

Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction

Revitalizing Kitakata, Fukushima Prefecture

Asst. Prof. Tad Hara / Asst. Prof. Steve Jones

University of Tsukuba / San Francisco State University

Abstract: Kitakata is located in the Aizu area in Fukushima Prefecture. Kitakata is well known for its old style warehouses made of brick, clay and stucco. The city is rich with regional resources, such as traditional Japanese lacquerware, agriculture and food products such as fine sake and ramen noodle. However, the city center has seen a decline in recent years¹. The problem was made even more apparent after the March 11, 2011 earthquake.

The impetus for the *Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction* workshop started a couple years prior with discussions of a “cross-Pacific” course between students at the University of Tsukuba and San Francisco State University. The workshop evolved to serve two functions—expand the students’ education, and research methods. The aim was to bring together a cross-cultural group of students, and a mix of problem solving styles to address the problem of structural revitalization in the context of underused/misused/abandoned architectural structures.

The San Francisco State University students with their a culturally different life experience, brought a perspective not found by the local designers and city planners—the community from Kitakata also learned from the students as well.

Two years after the 2011 earthquake, Fukushima Prefecture is still suffering from various problems, such as, radiation contamination, and damage to the reputation of its food products. In contrast, Kitakata suffered the least amount of physical damage (in comparison with other regions within Fukushima Prefecture). The project/workshop contributed to the revitalization of Kitakata. Both San Francisco State University and University of Tsukuba students employed methods of research and observation to find solutions for the region. Although experienced from an outsider’s point of view, the students immersed themselves in the region, i.e. staying with local host families. These experiences in turn contributed to their findings and design response.

Keywords: *revitalization, city planning, community engagement, local brand, regional brand*

1. Introduction

This paper is about the two-week intensive workshop *Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction*, a collaboration between San Francisco State University and the University of Tsukuba. The project involved the revitalization of two warehouses in Kitakata.

The workshop was in large part designed to investigate, document and answer the question: *What would happen if an international group of students from different backgrounds came together, involved themselves into a community, identified, and addressed a common problem through design/architectural research and methods?*

Two years prior to the workshop, Profs. Hara and Jones began talks about a class that would involve students from each others respective Universities. The challenges included: **1)** coming up with a suitable project, **2)** how to mitigate the distance and time zones between the US and Japan, and **3)** trying to sync course schedules between the two institutions.

Although in planning for two years, the 2011 Fukushima earthquake and its aftermath brought a new sense of importance to the project. There was a need in Kitakata that corresponded with our need in finding a suitable project. Although the earthquake did not have a direct physical impact to the community, mentally it connected the community. Additionally the community was impacted by a changed attitude to food production from the region. To many, this project may not sound like a 3.11 earthquake reconstruction support, but indeed it is—the support needed in this region is local revitalization.

As important as the history was for the San Francisco State University students, many of the University of Tsukuba students were not familiar with these rural areas either. Activities such as the nature walk in Wasetani District, Yamato, Kitakata added a lot to the students' overall understanding of the problem.



Nature walk, Wasetani District, Yamato, Kitakata.

2. Methodology

Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction, was a two-week workshop held July 28–August 11, 2012, in conjunction with the University of Tsukuba, Japan, and San Francisco State University. Co-taught by Asst. Prof. Tad Hara (University of Tsukuba) and Asst. Prof. Steve Jones (San Francisco State University), the workshop, was an opportunity to bring together students from different backgrounds, and encouraged intercultural exchange and international understanding. The workshop offered a unique, enriching, educational and social experience.

The workshop was designed to be a combination of instruction, on-campus, and project site visits (studio, collaboration, cultural study, museums, travel and speakers).

The methodology included having a point person in Kitakata, and recruiting students from Profs. Hara and Jones' respective University's, i.e. in the case of Prof. Jones, an announcement about the workshop was sent via email to students in the Design and Industry Department at San Francisco State that Prof. Jones knew met requirements and would be an asset.

The workshop built upon an initial workshop and investigations by Prof. Hara a year prior². From these investigations, he made connections with the people in the Kitakata community, like Mr. Kaneoya—all of which led up to, and was included into the *Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction* workshop curriculum.

What set our methodology/process apart from the (standard) design process and other similar interventions, was the direct input by members of the Kitakata and Fukushima communities. The (standard) design process is structured in the form of **1)** analysis, **2)** ideation, **3)** design development, and **4)** implementation (see Fig. A). In the context of working with communities, oftentimes, such a process and engagement is driven entirely by the incoming/visiting group or class, with minimal outreach to the relevant community. In contrast, the methods/process of *Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction* also included an immersive experience, group activities/team building, and *active reflection*. The workshop teams sat in on presentations by local merchants, citizens and city/government officials. The teams also participated in hikes, tours and activities with local artisans, to better understand the community—which in turn aided in the creative process.

