



# Designing Life after the Storm: Improvisations in Post-Disaster Housing Reconstruction as Socio-Moral Practice

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## Abstract

If there is any endeavor so demanding of human creativity, it is the remaking of lives and property after disaster. However, post-disaster recovery is considered the greatest failure in disaster management, and within this field, post-disaster housing reconstruction is the most insufficiently investigated practice. Furthermore, studies of disaster management attribute failure to top-down and technocratic approaches that often overlook the agency, capacities, and moral priorities of those directly affected. In contrast, this paper attends to those displaced by disaster as creative and moral agents who manage to carry on with life despite their socio-economic and political vulnerabilities by drawing from theory in anthropology, disaster studies, and cognitive psychology. Through examining how inhabitants of a post-Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) resettlement site transform their housing to negotiate multiple and vague rules and regulations, I entangle myself with literature that assumes that the creativity of design lies in the capacity of individuals to improvise according to their values and in response to those of others, within a world that is continually unfolding. I also assume that improvisation is contingent upon processes of cognitive innovation in which social relations operate as indispensable intellectual resources for grasping and mobilizing knowledge that would give inhabitants of resettlement housing the best possible chance of attaining their hopes, dreams, and ambitions. Consequently, I propose that viewing creativity as an improvisational process highlights the agentic potential of design in even the bleakest and most quotidian of settings. My own hope is to extend the possibilities for correspondence between built environment practitioners and those who, because of their subaltern positionalities, tend to be overlooked by the field of post-disaster housing reconstruction and yet must live through the consequences of its practice.

**Keywords:** design; disaster recovery; housing; improvisation; morality.

### Introduction: Context and Problems

Unity Village<sup>1</sup> stands at the end of a gravelly road and is nestled along a smattering of nameless hills in the Eastern Visayas Region. It is a transitional resettlement housing site built during the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda, one of the deadliest typhoons in the planet's recorded history that destroyed 4.1 million homes (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2014). Almost 300 of these small white, steel-and-polypropylene plastic houses fitted with solar panels gleam pristinely in the midday sun, a stark contrast to the more modest social housing assemblages of plywood, nipa, and concrete that are situated closer to the town center. A scan of newspaper articles will reveal that an urban planner contracted to develop this type of resettlement housing extolled the project as an example of "adaptive architecture" with the potential to become a relocation "model for the world."<sup>2</sup>

However, the house and, by extension, housing, is an "illusory objectification" and is therefore central to competing social claims (Bourdieu, 1977; Buchli, 2013; Levi-Strauss, 1987). And so, whereas built environment professionals may view Unity Village as the quintessential materialization of modernist imperatives such as "sustainability," the inhabitants I encountered tended to expound on the harsh everyday difficulties of living in the housing site. This was because of the many *bawal* (prohibitions) imposed on them, including strict prohibitions against making even the smallest of changes to their housing structures. They have thus learned to improvise their way through these constraints, such as by turning their homes into covert stores.

I view these changes made by resettlement site inhabitants as everyday negotiations of a particular moral world that is animated by the built structures of post-disaster housing reconstruction, which (as with disaster management in general) typically involve the intervention of a state-sanctioned "club of experts"—policymakers, donors, architectural urbanists, etc.—who are often unaware of how their personal choices affect displaced groups (Chambers, 1997; Dyer, 2002, p. 162; Lyons, Schilderman, & Boano, 2010) and who tend to reproduce socio-economically informed patterns of vulnerability (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002).<sup>3</sup> I maintain that everyday changes in resettlement housing imply that inhabitants have gained an awareness that their

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<sup>1</sup> All proper names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Due to ethical considerations, I chose not to cite the news sources to keep confidential the research site and the identities of those consulted. Those who would like to learn more about these sources can email me at [pamela@curiosity.ph](mailto:pamela@curiosity.ph).

<sup>3</sup> While post-disaster resettlement housing programs typically adopt a top-down approach, there are many advocates of bottom-up and participatory social housing schemes, as documented in: *Architects and Post-Disaster Housing: A Comparative Study in South India* by Gertrud Tauber (2014); *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* by Jeremy Till, Nishat Awan and Tatiana Schneider (2011); and *Grounded Planning: People-Centred Urban Development Practices in the Philippines* by Laura Hirst, Mariangela Veronesi and Jessica Mamo (2016).

