

Iwaki's Revitalisation 5 Years After the Disaster: Hisanohama District

For this edition, as part of our series which looks at areas recovering from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, we visited Hisanohama which is the northernmost coastal district of Iwaki. There we observed the progress of the reconstruction projects taking place and also went inside the newly designed Hisanohama Branch Office and Community Hall, a combined facility which also serves as an emergency evacuation building.

Before and during the disaster

Hisanohama was one of several main areas of Iwaki that were severely affected by the tsunami of 2011. The tsunami struck a roughly 1.3km long coastal strip of land east of the JR Joban Rail Line which was once home to 890 people and had 340 households as well as a shopping area. The waves, some of which reached over 8m in height, came in through the nearby Ohisagawa and Kohisagawa Rivers and flooded an area about 28 hectares in size. 45 lives were lost and 210 houses, 62% of all the households, were completely destroyed, with an additional 60 houses partially destroyed.



The Hisanohama district was also struck by a large fire at 3:40pm shortly after the first wave and wasn't extinguished until early the next morning. The fire extended over 15,000m² and raged through dozens of houses.

On top of the earthquake, tsunami and fire, Hisanohama was further affected by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster a few days later. Located 35km away from the plant, Iwaki City decided to issue its own evacuation order for the citizens of Hisanohama, with residents taking refuge in Yumoto High School. The order was eventually lifted and residents began returning to their homes around late-April.

Hisanohama 5 years later

In September of that year, the city held the "Vision for Recovery" discussions with residents regarding how to rebuild the area after the disaster. Whilst residents in the nearby northern areas of Suetsugi and Kanegazawa preferred to relocate to higher ground further inland, the majority of Hisanohama residents wanted to return home. After numerous rounds of meetings and planning, the first stages of the redevelopment of the community to make it safer in the event of future disasters commenced by December 2012.



The reconstruction project (otherwise known as land readjustment project) covers the 28 hectares damaged by the tsunami as well as the construction of a new district further inland. It includes 300 households which will house up to 800 people. 39 lots for housing have already been handed over earlier in March of this year, with 64 more lots to be handed over in late-August. All of the new lots for households are planned to be handed over by the end of 2017.

Apart from the rebuilding of houses and roads, some of the new infrastructure includes:

- A 7.2m high seawall to defend against the type of tsunamis that occur once every hundred years.
- An 8.2m high, 50m wide "green zone" made up of black pine trees facing the sea in order to slow down and weaken the impact of any tsunami which rises above the seawall.
- A new bridge for the prefectural road that crosses the Ohisagawa River and runs through the port area. The bridge will be 5m higher above sea level than the old bridge and 14m wide with double lanes and pedestrian paths to allow for easier access and smoother evacuation.

Hisanohama Branch Office and Emergency Evacuation Point

Another major feature of Hisanohama's reconstruction is the newly renovated Hisanohama Branch Office which also serves as an emergency evacuation point. The facility should not be confused with an evacuation shelter (you should evacuate to higher ground and/or further inland when there is a tsunami warning) but it serves as a last resort for the 260 residents who will eventually reside within 300m of the coast who are unable to evacuate in time. The building contains 1 day's worth of food, 2 days' worth of drinking water and 3 days' worth of self-generating power and tank water for 260 people. What makes this building unique is its tsunami-resistant design. The entire building is covered in thin glass which prevents the tsunami from bouncing up and reaching those evacuees on the higher floors. The first floor alone is 5.5m tall so that evacuees on the second floor are a safe distance above ground. There are "kick-down" gates around the building and staircases both within and outside the building to allow a smooth evacuation process for all residents both young and old. Finally, the thick slanted concrete pillars help the structure withstand the impact of any incoming waves.



The facility also contains a 3.11 exhibition where you can learn through various panels, maps and diagrams more about how Iwaki and Hisanohama was affected by the disaster. It includes a model evacuation shelter and a piece of a wooden bridge which was recovered over 1.3km down the coastline after the tsunami.

If you need proof that Hisanohama has not and will not give in to the 2011 triple disaster, you need not look further than one particularly symbolic spot in the area. Currently surrounded by various construction works and newly laid out earth is a small shrine. This shrine, known as Akiba Shrine, miraculously withstood the power of the 2011 tsunami and remains as a symbol of strength and resolve for the people and hope for the revitalisation of Hisanohama. If you ever have the chance to visit the area, please take the time to visit this shrine and pay respect to the victims of 3.11 and offer them your support for the reconstruction.

