

## Socio-Cultural Heritages of a Community Center: Traces of the modern local industry and citizen movements

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公民館建築における社会文化遺産

地域産業と市民運動の痕跡

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### Summary

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate an example of modern architecture in Shiogama Japan in terms of the effects of local industry and local community movements in relation to the transformation of Japanese society in the post-war period.

As the ultimate purpose of the modern movement in architecture is to benefit the common people, we decided to focus on the community centres that were built after Japan's defeat in the Second World War. At that time Japanese society changed rapidly from a military regime to a democratic regime. The community centre that is dealt with in this paper was built in the early 1950s, so we can expect to find some aspects of building a democratic society behind the actual building project. We are going to discuss the invisible value of this community centre in the period when the Japanese government promoted interior resources development projects.

Through this discussion, we are able to understand some hidden historical values of the community centre, which represents not only the social phenomenon of that period in the architectural expression and technical aspects of the building but also the local industrial heritage. We describe the importance of sustaining support for the local peoples' activities by conserving this community centre, and then explain how the municipality of Shiogama decided to renovate this historical piece of modern architecture. Now the former community centre has been re-born as a community centre and a museum of art for a local painter.

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of the hidden aspects behind modern architectural works since the Second World War. We decided to focus on an investigation of the social and industrial backgrounds which gave birth to a project, but which are not visible clerically today. In this paper we decided to focus on a community centre built in Shiogama in the 1950s, which was designed by the

municipality of Shiogama.

Throught the 1950s, the Japanese government promoted local industries for the sake of being economical independent. The 1950s was the reconstruction period of Japanese society after the Second World War, the same as other countries at that time. As the result of the government's economic development policy, Japanese society entered an era of high-speed economic development in the 1960s. We are able

to say that the decade of the 1950s is an important period when the foundations of current Japanese society were established.

We will discuss the backgrounds of architectural projects by using the community centre in order to find local industrial heritages being behind of the architectural work.

## 2. The Construction of the Community Centre

The community centre, which we will use in this paper as an example of modern architecture, is in Shiogama city, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. It was constructed at the request of the Ministry of Education, which issued a notice asking each municipality to build a community centre for the purpose of developing cultural activities among the citizens. These community centres were intended to function as libraries, exhibition halls, social meeting places, vocational training centres, and so on, with the aim of building a democratic society from the local communities. The government recommended local municipalities to establish, maintain, and use these community centres according to the needs and will of the local people using the budget of each municipality, because the community centre projects presented an opportunity to fulfil the democratic process in each local community<sup>1)</sup>. We understand that each community centre was a symbol of the democratic movement enforced by the government after the war.

Accordingly, in line with the government's policy, the municipality of Shiogama set up a building committee for the community centre consisting of sixty citizens selected by the mayor, and this committee established an initial community centre in a Christian church in the city. This was the starting point of the current community centre. The building committee officially requested the mayor to build a

community centre, and then the municipality decided to prepare a budget for its construction in April 1950. Construction started in July 1950 and the new community centre was completed in January 1951<sup>2)</sup>. From this historical data we are able to affirm that this public project was carried out in the spirit of initiating the new building regulations, for the benefit of society.

Therefore this building represents the social welfare policy of the Japanese government. Actually Miyagi Prefecture and the Japanese Government presented awards to this community centre in 1952 and 1954, because of the high standards under which it was being operated. So many people participated in numerous activities that the local people soon needed to build an extension. The people of the city donated the money and the extension project was completed in July 1957<sup>3)</sup>. According to an interview with a representative of the municipality, the extension building started to be used after 1958. The total number of users for the year 1954 was 165,000<sup>4)</sup>. This number is around four times as big as the population of the city, as the total population of Shiogama in the 1950s was around 45,000<sup>5)</sup>. From this we can recognize how popular the community centre was with the local people.

## 3. Composition of the Community Centre

The community centre consists of two parts. One part, which is the main building, houses the administration office, a kitchen, a reading room, meeting rooms and so on. The other part has a community hall, which was extended in 1957<sup>6)</sup>. There was a public library in the main building. The public hall was used for a variety of purposes such as a dance hall, a theatre, a cinema and so on. The hall also provided a venue for public elections<sup>7)</sup>.