“moral environment” is wrong, and thus endeavor to run against the dominant moral grain in pursuit of their values, or, “what really matters” (Kleinman, 2006, pp. 1–7). On this point, I refer to Arthur Kleinman’s distinction between two senses of the word “moral” (Kleinman, 2006, pp. 2–3): in the first sense, “moral” refers to “values,” and life is inherently moral because it is about “what matters most” to us; in a more focused sense, “moral” refers to a sense of right and wrong. For the most part of this paper, I will hinge on the first sense pertaining to values, however, I will also allude to “moral” as a sense of right and wrong upon wrapping up my reflections with an exploration of a local terms that approximate “creativity.”

We live in a manifestly shaky world in which “there is no script for social and cultural life” (Kleinman, 2006, p. 14). Because of this, “people have to work it out as they go along” (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 1). I posit that the ways in which resettlement site inhabitants transform their dwelling show how the creativity of design lies in the capacity of people to improvise, to navigate a world of materials that is malleably moral and “forever on the verge of the actual,” and in which people continually participate in each other’s “coming-into-being” (Gatt & Ingold, 2013, pp. 144–145; Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Kleinman, 2006, p. 23). This understanding of improvisation aligns with literature that recognizes the processual character of creativity (Denham & Punt 2017; Richards, 2010; Russ & Fiorelli, 2010), as well as with literature that perceives design as a capacity available to all humans (Cross, 1995; Gunn, Otto, & Smith, 2013; Hill, 2003; Miller, 2011).

Lastly, this paper assumes that improvisation requires acquiring and mobilizing specific kinds of knowledge to respond with precision to a world in *media res*. Specifically, I employ the concept of cognitive innovation, defined here as:

a recursive process in which an individual probes its boundaries to seek out new knowledge, selects promising avenues for more extensive exploitation, and synthesizes what it learns within its growing body of knowledge, which includes knowledge of how to act in the world and how to interact with other individuals. (Denham & Punt, 2017, supplement, p. 4)

I build on Denham (in Denham & Punt, 2017), Hallam and Ingold (2017) in underlining the significance of socio-cultural resources in cognitive innovation (and by extension creativity, particularly in an improvisational sense), which are not adjuncts to, but constituents of, mental activity (Geertz, 1973, pp. 73–74; Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2016).

In correspondence with these formulations of morality; conceptual links among improvisation, design, and creativity; and the sociality of cognitive innovation and mental activity, I ask: Why, and with what values do post-disaster resettlement site inhabitants improvise upon their housing? How do they go about acquiring knowledge that is critical to carrying on with life in resettlement? What kinds of improvisations emerge from this knowledge? I will next outline my methodology and findings regarding these questions.

## **Methodology**

My research interlocutors live in Unity Village, a resettlement site funded by a religion-based NGO, in cooperation with the government. As I was interested in processes of adjustment and recovery, I used methods that “privilege narrative and observation” such as interviews and loosely structured group discussions (involving 20 individuals in total), and photo documentation (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002, p. 12). I needed to establish a high degree of trust with my interlocutors, because displeasing the neighborhood association officers and NGO representatives by relaying complaints to an outsider such as myself might lead to sanctions or eviction from the resettlement site. As such, I started by speaking with the more familiar beneficiaries of a women’s NGO which commissioned me to conduct humanitarian shelter research in the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda. I keep their identities confidential, and purposely did not converse with any of the site officers and managers. Instead, when necessary, I gleaned their views from the online media coverage of the housing turnover ceremonies.

I now turn, due to space limitations, to my discussion of two cases of improvisation.

### **Case 1: Nerissa**

Nerissa moved to Unity Village with her two children and taught sewing classes at the site’s livelihood program. During her pregnancy with her third child, her supervisor allowed her to continue working but she had to resign as soon as she gave birth. “I was told that it is *bawal* (prohibited) to have too many children here,” said Nerissa. She thus needed to identify an alternative source of livelihood. Her partner, Joel, who is not the father of her children, contributes little to her family’s expenses. These include entrance fees for her teenaged daughter to join beauty contests. “She is not that smart but she is pretty and she likes fashion. She might have a future there,” Nerissa said.