The workshop was structured to maximize output in a short time frame, compared to the (standard) Design Process. We utilized “sprinting” and “rapid prototyping”—methods championed by Ellen Lupton³ of the Maryland Institute College of Art, and Tom Kelly⁴, of Stanford's d.school. Both methods focus on form giving, but our method involves a rapid immersion in the local community.

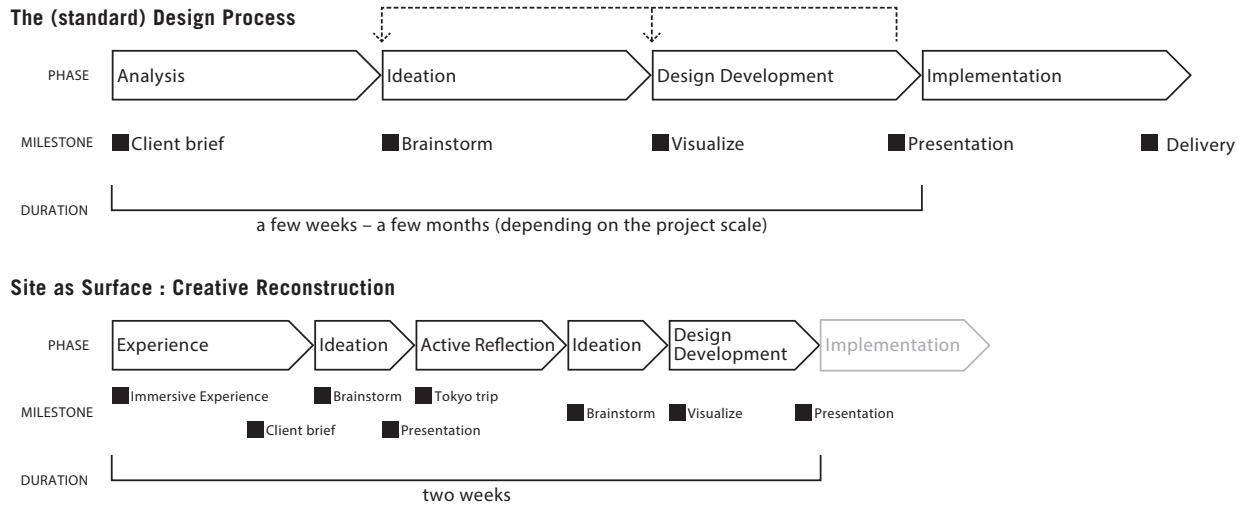


Fig. A.

Prof. Jones has had extensive experience in this type of community engagement, in both his studio practice and having taught a Community Arts Studio since 2004. His efforts have been acknowledged by a number of organizations, and awards, including the Faculty Award for Outstanding Contribution to Community Service Learning by the Institute for Civic and Community Engagement.

Students in the workshop planned and designed a proposal/creative revival plan for the restoration/reconstruction of the Kome-Gura Rice Barn and 38-ken Warehouse Shima-Shin (both located in Kitakata, Fukushima Prefecture). As part of the workshop, students received an overview of the history of the site and surrounding area—to better understand the value of using cultural resources and incorporating community learning. Students embraced the regional arts/traditions/customs. The workshop included the following:

- Site Visits
- Orientation
- Survey and research
- Idea sketches, model production
- Planning, design
- Presentation

The restoration programming included architecture, graphic design (environmental and signage), and proposed marketing strategies. As part of the design process, San Francisco State University and University of Tsukuba students worked together, in a hands-on manner, with residents from the local region—as well as incorporated the input/perspective/point of view from “non-designers” i.e. farmers and city planners. The workshop included visits to artists studios, and weekend trips to Tokyo galleries and museums.

Essential to the successful planning was the invaluable contribution of Mr. Kaneoya, a local resident of high esteem in the Kitakata community. He was an instrumental intermediary between the workshop and the community. Mr. Kaneoya's cultural and community savvy, facilitated and organized the meetings with the city planners, negotiated any obstacles, arranged for spaces to hold meetings and selected the site to hold the final presentation and exhibition. Without his contribution, there is no doubt, the successful outcome we were afforded would not have been realized.

