THE DISASTER UTOPIA

by

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Brit Naylor
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ABSTRACT

This project examines the architectural implications of the sociological phenomenon of the “disaster utopia,” coined by Rebecca Solnit. In the state of exception following catastrophic events, disaster capitalists and neoliberal governments work in concert to consolidate wealth and power. But ordinary people are also capable of forcing change and creating community; indeed, the strengthening of community bonds in the wake of disaster is well documented.

After decades of disinvestment in public services and infrastructure, climate-related disasters threaten to overwhelm our capacity to adapt. People who have been displaced from their homes increasingly rely on the good will of one another, growing stronger communities from informal networks of mutual aid.

The project offers a fictional narrative of the near future, in which citizens taking refuge from a disaster are forced to house themselves in absence of support from the state. The story begins with a fire similar to the one that destroyed Paradise, CA and ends with a rain-on-snow event like that which caused some of the worst flooding on the west coast. The unpredictability of climate and the relentless compounding of the effects of disaster is a central concern of this thesis. It is the point of view of the author that, at this time, neither the state nor the field of architecture is seriously interested in addressing the profound crisis that is only beginning to unfold. For this reason, the protagonist of the narrative is not the architectural professional but the ordinary individual radicalized by circumstance. The project is sited in Eugene, OR, a place of origin for radical environmentalist and anarchist ideals.

This thesis posits that informal changes enacted by citizens in the wake of disaster can transform into lasting, formalized changes in the built environment that speak to changing notions of privacy and sharing. The architectural interventions - a flexible community bench and table, a driveway bathhouse and kitchen, and a treehouse guesthouse - represent shifting ideas about community, amenities, and domesticity, respectively.
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DEDICATION

I'm immeasurably grateful to my family for their support and encouragement. I am deeply sorry that not everyone has the advantages that I have had.

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It is my deepest wish that we would all strive to locate the humanity within a profession that can be shockingly inhuman. Thank you to everyone who has helped me to feel that this goal is worthwhile.
Disasters are not what they used to be

Disasters are not what they used to be. Over the course of history, humans have had three categorically different relationships with disasters. These relationships correspond to the predominant ideologies of their eras: antiquity, modernity, and our present time, the New Climatic Regime, an era which accounts for the time since our understanding of the anthropogenic nature of climate change first began to inform our politics.

**Antiquity.** In antiquity, when humans believed that earthquakes, fires, and floods were caused by spirits or gods, the term disaster lived up to its Latinate etymology: literally, bad star or perhaps even without a star. There was little hope of predicting disasters, let alone defending them, beyond what divination, prayer, and morally good behavior could accomplish.

**Modernity.** The disasters of modernity, meanwhile, were understood in terms of modernity’s notion of fate or fortune as something that could be changed. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake is considered by some to be “the first great modern disaster [...] because it was widely treated as a natural occurrence rather than a divine manifestation.” This was not a trivial distinction, as humans had begun to believe that they could dominate nature. Following the earthquake, a city official updated the building codes – an act notably in defiance of nature, but not God.

The invention of the steam engine would expand the impression of dominance over nature immeasurably. Humans would no longer be cowed by natural impediments to progress, as long as progress was profitable. By this ethos, the wonders of the modern world were constructed and defended with increasing confidence. Though calamitous and unpredictable natural disasters still occurred, humans reasoned that nature could be conquered if it could be scientifically known.

**The New Climatic Regime.** In our present era, the New Climatic Regime, the relationship has changed yet again. Climate change is the crux of this distinction: our perceived dominance over nature – in the form of industrial power and the technological advancements it has borne – has proven to be the cause of our climatic catastrophe. The ecological
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stability of the Holocene, the very conditions under which agrarian societies first developed, has been disturbed by a global economic system releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. As a consequence, the earth (as commonly understood to mean “nature”) is “no longer the milieu or the background of human action” but a “political actor” itself.

The intention to control nature has tended to exacerbate the worst effects of climatic instability. We see this theme again in miniature: for example, in clearing the coastal wetlands that would have born the brunt of hurricanes such as Harvey and Katrina. Or in land management policies that favored excessive fire suppression, resulting in the buildup of dry brush that would inevitably fuel devastating fires such as the recent Camp and Woolsey Fires in California.

