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Research in Japan #1

individual social responsibility

a case study in iga-city, mie-prefecture, japan

INTRODUCTION

To change the path from wasting resources towards minimizing the use of finite resources the 3R-strategy (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) is regarded as a cornerstone of sustainability. In terms of building stock management this means reducing the 'scrap and build' mentality that focuses primarily on new building activities in favour of maintenance, renovation, upgrade and reuse strategies to extend the service life of existing buildings. Architects as building professionals are well aware of these issues and should regard themselves as pioneers in disseminating the knowledge about and advantages of such strategies. To reach an even wider audience than just the normal clients, a new understanding of Individual Social Responsibility of professionals may be necessary.

BACKGROUND

One of the buzzwords in contemporary discussions about sustainability is taking on the responsibility of corporations not only for their shareholders but for the societies in which they operate – Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR. To inform about their socially responsible activities corporations have started to compile so called CSR reports. But while talking about

it we sometimes forget that it is the 'Individual which make the Corporate'. So if we speak about responsibility for the society we should speak about Individual Social Responsibility or ISR as well.

Generally it is well agreed upon the fact, that every citizen in a society has rights as well as responsibilities, the ancient rule of giving and taking. In a philanthropic point of view the act of giving comes before or even without considering taking. It may be described as *“the power of donating, volunteering & campaigning”* (“Individual Social Responsibility“ 2009).

The WCIF (“WCIF position“ 2009) describes it as *“the engagement of each person towards the community where he lives, which can be expressed as an interest towards what’s happening in the community, as well as in the active participation in the solving of some of the local problems“*.

In my opinion it should be seen as a much broader concept, as this definition focuses only on the local community and should be opened up to include the global community and virtual communities as well. Even while travelling we encounter people we might engage with even if for a very short time only.

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following the
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Design of the Park
Library in Medellin,
Colombia

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CASE STUDY

Iga City, Mie Prefecture, Japan

In 2004/2005 I lived in Japan for twelve months. After having worked for Toyo Ito for half a year I decided to use the next half year to travel the country and learn more about Japan. During this time I did some volunteering on the basis of lodge and food for work. One place I stayed for a while was Iga City in Mie Prefecture. There I had the chance to use my knowledge as an architect to repair an old Japanese wooden house, which was used as an English school for children and adults and where about three to five volunteers found accommodation.

When I arrived in February 2005, the house was in a very bad state. Not only was it neglected by the then residents and hardly maintained as a place for people to live, but some of the original wooden and tatami floors on ground floor were removed to make space for a car to park inside the house !! All the walls were covered with garden fences, which were also used as gates. My immediate idea was to reverse some of the changes that had altered the house so badly. After a couple of days for cleaning out garbage and somehow organising available tools and materials that the volunteers found in the house, a couple of sliding doors as well, we proposed the owner to restore the wooden floor in the main room, the heart of the house. The owner didn't have much money but was willing to spend some 20.000 Yen for timber.

Even though the central room was our main aim, we basically cleaned and repaired almost the whole inside

of the house, including a backyard building, that was used as kitchen and dining room, the garden and the shower with no financial support but our bare hands.

Some pictures (see below) show the work we did.

As I pass by this house at least once a year, I have regularly the chance to see how it develops over the years. I guess the owner's decision to use this house as accommodation for foreign volunteers that teach English was based on the fact that due to its originally bad state it was virtually impossible to let. I can even remember that the owner considered to pull it down and use the cleared site as parking space. But since two years a young couple has been living in the house. In this sense our efforts have contributed even further than just to improve the current situation. It may have helped in improving the house to a state where it became possible to find an interested tenant, thus contributing to a small-scale regeneration.

Originally nobody expected me to rebuild anything, instead just to teach a bit of conversational English. But a situation like this when one is able to help beyond the initial mutual agreement is a quite satisfying experience. Once finished everybody was full of surprise, the owner, the users and of course the volunteers that helped to make this miracle happen in just a couple of days.

CONCLUSION

To encounter situations like this, where one is able, because of professional knowledge maybe even more able than others to improve a situation, is always unexpected. But it should be regarded within the responsibilities of professionals to help with their abilities of professional expertise. If this kind of advice is paid, partly paid or eventually unpaid and simply a voluntary action depends on the situation of course, but should not be reduced to paid and thus purely professional responsibilities. In terms of social responsibilities, the surprise, joy and happiness of the people helped can be even more fulfilling than any payment, which highlights the fact, that it is always the 'Individual that make the Corporate'.

So I think, I will have many chances to contribute with my abilities to other people's and the society's benefit beyond obligations in my professional career.

REFERENCES

Individual Social Responsibility. (2009). In *isrworld*. Retrieved December 13, 2009, from <http://www.isrworld.org/>
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That's how it used to be:



10.02.2005: Front room



10.02.2005: Central room after cleaning up



10.02.2005: Courtyard



10.02.2005: Backyard building



05.02.2005: Kitchen and dining room in backyard building

The change:



21.02.2005: Wood had arrived



22.02.2005: The doors shut properly



23.02.2005: Next came the primary loadbearing structure for the floor



24.02.2005: Then the secondary loadbearing structure



25.02.2005: And finally the boards



15.05.2005: Finished, three months later

Some “before – after” impressions:



05.02.2005: The Garden – before ...



09.05.2005: ... and after



10.02.2005: Inner courtyard – before ...



16.05.2005: ... and after