What Kind of Expert(ise) Matters in Disaster Governance?
By Dr Tyson Vaughan

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Tower Block Level 10, 469A Bukit Timah Road
National University of Singapore @ BTC

CHAIRPERSON

Prof Mike Douglass, Asia Research Institute and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in post-tsunami Japan, this is a story in three acts, about the re-imagining and reconfiguration of the built environment in post-disaster communities, and about the kinds of experts and expertise playing crucial roles in these processes. The first act features the kind of state-aligned, technocratic experts that have become familiar antagonists in many social scientific accounts of (re-)development and technical policy-making. The second act introduces “a new breed of specialist” (their own words)—theorized as engagement agents—who have developed the peculiarly anti-technocratic “expertise” of engaging non-expert locals and contextualizing technical know-how with local knowledge, constructing this expertise through trust-work. They collaborate with communities to re-imagine built townscapes, natural landscapes, and the social “lifescapes” of local inhabitants. Finally, the third act portrays a variation on the “engagement agent” figure, drawn more from the public than the expert community, ultimately ending on a note of hope for rescuing the agency of local citizens. The attempts of these locals and experts to enable broad participation, and to contextualize and integrate diverse ways of knowing, hint at the possibility of an alternative, richer and more inclusive regime of sociotechnical governance. Thus, ultimately this story looks beyond disaster, Japan, or participatory planning, and contributes to broader understandings of non-expert engagement with specialist knowledge and public participation in sociotechnical change.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Tyson Vaughan is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Asian Urbanisms and the Science, Technology & Society clusters at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, and a Fellow of Tembusu College at NUS. His research contributes to studies of disaster, public engagement with technoscience (knowledge, experts, technologies), and democratic governance of “envirotechnical” risk and sociotechnical order. Much of his work is ethnographically grounded in the context of post-disaster recovery in Japan. At ARI he is a member of the DisasterGovernance.Asia research team, funded by a Tier 2 MOE research grant (Mike Douglass PI).

REGISTRATION

Admission is free. We would greatly appreciate if you RSVP to Ms Tay Minghua via email: minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg