

# Designing with Children

## Spatial Renga Exchange

Having run education projects at an architecture centre for several years, during the final year of her masters architecture project Fiona MacDonald furthered her personal practice creating and facilitating design projects with children through the Spatial Renga Exchange project. This was inspired by the advocacy work of two architects, Shintaro Tsuruoka and Yuko Odaira, who trained at the Architectural Association but had returned to Japan to work for an NGO in Higashi Matsushima as soon as the earthquake and tsunami had struck. Their advocacy work had a more human, experiential and less risk-averse approach to post tsunami planning, which matched Fiona's own aspirations for her projects. They all readily agreed on an exchange project proposed by Fiona – an exchange of ideas about what makes a home, between school children in London and school children in Nobiru.

### Motivation

The Renga Exchange project aimed to explore the experiences, memories and lives of children who live in areas afflicted by the tsunami under redevelopment. Fiona's key goal was to apply new methods of pedagogy and learning through the exchange of perspectives between Japanese and English students; a rather experimental approach, which was relatively new to the Japanese education culture. The point of this exchange was to explore how the ideas of the involved children in these two different cultural and geographical contexts intertwine, differ, or complement one another, and to learn about community engagement and children's participation from practitioners who have considerable experience in international contexts. Children's exchange was thus envisaged to provide a cross-cultural perspective on the post-tsunami redevelopment of the areas, drawing on the diverse place experiences and memories of these two groups and support the children in Nobiru cope with the traumatic tsunami disaster. Key

### What

An exchange of perspectives of 'home' between children in Japan and the UK

### Where

Nobiru, Higashi Matsushima, Japan  
Hornsey, London, United Kingdom

### Age

6-9 years old

### Group Size

90 students from Rokesly Primary School, London; 10 students from primary after school club (hamako), Nobiru, Higashi Matsushima

### Project Stage

Pre-Brief

### Children's Roles

Advocates for Change, Creative Inspirers

### Timescale

6 half-day sessions (across 6 weeks)

### Partners

Fiona MacDonald (Architect, The CASS London Metropolitan University, project instigator)

Shintaro Tsuruoka (Architect, working at NGO 'HOPE' in Higashi Matsushima)

Yuko Odaira (Architect, working at NGO 'HOPE' in Higashi Matsushima)

Avital Wittenberg (Architectural Assistant, St. Ilian Architectural Workshop)

Patrick O' Callaghan (MA Architecture student, volunteer)

Megan O' Keever (Fiona's fellow student at CASS School of Architecture)

motivation on the part of the two Japan-based architects, Shintaro and Yuko, was to develop a wider network of support to the local prefecture for community-led projects and maintain relationships with the CASS School of Architecture and London (Fiona's base).

## Children's involvement

The children's exchange process was informed by workshops that the two architects had previously implemented in two of the most afflicted by the tsunami areas of the Higashi Matsushima prefecture, i.e. Nobiru and Omigari. These areas were seen to be too dangerous to re-inhabit, and yet, they held potent memories to the communities. These workshops involved drawings and semi-plans for redevelopment based on people's memories and aspirations for the future. For the Spatial Renga Exchange project only pupils from a Nobiru primary school and afterschool club were involved. The project tallied neatly with a project that Rokesly Primary School pupils had in the first half of the spring term. The children investigated homelessness and so their teachers found this to be a great opportunity for them to get a wider world perspective on reasons people become homeless – it seemed particularly poignant for them to be building links with children who themselves were made homeless by a natural disaster.

The project comprised 6 half-day sessions, which spanned across 6 weeks, between 6-8 year-old students at an after-school club (hamako) in Nobiru and three classes of 8 and 9 year olds at Rokesley Primary School in London. This took the form of a 'spatial' type of renga, a type of poetry whereby one party sends the other the first three lines of a stanza in the format 5-7-5 syllables, and then the other party replies. (In Japanese culture, a renga is a group of haiku-like verses linked in any one of several special ways. It is usually written by two or more poets who take turns writing the verses.) They thus created their own form of spatial renga, one that would conveniently cross the language divide through using images, drawings and models, and films of the making and doing, instead of words.

