

Their Future Home

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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A Great Love Village in Sri Lanka

Imagine once again cooking for your family in a bright, clean kitchen, or chatting with friends while standing under the eaves of your home, or sitting outside in the evening as a gentle breeze caresses your face, or planting crops in your garden. A few months ago, these dreams would have seemed impossible to the victims of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. But Tzu Chi is now helping to make these dreams come true. Just six months after the disaster, work started on a Tzu Chi Great Love Village in Siribopura. Homes, a community center, stores and even a school promises to bring new vitality to a community devastated by the tsunami. In Sri Lanka, the name Siribopura means "beautiful city." For those that are witnessing the birth of the Great Love Village in Siribopura, the future is indeed very beautiful.



The tsunami that occurred in the Indian Ocean on December 24, 2004, destroyed over 70 percent of the coastline of Sri Lanka. One of the most devastated areas was the low-lying coastal district of Hambantota. This region is located on the southern coast of the island, about 240 kilometers (400 miles) south of the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. Once popular with tourists for its pristine coastlines and beautiful beaches, Hambantota looked more like a war zone after the tsunami. The giant waves left thousands of pulverized homes, upturned vehicles, and uprooted telephone and telegraph lines in its wake. It was so powerful that even houses located one kilometer inland were demolished. When the waves finally receded, countless corpses floated in nearby lagoons and mangrove swamps. Official reports put the number killed at around 4,500, but the true death toll may never be fully known.

The perfect coastline no longer exists, and the ruins that remain are a grim reminder of that fateful day. In reaction to the devastation, and in an attempt to reduce the damage from future tsunamis, the local government has stipulated that no homes be rebuilt within 100 meters (328 feet) from the coast. Furthermore, to help survivors put their lives back together, the government has planned to relocate the remaining residents of Hambantota to Siribopura, a district located three kilometers (1.8 miles) from the coast. The government has pledged to build permanent homes there and help survivors begin again.

The relocation plan was announced within a month of the tsunami. On January 19, 2005, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga attended a monument unveiling ceremony held to inaugurate the construction of the new community in Siribopura. At the ceremony, she publicly invited international NGOs to build 2,500 houses. Tzu Chi, engaged in the reconstruction efforts in Sri Lanka since days after the tsunami, is playing a key role in this new endeavor.

Designing in Sri Lanka

Within days after the tsunami wreaked havoc on Sri Lanka, Tzu Chi volunteers and the [Tzu Chi International Medical Association](#)

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(TIMA) began helping survivors. Tzu Chi free clinics provided services for over 27,000 people, distributed relief supplies to over 70,000 persons in need, and built nearly 300 tent shelters for the homeless. In May 2005, Tzu Chi was contracted by the Sri Lankan government to build a Tzu Chi Great Love Village in Siribopura. By planning the overall structure of the new community and building about 1,000 of the 2,500 planned houses, Tzu Chi volunteers hope to bring true and lasting peace to survivors.



A multinational team of architects has been assembled to plan the new community at Siribopura. Taiwanese architect Guo Shu-sheng, Filipino architect Felino Palafox, and Sri Lankan engineering consultant Monchito B. Gayos are bringing the vision of the Great Love Village to life. Siribopura is a low-lying region of about 101 hectares (251 acres). Set among gently rolling hills, the site for the Great Love Village was formerly a jungle. When the three-member architectural team came to inspect the construction site, they saw an opportunity to design the village as a beautiful community following the gentle contours of the land.

After consulting with the provincial government of Hambantota, the Urban Development Authority, and other relevant government departments, Guo, Palafox and Gayos created blueprints for the 1,000-home development. In addition to private residences, their plans included a day-care center, offices, a library, a community center, a health-care facility, a job-training center, a shopping mall, and a school.

As principal architect, Guo has planned to build three smaller neighborhoods within the overall community. He hopes that residents of each neighborhood will work in harmony for the good of the overall community. "We can promote family-sized factories and train people with technical skills. This will help make Master Cheng Yen's livelihood plan a reality," said Guo. Palafox added, "By planning convenience stores or co-ops here, we are hoping the income can be reinvested into a community management fund."

The architects recognize that planning the physical layout of the town is only the first step in a long process of development. Transforming their vision into a successful community will take time, effort, and cooperation among the residents. Guo observed, "The physical design of the village is only a foundation. To manage the community well will require the residents to work together over a period of time. After their lives have improved, they must come to a consensus among themselves and work to create their future."



Preparing for the groundbreaking ceremony

Seven Tzu Chi volunteers specializing in construction, carpentry, plumbing and electricity arrived in Sri Lanka from Taiwan on June 21, 2005. Their tasks were to oversee the project,

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maintain high construction standards throughout the building phase, and arrange for the groundbreaking ceremony that would mark the official beginning of the Great Love Village. They were well equipped for their roles. "We have gained a lot of experience from Tzu Chi construction and landscaping projects elsewhere," said team leader Zhang Shi-wen.

