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What is a Happy Workplace?

A Conversation Between
Architect Tetsuo Kobori
and
Obayashi's Architectural & Engineering Division
Tatsuji Kimura / Chiharu Miki / Takuya Asanuma
moderator: Makiko Umeno



How do we want to work? What kind of workplaces should designers create? To find clues, we planned a series of discussions between Mr. Tetsuo Kobori, an architect, and members of Obayashi's Architectural & Engineering Division in charge of workplace reform. The first meeting took place in January 2020 and then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. With a rapid shift to online conferencing/telecommuting, what do designers need to think about? We explored this 'new normal' that will give rise to new ideal workplaces through opinions exchanged remotely in June 2020 and face-to-face in October 2020.

Tetsuo Kobori

Tetsuo Kobori was born in 1971 in Gifu, Japan. After earning a master's degree in 1997 from Hosei University Graduate School of Engineering and Design (Jinnai Lab), he took a position with Kume Sekkei Co., Ltd. In 2008 he established Tetsuo Kobori Architects. Since then he has won numerous awards, including the Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ) Award and The Japan Institute of Architects (JIA) Grand Prix for ROKI Global Innovation Center (2017), the JIA Grand Prix for NICCA Innovation Center (2018), the ABB LEAF Awards 2018 Shortlist BCS Award, and the AACA Award. Notable projects include Showa Gakuen High School, The Learning Station CROSSLIGHT at Baiko Gakuin University, and Minamisoma Fire Department Disaster Control Center.



COVID-19 Timeline



A Work Style Designed for a General Contractor

Tatsuji Kimura: We have retained a very old-fashioned layout at Tokyo Head Office for a very long time. It didn't feel right for doing creative work like that of the Architectural & Engineering Division. So we made it into a space where everyone proactively collects and shares information. Two "zip" corridors run horizontally, with the work spaces and open spaces that people can use freely on either side. Hubs are placed along the atrium at the center, like a review corner, where people easily gather. We think of the corridors as zippers that open to expose what's going on in the open spaces and hubs, and closes to bring it all together.

Takuya Asanuma: The Tohoku Branch's Architectural & Engineering Division has approx. 30 employees. We first held a workshop to boost everyone's awareness. We chose materials based on the biophilic design concept, which incorporates natural elements. This

allowed us to create a rich feel, even within the confined space. **Tetsuo Kobori:** Speaking of biophilic design, when decorating an office with plants, if you display the name of the employee who cares for it, the plant will serve as a barometer of the person's energy level. It's because plants are better cared for when people are doing well (laughs).