### Workshop 1

In January 2014, three classes comprising 30 pupils each visited the New River Path estate. The area, home to several of the pupils involved, was under development thus helping bring to life some of Nobiru's features. The children drew plans of the area, imagining it as a bird's eye view, focusing on natural or built features which could form part of their proposal for community activities that could make the area feel more like a home. Photographs of the children investigating the site and annotated scans of their drawings were sent to Nobiru, to receive in response photographs of the participant Nobiru-based children by way of introduction.

### Workshop 2

Rupert Buckland (Fiona's fellow student at CASS School of Architecture)  
Edd Farleigh (Fiona's fellow student at CASS School of Architecture )  
Yoko (Fiona's fellow student at CASS School of Architecture )  
William le Gresley (Fiona's fellow student at London Met)  
Yupin Chan (Fiona's fellow student at London Met)  
Robert Newcombe (Undergraduate student at the Bartlett School of Architecture)  
Canan Ahmet (Teacher at Rokesly Primary School)  
Bola Soneye-Thomas (Headteacher at Rokesly Primary School)  
6-8 year-old students at Rokesly Primary School, Hornsey, London (Participants)  
Jill Pughe (Deputy Headteacher at Rokesly Primary School)  
8 and 9 year-old primary school and after-club (hamako) students from Nobiru, Higashi Matsushima (Participants)  
Tom James (Photographer and designer, facilitator)  
Class parents, Rokesly Primary School

The Rokesly children worked on the challenge of writing the first three lines of a renga stanza. For example:

*Rebuild the great town*

*Live in peace once again please*

*Beautiful Japan*

The group spent the first part of the session drawing plans of the classrooms on squared paper, measuring lengths, with the children acting as 'human' rulers. In the second part of the session the group began drawing spaces and places for Nobiru where the activities brainstormed in the previous week could take place. A selection of the children's written renga and their plans of activity spaces for Nobiru were sent back to Japan. What the school received back this time were drawings of the children's memories of living in Nobiru. Many drew their homes, though one boy did a row of shops he remembered, one child drew the tsunami happening, and another showed stag beetles or scorpions climbing a tree. Shintaro and Yuko sent a film of aerial views of Nobiru shot by a drone.

### Workshop 3

Then the Rokesly group started making models of the spaces that the children proposed. Children's creations included parks, hotels, café-cinemas, fair grounds, swimming pools and tree houses among others. The models were made of recycled materials, plasticine, lolly sticks and pipe cleaners or cardboxes. The children made a good attempt at making their models to scale, too. Photographs of the children working on the models were sent to Japan and the pupils received a film of the Japanese children explaining their designs (see 2014.01.23 Nobiru After School Programme youtube video). Showing the children the film of the Japanese children was moving. Although the children were only able to say 'hello' and 'my name is' in English, with the rest of their descriptions in Japanese, the Rokesly children were enthralled; their eyes didn't wander from the film once and there were plenty of open mouths, Fiona recalled.

### Workshop 4

Given the relatively limited model-making repertoire the children had shown in the first modelling session, the children further developed their design skills by using only thin card and scissors. They learned how to create sturdier walls by folding along the bottom edge to give a greater surface area to connect to the floor; rigid floor and roofs by concertina-ing card; or, columns by rolling up a piece of paper into a cylinder and then cut a fringe at the bottom which it can balance on. The session was facilitated by Patrick, a MArch student, and Avital, and observed also by the governors who happened to be at the school on the day of the workshop.

### Workshop 5

At this session the group used tissue paper, strips of coloured paper, watered down PVA and school paint to add colour and texture to the models. The children were shown the map of Nobiru that the Japanese children had drawn the previous week, which helped re-focus the children and reminded them that they will need to decide where their building would sit in

the whole of the Nobiru landscape ready for next week. A film of the children making their spaces was sent to Shintaro and Yuko, who captured moments when the Japanese children saw the films and photographs of the London children watching them present their drawings. The Rokesly children received photographs of the Nobiru children beginning their own model.

