

Tzu Chi Opens Village for Typhoon Survivors

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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On February 11, the Tzu Chi Foundation will open the first section of its biggest aid project in Taiwan since it rebuilt 52 schools after the terrible earthquake of September 1999. It has completed the first 600 homes of a village for the survivors of Typhoon Morakot, which struck southern Taiwan last August.

The contractors broke ground on the Great Love Village in Shanlin township, on the outskirts of Kaohsiung, on November 15, with the aim of having the first group of houses available by Chinese New Year, which falls on February 14. To meet this ambitious schedule, the contractors and their staff took shifts worked on the site 24 hours a day, and the weekends and holidays. They have completed 600 of the 1,500 homes and two of the four churches to be built on the site of 59.3 hectares. They have constructed the homes to withstand an earthquake of eight on the Richter scale, resist winds up to class 17 and last for 50 years. The homes are made of light gauge steel, with blocks of two floors and three different sizes – 498 square feet for one-two people, 996 square feet for three-five people and 1,138 square feet for six-ten people. Last week some of the future residents were shown around their new homes and expressed delight at what they saw, including the high quality of the fittings and furniture. They will be given ownership of their properties, free of charge, and the right to pass them on but not the right to sell or rent them.



The new village contains many environmental features. The buildings are made not of reinforced concrete but light steel frames; the external walls have XPS thermal insulation boards, which absorb heat and allow the interior to remain cool. Only the ground floor uses wooden boards; this reduces the number of trees that have to be cut. When the house has to be reconstructed in the future, the light steel frames can be re-used. The houses have many windows, facilitating ventilation rather than air conditioning. The public buildings have solar panels and there are tanks to collect rainwater. The roads in the village are paved by the interlocking bricks, which enables rain water to pass through and allows the earth below 'to breathe'. Next to the roads are beds in which plants can grow; there are also streams and pools, home to fish, shrimp and dragonflies. There are large areas of grass and trees and bicycle tracks to encourage people to use two wheels and not four.

When it is completed, the village will contain not only 1,500 houses but also four churches, an arts and handicrafts centre where residents can make and sell traditional goods, public squares, a social and medical centre and an office of the local government. It will be not just a collection of houses but a place for the entire community to live, work, worship and socialize.

The idea of the village was born after Typhoon Morakot devastated southern Taiwan on August 8/9, killing more than 570 people, injuring 46 and causing US\$3.3 billion worth of damage. Most

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of the affected areas were home to Aborigines, descendants of the original inhabitants of Taiwan before the Han Chinese started to arrive on the island from the 16th century. The government determined that many of the mountainous villages that were destroyed were too dangerous for human habitation and that the residents would have to be re-housed elsewhere. So it was that Tzu Chi offered to build a Great Love Village. The government provided the site, belonging to the state-owned Taiwan Sugar Company, in Shanlin, on the northern outskirts of Kaohsiung, on land at the base of the mountain.



"We must build houses that we ourselves would want to live in," said [Master Cheng Yen](#). "They must be strong and sturdy and last for many years. We hope to set an example for the international community and make a model village. We must make safety a priority." Initially, many of the displaced villagers were unwilling to leave their ancestral lands and move into new houses on land which would not belong to them: the state is providing the land for the village but retains the ownership of it. They were also uncertain about the prospects of work away from land which they and their ancestors have cultivated and hunted on for centuries. To address these concerns, the foundation and its architects held detailed consultations with the four different tribes who will move into the village, to find out their wishes and requirements. Each has its own language, history and traditions. Each wanted a church, as similar to the one they left behind. So the foundation is building four, based on the designs of the original. They also asked to keep their community together; so members of each tribe will be able to live together, with public space they can use. The foundation has offered the

[indigenous art class](#)

and is providing training for them, so that the tribes can continue their traditional crafts. The new village will be close to primary and secondary schools, which will be more convenient for the children than in their previous mountain homes. Guo Shu-seng, an architect with Alexarch, one of the team responsible for the village, said that they would plant many trees, using local varieties and those from the areas where the residents came from. "We can recreate the local fauna and flora and attract birds, butterflies and animals."

Some of the construction workers are future residents, with a salary of NT\$800 (US\$15) a day. The relief work program gives them work and an opportunity to contribute toward the building of their new homes.



The foundation wants to leave its mark on the village in spirit as well as in the buildings. So it encouraged the workers to follow its precepts, including a ban on betel nut, cigarettes and alcohol. It did not make this a condition of working on the site but hoped to influence the workers in this direction. Volunteers provided them with free lunch boxes of vegetarian food. Once the foundation has handed over the village, it will no longer have a management role. But volunteers will continue to go there to serve the residents and, in so doing, hope to pass on their

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spirit and values. Alcoholism is a serious problem among Aborigines. The foundation has addressed this by providing training courses in woodwork, handicrafts and other skills, to give people more productive activities. It hopes to create a village that is new not only in its design and buildings but also in its spirit and values. So that becomes, in the words of Master Cheng Yen, a model for the international community.

The village embodies many ideals of the foundation – providing something precious and permanent for those in need with funds raised through the generosity of its members: a village designed through combining the traditions and desires of the residents with the skill and technical expertise of architects and construction firms: a community that brings together people of different races and religions together, that will be more than bricks and mortar but people joined by love and common concern for each other. From the death and devastation of a terrible typhoon has grown something good and long-lasting, where the survivors will be able to live in peace and security for many years to come.