Nerissa’s other livelihood skills are cooking and selling pork barbecue. However, setting up a barbecue business in Unity Village was also out of the question because eating meat is *bawal* according to the religious values of the NGO. She also could not afford to travel daily to town to look for work. She noticed, however, that some of her neighbors would secretly sell everyday provisions from their homes—secretly because it is also *bawal* to turn one’s house into a store. She thus decided to convert one of her two bedrooms into a home-based store, or *sari-sari* store in local terms. She chose the bedroom because she could at least lock the goods out of sight whenever the NGO representatives made surprise visits in the neighborhood, as part of their monitoring scheme. The next challenge involved keeping her goods fresh, as the plastic material of the house virtually turned it into an oven in the daytime (“we are being toasted in here”), and food items such as crisps became soggy and unpalatable.

To deflect the heat, Nerissa placed a fleece blanket donated by the NGO directly beneath the bedroom ceiling and over her goods by tying its corners around the beams (a common technique used in the neighborhood) with spare plastic straw rope which Joel asked from his employer. She had to tie the blanket in place because puncturing the walls no matter how slight was also *bawal*. Reportedly, the prohibition was based on the idea that should another disaster strike again and destroy the Unity Village housing units, the NGO could still recycle the undamaged housing materials for other purposes. “It’s difficult here, but I will be strong. They promised that if we remain obedient and cooperative, they might give us a better house after five years,” she said.

### **Case 2: Cora**

Cora had a stroke two years before Typhoon Yolanda and has been in a wheelchair since then. Cora spends all her days in her plastic house in Unity Village. She was especially worried about heat stroke because the interior of her plastic house was hot and made her uncomfortable. Unity Village has no electricity; the solar panel in every housing unit could only charge one light bulb for night-time use, thus using an electric fan is not feasible.

Moreover, due to the absence of awnings, direct sunlight tends to permeate the interior of the house, a health risk for Cora. Notably, the lack of awnings is part of the housing design in Unity Village to protect the roofs from being blown away by strong winds, a convention in disaster-resilient housing. Rodel, Cora’s husband, considered attaching a tarpaulin sheet to the front wall of their house for additional shade, but this, too, was *bawal*. Thus, Rodel cobbled together bamboo and discarded pieces of wood found within Unity Village to build a trellis in front of their house. He grew a vine which produced many long hanging roots forming a dense “curtain,” thereby providing shade and comfort for Cora. The idea of the vine curtain came from Rodel’s brother-in-law who lives in Manila. However, the village officers later ordered Rodel to remove the trellis to better monitor their household. Cora implored that they be allowed to keep it. “I cried and I begged. I told them I’m sick and I will die from the heat without the trellis. They took pity on me,” she said, unable to say whether they could keep the trellis for the long-term.

### **Summary and Reflections**

Everyday life restrictions that are imposed on resettlement site inhabitants and activated by the ubiquitous term *bawal* (Brenneis & Myers, 1984) make legible the moral proclivities of dominant actors in resettlement housing as a subfield of post-disaster housing reconstruction. Overtly, these include modernist interpretations of “adaptability,” “sustainability,” and “efficiency,” (which I attach to prohibitions regarding family size, resilient shelter standards, as well as recycling imperatives),

religious tenets that, for example, view eating meat as an affront to the dignity of life, and the donor's belief in their absolute power which they wield over their beneficiaries. On the other hand, this dominant moral grain at times runs against the values of resettlement housing inhabitants, which include securing the education and future of their children, supporting their children's extra-curricular activities, protecting one's livelihood, and maintaining one's personal health and that of loved ones. Those who live in the site therefore attempt to find consonance between their moral environment and their individual values by improvising upon their built environment (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Kleinman, 2006).

Finding one's way in the world also becomes more difficult due to the lack of transparency of what exactly these prohibitions mean. There is no written list of what is *bawal* given to the residents: its power lies precisely in its vagueness (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). This also allows those in power to interpret and implement the rules as they see fit, which according to my interlocutors, may depend on the social capital certain residents may have developed with the neighborhood officers and NGO donor representatives. As such, the relationship between the inhabitants and the NGO donor is not necessarily a dichotomous one, given volatile alliances and liminal social positions. Neighborhood officers, for example, are at once part of the resettled community as well as the NGO's official representatives within this community; their interpretation of "*bawal*" is therefore contingent upon their own shifting social identifications and sense of morality. Thus, while creativity has moral dimensions, moral decision-making is improvisatory and creative (Wall, 2005).

