Homes with heart for Sendai

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Credit: Mark Hanauer

When the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami hit Japan and wiped out much of Sendai, the hometown of UCLA architecture and urban design chair Hitoshi Abe, he resolved to make the reconstructed city more people-friendly than the one that was destroyed. UCLA Magazine editor Mary Daily talked to the world-famous architect about

his work there and the group he and his colleagues formed to help Japan rebuild.

How did you hear about the quake?

I was at home, looking through a Yahoo site to check out the Japanese news, when information on the quake popped up. I was shocked—"Oh my God!" I knew there's usually a big quake there every 40 years, but this was way bigger. And the tsunami we didn't expect at all. For two days I couldn't communicate with my parents. On the news, it looked like the area was completely overtaken by water. I saw the fires and all the destruction. Finally, on the third day, I was able to reach my brother, and he told me everybody was OK. But there was no way for me to get there until a month later.

Once there, were you shocked by what you saw?

Nowadays most of what they show on TV is shocking, so that creates a horrible mental image. But it wasn't until I got there that I realized how large the disaster actually was. The water had destroyed the coastline. Nothing remained. I saw a five-story concrete building tipped and moved, and a piece of road, thick asphalt, sitting on the pier. The power of the water is beyond the imagination.

How did you follow up?

Many friends emailed me, asking if I was OK. Everybody thought I was in the middle of it, but I was in California at the time. I felt bad that I wasn't there. Then my architect friends and I began to say maybe there's something we can do. About a week later we formed a group called ArchiAid, through which we could share information and collaborate on the reconstruction of the community. The group has grown to 300

members. Our goal was to assist in reconstruction through an international network, develop practical reconstruction and educational services, and accumulate and promote knowledge.

Is this a new idea—for architects to give input after a disaster?

This was the first time for our generation. We had to do it because in Japan, during disasters, the central government does not include architects in the recovery and reconstruction master planning. In order to rebuild quickly, the planning is driven by civil engineers in a top-down manner. Even a leading architect who is internationally famous couldn't influence the government to involve architects.

What are the special contributions of architects in this case?

Because the devastation covered a 400-mile-long coastline, the conditions are unique at each point. These are sensitive conditions. There is not much local industry, the population is older and each area has to be addressed with consideration of its culture, history, people and community. Civil engineering is more about preventing disaster damage, or reconstructing cities and towns in a technical way through which the sensitive local and community aspects are lost. The engineers presented a very dry proposal for the central government to fund and implement, creating lots of potential conflict and frustration within the community. Their aim was just to get people into safe housing as quickly as possible.

When somebody proposes something awful, local businesses and residents can only complain. It is difficult for them to be organized and create alternate proposals. They need a vision so they can believe in their future. We help them visualize their thinking, and we try to set their

mentality in a positive way.

Instead of just rebuilding what they used to have, which would be impossible anyway, we wanted them to think about building a new future. After all, if you rebuild a nursery school or junior high school to what it used to be, you're going backward. We see it instead as an opportunity to incorporate everything that's been learned. So we put forth counterproposals that fit the culture of the area. We sent teams of architecture students and professors to each of the little fishing villages to listen to the people and come up with ideas. Some were very successful and were accepted by the central government. Some were totally ignored.

We also wanted to work with local businesses to start a workshop with kids, to teach them the local fishing or forestry techniques, because those were the area's main industries. We want the next generation to understand what life was like before the disaster. We also helped the local government run a nationwide competition so they could come up with the best possible design for each project and create an ambitious building program. A nursing school and junior high school were built in this way, and social housing is coming.

What is your particular part of the reconstruction?

Through my Japanese architecture firm, which I started more than 20 years ago, I'm designing social housing for people who lost their homes. It has to be built quickly. Right now, many people are living in temporary shelters—at first, in big gymnasiums at the local schools, which is a horrible place to live, and then in prefab units that are really small. In Japanese law, temporary shelters have a limitation of three years. But because everything was in such confusion, the construction has been delayed. So the government extended the three years to five, and they're rushing to build. It's urgent. ArchiAid also did an

international workshop with students from different schools, including Princeton, Columbia and UCLA. It's a part of our mission to communicate what happened and what we learned, to hand this knowledge down to the next generation. We want to take the opportunity to educate architecture students. To assist with fundraising and to increase visibility, I have also helped organize some exhibitions outside Japan on the work of ArchiAid. There was one at the MAK Center [for Art and Architecture] in West Hollywood.

How would you like the new social housing to differ from the old?

There are sometimes notions that everybody in social housing should have the same environment, apartments exactly alike. But quality of life is different from being equal. For instance, it's nice to have a window facing to the south, but if everybody is lined up, it's almost like a bureaucratic office or an oldstyle hospital. There's no sense of community or chance of people getting together. The physical environment influences the way you behave. We believe it's important to create an environment that encourages people to interact. In traditional social housing, you would just walk along an empty corridor to your house. Once you arrive, there's no way to see anybody else; you're just looking at the south window and that's it. We wanted to create situations where you might see somebody on a terrace or through a window as you walk by. It's an especially big issue because the social housing will be occupied by elderly people, who can become extremely isolated. We want to prevent such a thing by promoting interaction. We want to create a strong community, to encourage people to care about each other.

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