What is a disaster?

What is a disaster? The word disaster belongs to a coterie of terms that are commonly used and seldom defined, especially in relation to one another. So we have a sense for the proper use of each – disaster, catastrophe, crisis, and emergency – though not always with their specific meanings ready at hand. In an era of climate change, their semantic distinctions reveal the multiple scales of our concern: physical, temporal, and perceptual.

Disaster is a function of human perception. When we think about how much attention an earthquake (a disaster) receives as compared to a trend of heart disease killing vastly more people (not a disaster, but perhaps a crisis), we begin to understand the importance of disaster as a matter of perception.

While technical definitions of disaster do exist, they are often bureaucratic in nature. For example, designating whether an event was an “act of God” determines whether or not insurance companies will pay. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) has specific criteria for what qualifies as a disaster, and this allows us to say with some certainty that the prevalence of disasters is increasing worldwide. We can see how these definitions simply have to be quantifiable, though there is no reason why one less death should make a categorical difference.

For most of the people who experience them, disasters are not understood technically but instinctually, as a function of perception and media. Disasters are “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and [erupt] into instant sensational visibility.” Beyond this, they are regarded as unintentional – though there are exceptions even to this, as 9/11 is widely considered a disaster.

With the understanding that disasters are defined by how they are perceived, there have been efforts to distinguish between the terms disaster, crisis, and emergency. Here, there are two reasons to
grapple with these distinctions: first, to clarify the logic undergirding the use of different terms, and then to question this logic in light of our changed relationship with the natural world.

According to a literature survey, all three terms tend to denote unexpected, unintended damage of a sudden nature. Both crises and emergencies can precipitate disasters if not addressed, but emergencies seem to refer to extant or imminent threats and do not require changes to existing procedures. Crises, on the other hand, describe more unique circumstances. The “student debt crisis,” the “opiate crisis,” the “2008 financial crisis,” the “crisis at the border”; crisis tends to denote complication, a mixture of fast, slow, and building issues that is perhaps not explosive, like a disaster, but takes place over an extended period of time.

Catastrophe, not an object of the study, comes to have a presence of totality, an overarching nature, within this lexicon. So Elizabeth Kolbert’s landmark book on climate change is entitled *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, not *Field Notes from a Disaster*. Timothy Morton would seem to agree that climate change is a catastrophe, and argues that disasters are only perceived from the outside:

> [W]e are in a catastrophe, which literally means a space of downward-turning. It’s much better to think you are in a catastrophe than to think you are in a disaster. There are no witnesses in disasters. Disasters are what you witness from the outside. Catastrophes involve you, so you can do something about them.¹¹

In other words, disasters have already happened, whereas the catastrophe of climate change is ongoing; we exist inside it. While I don’t subscribe to Morton’s definition of disaster in the strictest sense (we can do something about future disasters, whereas the tremendous scale of the climate catastrophe tends to provoke paralysis), the focus on perception is important. It clarifies the reason for making disasters the crux of this research: if perception influences action, and disasters are primarily perceived, then changing how we think about disasters is one avenue for changing our actions. This is in contrast to catastrophes, which are so large that they encourage inaction, and crises, which are too slow or complicated to be exigent, or sometimes even to be noticed.

**There is no such thing as a natural disaster**

There is no such thing as a natural disaster. Since the advent of modernity, this has always been true to some degree. When humans recognized that building codes could save their cities from destruction by earthquake, fire, or flood, they could now take the blame for failing to do so. Today, “there is no such thing as a natural disaster” seems truer than ever, and in three compounding ways:

- Our increased competency in managing disasters.
- Our social inequities and the unequal effects they engender in times of disaster.
- Our complicity in making disasters worse (or in causing them outright) due to climatic instability.