T. Asanuma: here is more that needs to be designed other than the space in order to change work styles, don't you think?

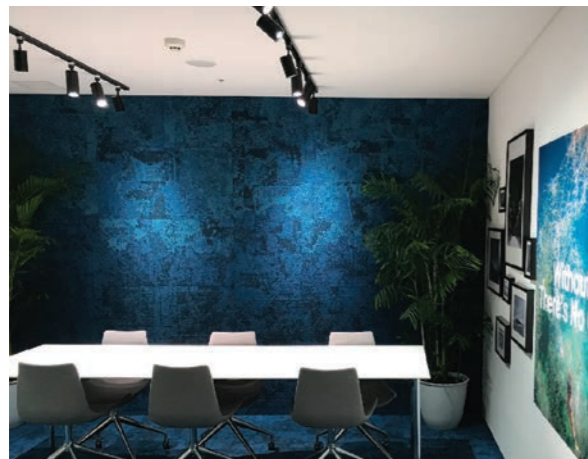
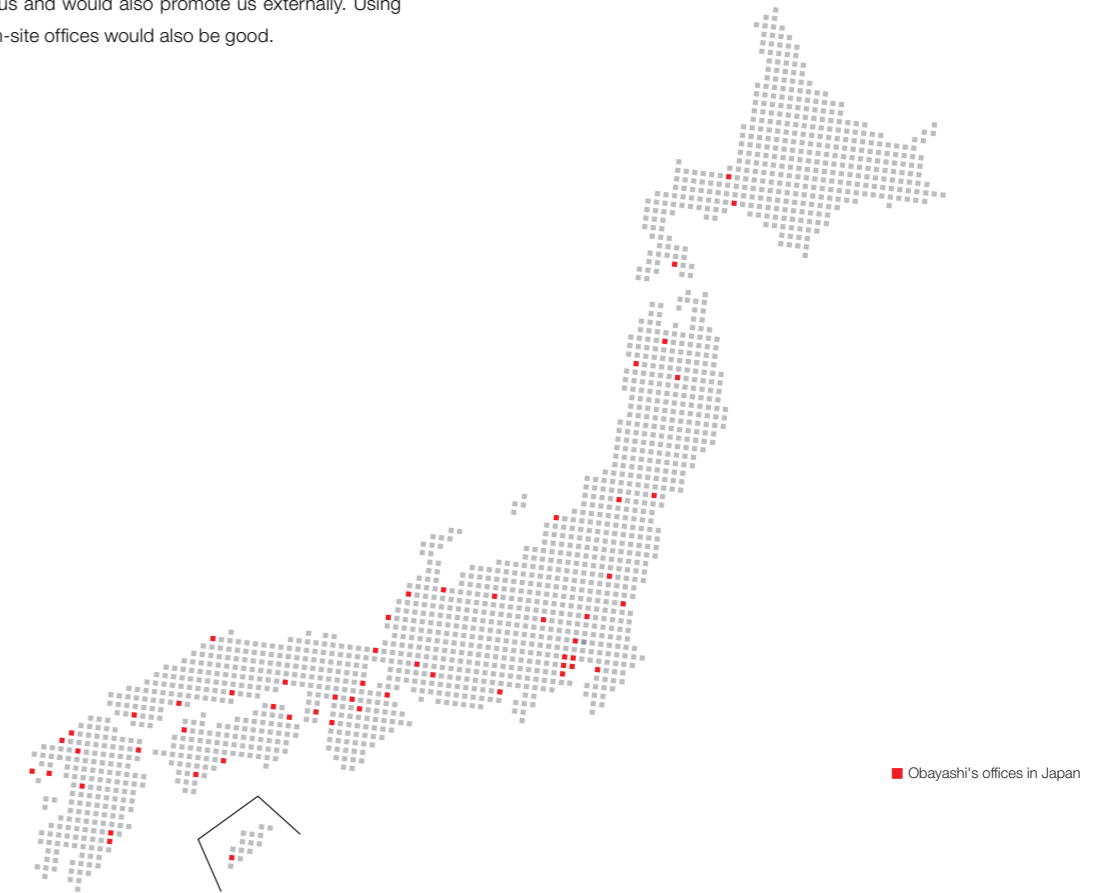
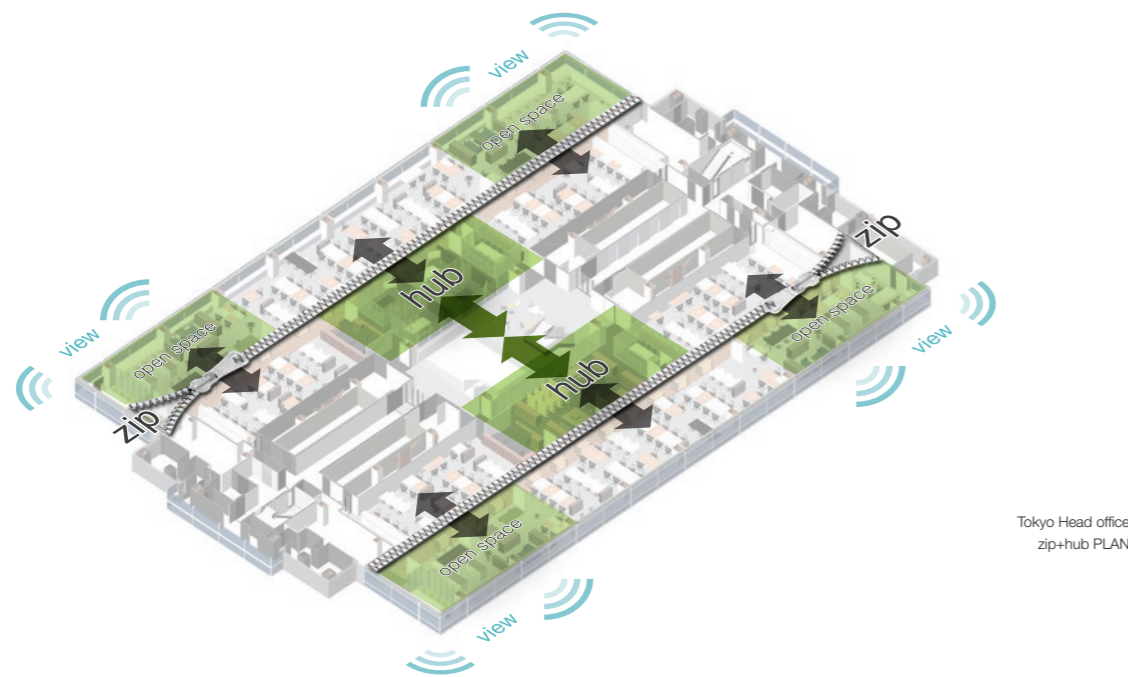
T. Kobori: At our office, the staff have breakfast together to make it easier for them to communicate with each other. This is a type of design using "breakfast" as a tool.

