

South Bend architect helping build homes, hopefully peace, in North Korea

Effort aims to house farmers.



Troyer

By **GENE STOWE** *Tribune Correspondent*

Volunteers from around the world will start building 50 houses in North Korea later this year, a rare opening for international cooperation in the isolated nation.

South Bend architect LeRoy Troyer, chairman of the Fuller Center for Housing that organized the project, participated in a groundbreaking in November, culminating two years of negotiation and preparation.

"The thought was if we could build houses and work together in a volunteer program, people-to-people, that would also help build peace," Troyer says. "To work together, you have to have relationships. Hopefully from that will grow peace."

The Fuller Center is partnering with the Paektusan Academy of Architecture for the project, using green building technology in the cluster of houses for farmers in Osan-ri near Pyongyang.

Han Park, head of the Center for the Study of Global Issues at the University of Georgia and a longtime advocate of improved relations between the United States and North Korea, helped arrange the opportunity. "They had a real difficulty at first with the concept of working with a Christian organization," Troyer says. "We said we build houses for anyone. We don't discriminate."

Along with Troyer and Park, Fuller Center President David Snell and Jubilee Partners founder Don Mosley participated in the groundbreaking.

"By partnering to build houses, we trust that we will begin to build peace, which is more important than the houses," said North Korean government official Chol Pak, president of the Asian Pacific Peace Committee, at the event.

Fuller Center founder Millard Fuller, who died last year, and former President Jimmy Carter, a longtime supporter, encouraged the effort.

Organizers expect the new village homes will become a model to ease overcrowded housing in the nation that, among other things, lost 30,000 houses to Typhoon Ewiniar in 2006. "They have collective farms," Troyer explains. "There will be 50 houses in a collective area, a little village adjacent to the fields." The goal is to replicate that in all 200 counties in the country.

Each project will cost about \$1 million, less than \$25,000 per house.

Materials could include Styrofoam blocks filled with concrete and strengthened with rebar, a high-insulation, earthquake-resistant product.

"We met twice and discussed the housing design," says Troyer, also founder of The Troyer Group in Mishawaka and a longtime advocate of sustainable design. "They wanted passive energy, a lot of green design. It gets cold there, colder than here."

The homes have lofts that foster ventilation in the hot summer and southern exposures with broad areas of glass for passive solar energy. The Fuller Center hopes to recruit volunteer builders from the United States, Canada, Japan, China and, eventually, South Korea -- probably a dozen people for one-week stints.

"We need to be very selective of the people going over," says Troyer, who worked on a Habitat for Humanity project in South Korea in 2001 that brought together workers with more than 15 languages on one fourplex unit.

"We want to make sure we have goodwill and a good relationship getting started, a good experience on both sides. We'd like to sponsor some to come here to this country."

The groundbreaking delegation in November stayed in a Pyongyang high-rise and met with construction and government leaders. At the construction site, farmers dressed in black had marked the outline of each house in the field.

"They were very excited about maybe getting a house," Troyer says. "Some people say, 'Why do you help your enemies?' We're not helping them enrich themselves by becoming a military power. If we can build up hope and faith, give them some hope that there is an alternative.

"They have families like we have. They have dreams like we do. They want a better life for their children and their families. They want a warm home and a place to lay their head at night."
