Understanding dynamics of Aid Coordination in Haiti: a new perspective for a new response

What is the link between disasters and design? Can a new design actually mean something in situations where natural disasters are often occurring? Can a place or a building mean something in the post disasters recovery process?

Starting from the original enchantment about the power of nature transformed into a disaster when interfering with the human sphere, the theoretical research part of the thesis, went on further in researching disasters causes and effects focusing on the aftermath. The analytical work introduces to understand what happens after a major natural disaster hit a country. What are the natural dynamics that a country have to face to cope with the hazard and continue life in the aftermath? Dynamics of post disaster concern every aspect of human life, especially if the destruction have been of a great extent like happened in Haiti.

The idea for the design of Aid coordination headquarters in Port au Prince, originated as a support for the theoretical investigation of the thesis about how aid coordination is essential after a major disaster for the immediate relief of the country but most of all for the long term redevelopment. The investigation took place firstly in general terms focusing on what causes a disaster and what are the effects. The outcome of this first general investigation was that the degree of affection that destruction can reach, highly depends on how vulnerable and resilient is the affected country. This factors combined with the force of the disaster, determine its effects in the aftermath.

Effects of natural disasters are not only the ones visible to the eyes, like physical destruction of the built environment. What a disaster affect the most is the system a country works with. Comparing two countries and having the same disaster force, if a country is very vulnerable at a system grade, the actual destruction will be much higher and the speed of the recovery much lower compared to another country where the system is more solid. One crucial factor playing is that most of the times, vulnerable countries are developing countries which as a matter of fact suffer the most from natural disasters.

The specific case study for this topic exploration is Haiti, one of the poorest and vulnerable countries in the west hemisphere which was hit by a major earthquake on January 10th, 2010. Haiti has been defined as a ‘complex emergency’ due to the fact that the country even before the disaster suffered from deep problem at a government, economical and societal level. The instability factor is a constant in such a country, and there is very little general organization or understanding of what is going on in the country. Hence, when a disaster hit a ‘complex emergency’ there is the origin of more long lasting human disasters. The relief process and the recovery are is very difficult. As a matter of fact, the earthquake in Haiti was a strong event, however the death toll and the destruction index would have been much lower if things were working differently in the country.
What generates long lasting humanitarian disasters, is the long lasting 'no recovery' or 'insufficient recovery' phase, where people are confined to live in tents for ages before the actual cleaning of the rubble and the real reconstruction take place and the governmental system is established again. Oftentimes the process of the reconstruction of the physical environment takes place quite quickly, although there is no long term planning involved and therefore there is no long term development in sight.

Why does this happen all the time? Isn’t there enough aid coming from all over?
The truth is that there is plenty of aid coming from anywhere. There is a huge money flow and a great amount of public and private organizations, states and people.

So what is happening in this phase if there is aid? Aid is there but there is poor organization which puts it in the right place.

As in Haiti, aid management is handled by foreign organizations such as UN OCHA, MINUSTAH, IASC, etc, which institute temporary clusters (teams of people working in specific sectors like shelters, water and sanitation, safety..) to reorganize the country at any level. This is a good step to start with. However it is a complete top down approach and no involvement of local organizations is involved in managing the money and the needs of the country. Therefore there is no regeneration of the country coming from the country itself. Why this is a problem? If the country can’t regenerate and stand on its own, it will always be very vulnerable and exposed to high level of damage during disasters because the regeneration doesn’t happen at a system level, and it doesn’t involve the government and the population.

Even if there is a very structured aid coordination scheme in theory, in practice the aid doesn’t stick if not embedded in the local tissue. We could compare this simply by imagining an anthill or a beehive destruct by some heavy rain. What would happen if a man or another animal, would come and try to fix it? What if different animals come and want to fix it together? There would be some relief at the beginning, but foreign entities don’t know internal system rules and processes to really affect the change.

The international community wanting to help the designed affected country needs to come together and take action at a local level in order to transform the aid into development. Nonetheless, this happens to be one of the biggest issues in the general organization of aid: big lack in communication and share of information, also within the international actors.

This issue has a key role in order to make aid coordination effective. If there is not enough communication and understanding, a lot of aid is wasted on the way.

The lack of communication is due to many factors internal to the different organizations, but as a matter of fact is also due to a lack of a proper place where to do it.

After a disaster like the 2010 earthquake the aid was initially organized in tents, just like any other thing. This can work for the emergency relief phase, but what about the long term?

The lack of a place might seem of no importance in a emergency situation. However looking at the long term relief phase, a place for permanent aid coordination in a country such as Haiti, where disasters are recurring often and there is no system stability to handle them from the inside, a place dedicated to this action is as important as a ministry.

To make aid organization effective and lasting, Haiti needs a permanent system which in disaster times organizes the emergency phase and long term organizes the development and gives awareness to people of further disasters coming and how to approach them.

This is a change that needs to happen in the way Haiti gives importance to this factor at a system level.

But as a matter of fact, this coordination issues, especially at a cluster level, need to have a permanent place to been discussed and worked through together with all cluster coordinators and government ministries. A place where when the emergency is over, the planning takes over, and truth is, there is a lot to discuss to continue the work of the clusters locally.

This place is where my design process activates. The generation of a coordination complex, where people can meet, share information, work together, formally and informally.
A pleasant place to stay, for it also involves a great public part, where people are invited to stay and become aware of disasters and how to approach them.

The plan follows a circular grid which originates from the centre of the amphitheatre already present in the city of Port au Prince and the dimensions of the grid relates to the surrounding elements of the tents. The aid coordination complex has a specific part of the program dedicated to offices for cluster coordination, which involves and a private-public patio, a public covered space where people stay, meet and talk and a open public space which is the amphitheatre.

Particular attention has been dedicated to the structure to be designed with natural and local materials such as bamboo and earth. This is to prove that also natural materials can be used as design elements in disaster prone areas and they better work to withstanding while accommodating the forces of the disaster instead of resisting at it.

The whole complex is designed to grow in time, and to develop through the years when aid coordination will become a stronger concept in the country as well.

It also has a flexible plan, meaning that thanks to the grid which creates modules of spaces and thanks to the structure which is designed to be following the grid, the spaces can expand easily when needed, in a short time of construction.

Overall the aid coordination complex with the new implemented permanent cluster system in Port au Prince, Haiti, will help improving the quality and efficiency of aid for a long term redevelopment phase to become possible in Haiti. It acts at a urban level being a new urban element for the city and it relates to the local level concerning the scale of action.