

URBAN RESILIENCE AND SLOW MOTION DISASTERS

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Abstract

Preliminarily, this article traces the similarities and differences between 1. Cities struggling to restore life to normal in post-disaster / war processes and demonstrating a huge urban resilience that allows the implementation of quick restorations, and 2. Cities with a long history of poverty, inappropriate land use patterns, environmental problems, among others, which build up cumulative chain crises along their existence. What is discussed here is a scenario of two different urban worlds in terms of the ability to solve problems, management tools and international aid to cope with local crises. This comparative discussion draws the attention to the outstanding difference between the scenarios working as a reference in looking to the past by these two kinds of cities and by the international political and financial support they receive. Much vulnerability can be detected in both cases. What makes them different is the resilience of their populations, the persistence of such vulnerabilities, and instruments and resources made available for each of them. The urban situation in Brazil is taken as a reference for the first group discussed here. Cities worldwide destroyed by wars and natural/man-induced accidents in the last three decades illustrate the second group. Urban management, international funds, international solidarity, and good practices exchange are the main topics of this article.

Key words: *urban resilience, urban poverty, international aid*

Introduction

In the first typology of city studied here, the built urban space may work as a model for the reconstruction. It means there is a city that is previous to the war or to the accident that can be used as a parameter for the positive transformation. In the second, cities, mostly characterized by their poor peripheries still in constant invention and construction, poor and lacking infra-structure and services, lack a visible history of a proper city. In fact, it remains to be invented. On the one hand, cities submitted to a violent and sudden deregulation of their everyday life, as in wars and natural accidents, must search for immediate reconstruction; on the other, poor, *peaceful and blessed* country towns in an endless impoverishment process that must, in this similar search of positive transformation, reinvent themselves since past is similar to present time and their history is all but a sequence of crises. Differently from the first typology, one does not fight for the

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reconstruction of what has been destroyed but for the construction of something that has never existed within minimum urban standards.

This article suffers from a lack of available data to confirm the case made here, but by using speculative and empirical methods it risks to observe differences on the specific chances of these two kinds of cities to obtain international financial help. The hypothesis discussed here is that the way the city presents its problem for the worldwide media reveals different approaches among financial donors. Further research will focus on case studies to start filling this gap. References made here mainly result from the author's experiences and from secondary data. Further researches may help understanding the perspective adopted in the discussion below. Ideas brought by this paper were produced having in mind possible comparative case studies such as: São Paulo, in Brazil and cities destroyed by Tsunami in 2004, in Asia; poor big cities in Africa, and cities destroyed by an earthquake in India and Pakistan in 2005; national and international aid received by New Orleans after Katrina and federal financial help used to reduce poverty in this very same city along the last decades, among many other examples.

It may sound unexpected when Brazilian urban administrators, whose experience is primarily based on domestic issues, decide to discuss a subject not directly linked to, or closely connected with, the most recurrent situation in their national cities. In fact, Brazil is not familiar with cities destroyed by wars or natural disasters. The country fought its last war in the mid 19th century and with practically no casualties in urban areas, destruction of its cities infrastructure or disruption of every day urban life¹. At the same time, this very same country of almost 6,000 towns and cities can hardly count a few whose history has been divided in two: before and after a natural disaster (floods, earthquakes, or great fires, among others). The city of Blumenau, in the south of the country, may perhaps constitute an exception. After impressive floods in 1983, with no casualties but large economic disruption, the city reinvented itself, altering its layout and functions. One of the main results of Blumenau's efforts to regain the glory of having a high standard of living was the creation of the Oktoberfest, a gastronomic and folk German celebration to bring tourists back to the city and reinvigorate its urban local ego.

In fact, at first sight Brazilian urban population would hardly share apprehensions with those cities that constitute a list of outstanding cases of natural and man-made disasters that are able to impose human and economic costs and present risks to material and intangible heritage. Recurrent monsoon floods that impact urban life in South Asian countries, for example, yet causing impressive human and economic damages, are limited in time and space to certain areas of the urban fabric and are not able to develop an appeal in international media. Annual news in the media may certainly induce international community to get used to this phenomenon, which wrongly seems to be not only inevitable but also with no mitigations. Recurrent disasters like those of the monsoons in Asia - both the very heavy as well as the failed ones² - tend in fact to gain only complacent interest. Concentration of natural and human induced disasters in Bangladesh may also offer us a good example of a huge recurrent disaster that looks like having no solution and no emergency action despite the catastrophic figures they present.

Most of Bangladesh lies within the broad delta formed by Ganges-Bruhmaputra Rivers. The country is exceeding flat, low lying ... Over the last three decades, Bangladesh experienced more than 170 large-scale natural disasters ... These

¹ This war against its neighboring Paraguay provoked profound social and political changes in both countries, but caused no important destruction in national urban fabrics.

² Lack of enough rains during monsoon season reduces agricultural production with serious impact on local economy.

catastrophes are estimated to have killed half a million people and affected more than 400 million. (WHO, 2001).

From a closer perspective the comparison proposed here is believed to help in developing an expertise to cope with urban crises in both situations. This expertise should rely on specific characteristics of both phenomena and with strategic purposes to 1. Increase availability of international solidarity resources; 2. Reallocate resources according not only to demand but also according to the ability to really use it; 3. Exchange techniques of urban planning and urban design between long demanding and poor areas with those experiencing sudden disasters; 4. Exchange logistics know-how long used in both situations. However, what is more important in this comparative study is the visualization of new sources of international aid for those poor cities but with low ability to compete for and internalise them with technical and administrative recognized ability. Just as an example, it is important to mention that the response to the disaster caused by the Tsunami in 2004 astonished us not only due to the amount of money involved but also to the short time taken to wire this money to the communities involved.

