

Reaction Paper Melissa Scudo

Both readings this week examined urban resilience within a context much broader than solely the physical capacity to rebound from a significant event, such as war, terrorist attacks and natural events. Urban resilience, as defined by the authors Vale and Campanella, is not sufficiently defined as the process of rebuilding. It encompasses and is shaped political, economical, social and cultural circumstances and conditions, making recovery and resilience unique to each urban area that experiences an event of significant proportions. The authors explore the phenomenon that, at least within the last two centuries, nearly every city that has experienced a large-scale trauma has rebuilt itself. While there is a similar cycle to disaster recovery activity, interestingly, the authors note how recovery and resilience varies by city depending upon the unique political, economical and social circumstances of the time, and the nature of the government, and power structures in place at the time. The nature of the leadership in place at the time of a disaster is also critical to how an urban area responds to an event.

The authors' Introduction provides a framework for examining urban resilience, notably through the examination of various case studies of urban disasters and through a search for commonalities in disaster response. I found interesting the author's definition of disaster impact as a function of how the disaster is experienced, interpreted and remembered by its survivors. This was interesting to me because while impact may be a function of the meaning that the disaster holds for survivors, it is more often memorialized by the power structures in place at that time. Disasters are experienced by residents of cities in different ways, and have different meanings for different populations, particularly for communities and individuals that were more affected than others and with lower coping capacities. In fact, the process of disaster recovery in cities in many ways provides a glimpse to the power structure within urban areas at the time of the event. The way an event is remembered also symbolizes how this power structure relates to and responds to the event. It is interesting to note the difference of memorials to specific events depending upon the groups that are in power and the political and social conditions during those times.

One argument proposed by the authors that I felt was unsubstantiated is the theory that cities have become more resilient over the past few decades. It would be interesting to examine what indicators (and what data exist) to quantify "changes" in resilience as proposed by the authors.