

## Designing spaces to talk together



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In Paris, France, there are gatherings called *cafés philosophiques*, where people gather every Sunday morning to discuss a range of topics. Anyone can participate, as long as they pay for coffee, and they do not have to identify themselves. However, philosophy cafes also have certain rules. Those who want to speak may express any opinion they wish, and those who do not want to speak may simply listen. There is no need to come to any one conclusion or for a consensus to be formed. It is simply a matter of participants sharing various opinions. When I first encountered the philosophy cafe while studying in France, I had a hunch that it would be useful for urban development, and after returning to Japan, I have introduced it to several urban development spaces.

I have long been engaged in practical research on community development, working with local government officials, volunteer residents, nonprofit organizations, and others on the topics of community recovery from disasters and depopulation. In the process, we have come to realize that there are no spaces in local communities where people can freely discuss various topics. The reason for this may be that talking about so-called “serious” topics, including social issues, problems faced by the community, and life concerns, is contrary to good manners. It is taboo, so to speak, because the speaker is not sure if he or she is allowed to talk, and the listener is not sure how to respond. However, without talking to each other, there would be no way to share our awareness of the issues we face, much less to work together to take action

to solve them.

In addition, with the advent of a super-aging society, participation in the community by the elderly has become a serious challenge. Older people who have spent most of their lives as so-called “company people” often only have tenuous ties to their community, and it not only takes great courage to enter the community, like a new employee, but they often stumble at the entrance because they do not know how to communicate there.

Although the term philosophy cafe may give the impression of inaccessibility, it is actually a valuable opportunity for social participation for those who want to think deeply about various issues and exchange opinions. Local intellectuals meet there and come to recognize each other’s existence through the discussions. It is also an opportunity for participants to learn the art of communication for placemaking, through the experience of building the place together to make it more complete. Furthermore, people who have mastered this type of etiquette create new connections and develop various community activities.

Nowadays, there is a demand for the design of spaces for discussion in the field of urban development.

November 2021