

# Comparative Study of Architecture Education in France and Japan in the 2010s

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores some features of architecture education in France in the 2010s by comparing the curriculum and teaching method of institutions of higher education in France and Japan.

Until 1968, architecture education in France was virtually monopolized by l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and its three annexes in Lille, Bordeaux and Marseille. Following the tradition of the department of painting and sculpture, the department of architecture at l'École des Beaux-Arts maintained a studio system which was seen as being outdated.

After the May 1968 protests, André Malraux, the then minister of culture in France, detached the architecture department from l'École des Beaux-Arts and re-organized it into twelve branch schools of architecture, or unités pédagogique d'architecture (UPA). The establishment of UPA made a switchover from a studio system to a school education system in which social sciences and historical research were considered as important as vocational training. UPAs finally became écoles nationales supérieures d'architecture (ENSA) in 2005. Each of twenty ENSAs now offers the curriculum corresponding to European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Experiencing the reforms as above, what could be called the characteristics of architecture education in France now in the 2010s? Although answering this general question is impossible, this paper attempts to show some aspects of it by comparing the curriculum and teaching method of architectural in France and Japan. The comparative analysis is made on the bases of interviewing Japanese students who enrolled in l'École nationale supérieure d'architecture Paris-la Villette from 2016 to 2018. The interviews particularly reveal how architecture schools in France respect a student's autonomy, and thus encourage art-oriented approaches toward designing architecture, which makes a sharp contrast to engineering-centered education offered by most universities in Japan.

***Keywords:** Architecture Education, Architecture School*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores some features of architecture education in France in the 2010s by comparing the curriculum and teaching method of institutions of higher education in France and Japan.

As of 2019, the institutions providing official architecture education in France include 20 national architecture schools called écoles nationales supérieures d'architecture (ENSA), one private school called l'École spéciale d'architecture, and one national engineering school called l'Institut national des sciences appliquées, Strasbourg. The origin of the ENSA goes back to l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and its three annexes in Lille, Bordeaux, and Marseille, all of

which virtually monopolized architecture education in France for more than two centuries until 1968.

Starting as a school run by two academies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, l'Académies royales de peinture et de sculpture and l'Académie d'architecture, the architecture education provided by l'École des Beaux-Arts was similar to their teaching of painting and sculpture since both were characterized by a studio system and a competition for the Prix de Rome. It is therefore said that the school trained its architecture students like fine art pupils. Naturally, architecture major courses such as mathematics, structural study, and architectural history were taught there from the start. Nevertheless, it was studio education that l'École emphasized most in their curriculum, as clearly stated by Kishiro Ida (b.1924), a Japanese architectural historian who studied at the school in Paris in the 1950s:

Architecture design education in studio—this is the core of the architecture education of l'École des Beaux-Arts and, for each student, the architect of the studio the student belongs to become his teacher. Theoretical education or subjects taught in lecture rooms are just for supplying the students with fundamental knowledge to understand their architects' teaching in studio<sup>1</sup>.

Although a studio system and the Prix de Rome competition were undoubtedly the features that l'École des Beaux-Arts was highly proud of for centuries, they were also the major causes of the separation of the architecture department from l'École in 1968. The tradition of emphasizing studio education and therefore giving the Prix de Rome the utmost importance was seen as outdated by both the students and the architects in the 1960s when there was an urgent demand for new town planning to address the postwar housing shortage in France.

The May 1968 protests in Sorbonne spread over to l'École des Beaux-Arts and the students and the reform architects claimed a new architecture education system and l'École's compatibility with a university system. André Malraux, the then French culture minister detached the architecture department from the school and reorganized it into 12 branch schools of architecture, or the unités pédagogique d'architecture (UPA). After these reforms, the Prix de Rome was finally abolished. The establishment of the UPAs triggered a switchover from a studio system to a school education system in which the social sciences and historical research were considered as important as vocational training. The UPAs finally became the ÉNSAs in 2005. Each of the 20 ÉNSAs now offers a curriculum in accordance with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Although it is impossible to describe French architectural education in the 2010s comprehensively, this paper attempts to highlight some aspects of it by comparing its curriculum and teaching methods with that of Japanese architectural education. For this, I interviewed four Japanese students who enrolled at l'École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-la Villette (ENSAPLV) between 2016 and 2018. The interviews reveal how French architecture schools respect a student's autonomy, and thus encourage art-oriented approaches toward designing architecture, in sharp contrast to the engineering-centered education in Japanese universities.