The building surrounds a courtyard, and there is a terrace between the inner corridor



Fig.1 The Court Yard of the Community Centre

and the courtyard. The main building is “L” shaped, and the extension of the public hall created the courtyard (Fig.1).

#### 4. Timber Structure of the Public Hall

One of the most important features of this building is seen in the main structure of the public hall. The elevation of the public hall is in the shape of a catenary curve, which shows us the modernity of the building. The height of the building to top of the catenary structure is 9.7 m. This catenary shape was formed by laminated wood (Fig.2). This structure was called the “Mokotuamiita-Kozo [木骨編板構造]”, denoting the weaved-wood laminar structure (a patent in Japan<sup>8</sup>). This vertical section is practical for many purposes.

In the Japanese architectural history of the catenary structure; [懸垂構造], we can find the example of Yoyogi Stadium, Tokyo, 1964, by Kenzoo Tange. Compared to this excellent work,



Fig.2 The Plywood Structure for the Public Hall

this public hall is an earlier example of a catenary structure in modern architecture. This structure gave a lofty vertical space to the interior of the public hall, which we presume represented the church building which was adopted as the initial community centre.

The main industries of the city were shipbuilding and woodworking, so we can say that the architects of the community centre intended to use local technology for the community's central architectural features. Here we would like to explain wooden shipbuilding methods in mid-20th century in Japan. After the Second World War, the General Headquarters, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers ruled Japan. During the occupied period (1945-1951), it was impossible for the Japanese fishermen to catch any fish in the oceans. They just fished near the seacoast. After recovering independence, this restriction was released, and the fishermen were able to fish in the ocean, so they needed bigger fishing boats, which were made of iron. So the shipbuilding method was changed from wood to iron. Until the mid 20th century, Japanese shipbuilders used traditional Japanese shipbuilding methods. In particular, the shipbuilding technicians and carpenters used a traditional technique called the ‘steam bending method’ in order to build wooden boats (Fig.3)<sup>9</sup>.



Fig.3 An Example of Wood Fishing Boat built in the 1940s (preserved in Tokyo)

The city of Shiogama was an important fishery port in the north part of the Japanese main island, so there were shipyards and timber factories in which fishing boats were built and repaired. Thus, the architects of this community centre applied this shipbuilding method for the main structure of the central hall, and then the laminated timber structure appeared as an advanced building method. This structure was used for a gymnasium in the city in the same period. Thus we are able to confirm that the municipality/architects intended to sustain the local wooden shipbuilding industry by incorporating it into the local building industry, because shipbuilding methods and materials had changed during the 1950s.

## 5. Stone for the Building Surfaces

The second feature of this building is seen in the material covering the walls of the building. The architect used Shiogama-ishi stone for cladding the walls of the main building and on the pillars of the public hall. Shiogama was famous for this stone. Shiogama-ishi stone is a kind of pumice tuff which is easy to shape, and several companies were running mining businesses in the city. This stone was very useful for agricultural warehouses, and development projects in the northern part of Japan needed this stone for their building projects. The idea of employing Shiogama Stone for the community centre was suggested by the Mayor, Mr. Sakurai<sup>10)</sup>.

There used to be several quarries sites in the city<sup>11)</sup> (Fig. 4). A stone industry company was operating until 2006. It stopped mining Shiogama-ishi Stone, but we can still see several traces of these stone quarries in the city. The stone industry was most active before 1950s. The stone was used for the main structure of buildings, but after the new building regulations were introduced, the use of stone for the

structure of a building became a difficult issue from a technical point of view.

Therefore the city's stone industry decided to change its business style. Many stone companies started construction businesses for civil engineering<sup>12)</sup>. We suppose that one reason why the mayor requested the architects to use Shiogama-ishi stone was to find a new way for the building industry to make use this local material, while conforming to the new building regulations.

Therefore, the architects decided to use this material for the surface of the building (Fig. 5). We can say that cladding the building with Shiogama-ishi stone was intended as a way to support and activate the local stone industry. This is yet another reason for evaluating this community centre as an example of locally orientated modern architecture. The community centre could have been a technical innovation project for the local industries.