Response to the disaster was so good that the charity raised four times the amount it needed, despite closing its appeal only a week after the tsunami. [...] the unprecedented generosity of donors from around the world netted the charity a total of 105m Euros (\$135m) – leaving it with far more cash than it had bargained for. [...] people gave so much money because it was such a big disaster, and it was covered so extensively by the media [...]. People thought, 'It could happen to us,'" he said. [...] They can identify with it more than with other humanitarian disasters, like victims of conflict or civil war (BBC, 2006).

For cities like those in Brazil the main financial sources are still dependent on foreign agencies linked to the World Bank system, that are highly criticized by only guiding investments according to central countries interests and not by domestic demands. These sources are commonly connected to compulsory fiscal adjustments, better economic performances, reduction of the importance of the State, economic flexibilization and an open market policy (Joseph E. Stiglitz, 2003). If all this is now proven disastrous, in the 90s orthodox neoliberal rules were considered prerequisites for any socio-economic transformation.

Besides this monetary and virtually exclusively dependence, Brazilian cities³ still rely on International Financial Institutions (IFIs) for elaborating their own public policy, so being subjected to an external intelligentsia.

Besides the important function merely financial, Banks have also played the role of "Intelligentsia", helping local government in the preparation of programs and projects as being responsible for policies aiming structural adjustments, development sector projects, those thought to fight poverty [...]. This way, part of new ideas in the public policy and Brazilian government projects is, most of the times, the result of an international cooperation in which the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank / IDB generally play an important role. (Viana,1998, from the original in Portuguese)

Just to have an idea of the amount of resources that are internalized by countries in Latin America, due to traditional economic development programs, which are designed to reduce the lack of urban services and infrastructure and to compare this amount to that wired to cities in situation of a natural accident or war, we can take the role of the IDB - the most important international agency in the region -.

³ The case of Brazilian cities is taken here as an example of many others cities in similar situation. We could refer to the *Brazilianization Process*: an expression used to characterize generalized urban decay, mostly in large metropolis areas.

Since 1985, IDB has financed approximately US\$ 8 billion in urban projects. This amount varies from US\$ 142 million to US\$ 500 million in 1985, 1988, 1989 and 1993; from US\$ 600 million to US\$ 1 billion in 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991 and 1995; more than US\$ 1 billion in 1992 and near US\$ 2 billion in 1994.[...]. Financing resources normally give priority to: water and sewage (US\$ 3.1 billion) [...] sanitation and decontamination services (US\$ 1.5 billion) (IDB, 1996, from the original in Spanish)

Considering all monetary impositions, as well as the bureaucratic burden to obtain resources from institutions like IDB, it is easy to understand the importance of new kinds of resources for cities under this situation. Despite the considerable amount of money made available by the World Bank and IDB in Latin America⁴, its impact may be less important than aid given by international solidarity in some regions destroyed by wars or accidents.

Thus, while it is important to discuss the characteristics of international traditional⁵ resources, their amounts and their conditions, we should also reinforce the importance to discuss the geography of resources distribution. These facts have insistently been discussed in the urban literature and on public policies debates. Other important, but not equally discussed topics, are the differences in terms of impacts brought by traditional and non-traditional sources, and the possibility of making erratic aid more consistent combining efforts made by different sources. The main purpose of this article is to bring to the debate the changes for cities experimenting long and endless loops of a set of phenomena seeming to overlap others not only in terms of time but in terms of space, too: construction, destruction, reconstruction and the appropriation of urban construction. This is a phenomenon that constitutes a silent and a huge slow accident not really taken into account by international community. However, we should also stress the importance to discuss the hypothesis that international solidarity experience in natural disasters and war may be replicated by town planners from countries such as Brazil in their efforts to cope with cumulative crises. Besides, the simple search for possible reproductions of action in both cases and proven results may help to reduce failures and increase successes.

1. Importance of this Subject

In order to prepare the first scenario on destroyed cities (here made different from those submitted to a long and uninterrupted process of cumulative crises) we could select two classical examples of cities, whose histories are characterized by their ability and peculiarity in terms of urban resilience: the group of Japanese cities under the constant risk of earthquakes and the group of cities such as Jerusalem, constantly involved in historic territorial disputes. At first sight, by selecting these two groups of cities it may sound impossible to present comparative arguments with cities such as those in Brazil. Due both to huge adversities and to the recurrence of these facts along their histories, such urban settlements are part of a long list of occupied spaces submitted to the phenomena that put under risk their own existence and, equally, force them to a difficult learning process to survive. Yet, for many reasons, these very phenomena make them able to recover, constituting astonishing spaces of heroic resilience.

⁴ Brazil is a member of the IDB since its creation, owns more than 10% of its capital and one of its largest beneficiaries.

⁵ Traditional sources here refer to those made available by the International Financial institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank. Non-traditional sources refer to those made available by solidarity mostly by means of NGOs.

Jerusalem is the greatest site of physical destruction and renewal known to history. For some 4,000 years it suffered wars, earthquakes, and fires, not to mention twenty sieges, two periods of total desolation, eighteen reconstructions, and at least eleven transitions from one religious faith to another. (Elon, in Beinart, 2005).

Natural disasters have destroyed, in whole or in part, Japan's cities on numerous occasions. Human action, whether internal warfare or the air raids of the Second World War, has been the cause of further devastation. (Carola, 2005)

More than the intrinsic aspects of destructions that certainly reinforce the peculiarities of these cities, the ability of such spaces to recover themselves is what really draws the attention. Such ability, it is important to remember, does not result from the sole availability of resources, but also from a myriad of effects that are difficult to synthesize and to plan to reproduce in other situations.