Chiharu Miki: At the Osaka Main Office's Architectural & Engineering Division, we asked our colleagues in their late 30s how they wanted to be working in 10 years' time. We got a lot of opinions such as the need to change the mindset of the company and that it should start with bosses. So we first adopted hot desking for managers' to

replace their fixed desks. They were very flexible and said putting everything away at the end of the day cleared their head, and that boosted communication. It proved very popular.

This renovation was only for the Architectural & Engineering Division, but when it comes to the entire company, more diverse work styles are possible. As a general contractor, we have many on-site offices and sales offices in Japan. It would be interesting to use them as satellite offices or to diversify the use of bases would be interesting.

T. Kobori: I always think it would be interesting to open on-site offices up to communities. Opening them up to society would be a source of pride for us and would also promote us externally. Using empty houses as on-site offices would also be good.



Tohoku Branch (located in Sendai), Biophilic Design



Tokyo Head Office, "zip" corridor



Osaka Main Office, Trial

Towards the Age of “Design by People”

Makiko Umeno: Your recent architectural works in office design are gathering much attention, Mr. Kobori. Can you tell us any interesting learning experiences from these recent projects?

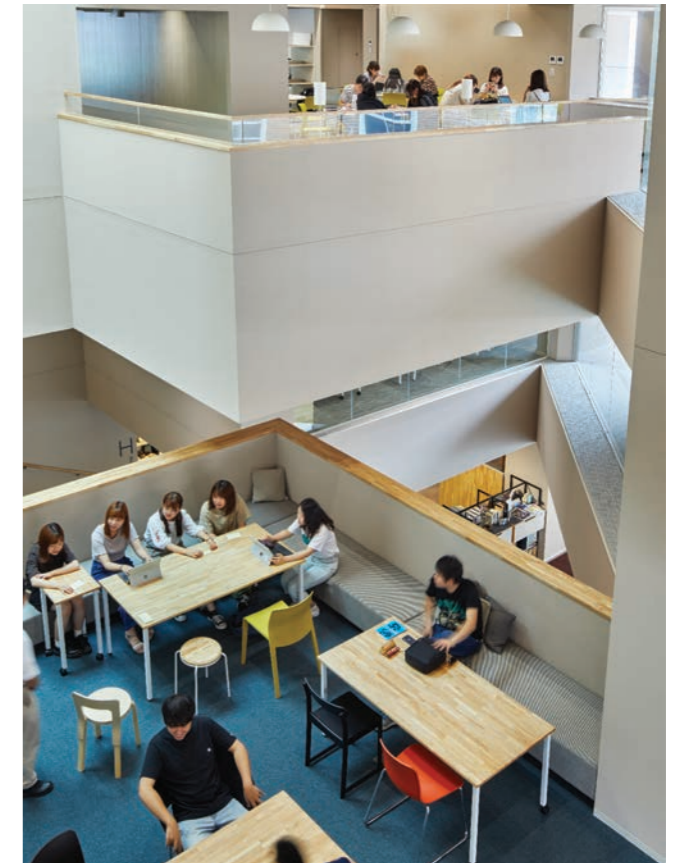
T. Kobori: In the case of the “NICCA INNOVATION CENTER” newly built in 2017, employees had no particular complaints for NICCA Chemical’s existing office. To break through their conservative mindset, I started by having the client think about what they wanted. I invited Prof. Emeritus Nobuyuki Ueda of Doshisha Women’s College of Liberal Arts, who advocates “playful thinking,” and held a workshop using the “KDKH model,” which incorporates concepts of space, tools, activities, and humans. It convinced me that preparing the space wasn’t enough for the project to succeed—the tools, people’s behavior, and the people themselves had to change. Liz Sanders believes there will be an evolution of design: from “Design with people” (2014) to “Design by people” (2044). Perhaps it’s time to nurture a sense of design by the users themselves.

C. Miki: You placed yourself within the client and started by changing their awareness, and ultimately completed an attractive space. I was surprised by your vitality.

T. Kobori: It requires a lot of energy (laughs). The thing is, I want to create designs that bring joy. It’s not easy, but I want to provide an exciting space. There is much to learn with each project, and the aim changes every time. In the design for Baiko Gakuin University’s “The Learning Station CROSSLIGHT” (2019), I thought about communication at the university at a time when all students have PCs, and so, I built a lot of walls.



NICCA INNOVATION CENTER



BAIKO GAKUIN UNIVERSITY “The Learning Station CROSSLIGHT”



January 2020, at Tetsuo Kobori Architects (from left) Mr. Tetsuo Kobori / Makiko Umeno / Tatsuji Kimura / Chiharu Miki / Takuya Asanuma

Can We Make a Radius of 3.6 m Happy?

