

## Arts

## Crafts

## Stirred into action

After its devastation in an earthquake, a farmhouse used by Australian artists to nurture links with Japan will be reconstructed.

Andrew Cornell

Echigo-Tsumari, in Japan's rugged north-western coastal and mountain prefecture of Niigata, is one of the country's most idyllic rural settings.

Traditional crafts are still practised and rural rituals followed, but the region's reverence for artisans' works has also made it a welcoming home for one of Japan's most successful modern art festivals, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (ETAT).

Australian artists have been well represented at the festival and in 2009 that participation was extended with the acquisition of a 150-year-old traditional rural farmhouse converted to an artist's residence, Australia House.

In its first year three artists and a co-ordinator created art with locals, volunteers and many others. Lucy Bleach's *Butterflies* was a work created from plaster casts of participants' ears, joined to form butterflies, representing her desire to listen to another culture and create from that experience.

Nearly 400,000 people visited ETAT in 2009 and the embassy believes it introduces contemporary Australian art to a major audience.

"Equally important are the relationships built through Australia House – relationships between Australian and Japanese artists, but

also between artists, the Australian embassy, the people of the local community and volunteers," says a spokesman for the embassy.

"This interaction with the local community is a very important part of Australia House."

Echigo-Tsumari also sits along one of Japan's major seismic faults and on March 11 the region was struck by a series of major earthquakes – but different quakes to those which hit Japan's north-eastern fault line, sparking the devastating tsunami.

These were major quakes in their own right, causing massive landslides and, being winter, avalanches. Australia House didn't survive, collapsing under the shaking and weight of snow.

In the shadow of the utter devastation in the north-east from the tsunami, an art project may seem a low priority but, in Japan, art occupies a profound terrain in the psyche. Japan, after all, recognises artists and craftsman as national treasures.

The foundation theme of the Art Triennial is "human beings are a part of nature".

Japanese Film Festival director Masafumi Konomi says art in Japanese culture is deeply embedded.

His theme for this year's festival, in the wake of the March catastrophe, is simply "hope".

"We see in these stories patterns of recovery. Hope is very important in art," he says. "We have experienced many disasters in Japan and in films, in art, we can see a future."

Now ETAT has launched an open call for architecture designs in



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conjunction with the Australian embassy in Tokyo, to rebuild Australia House. Renowned Japanese architect Tadao Ando will head the selection process, along with the University of Sydney's Tom Heneghan and ETAT director Fram Kitagawa.

The ETAT organisers say the selection of a design is one of the main art projects of the upcoming Triennial next year.

"The new Australia House will continue the purpose of the original, providing space for Australian artists to live, work and present their art works, and serving as a venue for joint projects between Australia and Japan," the committee says.

"In addition, it is hoped that the new Australia House will be a symbol of Japan's recovery from the earthquake, and therefore it should be designed to thoroughly reflect disaster prevention and environmental considerations."

Despite the ruin of the original Australia House, an artist in

residence program will continue, with Ballarat artist Kim Anderson chosen for this year. The designer of the new house will be expected to work with Australian artists taking part in ETAT 2012, by which time the new house is expected to be operational.

In its brief life as a cultural exchange centre, the old Australia House hosted the Japan Australia Art Musings project, which brought together six art students from the University of Newcastle and Tama University to work on joint projects.

Other art projects, too, are being discussed to help restore the Japanese cultural spirit after the March catastrophe, both non-profit and commercial.

Sydney-based wood carver Jean-Christophe Burckhardt of Master Artisan is looking for backers for a venture to use the internet to increase awareness of traditional Japanese woodworking and make the work of local craftsmen more globally available.

The original Australia House, an artists' residence in north-western Japan, was destroyed in an earthquake earlier this year.

Photos Takenori Miyamoto & Hiromi Seno

Burckhardt, whose father is a collector of Japanese art and craft, believes such a commercial engagement with the often insular Japanese art world is both a viable business and means of helping rebuild an art community suffering from not just the traumas of March but the consequent collapse in the Japanese economy.

The Australia House project touches upon another sensitive issue and one which was all too evident in the wake of the tsunami: many Japanese rural communities are rapidly ageing and shrinking.

One of the ideas behind ETAT was to restore vitality to a spectacular and traditional rural location that was suffering such a fate.

When Australia House opened, the head of the local Urada Council, Teiichi Maruyama, noted: "We are grateful you like our home. Our population is steadily decreasing but I hope the creation of this base for exchange will be an opportunity for new beginnings."

The embassy sees the project as developing the deep links between art and community in Japan.

"We want the new Australia House to stand as a symbol of Australia's commitment to Japan, particularly as the country works to recover from devastation," the spokesman says.

"We want it to blend Australian and Japanese architecture and design. And we want to continue to build on Australia's relationship with the Echigo-Tsumari region, and our long-standing participation in the art Triennial."

"As one example of the relationship we have established with the region, the local government has committed ¥20 million (\$230,000) to the rebuilding project."