

Lessons from Abroad: The Essence of a Community and a Commitment to Place

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In 2013 my colleague Mark Rembert and I got what we considered to be a strange phone call. It was from Betty Borden with the Japan Society asking if Energize Clinton County would be willing to host a group of social entrepreneurs from Japan in Wilmington between stops in New Orleans and New York City. The visit was part of an exchange program that the Japan Society was coordinating to help connect social innovators who were developing post-disaster community and economic development programs in response to the 2011 Tohoku Tsunami and Earthquake in Japan with individuals working on post-disaster efforts in the US. The visitors were interested in learning about efforts in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, New York's Hurricane Sandy response, and the efforts in Clinton County following the DHL crisis.

Initially, we were a bit perplexed by the perceived connections—especially given that the DHL crisis did not result in the physical damage and loss of life seen in the other examples. Nonetheless, we welcomed the group with open arms and an eagerness to learn and share. What followed was a meaningful exchange of reflections, ideas, insights, and theories all tethered to the contemplation of our relationships as individuals to the places in which we live.

Given how much we look to the outside to inform our work in Clinton County, it really was no surprise for us to see these individuals traveling across the globe to rural Ohio to explore new ways of thinking about the future of their own communities. What was most striking, however, was that many of these individuals were working in communities, some of similar size to ours, that were literally wiped away in one fell swoop. Responding to such a disaster as that really brought to mind questions about what is the essence of a community and what does it mean to preserve and develop it?

Building upon the relationship we developed through that initial visit, I was invited this past October to visit Japan as part of an exchange called *Resilient and Vibrant Rural Communities in Japan and the U.S.* Most of the communities we visited were not directly impacted by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Instead we visited rural communities facing many of the same challenges (to varying degrees of severity) that rural communities in the US, including in Clinton County, are facing.

While major shocks, such as job loss or a natural disaster, are more obvious to point to as a threat to a community's existence, more often than not, the decline caused by the many, smaller cuts a community withstands through the years, and our futile efforts to respond, is the real threat. This has especially been the case for rural communities both in Japan and the US.

And such was the case for Clinton County in 2008. While we viewed ourselves as comfortably in an era of prosperity, only to be disrupted by the abrupt loss of jobs, underneath the surface

there had long been trouble. For decades there had been a decline in the younger population and especially those going off to college or becoming more mobile through new, in-demand skills; high-wage earners were moving from the community; entrepreneurship and small business development ranked near the lowest in the state; and our local economy was reaching peak vulnerability with 53% of total county payroll being based in one sector and a third of the county workforce being employed by the same employer.

Our work has been shaped as much by these trends, and a desire to rethink development strategies, as by the economic crisis itself. On this trip I observed a similar desire to know what ails a place by many of the individuals we met. In addition, these individuals were clearly working to match the strengths of their community to the challenges faced. For instance, in Tono we met an entrepreneur who co-founded a brewery—something that is not too uncommon in rural communities in the US as well. However, Junichi Tamura is not exclusively focused on his brewery. Tono, a small town of 28,000 is the historic hop region of Japan, and Tamura-san is working through his social enterprise and a partnership with Kirin, one of Japan's largest beer conglomerates, to build the hop-tourism brand of Tono.



Through this effort, and his Next Commons Lab, he has successively attracted a number of young entrepreneurs to the region working on a variety endeavors both related and unrelated to the hop economy. The bond, however, between these various endeavors is the alignment with cultural and economic heritage that Tamura-san's work promoted. It is a great example of the leveraging of one of his community's most unique assets (its hop heritage) to not only build a successful business, but to build a future vision involving endless opportunities around a historical, and unique, brand for the community in which his business resides.



Following our visit to Tono, we met with Atsuhisa Emori, founder of the Taberu Journal, which in Japan is a wonderful food subscription service that connects producers with consumers all over Japan and packages the food with a beautiful magazine full of content which provides depth to the food subscription by showcasing producers, growers, and rural regions. Emori-san showed us the Koishihama Fishery and introduced us

to one of the local scallop fishermen. Hearing first-hand the fisherman's story, particularly as it related to his tiny community and the local history surrounding the fishing industry there, gave us a similar connection that the Taberu Journal gives its subscribers. Like the Journal subscribers, we also got to taste the fresh scallops prepared on the spot.

Similar to what was observed in Tono, Emori-san's Taberu Journal goes beyond just a simple food subscription service that connects producers to consumers. The story-telling content and beautiful photography of the journal builds an emotional connection between the producers and consumers that is able to capture a richer sense of place. The accompanying food with the journal adds a whole other sensory dimension that really draws in the consumer.

These visits, as well as our other stops, were strong examples of individuals focused on the heart and soul of their communities as a development strategy. Understanding the essence of a place and working to leverage its inherent qualities as a tool of resiliency has been at the core of our work as well. This is a necessary component to rural development. It is not enough to simply hope that people see the value in community, we have to take the time to look deeper—to identify, curate, and invest in our community assets.

In each of the communities we visited we saw many individuals, businesses, organizations, and institutions that, through their efforts of revitalization and development, are essentially making their communities more capable of withstanding shock (some more consciously than others). Being the visitor, and observing these various efforts reminded me of what I find to be one of the most unique qualities about rural communities—the important influence that a single individual can have in shaping a community's trajectory. So often, unfortunately, this is lost amidst the veil of trying to do everything.

Many of the individuals we met with were not from their communities, did not have the familial ties, but they were



committed. Several of the individuals referred to a “squad program” that sounded very reminiscent of the AmeriCorps program as being what landed them in their communities. I know of many similar examples of AmeriCorps volunteers that ended up in Clinton County (and other places), fully vested in a place that they originally were working in on a temporary basis.

Both of these components—the role of the individual and the commitment to place were well-articulated in an interview with Whitney Kimball Coe of the Center for Rural Strategies who said, “we have this blind spot where we think we need to be addressing these big, global issues, and we forget what is ours to do in the moment.... What is yours to do could just be right in front of you. And in a small place, that is so much easier to see... that just one action, or point of connection, can strengthen your humility and commitment to the space around you.”

In both the US and Japan, cities have the luxury of having the market affirm their existence through population growth and increased economic investment. As populations continue to consolidate in urban areas, the challenge for rural communities seemingly grows. Rural places do not have this luxury of ubiquitous market affirmation. Therefore, it is essential to reach inward to find what connects us to these places—to understand the essence of place and commit. I was grateful to have the opportunity to see examples of individuals doing just that across the globe.