T. Kobori: Inspired by Edward T. Hall’s *The Hidden Dimension*, I think the key to making people happy in a “social space,” which is categorized as an interpersonal distance, is to design within a radius of 3.6 m from an individual. By shifting small work places slightly, away from the typical arrangement, I created extra spaces for people to intersect. There are no private labs there, and the professor’s books are openly placed so students can borrow them freely.

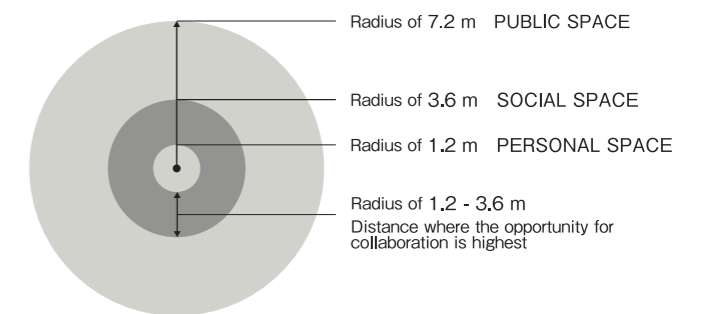
T. Asanuma: The scale of 3.6 m looks likely to become one index when thinking of how to design for communication. Having many walls, I thought, was very suitable for setting up bookshelves and monitors. Even with them, it does not feel closed. You can see many things.

C. Miki: Making it possible for anyone to listen to a university lecture is revolutionary. You really do have a lot of vitality (laughs). How did you arrive at this method?

T. Kobori: It was triggered by an experience that I had. A client was very happy when I communicated closely with them when designing. If you make architectural models with a client, they will be very happy. It’s about giving them a taste of the process of creating an architectural work. I felt that doing this resulted in making an

even better piece.

M. Umeno: It seems we’d get closer to an age of “Design by people” if the joy of creating architectural works could be shared by clients and the community.



Modified from Edward T. Hall. *The Hidden Dimension*

遊ぶ = 自由と創造
の文字



「人が旗を掲げて外の世界へ行く」
= 神のみ

Shizuka Shirakawa, The origin of the word "play"

A Sense of "Playing" Instead of "Working"

M. Umeno: After our first meeting in January, we have finally gotten together again online five months later. COVID-19 has greatly changed our work styles. There was talk of workplace reform even before the pandemic but how do you think things will change now?

T. Kimura: Things will probably differ depending on whether highest priority is given to preventing infection or to promoting face-to-face interaction again with minimal infection control.

T. Kobori: What's gradually becoming apparent is nonessential, nonurgent matters are being dealt with online, while urgent matters are still being handled in person. However, in our personal lives, nonessential, nonurgent matters such as going on a trip is still very important to us.

T. Kimura: There's a similar trend in communication. I'm comfortable at home, so I prefer to work remotely. At the office, people come by and ask me to do troublesome jobs. But that can often make things go more smoothly, so I tend to go in for that reason, even if it's stressful.

T. Kobori: Shizuka Shirakawa, a scholar of kanji (Chinese character), wrote in his essay, *Yuji-ron*, that the kanji for "play" represents a world of absolute freedom and rich creativity. The character depicts a Mongolian pioneer waving a flag as he moves forward. We designers should be like that, pioneering new ways to think about design and involving as many people as possible. I believe that engaging in work with a playful spirit will become important moving forward.

Designing Connections

T. Kimura: Up to now, there have been design efforts like activity-based working (ABW) in which diverse places to work were set up within one facility that users could choose from. I'm wondering if it's going to be about increasing that selection within a single facility, or about increasing the selection of diverse places in general.

C. Miki: I also feel possibilities in going outside of the facility itself. In other words, you could work at so-called third-places, such as a co-working space, or even at a cafe.

T. Kobori: I call workspaces like that, outside of the office, "field-type" spaces. I think it's going to become a very important area going forward.

I've also come to think of the digital space as a newly acquired distance outside of personal, social, and public spaces, illustrated in *The Hidden Dimension* that I mentioned in January. The concept of ABW was about selecting various places to work based on a sense of physical distance. From now, I think it's going to be hybrid ABW in which you can select your own distance, including digital space.

T. Asanuma: I can really identify with that. You can now remotely participate in meetings from a bullet train. Digital communication has become ubiquitous.

C. Miki: Over the past two months, I've felt a huge difference between interpersonal relationships at online meetings and at in-person meetings. The hierarchical relationship in Japanese companies may have become flatter in the digital world.

T. Kobori: More proactive use of this new sense of distance can now be made. While telecommuting is a rather passive use of

digital methods, I'm more interested in its active use. I know general contractors are also working on various things, like site walks in VR.