Fig.4 The remains of a quarry in Shiogama



Fig.5 A Photo of the Shiogama-ishi Stone

## 6. The Plywood Industry in Japan

According to the research<sup>13)</sup> by Dr. Yotsu, the plywood industry in Japan started from the 1930s in Akita Prefecture, and formed a certain production system in the 1960s in local areas. In 1958 there was an experimental building project using plywood in Noshiro (Akita Prefecture), but this project was not completed<sup>14)</sup>.

The oldest example of plywood-structured architecture was a forestry memorial building in Tokyo (1951). This building employed plywood for the main structure, but its plywood structure was not exposed to the user. The body of the building was box shaped and capped by a pitched roof. However, the architect's use of plywood as the formal feature of the structure was not apparent in the completed design. This plywood structure was used instead of the usual wooden beam of typical wooden architecture<sup>15,16)</sup>. A structural member of this building has been preserved by the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute (FFPRI)<sup>17)</sup>. Other examples of plywood-structured buildings in the 1950s were warehouses and gymnasiums, but these examples did not reveal this structural feature as an architectural expression<sup>18)</sup>. Comparing these examples with the community centre with its uniquely shaped plywood beams, we are able to say that the structural design of the public hall was an advanced technology in Japan in the 1950s.

Actually, from a technological development point of view, the plywood industry was in its early stages in the 1950s, and actually matured in the 1960s, so we can understand that the technical development employed by the architects of the community centre makes it quite an advanced development project. From this we can also say that the structure of the public hall in the community centre was an early example of plywood structure in Japan, using what was advanced technology, aiming for the

activation of the local industry of Shiogama.

On the other hand, we recognize that the wood industry was a very important politically in Shiogama city around 1950, because many of the members of the municipal assembly got their votes from the people of the wood industry<sup>19)</sup>. Considering the relation of the wood industry in Shiogama to the local economy, building up the industry was a high priority for the municipality. From this point we are able to understand that the architect invented a new structural system for the community centre, in order to activate the city's timber industry.

Seeing the plywood structural members of the community centre, we are able to affirm that this project is a kind of neo-realism architecture, using local materials and advanced plywood technology, which were related to the main local industries of the city in the 1950s.

## 7. Local Community Movement

In the reconstruction period of Japan after the Second World War, the city of Shiogama underwent very rapid urbanization, because people who were suffering from a shortage of food, came to live in the city just because of its thriving fishing industry. In terms of food supply, this city was very attractive to the common people, and so many new inhabitants immigrated to the city from neighbouring prefectures<sup>20)</sup>.

An important feature of the city is its early and swift urbanization even before the rapid economic development period had begun. After the Second World War an important political aspect of the city can be seen. The mayor who started the community centre was the first mayor to be elected by a direct vote by the citizens of the city. This was the first example of a mayoral election among the Japanese municipalities. Before the Public Office Election Law was passed (1950), the mayor of the municipalities was appointed by the Home Office

of the Japanese Imperial Government (The Japanese Government abolished the Home Office in 1947). In 1946 the Home Office, requested the city council to recommend a candidate for the mayor of the city to the Home Office using the old governmental system and then the city council decided to carry out a public election in order to recommend the mayor to the Home Office.

This experience was the first example in Japan of a vote by the citizens for a mayor (At that time, the movement for democracy appeared, and the city council realized that it would be difficult if not impossible to recommend the mayor by using the old ruling system). Before a law defining the direct election of the mayor was formally instituted, this election method was used by neighbouring municipalities, and spread throughout the municipalities in Japan. As the result of the first civil election in the city of Shiogama, Mr. Sakurai was selected as the mayor<sup>21)</sup>. The advanced democratic and political aspects of the city in Japanese society are seen behind the building of the community centre. When these invisible facts are revealed, we are able to understand the Shiogama people's high consciousness of political and social matters. Behind the community centre building project, we are able to understand the democratic activities and the orientation of the citizens and the municipality.

On the other hand the financial condition of the municipality was not healthy. The budget of the municipality had almost run out, just like other municipalities in Japan. This financial collapse took place in 1952 and the community centre project was carried out under these tight financial circumstances. In order to make money for the community centre project, the municipality sold reclaimed land that had been reserved for future industrial projects<sup>22)</sup>. Thus we can understand that the community centre

was designed with consideration for a limited and minimal budget. The background to this process demonstrates to us that the will of the mayor, representing the voice of the citizens and expectations of the general public for the community centre, was very strong.

