

Constructing Food Stalls in a Tsunami-Hit Town: The Case of a Reconstruction Approach in Otsuchi Town, Iwate Prefecture

Shin OSAKI

OVERVIEW OF OTSUCHI¹

Otsuchi (大槌), located in the middle part of Iwate Prefecture and facing the Pacific Ocean, was a town with a population of 15,000 before the earthquake. The area is approximately 200 km², 90% of which are forests and open fields; only 1% is housing land. The population density was high, and ranked fifth among prefectural municipalities. The extent of damage from the earthquake and tsunami was massive, with more than 10% of the population (1,600) either dead or missing. The number of evacuees accounted for was 4,300; initially, about 9,000 people had been unaccounted for. According to the damage classification by the Iwate Prefectural Government, Otsuchi Town's damage was classified as the most serious "Catastrophic" type. Also included in this type were the Taro (田老) district of Miyako City (宮古市), Yamada Town (山田町), and Rikuzentakata City (陸前高田市); the media has frequently reported the staggering level of their damage.

Otsuchi Town borders Yamada Town to the north and Kamaishi City (釜石市) to the south, and it faces Otsuchi Bay and Funakoshi Bay (船越湾). The southern half of Otsuchi Bay belongs to Kamaishi City. In the coastal area, the Otsuchi River and Kozuchi River (小鉾川), flowing into Otsuchi Bay, form a sort of skeleton for the open plains. At the most downstream confluence point of the two rivers, there is a central urban district called Machikata (町方). Located to the side are fishing village such as Ando

(安渡) and Akahama (赤浜). There are two other settlements called Kirikiri (吉里吉里) and Namiita (浪板) that face the neighboring Funakoshi Bay. The town, with the exception of the mountainous settlements, mainly consists of those five settlements.

The railroad (JR Yamada Line), National Highway Route 45, and the old National Highway Route form a skeletal transportation axis from north to south. Looking at the elevation data, it is quite obvious that flat land suitable for residential areas is limited to the two riverfronts and the bay entrance area; thus, the location requires a very close relationship with the sea.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DAMAGE

Observing the tsunami-flooded area from the data provided by Iwate Prefecture, it is apparent that nearly the entire urban district of Otsuchi was inundated. Particularly hard hit districts were the area south east of the old National Highway route in Machikata, as well as Komakura (小枕), Ando,



Photo 1 Extent of damage (central district in Otsuchi)

Shin OSAKI, Assistant Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, University of Tokyo

and Akahama; there, wooden buildings were almost all swept away. The few concrete buildings that had managed to remain were also greatly damaged.

Let me explain the above circumstances with photographs. I took Photograph 1 on April 19th. Looking at the central Otsuchi district from the port side, one can see that nothing remains. The hill in the center is called Shiroyama (城山), and on it there is the Central Community Center. The hall functions as the evacuation center for the town. At the foot of this hill is the Town Office, now flooded. This area is the core of Otsuchi Town.



Photo 2 Extent of damage (along the Kotsuchi River)

This photograph shows the Kozuchi River. The Kozuchi River had a floodgate, while the Otsuchi River did not. Though the tsunami run-up distance was 3km on the Otsuchi, it was only 2km on the Kozuchi thanks, allegedly, to the floodgate. In the central urban area, 52% of the building sites were inundated, the most in the prefecture. Also, as indicated by its classification as “Catastrophic,” the entire urban district had been washed away and almost all commercial and productive functions had stopped. There were no stores. Later, one convenience store along the National Highway Route, a Lawson store, resumed business. At lunchtime, there were incredibly long lines to buy foodstuffs.

Another characteristic was the paralysis of Otsuchi’s administrative functions. Not only the mayor, but also seven out of the twelve section chiefs were also swept away in the tsunami. Other Town Office workers also

suffered or were seriously affected. As a result, newly recruited workers at the Town Office were suddenly assigned to hard work. For example, because the family register data had been washed away, they had to start from scratch by making a name list of the town residents.

THE BEGINNING OF HELP WITH RECONSTRUCTION

When we entered Otsuchi Town for the first time, the local residents were living from day to day and could not envision a future plan for the town. About 70 days had passed, but the residents were still deeply concerned about what would happen to them. One reason we were in Otsuchi Town was because our research facility, the Atmosphere and Ocean Research Institute of the University of Tokyo, happened to be located in the Akahama district. Therefore, in relation to the campus planning, it was suggested that we would enter this region. In addition, Professor Yu Nakai of UTCE was commissioned by the Iwate Prefectural Government to go to Otsuchi as an adviser. And then, the Landscape and Civic Design Laboratory of UTCE, along with the Urban Design Laboratory of the Department of Urban Engineering, began to be active. On top of that, experts on tsunami and fisheries joined them, thereby organizing the University of Tokyo Otsuchi Reconstruction Assistance Team. We began to discuss what we could do for Otsuchi in around the middle of May.

