The Ideal Bathroom in Middle-Class Homes of the Taisho Period: The New Style of Interior Finish and the Bather’s Experience

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Until the late Meiji Period (1868-1912), the bathrooms of middle-class Japanese homes were finished with wood and mortar, but in the Taisho Period (1912-1926) tiling became common. Also, beginning in the Taisho Period, the housing reform movement altered the layout of the rooms in middle-class homes, shifting the emphasis from receiving guests to family life, and the bathroom was accordingly brought in from its isolated position on the northern side of the house and made part of the living area.

The bathroom had been excluded from the living area because it was seen as dark and unsanitary, but the refurbished Taisho Period bathroom was assigned a function within the living space. Previous studies have attributed this improvement to the rearrangement of the overall floor plan and the adoption of sanitation facilities during the Taisho housing reforms. However, these studies were limited to the stylistic dimensions of change as seen by architectural historians; thus, they did not address the questions of how the bathroom as a “lived-in” space was actually improved and how it was used by the home’s occupants.

In this study, I assume that factors such as rationalization and plumbing installation during housing reform contributed to the improvement of middle-class bathrooms, and focus instead on an aspect not seen in previous interpretations, namely, the improvement of interior finishing. I show how the use of materials like tiles and glass altered the home dweller’s experience of bathing.

Chapter 1 traces the process of formal change from the wood and mortar bathrooms of pre-Meiji and Meiji times to the tiled bathrooms of the Taisho Period. I also look at how amenities and materials were actually employed in middle-class bathrooms, and the floor plan that resulted from improved wet area design as part of housing reform.

Chapter 2 focuses on the “campaign for improvement of living conditions” as a factor in the remodeling of bathrooms, and discusses the campaign’s criticisms of Meiji lifestyle prac-
tices and the improvements it attempted to make. I show that the movement was characterized not only by rationality, but also, in the context of the urban living environment of that time, by its educational mission to spread hygienic concepts.

In Chapter 3, to gain more insight into bathrooms as "lived-in" spaces, I analyze the illustrations in a volume of architectural photographs, *Chūryū jūtaku no yokushitsu* (Bathrooms of Middle-Class Houses), paying attention to how the bathrooms seen in house plans were actually finished, and I explore how the use of materials such as tiles and glass transformed the bathing experience.

This approach makes it clear that the Taisho-Period middle-class bathroom served not only as a clean place for washing, based on hygienic concepts, but also as a place for relaxation. Thus, the improvement of middle-class bathrooms included a factor, the new style of interior finishing, that the privileging of rationalization based on sanitary concepts fails to take into account. I will show that, for the home dweller, bathing became a more esthetic and sensual experience due to the surface qualities of materials such as glass, which let in ambient light, and gleaming white tiles.