C. Miki: Hearing "active" reminds me of the "play" that you were speaking of earlier, Mr. Kobori. It's not about being ordered by someone to go somewhere to work but choosing your own place to work, whether it's digital or physical.

T. Asanuma: You can't become active in that sense unless you have a clear idea of how you want to work. It's also linked to the "Design by people" mentioned earlier.

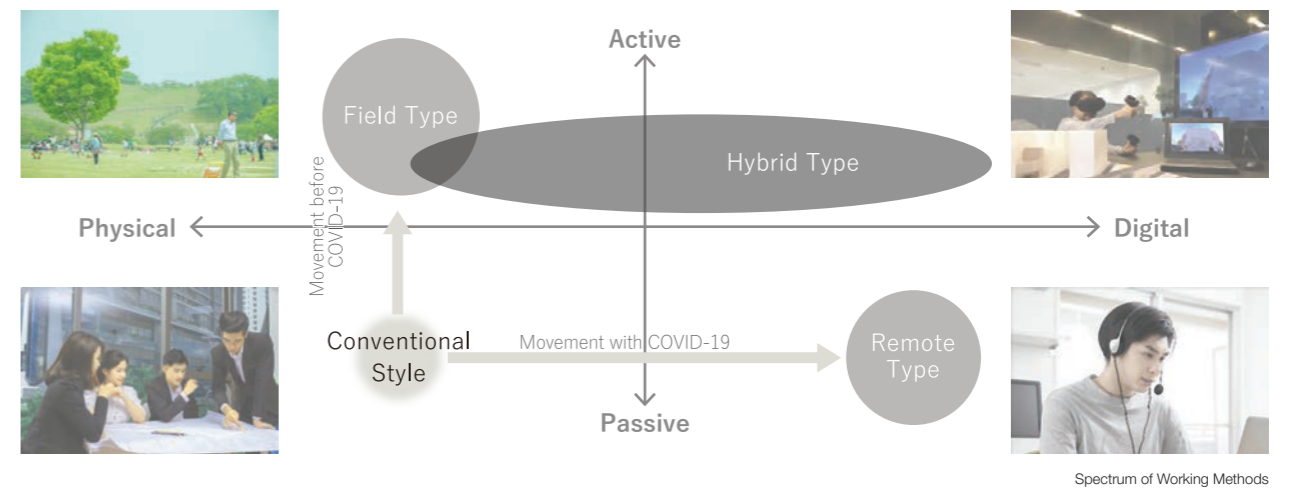
T. Kobori: That's why I came to believe in the importance of connecting active people and places that have become disconnected due to a new sense of distance. Rather than the idea of "how to gather = coworking", it's becoming "how to connect = connected working."

T. Kimura: I had thought that expanding the digital realm was

dependent on the design of digital tools, not architectural design. I think there are clues for designers like us in how we link the places for connected working. Physical connections are important, too, for our intuition. We still have to depend on the physicality.

T. Asanuma: Maintaining the balance between digital and physical is about choosing the right distance in deciding where to work. So, diverse places are still needed.

M. Umeno: The environment we want for our workplaces is becoming clearer after today's online meeting. Our next meeting is planned for a "physical" place, so we can expect our discussion to be different.



Spectrum of Working Methods



June 2020, online meeting (from top left) Tatsuji Kimura / Mr. Tetsuo Kobori (from bottom left) Chiharu Miki / Takuya Asanuma



The four types of play, from *Man, Play and Games* by Roger Caillois

The Beauty of Preserving Diversity

M. Umeno: Following the opinion exchanges in January and June, it is now October. This time, we are meeting at the Cambridge Innovation Center (CIC) Tokyo, which is located on the 15th and 16th floors of Toranomon Hills Business Tower. CIC and Mr. Kobori jointly handled the office planning.

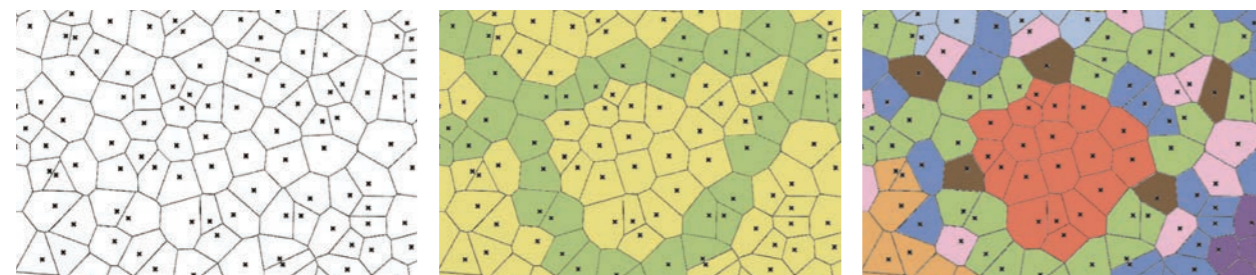
T. Kobori: Founded near Boston, CIC is now in 9 cities. CIC Tokyo is the first in Asia. The theme I was given was "a place that remains diverse and is not uniform." We discussed how to make something that is not homogeneous and asked ourselves, "What remains diverse and is beautiful?" We decided to create a place that was like a living organism made of interconnected cells.