**Competency.** In a 1963 article entitled “The Perception of Natural Hazards in Resource Management,” Ian Burton and Robert Kates remarked on the changing relationship between natural hazards and the human capacity to mitigate their worst effects:
The 'acts of God' of today are often tomorrow's acts of criminal negligence. Such changes usually stem from a greater potential to control the environment, although the potential is frequently not made actual until after God has shown His hand.\textsuperscript{12}

Natural hazards only become disasters when humans are present, and they are only truly natural when humans have no ability to anticipate, mitigate, and manage them. Disasters have always been a function of ignorance, incompetence, greed, or some combination of these as they are understood in the strictest sense: ignorance as not knowing, incompetence as not being able, greed as ignoring known risks for profit. The humans of antiquity were often ignorant of the causes of disaster, or powerless to resist them. Today, institutional knowledge, technological capability, and statistical models bring us to an unprecedented level of awareness and control. As ignorance and incompetence are diminished, greed necessarily claims a greater proportion of the blame.

\textbf{Inequity.} Inequity – of material conditions and of the availability of resources – implicates the neoliberal logic of the development of urban forms. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, geographer Neil Smith wrote, "It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster." He was concerned that the Bush administration would "relegate Katrina to the historical dustbin of inevitable 'natural' disasters," thereby absolving the administrating organizations of wrongdoing and eliding capitalism's role in perpetuating conditions of inequality in New Orleans. He observed that "the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus," one which acknowledges historical context, systemic inequities, racial animus, institutional neglect, and incompetence. Reading the spatial reality of inequality is sometimes as simple as reading a map: in New Orleans, "topographic gradients doubled as class and race gradients."\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Climate change.} “There is no such thing as a natural disaster.” Climate change inflects this truism with new meaning. We now have a third relationship with disaster, one much stranger than that of antiquity or modernity because "acts of God" now bear the mark of human influence.

So why does this matter? To begin with, the distinction between “natural” and anthropogenic disasters becomes less meaningful, as it only refers to one clear "origin" rather than precipitating crises. By this logic, droughts caused by warming, flooding caused by rising seas, and earthquakes caused by fracking are all natural. Given our “greater potential to control the environment,”\textsuperscript{14} the only truly natural disasters that can occur today are ones that we do not originate, that catch us completely by surprise, and that are not socially reproduced. Such events are practically, or literally, alien. An event such as the Chelyabinsk meteor that damaged thousands of buildings in Russia in 2013 comes closest to meeting these criteria. Looking ahead to an era of climatic instability, we face a minefield of “not if, but when” events for which we will lamely claim we simply could not gather the political will to adequately address.

Distinguishing between “natural” and “manmade” disasters has the effect of reifying the human / nature duality that undergirds our most harmful land use policies.

The “natural” designation should be dropped, but semantic accuracy is not the end goal of this exercise. Once we understand that disasters are created by humans – by their very presence and by social, organizational, and technological decisions – we can hold states and corporations to new standards of efficacy and responsibility. We are also empowered to locate our own competencies (at scales individual, local, and regional) with regard to disaster preparation, management, and recovery.

Most importantly, disasters – these powerful focal points of our collective awareness – undergo an “explosion” of contexts\textsuperscript{15} which reaches less visible crises, chronic conditions, and interrelated systems.
The future of disaster (and other chronic conditions)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned in its 2018 special report that we have only 12 years left to limit climate change to a 1.5°C rise globally. The projected consequences of failure include increased "risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people." Media representations have tended to reify climate change as a singular problem, but the reality of climate change constitutes a series of cascading disasters and disrupted systems, a new valence and a greater degree of chaos in a world of extant human conflict. The environmental, social, and geopolitical factors contributing to disasters become increasingly difficult to extricate.

The preponderance of disasters has increased in the past century, and this trend is projected to continue. This can be attributed to two basic facts:

» More people are alive today and living in disaster-prone places than ever before.
» More carbon in the atmosphere is causing the breakdown of extant weather patterns. Increased carbon output correlates with a higher standard of living for a greater number of people.