I shall first describe briefly the differences between the French and Japanese architectural education system. Next, I will use the interviews to analyze the ENSAPLV's liberal arts and project courses and attempt to clarify the school's educational policies. Naturally, the analysis shall be made by comparison with courses in Japanese universities. Finally, I shall attempt to show the characteristics of architecture education in France in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 1. Architectural School System in France and Japan

After the establishment of the unités pédagogique d'architecture (UPA) in 1968, the French architectural school system went through four major reforms in 1978, 1984, 1997–1998, and 2005.<sup>2</sup> Besides, the state-run architecture school, the UPA, changed its name twice: to école d'architecture in 1984, then to école nationale supérieure d'architecture (ENSA) in 2005. The ENSA is a *grande école*, that is, a training school, not an academic institution like a university. As of 2009, nearly 20,000 students are enrolled at the 20 ENSAs.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we shall look at the system of the ENSA to understand the general architectural school system in France.

The ENSA basically offers the three cycles of License, Master, and Doctorat, a scheme established by the Ministry of Culture in 2005 so that the country's architectural school system conforms to European standards. Under this scheme, architectural studies last for a minimum of five years, divided into ten semesters. Students must complete a first three-year cycle of License, which is equivalent to the undergraduate degree in other countries including Japan, and then a second two-year cycle of Master, which is equivalent to the postgraduate degree in other countries, to acquire the diplôme d'Etat d'architecte (DEA).

With the DEA, one can work as a state-accredited architect in the form of a civil servant, employee in an agency, actor in local authorities, or consultant (for the State, local authorities, or individuals).<sup>4</sup> To open one's own practice, one has to acquire a qualification called the habilitation à exercer la maîtrise d'oeuvre en son nom propre (HMONP). The ENSA offers the one-year HMONP course, which includes a minimum of six months of professional practice and a 150-hour theoretical training.

The Doctorat cycle was established at the ENSA after the 2005 reform. However, the 1984 reform allowed the école d'architecture to offer the diplôme d'études approfondies (DEA), which sanctioned the first year of doctoral studies but not a PhD degree, since the école d'architecture is also a *grande école*. In 2017, this inconvenience was addressed and now each ENSA offers a PhD in architecture.

Now, we shall briefly look at the Japanese architectural school system. While about 20 state schools offer architecture education in France, various types of schools in Japan, including universities, junior colleges, vocational schools, and high schools, provide it. Among them, at least 165 universities offered architecture courses in 2001. The reason so many Japanese universities offer architecture courses is that one has to pass an official qualification examination as well as graduate from university to work as an architect in the country. As of 2019, to obtaining a first-class Kenchikushi (architect) license, one must graduate from university, practice professionally for two years, and then move on to the qualification examination.<sup>5</sup> Under this system, students have to attend university to be eligible for the qualification examination. Therefore, many universities have set up courses to attract aspiring architects. However, very few graduates actually appear for the qualification exam. At Kindai University, which boasts the highest percentage of first-class Kenchikushi among its alumni among all west Japan universities, 77 graduates were qualified as first-class Kenchikushi in 2018,<sup>6</sup> whereas approximately 410 architecture majors graduate from its Osaka, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka campuses every year.<sup>7</sup> I therefore assume that less than 18 percent of architecture graduates become a first-class Kenchikushi.

As we have seen, French and Japanese architectural school systems differ in the way a school's degree is related to one's qualification as an architect. There is a direct relationship between the degree and the qualification in France since the ENSA is not a university but a training school, at which nearly all subjects of the License and the Master courses are related to architectural study. In contrast, Japanese universities include many liberal arts subjects in their curriculum. At Kindai University, even architecture students must acquire 28 credits in liberal arts subjects, including sports, sociology, law, and foreign language. It makes up 22 percent of

the 144 credits required for graduation.

Another big difference is that the curriculum of Japanese universities has more construction-related subjects than that of the ENSA. For an architectural design major at Kindai University, the required number of class hours for construction study is about 270, whereas it is about 174, including 27 hours of tutorials, for the License course of the ENSAPLV.<sup>8</sup> This is because the ENSA's origins lie in l'École des Beaux-Arts. Currently, most ENSAs run a joint educational program with partner engineering schools for students who wish to take a Master degree in engineering. The percentage of students enrolling in the joint program is considerably high; in 2018, 452 out of 861 Master students at the ENSAPLV took the joint program.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize this section, French and Japanese architectural school education differed especially in terms of curriculum; nearly all subjects of the License and Master courses at the ENSA are related to architectural studies, whereas the curriculum of Japanese universities includes many liberal arts subjects. Moreover, the curriculum of the latter includes more construction-related subjects than that of the ENSA. I argue that this is due to the differences in the history of architectural school education and the architect-accreditation system in the two countries. In the next section, we shall look at how architecture is taught differently in France and Japan by analyzing some subjects offered by the ENSAPLV.

