

**Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need:
Community Healing and Engagement in Times of Disaster**

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While reading the papers by Born, Burkle, and Ubalijoro I was struck by two themes- one, the detrimental effects caused by limiting and controlling information, and the other, the increased resiliency found through sustainable community development. My particular interest is in the area of shelter and planning for traumatic urbanization and these two themes bracket the main concerns of my own research. Winston Churchill is credited with saying, "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." My belief is that we in the humanitarian aid regime are failing those in need by not listening to their desires for home and community. And while our deafness about temporary settlements may be born of ignorance, it is surely matured through our desire to control and fear of truly empowering those we propose to help.

During the First World War, shelter for refugees was found in abandoned military camps whose design was based ultimately on the Greek historian Polybius' description of the Imperial Roman Army's castrametation. As described by Polybius, and codified by Machiavelli a millennia and a half later, the grid of the army camps reifies the hierarchical, top-down organization and control of the military's power. As the ideas and theories of a human rights regime gained a foothold in the 20th century the original form of the military camp became adopted for refugee settlements without a clear understanding or appreciation of its provenance. For the last hundred years this tragic irony has resulted in inhumane, dangerous and wasteful quasi-military encampments. I believe that the design and intentions of these camps can and must be improved. We must instead make new communities.

The urgent need for a new approach to community settlements in post-disaster situations can not be over-emphasized. The International Panel on Climate Change reports make clear that as many as 145 million people, (a population equal to those currently living in the 17 largest cities,) will be permanently displaced in the next 90 years. The numbers who will experience at least temporary displacement, such as those in the Gulf after Katrina, is inconceivable large.

There are obvious technical, engineering-like problems implicit in the ubiquitous grid of tents that spring up to house those displaced after a disaster. Oblivious to topography, these settlements create challenges for drainage of water and effluent which lead all-too-often to outbreaks of

water-borne diseases like cholera. A typical disregard for orientation to sun and winds limits opportunities for passive thermal control and micro-climates. Adherence to the grid limits opportunities to distribute clean water and increases the likelihood of massive erosion. Finally, and perhaps most urgently, a fundamental change in the intention of these settlements must be acknowledged: no longer are these camps going to be temporary. Decisions about siting and design will from here on have lasting implications for the quality of life experienced by those displaced.

While design and engineering opportunities to ease the material discomfort of the traumatically displaced are obvious enough, the more tragic opportunities lost are cultural and social. Designed originally to organize Roman legions, refugee camps serve poorly as a home for the displaced women and children that typically comprise 80% of their population. Panopticon-like streets provide clear lines of site that allow optical control of space and result in intimidation or worse. Centralized distribution of water and food, communal toilets and showers, and increasingly remote sources of fuel jeopardize the health and welfare of women and children.

Imagine empowering a community so that they can decide to put education or religion at their physical center, or an agora for the exchange of ideas and information. Imagine the possibility of a community deciding that they would like to be able to have greater independence from the aid regimes that support them by harvesting rain water or promoting food security. Or deciding that entrepreneurial concerns should be fostered and complemented by the communication tools of a flat world.

Effective innovation in design and engineering for traumatic urbanization requires both empathy for the poorest people on earth and a willingness to develop non-conventional approaches to materials, methods of production and their deployment. Humanitarian aid workers, their agencies, NGOs and contractors must develop both the capacity to hear the social and cultural desires of a community and develop the capacity to improvise effective short-term strategies for care that lend themselves to long-term solutions. Acuity and nimbleness are difficult in the best of times- effective approaches will resolve themselves more easily when the aid regime learns to listen to local wisdom.

To paraphrase Sen, there is no such thing as an apolitical camp. The humanitarian assistance regime may argue that their opportunities to listen are limited by the urgency, limited resources or realpolitik of a given crisis. I believe that these arguments are a mask for continued political influence or economic control. At a recent meeting I attended at the Pentagon, discussions about “military assets” being used to mitigate mass atrocities made clear that highly detailed

topographic modeling is generally available for almost any arena. These topological surveys have their counterparts in other social-political arenas. However, at on-going high-level meetings at USAID major engineering firms and the organizations that represent their professional interests are arguing for multi-million dollar pre-positioned contracts in anticipation of eventual disasters. The concerns of these multi-national corporate engineering firms are legal and economic; only lip service is given to community engagement. The disconnect between available tools and the services offered is startling to me. While conventional and expedient surveying techniques may have justified the grid of the past, the practical resolution of both our global positioning systems and our geopolitical diplomacy is more than sufficient for us to create long-term strategies for helping communities craft their new settlements as disasters unfold. What is lacking is the political will to demand more humane solutions that incorporate the wisdom of those effected.

Or perhaps I am simply too naive and idealistic. Should we hold American companies and NGOs working in developing communities to a higher standard of creativity and responsiveness than we hold them to in our own country? Should diplomacy aid create empowered communities in the developing world? Is this simply an invitation to geopolitical destabilization?