Our team came up with various ideas, but it was obvious that if we were to suddenly begin talking about subjects such as urban structures, neither the administration nor the locals of Otsuchi Town would have been ready to accept any of them. Therefore, we came to the conclusion that we should first focus on what we could do to simply encourage them.

The Urban Design Lab, upon learning that the

discussion on town development by the locals had started in the Akahama district, where the Atmosphere and Ocean Research Institute was located, began to help them. Meanwhile, the Landscape and Civic Design Lab, to which I belonged, felt that there should be a venue to discuss various topics among the local residents. Since many were living scattered at that time in evacuation centers, making their own separate spaces with cardboard walls, we thought about creating a community-gathering place for them. But we knew of no channel to make suggestions. Just when we thought we had no choice but to consult the Town Office, we learned, by chance, of “YUICCO Otsuchi,” a local aid organization that had just been founded.

“YUICCO” is a group of volunteers centered around cities such as Kitakami (北上) and Hanamaki (花巻) in the inland area of Iwate Prefecture. There was no YUICCO center in Otsuchi at that time, but the founding members were strongly encouraged by the YUICCO staff to found one, which made them feel that they, too, had to do something. Finally, three people, Mr. K and Mr. A from the Ando district of Otsuchi and one more person, founded YUICCO Otsuchi. That was around the 20th of May.



Photo 3 First residents' meeting

The first activity of YUICCO Otsuchi was to gather residents' opinions by hosting the “Residents' Meeting on the Town's Reconstruction.” This photo shows the first meeting. The venue was a corridor in Ando Elementary School, which was also an evacuation center in the Ando district.

FOOD STALLS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR DISCUSSION

On May 31st, we attended the first YUICCO Otsuchi meeting, and after that, we explained our plan to representatives Mr. A and Mr. K. By June 1st, we had decided to establish food stalls. We immediately informed the residents of that, and they said, “By all means, let's do it.” Actually, Mr. K used to run an izakaya restaurant and bar before the disaster. To some degree, that was why the idea was decided upon rather quickly. Still, very little was decided as to how to finance the project and supply food materials. On the project proposal, it was written simply, “We'll figure it out as we go along.”

After making a snap decision on the plan, we began to discuss how we should proceed with the project. We could “go big” by seeking an infusion of public subsidies, but in the long run, perhaps that would not take root in the local area. In the end, we decided that local residents should contribute to the project little by little. Since this project was not about assisting businesses, running food stalls was not our direct goal. Thus, it was important that we create a “public venue” with food stalls as its medium. For example, the place could be used for food stalls at night and for “kamishibai (紙芝居)” (i.e. picture-card shows for children) during the day. Middle-school children could stop by for ice cream after school, and it could also be a café-like place where grandmothers could visit to enjoy sweets. Of course, it did not have to

be limited to the food business; we suggested that they should not limit the type of profession or target customers.

In addition, we asked a designer named Katsushi Nagumo to join our team. Mr. Nagumo is a food stall aficionado, and the founder of the “*Nippon Zenkoku Yatai Darake Kurabu* (日本全国ヤタイダラケ倶楽部)” (i.e. food-stalls-everywhere-in-Japan club). He is a designer of furniture, including street furniture. He frequently designs furniture using wooden materials such as cedar. Thus, he had ample experience making wooden food stalls as well. He was indispensable for our project.

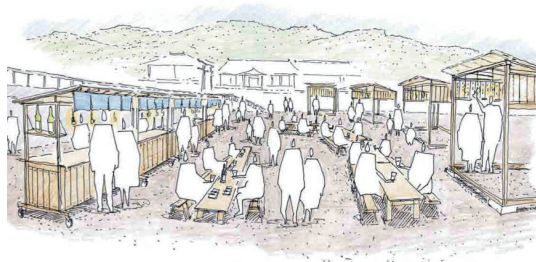


Figure 1 Design image of food stalls
Note: The image was drawn by Katsushi NAGUMO.

We asked Mr. Nagumo to design food stalls after explaining the aforementioned plan to create a venue for the future where local residents could get together. At the least, we asked him to make two food stalls, benches and tables. There was also a hut called an “*ema-goya* (絵馬小屋),” which people can use as a place of shelter when it rains. It was arranged so that anybody could draw doodles and graffiti or scribble messages praying for reconstruction on the walls and waist panels.

Next, we had to find an actual site for this project. This was also difficult. The initial idea was the premises of a Shinto shrine called Kozuchi Shrine at the foot of Shiroyama, which did not work out. Half ready to give up, we asked the Shinto priest who owned the private property in front of the shrine.

The owner happened to be an ex-classmate of Mr. K. Later, Mr. K contacted the owner and he easily agreed to lend the land. Thus, the venue was decided.

