

Discovering the “mysteries” lurking in the depths of regional policy and urban policy and approaching the true nature of problems from a social sciences viewpoint

How I switched my environmental design approach from urban engineering to social sciences

Up to now, the design of livable environments has been seen as mainly the role of urban engineering. People were convinced that from city planning to construction of buildings, they could count on experts in urban engineering to achieve a livable habitat. Personally, however, I felt a significant gap between the kind of “livability” envisioned by experts in urban engineering and the desires of the people living in the environment and using the facilities. Besides, the problem-solving method in urban engineering tends toward treating the symptoms, and I came to believe a different approach was needed to get at the true causes.

That’s why I decided to attempt a social sciences approach to issues of environmental design, becoming engaged in research aimed at acquiring insight that would lead to solutions. The main themes of these studies dealt with relations between local administrations and residents. Among the topics taken up were the protection of residential environments and resident self-organization, public facilities management and government-citizen relations, and non-profit organizations (incorporated NPOs, etc.) and community planning.

A while back, for example, I conducted a piece of research entitled “The role of conflict prevention by neighborhood associations in protecting residential environments: A case of its role as an intermediary between residents and builders in the Tamagawa area.” People living in a quiet residential area do not want the view spoiled, whereas builders want to leverage the brand value of popular areas by putting up large condominiums and commercial facilities. I looked into how a neighborhood association, acting as an intermediary between the two sides while coordinating also with government officials responsible for regulations and management, was able to introduce voluntary rules and to find points of compromise.

In another study, I took up the example of how playing football came to be allowed in one neighborhood municipal park in Nerima Ward in Tokyo, even though such activities were forbidden by a local ordinance. By looking into the relationship between the local administration, which had instituted an ordinance for the livable development of Nerima Ward, and local residents who volunteered to patrol, monitor, and manage the neighborhood, it was possible to see the points of compromise unique to the area.

These studies examined not only “hardware” aspects such as the living environment and parks, but also “software” policy aspects including initiatives by residents working in cooperation with each other. One issue is what

to do about empty storefronts in shopping districts. This is a difficult problem faced by shopping districts all over Japan. Up to now the hope was for these vacant storefronts to be replaced by shops that would generate revenue. In one shopping district, however, the spaces came to be used by an incorporated NPO engaged in creating child-care centers. Since the shopping district was in the middle of a residential area it was an ideal location for activities by the NPO, and the shopping district benefited in that mothers coming for the NPO services would also shop while they were there. This example shows that



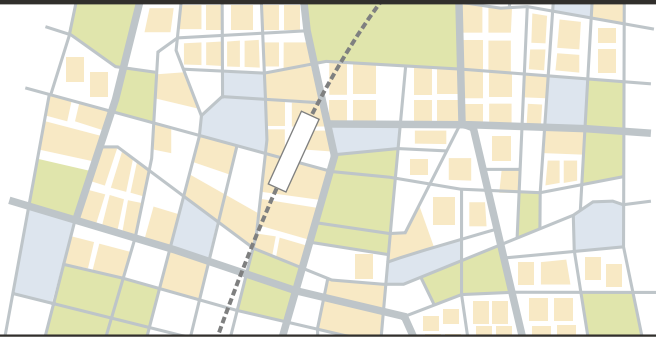
examining how cooperation is possible between a shopping district and an NPO is a vital part of community planning.

The importance of making steady efforts to learn about society as a whole, not deciding based on convenience and efficiency alone

Taking a social sciences approach to environmental design issues rather than an urban engineering approach is something I had started doing already in my student days.

In graduate school I majored in urban engineering. I was in a department that trains specialists in city planning, architecture, and administration. In seminars, individual students exchanged views on their virtually created cities and buildings. Hearing comments like “this city has a good design” or “this building is bad,” I started to feel a disconnect.

