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Roundtable V: Disaster, Rebuilding, Memorials and Heritage Narratives Related to Natural Disasters

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INTRODUCTION

The Roundtable on Disaster, Rebuilding, Memorials, and Heritage Narratives Related to Natural Disasters raised urgent questions about the relationship between disasters, heritage, and design and planning, with reference to case studies from, among others, Greece, China, Macedonia, Portugal, Japan, Bosnia, Finland, Italy, and Spain. The participants, who included a number of students from the TUDelft History Thesis master's course, highlighted and asked questions about the nature of post-disaster architectural interventions. The discussion on the causes and consequences of natural disasters and of disasters caused by political and military violence focused on the following topics:

MEMORY, COMMEMORATION, COLLECTIVE AND PRIVATE IDENTITY

Memorials

Depending on the context, private and official remembrance projects dealing with traumatic events can take many different forms, although architectural monuments and memorials are the most common materialization. In addition to their obvious purpose of defining a place for remembrance, contemporary memorial spaces are also created to aid the psychological recovery of the survivors and the reconstruction of communities affected by natural or man-made disasters.

In fact, the construction of architectural monuments to facilitate mourning and bereavement processes is advocated as a strategy for rebuilding societies. The processes of creating these

projects, however, are commonly geared toward the final goal (the memorial) without taking account of the fact that the process itself is of equal, and at times even greater importance. It is here that potential dangers, such as contradictory narratives and misinterpretations of historical facts, can be addressed. If the process of creating remembrance projects is interdisciplinary and inclusive, there is a greater chance that the final outcome will actually be meaningful to users. Architects need to recognize this and to re-examine their role in such highly sensitive projects and, possibly, act as coordinators and activists rather than simply providing the architectural solutions at the very end of memorial-making processes.

Rebuilding buildings and cities

Since both personal and collective identity are formed in relation to the concept of "place memory", attending to this is crucial in processes of recovery. Architects mainly focus on the physical restoration of memory (the pre-disaster situation) rather than the intangible (immaterial) aspects of identity (interdisciplinary field of research). Practice shows that it is not uncommon for architects to neglect essential aspects and values contained in specific aspects of recovery processes, such as the use of local materials and building techniques, the historical and documentary value of these techniques and, as mentioned in the case of memorial-making processes, the involvement of survivors and people affected by atrocities.

The roundtable discussions underlined the fact that there is a mismatch between theory and practice and that it is therefore important to develop an approach to rebuilding that is tailored to the specificities of a man-made or natural disaster. A number of participants argued for an architectural approach that puts the provision of (temporary) housing and basic services first, allowing heritage issues to be addressed in later stages of post-disaster restoration. This is important so that communities are supported in concrete, social, and psychological ways. While this was suggested as an imperative, roundtable participants also stressed that in certain contexts the community may regard its collective heritage as essential to its identity and thus a priority for reconstruction efforts.

PARTICIPATION AND REBUILDING

1:1 Model (not always based on historical facts)

A 1:1 model (a very realistic replica of a building, construction techniques [as in case of Paanukirkko church, Finland], materials and craftsmanship) of buildings or districts or entire cities can be constructed with or without the participation of the public. Professional decisions about the construction of replicas often do not involve the participation and opinions of ordinary people. Although the list of actors (architects/builders, laypeople) keen to influence and participate in the reconstruction decision-making process is long and varied, such buildings and areas are often rebuilt without any knowledge of how things were done in the past. Yet the main reason for building a 1:1 model is to meet the needs and requirements of the public, a practice that can be traced back to the 19th century.

Simulation of space

Simulation is a process that recreates past architecture and space in more or less accurate representations of former buildings or areas. The main idea is to present the simulated article as genuine, thus illustrating examples of structural, environmental, and apparently analogous representations. People generally decide that they want to regain a place of community lost during a disaster. In the participatory decision-making process, they are faced with two options: either a simulation is built as a 1:1 model, or the lost structure is rebuilt very quickly and in a contemporary way (with contemporary materials, contemporary room layouts, etc.). In the example discussed (a church on Terceira Island, Azores, Portugal), people decided that they would rather have a simulation of the lost space, which enables them to continue their previous spatial behaviors, than a traditional/local reconstruction of the space.

Innovation

Natural and man-made disasters destroy human lives, and they also destroy and reduce the chances of survival. The state of immediacy they create requires a reinvention of existence in places where disasters occur. They are therefore the starting point for innovation: to survive in the midst of carnage, people must invent new forms of life, production, construction, etc. Torn down urban structures, originally built to stand for centuries in designated places, give cities the opportunity to design and implement new strategies and often new large-scale urban interventions. Houses are rebuilt using different technologies to make them safer and more resistant to future events. In the presented case, people felt the need not only to restore normal life but also to "use" the disaster to make the buildings safer and more durable (as in the case of the 'Gaiola Pombalina', a three-dimensional wooden structure embedded in the masonry to ensure the structural safety of houses in Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake).

DISASTER SITE BECOMES AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

With regard to the theme of remembrance and commemoration, the didactic aspect of the sites and installations concerned can be examined in various ways. Here too, architects can play an important role, as we have seen in the case of the 2011 earthquake off the Pacific coast of Tōhoku. With the current availability of digital technology, disasters can now be mapped and explained, their effects preserved and used for educational and informative purposes. Immersive technologies, combined with the historical value of the site and architectural interventions, have enormous potential for processes of reconstruction, preservation, and storytelling after disasters. For survivors and other affected groups, participation in educational projects is beneficial because it can provide a framework for embedding their experiences for a meaningful purpose.