

Art-Based Approach for Developing Disaster Improvisation Capabilities

***Notes from a research trip to Japan and a call for
interested parties***

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The possibility of destruction is a constant element of everyday life in Japan. Television is overlaid with earthquake alerts and tsunami warnings. Disaster communication services are standard in all cell phones. Emergency supplies are installed in public parks. Monolithic canyons have been created deep under the foundations of the Tokyo mega region, in an attempt to prevent major flooding. The first thing that children learn at school is how to react in the event of an earthquake. Needless to say, Japan is a world leader in preparedness and when disaster does strike (within predicted limits) modern buildings and physical infrastructure fare relatively well.

At the same time, we know that ‘hard’ technocratic approaches to disaster management are insufficient. They may be measurable and fundable, but their facade of efficiency encourages us to take the risks for granted, and make less effort to bother even preparing for an unexpected event. In proposing a ‘New Deal for Japan’ after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Christian Dimmer, Assistant Professor at the University of Tokyo, stressed the importance of recovery as “a continuous process through which civil society can develop more fully, communities can grow again closer, and the entire country can become more resilient and self-reliant.”¹ Dimmer cited a Japanese government commission which responded to the unsatisfactory government response to the 1995 Kobe earthquake, by proposing working toward a future where “tough yet flexible individuals will participate in and expand public forums on their own initiative,” developing individuals and a society that can “address pioneering challenges, and are more creative and imaginative.”

1 <http://www.japanecho.net/society/0091/>

Experience shows that communities cannot rely on simply ‘toughing it out’ until the government and other formal organizations can deliver necessary resources. Even when food, water, shelter and health needs are met, official reports and personal stories reveal that the psychosocial perceptions of those who experience disasters produce immediate effects with long-term consequences². While accepting that top-down approaches have their place in disaster recovery planning, Christian Dimmer recommends that in addition to being evaluated in terms of tangible outcomes the ways in which those outcomes contribute to the empowerment of civil society also need to be considered.

From my perspective as a researcher/designer of environments for fostering creative interactions, and as someone who often participates in activities that could be called ‘art,’ I have both experienced and witnessed the incremental psychological, social, and/or environmental effects that emerge when diverse people are able to enjoy unexpected encounters with everyday objects. I am aware that these ‘curious encounters’ can stimulate innovative thinking, and initiate conversations that strengthen diverse community connections. Nurturing innovative and collaborative problem solving that can inform and assist people in coping with the unexpected consequences of a disaster does not ignore the necessity for safe and hygienic shelter, nor the importance of access to food, water and basic facilities. Designing opportunities for community members to practice collaborative goal setting and problem solving, in a safe environment that encourages the expression of diverse spiritual and cultural practices, can develop and strengthen crucial community capabilities identified by the Psychosocial Recovery Advisory Group that formed after the 2010/11 Canterbury earthquakes (Mooney et al., 2011).

Art activities that draw people together can be more effective than pharmaceutical remedies in the short term, and top-down attempts at community building in the longer term³. Humans have been developing ameliorating disaster improvisation rituals since ancient

² For information from a New Zealand context refer to Mooney, Paton, Terte, et al.’s 2011 NZ Journal of Psychology article: *Psychosocial Recovery from Disasters: A Framework Informed by Evidence*. <http://www.psychology.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/NZJP-Vol404-2011-6-Mooney.pdf>

³ For an introduction to a number of Japanese artist’s approaches to dealing with disaster see http://artterritory.com/en/texts/articles/2166-how_art_can_heal_the_scars_left_by_a_catastrophe/.

times. For example, Japanese author Kyohei Sakaguchi, in his account of his family's autonomous evacuation from the recent (April 16, 2016) Kumamoto earthquake wrote:

“Music and stories, regarded as two of the most useless things in times of crisis, functioned as the best medicines for the children... Dance with the sounds. Stamp the ground as you dance. Following the banging of the Taiko⁴, perhaps the act of ‘dancing’ was born out of the desire to soothe the fear of earthquakes.”⁵

Sakaguchi recalls how he and his family dealt with the trauma during the strong aftershocks following the first earthquake:

“The kids must have been full of nervous tension. In an attempt to soothe their nerves, I took my guitar out of my study and started to sing some of my own songs. The children began to pick up stuff that had been thrown around the room and began banging and shaking them, producing their own rhythms. We danced around the room - a band of crazed and wonderful minstrels... Finally, Ao [his daughter] performed a solo at the top of her lungs and fell on the floor, laughing for the first time since the earthquakes started.”

