



Japan Society's Innovators Project retreat, entitled *(IN)SPIRE: Connecting Communities*, was held from June 14-16 in San Francisco, CA. This was the first in a series of retreats that will involve American and Japanese innovators from a range of fields. *(IN)SPIRE* was designed to explore problem-solving and areas of potential U.S.-Japan collaboration.

Japan Society settled on the theme of Connecting Communities as a way to address the fact that, however they are defined (from the digital realm of the Internet to the bricks and mortar worlds of village, town, city and state), communities in the 21st century face unprecedented challenges. Increasingly, problem-solvers are collaborating across borders and across categories of expertise to define how communities should respond to these challenges. How well a community innovates and connects with other networks – whether in dealing with the catastrophic consequences of a natural disaster like Katrina, or in harnessing technology to build new modes of virtual interaction – is crucial to how successfully it will adapt and evolve.

In short order, this retreat evolved into a community in its own right. Twenty-two Japanese and American social entrepreneurs, architects, business innovators, and artists came together at the offices of Stone Yamashita Partners for two-and-a-half days to engage in multidisciplinary, bilateral dialogue on the challenges facing communities in the 21st century, and to identify areas of potential U.S.-Japan collaboration in seeking real solutions.

Included among those at the retreat were:

- **Mr. Mitsuhsa Ishikawa**, President of Production I.G., a cutting-edge anime production studio
- **Ms. Megan Smith**, founder of PlanetOut.com and now Director of New Business Development & Strategy at Google, Inc.
- **Mr. Bill Strickland**, community advocate and President & CEO of Manchester Bidwell Corporation

For a full list of Americans and Japanese present at the retreat, click [here](#). (you must be a member of the IN Network to view).

The retreat was organized around a series of discussions on different kinds and definitions of community, including:

- Creating healthy communities
- Online communities and social networking
- Entrepreneurial communities
- The role of 'place' in communities
- Communities of and for the next generation of innovators

Each participant was given time to speak about his or her ideas on building, maintaining and nurturing community, in whatever form that might take. Each speaker was also encouraged to tell

the group what communities he or she belongs to and to close with a “firestarter question” to the group, to spur discussion.

In addition to the participants themselves, a jazz trio and a featured speaker enlivened the proceedings. During dinner on the first evening of the retreat, Marty Ashby and two fellow musicians thrilled the crowd with three jazz numbers, none of which they had ever performed together. The trio used the musical pieces to demonstrate the dynamic relationship between improvisation and innovation.

The next afternoon, featured speaker Craig Newmark, founder of the extremely popular and multi-use website craigslist.com, detailed his experiences developing and scaling up his online community. He spoke about the website’s humble beginnings and its ongoing worldwide expansion into countries from Chile to Lebanon to Vietnam.

By the end of the third day, the retreat participants had formed a community in and of themselves, one that will continue both informally and under the auspices of Japan Society’s Innovators Network (IN). The connections made and conversations held over the course of these three days were invaluable and will lead to greater collaboration and communication between leaders in both countries in the months and years to come.

Many exciting ideas emerged over the course of the retreat. The next step in the Innovators Project is to take the many conversations and discussions from *(IN)SPIRE* and refine them into 2-3 ongoing projects. Some themes that will be discussed and potentially developed as the project moves forward include:

- U.S. & Japanese Architects in Africa
- Structured Finance for Low-Income Housing
- Non-Profit Alliance-Building
- Young Social Entrepreneurs
- The Future of Communication Technology
- Young People’s Media Fellowship

Criteria for evaluating project ideas will include questions such as – What concrete and realistic goals can be identified? Is the challenge fundable? Is the challenge truly collaborative and does it leverage Japanese and American strengths? Does it have the potential to have real impact and create positive change? These are challenging but exciting questions to address as the Project moves forward.

The next Innovators Project retreat will be held in Tokyo, Japan from January 19-21. In the coming weeks and months, check back to this site for more details on participants and themes.

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