As the incidence of disasters has increased, so has our ability to manage them. As a result, disasters are more common than ever, but also less deadly. This benefit is unevenly distributed, however, roughly commensurate to a group or state’s available wealth and quality of infrastructure. While we can anticipate that disasters will become more commonplace, we cannot anticipate that existing political structures will resist being transformed – or degraded – by their effects. Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, in “Climate Leviathan,” a scenario planning exercise for the possible global responses to climate change, write:

[T]he challenge of climate change is so fundamental to the global order that the complex and manifold reactions to climate change will restructure the world[…] [T]he continuing hegemony of existing capitalist liberal democracy cannot be safely assumed.

Projections for the 21st century are uneven, uncertain, and unsettling. In general, analysts predict that political instability and extant chronic conditions will worsen in combination with extreme weather events. Scarcity and political disruption will cause economic instability, refugee crises, and armed conflict. These further disruptions will in turn impact recovery efforts when disasters occur.

Ecologist CS Holling’s concept of panarchy, in which complex systems trade flexibility for greater
efficiency, describes the breakdown of highly efficient centralized systems such as those that comprise the global economy. In their place, humans and ecologies will (re)organize systems that are in many ways less connected, less efficient, and more resilient. Political pressures and resource scarcities will in some ways emphasize the local over the global.

Disaster is not the only – or even the central – aspect of theses such as Wainwright and Mann’s “Climate Leviathan” model of geopolitics. Disasters are not merely singular events in which people die and property is damaged. They are instead taken in aggregate and their transformative power is understood to be deeply contextual; for example, Wainwright and Mann write of the political possibilities of Asia’s “climate-stressed poor people and the political structures that abet those very stresses” that “[i]n the imminent confrontation of Asia’s historical-geographical conditions with catastrophic climate change, too many people have too much to lose, too quickly—[a] formula for revolution.”

Similarly, Rebecca Solnit perceives disasters as doorways to other modes of being. In A Paradise Built in Hell, she writes: “[L]ong-term social and political transformations, both good and bad, arise from the wreckage. The door to this era’s potential paradies is in hell.” Elsewhere in the book, disaster is not a doorway, but a window: “Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times and in other extraordinary times.”

Thinking of disasters as thresholds causes us to question the spaces or “rooms” between them. In this interregnum we have what we think of as “ordinary life,” the usual business of commerce and governance. Yet it becomes increasingly clear that “ordinary life” means something else in the 21st century. A sampling of recent news articles gives us a picture of an increasingly disrupted world in which disasters do not read as discrete, anomalous events:

‘LIKE A TERROR MOVIE’: HOW CLIMATE CHANGE WILL CAUSE MORE SIMULTANEOUS DISASTERS
November 19, 2018

Global warming is posing such wide-ranging risks to humanity, involving so many types of phenomena, that by the end of this century some
parts of the world could face as many as six climate-related crises at the same time, researchers say...  

U.S. CLIMATE REPORT WARNS OF DAMAGED ENVIRONMENT AND SHRINKING ECONOMY  
November 23, 2018

A major scientific report issued by 13 federal agencies on Friday presents the starkest warnings to date of the consequences of climate change for the United States, predicting that if significant steps are not taken to rein in global warming, the damage will knock as much as 10 percent off the size of the American economy by century’s end... 

PG&E BANKRUPTCY TESTS WHO WILL PAY FOR CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES  
January 14, 2019

Pacific Gas and Electric said on Monday that it would seek bankruptcy protection as “the only viable option” as the giant California utility faces billions of dollars in liability claims from two years of deadly wildfires [...] Indeed, energy experts said PG&E’s intention to file for bankruptcy was one of the first major financial casualties from climate change — and far from the last...

CLIMATE CHANGE CREATES A NEW MIGRATION CRISIS FOR BANGLADESH  
January 24, 2019

The country, already grappling with the Rohingya crisis, now faces a devastating migration problem as hundreds of thousands face an impossible choice between battered coastlines and urban slums...

A THIRD OF HIMALAYAN ICE CAP DOOMED, FINDS REPORT  
February 4, 2019

At least a third of the huge ice fields in Asia’s towering mountain chain are doomed to melt due to climate change, according to a landmark report, with serious consequences for almost 2 billion people [...] The glaciers are a critical water store for the 250 million people who live in the Hindu Kush-Himalaya (HKH) region, and 1.65 billion people rely on the great rivers that flow from the peaks into India, Pakistan, China and other nations...

