



Insular Attitudes

So here we are, just past the shortest day of the winter. Of course that doesn't mean the coldest day of the winter - that is probably nearly two months away! Two months more ... of getting colder and colder day by day, before temperatures will finally begin to climb upwards again. How will I survive? As I sit here at the keyboard of my computer, I am wearing a heavy sweater, drinking hot cocoa, and blowing on my fingers to try and keep them warm enough to type properly. What's wrong? Am I working outdoors? No, of course not - I'm indoors, in a modern Japanese home ... and it's freezing in here!

When I meet people for the first time, and they learn that I am from Canada, they invariably say the same thing, "Kanada wa samui desho ne!" My reply, which is quite true, is "Not as cold as Tokyo!" I have been far colder since moving to Tokyo than I ever was in Canada. Canadians long ago learned to construct warm houses for themselves. They had to, living in such a severe climate. But it is a never-ending source of amazement to Canadians who visit this country, that Japanese houses, even quite new ones, can be so cold and uncomfortable.

If I ask Japanese friends about this puzzle, they sometimes answer that houses here are designed to be cool in summer, rather than warm in winter. But actually, a well-insulated house is both! Then they might answer that the energy cost of heating a house to a comfortable level is just too high. But actually, a well-insulated house has very low energy costs!

I read a newspaper story some time ago about a Canadian-style house built in Nagoya (which is certainly a place with cold winters). The house has a very large floor area of 271 square meters, a huge space that you would expect to be extremely expensive to keep warm. It seems though, that it is being fully heated to 'shirt-sleeve' temperatures for a cost of less than 5,000 yen per month, even during the coldest part of the year.

The key of course, is insulation. That building is very well insulated and sealed, and the windows are triple-glazed. Unlike many new Japanese houses, which have only a few centimeters of 'glass wool' stuffed carelessly here and there in the walls, that home has 15cm of insulation in the walls and under the floor, and 22cm in the ceiling. In case you are worried that a completely sealed house would soon become musty and damp, you should know that the house also has a device known as a heat-exchanger, which continually brings fresh air in from the outside, warming it up as it comes into the building. The result is a very livable environment, with extremely low energy costs.

Reading about that home is of course very frustrating for me. My own home in Ome is not such an old building - it was built only 12 years ago - and thus should have been constructed with that sort of insulation. But there is almost none, the windows are single-pane thin glass, there are leaks and cracks everywhere, and the only heating system built into the entire four-story structure is a single infra-red light bulb in the hori-kotatsu! When I tell foreign friends about this they think I'm joking!

But unfortunately, it's no joke. Maybe one day in the future, when I have eventually finished renovating my home into a modern comfortable place to live ... maybe then I will be able to laugh at this situation, but these days, it's not so funny! Achoo!

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