The possibility of visualizing an urban reference, a desired city, believed to be found in the past, is certainly one of the attributes that could explain the repeated desire to reconstruct what has been destroyed. In aforementioned cases, religious and national attachments could partly explain observed recovery desires. In the case of the suburban areas in Brazil or of any other similar country⁶, the uncertainty of what is really desired and the lack of parameters in the past could provoke a lesser degree of resilience.

The concept of resilience here is connected to the ability to transform and retransform urban spaces. Resignation or submissiveness, which sometimes give the impression of being strong or tolerant when facing poverty, are in fact considered the absence of resilience. In fact, it is important not to equal resilience (ability to implement positive changes) to the humble and stoic gestures facing increasing adversities. The so-called resilience in facing natural or man-made adversities could include the most significant and recent examples of Lower Manhattan with its project to reconstruct, renovate and reequip the area destroyed by the September 11th attacks, the coastal Asian cities destroyed by the 2004 Tsunami, the floods in New Orleans or the areas in India and Pakistan devastated by earthquake in 2005, among many others. From a long list of uncountable disasters, selected merely by the visibility they get in the international media, we can notice both rich and poor cities, but all with an incredible ability to articulate immediate reconstruction aid action.

From cities with cumulative crises, we can detect appalling changes in society, late industrialization, generalized impoverishment, concentrated and increasing urbanization, among others. All these facts have imposed, re-imposed and accumulated crises to urban settlements without being able to generate the same resilience observed in the aforementioned list. Such cumulative process overlaps interests, disputes, constructions, deterioration, abandonment of central areas, sprawl and, among others, squatting of environmentally fragile areas, spaces of natural risks and low housing standards. Based on this list and from the perspective of the consequences - and not from the problem or from the solution - we have very similar situations. Strategies to raise money and techniques to cope with these situations may so be submitted to an interchange as a kind of good urban practices replication.

In cities of poor, *peaceful and blessed* countries, scarce resources are left to cope with the accumulation of problems (urbanistic, social, and environmental). All this results in unaccomplished demands in terms of sewage, water, public health, education,

⁶ Here, the country is partly characterized as a country with a high percentage of urbanization, rapid rural-urban migration, demographic concentration in big metropolitan areas, high degree of non-formal settlements and widespread poverty.

transportation, public spaces and housing are faced without planning expertise and without emergency appeal since they occur in a cumulative way, slowly, and, maybe because of that, less perceptible. Needless to list here are the indicators of such urban crises and of the low impact of public policies implemented to face it. These cities present, in fact, a deficit of resources and a low level of interest outside their boundaries. On one hand are instant destruction and a strong appeal of the sudden sufferings; on the other, slow crises becoming unbearable. On one hand are local resilience and international solidarity; on the other, helplessness.

Thus, disparities in terms of causes, strategies, and availability of resources and similarities in terms of characteristics of the problems and possible solutions, make the so-called recovery ability of cities submitted to wars or accidents a fake antithesis of cities in countries considered peaceful and free of great natural accidents.

International examples, in both kinds of cities, restricted to the current decade, express a corollary of not only huge human and material losses, but mainly an incredible power of resilience or lack of such handicap. If differences may be easier to detect, further researches could confirm the similarities between these two kinds of cities. However, qualitative analyses may help speculating the similarities in terms of the material conditions of these two urban spaces to solve their problems.

In fact, and this is the main hypothesis of this article, astonishing societal changes, rapid industrialization, generalized impoverishment of the population, concentrated and fast urbanization observed in cities like those in Brazil, are factors that may provoke the exact same list of impacts observed in post sudden destructions. As a matter of fact, never-ending and overlapping interests, disputes, construction, decay, abandonment of urbanized areas and sprawling over environmentally fragile spaces (legally or illegally) seem to reproduce the same process of construction-deconstruction-construction undergone by cities officially recognised as subjected to war or natural disasters. For those involved in the planning of poor and *peaceful* metropolises or for those who have them as a subject of research interest, it may be appropriate to speculatively identify clear similarities with those under appalling disasters or generalized war. If we are right in this assumption, we can even assume that casualties, fatalities and the amount of material destruction observed in domestic examples outnumber those calling for immediate international aid due to wars or natural accidents. Discounting facts observed soon after a declaration of war or the stampede of an accident, the situation may be summarised in terms of lack of shelter, no proper integration between parts of the same city, insufficient clean water, and hunger, among others: a list of damages well known among poor and *peaceful* cities. The most distinguished factor is thus based on the impact of the phenomenon, the reaction caused internationally and the commonly incredible and fast action from international aid agencies in one of these cases.

By most accounts, the emergency-relief effort in the immediate aftermath of the Tsunami was a notable success. Unlike in previous disasters of this magnitude, almost no one died from outbreaks of disease, lack of clean water or starvation in the wake of the catastrophe, even in remote islands off India and Indonesia. (The Economist Magazine, 2006).

Known as Relief Agencies, these institutions have gathered resources from their governments and their nationals in increasing amounts of technical and financial support in the last decades. Despite having problems of articulation between them - something that is considered recurrent by analysts involved in situations of emergencies and by local governments that work as intermediate agencies - it is possible to detect joint work initiatives in networks envisaging the optimization of the resources and so making their action even more important. The problem concerning their activities and their logistics,

which can be justified by the complexity of the situation, does not diminish their influence even once the emergency fact that has justified their action disappears. Thus, it can constitute, once more, a better situation for the local community, if we compare it with impositions and time necessary for a traditional financial agency act in its programs and projects.