It is not enough to say that this litany describes the future, nor even to admit that the future is here. While these excerpts describe some of the challenges of climate change and hint at the potentially catastrophic consequences of interrelated phenomena we do not fully understand, we must still read them within their fuller contexts: a shrinking US economy in an era of wealth inequality; climate migration contemporaneous with violence against the Rohingya; disappearing ice caps in a region with crushing poverty and booming population growth.

Solnit has observed that “in a society in which participation, agency, purposefulness, and freedom are all adequately present, a disaster would be only a disaster,” which is to say that disasters exacerbate existing problems more often than they create new ones. The 21st century stands to inherit the unsolved dilemmas of the 20th; we had not yet built our utopia.

Charles Fritz, the pioneering disaster researcher who experienced the bombing of England during World War II, was eager to clarify that disasters are not inherently worse than the chronic conditions we already live with; sometimes, just the opposite:

The traditional contrast between ‘normal’ and ‘disaster’ almost always ignores or minimizes these recurrent stresses of everyday life and their personal and social effects. It also ignores a historically consistent and continually growing
body of political and social analyses that points to the failure of modern societies to fulfill an individual's basic human needs for community identity.27

Decades later, Solnit pins the collapse of community identity more specifically on neoliberal privatization, calling it "a slower, subtler disaster all its own."28 Rob Nixon has another term – slow violence – which he defines as

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.29

Here Nixon too would seem to suggest that disasters are not necessarily worse than slow violence; actually, the fact that they are "explosive and spectacular in space" means that they draw our attention and our resources, whereas we are not attuned to slow violence. So it is that "[t]he long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory."30 What we know about the future of disaster and other chronic conditions is that they won't occur in isolation.

The disaster utopia

In the previous section, I embraced the notion of disaster as threshold. The purpose for this analogy is not only to characterize disaster; we are just as interested in the spaces before and beyond the threshold, the spaces between disasters, the circumscribed so-called ordinary life. As Rebecca Solnit, Charles Fritz, Rob Nixon, and others have noted, life's chronic and sometimes "ordinary" conditions (ordinariness being a relative designation) often go ignored and untreated: a "slower, subtler disaster"31 belied by ordinariness. As we've uncovered, these conditions include the poverty and homelessness we see today and think of as ordinary. Other conditions of slow violence include "the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, [and] acidifying oceans,"32 the somewhat inscrutable consequences of which threaten to compound, especially in times of disaster. The disaster utopia is a different way of thinking about and addressing these problems that leverages the uniquely experiential qualities of the disaster.

The disaster utopia is a concept defined by Rebecca Solnit and based on the findings of sociologist Charles Fritz and other disaster researchers. Their central revelation is that disasters sometimes encourage community development, social change, and altruism, all by virtue of the experiential and perceptual qualities of disasters. People do not respond to disasters with only grief; they feel joy when they engage in community, and sometimes they later feel nostalgia in reflecting on times of disaster. This is what it means to say that someone is missing the war: they miss the opportunity to act with purpose. Solnit argues that disasters cause people to feel powerful feelings (at both extremes) against which the comforts of modernity have inoculated them. The disaster constitutes a suspension of the existing social order; in this space, communities can come to accommodate new ideas informed by new experiences. These effects can last long after order has been reestablished. Solnit describes the disaster utopia in this way:

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In the moment of disaster, the old order no longer exists and people improvise rescues, shelters and communities. Thereafter, a struggle takes place over whether the old order with all its shortcomings and injustices will be reimposed or a new one, perhaps more oppressive or perhaps more just and free, like the disaster utopia, will arise.  

The disaster utopia is made possible, in part, by psychological and sociological realities that run directly counter to the Hollywood narrative of disaster as an atomizing force that transforms society into a Hobbesian contest of survival of the fittest. When improvisational communities rise up in times of disaster, they provide proof of concept for a model of living that recontextualizes reliance on the state and on private entities; if society does not collapse in absence of the state, what is the state for? And what more could civil society be doing? Solnit writes that “[t]he positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances [of disaster] demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding,” suggesting not only that the state has failed to create an environment in which social ties and meaningful work exist, but that the state – and the privatization it has abetted – have actively hollowed out an environment wherein such a sense of meaning could have been cultivated.

