



Deconstructing disaster: Psycho-social impact of building deconstruction in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Hazel Denhart *

Communication Studies, Portland State University, 721 Harrison, NH 23, Portland, OR 97207, United States

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study inquired into the psycho-social impact of building deconstruction in disaster response. Nine building owners participating in a Mercy Corps' sponsored building deconstruction program in Post-Katrina New Orleans (2005–2008), engaged in extensive interviews about their experience. The core phenomenon they shared was empowerment arising from a synthesis of positive social interaction and material discovery. Dedicated, local, Mercy Corps trained contractors brought immediate relief to these distressed participants by facilitating “a dignified end” to their buildings and by proxy to the lives they held before the catastrophe. Deconstruction allowed participants to reclaim wealth that would have been scrapped for landfill waste by federal mandate. Participants reported a sudden psychological shift from despair to enthusiasm as they regained control of their property and then discovered value out of the ruined buildings. Data indicated that merely possessing reclaimed material did not explain the psychological transformation. Four of nine informants (including impoverished individuals) experienced psychological transformation by giving all of their reclaimed material away. The sharing of material was described as akin to “donating organs” giving life to their critically injured community. Data indicated the program also promoted more environmentally sustainable behavior. Previously, deconstruction has only been addressed in terms of technical, mechanical, economic, or environmental outcomes. This study adds a new component by seeing the human side of that technical process. This report is a companion study to another; Deconstructing Disaster; Economic and Environmental Impacts of Deconstruction in Post-Katrina New Orleans, which provides a quantitative analysis of material salvage from the Mercy Corps program.

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Introduction

I'm able to give to another and give to another of something that is of some value that will have a life, please forgive me, a resurrection.
RDW

This study is about people in urban neighborhoods having undergone the largest natural disaster in US history. Although they escaped with only their lives, they managed to return to their homes and find value out of the ruins by defying traditional disaster remediation processes in favor of deconstruction, an avant-garde technique for economic and environmental protection.

Presently, the most common response to disaster in urban areas is for massive machine demolition of buildings which are subsequently broken into small pieces and stacked into landfills for eternity. By contrast, the approach of *deconstruction* calls for the hand dismantling of buildings to extract maximum salvage. Through deconstruction, building material is redirected out of the waste

stream and back into the marketplace for reuse (usually through low-cost, non-profit building material stores).

After the Gulf Coast storms of 2005, development professionals typically viewed the area as a waste land with nearly \$100 billion in damaged structures, including severe or total destruction of 275,000 homes (Service Assessment Hurricane Katrina August 23–31, 2005, 2006). The US Government responded by ordering heavy machinery to demolish buildings damaged beyond 51% of their fair market value (Protocols for Estimating Replacement Housing Costs, 2007). There were no alternatives. Periodically, these demolitions happened without prior notice to the building owner (Nossiter, 2006) and even inadvertently included the demolition of houses undergoing renovation (Denhart, 2006). This left many homeowners, especially impoverished ones whose sum wealth resided in the broken structure, living in a state of anxiety wondering if their home might be next.

Mercy Corps, an international non-profit, humanitarian relief and development agency, implemented a deconstruction program in New Orleans immediately after the hurricanes of 2005 to offer building owners an alternative to demolition. In this program, low-income property owners were able to retake control of their

* Tel.: +1 5037522555.

E-mail address: denhart@pdx.edu

property and salvage considerable value from their homes. The purpose of this paper is to offer disaster response agencies, government officials, planners, and development professionals a glimpse of deconstruction as a grass roots tool for conscientious redevelopment in disaster.

A context for poverty and housing in New Orleans

One of the driving forces for the Mercy Corps deconstruction program in New Orleans was to provide inexpensive building materials for low-income residents wanting to return to the city to rebuild. Over 70% of New Orleans' housing was either destroyed or severely damaged by the hurricanes of 2005. By late 2007, about 70% of the population had returned (Kahn, 2006), but tens of thousands of homes remain damaged (Shrayer, 2007). Returning residents faced high unemployment rates and a scarcity of construction materials for rebuilding, complicated by inflated prices for materials that were available. Since the majority of low-income housing was destroyed (and very little of it was back in place 2 years later), those returning to the city in the early years after the storm were those who had the money to return. Large numbers of low-income residents were threatened with being priced out of the rebuilding effort (Kahn, 2006). This concern manifested in a violent protest in December, 2008 against the New Orleans city council's unanimous decision to demolish four public housing campuses with 4534 units (Filosa, 2007). Before the hurricanes, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) operated 5100 low income units in four sites. By late spring, 2008 only 880 families had been allowed to return to this low-income housing (Shrayer, 2007). Perry (2007) commented upon the act of boarding up and demolishing public housing units: "the Department of Housing and Urban Development has spent around \$500,000 to board up and demolish public housing units, preventing working-class residents – largely Black women and children – from reclaiming their homes" (Perry, 2007).

