

Rethinking home

Climate change in New York and Samoa

A “Museums Connect” project, funded by the American Alliance of Museums, a collaboration of the American Museum of Natural History & the Museum of Samoa

Project overview

Communities in Samoa and New York both face challenges to home and home lands from the increasing severity of climate-changed weather systems. A group of Samoans and New Yorkers, with homes in coastal areas impacted by hurricanes, will work together to share and learn from their personal and community experiences of climate change. The groups will approach the issue by focusing on houses and the idea of home. In workshops they’ll explore how our houses define us; either succeed or fail in sheltering us; and might adapt in the future. Practical sessions will center on the traditional house of Samoa and on volunteer work with those rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy. The teams will continue discussions in an online forum. They will produce a video for schools, an online exhibition, and other online resources. The project will create strong cross-cultural exchanges and strengthen personal resources for dealing with climate change.



Figure 1 After Cyclone Evan, Samoa, October 2013.
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Background

People living near coastlines are particularly subject to the ecological impacts of climate change. Sea level rise, severe weather systems, shoreline erosion and damage to reefs are increasingly impacting sites of significance, causing communities to become displaced and homes to be damaged or destroyed. The

project ‘**Rethinking Home: Climate change in New York and Samoa**’ will bring two coastal communities together over the course of a year. They will learn from each other,

generate ideas, and create resources for education about the past, present and future of homes in a climate changed world.

To date, climate change research and policy has paid little attention to the cultural impacts of climate change.¹ Matafeo Falana'ipupu Tanielu Aiafi, CEO of the Museum of Samoa, has said: 'as custodians of our Pacific culture we cannot be satisfied with the recent focus on just the physical impacts of climate change.'² The Museum of Samoa (MoS) and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) propose facilitating an innovative collaboration between islanders who are being directly impacted by climate change, in Samoa and in New York. Members of these culturally distinct communities will have a unique opportunity to learn from each others' perspectives.

On the Samoan side, participants will be invited from several villages; Asau (Asau Bay, Island of Savaii), Aopo, (Savaii), and Fagaloa (a site of particular cultural significance, island of Upolu). These communities have particular interests in the maintenance of cultural traditions. They have, like many villages in Samoa, been damaged by the increasingly severe cyclones, eroding shorelines, destruction of the built environment, and other challenges in Samoa to cultural practices and places of significance. Samoa has a high degree of environmental integration; people and their pasts are intimately entwined with their local environment. Many traditional practices integrate plant and animal elements and are connected to the natural world. These elements are starting to change, often becoming scarcer.

¹ W.N. Adger, J. Barnett, F. S. Chapin III, and H. Ellemor, 'This Must be the Place: Under-representation of Identity and Meaning in Climate Change Decision-Making', *Global Environmental Politics*, 11:2, May 2011.

² Matafeo Falana'ipupu Tanielu Aiafi, letter to M. J. Novacek, Provost, AMNH, March 12, 2013.



Figure 2: After Hurricane Sandy, Staten Island, Nov 2012 © Jennifer Steffey

On the American side, participants will be invited from a contrasting set of island coastlines, with a distinct set of relationships to nature and their local environment, set amongst the culturally diverse milieu of one of the world's largest urban centers, New York. As the recent damage of Hurricane Sandy underlined, the islands that make up New York are as vulnerable as other shores to the impacts of climate change. The key value of this project lies in bringing together people from these contrasting, but linked, perspectives. New Yorkers will learn about the traditional Samoan house: the *fale Samoa* ("FAH-ley SA-moa") and the ways in which its open-sided form, locally-sourced materials and rebuildable nature make it suitable or less suitable for the changing conditions. The ways that Samoans are continuing and adapting their cultural practices will provide powerful insights for the New York community group. Likewise, Samoans will gain important perspectives by learning how people of a variety of cultural backgrounds, but with roots in Staten Island, Long Island, Red Hook, and others, might be reconsidering ways to rebuild their homes. They will explore how these people are considering the qualities of their respective housing traditions, as well as considering options such as relocating, and new sustainable architecture approaches. At this time of change, thinking cross-culturally offers a highly relevant potential for forming innovative approaches.

