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Health and wellbeing hub

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Place and public health: the impact of architecture on wellbeing

Architecture helps shape the quality of our environments and can contribute to health and happiness, writes **Karl Johnson**

Karl Johnson
Guardian Professional, Tuesday 11 June 2013 12.19 EDT



A school-girl visits Yoshihama elementary school in Kitakami, devastated by the 2011 Japanese tsunami. Architects and residents have collaborated to build a youth and market centre providing a safe community building. Photograph: Kimimasa Mayama/EPA

When discussing public health, architecture is not generally the first thing that springs to mind. Yet its influence on us is inescapable.

Architects play a critical role in shaping the qualities of our environment; they work in collaboration with end users and their needs and ambitions, and they have the power to restore and promote solidarity, mental and physical health and be a source of happiness.

At [Architecture for Humanity](#), we don't have to look far to find evidence of a building's positive impact – in any and every corner of the world. Our mission takes us where basic needs are most profound: from communities facing poverty and climate change to those recovering post-disaster. Through a participatory design process, architecture can tailor specific solutions to sudden or corrosive natural and man-made forces.

'We Are One' Market and Youth Center, Japan

In 2011, a [tsunami struck Japan](#), sweeping entire villages out to sea. As the wheels of the federal reconstruction machine slowly began to roll, hundreds of thousands of people were left on standby. They must have anticipated several years of a constrained lifestyle, one that often leaves a profound impression on a community's youngest and oldest

members.

In Kitakami, three primary schools consolidated on one surviving campus. The overburdened classrooms and facilities, in addition to cramped temporary housing, left no space for students to relax or study. Meanwhile, Kitakami adults struggled to find convenient groceries. The closest market was a 15-minute drive away, with the elderly relying on neighbours to take them shopping.

Naomi Sato, a mother and temporary housing resident, envisioned a combined roadside market and youth centre for Kitakami, which she named We Are One. In her vision, the centre would sell fresh food and supplies, and provide a safe, clean and peaceful space for children. The centre would employ a small group of mothers to stock and vend merchandise and look after the youth activities.

Sato was introduced to architect Fumihiko Sasaki, whose firm had built a reputation on small-scale wooden projects. A traditional Japanese building material, wood carries with it a sense of comfort, and, when left untreated for interior finishes, lowers the risks of combined indoor ailments known as sick building syndrome.

The client and architect collaborated to design a building focusing on health, inside and out, from the fresh fish and community garden vegetables sold in the market to the thermal and acoustic insulation imbued by the walls themselves, to the carpentry construction techniques. The innovative building system pieced together several wood frame modules, a strategy that reduced the overall cost. The layout placed the till at the threshold between the market and youth centre – so one person could manage the diverse goings-on. Other design decisions ensured that the centre would quickly and permanently make up for the post-tsunami loss of public space.

After opening in January, the centre rapidly filled its events calendar with everything from English classes (the only in the area) to reconstruction meetings with groups such as the Japanese Institute of Architects. The market now provides everyday goods and produce for hundreds living in the nearby temporary housing complex, and hot meals entice travellers passing along the highway. Four Kitakami women now work at the market – reversing a pre-disaster employment trend children's room has tables, crafts and an abundance of natural light.

"Sometimes we feel overwhelmed to see many challenges in front of ourselves," Sato writes. "However, we also feel very fortunate to see big smiles on children's faces at events of the youth centre." An inaugural Saturday design workshop drew two dozen primary school-aged students and the youth centre has scheduled a series of art workshops with local non-profits throughout the summer.

Architecture beyond wellbeing

A close relationship between a perceptive architect their end-user client lays a figurative foundation for the best kind of building – one that honours the needs and wellbeing of those who will use it. This level of collaboration is not a default in the development of the built environment, but greatly determines how well a community lives and thrives.

We're seeing in Kitakami the impact of a building empowering a village to move beyond several daunting challenges to tsunami recovery, and becoming an active participant in that village's growth.

Karl Johnson is the communications associate at Architecture for Humanity headquarters in San Francisco. He has developed projects in Canada, Costa Rica, Haiti, Japan and California through a lens of community led design.

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