This past summer I went to the Philippines to survey the after effects of Typhoon Yolanda on the development of typhoon resistant housing and the reconstruction process in the eastern Visayan region. In the Philippines, the most exposed country in the world to tropical cyclones, no other problem has an impact as large in scale as natural disasters. The strongest storm ever recorded at landfall and the deadliest Philippine typhoon on record, category 5 super typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) caused catastrophic devastation in the eastern Visayas. Almost a year has passed, but thousands of lives, along with billions of pesos worth of infrastructure, property and livelihood were lost, and the region is still struggling to recover.

I traveled to the city of Tacloban with the non-profit shelter organization Habitat for Humanity to survey their long term rebuilding project for the region following Typhoon Yolanda. Currently, the organization has multiple site developments in the area to build permanent housing in the cities of Ormoc, Javier, and Kawayan. The first thing I noticed upon arrival is the seemingly normal state of operations in the city. The airport had been repaired, local shops and hotels were open for business, and construction was ongoing. However, upon closer inspection, it was clear that the damage was still evident. Hundreds of buildings were left in a state of disrepair, with debris from the typhoon still scattered on the roadsides. But what startled me the most was the condition of the temporary housing shelters, what the locals called “tent city.” Dilapidated UNHCR tarpaulin tents line the road adjacent to the airport, in evidently cramped and filthy conditions. In May, the same tent city endured a fire that killed a number of Yolanda survivors. These typhoon victims remain exposed to the same hazards by remaining in temporary housing, yet are stuck due to terrifyingly slow operations in the region and the new ‘no-build’ zones. Though the no-build zones are meant to alleviate future hazards in disaster prone areas, the lack of suitable land for relocation means that people have been returning to familiar yet unsafe land, regardless of the known risks associated with it. As a result, victims have moved closer to the coastline despite the 40-meter easement rule, becoming seaside squatters despite the risk of a storm surge.

Informal settlers have also taken residence within a number of ships after they were swept onto shore last November. “Yolanda Village,” as the locals call the coastal settlement, has recently become a site for disaster tourism. The grounded ships have become somewhat of a local landmark, with locals and foreigners alike treating the site like a tourist attraction. Locals have even begun to offer tours from within the ships, with a price. Children run around as if the site was a playground, while the adults loiter outside their small family owned stores. Despite their current living conditions, the locals have an exceedingly cheery disposition. As I conducted my interviews while documenting different sites during my trip with the Habitat for Humanity group, I was incredibly fortunate to meet individuals who openly shared their stories with me, welcomed me into their homes and even treated me like family.
“The Filipino spirit is waterproof” is a saying I hear time and time again, often utilized by the Philippine media to propagate the sense of immediate recovery in an aftermath of disaster. Through my observations and interactions with individuals and groups alike during my trip, I was taken by the sense of community formed by the displaced victims despite the extensive damages and loss of life in the Leyte region. While the city was evidently and catastrophically damaged by Yolanda, ultimately the attitudes of the people I met indicated a somewhat good-humored “life goes on.” However, because of the geographical necessity of typhoons in the Philippines, Filipinos are forced to constantly endure, and for the impoverished this has become somewhat of a lifestyle.

The region of Leyte will take years to recover because of a history of a lack of ready infrastructure to mitigate typhoons, and due to its proximity to the sea, natural disasters remain a constant threat. Though master plans for typhoon-resistant housing is at bay and construction has begun, tension between central and local governments and intricacies amidst land issues are making the recovery process unnecessarily slow, and for the local community, intolerable. The country needs a systematic long-term method for natural disaster mitigation free from internal political tensions and complications that hinder progress. By understanding location-specific risks in order to fortify and build infrastructure to withstand disasters, co-investing for resilience, improving warning and preparedness measures, engaging the community, and calling for innovative engineering and design solutions, the Philippines can learn from the horrific catastrophe that was Yolanda and take steps forward to rebuild smarter and stronger. However, with the current state of the nation, one can only wonder if such a formula is possible with the extent of the corruption and convolution in the Philippine political arena.
Children playing in “Yolanda Village”
A man sits on debris from the typhoon
A worker takes a break from harvesting metal from one of the grounded ships
New housing built at a ‘no-build’ zone near the sea
Temporary tarpaulin tent housing still in place
A fisherman weaves his net among garbage and debris
A grounded ship blocking one of the main roads
Construction has begun for new typhoon resistant homes in Javier, Leyte.
New Habitat for Humanity loft-style typhoon-resistant housing, said to be able to withstand wind strengths of 300 kph
Children playing in Kawayan Ville, Tacloban, as a storm approaches
Mass graves in Tacloban