C. Miki: I walked through it today for the first time. The atmosphere

differs for each room and corridor, and if you walk deep inside, you even lose your sense of direction. At the same time, it left me with a sense of calmness. It was a very intriguing feeling.

T. Kobori: The rooms on the 15th floor follow a Voronoi grid, and the corridors are like back alleys. The 16th floor is reminiscent of an urban space. It's like Paris with a central avenue. Finding a comfortable spot to "nest" and work is important so it's public outside the room, but you're free to do as you like inside. It's a collection of that. The people at CIC are playful but serious. They liked my "living organism" concept and agreed to try it. Workspaces also need games, they said. It taught me that we should work with that kind of sensibility.

T. Asanuma: So, it's about creating a feeling of trust through play.



Voronoi grid that creates a place resembling the cells of a living organism

Playing Hide-and-Seek to Get to Know the Space

T. Kobori: I was surprised by so many things about the people at CIC, but can you imagine what they did as soon as CIC Tokyo was completed?

C. Miki: Did they play tag?

Mr. Kobori: Close! They played hide-and-seek. Instead of using drawings to check the layout and function of the rooms, they decided that they could get to know the space inside-out if they played hide and seek there, which they did for around three days. They literally made learning the characteristics of the space into a game. I think that learning things while creating a playful environment is a clever way to do things.

T. Kimura: It's really wonderful that they can change their attitudes and thinking like that.

T. Kobori: Engaging passively in work can make one negative. I think efficiency would be greatly improved if you positively incorporate elements of play into work. They're professionals at connecting people, and a diverse group from many countries. They speak three languages on average. This group of diverse people has the power to connect other diverse people. Going forward, creating a new culture by connecting people will become more important.

T. Asanuma: It would be great if that kind of sensibility spreads.

A Physical Space that Brings About Chance and Vertigo

T. Kimura: In Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1958), "play" is divided into four types. Competition and Mimicry involve volition. Chance and Vertigo are non-volitional. Online meetings are volitional. But things that happen unexpectedly, such as accidental encounters and chats, are not very easily done digitally. Baiko Gakuin University and CIC Tokyo, which you created, Mr. Kobori, have incorporated Chance and Vertigo very well. I see meaning in creating real places like that right now. There are many things that can only be done in a physical space.

T. Kobori: Vertigo is an interesting concept. For example, in our case, design is a process that builds over time. If you come up with an interesting idea part way through, would you consider it a risk or a positive thing? It can be hard to say anything if work has already progressed to a certain extent. You can't really tell if something that is acceptable in a world of play would be accepted in a world of work.

C. Miki: When working as a team, it could depend on whether you trust each other and can express your opinions freely. It's easier if you trust and feel reassurance that you'll be heard.

Designing Activities, Not Just a Structure

T. Kobori: With NICCA Chemical, we executed many workshops to prevent things from becoming fixed. The intent was to think about both a space and a mindset for innovation.

C. Miki: I was impressed by both the space you created and the understanding I saw between designer and user in the intent behind the space. If the users do not have a sense of "this is how the space was designed to be used, so this is how it should be used," the space will not live up to its full potential. It is a bit troubling if space is created for certain activities and those activities aren't sustained. By working together, Mr. Kobori and Prof. Ueda were able to actively change the consciousness of the employees of NIKKA Chemical.

T. Asanuma: It's changing awareness by placing yourself within the client, as you mentioned before.

T. Kobori: There are some who wonder whether the designer should go that far, though. And even if you design an activity through physical space, it won't be utilized unless people who stir things up are also nurtured. At NICCA, we held eight workshops. The participants volunteered to launch the Innovation Planning Division. They played a central role, and employees of various divisions gave visitors a tour and explained the intent of the spaces. I was impressed.

C. Miki: So, there was the passion of the employees, and the company backed it up. I think there is meaning to their activities from a corporate PR viewpoint as well.

We Need People to Stir Things Up

T. Kimura: You mentioned "stirring things up." That's what we're trying to do in Osaka.

C. Miki: We have 8,800 employees of which about 2,500 are in the Osaka Main Office. About 1,500 of them are assigned to construction offices. We decided to change the Osaka Office and in late 2019, a project team consisting of 24 young employees was launched to discuss the new office. The concept they came up with was "FAN&FUN."

