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POST IMPACT

Avoiding the Next Disaster

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As we pick up the pieces after the Moore, Oklahoma, tornado -- and honor the deceased -- we're getting figures now that this tornado, while not the most powerful recorded, may possibly be the most expensive in U.S. history. We at Architecture for Humanity, like many, pause and wonder at how much damage could have been prevented -- a consideration that is becoming more relevant to more cities as our climate continues to change.

There's nothing we can do to stop tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes from happening. They are natural events. What makes them natural "disasters" is the effect they have on our homes, lives and communities. That's something we can affect -- and work is already underway.

As attention and nonprofit action focuses on the first days of recovery, it will take a wider community of professionals, volunteers and organizations working together to make us as safe as possible from future events. Architecture for Humanity works among several groups to establish a network of locally-focused resiliency and reconstruction strategies. As time moves on, communities face a second wave of hardship. Things need to be done differently to prevent future disaster, but who will help after the cameras turn away?

Building a network of collective wisdom and shared prevention and preparation resources asks us to leverage a disaster to reframe the question "What do I do?" as "What are we going to do?" How do we engage the entire recovery cycle and who should be doing it?

The gaps lie in the moments beyond relief (directed by a small body of highly-skilled professionals and first responders) and immediate recovery (directed by the Federal Government, and the insurers). For the town of Moore, FEMA has committed to three months of cleanup, and footing 80 to 85 percent of the bill. Insurance money intervenes at that point to assist homeowners and businesses rebuild.

By now conversations should already have started with the community about what's missing.

From our past experience in long-term reconstruction, we can expect public, community and recreation spaces to return more slowly -- at a rate that creates an unhealthy environment, especially for children. For an 8-year-old, going a whole year without a trip to the park can have a major impact. Long-term rebuilders look for these and other "invisible" spaces and infrastructure that make a community whole. It is here that local creative minds can intervene and ensure a complete recovery.

Surveying for this kind of work happens at the human level.

In the following weeks and months we'll have the opportunity to talk with communities in Moore. Meetings become workshops, workshops become charrettes: designer-led discussions assessing where needs lie, and what can be rebuilt with the resources at our disposal.

At this level of engagement, architects serve in developing visions and connecting the pieces to see a project through construction. We've worked in countless scenarios where the result is not only a beautiful and delightful space, but one that rapidly becomes a hub for community activities during and beyond recovery.

At the prevention and preparation level ("resiliency"), we're finding architects can play a leading role engaging organizations and policymakers to coordinate resources and establish plans for communities or cities. This is the final step in disaster response -- a move for both affected and unaffected regions to have the precautions and support in place to respond to disasters with maximum efficiency, and minimal damage.

In some communities that's a big ask. Elevating housing above storm surge water levels has not been easy for Biloxi, and will not be easy for coastal New York and New Jersey. After a disaster, we're often asked to make changes in the way we live, the way our homes are built, and the way our communities are organized. It can be infuriating, especially for survivors who only want things to go back to the way they were. Moreover, these changes can require significant investment -- the sort of investment that at lot working families can't afford.

The old wives' tale has been borne out by the latest in advanced disaster research: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. By some estimates, for every dollar spent on risk reduction, forty dollars is saved in disaster recovery. A recent UN

report claimed that the world has spent a staggering \$2.5 trillion on disaster recovery since the year 2000. The toll in human costs is much, much higher.

As we help Moore, Oklahoma, recover from this tragic event, we should also be looking for opportunities to spare the next town, by advocating and implementing safer building, planning and emergency strategies before disaster strikes.