

AMID THE RUBBLE, A SWEET SOLIDARITY

by Paul E. Fallon

Safety comes in two varieties. Buildings and barriers provide physical safety from the ravages of nature and terrorist violence, while human connections provide the psychological safety derived from belonging to a tribe. When I traveled to an impoverished land to lend my hand constructing safe structures after a natural disaster, I came away with a deeper understanding of how these two components of safety sometimes reinforce each other and sometimes work against each other.

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 Richter scale earthquake struck Haiti. Unreinforced concrete frames and sun-baked blocks imploded. Up to 250,000 people died.

On February 27, 2010, an 8.8 Richter scale earthquake struck Chile. There, 500 people died from the quake and subsequent tsunamis. Thousands of buildings were damaged, but few were destroyed.

These two events highlight our technical capacity to protect against earthquakes, as well as our failure to apply it universally. A powerful quake in Chile, the nation with the world's most stringent seismic codes, kills 500 times fewer people than a quake 60 times less powerful does in a country with, essentially, no building codes.

Haiti's earthquake was a tragedy of design and construction; as an architect who had visited the Magic Island, I needed to step up. I volunteered to design an orphanage in the town of Grand Goave, 15 miles from the earthquake's epicenter, then a school. The concept was straightforward: pay Haitian laborers to use traditional construction methods in an earthquake-resistant manner with volunteer technical assistance.

We'd barely begun excavating the complex foundations required for constrained concrete construction when we recognized our need for regular supervision. So I left my job and spent a year oscillating between the poorest country in our hemisphere and the wealthiest nation on earth.

I worked with hundreds of Haitians, often around the clock. We built impressive structures, mixed and poured by hand. In exchange for providing Haiti a morsel of physical safety, I experienced a different way of being. Each night I walked home amidst the sounds of goats, of children, of singing: laughter always within earshot. When I returned home, the plugged-in ears and averted gazes I encountered on the subway seemed so cold.

Haiti is poor by almost every measure, yet Haitians are a proud people. Solidarity of the first Black Republic binds them against all external forces. Mother Nature killed 5 percent of its people; yet I never heard one Haitian complain, "Why us?" Haitians accept hardship; they endure. I cannot help but wonder—Would we Americans be as resilient in the face of comparable disaster?

Our orphanage and school provide nurturing places for children to learn, to grow. But they also provide a physical haven for Grand Goave's citizens as the community's refuge from mudslides and hurricanes. They enhance the psychological safety of the entire town.

In the United States, with building codes nearly as stringent as Chile's, death from earthquake is unlikely (1 in 130,000, according to the Cato Institute). We're preoccupied instead with protecting ourselves from foreign terrorist attacks (1 in 45,000) and mass shootings (1 in 11,125). Physical safety is often at odds with psychological safety. Almost everything we do to make us physically safe from terror (increased security guards, bollards, fences, controlled entries) diminishes the sense of community essential to psychological safety. They divide us rather than unite us.

Rebuilding Haiti provided difficult challenges of logistics and money. In our nation, where these fundamental issues are easier to address, our challenges—social and political—can be even more difficult to resolve. How do we architects create safe spaces that draw us together rather than keep us apart? How do we root our design in common ground? ■

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LEFT

The construction of the Mission of Hope School in Grand Goave, Haiti. Photo: Mission of Hope International