Nearly half of French donations for victims of the 2004 Asian tsunami remained unspent 12 months ago and should be allocated to other charitable causes ... It explained the unspent funds on the sheer volume of donations to non-government organizations. The problem generally met by the NGOs was not a problem of financing projects, it was a problem of using abundant, even overabundant resources... the World Bank said that about 60 percent of \$600 million tsunami aid it was administering for two Indonesian provinces had not been spent, adding that this rate of expenditure was fast compared to past natural disasters. ... In the case of the French Red Cross some 85 percent of the total was unused at the end of 2005. (Yahoo News, 2007).

Needless to say, abundant resources not possible to be entirely used in emergency situations could be redirect to other situations with existing diagnosis of urban demands, better logistics to bring these resources to the ones really in need, and time to plan actions better. Despite the value of international solidarity, it should not be free of pragmatic evaluations.

2. Taking Political Advantage of Suffering

Generally speaking, cities and regions that are destroyed by war or natural accidents get immediate notoriety in the international media for a minimum period of time. This guarantees a higher power of negotiation in the search for international resources. Besides, the moment that follows a disaster or the end of a war constitutes symbolic moments that favour the decision to definitely install offices of international agencies. Once installed, these agencies exercise their ability to raise funds with an efficiency that in nothing compares to those so far demonstrate by traditional IFIs with their bureaucracy to make loans possible for local governments. At the same time, at the academic level, as we can presently see in developed world universities, the constitution of research institutes aiming to develop studies on emergency situations is a fact that certainly may help to validate the action of these agencies. Beyond the academic circle we can speculate that there is an interest in discussing topics such as tools to be used, logistics to be adopted, ways to adapt known urbanistic intervention in an interchangeable manner, and exchanging expertise already tried in one or another situation. In countries with rapid urbanization and poorly implemented settlements, illegality is rampant and forces administrations to review long adopted rules such as zoning, motorized access to individual lots and properties right. In many cities destroyed by wars or disasters, new uses for the land is searched based on original occupation; if possible, this search is also - and still - based on precepts proposed by the Chart of Athens that reinforces the importance of different zones for different urban activities. Mostly in the case of natural accidents, such as the Tsunami, in 2005, devastation may cause the loss of state boundaries, both in terms of documentation and in terms of concrete demarcation of the lots.

Behind the intervention to rebuild, efforts head to the orchestration of a collective reconstruction, as if society could have one single and generalized project, a strong desire to return to the past, to a glorious era, or perhaps even better moments that are partly the result of an idyllic vision of a largely idealized and constructed past. This sometimes artificially elaborated desire triggers not only an incredible urban resilience but also

attitudes that can be easily identified with ideas such as patriotism, national greatness, community joint efforts, and even revival of ethnic superiority.

Such incentive for the reconstruction, in a quite entrepreneurial way, creates, sometimes artificially, the desire and the power of having a unique urban recovery that can synthesize the image of one single political group. Soon after the enormous 7,8 on the Richter scale earthquake devastated the entire Chinese city of Tangshan in 1976, perhaps the biggest disaster on earth, officials under the leadership of Chairman Mao and his Communist Party had no doubt in seizing on the disaster as an opportunity to show their strength. Chinese politicians even refused offers of aid from international organizations and launched a campaign entitled "Resist the Earthquake, Rescue Ourselves." In fact, China officially refused any help from abroad and used the casualties to make political pretensions of ability and efficiency. (Time Magazine, 1999).

Behind highly plausible efforts to offer shelter and restore services and infrastructure in cities damaged by accidents and wars, there is also a desire to seize the opportunity for not so dignified purposes. The city, or better, the group that is currently in charge of it, boasts itself as the sole being able to provide something much better than the past was, more beautiful, more efficient, stronger, depicting a scene where the phoenix regains life from its own destruction. What is at stake in fact is the ability to remain in power by those who are able to recreate the city from the ashes and lead it to progress: an asset to be highly prized. "Never mind the unpleasant things of this terrific episode [San Francisco Earthquake] in our history, the Oakland Herald cheered from across the bay. Think of the good times coming". (Rozario, 2005).

By bringing this discussion to illustrate the case of cumulative crises cities, we may take the reference of the governmental fight against the Brazilian housing deficit, which could be characterized, among other peculiarities, by its meagre production in the last decades. Cordeiro, 2005, when discussing the case of the city of São Paulo states that:

Despite governmental speeches and some concrete initiatives concerning low income housing production, urban shelter problems are visible and preoccupying. Actions taken to cope with this problem occurs occasionally and do not respect socioeconomic features of the people of São Paulo. Many of the solutions adopted were insignificant and even questionable in terms of sanitary standards and of social relations in the community. (Cordeiro, 2005, translated from Portuguese).

Despite the scarce results of any housing program in Brazil, it is always an opportunity for a politician to apologetically and erratically offer a small number of urban shelters in low-income housing programmes. The act of officially inaugurating a handful of houses for poor families represents no more than a drop in the ocean considering the severe housing deficit in the country, calculated at 5.4 million houses⁷ and demanding 10 percent of the National Gross Product to be eliminated. (FJP, 2001). "The target of Mr. Lula [president of Brazil] government is to finance the construction of 600 thousand units per year, ... , eliminating the deficit in 20 years" (Dutra, Cities Ministry, 2004). Even disregarding the mathematic imprecision of this political intent, one should doubt the feasibility of maintaining such an effort for two decades. Tsunami affected families in Asia are perhaps in a better situation. In Indonesia, one of the most devastated countries by this disaster, approximately 40 percent of needed houses had been built or were under construction one year after the disaster. (The Economist Magazine, 2006). Despite far

⁷ This number swells to 6,6 million housing units if the deficit in rural areas is taken into account. Taking the average of 3,8 people per house, the total homeless population combined with those living in inadequate housing is approximately 25 million people.

lower figures than those of the Brazilian housing deficit, the prospective of realization in itself makes a huge difference.

