

Urban Liminal Spaces: Public baths in Beppu City, Oita

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INTRODUCTION

In Japan, there is a culture of soaking in warm bath every day out of habit. Soaking in warm bath not only relieves fatigue, but also serves the purpose of enjoying conversation with those who bathe with you.

There are many hot springs in Japan. Beppu City in Oita Prefecture has the largest amount of hot spring water in Japan. In areas where there are many hot springs, there are many public baths. Public baths have hot spring in each district. Public baths are used daily by the local people. Public baths are managed jointly by the local people. Members of the public baths association pay a monthly association fee of about \$7~\$12, which allows them unlimited using public baths. Non-union residents can also use public baths for a very low price of about \$1~\$3. This price is very inexpensive compared to typical bathing fees in Japan.

There are three advantages to using public baths.

- ① People using public baths enjoy talking with the locals.

For the elderly who live alone, conversation with other residents is a daily pleasure.



- ② Saves money on gas and water bills.

When using a bath at home, fill the bathtub with hot water. However, using public baths is cheaper than storing hot water at home.

- ③ Public baths are natural hot spring and has beneficial effects. The components within the hot spring have a positive effect on the body. There are several types of components in hot springs.

【Chloride spring】

Chloride springs are called "hot water of heat". Salt adheres to the skin, blocking pores and preventing evaporation of sweat. This has the effect of keeping the body warm and promoting blood circulation.

【Hydrogen carbonate spring】

Hydrogen carbonate spring is called "beauty water" because it softens the keratin of the skin. After bathing, the body is easily warmed and refreshed.

【Acid spring】

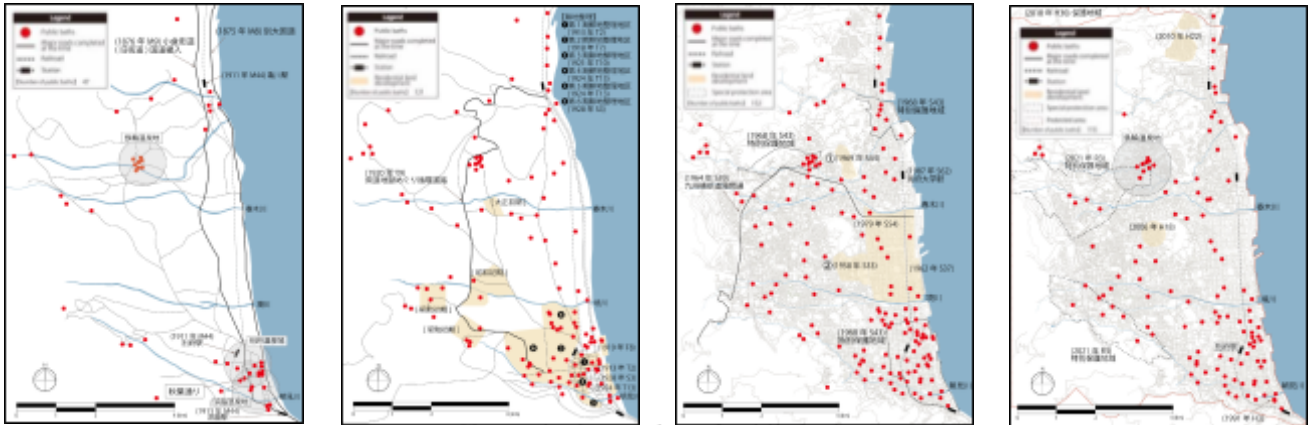
Acidic springs contain highly sterilizing ingredients. Therefore, it is effective for skin diseases such as athlete's foot and eczema. If the hot spring contains iron or hydrogen sulfide, the color of the hot spring is light brown or light green.

【Sulfur spring】

The components are hydrogen sulfide. Because of the strong sterilizing power of the hot spring's ingredients, it has the effect of easing skin inflammation.

BACKGROUND OF URBAN SPACE

Beppu City experienced a boom after World War I. Therefore, Beppu City developed residential areas by clearing arable land, opened exposition and amusement park, and widened roads to make the city a tourist destination. The number of public baths has increased due to tourism in Beppu City, and the number of visitors to public baths had reached approximately 4 million. Furthermore, the number of inns increased, and the number of overnight guests also increased. However, the public baths began to go out of business around 1960, and the number of guests began to decline around 1980. The public baths are used by both tourists and residents and have become a part of the residents' daily lives. However, Beppu City's aging population is making it difficult to manage public baths.



Change in the number of public baths

LIST OF URBAN LIMINAL SPACES IN OITA

1. Bathtubs in public bath

In a public bath, they are excited to talk with each other, their laughter echoes in the bath, and their wash each other's backs. Conversation naturally occurs as bathers engage in the same act of bathing and are in close proximity to each other in the same bathtub. The bath is a private space, but in a bath, it is also a public space where people interact with each other.



Bathtubs in public baths

2. Benches in front of public baths

There are benches in front of the public baths. It is used by those who have taken a bath, those who are going to take a bath, and those who will not take a bath but will take a rest. Public baths are sometimes attached to community centers and are often used by people other than bathers. After getting out of the hot spring, we sit on the bench and continue our conversation while bathing. While resting on a bench after taking a bath, people who were just passing by or neighbors who had come to take a bath stopped and started a conversation. A single bench placed in front of a public bath provides an opportunity for community.



People sitting on a bench in front of a public bath having a conversation

3. Bandai (Reception).

At the Bandai, a receptionist sits in a small space about one mat in size to receive bathing fees and check for safety. In addition, a bulletin board is placed at the Bandai where notices and other information are posted. Regular customers communicate with the receptionist. Therefore, if a day goes by when these people do not come in, the receptionist can notice something unusual. Thus, preventing lonely deaths of the elderly.



Bandai