## 2. Architecture Education in France

### 2.1. l'École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-la Villette (ENSAPLV)

l'École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-la Villette (ENSAPLV) was founded in 1968 as Unité pédagogique d'architecture 6 (UP6). UP6 was seen as the most avant-garde among all UPAs in Paris as it was set up by the architects and students who had actively supported the May 1968 protests. This spirit is still visible in the school's objective, which is to "resist elitism and social selection while ensuring a high academic level."<sup>10</sup> Since it was established in 1968, the enrolment at the ENSAPLV has always been the highest amongst all ENSAs. As of 2018, the number of students enrolled at the ENSAPLV is 2,038, including 847 License students, 861 Master students, and 256 HMONP students.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.2. Education at the ENSAPLV

I shall analyze the teaching methodology at the ENSAPLV by interviewing four Japanese students who enrolled at the school between 2016 and 2018. I conducted the interviews from February 2019 to March 2019. I have listed the academic information of the four students below. Each of them studied at different universities in Japan.

- **Student A:** Master's student in Japan in 2016; enrolled as a Master student at the ENSAPLV in 2016.
- **Student B:** Undergraduate student in Japan in 2017; enrolled as a License student at the ENSAPLV in 2017.
- **Student C:** Completed master's course in Japan before 2017; enrolled as a Master student at the ENSAPLV in 2017.
- **Student D:** Master's student in Japan in 2015; enrolled as a Master student at the ENSAPLV in 2016.

When asked about the difference between French and Japanese architectural education, all four students pointed out the uniqueness of the art subjects taught in France, wherein fine art and music are taught in relation to architecture. Emphasis on art subjects at the ENSA is

undoubtedly a continuation of the tradition of l'École des Beaux-Arts. Therefore, I shall first analyze these subjects.

The students also noted that the teaching of architecture design at the ENSAPLV is completely different from how it is taught at Japanese universities. Therefore, I shall also look at the architecture project seminar classes at the ENSAPLV.

### 2.3. Art subjects at the ENSAPLV

Below are some examples of the art subjects taught at the ENSAPLV:

**Example 1:** Subject Title: Art, Music and Architecture (License, 1.5 hours per week, 14 weeks)

According to Student B, the objective of this seminar class, which was conducted by a musician, was to consider the structure of music from an architectural framework.<sup>12</sup> The subject's contents were based on the idea that architecture and modern music are similar in that both have composition and rhythm. The class consisted of seven students. In the first class, the tutor showed a documentary film featuring modern music and gave the students an assignment to collect sounds or noises during the Easter holidays and use them to make music.

**Example 2:** Subject Title: Urban Sound Workshop (Master, 1.5 hours per week, 14 weeks, 29 hours of individual work)

The tutor of this seminar class was the same as that of Example 1. The assignment was also the same: to make music with sounds or noises of the city. The students were taught how to use the sound-editing software, Audacity. Student A recorded the noise of her apartment building and people's conversations, and mixed them to make a piece of music using Audacity.<sup>13</sup> Both Students A and B were inspired by Examples 1 and 2 because Japanese universities rarely undertake exercises where students are taught to analyze a city through its sounds or noises.

**Example 3:** Subject Title: Plastic Approaches (License, 7 hours per week, 14 weeks, 77 hours of individual work)

This subject was taught by seven tutors and each tutor had his or her own student group. The theme of Student B's group was "What is a sculpture?" There were three assignments in one semester: the first assignment was to make a sculpture of one's choice; the second one was to make a sculpture on the theme of "body"; the third one was to again make a sculpture of one's choice. Each assignment took two to three weeks to complete. On the first day of the first assignment, the students saw documentary films of sculptors in the morning and went to the city to look for materials for sculpture-making in the afternoon. The students could choose anything including meat or old clothes, as materials. On the first day of the third assignment, they saw an exhibition of the sculptor, Taro Izumi, at Palais de Tokyo. On the presentation day, the students started installing their sculptures in the classroom from 9 a.m. The presentations began at 11 a.m. Student B noted that this subject taught her to see sculptures from an architectural perspective.