The volunteers arrived just in time, too. Although estimates predict that the new homes will be ready as early as next year, a model home was built on the construction site in time for the groundbreaking ceremony. The model would allow residents to get a better idea of the good things to come. The volunteers from Taiwan arrived just in time to help put the finishing touches on the building.

Since the model house had to be finished in time for the groundbreaking ceremony on June 25, the volunteers sweated under the sun to speed things up. The working conditions were very difficult. It is not uncommon for daily temperatures in June to hit 37°C (99°F). The site was unprotected, and wind, dust and sunlight forced the volunteers to keep their heads down. Thorny weeds pricked the volunteers as they went about their work. A lack of adequate tools slowed their progress, but did not discourage their nimble movements. The volunteers simply imagined that they were working back in the early days in Taiwan, when many things were done by hand.

"I haven't held a hoe in 50 years," said Zheng Bang-yuan, still looking healthy at the age of 70. Zhou Ji-dun, head of a big construction company in Taiwan, said with a smile, "At home, I just order other people to do the work." Lin Wan-lai, who specialized in construction materials, echoed, "We normally do our jobs with only one finger [pointing out things to be done by subordinates]."

From dawn until dusk, the seven volunteers cooperated to accomplish each task one by one. They put the bricks, sand, and all the construction materials scattered around the showpiece home in order; they used hoes to plant trees and shrubs; they laid a walkway in front of the model home. They even erected a large billboard and used wires to secure the supports for a presentation platform. Eventually, the home was ready for the groundbreaking ceremony.

The ceremony

Although rain the previous day had left some puddles, the day of the groundbreaking ceremony arrived hot and sunny. The picturesque scenery surrounding Siribopura easily allowed one to sense Mother Nature's vitality. The golden sunlight cast dazzling reflections on ponds in a nearby wildlife preserve. Aquatic birds danced gracefully on the surface of the water. Occasionally, monkeys could be seen jumping from limb to limb. Cattle grazed leisurely.



Despite the scorching sun, there was an atmosphere of happiness and excitement. Sri Lankan,

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Buddhist, and Tzu Chi flags flapped rapidly in the wind. People moved throughout the area with enthusiasm and anticipation. Cheerful music contributed to the feeling of joy. Even the Tzu Chi volunteers setting up the tables, chairs, and decorations felt their own hearts beating faster in anticipation of the grand event.

Hundreds of people of diverse ethnic groups and interests arrived for the groundbreaking ceremony. Tzu Chi volunteers from Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka were present. Officials from Hambantota attended, as did the chief of the Urban Development Authority. There were abbots of local Buddhist temples, Islamic elders, and Catholic priests on hand. Anil de Silva and Shirosha Prithviraj Guntiltake of the Leader Day Company brought 13 employees to the ceremony.

Anil and Shirosha had been instrumental in bringing Tzu Chi volunteers to Sri Lanka soon after the tsunami. "I remember that Mr. Silva came four days after the tsunami hit and discussed with me about having a place that Tzu Chi volunteers could hold relief work," said Mr. M.A. Piyasena, a local Hambantotan official. "The conversations we had made me aware that their projects would be very helpful to the victims. We immediately provided a house in which Tzu Chi could hold a free clinic." (For more information on Anil, Shirosha, and the Leader Day Company, see "My Friends, My Family" in the summer 2005 issue of Tzu Chi Quarterly.)

The groundbreaking ceremony began with many speeches and gestures of appreciation for the Great Love Village. A message of blessing from Master Cheng Yen, founder of Tzu Chi, was read at the ceremony by Hsieh Ching-kuei, who is in charge of Tzu Chi humanitarian aid and cultural affairs in Sri Lanka. Mahida Amaraweera, Sri Lankan deputy minister for urban development and water supply, expressed thanks to Tzu Chi for helping the survivors. He said he would do his best to ensure smooth completion of the construction project.

In addition to the presentations, local volunteers of all ages performed on stage to inspire the survivors. Relief goods were distributed to those in need. Over 300 families who attended the ceremony picked up milk powder, sugar and blankets. Finally, the official ceremony came to an end as cornerstones were laid to mark foundations of the new buildings that would follow.

Once the ceremony was over, it was time for the guests to tour the showpiece home. As they lined up to go through the house, they were clearly looking forward to a view of their future. Anticipation for the new houses and the city replaced the worry and uncertainty that they had born for so long.

The model home

The first thing that greeted the guests as they approached the house was the veranda, a place where the whole family could sit and chat in the cool evenings. Walking through the veranda, visitors stepped into the living room. Doors on each side of the living room led to the bedrooms. Walking through the living room, visitors entered a spacious dining room. Beyond that was the kitchen, where an L-shaped kitchen counter sparkled in the sunlight.

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