Unfortunately there is not enough information to go deeper in this discussion about other urban development sectors to compare cities involved in wars or disasters and poor cities of poor countries and at the same time peaceful and free of severe natural adversities. In fact, what we observe in terms of housing - meagre governmental actions versus high political interests - could also be detected in all other sectors considered to be basic for urban dwellers. Quite similarly, generalized destruction by war or accidents may also work as strong political icons.

Efforts to restore life to normal after wars or accidents, the same way the efforts to simply bring basic services to those who have always been marginalized (poor people in poor cities), are always accompanied by hidden interests. These interests are not always based on solidarity or on public needs. In fact, in an urban reality of extreme social deficit, populist attitudes seem to be present in every essay, concrete or not, to provide populations with urban services. Joaquim Roriz, four times governor of the Federal District in Brazil, publicly promised 40,000 houses for poor families; only 26,000 were built. Despite being a speech transformed into the reality of impressive figures, such action does not correspond to the promise made during his campaign, does not concretely reduce the housing deficit, and, what is really worse, can be considered one of the most populist experiences in the country that was made real with very low construction standards, urbanization of fragile areas and misuse of public money.

Another possible comparison between the two spaces discussed here and that makes clear the hypothetical disadvantage of those cities located in *peaceful and naturally blessed* countries is the fight of communal leaders or even politicians for guaranteeing the formal ownership of the urban land. After long years of fighting for the legalization of their land (or simply occupying a piece of land that can hardly be called urban), the feeling of victory may sound somewhat naïve: neither the quality of the shelter, nor the location of the lot in the urban fabric, nor the difficulties in obtaining such poor results justify words of revolutionary victory. In fact, obtaining full documented lots by families in once squatering areas or even in irregular settlements may take half a generation. Empirical examples could even demonstrate that this is only the beginning of the process, the moment when the state accepts to discuss with dwellers their needs in terms of services and infrastructure. "I really think it is a good idea that the [Brazilian] president can provide us with the documentation we need. I have live here for 32 years and, as everyone else, I still lack documentation" (statement of a slum dweller in Rio de Janeiro, NGO Viva Rio, 2001). In another request to the local government in São Paulo, we can observe the same situation, confirming the generalized poverty as well as the simplicity of the demand:

We, mothers of the Mooca District in the city of São Paulo, who are part of the poorest in the city ... do not have the option of leaving our children to go to work. Here, there is a private kindergarten, but not enough vacancies. The kindergarten is full and we cannot afford it. Most of the mothers just rely on the elder children all day ... Others just lock their children in their house ... Others are obliged to abandon their children or just "offer" them to other families ... we live in backyards with more than 50 people, in very small rooms ... with no space for our children ... because of all this we urgently need a kindergarten in the area ... we really depend on your attention. Signed by Mothers and Fathers of Mooca.

(statement of a mother living in shacks to the Mayor of the City of São Paulo, 1980)⁸.

All this may look unexpected in a decade in which global and instant aid, as well as community involvement in the search of solutions to crises, are commonplace. For one kind of typology of urban crises we have immediate solidarity and pragmatic action; for another, the endless and almost lonely fight of the communities for land, services, and infrastructure. In both crises there is an opportunity to have the best and the worst of the contemporary world, at the same time, in the same place. Destruction may mean a possibility to construct a world according to the interest of a specific group; poverty and meaningfulness victories may provide specific political interest groups an opportunity to access or to maintain power. Ironically, the generalized destruction may signify the opportunity to discuss structural problems in the way urban land is occupied and on the way cities are used, produced and consolidated, despite the fact that it may also mean a tool to build a new world according to specific interests of specific groups. Expectedly, unaccomplished promises or meagre actions are also used by specific interest of specific groups. Just to illustrate the scale of social gains that may guarantee political gains, it is important to notice that housing projects offered under so-called low-income housing governmental programs can cover an area as big as 32 square meters⁹ and be located in areas far from jobs and downtown districts, segregated in single-use, poor, peri-urban settlements.

In the first case, it is important to have in mind the nationalist reaction of the Chinese government to the Tangshan Earthquake in the 70's, which provoked the death of 240,000 people (*Time Magazine*, 1999). Another example is the reconstruction of Beirut, after the end of the Civil War, in which the dispute on the recovery works was based on the city considered to be European (low buildings and compact) and a city looking towards the market and with verticalization. Rober Saliba (2000) analyzing the reconstruction of Beirut, mainly the restoration of the architectural heritage, qualifies the city as that with a process of "tradition of deconstructive construction", "political desire for modernization", "economic desire to integrate the capitalist world" and "personal desire of a group of politicians in making history'.

In the second case, generalized poverty and scarce victories may equally promote and confirm power for a long period for political groups without really building an international solidarity able to import resources for a positive and structural transformation.

Particular interests, political intentions, side by side with solidarity, inconsistent and intermittent actions, among other particularities, make explicit the similarities and the differences between the two cases of urban crises discussed here. But it is important to notice that the different reaction to the necessary transformation in both cases forces the coexistence of what is important and what is opportunistic.