Another thing that we had difficulty obtaining was lumber. How could we supply lumber for the food stalls? But, this problem also found a solution thanks to the personal network of Mr. K. As we were talking over lunch at a restaurant in the Namiita district, Mr. K suddenly told us that he knew an acquaintance who had been the senior managing director of a lumber mill. He called the senior managing director and, thirty minutes later, we were visiting the lumber mill. We explained our project plan to the president of the mill, who had happened to be in the office, and negotiated over whether we could use their left-over fragments of wood. The president got angry. He said, “You can’t make food stalls with left-over wood. If you want to make decent food stalls, why didn’t you say you needed decent materials?” That made sense. So, we asked the question again. The president said, “Take anything you want from the warehouse.” We were all aghast. Nobody thought that on the same day we could have the prospect of obtaining lumber. We thanked him profusely. Then, the senior managing director took us to the warehouse. After the disaster, this lumber mill had also been flooded and the discolored materials had lost commercial value, he said. We consulted him over future arrangements. This senior managing director was very enthusiastic about helping us. We were there only to get the materials, but he even arranged premachining as well, without telling the president.

As the opening day approached, we made fliers. Yet we could not secure enough people to hand them out to evacuation centers. So, our ad campaign started on June 23rd, just one day before the opening day. That day was a Saturday; with the cooperation of volunteers, we managed to disseminate 300 fliers.

THE MAKING OF FOOD STALLS: REPORT ON THE TWO DAYS THEY WERE MADE

The location of this picture is the premises in front of the Kozuchi Shinto Shrine. There were two piles of crushed stones. Mr. K had obtained them for free after negotiating with a builder, an acquaintance of his. We needed those stones to level the ground. There had been small bits of glass on the ground due to the flooding. As soon as we began the laying operation with the lab members, a man sauntered up to us, asking, “What are you doing?” After hearing



Photo 4 Venue before construction

our explanation, he said, “Doing that operation by hand is very hard,” and then left. A few minutes later, he returned in a loader, and before we knew it, he had finished leveling the ground.

The next step was making food stalls. This picture shows us working after borrowing equipment from the mill. That aforementioned senior managing director was so nice to let us use their workspace and equipment. Local carpenters and volunteers also helped us assemble food stalls. Several days before this, the frames of stalls had been assembled by two carpenters. That day, we managed to complete the manufacture of one stall. We set it up in the plaza and tested it on the eve of the festival. The next day, we made another stall and additional benches and tables, as well as an “*ema* (絵馬)” hut. We barely made it



Photo 5 Students working at lumber mill



Photo 6 Local people assembling food stall to the opening day.

In the end, we manufactured two food stalls, one *ema* hut (we planned to make two, but ran out of time), two sets of benches and tables. Just before the opening of the event, we had Mr. and Mrs. K write the names of the stalls as the finishing touch.

After the tsunami disaster, there had been nothing at all in this area where the food stalls were set up now. So, the sight of small lights illuminating the pitch-black darkness was quite moving. Those lights were made possible by an electric generator, which we were able to have, thanks, again, to one of Mr. K's



Photo 7 Just before opening

acquaintances.

As for the visitors, few locals were there on the opening day. That was because not all evacuation centers were located within walking distance of our venue. That day, a few people came from the evacuation center in Shiroyama that was closest to us. Many people had lost their cars to the tsunami, and everyone had difficulty in terms of access. But one middle-aged local man said with deep feeling, "The sake tastes so good in a situation like this."

Q & A SESSION

The Characterization of the Food Stall Project in the Regional Community

Terada: Do you intend to further create plazas centered around Shinto shrines? Or will you try to discover places that the locals are attached to in a special way? How are you going to create some kind of spatial network with the cooperation of local citizens?

Osaki: I think that the Shinto shrine is the center of this town. Basically, we felt we should create a place at the shrine for the good of the entire town. Furthermore, since individual communities are now scattered around, this kind of place should be created for every community. The ideal would be to create a network of those places while at the same time judiciously allocating different roles according to their differences. But in reality we are not at that stage yet. That we were able to borrow the land in front of the Shinto shrine was sheer luck. We don't know how long we can continue to use it. If by chance a relatively large aftershock comes and a tsunami warning is issued, that place will be off limits. Also, businesspeople may have mixed feelings about this project because they want to start or resume businesses but cannot do so right now. So,

we need to continue to do this while finding a balance between the ideal and reality.

Sato: I've been involved with citizens' activities in Iitate Village (飯館村), Fukushima Prefecture where residents were forced to evacuate due to the nuclear power plant accident. One thing I learned there is that what outsiders do out of good intentions for the locals more often than not ends up alienating them, sometimes even changing the direction local residents wished to go. How do you feel about the relationship with the locals for the future? For example, how will you broaden the relationship with those who were involved with this food stall project? And if or when you eventually leave the town, how will you handle that relationship in the future?

