Looking Beyond the Walls and Roof: The Architect’s Role in Re-Envisioning Recovery

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The architect as a professional and technical entity has always been involved in disaster recovery. When large parts of the built environment are destroyed by disaster, it is natural that architects would be involved in its reconstruction. This paper discusses the current role played by the architect in disaster relief, response and recovery. Through examples from Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, Kenya’s largest refuge camp of Dadaab, and Japan following the Tohoku earthquake, it looks at the way that the architecture profession has in many ways pigeonholed its role to very limited actions focused on shelter design and construction management. It ascribes to a vision of architecture as the creation of walls and roofs, outside of context and relation to policy, politics, health, economy and society.

The built environment is often in many ways the cause of disaster, through its vulnerability. The recovered and reconstructed built environment often possesses the seeds of future disaster: natural catastrophe, disaster related to health, social inequality or other forms of disaster. However most architects have currently engaged little in the debates and politics related to such things, even if they have the training to do so, and a unique situation of witness of these issues.

This paper will therefore document examples of the limited scope of architecture engagement in many of the largest recent disasters. It also describes examples of some architects who are breaking this trend, by envisioning a purpose of architecture that serves as a connection between shelter, sanitation, health, economics, policy and ethics. They further serve as key communicators, visualizing local knowledge and describing the causal links between the policy realm, the design realm and the reality on the ground. The research described is further illustrated with diagrams and concept maps. These serve to visualize both the current role of the architect in post-disaster recovery, as well as the role that the profession could and should play to promote resilient and sustainable post-disaster community recovery.