According to the record of the utilization of this community centre, the public used this building for classes, debates, exhibitions, exercise activities, elections, social meetings and so on. Performing groups, a folk dance club, an English club, a wind orchestra, a chorus group and a reading-circle used this community centre daily<sup>23)</sup>. Not only these citizens' groups, but also chorus groups from universities and traditional music groups from other areas performed there. A traditional folk song program was carried out by the staff of the municipality of the city. The audiences came not only from the city, but also from the neighbouring municipalities. The citizens' painting group has been working for the annual painting exhibition since the 1950s<sup>24)</sup>. These kinds of cultural or social activities were promoted in the radio broadcasts of the municipality of Shiogama by NHK, the national broadcasting company of Japan (Nihon Hoso Kyokai). The municipality distributed a community journal on the activities of the community centre twice a month. The total number of copies of the journal printed in the 1950s was 11,500<sup>25)</sup>. At that time the number of families living in the city was 12,134<sup>26)</sup>, so we can see from this that the municipality was running the community centre by keeping in close touch with the general public.

## 8. Renovation Project of the Community Centre

Around 2012, the municipality of Shiogama was looking for a chance to renovate the community centre. The author conducted a research project in order to evaluate this work

in September 2012. He wrote a report on the building and submitted this report to the municipality at the end of January 2013. As soon as the report was accepted by the municipality, the city council of Shiogama discussed the renovation project and decided to make a budget for the renovation project.

In May 2013, the guideline of the renovation project was opened to the public and open competition to win the contract for the renovation work started. In June 2013, Tohoku Institute of Technology conducted research and in October 2013 this community centre was designated as a historical monument of the city. The renovation work was started in November 2013, and completed in November 2014. In this renovation project, a new art museum was planned together with the community centre. The building part, which was constructed in 1952 was transformed into the Shiogama Sugimura Jun Museum of Art, and the central hall, built in 1957, was renovated as the general purpose space it used to be (see fig.11). The guideline of the renovation project indicated that the important point was to preserve the atmosphere of the original space.

After the renovation work was completed, the complex of the community centre and art museum accepted a new private organizer, who was willing to do something for the memories of

the local people, because this community center still has a role in the daily lives of the local people. Today this complex is used not only by the elder people but also by young people for the sake of maintaining and creating common memories of the local area (Fig.6)<sup>27)</sup>.

## 9. Concluding Remarks

As we have discussed only the invisible aspects of an example of modern architecture in the 1950s in Japan, which is still used frequently by the local people, we are still not in a position to recognize monumental or spectacular aspects of the architecture, but through the stories behind the planning, construction and running phase, we are able to see the authentic purpose of this piece of modern architecture. In other words, this can be described as architecture not only for the people, by the people, but also for the local society and its industries. This example illustrates for us the historical formation of a democratic and industrial Japanese society in a local city in the twentieth century.

It is necessary to investigate the invisible “facts” in order to understand this kind of community architecture, which is a unique type of building in the history of architecture, demanded by the ordinary people, supported by the innovation of the local technology, and showing the needs of 20th century society.

Actually, this kind of building project teaches us the importance of investigating the background to the original project, which is closer to the invisible “facts”, and farther from the visible “truth” as we experience it today, because the local people, some of whom are still alive, have left documents or spoken about this modern project from their actual memories. So from their contribution, we intend to extract what the local people have left behind or still remember. Particularly by using this example, we are able to understand, from a technical



Fig.6 The Public Hall, after the renovation project  
(Photo by the Author, 2017)

point of view, the significance of modern architecture, which can be found both in social studies and architectural studies. Thus, we are able to understand that this heritage shows us socio-cultural aspects, which include industrial heritage and social movements of the local.