Art offers spontaneous and tangible methods for addressing the physical aspects of disaster preparedness and response. Fluency in the flexible manipulation of everyday, non-specialised materials is helpful when confronting unexpected everyday challenges that appear in disaster areas. Prosaic examples from Kumamoto evacuation centres set up in schools and public buildings illustrate this idea. Examples include using waste cardboard boxes from relief activities to create changing rooms and partitions (addressing privacy, breast feeding, and changing concerns while decreasing congestion in public toilet areas and improving hygiene), beds

4 Traditional Japanese drum.

5 All excerpts from texts by Kyohei Sakaguchi are my own translations based on texts supplied by the author.

(enabling older people who were unable to stand up easily after lying on the floor, to rise and take exercise), and sun shades (addressing heat and light concerns, enabling better sleeping conditions). Small-scale agricultural hot houses have been turned into shelters, and curtains and insect nets for school gymnasiums have been fashioned from found materials. Simple handicraft methods for delineating space have proved effective in fostering small-group formation with large-scale evacuation centres. This has measurable effects such as decongesting lines of communication with the authorities (group leaders act as go betweens), shortening waiting times for food and water rations (representatives collect rations for the whole group), and alleviating 'economy class syndrome' through the ease with which small groups can be aware of one another and organize collective daily exercises.

At the other extreme, Kyohei Sakaguchi has proposed a Kumamoto "workshop in a disaster zone" as an alternative to an evacuation centre. Here, evacuees across the age range build mobile houses that become their homes. Through a process of building, dwelling and thinking disaster 'victims' develop the abilities to generate new concepts and ways of living which carry them through into a more resilient, adaptable and pleasurable future.

Artistic methods are opportunistic and exploratory. Foothold finding. They take existing knowledge (techniques) and concepts as foundations and jump-off points. They connect tradition and contemporary concerns, taking solace in rich cultures while seeking new paths. Seemingly simple or irrelevant acts can be surprisingly effective. We are not just talking about singing and dancing while apartment blocks crumble, but building problem solving capacities that encourage responding mindfully without needing recourse to fixed guidelines. We recognize the power of the creative individual and trust in social processes of knowledge transfer and transformation.

Art-based disaster improvisation explores organic processes that are akin to self-healing. By designing spaces where creativity can flourish, this approach to disaster preparedness values and affirms individuals and groups' evolving adaptability, rather than any repeated attempts at reconstructing their fragile permanence

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*"Making furniture out of de-construction junk at Hostel Yume-Nomad, Kobe, Japan. 2016"
(Project by Xin Cheng)*



"Practicing making stable structures from cardboard and sticks at a Tokyo Kindergarten, 2016"

A Proposal and Invitation

The above discussion begs the questions: “What are the relevant artistic methods, how can we leverage them in practical situations, and in what ways can we foster skills in such areas?”

Auckland-based artist/researcher Xin Cheng⁶ and I would like to propose a series of workshops and discussions in the pursuit of an art-based approach to disaster response which develops the improvisation capabilities of everyday people. This approach can happen in any and all everyday environments, from schools to nursing homes, community gardens to supermarkets.

We invite all interested parties to join in an exploration with us. For our part, we derive methods from our ongoing experiments in creating environments for creativity and working with resources at hand. Examples include a term-long self-building workshop at a local primary school⁷, a month-long outdoor workshop at headland Sculpture on the Gulf⁸, and a public programme in Artspace, which explored ways of interacting with our Super City through a series of walks, workshops and publications⁹.

At present we are in Japan on a “research and doing” exploration, investigating aspects of the ‘shelter crisis’¹⁰. Near-future projects include a programme of shelter-themed workshops and education activities with TEMP outdoor art science forums and labs at Corban Estate Arts Centre, and *small modifications*, a five-week public programme at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery which will investigate themes such as collaboratively transforming everyday materials and spare parts to co-create alternative perspectives of living.

In the spirit of this brief text we are ALWAYS open to suggestion and conversation. Please do contact us.

6 <http://xin-cheng.info>

7 <http://small-workshop.info/sww/>

8 <http://h.making-doing.info/about>

9 <http://md.making-doing.info/>

10 <http://jpn.making-doing.info>

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"Children worked with improvised blades at a kindergarten workshop in Tokyo, 2016"