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Title
Design after Disaster

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0rk7r6mg

Journal
Places, 21(1)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
2009-05-19

Peer reviewed

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Design after Disaster

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In the past decade, as architects and planners, we have tackled America's greatest urban catastrophes—in New Orleans and in Lower Manhattan. In spite of our tenacity and creativity, in spite of desperate need, civic engagement, and urgency—we failed. Perhaps a different story will be written with greater hindsight, but it seems doubtful that either of these places, slates wiped violently clean, will be remade in ways that symbolize what everyone sought: triumph over disaster.

Above: Proposal for a New Orleans "Floating House." Marc Kersey of Clark Construction, Thom Mayne and Brandon Welling of Morphosis, and Tom Darden of Make it Right discuss a model at the chassis prefabrication site at UCLA. Photo by Saji Matuk.

Designers involved in these efforts have complained that their hands were tied by politics and economics. But these forces always predominate in postdisaster scenarios. Are we to conclude that design is inherently emasculated just when it could have its greatest impact? Clearly, we must find more productive ways to operate, so that we can side with President Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, who famously stated, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste."[1]

Lately it seems there is no shortage of crises, but the jury is out about the role architects and urbanists will play. Stemming from a multiyear investigation on the part of cityLAB, a think tank in the Department of Architecture and Urban Design at UCLA, the following seven articles explore ways that design can indeed be part of the postdisaster solution.

Cleaning the Slate

When it comes to urban places, disasters make their mark through destruction. Fires, floods, wars, hurricanes—these catastrophes violently rend the city, opening up territories to the schemes of power-brokers and visionaries alike.

The notion of tabula rasa has always held a certain attraction for architects. It suggests potential, a lack of preconceptions, an ability to start fresh, an opportunity to create a new world. A tabula rasa is conceptually open-ended; its indeterminate constraints and program offer the freedom to think anew. But more than anything, for designers it is a theoretically empty site—empty of structures, context, compromise, politics, regulation.

Sometimes, the desire for tabula rasa is so great that we attempt to empty sites the way we might empty the trash, with little regard for all that is cleansed away. This was the story of urban renewal, when vibrant, poor neighborhoods in American downtowns were demolished to make way for antiseptic corporate highrises. As I discovered in research for *The Provisional City*, destruction was as much a part of the solution as the new urban fabric, but it was not nearly so well planned.[2]

There are many ways besides destruction to start with a clean urban slate. Sometimes new territories are discovered—hinterlands that for some reason become feasible for development, or open spaces that change hands, as when military bases are decommissioned. Sometimes technology makes an uninhabitable place buildable, as when levee construction moved the waters away from New Orleans. But often, violence prevails—natural or manmade—to create a tabula rasa: the Gulf Coast after Katrina, Rotterdam after World War II, Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, Rome after Nero's conflagration.

The tabula rasa of disaster provides a new starting point. Yet, compared to the true clean slate, disaster sites are profoundly tainted. The violent erasure of history leaves a highly polemic and traumatized place, where politics, memory, economic interest, and opportunity vie for priority in the process of recovery. Moreover, war-torn sites, from Beirut to London, depend not only on exigencies of recovery but narratives of deliverance. In no place has this conflicted history been as palpable as at Ground Zero, where visions for the site's future have been steadily eroded by an ordeal that has afflicted everyone involved, from victims' relatives to city officials.

A catastrophe steals away a future that can never be imagined, and its site becomes a site of injustice. The role cast for architecture in this case is generally to memorialize, looking back rather than forward. But the coupling of nostalgia and a desperate urgency to forget creates a paradox that may paralyze those charged with rebuilding. As with the Chicago fire, it can take decades for the redemptive power of the disaster narrative to take the place of loss, so that effective recovery can proceed.[3] In the case of Chicago, deliverance did finally arrive in the form of innovative architectural departures such as the steel frame and urban visions like that of the skyscraper, and like a phoenix, the city rose to meet the new urban possibilities.

Rocovery from Shock

The case studies described here make clear that design after disaster is not an autonomous project. In other words, disasters destroy more than buildings, and more than buildings need to be reconstructed in their aftermath.

The long historical record of urban and political restructuring after disaster is evident in Brian Sahotsky's article on the aftermath of Rome's great fire of 64 CE. In its wake, Emperor Nero sought to build a private palace in the formerly public center of the city. Nero's failed venture, as well as his successor's pointed rebuke, is an ancient example that speaks to Naomi Klein's contemporary analysis of disaster capitalism, the economic and political opportunism that may emerge when a catastrophe—natural or manmade—produces mass disorientation among a people.[4]

Klein's "shock doctrine" holds lessons pertinent to urban design. When a city is rebuilt, is not only there collective trauma, but also some form of state-scale response that holds the capacity for significant restructuring. Claudia Ziegler's study of a modern Italian catastrophe, postwar Milan, provides an early example of the possibilities of such postcatastrophe reengineering. The city's architecturally striking Pirelli Tower symbolized its place in the new world order as well as its triumph over historical impediments.