The protests might seem ironic in light of a plethora of media stories attesting to the gross mismanagement of these projects by corrupted bureaucrats who effectively abandoned the residents to miserable conditions. It was this history that granted momentum to the city council's wholehearted decision to demolish the buildings as a means of being "done" with that era. The protests, however, arose not from residents' desiring to return to that way of life but rather from the fear that *any way of life* in New Orleans was being closed to them. Early in 2008 an editorial appeared in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper urging the city and federal government to allow Mercy Corps (MC) to use deconstruction as a means of preserving artifacts, culture, and history from the public housing projects (Lolis, 2008; Reckdahl, 2008). MC persuaded the government to halt some of the demolition and allow for preservation and distribution of a limited amount of this material.

The deconstruction field

A small but growing body of literature is contributing data on the environmental, economic, engineering, and technical aspects of deconstruction. No studies are available addressing the psychological impact deconstruction might have on individuals or communities or the usefulness of it in disaster situations. Deconstruction is beginning to move through a variety of disciplines including engineering, architecture, and planning, among many others, as well as some non-scholarly research communities (National Association of Home Builders, EPA, etc.). Deconstruction remains a nascent field still lacking a unifying focus or field identity. Even within disciplines, findings are difficult to compare because

the field has yet to agree upon methodologies and nomenclature. Preliminary research on deconstruction yields three categories: *environmental, economic, and social* (Endicott et al., 2005). Scholarly studies tend to focus on the environmental impact where popular inquiry centers more on economic and social benefits. Social benefits are limited to workforce development and do not as yet include any psycho-social findings. For a detailed literature review of the deconstruction field, the reader is referred to the companion study to this report, "Deconstructing Disaster: Economic and Environmental Impacts of Deconstruction in Post-Katrina New Orleans" (available from the author).

Disaster, development, and planning

Bull-Kamanga et al. noted, "urban specialists do not see disasters and disaster prevention as being within their remit" (2003, p. 193). However, Pelling (2003) countered that, "the increasing numbers of people affected by disaster has led to a growing recognition that disaster impacts can set back development," (p. i). Pelling argues that the planning field is mainstreaming disaster planning driven in part by the United Nations eight "Millennium Development Goals" (MDG) which aim to 'intensify our collective efforts to reduce the number and effects of natural and man-made disasters' (UN, 2000). The UN Millennium Declaration states: "We will spare no effort to ensure that children and all civilian populations that suffer disproportionately the consequences of natural disasters, genocide, armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies are given every assistance and protection so that they can resume normal life as soon as possible" (UN, p. 7).

The MDGs also call for ensuring environmental health and sustainability. Pelling (2003) argued:

Natural disasters are a major threat to environmental sustainability in rural and urban contexts. Natural disasters are also an outcome of unsustainable human-environment relations and systems....we need to ask why it is that disaster has remained outside the remit of development planning for so long. A large part of the answer to this question lies in the discourse that has surrounded disaster-risk management. Even during the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, disaster risk was constructed as a problem for physical science, with engineering not social development as the chosen vehicle for risk reduction. Great gains have been made by the physical science and engineering communities, but this approach can only ever be partial (p. vi–viii).

This study investigated the use of deconstruction in response to hurricane Katrina from a social rather than an engineering standpoint.

Phenomenological study findings

A phenomenological study differs from a case study in that the latter provides an objective view of a given situation through observation whereas the phenomenological approach provides a subjective understanding of lived experience through voice. In other words, a case study seeks to describe what a situation "looks like", whereas a phenomenological study seeks to relate what it "feels like" to be in a given situation. The phenomenology ultimately seeks to identify a core, unchanging, essential aspect of a shared experience. See Appendix A for the detailed methodology used to conduct this study.

Initial data coding yielded 36 categories, ultimately reducing to three "core" shared experiences: Emotionally Wrenching Situation; Empowerment; and Desire to Spread the Word and Keep Going.

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