



On the morning of June 12, 2006, a group of seven Japanese Innovators came to Japan Society in New York City to kick off a two-day program of site visits to three of New York's most exciting and intriguing development projects. This two-day New York visit was organized by Japan Society in connection with its *U.S.-Japan Innovators Project* and in advance of its Innovators Retreat in San Francisco (June 14-16). The theme of the retreat and these pre-retreat visits was "Connecting Community."

In this group of Innovators were:

- **Mr. Limbon**, a social activist, architect, and professor of urban planning at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto
- **Ms. Tomoko Fujisaki**, former director of an influential international aid organization in Japan
- **Mr. Chikara Funabashi**, an entrepreneur who uses sophisticated role-playing games to educate adults and children
- **Mr. Mitsuhsa Ishikawa**, a producer of some of the most critically acclaimed anime in the world
- **Mr. Kohei Nishiyama**, an internet-based entrepreneur with a revolutionary business model
- **Ms. Mitsuko Shimomura**, a health care leader who brings together Eastern and Western medicines
- **Mr. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto**, a young architect whose passion is utilizing small 'forgotten spaces'

The three urban development projects they visited vary in terms of scope, visibility, budget, emotional resonance, and degree of completion. But all three are important ongoing projects with valuable lessons to learn about how to preserve, protect, and promote community in a modern city.

VISIT #1 – GROUND ZERO:

On the afternoon of June 12, the Innovators went to Lower Manhattan for two meetings examining the state of rebuilding and revitalization. The first meeting was with Suany Chough, Senior Planner for the **World Trade Center Memorial Foundation**, and Cliff Chanin, Senior Consultant to the Foundation. They gave a concise overview of the current state of plans for the 9/11 Memorial. From the Foundation's offices the Japanese Innovators were able to get a rare view down into the footprints of the destroyed buildings, to witness the magnitude of the reconstruction project.

The second meeting in Lower Manhattan was with Jen Hensley, Assistant Vice President of Corporate and Intergovernmental Affairs at **The Downtown Alliance**, a nonprofit that manages the Lower Manhattan Business Improvement District. Ms. Hensley spoke about business improvement downtown, the role of non-governmental organizations in the revitalization of Ground Zero and

lower Manhattan, and the River to River Festival (an arts and culture festival that was founded in response to 9/11).

VISIT #2 – COMMON GROUND COMMUNITY:

On the morning of June 13, the Innovators group visited **Common Ground Community**, a pioneering non-profit organization founded and directed by fellow Innovators Project participant Rosanne Haggerty. Common Ground seeks to provide “supportive housing” to low-income and formerly homeless tenants, by purchasing out-of-use hotels and apartment buildings and refurbishing them to make them not just ‘livable’ but attractive and comfortable. To do all this, Common Ground collaborates with a broad range city groups including government offices, contractors, architects, private companies, health providers, and other housing non-profits.

The Japanese met Rosanne at one of Common Ground’s buildings – The Times Square Hotel at 43rd Street and 8th Avenue. Rosanne gave the group a tour and an overview of her organization and then led the group to the top floor of the building, where she had arranged for several groups of tenants to meet with the Innovators. The meeting was a great success, combining discussion of the practical elements of running a successful housing organization with the emotional weight of hearing what that organization means to those who benefit directly from it.

VISIT #3 – THE HIGH LINE:

That afternoon, the Japanese Innovators took the subway to the Meatpacking District to meet with **Friends of the High Line**, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and reuse of the High Line - a 1.5 mile, elevated railway that runs along the west side of Manhattan. Founded in 1999, Friends of the High Line is supported by elected officials, civic organizations, businesses, and thousands of preservationists, open-space advocates, design professionals, and civic-minded individuals from New York and across the U.S.

The project is still in the early stages, so the Innovators’ purpose in meeting with Robert Hammond, co-founder of the group, was to see what the future holds for the site and to learn about how this project was conceived originally. Since its inception, the movement to preserve the High Line has been a grass-roots project, making connections, raising money and awareness, and building consensus from the bottom up. Mr. Hammond spoke about his belief that this is a more effective way to organize, and, paradoxically, a more powerful way to get work done in a city like New York.

CONCLUSION:

These three visits to ongoing development/renewal projects in New York were an effective way to jump-start discussions of community and innovation, which would be the dominant themes in the subsequent Innovators Retreat. The next morning, June 14th, this group of Japanese Innovators boarded a plane to go to San Francisco to meet with many more American and Japanese leaders at Japan Society’s retreat, “(IN)Spire: Connecting Communities.”

Visit the Innovators Project website: <http://innovators.japansociety.org/>