This is a project of **cultural exchange**, but also of **cultural documentation**. Across the Pacific, and increasingly in other ocean-facing communities, islanders are re-evaluating their futures, seeking ways to record their tangible and intangible heritage to ensure long-lasting transmission to future generations. Many are working to alert the broader world to

the degree to which they and their cultures are under threat. Youtube and international climate change forums have been the means by which many Pacific Islands activists have had at their disposal.³ UN Development Program funding for ‘participatory video’ projects in Samoa have aimed to bridge the gap between locals and policy makers.⁴ *Many Strong Voices* links the Arctic and Small Island Developing States in publishing stories and images online as well as having created a travelling exhibition.⁵ Those wanting to comment on the destruction of homes and other sites brought by Hurricane Sandy have commonly used Youtube to share experiences and, presumably, in hopes of helping in the process of recovery.

There is a need for more community-based projects of this nature, providing a **forum** for ordinary people to share learning about building and rebuilding in a changing environment, whether in villages or urban centers. We need more avenues for people who are experiencing threats or loss of home to obtain reliable information, in a mode that connects to their world, to think through implications in a supported way, and to respond in a way that is productive for themselves – as well as sharing this kind of learning with others facing similar challenges.

Workshops

Through a series of 2-day **workshops** over the course of a year: two at the Museum of Samoa, two at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, the two communities will discuss and share their concerns. The project aims to recruit 10 Samoans and 10 New Yorkers to meet in their own countries and meet with each other. The project coordinators and their team of support staff will manage the project, facilitate the workshops, bring in experts in climate change and various building technologies to run sections of the workshops, oversee the communications and visits between the groups, and manage the outputs.

³ See videos such as http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq2Ybg_HDYs;

⁴ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUFsZtLtzHU> and <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/may/les-habitants-de-samoa-documentent-le-changement-climatique-en-vido.en>

⁵ www.manystrongvoices.org

This project between the AMNH and MoS focuses on the idea and the **materiality of homes**. This is one powerful way to explore the personal and social/cultural impacts of climate change. It is also an important way to center the project in an accessible way for the participants, one that allows an immediate point of shared concern between Samoa and New York. Participants will discuss the ways climate change has been impacting their homes, and how they are likely to be impacted in the future. The changing significance of home will be explored as a place of safety, as a locus of cultural tradition, as a managed structure with implications for environmental stewardship, and a site of social and personal meaning.

The ways that Samoans have been building houses has been slowly shifting from the mid-20th century. The traditional *fale Samoa* is an open-sided house, oval in floor plan, with a framework of poles lashed together with coconut fiber and thatched with palm leaves. Since the mid 20th century the *fale* has been changing to include corrugated iron and concrete - materials that are easier to manipulate and have carried a certain caché of modernity.⁶ While in recent years some local teams have looked to materials in the surrounding environment when developing emergency housing,⁷ many people have been abandoning traditional materials and form altogether for their houses as they look for protection from increasingly frequent, and increasingly severe, cyclones.



Fig 3 & 4: Left: 'A Traditional Fale', Savaii, 2006. Photo: Jean Adam. Right: house in Mantoloking a month after Hurricane Sandy, NJ, Nov. 29, 2012. Photo: Reuters/Andrew Burton.

⁶ N. Thomas, 'Tin and Thatch', *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories*, Duke University Press, 1997, pp.171-85.

⁷ 'Ole Fale Ofe [Bamboo fale]', Vaialele, Samoa. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9218BT2Tdkg>

In New York, many houses – historic and modern – were damaged or destroyed by **Hurricane Sandy**. This has prompted many to rethink the location and form of their homes. The power of climate-changed weather, with the likelihood of the increasing severity and frequency of such events,⁸ is affecting the degree to which home can be thought of as a refuge.