3. The Reference to be found in the Past

Both similarities and differences may also help to understand the phenomena presented here. An important difference between them may be their conceptions of the past. In cities destroyed by wars or accidents, the past is always a model and frequently a reason for

⁸ This letter is known as *Letter from Fathers and Mothers of Mooca Shacks*, São Paulo, organized by a local Association.

⁹ The average area cited in this article is the minimum of a house constructed by the government of the State of Paraná in its housing programs and that is largely adopted in other States, too.

dispute. In urban struggle in Brazil and other poor countries with increasing urbanization, not only there is no past model to look at, but also no visible future. The form and the time spent to cope with the two kinds of crises may explain this author's pessimism: cities under cumulative crises run the risk of losing the reference of an adequate settlement, as a palimpsest in their histories. Once an area is squattered with no proper urban regulation, legalization will only try to reproduce "traditional" neighbourhood ties; an initiative that plays no more than a marginal importance when compared to the possibility of having a "proper" dwelling. Research has proven that when removal is necessary, community ties *can* be reproduced in new settlements and so this is not the main factor to consider¹⁰. In fact, a vision of the past becomes less significant. Even so, urbanization of slums (highly recommended as the alternative to total removal both by Brazilian government and agencies such as the World Bank) implies urban readjustment with the least possible number of families relocated, somewhat freezing a situation that ironically does not celebrate the past but only seeks cheaper actions. In cities totally destroyed by wars or natural disasters there seems to always be an ironic opportunity to introduce land readjustments and new urban functions. This is compulsorily discussed side by side with the restoration of historical and traditional landmarks, implying an obligation to look at the past. Beirut is perhaps an outstanding example of the search for this difficult balance. The amazing equation of choosing between a "Paris of the Middle East or a Hong Kong of the Mediterranean".was certainly one of the most important and delicate issues of the debate over the reconstruction of the Lebanese capital in the 1990s.

Urbanization of slums in Brazil and similar countries normally and paradoxically means "to properly build for the first time" or at least to officially build what had already been made with no formal governmental control. In this case, reconstruction means an effort to offer for the very first time a "proper" house to live in, the "ownership" of the land that had long been dreamed of, and the "easy" and "adequate" access to public services and infrastructure. Perhaps the greatest difference between the models compared in this article is the fact that in poor countries - blessed by no wars or no natural accidents, such as Brazil - there is a struggle to set *new* standards for urban development and architectural assets. On the other hand, in many cities officially destroyed by natural or man-made accidents, rebuilding is focused on restoring the city. This situation values the replication of architectural styles and the maintenance of the general structure of the city while at the same time attempting to modernize and adapt to new demands and the interests of those in power.

4. A Huge Accident in Slow Motion

Urbanization of slums¹¹ in Brazil is one of the key elements of current urban policy¹². In fact, the adoption of new legislations by the Brazilian government, mostly those based on the Statute of the Cities that reinforces the importance of the democratic access to urban land, makes explicit the priority of re-urbanization of slums instead of regulations for new

¹⁰ Social impacts resulting from removal action are normally considered the most difficult to mitigate. In the case not yet consolidated cities, the author's experience in working with legalizing squattering areas indicates that newcomers value mostly the possibility of better areas, close to jobs, availability of transportation and basic education for their children rather than neighbouring ties.

¹¹ According to IBGE, Brazilian Census Bureau / IBGE, a favela is constituted by an area of at least 51 houses with no property ownership and characterized by low standards in public services and by an informal urbanization pattern.

¹² The adoption of a new legislation aiming to democratize access to urban land, optimizing public services and infrastructure while re-urbanizing squatter areas, can be considered the unofficial touchstone of Brazilian urban policy in the last two decades.

settlements¹³. In the past, administrations and planners simply denied the existence of slums or considered them fit only for total removal. Now they are considered an important target of intervention through “urbanization’ and regulation, with minimal removal action and intensive participatory processes. This change in the status of slums for urban planners results from the strength of the appalling scale to which they replicated themselves all over the country since the 1970s. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, to take just one example, 18.8 percent of the population lives in slums, with a high level of concentration in some specific areas. This city, known worldwide for its beauty, shelters the most likely biggest favela of Latin America: Favela da Maré with 113,807 inhabitants. Besides, it also has the Favela do Alemão with 65,026 and Favela da Rocinha with 56,338 (Brazilian Census Bureau, 2000). As previously said, the regulation and urbanization process may take more than 30 years. Of course, in this period, contact with neighbouring formal areas may reduce the characteristics of an illegal settlement in the *strictu sensu*. Besides, distribution of poverty in the intra-urban fabric does not confirm the idea that the entire population living in squatter areas is below the poverty line. Nevertheless, urban conditions that go beyond the formal ownership and of the dweller’s income can be confirmed in the low standards of public services, unemployment, violence, total lack of governmental intervention and environmental vulnerability due to constructions patterns. All this can easily justify the existence of a silent war, of cumulative and irreversible crises.

The images of citizenship in Rio de Janeiro I got from my research [in favelas, concerning the violence] are outstanding and point to a deep connection between a city that consolidates itself in a state of war and the development of an ambiguity towards civil and human rights of people living in favelas because now they are considered incompatible with the social order (Leite, 2000).

The examples above demonstrate the importance of such phenomenon and the priority that should be given to concrete interventions. For this same reason, such figures stress the analogy made here with the necessary interventions in cities destroyed by wars or disasters, observed in warlike countries or those less fortunate by nature. Large areas of large cities in poor countries built up with favelas or by irregular settlements, not documented or just suburban, go beyond any official urban frontier and may build an image of destruction similar to that observed in post-war or post-disasters situations.

