

Un-Natural Disasters, Recursive Resilience, Unjust Compensation, Visionless Planning

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THE DISASTERS WE CARE ABOUT are not natural but social and they are different from the disasters of previous eras. *Resilience planning* accepts their recurrence and often uses them to further already desired urban restructuring rather than preventing them. Vulnerability to the damages and compensation for the suffering such “disasters” cause are both unjustly distributed. No vision informs disaster planning policy, and participatory planning to deal with them is badly under-developed. Good, democratic, equity-oriented planning is badly needed.

Un-natural Disasters

There is no such thing as a “natural” disaster. This is the title of the book edited by PNers Chester Hartman and Gregory Squires that followed Katrina in New Orleans. A natural event, an earthquake for example, is only a disaster if it affects people. As Nabil Kamel observes, Vesuvius was only a disaster because Pompeii lay in its path; a tornado in an uninhabited desert is not a disaster. Today, most disasters resulting from the forces of nature are avoidable; building in earthquake-prone zones can be regulated, within the limits of advancing scientific knowledge. Today, disasters are caused by social and economic arrangements, the forces of market capitalism, climate warming, filling in of wet lands for development, inadequate provisions for durable building, political terrorism, the unequal distribution of incomes leaving poor people, particularly

in the global South, to settle on undesirable, therefore cheap, erosion-prone sites and only the better off to build on desirable but flood-prone zones. Erminia Maricato of Brazil clearly pointed this out in her talk.

In sum, calling socially avoidable harm caused by natural events “natural disasters” is a politically-loaded evasion of responsibility.

Recursive Resilience

Not only the causes but even more the responses to disasters are dictated by the existing economic and political structures of society. Obviously, planning for resilience is accepting the inevitability of that to which it responds, including un-natural disasters. In the real world the choice between dealing with the causes of a disaster and accepting them but mitigating their consequences, is a matter of cost-benefit analysis, weighing the costs and benefits of the alternatives against each other. But costs and benefits are not distributed randomly. Some consequences may even be desirable, and fit in with the ongoing restructuring of urban space that is a feature of mainstream economic development policy in most cities today.

Here are two examples. In New Orleans after Katrina, resilience planning served to accentuate processes already under way, desired by the power structure, and facilitated by the hurricane damage. Forty-five hundred units of public housing, long neglected both by the City and HUD and badly damaged by Katrina were demolished by the city with HUD approval, although many experts considered them quite salvageable. As Louisiana’s Republican Congressman Richard



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Baker said a week after Katrina, “We finally cleaned up public housing. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

In the waterfront areas of New York and New Jersey hit by Sandy the result of government policies may well be that in desirable beachfront locations lower-income households, many of whom moved there and built when the area was remote and undeveloped, will take storm relief money and move. Wealthier landowners, arriving later and benefiting from extensive development and public infrastructure provision, will take the loans and grants and rebuild. The net result: the public amenity, the beach, will become what the market would have it, a semi-exclusive preserve of the well-to-do, with even more beach available for private use. And the future of damaged public housing is still very much in abeyance.

According to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg,

“It is true in some cases, based on the level of damage and other factors, owners may want to voluntarily sell their homes and relocate. . . . The city will work with the communities and developers to strategically redevelop those properties in a smarter and more resilient way.”

Unjust Compensation

The bias in the distribution of the costs and benefits of government resources in response to disasters might be most egregiously seen in the handling of compensation to the victims of disasters. For example, after 9/11, the families of those who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center were provided compensation by special congressional legislation, administered through a Special Victims’ Compensation Fund with clear standards rigorously applied. The measure was the loss of income from the victim that the victims’ families would have received had he (less often she) survived.

The formulas were spelled out and based on the loss of earnings that would have been received had the victim lived, so that the higher the income the higher the award, with a cap on that calculation if the earnings were above the 98TH percentile of earners, or \$231,000. In addition, “each claim received a uniform non-economic award [that is, independent of

earnings or need] of \$250,000 for the death of the victim and an additional non-economic award of \$100,000 for the spouse and each dependent of the victim,” according to the Special Master’s Report.

By comparison, no such fund was established for the victims of Katrina and the maximum required payment to the families of the victims was the coverage of funeral expenses! Think about how federal funds could have been distributed between New Orleans’ Ninth Ward and New York’s financial district if the criteria were human need, rather than financial loss.