## Workshop 6

Finally, the 6<sup>th</sup> and last workshop in February 14, 2014, culminated with the creation of a large-scale, 3D model of the whole of Nobiru at Rokesly school hall. The children chose where to locate their buildings and public community spaces. Portraits of the children with their individual models, panoramic photographs of the community-filled version of Nobiru and a film of the children building their new version of Nobiru, with interviews with individual children explaining their decision-making process were all sent to the children in Nobiru.

## Outputs and outcomes

In retrospect, Fiona realised the degree of diplomacy that was involved and how many different parties had to give their permission in order for the exchange to take place. The process was very illuminating in seeing at first-hand how tact and perseverance is needed to get projects off the ground, particularly in a context with a clear hierarchy such as Japan, where individuals have less power to take matters into their own hands.

Canan, one of the teachers involved, felt that the workshops were 'really inspiring' to both adults and children. To Fiona, one of her concerns was whether the children would be able to empathise with what the Japanese children had been through and, therefore, how they would respond to their work. The teachers were reassuring, and they proved to be right: the children were very thoughtful and Fiona felt humbled by their inquisitive response and their intelligent and sensitive questions.

One of the children, Hannah, was particularly engaged as her mother is Japanese. Her father is in a band, 'Feeder', and was touring in the Tohoku region of Japan at the time the tsunami hit. He had seen its devastation at first hand as he had been in hospital being treated for a throat injury when injured people started coming in. As such since then he has given a considerable donation to the government to help with the rebuilding process.

To Fiona it was interesting to get a positive assessment from her peers about her own teaching skills, as normally there is not the opportunity for this type of feedback. As a designer working with children and wanting to collaborate and exchange ideas with them, she regularly reflects on her praxis. 'How do you create the framework to ensure you are not over-influencing their ideas?' and 'Where does the boundary lie?' were some of her questions, which her experience working on the Spatial Renga Exchange helped to further investigate.

## Acknowledgements

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## Resources

MacDonald, F. (2013-2014) *Learning through Renga*. Integrated Design Study Report.

MacDonald, F. (2013-2014) *Education and engagement workshops. Action research to inform a proposal for a landscape of learning in the post-tsunami patchwork landscape of Nobiru, Japan.*

2014.01.23 Nobiru After School Programme. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh-spEeIDjQ&feature=youtu.be> (accessed April 2 2016).



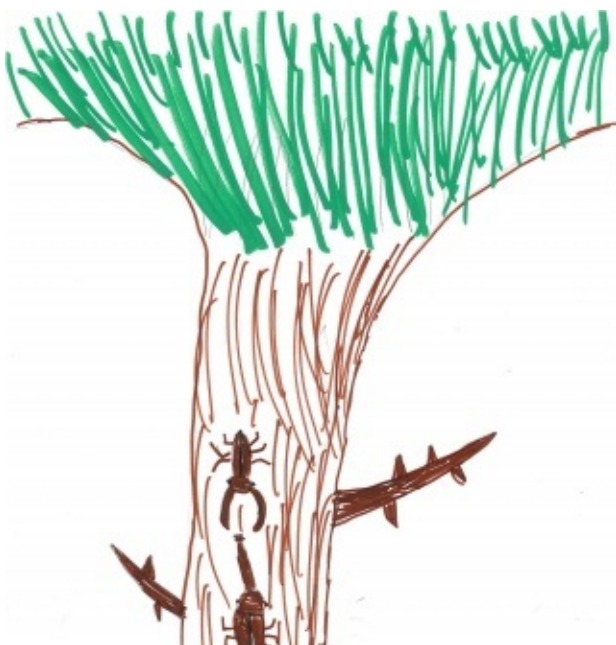
Model of the new community proposed for Nobiru by the Rokesly Primary school students at the end of the Spatial Renga Exchange. Courtesy: Tom James.



Drawing by student in London of Nobiru as they imagined it. Courtesy: Fiona MacDonald.



Children presenting their creations at the festival in Nobiru. Courtesy: Shintaro Tsuruoka.



Shintaro and the children with their model. Courtesy: Shintaro Tsuruoka.



*Drawing completed by child in Nobiru. Courtesy: Fiona MacDonald.*



*Labelled image of the London children's community model which filled their school gym. Courtesy: Tom James.*