The project coordinators Lumepa Apelu and Jenny Newell will facilitate the workshops with assistance from curatorial associate Jacklyn Lacey (AMNH) and culture specialist Mata'afa Atuagavaia (MoS). Two workshops will be held in each location. The content of these two workshops will be mirrored in the two locations. The program is described below. In New York, the first workshop will include not just the local community group but also 2 participants from the Samoan community. In the second workshop in Samoa, 2 participants from the New York community will travel to Apia to participate.

In addition to the reciprocal visits between representatives of the two groups, workshop participants will advance their conversation through an online discussion space: a **Facebook group**, which allows members to not only write to each other easily but also upload images. The project will allow the two groups to learn with and from each other and create educational resources that will extend their learning to much broader audiences. Experts in oral history methodologies will train the community members in Samoa and New York in recording oral testimony and images, as well as documenting the heritage of housing and the local impacts of climate change. This will enable the participants to extend their knowledge of climate change to others in their communities and share ideas for sustainable building with a local and international audience, via the project's website, hosted at the AMNH (www.amnh.org) and linked to the MoS website (www.museumofsamoa.ws).

⁸ "Climate change is causing a greater number of intense storms. The total number of storms has remained constant, but the proportion of high-intensity events has gone steadily upward in most parts of the world." Prof. K. Emmanuel, Atmospheric Science, Mass. Inst. of Technology, quoted in M. Ciments, 'Perfect Storm: Climate Change and Hurricanes', *Live Science*, on-line journal, April 5, 2013.

First workshop: Hurricanes and Homes

New York and Samoa

Participants will be asked to bring in photos of their own homes. Reflecting on how their homes and their places of significance help to define who they are, the centrality of these sites to personal and social well-being will be explored. Discussion will move on to consider the increasing impacts of climate change on home, heritage, and cultural continuity.

In the afternoon session of the first day, climate change scientists will provide an introduction to climate change, focusing on local manifestations. At the MoS the presenter will be Tapulolo'u Tuaillemafua, of the USP-EU Global Climate Change Alliance Project. Information on how climate change is likely to affect one's own environment is often not readily accessible: these sessions will ensure the participants are well-informed and better fitted to consider points of resilience in the face of the personal, cultural, and physical impacts of a changed climate.

The second day of the workshop will provide the participants with training in using the audio, video and still image capturing functions of tablet computers, as well as using digital audio recorders. This will be followed by a session on interview techniques and archiving oral testimony and digital images, provided by an oral historian and archivist. This training will provide the basis for participants to be recording climate change observations and reflections on the future amongst their fellow group members and in their broader communities. They will also be able to upload the material they collect to an archive portion of the project website. The groups will practice these techniques by uploading their own photos of home, with captions about significance, to the project website and to the participants' Facebook group, creating brief online exhibitions. The tablet computers will remain accessible to the communities after the completion of the project. This will make it easier for them to record interviews about places and climate change, videos of demonstrations of traditional techniques, and other relevant material.

A few weeks after the workshop, in late October, participants in New York and Samoa will link up through a video conference. This conference (at the AMNH in NYC, and at the US

embassy in Apia), will allow the two groups to meet each other and share their answers to the several key questions under discussion.

Second Workshop: Rebuilding home

Samoa

This more practical workshop will center on buildings. In Samoa, several of the group from New York will travel to Apia for the workshop, in company of J. Newell and J. Lacey of the AMNH. The focus of this exciting two days will be a visit to a village in Upolu to learn about the techniques and customs surrounding the *fale Samoa*. The village will extend a formal welcome ceremony to the visiting group, and offer a meal. A *fale* builder and his assistants (including men who do the heavy timber work, and women who weave the palm frond mats for floor coverings and movable wall panels), will talk about the processes and demonstrate building techniques, by making a model *fale*, planned to be 58 inches high x 28 inches long. Participants will have a chance to try some of the techniques (plaiting, weaving, and other skills) – making these at full, rather than model, size. The model *fale* will be completed within the village after the workshop is over, taking about 6 weeks to finish. It will then be delivered to the Museum of Samoa to be placed in the foyer, as an ongoing educational resource for future workshops and education sessions.