T. Asanuma: The members weren't just designers but were from various divisions, right?

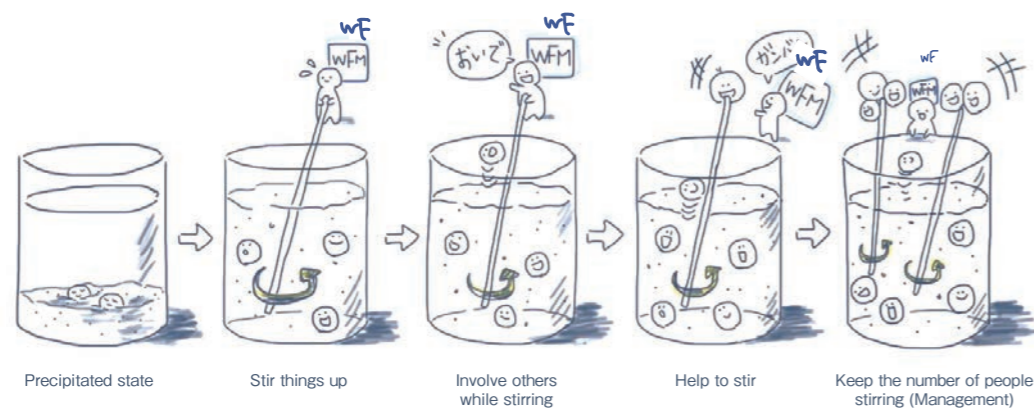
C. Miki: In the beginning, they weren't doing much more than voice their complaints about the current office. But they gradually owned the project under the realization that the company wouldn't change unless they did something. They now seem to enjoy the project.

T. Kobori: Yes, everyone looks animated in the photographs.

C. Miki: In the end, instead of a layout, they presented the need for work facilitators. It makes sense. Instead of a division linking various divisions, facilitators, who would "stir up" people and teams within the company, would boost the chances of something being born. It reminds me of your efforts at NICCA. A mechanism was proposed instead of space.



"FAN&FUN"



The "Work Facilitate" concept of FAN&FUN



Everyone Needs to Enjoy Themselves More

C. Miki: At the Osaka Main Office, we are asking employees for input. Due to the coronavirus, they now know how to work continuously from anywhere. On that basis, what do they need in an office? I am the liaison between the Architectural & Engineering Division, responsible for design, and General Affairs, responsible for the general management. I realized that there are so many talented people that I don't know, and General Affairs handles so many things. If we collaborate with each other, we can do so many interesting things. If the resources and space for working across divisions is provided, collaboration within the company, like CIC Tokyo, will open up a whole new world.

T. Asanuma: Ms. Miki also belongs to General Affairs, and connects the Architectural & Engineering Division and General Affairs.

C. Miki: I have been asking many divisions if they would like to change their work style. There's always someone who shows great interest and agrees, and I saw that there are some interesting people at our company. If we want to have fun in our work, that's possible, too.

T. Kobori: At times like this, you need to possess a lot of "keys" to open doors in different divisions, where you can collect new information. A large company is like urban space. It is a collection of people from different places, and you need people who can

facilitate things – connect interesting people with each other. Japanese people are not very good at opening themselves up for communication, so you need someone who understands and links people's skills, or you need to do it yourself.

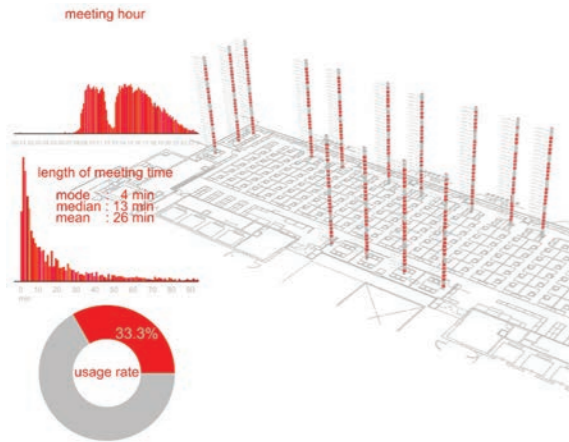
C. Miki: If bringing people's individual capabilities together like that will boost the company's productivity by 20% or even 50%, then we could probably afford hiring a professional who will stir things up. I think that is something Japanese companies haven't considered until now.

T. Asanuma: Having met the idea of "play" in work, the idea of a facilitator is likely to evolve.

C. Miki: With the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone realizes that values will have to change. If that thought spreads and Japanese companies are willing to spend human and financial resources on it, then I have hope that companies will improve.