Much of the time planning the workshop included setting up an itinerary that needed to sync several factors/schedules, i.e. city planners, host families, field trips, accommodation availability, etc. From the beginning, Profs. Hara and Jones agreed that as important as it was to have guidelines and an itinerary, with each day planned out (a requirement for both institutions)—it was equally important to also have the option to keep things open. The cross-cultural aspect of the workshop was seen as mutually and extremely important, as well as the input and participation of the host families. This was demonstrated in activities and day trips to places such as Oguni-numa at Bandai-Asahi National Park, group breakfasts and dinners, local festivals, a visit to an onsen, sake brewery tours, basket making workshop—most of which were partially planned, but all rich experiences that were realized by having a flexible itinerary.

The overwhelming positive response to the extracurricular activities emphasized, and justified our decision to implement a random quality to an itinerary that was agreed should have some structure, but loose enough to exploit the different activities going on as well. We had a framework, and between the two (planned and unplanned schedules), the lesson learned was: to have a framework, but be open as well.



From left to right: Group dinner with host family; Oguni Nemagari Dake basket making workshop; Soba noodle workshop at Oguni no sato.

The cross-cultural and international component and composition of the student teams was also deliberate. The particular dynamic was different than the often homogeneous make-up and approach, traditional to Japan.

When it was time to decide on the make up of the two teams—this was done primarily for pragmatic reasons and time constraints, to maximize the outcomes, as opposed to one large team that worked on one project right after the other. Profs. Hara and Jones met to review and discuss the individual skillsets for each student. Some factors that determined the make up of each team were:

- English language ability
- A mix of American and Japanese students
- A mix of male and female
- Educational background (graphic design, product design, architecture, etc.)
- Team leading experience
- Requirements of the individual site

TEAM 1: Kome-Gura Rice Barn

Keishi Nishiwaki	University of Tsukuba	Plastic Art & Mixed Media
Ikue Okumura	University of Tsukuba	Visual Design
Nicholas Steele, grad student	San Francisco State University	Architecture/Product Design
Stephanie Tang, grad student	San Francisco State University	Graphic Design

TEAM 2: 38-ken Warehouse Shima-Shin

Alice Clifford	San Francisco State University	Graphic Design
Yoko Kanamori	University of Tsukuba	Visual Design
Takao Mizumoto	University of Tsukuba	Visual Design
Eva Rogers, grad student	San Francisco State University	Graphic Design
Yui Takashima, grad student	University of Tsukuba	Product Design
Miki Takizawa	University of Tsukuba	Visual Design

3. Workshop

The workshop began first with an introduction to the community and local culture, followed by an overview and presentation to the students on the history and important features of the site and region. Japan is different than the US in many ways, for example, in Fukushima the San Francisco State University students observed how small towns and villages with a few elderly inhabitants were not forced to move.

With many of the villages around the Kitakata region in decline, once a year, because there are not enough locals, folk from outside the community come to clean up the aqueducts for the water system. But after the cleanup, the people leave. We asked, *How do we keep people there? How can we get folk to drive 4–5 hours and stay in town?* We wanted to address this secondary question—the rice barns throughout Kitakata region can be a way to bring new life to these towns and villages.

The San Francisco State University and University of Tsukuba students formed into two teams to propose a solution/s for the project:

- Kome-Gura Rice Barn in front of the Kitakata train station. Reconstruction of this site should be driven around the concept of “food.”
- The 38-ken Warehouse Shima-Shin, a variety store. Shima-Shin is a series of five warehouses (total of 38-ken, about 69 meters) which is considered a primary to the identity of Kitakata. This open lot could work as a connection between the Midori area and the Suwa Shrine.

The project re-conceptualized spaces that would serve as a nexus of physical, cultural, and economic forces. These new, hybridized spaces would be understood as a dynamic realm of routes, material transformations, and flexible spaces to form a space constantly in flux, animating the relationship between the interior and exterior, city and site, public and private.



From left to right: site visit to the Kome-Gura Rice Barn; site visit to the 38-ken Warehouse Shima-Shin; student orientation with Kitakata city planners.



From left to right: student orientation with Kitakata city planners; initial strategy and design meetings; article on the workshop in the local newspaper.

After researching existing revitalization projects around the world, the teams chose relevant functions—a social hub and marketplace for the Kome-Gura Rice Barn, and the 38-ken Warehouse Shima-Shin. The workshop demonstrated the students’ ability to connect with the local community, infrastructure and landscape—and the ability to solve complex problems in a very limited time, with very limited resources.

There were group orientations, initial meeting and presentation with city planners and local residents to present initial design directions and receive community feedback. For the final presentation, the students planned, and set up an exhibit displaying their maquettes, video, posters and installations based on their research and findings (see Fig. B). We invited locals to the final presentations—a group that included local businessmen, residents and city planners.