Several of the participants will record the day in the village in photographs, videos, and orally recorded interviews.

The second day of the workshop will be based back at the MoS, reviewing the discussions and teachings of the previous day. Late morning, there will be a session of walking in the local area so participants can note and record modern versions of *fale* around them: the uses of corrugated iron, concrete, and other imported materials, more angular forms and closed-wall, western-style buildings. In the afternoon, an architect of sustainable buildings (either from the University of Samoa, or as part of the contingent from New York) will lead discussions, as the group will explore how the traditional *fale* might be re-thought, and potentially re-designed, in response to changing environments and increasing needs for ‘green’ approaches to building.

In the last part of the afternoon, and later video conferences, the group will discuss the uses that the collected recordings, images and learning will be able to be put to. This is outlined in the 'outcomes' section below.

New York

In New York during the second workshop, designers of climate-change resilient buildings will work with the group to rethink traditional forms of home from a variety of cultural perspectives. This is an effective approach for promoting resilience: as a curator at MoMA wrote recently, 'one of design's most fundamental tasks is to help people respond to change.'⁹

A visit to a site of rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy will form the first day. This fieldtrip will be in the company of several people with sustainable architecture expertise, and the participants will also have opportunities to speak to people who are continuing the process of rebuilding their homes, by taking part in a day of volunteering with the 'Hands On' network.

The second day will mirror discussions held in Samoa on the second workshop's final day.

Structure

Targeted segments of the community

The project will recruit 10 community members in Samoa and 10 in the US according to criteria of 1) place of residence, 2) interest in the aims of the workshop, 3) cultural affiliation and 4) availability to commit to the days of the workshop and additional contact hours corresponding with community partners. We will invite people who are living in one of several rural Samoan villages selected for their interest in maintaining cultural heritage, and people from across a number New York communities.

Participants will be able to reach the MoS and AMNH using their own transport for the most part, and they will not require overnight accommodation, thus reducing the costs of the workshop.

⁹ www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1353 'Applied design' exhibition rationale; site accessed 27 March 2013.

In New York, we will aim to recruit four or five Pacific Islanders resident in NYC, preferably several of the group to be of Samoan heritage. These people will provide the diaspora perspective – people who (for a variety of complex of reasons) have already left homelands and are negotiating a changed relationship to home. Four or five participants will be from Staten Island or Long Island, Red Hook or the lower reaches of Manhattan, whose homes were damaged by Hurricane Sandy. We will endeavor to recruit 1 or 2 participants who are involved as architects, designers, or engineers working in sustainable architecture.

In overview, the main outcomes of the project will be:

- **For participants**
 - Learning about climate change, in its global and specific local impacts
 - Developing personal and social resources for dealing with climate change and damage/loss of places of significance
 - Learning techniques and technologies for recording community members' observations, reflections about the environment ('Developing amateur experts')
 - Obtaining training in uploading material online ('Developing amateur experts')

- **School community**
 - A **video** for use in upper elementary and middle schools in Samoa and New York. Workshop participants in Samoa and New York will collaborate to produce material for a video, 'Our Changing Climate'. It will use the participants' own stories as case studies, to best connect to the students and engage them in addressing climate change as it relates to Samoa and New York. The video will be accompanied by a few key questions about impacts of climate change on culture, community and the built environment, along with a set of activities for teachers to use within classes. Additional multimedia resources to support this curriculum material is already available on the AMNH website, and further resources will be developed. Note: the production of the video will be funded by the AMNH, and be produced after the grant project is completed.

- **Academic community**

The project coordinators and their associates will produce an edited **book** of accessibly-written essays which will incorporate ideas, stories, images and strategies emerging from the below conference and the workshops, in addition to essay-form scholarly

writing. The literature developed out of this project will seek to be dynamic in scope and depth while aiming to remain accessible and usable to the communities with which the project is engaged. Note: the production of the edited volume will be funded by the AMNH, and be produced after the grant project is completed.