Student A also took Plastic Approaches, but with a different tutor. The theme of Student A's group was "Repair." This group also had three assignments. The themes of the assignments were "repair of an object," "repair of a human body," and "repair of a city," respectively. The instruction for the first assignment was to make an object with trash, such as broken chairs found in the city. The finished works presented by the students include a piece made with chains of cigarette ends. According to Student A, the third assignment, "repair of a city," was the most difficult task for Japanese students, mainly because there was no specific instruction for this assignment. The students, therefore, had to start from scratch, which was completely opposite from the way they tackled projects at Japanese universities where each assignment was accompanied by detailed conditions and instructions. After some speculation, Student A decided

to approach the assignment by reconsidering the relationship between herself and the city. She walked in the city and tried to express the forms of unusual buildings using her body parts. Such an approach had never occurred to her while she was studying in Japan. She reckoned that the strong relationship between art and architecture in the art subjects at the ENSAPLV unconsciously affected her view of architectural planning.

#### **2.4. Architecture Project Subjects at the ENSAPLV**

The descriptions of the art subjects at the ENSAPLV make it clear that the idea of regarding architecture as an art characterizes the school's teaching method. Most Japanese universities do not follow a similar method in their liberal arts subjects. They also rarely let students tackle a project from scratch. Japanese tutors normally give detailed instructions, which include specifying the site and listing other requirements.

The teaching of the art subjects at the ENSAPLV focuses on students' freedom to develop their own ideas. Nevertheless, this is not always the case when in architecture project subjects are taught in the studio at the ENSAPLV. The following examples of their project subjects reveal that the relationship between art and architecture is far more complicated in the studio class than in the art subject class.

**Example 4:** Subject Title: Architectural and Urban Project—From Idea to Project (Master, 8.5 hours per week, 16 weeks, 204 hours of individual work)

Student C recalled that the class was conducted by three tutors and started with reading and discussing the poems of R. M. Rilke in the classroom. The first assignment was to make a model of artwork inspired by a poem of Rilke chosen by a student. One impressive comment that Student C remembers is that the tutors often said, "This model of artwork is not good because it almost becomes architecture. What we want you to make now is something not yet architecture."<sup>14</sup> It appears that the tutor's intention was to encourage the students to concentrate on the artistic aspects of architecture in the first stage of the project planning.

**Example 5:** Subject Title: Architectural and Urban Project---Design of a Mixed Building Complex for Activities and Housing (Master, 8.5 hours per week, 16 weeks, personal work 204 hours)

This was another group of Architectural and Urban Project subject, also conducted by three tutors. However, the teaching policies of the two groups seem very different. While the tutors of Example 4 encouraged the students to conceive architecture as an artwork, the tutors of Example 5 gave detailed conditions for the project assignment (planning a leather factory, a hospital, and dwellings in the same site). Moreover, the tutors of Example 5 demanded that students drew precise plans. Student A was surprised at the tutors' expectation of advanced drawing skills that are not required for students in Japan.

Another notable feature of the project subjects at ENSAPLV was, unlike in universities in Japan, the tutors did not show sample projects. At Japanese universities, tutors always show examples by well-known architects in an effort to enhance students' understanding of a project. This always happens at Japanese universities on the first day of assignment. Whereas, at ENSAPLV, the project class normally started with going to the actual site with classmates, making observations, and doing sketches. Moreover, students were instructed to conduct a historical research on the site. According to Hiroyuki Kakita, architect and Associate Professor at Kindai University, who studied at ENSAPLV in 1992-1993, researching the geological and cultural histories of the site and getting the idea of design from it is a typical French way of planning architecture and cities, which goes back to the tradition of l'École des Beaux-Arts.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

We can conclude that architecture school education is different in France and Japan in terms of the type of school, degree system, and curriculum. ENSA is a *grande école* and students completing their Master courses at ENSA automatically become qualified architects. In Japan, universities offer bachelor courses in architecture but the degree does not endow them with the qualification of being an architect. One must pass the required exam to obtain the qualification.

As for the curriculum, ENSA is art-oriented, whereas universities in Japan emphasize the engineering aspects of architectural study. The art-oriented teaching policy is the inheritance of l'École des Beaux-Arts.

Therefore, it is tempting to say that architecture education in France, as compared to Japan, is focused on fostering creative and imaginative architects. In a way, this is true as shown in the analysis of the curriculum of ENSAPLV. However, we should not forget that the analysis in this paper also shows that the students of ENSAPLV are instructed to design and draw precise plans.