Because architects and planners are well aware of the difficulties of redirecting the urban status quo, they may relish the possibility in Klein's shock scenarios to create utopias that would otherwise be impossible. But Klein has illuminated the likelier scenario that oppressive, corporate-state coalitions will dominate recovery in emergency conditions. We see how those same interests prevailed in the case of Lower Manhattan, even though broad community support was expressed for innovative design alternatives at Ground Zero. Instead, the developer, the municipal and state agencies, and the corporate architecture firm SOM maneuvered to exert control. The terrorist threat and the need to rebuild formed the "excuse that was

needed to push through a program that would have been politically impossible under normal circumstances."[5]

What political philosophers consider the state of exception (read: emergency) is an essential part of the rule of law: it is exactly the moment when laws can be suspended.[6] But Berlin's INFO BOX offers an example of how shock scenarios can be productively restrained. The largest construction site in Europe emerged at Potsdamer Platz after the demolition of the Berlin Wall. However, Rebecca Choi argues that the temporary, brilliant red INFO BOX helped visitors both deal with the tragic past and contemplate a future under construction. At this place that once symbolized a severed nation, its success derived from its ability to embody Lebbeus Woods's notion of a scab.

It may be that catastrophe, particularly in our postutopian age, is too grand for the bold actions of visionary designers and planners. We are rightly suspect of master plans. Yet large-scale destruction like the tornado that flattened Greensburg, Kansas, seems to necessitate broad brush strokes—or, as the political scientist James Scott cautioned in his book of the same name, "seeing like a state."[7]

Above: Rendering by the architects, Schneider + Schumacher, of the INFO BOX surrounded by new buildings. The intent of the design, however, was that it would be a temporary structure that would be taken down once new development around it was complete.

Scott was referring to the abstracted, distant view that reduces on-the-ground complexities to singularities. Linda Samuels's investigation of post-Katrina/Rita highway infrastructure shows how emergency management has perpetuated such a singular, abstract view of this essential feature of the public realm in New Orleans. In that case, recovery has also been postponed by the symbolism of the city's highways as places of life and death during the days following the disaster. Similarly, Sérgio Figueiredo shows that an architectural discourse of "sustainability" may have been a success in branding Greensburg's early recovery. But it will be increasingly less capable of guiding the town's reconstruction if it is not accompanied by visual evidence of architectural innovation.

Radical Increments

While Scott learns from our failed attempts to implement utopia, these articles take the opposite approach, by learning from success. As case studies, they demonstrate what we at cityLAB call the power of the radical increment.

If the cataclysm has tended to upbraid the architect, this is not because the problem is too large, but because the solution is excessive. In the face of catastrophe, architects and urbanists might do better to appreciate the logic of accidents. According to the cultural theorist Paul Virilio, the speed that characterizes contemporary civilization inherently breeds the accident.[8] Echoing Aristotle, Virilio suggested that "the accident reveals the substance." This led him to a conclusion that featured large in our thinking about design after disaster: "To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment." Thus, the levee previsions its rupture; the regulation its variance; the security wall its breach; and construction its deterioration. However, when the accident reveals such substance, it also holds the kernel of reinvention. Seen from this vantage point, a crisis offers not a tabula rasa for utopian dreams, but an opportunity to question old rules.

The floating house proposed by Morphosis and a UCLA graduate architecture studio for New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward breaks plenty of rules when it comes to residential construction. But, as Erin Smith recounts, it is a critical piece of a large new idea—that New Orleans could thrive without levees. The proposals for a floating house, or a bent house, are radical increments that can launch minor architectures. Like the minor literatures outlined by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, they hold the power to enunciate political and collective values that are not part of dominant practices.[9] Such design after disaster is capable of countering the homogeneous singularities that both Klein and Scott show to be fundamentally dysfunctional.

We must separate the concept of a radical increment from a simple project, however. A project is singular, with no implications beyond its own boundaries; the radical increment, on the other hand, is a particular response that systemically or prototypically intervenes in a more extensive problem. Like the thoughtful student-built art center in Greensburg, a single building can serve as a point of debate and inspiration for an entire town's reconstruction. In her study of Detroit's ongoing crisis of decay, Whitney Moon likewise shows how small-scale interventions can highlight, appropriate, and transform isolated sites to create a vital new field for the recuperation of a ruined city.

The radical increment, then, is a catalyst for change. From the Roman Colosseum to Milan's Pirelli Tower, the INFO BOX, and the experimental floating house, the examples here demonstrate its importance to design after disaster. By appreciating its power, the architect can become truly instrumental.

Metropolitan Possibility

Seven essays cast a net around the ways that design operates after a crisis. The authors are all graduate students at UCLA who participated in an ongoing advanced seminar on the topic under my direction. Our charge was to remain close to our objects of study, the buildings and infrastructure designed after disasters, so that we might better understand their origins as well as their function in recovery. Operating as ruptures of the norm, disasters can spark fresh thought, and these essays offer *constructive* examples of that potential, in both the literal and projective sense of the term.

The design professions have been accused of adding to the catastrophes in the Gulf Coast and in New York City. But the following stories offer an alternative. There are no grand conclusions. Instead, they open new ways to look at disasters, large and small, as sources of possibility for the next metropolis.

Notes

1. Gerald F. Seib, "In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 21, 2008, p. A2.
2. Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
3. Kevin Rosario, "Making Progress: Disaster Narratives and the Art of Optimism in Modern America," in Lawrence Vale and T. Campanella, eds., *The Resilient City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp 27-54; Ross Miller, "Out of the Blue: The Great Chicago Fire of 1871," in Joan Ockman, ed., *Out of Ground Zero: Case Studies in Urban Reinvention* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2002), pp. 46-61.
4. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).
5. Ibid., p. 155.
6. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). In this post-9/11 text, Agamben argues that the emergency has become habitual rather than exceptional.
7. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
8. Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).
9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).