

Developing Sensibility into Literacy

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“Ito Juku” is a small architecture school in Tokyo, Japan, privately run by NPO “Initiative for Tomorrow’s Opportunities in Architecture” (ITO; chairman: architect Toyo Ito). ITO has been conducting an architecture school for children (in the upper grades at different elementary schools) in “Ito Juku” for 3 years. This paper aims to state sensibility and literacy as fundamental abilities, which architecture education for children can develop, through examining the background of architecture education for children in Japan, the philosophy and the curriculum of the architecture school for children in “Ito Juku” and the children’s response to the activities held in the school.

Housing and architecture education in Japan

The term “*i-shoku-ju*, 衣食住” (clothing, food and housing) is widely used in Japan in order to mention basic concepts in human lives. Housing science in Japan developed in the field of housing studies and home economics, apart from architectural science, which formed the basis of housing education for home economics in primary and secondary education. In 1970s, housing science was dramatically deepened along with the increased public concern about environmental pollution as a serious social issue and the concern about integrated learning as a new educational method. Then housing education and housing environment education were systematically incorporated into school curricula, providing opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning in such fields as social studies, living environment studies, and integrated studies.

From Meiji era, when architecture began to be taught in Japan till 1980s, architectural science had been staying the prerogative of engineers and architects and demanded a specific education for the researchers. In 1984, Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ) featured “housing environment education” in its journal and emphasized the importance of built environment education, including architecture and urban education, for children and youth. In 1990, the AIJ research committee on architecture education introduced a built environment education program developed in the United States and built a network of that program. Since then, however, built environment education has not spread into school curricula and has only been offered as informal activities, such as school visits by architects and workshops in museums. Recently, the Japan Institute of Architects (JIA) has been giving prizes to well-designed built environment education programs for children and youth in relation to “UIA Architecture & Children Golden Cubes Awards” from 2011. AIJ established “the Council for Children Education Support” in 2012 and decided to support architects, related professionals, and educational communities for elementary and junior high schools to promote built environment education for children and youth.

Housing and architecture education in Japan underwent different developmental processes. It would be controversial for architecture education that recent experiences for architects in a mature society or a major disaster in Japan have been generating self-reflection on their occupational abilities. Therefore, architects have been facing a fundamental question: how can they shape their surroundings and human lifestyles beyond the eye of architects? This will create a new path to architecture education for children and youth. The following is a case study on architecture school for children in “Ito Juku”.

Architecture school for children in “Ito Juku”

ITO was established in 2011 to provide a new platform for architecture education by integrating “Ito Juku” in Tokyo with “Toyo Ito Museum of Architecture” (TIMA) in Imabari, Ehime (opening in summer of 2011). ITO offers 3 courses in “Ito Juku”: open lectures for the members, an exclusive course for young architects and an architecture school for children. In order to foster young and talented architects for the era and society to come, ITO considered a private school would meet its purpose apart from traditional architectural education systems. Then ITO also established an architecture school for children in that private school. Toyo Ito had been surprised and motivated by children full of ideas participating in his workshops in museums. So he desired to spend as much time as possible fostering children’s sensibility and creativity, which enabled children to create various images and ideas quickly, even in a short time.

Lecturers in the architecture school for children in “Ito Juku” are Toyo Ito, Hiroshi Ota (architect, lecturer of the Institute of Industrial Science at the University of Tokyo) and Shin Muramatsu (professor of the Institute of Industrial Science at the University of Tokyo, professor of Research Institute for Humanity and Nature). Teaching assistants (TAs; college students and architects as volunteers of the school) help children’s creations. The curriculum of the school is arranged every year and based on a semester system, which includes 20 days of activities per year such as lectures, workshops, town exploring, model making and presentations. “House” is a theme for the first semester and “Town” for the second. The following is about the activities held in 2013 (20 children aged 8-12).

“House” activities aim to foster children’s spontaneous ideas concerning architecture and environment; that is, activities for nurturing children’s sensibility to their inner pictures of architecture, human beings and nature. Through creating “a house LIKE <*no-you-na*, の様な> nature (flower / cloud / water / bird / forest)”, children project their images, feelings, and memories concerning nature onto the house. The curriculum includes lectures and workshops using the concepts of light, heat, wind, sound and scale, followed with model making and presentations.

“Town” activities aim to foster children’s social perspective and creativity concerning architecture and environment; that is, activities for developing children’s social and environmental literacy. Through creating “an architecture in a relationship WITH <*to-tomo-ni*, と共に> town (wood / hill / people / flora and fauna / water)”, children observe and understand various aspects of the town in Ebisu, Tokyo, envision the architecture with the hints in the town, and finally express their ideas. The curriculum includes town exploring, lectures and workshops using the concepts of landscape, history of the town, water and green environment, and coexistence and harmony with nature, followed with model making and the final presentation held in public in the end of the year.

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In the “House” activities, children’s sensibility to their inner world emerges in children’s expression beginning with “I” (about the self). Children try to dive into the space they have built (“a house LIKE nature”), describing their own feelings, such as a feeling like flying in the sky or a feeling of breaking the surface of the water. Children’s feelings appear more and more clearly through dialogue with TAs and lecturers, who have their own sensibility and literacy on architecture.

Children’s sensibility developed in the “House” activities is essential also in the “Town” activities, for it forms a foundation for children to observe, envision and express ideas in the real-world context. Followed with knowledge of the town and practical skills, children’s sensibility develops into social and environmental literacy. Such literacy emerges in children’s expression beginning with “we” or “they” (about the relationship). Children try to seek how to harmonize one’s feeling with the feelings of others in the town, finding, for example, a comfortable place to be shared by birds and people, and the music of trees and children’s voices to be heard. They also try to share the experience with others, who have their own sensibility and literacy on the town, by letting them dive into the space children have built (“an architecture in a relationship WITH town”).

All the activities aim to encourage children to listen to their heart and to be open to the outer world. Architecture works as a medium for children’s feelings, a tool for sharing ideas between children, TAs and lecturers, and moreover, family members, friends and the general public (e.g. the audiences of the final presentation). This would be an opportunity for children to find self-expression and to feel responsible for their surroundings and human lives, rather than to become architects in the future.

In Japan, ITO opened the door to a year-round architecture education for children through running a small private school. ITO hopes this will inspire young children to architecture and, through their family members and friends, will eventually lead to deeper understanding of architecture by broader public. Children’s works and presentations are to show their achievements.