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

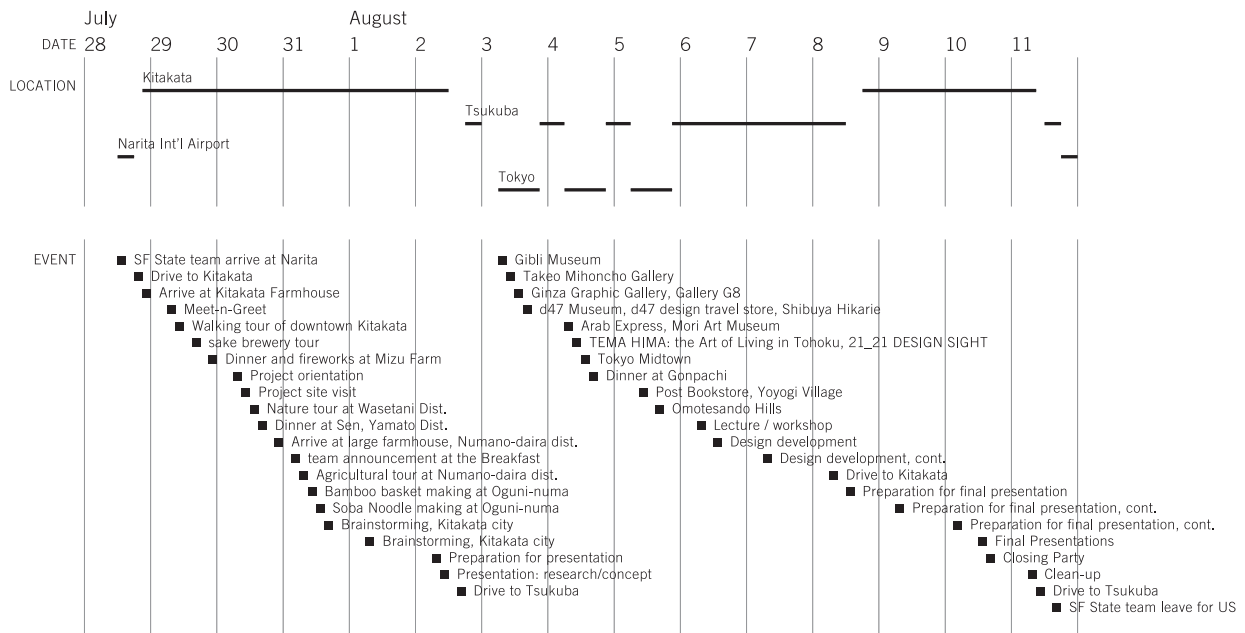


Fig. B

4. Conclusion

The workshop was a great demonstration of two types of learning: the structured (with projects), and the residual (with intergroup activities). A continual driver throughout, was the importance of having US students bringing fresh eyes, ideas and methodologies from the outside—and the Japanese students bringing an understanding of customs and conventions. An example of this was the incorporation of the metaphor of water into the final design programming for the 38-ken Warehouse. Many in the Kitakata community were blind to the value of water as a theme, primarily because they took it for granted—they did not see it as overly important (conceptually), and this was eye-opening for them



From left to right: Spring water by a sake brewery is served throughout the community; project installation; installation of bottled water and water tasting kit.

After the presentations, reception and opening, we had a dinner, with food provided by the local community. The students will never forget the experience—as educators, we are confident that even after the workshop, the experience will carry on into their other projects—hopefully they become teachers.

Additionally, a Facebook page was set up and updated daily - <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Site-as-Surface-Creative-Reconstruction/502701563080452>. The Facebook page proved to be a beneficial motivational tool. Students kept up with it, checking in daily and sharing the page with their friends. The Facebook page performed both internally and externally—motivating the students (internal), and connecting/exposing the workshop to the public (external).

At the completion of *Site as Surface : Creative Reconstruction*, the San Francisco State University students were required to complete a survey. Although not required of the University of Tsukuba students, many of them offered their comments/thoughts/feedback:

“As a team, we had a clear vision as a team... we presented something that touched the audience.”

“I felt strongly that the visual images have so much power to communicate.”

“Our proposal was something rooted to the local community since we started our workshop from experiencing local culture, like the farm stay.”

“Since there were plenty of time for local activities, we became close to each other, and it was a good preparation for forming a team.”

“When we saw the locals sharing the spring water, we thought it’s beautiful. Sharing limited natural resources would become the new way of life for the community. The idea is not only for Kitakata, but universal.”

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