The Japanese students consider such instruction to unfortunately lead to the standardization of the students' designing techniques. According to them, at the beginning of the project course, each student tried to propose something unique. However, at the end, all the finished plans seemed similar, like a cubic design, as the result of following a series of instructions. This reminds us that it was the complaints to the studio system of l'École des Beaux-Arts together with the Prix de Rome competitions that motivated the students to join the May 1968 protest. Considering the fact that the studio system required precise and beautiful architectural designs more than anything else, the instruction of precise drawings at ENSAPLV certainly follows the tradition of l'École des Beaux-Arts. Therefore, architecture education in France in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still retains the teaching approach or the attitude of l'École des Beaux-Arts to a great extent.

## Notes

1. Kishiro Ida, '3 Bijutsu gakkō [Art School]' in Shoichi Kawai ed., *Kakkoku no kenchiku kyoiku: Europe [Architecture Education: Europe]*, Tokyo: Shokokusha, 1958, p. 71.
2. See followings: Yoshiyuki Yamana, 'France ni okeru konnichi no kenchiku kyoiku [Architecture Education Today in France]', *Nikkan Kogyo Gijutsu*, No. 47, 2001, pp. 74-75.; 'Décret n° 97-1096 du 27 novembre 1997 relatif aux études d'architecture' retrieved from <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000752651&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id> ; 'Décret n° 2005-734 du 30 juin 2005 relatif aux études d'architecture' retrieved from <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000258877&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id3>. P. M. Desmet and P. Hekkert, 'Framework of product experience', *International Journal of Design*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2002, pp. 57-66.
3. Wikipedia entry of 'Études d'architecture en France' retrieved from [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89tudes\\_d%27architecture\\_en\\_France](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89tudes_d%27architecture_en_France)
4. The information cited in the homepage of Prépa Architekton retrieved from <https://www.prepa-architecture.fr/le-diplome-detat-darchitecte-dea/>
5. For the information of the exam for Kenchikushi, see the following home page of The Japan Architectural Education and Information Center, [https://www.jaeic.or.jp/english/k-pamphlet\\_e20181226.pdf](https://www.jaeic.or.jp/english/k-pamphlet_e20181226.pdf)

6. The data cited in the home page of The Japan Architectural Education and Information Center retrieved from <https://www.jaeic.or.jp/shiken/1k/1k-data.html>
7. The data cited in the home page of Kindai University retrieved from <https://www.kindai.ac.jp/about-kindai/overview/students/>
8. The main construction-related subjects of the License course at ENSAPLV are as follows:  
Licence 1 Construction Générale 1 (1.5 hours x 14 weeks plus 9-hour tutorial), Construction Générale 2 – 1.5 hours x 14 weeks plus 9-hour tutorial; Licence 2 Structures 1 – 1.5 hours x 14 weeks plus 9-hour tutorial, Structures 2 – 1.5 hours x 14 weeks plus 9-hour tutorial; Licence 3 Construction Générale 3 – 1.5 hours x 28 weeks, Analyse Constructive (tutorial) – 1.5 hours x 14 weeks. See the home page of ENSAPLV, <http://www.paris-lavillette.archi.fr/index.php?page=LUE>  
<http://www.paris-lavillette.archi.fr/index.php?page=UES7S8>  
<http://www.paris-lavillette.archi.fr/index.php?page=s1>
9. See the home page of ENSAPL  
<http://www.paris-lavillette.archi.fr/index.php?page=presentation>
10. “School Objectives” in the ENSAPL’s brochure in English published in January, 2014.
11. See the home page of ENSAPLV,  
<http://www.paris-lavillette.archi.fr/index.php?page=presentation>
12. Interview by the presenter to Student B, February 23, 2019.
13. Interview by the presenter to Student A, March 7, 2019.
14. Interview by the presenter to Student C, March 6, 2019.
15. E-mail from Hiroyuki Kakita to the presenter, March 25, 2019.

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## Author Biography

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Keiko Hashimoto received BA (English Literature) from Keio University, Tokyo, MA (Art History) from University of East Anglia, UK, and PhD (Design History) from Kobe University, Japan. After working as a Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, she became an Assistant Professor at Kobe Gakuin University, Kobe (2011-2106) and Associate Professor at Kindai University, Osaka (2016 to date). Her field of research is History of the 20th Century Art and Design, and she is currently working on commercial interior and furniture design by Shiro Kuramata and other avant-garde interior designers in the late 20th century Japan. She recently wrote; 'Book 2: Catalogue of Works' in Deyan Sudjic, *Shiro Kuramata*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013; 'Kuramata, Shiro (1934-91)' (book chapter) in Clive Edwards ed., *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design*, 3 vols., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, Volume 2, and Kuramata entries of *Atlas of Furniture Design*, Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2019.