studies to give substance to the concept of our proposal designed to enable users to obtain information by freely moving inside the wall-free space. In the process, we tenaciously scrutinized various elements, including the height of the ceiling and materials as well as furniture and lighting devices that secure the function of each space without walls. We carefully tuned the taste of space to prompt users to act voluntarily. Upholding such a naïve environment was the setup that consisted of strange structural elements called "tubes" and a flat, wall-less slab. It was materialized by a highly precise method adopting shipbuilding techniques.



Source : Compiled by author

Led by the architect, a team comprising structural designers, construction companies, shipbuilding engineers, window frame makers and other parties worked together and developed various methods on the shop floor. I was told that in the United States and other countries where projects are clearly divided stage by stage under contracts, it is difficult to adopt a method requiring integration of design, construction and planning. The Sendai Mediateque has become the site of a national competition for choosing the best architectural design from among graduation works done by architecture students at universities. The facility thus has become a very important venue where architecture students from all over Japan get together once a year. This is an episode that made us realize that good activities dwell in good architecture.

### Civic Participation & Architectural Design

We next participated in the Kumamoto Artpolis project jointly with architect Hitoshi Abe, currently dean of the Department of Architecture & Urban Design, the University of California, Los Angeles. This project, launched by the Kumamoto prefectural government for the purpose of regional revitalization with architectural design, takes the form of introducing talented architects, chosen by commissioners (then assumed by architects Teiichi Takahashi and Toyo Ito), to clients in the prefecture. During the late 1980s bubble period, various provincial governments, pioneered by Kumamoto Prefecture, supported projects for regional design. But such projects have been terminated in the wake of the economic slump that followed the burst of the bubble and only the Kumamoto project has survived to this day.

Our client was Reihoku Town in the picturesque Amakusa Islands, Kumamoto Prefecture. The town office was then considering such projects as a community center and a cultural facility aimed at boosting its regional individuality. After holding a series of workshops with local residents, we proposed to integrate the town office's plans and build a new facility made up of a hall with large mobile walls that can be used as open space and several separate rooms. The interior of this facility was to be uniformly covered by curvy wooden walls (*Photo 2*).

Lately in Japan, local residents are increasingly involved in the planning of public facilities. Yet, as far as design is concerned, many plans prove unavoidably questionable. It appears that our project, for its part, successfully produced a new function and form even though it was based on civic participation. I think this can be attributed to the fact that the city office and residents fully trusted us and left everything to our discretion as far as design is concerned.

Photo: Taichi Ano / FWD INC.



GALLERY

*Photo 3: Part of the Ina Higashi Elementary School library: It is versatile space featuring a movable ceiling and offering easy access to such facilities as a science lab, a courtyard and a computer room.*

### Environmental Design by Children

Currently, we are engaged in a project to rebuild an elementary school in Ina Town, Nagano Prefecture, jointly with design group Mikan after winning a design competition for the Ina Higashi Elementary School project (*Photo 3*). In Japan, generally speaking, building of a new elementary school envisages the adoption of open space in which versatile educational programs can be implemented. However, regional conditions are not fully taken into consideration except for several advanced schools, and "space literacy" for teachers is not available, making most new elementary school buildings unfriendly to users.

In the Ina Higashi Elementary School project, we proposed a new open space for each grade fitting its conditions. A large library where students can get together was set up in the center of the school building by making some extra space available from other parts of the structure. We look forward to seeing how students will use the new building.

### As a Scriptwriter

The architectural projects explained in this article constitute only a very limited portion when seen from the country as a whole. I wish to establish that a good script produces good architecture. Yet, the current economic conditions in Japan that are not necessarily good impose severe cost pressures on planners, and thus we are now in dire straits. I am particularly concerned that not only costs but also these conditions cast a dark shadow over the attitude of people engaged in architectural projects.

No matter how well a script is written, a movie producer can hardly make a good film when he works with a sponsor who is concerned only about costs. Likewise, it is no easy task for us to motivate people who have no will to make a good thing to produce good architecture.

As a playwright, I will perhaps remain in agony for the time being.

JS

*Yasuaki Onoda is professor, the Department of Architecture and Building Science, Graduate School of Engineering, Tohoku University.*

*Photo 2: The public hall of Reihoku Town won the 2003 Architectural Institute of Japan Prize. The central space covered by glass panels serves as an entrance hall-cum-foyer-cum-information corner.*