Lack of quantitative and consolidated data to confirm similarities and differences presented here really makes any assertive statement difficult. But, by speculating specific situations, we can have an idea of the dimension of the problem, for example, in terms of floods that make large areas of poor cities vulnerable.

In Brazil research concerning damage caused by floods is rare. Japan International Agency (JICA) estimates that 7% of the total value of all properties in the City of Blumenau [a city located in the Southern Brazil, an example among others in the country] is lost in floods. US\$ 22 million are lost in similar situations in the Itajaí Valley [Blumenau’s neighbouring and very industrialized region]. Damages caused by floods with a recurrence of 50 years are calculated in US\$ 25 million (Tucio; Espanhol & Cordeiro, 2000).

Even at a very speculative scale, this author risks to say that people living in poor settlements under risk (flood, landslide, fire, disease, etc.) probably outnumber the people living in cities trying to cope with disasters that eventually destroy the entire urban fabric.

¹³ Statute of the Cities is a federal law, passed in 2001 after 20 years of parliamentary discussion, and can be considered different from previous national legislations that had prioritized minimum parameters for the development of new areas and their urban use.

According to different methodologies, the true figure of Brazilian people living in poor and risky conditions varies. Illegal areas - meaning not only squattered areas but also those pieces of land bought by the population but not fully documented - may cover some 50 percent of the entire city of São Paulo (Maricato, 1996), the biggest in the country with 11 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2000). Not all these illegal areas are at risk of recurrent summer floods (to mention just one environmental risk), but the situation of floods in São Paulo, for example, may also be assessed by the number of people hired in the critical months to fight the situation. In 2005, the municipality announced it was hiring 3,000 people (City of São Paulo, 2005) for a period of four months, to work in a program that even if it does not fully resolve the situation may be considered of emergency war-time scale. What is interesting in this article is the fact that such situation paradoxically does not draw the same international attention and so does not allow the same competitive performance for international loans or relief aid. In fact, recurrent situations, which repeat themselves every summer season, the same way destructive Monsoon rains in Southern Asia, for example, do not appear in the global media with the same impact of an unexpected accident.

As a matter of fact, cumulative disasters as well as “announced” ones are paid less international attention than others. The hypothesis of this article is that foreign aid as well as local resilience seems to respond equally. The same justification was used, for example, by representatives of Brazilian human rights organizations to defend that the indemnizations to the victims of the disaster in the construction of the underground line expansion works in the city of São Paulo should be paid immediately after the deaths and the destruction of the neighbourhood. “We strongly suggest the state government of São Paulo make indemnizations by means of a decree as soon as possible, in order to avoid an argument about who is supposed to pay” (Castro Filho, General Secretary of Human Rights State Council, 2007, translated from Portuguese). Behind this proposal, of course, there is the clear intention to solve the situation while the fact still draws public attention¹⁴.

Another process that could confirm the comparison in this article is the speed in which urban occupation is occurring in large cities of poor countries. In the last 25 years, the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (39 municipalities, almost 20 million inhabitants and the largest Brazilian urban agglomeration), witnessed an increase of 2.4 times in its continuous occupied area, from 744 Km² to 1765 Km² (Azzoni, 2006). This process includes central verticalization, low-income condominiums, squatter areas, and individually purchased lots in the periphery. As said before, the large majority of this process occurs on risky areas and with no proper urbanistic order, so increasing the chances of urban risks.

All this builds upon a reality of profound urban changes in almost total absence of disasters or wars. Forests are destroyed, squatters take catchment areas, non-licensed structures are built, and never ending acres of rural areas are transformed into urban environments. In this slow motion disaster there is no pause, only a cumulative disaster. To make the situation even worse or closer to that of cities under the process of a war, urban physical and environmental disorder is followed by high levels of social violence as in a non-declared state of war.

¹⁴ The disaster took place on Jan. 12th, 2007, due to works for the expansion of underground transportation network in the city of São Paulo. Apparently, a series of mistakes in civil works has caused the destruction of almost 100 buildings, killed 7 people and provoked serious traffic problems as the resulting crater was formed near main access axes of the metropolis. (Folha de São Paulo Newspaper, Jan., 25th, 2007).

... Vidigal, the favela where I sat and ate dinner two weeks ago, had become a full blown war zone in a battle with Rocinha (although it is perhaps surprising that even one English news channel bothered to look this far for news). Outside the house police with machine guns guarded the road, overhead helicopters buzzed and hovered, sporadic bursts of gunfire, 15 dead. (Bargent, 2005, one among uncountable similar reports on the state of war that can be observed in many urban areas in poor countries)

5. Throwing the Baby out with the Bath Water

Another important consideration in constructing this comparison between the two seemingly different urban situations discussed in this paper is the cost of solving a problem, or the cost of resilience itself. To what extent can an emergency situation justify rushed decisions that exacerbate future demands and the lack of better solutions? The Great Fire in Chicago in 1871, and the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, are both cited as the two most devastating urban catastrophes in American history, not just due to the human losses but mainly due to the astonishing property destruction they produced. The Great Fire in Chicago killed 300 people, levelled nearly 18,000 buildings and left as many as 100,000 people, nearly one-third of the population, suddenly homeless. The 1906 earthquake in San Francisco destroyed 28,000 buildings, leaving 400,000 residents without shelter. (Rozario, 2005). In fact, the paradox we have here is the coexistence of solidarity, generous, entrepreneurial actions with non planned interventions causing irreversible damages.