## Note

- 1) The Basic Documents on the Community Centre (July 1946, No. 122, Vice Minister of Education) [公民館に関する基礎資料], National Institute for Educational Policy Research of Japan, 2006, p. 43
- 2) The Community Centre of Shiogama, 'The Handbook of the Community Centre of Shiogama', The Community Centre of Shiogama [塩釜市公民館要覧], 1958, p. 10
- 3) *ibid.* p. 11
- 4) *id.*, p. 9
- 5) The Compilation Committee of Shiogama's History, 'The History of Shiogama City II [塩釜市史 II 本編 II]', 1986, p. 736
- 6) The Community Centre of Shiogama, *op. cit.*, p. 8
- 7) The Municipality of Shiogama, 'An Architectural Feature of the Shiogama Community Centre [塩釜市公民館本町分館の建築の特徴について]'
- 8) The Community Magazine of Shiogama, 'Fureaiesupu Shiogama\_Kominkandayori [ふれあいエスプ塩竈\_公民館だより]', No. 160, 2012
- 9) Regarding Japanese wooden boatbuilding in the mid-20th century, there is a wooden fishing boat, built in 1946, in a museum in Tokyo. The name of the boat is "Daigo Fukuryu Maru [第五福龍丸]" (see fig.6).
- 10) The Community Centre of Shiogama, *op. cit.*, p. 10
- 11) The Board of Education of Municipality of Shiogama, 'Handbook of the Education Centre of Shiogama [平成24年度塩釜市生涯学習センター要覧], 2012, pp. 44-45
- 12) This information was given by Mr. Seiichiro Watanabe, who was the director of the Community Centre
- 13) Department of Port; the Municipality of Shiogama, 'News of the Venice Project of Shiogama [塩竈ヴェネツィア計画 ニュース]', No. 3, 2003
- 14) The Union of Plywood Industry of Japan, 'The Report of Durability on the Plywood Building [集成材建築物の耐久性調査報告書]', 2008, pp. 86-87
- 15) The Union of Plywood Industry of Japan, 'The Handbook of the Plywood Architecture [集成材建築物設計の手引き]', Taisei-Syuttpansha, 2012
- 16) Yotse, Ryuich, 'A research on the locations of Plywood Mills in Japan [本邦の集成材工業分布に関する検討]', The Science Journal of the Tohoku Gakuin University, No. 7, 1976
- 17) The Union of Plywood Industry of Japan, 'The History of Important Plywood Buildings [貴重な歴史的集成材建築物] (Panflet)
- 18) The Union of Plywood Industry of Japan, 'The Report of Durability on the Plywood Building [集成材建築物の耐久性調査報告書]', 2008, pp. 10-12
- 19) The compilation Committee of Shiogama's History, *op cit.*, p. 638
- 20) This information was given by Mr. Seiichiro Watanabe.
- 21) The compilation Committee of Shiogama's History, *op cit.*, pp. 680-683
- 22) This information was given by Mr. Seiichiro Watanabe.
- 23) The Community Centre of Shiogama, *op. Cit.*, pp. 9-12
- 24) This information was given by Mr. Seiichiro Watanabe.
- 25) The Community Centre of Shiogama, *op. Cit.*, p. 9-12
- 26) The Board of Education of Municipality of Shiogama, 'The History of Shiogama [塩竈の歴史]', 1975, p. 57
- 27) The author conducted the research project on the community centre in Shiogama in November 2012 and October 2017.

## 本論の概要 (Summary in Japanese)

本論の目的は、戦後の日本の社会に関する地場産業と地域コミュニティに関して、塩竈市の近代公共建築を事例に検討することにある。近代の究極の目的は社会福祉であると考えられていることを考慮して、社会福祉の増進が明確に憲法に示され、目指された第二次世界大戦後の日本社会で建設された公民館に関して議論を展開してゆく。

本論で検討する公民館は1950年代に建設されたので、民主主義による社会構築に関する建築的側面を発見する事が期待できると考えた。加えて、当時の日本政府は国内資源の開発を積極的に目指していたことから、1950年台の公民館の背景に存

在する地場産業の側面を検討してゆく。

本論を通して、公民館の隠れた歴史的価値を理解した。特に建築表現における技術的な側面と地域産業の痕跡に加えて、地域の社会現象も公民館建築に反映されていることが把握できた。

その上で、公民館の保存が、地域社会のコミュニティの支援として役割を担っているように、建築の維持や保存が重要であることを示した。公民館は、地域の画家の美術館として活用されている

ことを通じて、改修事業についても触れている。

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