- **Museum/ general audience**

- We expect to develop an **app** entry for iPhone, iPod and iPad use, about the *fale Samoa*. This will be linked to the Pacific Hall's Samoan *fale* diorama, to be included in the AMNH's existing, award-winning 'Explorer' app.
- '**Collecting the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change**' is a **conference** (co-convened by Dr J. Newell) held at the American Museum of Natural History, 2-4 October 2013. It will bring together museum professionals from around the world and interested members of the public, to explore how museums are engaging their audiences with the cultural aspects of climate change. Designing effective exhibits and forming collections on this increasingly central issue is a major focus for this conference, from both practical and theoretical perspectives. Four project participants from Samoa will attend and present at this conference, providing valuable perspectives for attendees, and learning much from hearing the approaches of curators from Europe, Australia and America.

- **Online community**

- A project **website** will engage web audiences to the ANMH and MoS sites. The video, images, audio and writing that participants produce during the workshops will provide a substantial and engaging module, hosted on the AMNH website and linked to the MoS.
- This site, centered on climate change and rethinking traditional approaches to houses, will include a link to relevant **objects** in the two institutions: such as the new model that will be built for the MoS, and the Samoan *fale* diorama at the AMNH's Pacific Hall. These objects will be given dynamic context through images and video from the practical *fale*-building workshops.
- An **online exhibition** curated by workshop participants – with images, captions and reflections on climate change and home – will address a global audience.

Project Convenors

Ms Lumepa Apelu

Museum of Samoa

Lumepa Apelu is the Principal Officer/Curator of the Museum of Samoa, a position she has held since 2011. In addition to the management and curating of the museum, she maintains the website and writes regularly for the museum.

Her background is in tourism, mathematics and law. She won a scholarship to study in New Zealand and Australia. She has a Bachelor of Mathematics, Applied Statistics: Wollongong University, Australia, and the National University of Samoa. She speaks both English and Samoan fluently.

Lumepa has experience in resort management, as a math teacher, and research officer for the National Kidney Foundation. She is also the secretary and a founding member of the Arts Sector of Samoa.

Mr Mataáfa Atuagavaia is a Culture Specialist for the Culture Division in the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture. Mataáfa is the main writer for the oral traditions educational books published by the Ministry. He will be the link between the indigenous *fale* builders and other workshop participants and his in-depth knowledge of the Samoan customs will help tremendously in the visit to the village community.

Dr Jennifer Newell

AMNH

Jenny Newell is curator of Pacific Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History. She began this job in March 2012. Her main research project centers on the **cultural impacts of climate change in the Pacific**. She runs regular **'Pacific open house'** sessions at the Museum to provide Pacific communities, particularly those in New York, opportunities to connect to their material culture heritage at the Museum.

Jenny has a PhD in Tahitian environmental history from the Australian National University (2006). She was curator (Polynesia) in the British Museum's Oceanic section (2001-2008). She then took a research fellowship in her home town, at the National Museum of Australia

(2008-2012). Jenny has published two books: *Trading Nature: Tahitians, Europeans and Ecological Exchange* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), and *Pacific Art in Detail* (British Museum Press/Te Papa Press/ Harvard, 2011), an introduction to the arts of the Pacific through highlights of the British Museum's collection.

Jacklyn Lacey

AMNH

Jacklyn Grace Lacey has been curatorial associate of African and Pacific Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History since autumn 2011. She has a background in virology and medical anthropology, previously working in HIV/AIDS and TB testing, research and education at African Services Committee in Harlem, New York, as well as in the NSF-funded immunology lab at Sarah Lawrence College. After Hurricane Katrina, she worked with a multi-faith coalition to clear debris from destroyed homes on Flood Street in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, where she first started to think about the fragility of coastal settlements in the face of a changing climate.

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