Osaki: In the case of this project, only the locals who were eager to participate came. And that's okay, I think. There are those who are willing to do this in the local community and they cooperate with the outsiders who want to help them, which is just fine if the two sides mesh well and achieve something. As for how we leave the town or the timing of us leaving the project, I think the ideal time would be when the locals become independent enough in terms of physical power and ideas.

Suzuki: Isn't it important to not only host events like this, but also develop everyday communication?

Osaki: I'm not very familiar with the laws on hygiene, but the setup of those food stalls was allowed only because it was characterized as an event project. The limit on the duration of an event is one week, but as an alternative, it seems possible to repeatedly hold a short-term event.

Suzuki: I'd imagine it's not easy. You started from

here, but then how you could smoothly get into the daily lives of residents may be the next thing you might want to think about.

Osaki: As expected, the age group involved in the project is lopsided when holding an event only at night. In order to truly integrate into the lives of the locals, we should aim at creating venues for different people to utilize, particularly for the comings and goings of women and children.

How to Utilize the Power of the Regional Community

Mori: Did local groups in the Otsuchi area often hold residents' meetings in the first place?

Osaki: I think they did. In the Ando and Akahama districts, in particular, I find their community bonds very strong. Among the University of Tokyo project teams, the Urban Design Lab has more contacts and a stronger connection with the local community than we, the Landscape and Civic Design Lab. They have been assisting the Akahama district in examining their town development. For instance, some residents have rather extreme ideas: they want the tide embankment to be 25 meters high. In response, the Urban Design Lab may provide them with a specific feasibility plan: "If the embankment is 25 meters high," they would explain, "that may look like this and cause this." Or if some residents say, "I want to move to a place where the sea waves will never reach," lab researchers will show them how to realize their wish. In this manner, we've been assisting the locals so that town development will take concrete shape.

Suzuki: Is that kind of activity going on only in the Akahama district?

Osaki: Yes. For now, only in Akahama. We believe

that this kind of painstaking assistance work is necessary in every settlement, but so far, other districts have not yet adopted it. In the Kirikiri settlement, where the sense of community is very strong, it may be happening.

Mori: There is a power structure in almost every settlement. There are often biased situations against outsiders in which only certain, special local people can participate. How will you incorporate opinions of those who are unwilling to express themselves in their settlement?

Osaki: That can happen in town development during normal times. But we're not in normal times now, and everyone is trying desperately to cope with the current situation they're in and thinking about how to improve it. Still, we cannot force residents to get involved in town development; so, as for now, it's okay if they work on a voluntary basis. Eventually, when examining the reconstruction of the town in a proper fashion, we should focus more on the voices of rank-and-file town residents.

Kamiyama: While listening to your presentation, I felt that the key would be how to further expand this activity in the future. Do you have plans to create opportunities for more townspeople to gather at events such as a summer festival at the Shinto shrine?

Osaki: Yes, as strategies, not as plans. We're not sure if the local festival will take place this year, but Otsuchi has been selected as one of the eight coastal fireworks sites for the "Light Up Japan" event. The date is August 11th. They're really up for it; 2,000 fireworks will be set off. Nike is one of the sponsors, so it will be quite an event. This is going to be an opportunity, I think. Also, in mid-September, Shinto rituals will be held at the Kozuchi Shrine. This may

not be a festival, but we could expect some turnout at least. The place for food stalls is traditionally the point where the “*mikoshi* (神輿)” (i.e. portable shrine) would depart, a very important spot on the festival route.

Kim: Since the time this project was launched to date, how have things changed? I’m talking about the extent of reconstruction, the conditions of evacuation centers, and volunteer activities.

Osaki: Our project does not necessarily cover the entire area or condition of the town, so we don’t know the details. But the commercial function has been gradually recovering, and it seems that its center has shifted to the areas along the Kozuchi River, where there is the Lawson convenience store on one side and a large-scale commercial complex opposite it. There seems to be another plan in town to create something like a Food Stall Village, but because it’s more of a business endeavor, some are opposed to it. In terms of the evacuation centers, they are mostly elementary schools, the Community Centers, and Shinto shrines. Currently there are several centers in every settlement. There were nearly 100 separate emergency shelters after the disaster. Now it’s down to about twenty.

Terada: I believe that this project had the intention of restoring venues for the locals to gather, in the same way as they used to. For a method to assemble people, how do you feel about the relationship between this project and the approaches of restoring people’s performing arts and traditional events?

Osaki: Those approaches have already started in the local area. For example, they are discussing how to make the costume for the mikoshi parade because it was washed away by the tsunami. Such approaches

are also very important, so we would like to do both while considering their frequency.

Notes

1 Figures on the extent of damage as of late July, 2011. All photos were taken by the author unless otherwise stated.