While the disaster utopia is made possible by the psychological and sociological aspects of disaster, it is by no means assured. The spatial, financial, and (geo)political conditions of disaster also make communities targets for abuse; so it is that the new world after disaster is “perhaps more oppressive or perhaps more just and free.” (Emphasis added.) Disasters offer moments of vulnerability and flexibility, for better and for worse. The same qualities that enable the disaster utopia also enable disaster capitalism.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes the “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” which constitute the practice of disaster capitalism. Corporatist interests use “moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” so that affected communities are primed to accept deregulation and privatization. Klein collects a variety of quotes that illustrate the stakes of disaster; this is just a small sample:

*I don’t think anybody has looked at disaster reconstruction as an actual housing market before. It’s a strategy to diversify in the long run.*
– Ken Baker, CEO of Forestry Innovation Investment Ltd., a forestry trade group

*For us, the fear and disorder offered real promise.*
– Mike Battles, ex-CIA operative, regarding business prospects for his private security firm in post-invasion Iraq

*In a cruel twist of fate, nature has presented Sri Lanka with a unique opportunity, and out of this great tragedy will come a world class tourism destination.*
– Sri Lankan government after the Indian Ocean tsunami

*We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.*
– Richard Baker, Republican congressman, after Hurricane Katrina

Rebecca Solnit doesn’t entirely agree with the focus of Klein’s thesis, characterizing her description of communities as “surprisingly disempowering” to the degree that it emphasizes overwhelming corporatist power over the potential of community activism. They don’t disagree about the basics, however. This minor disagreement only emphasizes the need to understand and anticipate the possibilities that exist: disaster utopia, disaster capitalism, or pure
degradation through neglect.

Throughout Solnit’s treatise on disaster and disaster research, she keeps her definition of the disaster utopia somewhat loose, an aspirational ideal as much as an occasional reality. In that spirit, I propose a clarifying of the definition of the disaster utopia so that it is more useful to planners, designers, and architects. This disaster utopia originates in the wake of disaster, but it does not solely exist there. Instead, it expands in both temporal directions to encompass possibility, preparation, and action, which is to say that it must begin as an ideal and it must be recognized as a perennial ideal that awaits activation. This means living with disaster at all times in a way that is neither fatalistic nor apprehensive, but imaginative. I enumerate the qualities of the disaster utopia in the following section.

There is a useful analog to the disaster utopia found in nature: refugia. In forests and grasslands, there are places that tend to survive wildfires again and again. Scientists have observed that these “islands of trees, shrubs and grass that survived unharmed[...] shelter species that are vulnerable to fires. Afterward, they can be starting points for the ecosystem’s regeneration.” The concept incorporates a figurative higher ground. These refugia always exist, though only in specific moments in time and in the context of systems and cycles do they fulfill their recognizable role. Disaster utopias should be similarly understood not as discrete moments but as vectors through which systems are processed.

Architecture and the disaster utopia

Architecture has a role to play in the disaster utopia, but this role is not easily explicated. It is embedded in the nature of disaster, which is itself subject to the complicated interactions of interrelated systems and forces, as we have seen. Unfortunately, architecture’s response to disaster is highly defensive, and does not adequately engage in systems thinking. Since 9/11, architecture has seen a “trend toward a rematerialization of the delineation of space: articulated thresholds, the growing complexity and thickness of envelopes, and an increased focus on structure demonstrate a general hardening of surfaces, a petrification of architectural borders” for reasons of sustainability and security. States have begun to “view architecture and urban space predominantly from the state of exception perspective: the performance of design in case of assault, terror, or panic. The notion of smooth space and frictionless flow[...] has been replaced by active and passive defense – that is, shock resistance and surveillance, leading to a control society[...]”