T. Kobori: I think that the word "labor" has some negative connotations to it. In the beginning, people lived and worked in the same place. Then, they started leaving the home to work. But now, we're back to working from home. That's the third value that has appeared. If we have to go out of our way to travel and get to work, then how do we create a new sense of value for that? There are people, projects, colleagues, and teams. Companies will become stronger if they thoroughly re-design their offices.

Small Hidden Space (Cloistered Octopus Pots) vs. Open, Free Space



Visualization of usage rates of meeting tables at Tokyo Head Office using IoT sensors

T. Kimura: After the layout change at Tokyo Head Office, there are now fewer meeting rooms than before. But a follow-up survey showed that even so, meeting rooms were now easier to book. Up until then, people chose to use meeting rooms over poorly-made open spaces. When made more convenient, people realized that open spaces could be used just as well.

T. Asanuma: When it's just an open space near the boss, nobody wants to use it for meetings.

T. Kimura: We made as many small, empty spaces as possible. Data confirmed a doubling in the number of people standing and chatting. Communication styles change dramatically according to how a space is designed. In the past, the boss' desk was cloistered, like an octopus pot. With that gone, the boss started talking about space for designing a creative future. Without a heap of documents and memorabilia, the boss experienced a new way to work.

C. Miki: We talked about how it would be better to implement a clean desk policy because you might start seeing something different if you do away with your own castle.

T. Kobori: We held the first seating draft at our office, and staff told us where they wanted to sit. Even the seats close to the telephones, which you'd think wouldn't be popular, were filled. I saw that everyone wanted to re-set, and that moving around was good.

M. Umeno: The layout change had an interesting effect at the Tohoku Branch, too.

T. Asanuma: The Architectural & Engineering Division at the Tohoku Branch changed the layout of the whole floor. Natural elements are said to increase happiness, so we incorporated biophilic design. Some wanted small hidden spaces, so we placed booth seating by the windows. They're used in a variety of ways.

M. Umeno: You have a big table in the middle.

T. Asanuma: People can have meetings or eat there. The 85-inch monitor at the far end streams projects to help inspire people. Before, there were high partitions, and documents were piled high on desks. Some stayed like that for 20 years. And now, the atmosphere has changed, and the booths are frequently utilized. The coronavirus spread just as I moved to Tokyo, and they put partitions back up. With no one to stir things up, things often go back to how they were before.

T. Kimura: We will be making ongoing changes at Tokyo Head Office. With COVID-19, we've partially adopted the hot-desking system for now to avoid close contact, etc. Executives and young employees work in the same place. Data shows that executives are at the office less. Effective use of the space makes everyone happy. Changing the bosses' desks greatly changes the company, the openness of workspaces, and the attitudes of organizations.

C. Miki: Adopting the hot-desking system in Osaka increased communication between bosses and their teams. More than 90%

responded that they are happy with the changes.

T. Asanuma: The hot-desking system makes every day feel like you are looking for a picnic site. Before, it was like holding up in a secret hideaway that I wasn't very pleased with. Now, it feels like I'm at a park with a magnificent view. The Hitachi Central Research Laboratory Kyoso-to (pp. 18-25) incorporated qualities of Activity Based Working (ABW). To enable effective use of the facility, a system was used to resolve the challenge of changing people's awareness. You need to design space, tools, activities, and people, all at the same time.

Relationships of Trust Bring About Happiness

T. Kimura: This relates to the concept of "Design by people." In *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*, Kat Holmes wrote, "We are all designers." She gives active pointers on achieving inclusive design, saying that matters one feels comfort with contain unconscious biases (i.e., exclusivity).

T. Kobori: I see. How can one become aware of an unconscious bias?

T. Kimura: That is where "Design by people" comes into play. You know what you don't like. Other people know what they don't like. So, by having people do the designing together, they understand what needs to be solved. Resolving what you find problematic and what others find problematic leads to inclusive design.

C. Miki: So, what's important is that you motivate yourself and share an awareness of issues with others. Nothing will change if you keep on saying that there aren't any problems.

T. Kobori: People can argue with each other if trust exists. If not, people won't say anything. So, it may be really good if we create an environment where it's okay to say things, become mutually aware of issues and exclusivity, and discuss what to do.

M. Umeno: And that's where the power of the space can really come into play through its impact on relationships.

T. Kimura: Perhaps, if you dig deeper, that's what a happy workspace is about.



(top) Open communication through adoption of the hot desking system
(bottom) The table at the center of the Architectural & Engineering Division floor at the Tohoku Branch



October 2020, at CIC Tokyo
(from left) Makiko Umeno / Mr. Tetsuo Kobori / Tatsuji Kimura / Chiharu Miki / Takuya Asanuma

