“There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”

H.L. Mencken

After a disaster, most observers assume that an important goal is to rebuild as many houses as quickly as possible.
Number of housing units built over time:

- It’s easy to measure, and an easy benchmark for government, public, donor agencies, and press to use in evaluating recovery.
- But it is actually a very poor indicator of recovery success
  - They might be the wrong types of housing units
  - They might be in the wrong place
  - They might not be what the residents want.
- Emphasis on this indicator can drive governments to rebuild too quickly, thereby creating these ill effects.
The goal is not to construct buildings; it is to create and restore communities.

- Homes are more than structures with walls.
- Counting them says nothing about their internal design,
- the design of housing sites,
- accessibility to livelihoods and support services, and
- accessibility to social and economic networks.
Communities don’t even need buildings to conduct commerce. Cities are primarily social and economic networks.

Dujiangyan, Sichuan Province 2008

Port-au-Prince, 2010
1995 Kobe Earthquake

Photos: EERI
• Kobe Housing Restoration Plan: 3 year plan to construct 82,000 units
  – Public housing: 16,000
  – Rental housing: 6,900
  – Redevelopment-related housing: 4,000
  – Semi-Public Housing: 13,500
  – Private housing: 31,600 (4,600 by public subsidy)
  – Already started at plan time: 10,000
• Goal of 80,000 publicly-financed units was met within 3 years
• Total of 300,000 units built in Hyogo Prefecture within 4 years, most of them private. 138,000 units built in Kobe.
But distribution of housing was uneven

- Private investment was in upper income areas.
- Private low-cost housing was not rebuilt; many elderly and low-income households had to move to public housing.
• But public housing was not necessarily built where it was most needed.
• Nor was it mixed with other community uses.

“HAT Kobe”

• Poor transit access
• Lack of convenient retail centers

>> The 3-year numerical housing goal was not the right goal
2008 Wenchuan, China Earthquake: A Fast-paced Top-down Process

• August 2008 national plan for construction of
  – 3,289,700 rural housing units
  – 859,800 urban housing units, and
  – Repair and strengthening of millions more (NDRC, 2008)

• 90% was complete by the end of 2010
Easily visible: Fast physical recovery
Beichuan, 2008
New Beichuan, 3 years after earthquake (new town, built 30 km away from original)
2011 household survey results confirm successful physical aspects of the reconstruction

• Substantially more than 50% of respondents say:
  – Exterior appearance is better.
  – Infrastructure is better
  – Transportation is better.
  – Housing structural safety is better
Less successful aspects: Livelihood, Regional economy

- Livelihood Recovery, especially in the rural areas
  – approximately 1/3 of respondents said income and job opportunities were worse after the earthquake

- Tourism-oriented vision for almost every town in the entire region has little chance to be an overall success.

- Several industrial parks were planned but very few companies moved into them.
Tamil Nadu India, after 2004 tsunami

Tamil Nadu India, after 2004 tsunami

- Fast track: Most new housing was completed within 3 years of the tsunami.
- But livelihoods are more important than housing.
Coastal fishing communities need to be close to their boats and nets.
Housing rebuilt 1 km inland (along a river in this case)

Most owners did not move into the new housing:

- too far from the sea
- dissatisfaction with construction quality.
2004 Niigata Prefecture Earthquake, Japan

- The primary factor in households’ resettlement decisions (rebuild, relocate as a village, relocate individually) was access to livelihoods (Iuchi, 2010).
- Government incentives to relocate or rebuild were not enough to overwhelm livelihood-based decisions.
• Evidence shows:
  – Residents have broad long-term priorities.
    • Community, livelihoods, access to services.......  
  – They do not necessarily want housing units produced as fast as possible.
Survivors of 1999 earthquake in Turkey were not happy with their rapidly-built housing. (Ganapati and Ganapati, 2009):

• “speedy completion alone does not indicate success. Although the permanent housing units were bigger and more comfortable than the tents and prefabricated housing units, many of the permanent units remained vacant.”

• “earthquake victims ...said that they were reluctant to move into the permanent housing because it was distant from the city center and had no schools, stores, or health centers nearby when it was first completed.”

• “One earthquake victim who was interviewed said he would have preferred to wait a little longer for better housing”
Speed undermines citizen involvement

• When governments perceive that they must rebuild housing as quickly as possible in order to keep the masses satisfied, they generally do so by foregoing meaningful citizen involvement.
And involvement is what residents want most of all:

“The drive for quick reconstruction can lead to inappropriate and costly responses. Often, building takes place quickly at the expense of meaningful participation. Research undertaken by Tony Beck(7) for ALNAP and the ProVention Consortium after the 2005 South Asia earthquake found that ‘...there is accumulated evidence that people affected by disasters want to participate fully in the response, even if this means a slower implementation process.’ (reported by Sanderson and Sharma, 2008)
• In fact, virtually every disaster recovery case tells us that housing reconstruction works best when residents are actively involved.

• They know what types of homes and communities they want to live in.
The Answer:

• It is increasingly clear that what residents most want is **to be listened to**. They want to be **full partners** in the process.

• To do this well requires considerable investment of governmental resources.

• (The process also needs to be connected to real construction money).
Unified New Orleans Plan, 2006, got part of this right:

• People wanted to be heard...
• But the process was disconnected from most of the reconstruction funds.
In Kobe, there was eventually community involvement with reconstruction (belatedly)

- The City funded planners to work with local “machizukuri” organizations, especially in targeted land readjustment areas.
Conclusion: Slow Down!

• It’s not about houses. It’s about homes. And communities.
• It’s not a race.
• Don’t fall into the housing units/time trap.
But...extra work is needed

• Successfully “slowing down” requires a major investment of resources.
  – Extensive and substantial resident involvement.
  – Costs of information and technical assistance.
    • In compressed time, you need to widen the bandwidth of information and communication.
• These processes need to be part of the initial budgets and recovery work plans.