In urban engineering, the premise when creating structures on urban land emphasizes values such as convenience and efficiency. I began to have doubts, however, as to whether such a premise was appropriate for deciding



“good” and “bad.” Should we not rather be thinking from the viewpoint of the users and ordinary citizens, looking at such issues as who will use the structures and their effects on the surroundings? If so, “good” and “bad” cannot be decided based simply on convenience and efficiency. I came to the conclusion that while urban engineering is a highly important discipline, by itself it is not sufficient, and it is necessary to broadly learn the social sciences as a whole.

So while continuing to deepen my studies in my major, at the same time I broadened my studies to include sociology, psychology, economics and other social sciences. Thinking back, this was a period in which the concept of “interdisciplinary” studies was beginning to develop within me.

Today, I am fortunate to have a position in the Hitotsubashi University Graduate School of Social Sciences, working in an environment for which I feel really grateful. There are faculty members from many different disciplines in the Graduate School of Social Sciences, from whom I am able to obtain all kinds of wisdom as I investigate my own research themes. This is truly an “interdisciplinary” environment, full of moments where I find out things I surely would have missed if I had remained cloistered inside my own field.

The biggest influence on me from working in this environment is the way of approaching issues. It has been quite illuminating to see the way questions are posed in the social sciences (and especially in sociology) when getting at the real nature of the issues being faced. In urban engineering, questions focus on what can be done to create a good environment. In sociology, on the other hand, the question first of all is, “Why has a good environment been created?” By asking “Why?” we are able to focus on the causes of problems. The ideal approach is to continue steadily compiling case-study research and fieldwork, asking the question “Why?” I came to be convinced of this as I carried out my daily research work at Hitotsubashi University.

Taking advantage of the interdisciplinary environment to develop thoughtful generalists

All the more because of the interdisciplinary environment, I want students to adopt an attitude of pursuing the real nature of problems. And in order to get at the real nature, I tell them the first thing to do is search for “mysteries.” In our “mystery hunter” workshop I encourage this by walking around town with my seminar students, having them look for things they find to be “mysterious.” They learn to look at things from the viewpoint of “Why

did this happen?” and “How was it possible (or not possible) to accomplish this?” Back in class, they present their findings to each other and analyze them, after which they classify them into two kinds of mysteries. The first kind is “mysteries” that they were not aware of but which society has already solved. The second are “mysteries” in society that in fact others also see as such. Since the latter are “mysteries” that may go counter to conventional scholarly wisdom, the classification here is vital.

The students by themselves, however, no matter how much wisdom they bring to bear, may be unable in some cases to decide which kind of “mystery” it is. It is at just such times that we need to draw on the interdisciplinary environment. Rather than staying cooped up in the laboratory, it is a good idea to step out of the lab and toss questions at faculty members in every field. As in my own case, I believe students will surely gain a broad knowledge in that way.

Nor is this applicable only to the way students lead their academic lives. When Hitotsubashi students go out into the world, it is quite likely that they will find themselves in charge of a project. That project may involve specialists from various departments and industries. In that kind of situation, the presence of generalists—people who can draw out the best from the specialists and act as a bridge between them—is essential. Moreover, they have to be wise, thoughtful generalists, not limited to one-dimensional knowledge or thinking. I want Hitotsubashi graduates to serve capably in such positions, and to take advantage of the interdisciplinary environment while they are still students so as to become thoughtful generalists.

Takahiro Domen

Associate Professor, Graduate School of Social Sciences

Obtained his doctorate in engineering at the Tokyo Institute of Technology Graduate School. Graduated in 1997 from the Department of Environmental Design, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Hiroshima Institute of Technology. He obtained his master's degree in 1999 and doctoral degree in 2004 from the Tokyo Institute of Technology, studying in the Department of Social Engineering, Graduate School of Decision Science and Technology. After working as a research assistant and then as assistant instructor in the Tokyo Institute of Technology Graduate School of Decision Science and Technology, he became a full-time instructor in the Hitotsubashi University Graduate School of Social Sciences in 2008, and was appointed in 2011 to his current position as Associate Professor.