Visionless Planning

Good planning is supposed to start with a clear statement of the goals of the plan. Here, the challenge is to start with the measures that might be taken to address the destructive forces creating the problem and then develop an idea of how areas likely to be subject to those natural forces should be handled. For the former, dealing with climate change would be an obvious priority. It is remarkable how little the big question of the causes of climate change has been linked to disaster planning. Obviously climate change is a long-range issue, and its causes will not be under control in time to affect more immediately feared disasters; yet one would think it would produce a major upsurge in attention to what could be done. Legislation would be debated in Congress, regulations proposed at all levels of government, huge funding for research would be provided, all to prevent the un-natural disasters from occurring and to deal with the complex legal problems requiring legislative solutions. This is not happening.

Relatively little long-range land use planning is going on at the local level. The issues are indeed complicated, with all kinds of difficult trade-offs needing to be evaluated—at long, medium, and short ranges. But some principles of a vision might be useful to structure a vision:

- The amenity value of many fragile locations is high. These include beaches, river banks and marshes, for example. Such natural amenities should be available to everyone and direct public ownership might be the default arrangement.

- Permitted uses should be only those not requiring permanent structures, so that evacuation in a predicted danger could be simple and fast.
- Relocation would undoubtedly be necessary and the distribution of its costs is tricky. But the principles of social justice should be prominent criteria where government assistance is involved. Need should be a dominant factor and loss of community and social networks, and possibilities of maintaining them with relocation, would be desirable.
- Complex legal problems attend any comprehensive implementation. As it stands, planning needs to take into account and intervene in legal and legislative discussions affecting:
 - Definition of the zones, now up to “normal high tide,” that are publicly owned;
 - Definition of the next inland zone above high tide that is in the public trust and “subject to public trust uses”;
 - Definition of the property rights of the holders of private title to land in flood-prone or environmentally sensitive areas where regulation now becomes a “taking” requiring compensation if no economically viable use of the affected property remains; and
 - Flood plain regulation by and large should not be a taking if an economical use for the affected property remains. Thus, disaster-vulnerable zoning should permit temporary uses, such as campgrounds, recreation or farming, in carefully defined zones.
- In any event, for any plan, a social equity statement should be required, spelling out in detail who is affected, both on the cost and on the benefit side, and be a major consideration in any decisions.
- Procedures need to be worked out to make decisions democratically on the many trade-offs involved, not simply at the neighborhood and community levels—where segregation by income and likely by ethnicity will be perpetuated—or only at the city-wide level where active participation and local preferences will be ignored.

Participatory Planning

Solutions will be complex and much work needs to be done to arrive at the best combinations, which will vary widely from place to place and time to time. Structuring real participation is also complex because there are multiple levels at which it is needed. First and foremost, of course, is participation by the immediate community affected. But that’s not enough: decisions and resources from higher levels are inevitably involved and planning at those levels, and importantly at the federal level, is necessary. At the initial level, planning needs to respect the needs of those most directly affected letting them be involved in the rebuilding or removal decisions, and if removal, how and where, with community networks respected. At the city and national levels, major resource allocation decisions are involved. Regional plans are almost inevitably important. No technocratic report can take the place of participation at these levels, although the technical information needs to be readily accessible at each level.

Mayor Bloomberg’s declaration doesn’t cut it: “As New Yorkers, we cannot and will not abandon our waterfront. It’s one of our greatest assets. We must protect it, not retreat from it.” *Our* waterfront? No. *Whose* waterfront? must be a central part of any analysis and *whose* costs and *whose* benefits a central part of any solutions. In the New York City case, there is a well-developed Uniform Land Use Procedure in place and the city has an experienced city planning department and competent staff. But the Bloomberg Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency was kept in the Mayor’s office, and its recent report does not even list the City Planning Commission or the Planning Department among the agencies they involved—not to speak of ignoring the land use review process entirely.

In sum, this is the wrong way to go: treating all disasters alike, and un-natural ones as natural; limiting planning to increasing resilience; allocating resources, whether compensatory or developmental, without regard to participatory procedures or social justice; and doing all this without a constructive vision for the ultimate results desired. Good, equity-oriented, participatory planning is badly needed. P²