One of the most grotesque statistics to emerge from the whole affair [Great Fire of Chicago] is that the great rebuilding took more lives than the fire itself, with as many as twelve construction workers dying each day because of the need for speed and inattention to safety. The mad rush toward a happy ending would not produce happiness for all. And yet, this lesson would be largely forgotten. It was the resilience of Chicago that would enter American lore. (Rozario,2005).

Despite the humanitarian, political and economic interests (reconstruction may actually be a boom for the economy) a situation of crisis evokes, in an attempt to solve a problem, good-hearted actions may also cause irreversible damage themselves. This situation recalls the German proverb that one should not "throw the baby out with the bath water", where, in the rush to rescue the city from chaos and suffering, policy interventions and their implementation may be equally disrupting.

[In the] vital void reconstruction of downtown Beirut, the house where he lived ... the shop owned by a Sunni Muslim ... and the parlour where his mother was trained by an American piano teacher are all eventually wiped out – not by the war but by the reconstruction project. (Sakkis, 2005)

The economic and social crises that have coexisted in Brazilian cities since the beginning of rapid urbanization in the 1970s¹⁵ (which transformed the country not only into an urban one but also and mainly into a territory of concentrated metropolitan areas), justified progressive loosening of urban legislation and a condescending approach to the problem of squatters in inappropriate areas¹⁶. Simplistic ideas, mostly focused on guaranteeing shelter for all, fostered 1. The occupation of large fragile areas - damaging the environmental system of the city as a whole and creating countless high-risk areas – and, 2. The establishment of a chaotic land use pattern that makes difficult, if not

¹⁵ Favelas can be traced back to the 1920s, but the massive rural-urban migration of the 1970s represented a turning point in national urban history.

¹⁶ Needless to say that the process is far more complex and goes beyond the purpose of this article.

impossible, the future provision of public services and the implementation and appropriation of urban production.

In a paradox, squatter areas have become a symbol of resistance in the fight for a better city, supported by well defined ideological rationales, by inclusive urban legislation and mainly by the complacency of governmental administrations.

Contrary to popular beliefs, informality is expensive and therefore is not the best or even an advantageous alternative to combating poverty, but it is usually the only one available to the urban poor ... Not all occupants of informal settlements are poor, The rate of new irregular land occupation is much higher than the rate of increase in the number of poor families. In Brazil, for example, the total number of favela residents has increased at five times the rate of poor residents, and a similar trend is seen in most large Latin American cities. (Smolka, 2003)

Not only are the costs of subsequent urbanization programs in squatter areas high, but this kind of occupation is also the basis of serious environmental hazards: entire metropolitan regions in Brazil present bleak futures in terms of drinking water provision, despite the construction of expensive infrastructure to cope with this situation.

Environmentally fragile areas that are of great interest to the production of water are normally of low real estate value and subject to invasions, putting water resources at risk. In the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, according to the Brazilian Census Bureau, 2000, more than 1,6 million people lived in environmentally protected areas, meaning more than 10 percent of the population of the entire Metropolitan Region of São Paulo. Such substantial numbers clearly eliminate the viability of relocation programs and at the same time exacerbate demands for huge investments that the city or the national governments is unable to make. In fact, the combination of environmental protection, inappropriately consolidated urban settlements, high demographic growth and lack of resources is an equation that produces cumulatively bad results; an invisible enemy, a step by step disaster.

Conclusion

Based on the similarities and differences discussed in this article, it is possible to observe mutual lessons to be learned by cities experimenting the two processes: the legalization process of urban land in Brazil side by side with participatory process may teach and learn from emergency actions implemented in post-war or post-disaster moments where state demarcation of lots is lost and new demands are presented. Construction techniques for emergency or low income housing programs may equally constitute topics of common interests. Replicating logistical expertise in coping with emergency situations, the consideration of new agencies in the construction / reconstruction process is another important example that may interest in both situations. However, more important than replicating methodologies and techniques is the possibility - for those cities like those in Brazil - to better compete in the international scenario for financial resources. This is, in fact, the main purpose of this article, believing that there are other ways to internalize international money than the one offered by the apparent monopoly played by the World Bank.

Although this article is already in its conclusions, it is important to remark once more that the two situations described here may, of course, overlap themselves, avoiding the clear distinction adopted by this author to defend his ideas. In the case of cities destroyed by wars or natural accidents, most of them reveal the same problems of those cities presented here as poor cities of poor countries. But it is also important to remember that the

phenomenon of war or natural accidents is decisive to establish changes and, ironically, favors the internalization of resources and may increase urban resilience before diverse vulnerabilities.

This article may seem another bleak description of contemporary world urban crises. However, its main goal is to expand the discussion on how to guarantee international resources by exploring the potentials of cities and regions. No numbers are officially and consistently available to confirm the accuracy of the comparisons made above, but isolated cases clearly do. Silent and slow moving destruction may be even worse than immediate and clearly visible disruptive events. A long, cumulative process of inappropriate land uses (as in illegal squatter areas), decades of impoverishment proving social mobility practically inexistent, urban violence made common, among other to-be-feared situations may transform the act of looking back into the search of solutions or a model for the ideal city a Sisyphus exercise. The worst of the urban world is taken for granted and no model may be left to be reproduced even if not only humanitarian interests dominate. Cumulative disasters may exclude the possibility of looking backwards in time in search of solutions. Sometimes we feel condemned to push the rock up the mountain, as in an incredible punishment made concrete by a useless and hopeless task.

The good performance shown by certain cities in post war or post accident crises is much more rewarded than that of poor cities in the cumulative process of silent deterioration. Global media and important international donors as well as financing agencies may respond differently according to the impact of the event. In fact, there are two different causes of crises, two different abilities to cope with them and two similar set of urban problems.

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