Meanwhile, the improvisatory practices of inhabitants include conversing with each other and with neighborhood and NGO officers to obtain information to clarify applications of "*bawal*," and observing the practices of neighbors to discover which prohibitions will have the greatest effect on their lives. Unity Village inhabitants not only depend on social relations to grasp the moral constraints of resettlement; they also acquire ideas, methods, materials, and skills from their spouses, kin, and neighbors to improvise according to their everyday dilemmas. For example, Nerissa decided to convert her bedroom into a provision store upon noting that her neighbors have been able to successfully run covert stores from other parts of their houses, and her use of a donated fleece blanket to preserve the freshness of her goods was also derived from her neighbors. Further still, it was Cora's husband, Rodel, who initiated finding an alternative to a tarpaulin sheet to provide the shade needed to address her health concern; Rodel obtained the inspiration to build a vine curtain from his kin: his brother-in-law in Manila. Social relations are therefore not only significant; they are fundamental to cognitive innovation and improvisation (Denham & Punt, 2017; Geertz, 1973; Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2016).

Furthermore, the natural environment itself can either pose constraints or become a material resource. Both Nerissa and Cora had to improvise against excess heat within contexts of livelihood and health, respectively. Meanwhile, inhabitants also draw materials from the natural environment when improvising. Cora's husband used vines for much needed shade; these were grown and formed with the help of bamboo slats from trees within the area. Nerissa and other female interlocutors improvised display shelves and other types of furniture partly out of wood sourced from a nearby bamboo grove, and often with the help of male members of the community.

And lastly, my research data point to improvisation as a process of finding the grain of one's becoming (Gatt & Ingold, 2013), which includes casting aside other grains permanently or temporarily for possible use in the future, as may be the case with Joel's tarpaulin idea. Constraints such as prohibitions, physiological conditions, and environmental forces such as heat bracket futures that are presently not possible (but might be explored later under different circumstances), and with them, specific assemblages of subjectivities, materials, and actions. Through iterative processes of not just selection (Denham & Punt, 2017), but also of casting aside for good or in the meantime, the friendliest stream to flow into becomes perceptible (as Ingold and Hallam [2007] might say): when one reserves using tarpaulin for a more opportune time, the viability of using vines as shade comes into view.

In some major Philippine languages, a term that approximates "improvisation" is *diskarte*, which can mean "strategies" or "resourceful" (as with the adjective *madiskarte*). Interestingly, *diskarte* is a Filipinization of the Spanish verb, *descartar* (to discard) and it originally referred to the piles of cards set aside or rejected during card games (Paz, 2008). *Diskarte* has a wide variety of meanings and applications, and one inflection refers to problem-solving in situations involving a high degree of uncertainty—from fishing (Veloro, 1994), to courtship (Tan, n.d.), and as I've learned from colleagues, to industrial design, and social housing as well. Notably, some of my interlocutors also said that *diskarte* has moral inflections in Kleinman's second sense of "moral" as pertaining to standards right and wrong (Kleinman 2006, pp. 2–3): *diskarte* that takes advantage of others is unacceptable, while life strategies that are adopted out of desperation, such as engaging in prostitution, can no longer be considered *diskarte*.

This paper borrowed from Kleinman (2006), Ingold & Hallam (2007), Gatt & Ingold (2013), Denham (in Denham & Punt, 2017), and Geertz (1973), and literature in disaster management studies (Barenstein & Pittet, 2007; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002; Tran, Tran, Tuan, & Hawley, 2012) that are critical of top-down approaches in post-disaster housing reconstruction. I have also traced how inhabitants of Unity Village improvised or used *diskarte* upon their dwellings according to their values, through seeking and applying intellectual and material resources from social ties. As such, I put forward an understanding of creativity and cognitive innovation as socio-moral practice. In relating improvisation to the notion of *diskarte*, I also offer an additional nuance

in understanding improvisation as a creative process, one that emphasizes the significance of casting aside to finding one's way within a world infused with difficulty and uncertainty. I hope that a study focused on everyday creativity, such as this one, will encourage resettlement housing practitioners to develop disaster recovery policies that attend to displaced groups not as mere objects of "needs assessment," but as potentially skilled designers who are capable of nudging life towards their own visions of sustainability, despite overwhelming constraint and with the barest of means.

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