However often this kind of ethos manifests in the form of airport security theater, in the attack-resistant design of the One World Trade Center, in the presence of dump trucks filled with sand to protect people from vehicle attacks during New York City’s New Year’s Eve celebration or to protect Trump Tower from bombs, these implementations do not help ordinary people in ordinary times and do not contribute to the strengthening of civil society. Nor do they serve as any kind of resource in the wake of disaster; they are purely defensive.

Whatever the “state of exception” includes in its definition – since at least 2001, terrorism has been overrepresented in proportion to its incidence – these are the security problems that architecture will address. So it is that people are safer from terrorism (if they happen to be in the buildings built to withstand attack; are architects protecting people or capital?) than they are from climate-induced chaos. This is of course because architecture exists in defense of the neoliberal order that finances it. Ana Jeinić argues that the neoliberal architectural project is in crisis, unable or unwilling to address the underlying problem, the system itself, so that even “the green utopias of the early twenty-first century are[...] concerned with the possibilities of surviving the potentially disastrous consequences of the given political and economic developments hallmarked by neoliberalism (without trying to undermine or
significantly rechannel these developments)." She argues for big thinking effected in small ways:

[T]he project capable of overcoming the present status quo will have to outline the form of a possible better world, while simultaneously taking into account processes of transformation toward it; to determine a horizon of emancipatory change but allow for its constant redrawing; and to entail a macroscopic model but presuppose that the transition would rather be initiated by microscopic practices.

We can begin to describe the practical application of the disaster utopia by exploring an example in greater detail. In her reportage on Puerto Rico's recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Naomi Klein opens with a description of a tiny disaster utopia that best exemplifies the archipelago's battle against disaster capitalism. After Puerto Rico’s centralized power system fueled entirely by imported fossil fuels ("It’s hard to imagine an energy system more vulnerable to climate change-amplified shocks than Puerto Rico’s.".) was crippled by the storm and its residents were plunged into darkness, Klein describes a house in the mountain city of Adjuntas that
glowed like a beacon in the terrifying darkness.

The pink house was Casa Pueblo, a community and ecology center with deep roots in this part of the island. Twenty years ago, its founders, a family of scientists and engineers, installed solar panels on the center’s roof, a move that seemed rather hippy-dippy at the time. Somehow, those panels (upgraded over the years) managed to survive Maria’s hurricane-force winds and falling debris.

Which meant that in a sea of post-storm darkness, Casa Pueblo had the only sustained power for miles around.

And like moths to a flame, people from all over the hills of Adjuntas made their way to the warm and welcoming light.

Casa Pueblo became a “nerve center for self-organized relief efforts,” a place where relief aid could be distributed, where people could charge their phones, where people could receive news, and where the elderly could plug in their oxygen machines. Klein describes the experience as "a bit like stepping through a portal into another world, a parallel Puerto Rico where everything worked and the mood brimmed with optimism." On the site there is even a community-owned plantation where coffee and other crops were grown. Low-lying plants (most root vegetables) had survived the storm, and these were distributed to the community.

The act of survival alone, a measure of resilience, does not make Casa Pueblo a disaster utopia. It is rather the way in which Hurricane Maria has encouraged a sense of community and a new way of living that makes Casa Pueblo an example of a disaster utopia. Klein finds Casa Pueblo within a context of local resistance stemming from systematic abuses: Puerto Rico’s history of colonization, its ecological devastation perpetrated by American manufacturing and agribusinesses, its disenfranchisement in the American political system, and its debt crisis, among others. This last problem, compounded by Hurricane Maria, has paved the way for a chorus of entrepreneurs who would claim to solve Puerto Rico’s financial woes by transforming it into “Puertopia,” a depopulated, deregulated Caribbean Silicon Valley for cryptocurrency.

The Disaster Utopia
The function of the disaster utopia is to counteract the hollowing of community and to encourage self-sufficient, decentralized systems. The effect of Casa Pueblo was not mere survival or community support; it was also a denial of the systems that have disenfranchised Puerto Rico and an example of another way forward. Even after the initial moment of crisis, Arturo Massol-Deyá, president of Casa Pueblo’s board of directors, found that the obvious vulnerabilities exposed by the debt crisis and the hurricane were “helping him make the case for a sweeping and rapid shift to renewable energy.” Casa Pueblo handed out thousands of solar lanterns to residents in the days after the storm. Beyond their utility, they symbolized self-sufficiency and freedom for the Puerto Ricans.

