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12 May 2016

An Urgent Appeal for Protection of the Cultural Properties damaged by the Kumamoto Earthquakes

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First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt sympathy to the people affected by the series of still on-going earthquakes in Kumamoto Prefecture and its neighboring region since 14 April 2016.

The series of earthquakes reportedly damaged 365 items of cultural properties primarily in Kumamoto and Oita Prefectures as of 11 May; among them, 134 items are nationally designated or registered cultural properties, and 230 of those are designated as such by local governments. In addition to that, a number of undesignated old shrines and temples, and traditional residential buildings are known to have been totally or partially destroyed. The total number of quake-affected buildings is expected to rise as the whole picture of the disaster damage eventually reveals itself.

Japan ICOMOS National Committee dispatched to the ground an investigation team made up of 18 experts from 3 to 6 May, jointly with the Architectural Institute of Japan and the World Monuments Fund.

As the team confirmed, the Kumamoto Castle suffers tremendous damage; many sections of its stone bases crumbled and some constructions such as *yagura* watchtowers have collapsed. While it will take a long time to fully restore them, it is desirable to make these cultural properties somehow available for touristic use even during the rehabilitation, while ensuring the security. In addition, to other heritage buildings such as the main gate of the Aso Shrine and the Eto Residence, both designated as Important

Cultural Property, the Janes Residence (former teacher's residence of the Kumamoto Yogakko School) which is designated by the Kumamoto Prefecture, and Suizenji Jojuen garden, a nationally-designated Place of Scenic Beauty, more national assistance for recovery needs to be allocated, depending on the degree of damage, so that one can have outlook for rehabilitation.

While there is an established framework for total conservation and repair for these cultural properties which are designated nationally or locally, that is not the case for those which are categorized as Registered Cultural Properties and Structures of Landscape Importance, let alone undesignated constructions with historic importance. Yet, many of the buildings which are suffering grave damage fall into these categories. For Registered Cultural Properties and Structures of Landscape Importance, there is normally no subsidy available for repair works, or when available, it is with a ceiling. In such an emergency situation like this time, there is a serious risk that many of such historically important constructions go vanished due to soon-to-start public dismantling operation of collapsed houses, without some sort of rescue scheme to subsidize repair cost.

For instance, Shinmachi-Furumachi (literally "new town, old town") area in Kumamoto City is known to have kept a historic feel of a castle town; an old townscape of what was revived after a major destruction caused by a civil conflict in 1877 has partially survived. However, many of the historic townhouses there got damaged and condemned as dangerous by emergency safety checks, which forces their owners to consider dismantlement as an option. The townhouses have been utilized as ateliers for traditional products such as papered doors and traditional medicine, or cafes, and they house many valuable materials such as movable cultural properties and historic documents. While busy applying emergency measures to prevent their buildings from total collapse and to protect cultural properties they own, the townhouse owners who hope to continue their family businesses that they are proud of are in dire need of a prospect for repairing their houses. The Shinmachi-Furumachi area not only has kept historic stone bridges and river landscape, but also traditional culture since the Edo

Period, kept alive by citizens, therefore it is an important place of tangible and intangible memories stored in an urban landscape. In that sense, Kumamoto is on the verge of extremely serious loss of its culture; it is feared to be the case of “a castle remains, but its castle town does not.” Even in areas other than Shinmachi-Furumachi, a number of damaged Registered Cultural Properties are found here and there. In case they are badly damaged, their owners must bear a heavy burden. Some kind of public financial assistance for repair at the time of major disaster is indispensable to save the Registered Cultural Properties.

Another example is the case of the smashed shrine pavilion of Haichiosha Shrine in Miyayama District, Nishihara Village. The shrine pavilion, which is an undesignated property, holds the local festival and is a core of the community. The shrine parishioners, despite their own significant suffering, are wishing to manage to revive the shrine. Parts of the pavilion’s design date back to the Edo Period, but its preservation depends whether or not public or private funding is available. Assistance from earthquake rehabilitation funds and the like is needed.

What is urgently needed now is to assess promptly and precisely the details of the damage on cultural properties, to reinforce the assistance measures by establishing supplementary budgets, to plan and execute repair works and rehabilitation of local cultural heritage regardless of its designation/registration status.

Furthermore, the Japanese archipelago being in a seismically active period, more natural disasters including new big earthquakes and floods as their consequence, are expected. In such circumstances, it is strongly desired to establish a system to save cultural properties in time of emergency. Proposed measures include:

1. Creating cultural heritage rehabilitation funds comprising donations from private funds.
2. Constructing an organic public-private cooperation system.
3. Promoting rehabilitation measures in the framework of historic

community renovation policies.

4. Building nation-wide strategies for promoting registration of historic buildings.
5. Promoting training of technical experts, and their certification, so that they can engage in cultural property registration and preservation as part-time conservation architects.

It is believed that long-term rehabilitation assistance through such measures as above will contribute to regional revitalization through cultural tourism.

In 2015, at the time of the third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction was adopted and the Recommendation of the International Expert Meeting on Cultural Heritage and Disaster Resilient Communities was issued. It is considered a good opportunity to put into practice the concept of Build Back Better (BBB), which is the pillar of the both documents. It is expected that public and private sectors work hand-in-hand towards comprehensive protection of cultural properties. Japan ICOMOS is determined to play an active role in the preservation of cultural properties affected by the Kumamoto Earthquakes.

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