While the disaster utopia seems to “activate” at a specific point in time—the moments immediately after disaster—its existence extends well before and well beyond. It begins as ideation and preparation, the latent potentials of space and material. Later, it becomes participatory culture.

This study of disasters, crises, and slow violence within a context of neoliberal development patterns and the complications of climate change delivers to us a menu of the characteristics of the disaster utopia in application. The disaster utopia would involve:

- **Creating or reclaiming public space.** That reclaiming public space combats privatization is nearly a tautology, but the value here is ideological as much as it is practical: “economic privatization is impossible without the privatization of desire and imagination that tells us we are not each other’s keeper.”

- **Building decentralized systems.** Sooner or later, disasters will always reveal the vulnerability of certain centralized systems. Though not all systems can be decentralized, a great deal of them are centralized based on an economic model that requires the burning of cheap fossil fuels in order to perpetuate itself. Where they are economically sustainable (for now), they are still vulnerable to disruption. Decentralization not only defends against this disruption, but allows for more redundancies and smaller loads per system, so that even when one community is left vulnerable, others are able to assist. Self-sufficiency through decentralization is a key element of the disaster utopia.

- **Anticipating and countering disaster capitalism.** Disaster capitalism may be countered through the demonstration of other characteristics listed here (for instance, decentralized systems make communities less vulnerable to the predations of disaster capitalist because the communities are not economically desperate), but it is worthwhile to note the conditions of disaster capitalism, as the state of exception that makes them possible also makes the disaster utopia possible. Disaster utopias will likely not be formulated in a vacuum, but will have to anticipate and address actions that run counter to the interests of the community.

- **Leveraging the focus on disaster to bring attention to chronic conditions and slow violence.** Rob Nixon’s recognition of slow violence invokes the “need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.” Here there is a clear understanding of the value of disasters to draw attention and action because they are “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and [erupt] into instant sensational visibility.”

- **Providing refuge (refugia).** The notion of refugia is inherently systems-oriented, as it conceives of disasters as metabolic processes. Here, there is an idea of best use for “higher ground” as refuge that is inherently spatial.

- **Engendering participatory culture: thinking big with small actions that can be enacted by small groups or individuals.** The disaster utopia only works with systems thinking and with community buy-in on the individual level. This requires “a macroscopic model[...] initiated by microscopic practices.” The architecture of the disaster utopia may well be larger than these practices, but must contain and abet them. The architecture will aid in bridging the gap between...
the macroscopic and the microscopic.

**Designing within a context of climate catastrophe.** Again, some of the other characteristics listed here will address the issue of climate; the disaster utopia is a useful framework in which to note confluent needs and strategies. The climate catastrophe forces multiple insights on multiple levels: the need for self-sufficiency on the local level and self-sufficiency’s inherent bias toward ecologically sustainable practices; the value of aid and knowledge exchanges between communities; the tragedy of the commons at every scale; and the complicity of capitalism and neoliberalism in creating / accelerating the climate crisis, noted not merely to assign blame but also to inject doubt about the existing system’s claims that it can solve the crisis it created (or even has the will to do so). Any disaster utopia that does not incorporate climate solutions into its ethos is self-defeating on a longer time scale.

As we have observed, the disaster utopia is not principally about survival. It is about thriving, about community engagement, which in an era of privatization and deregulation amounts to reclamation. The simplest architectural solutions – stronger structures and other nods to the neoliberal security regime – are insufficient to realize the disaster utopia.
The Disaster Utopia

16 year floodplain
(flood insurance required through NFIP)

KEY

100 year floodplain
(flood insurance not required)

500 year floodplain
(flood insurance not required)

Fig. 7   Flood Map of Eugene, OR
THE PROJECT

Premise and Structure

The project began as a literal exploration of the notion of the disaster utopia. Because the disaster utopia is a sociological phenomenon, this project was partly concerned with answering the question of architecture’s role in creating or encouraging the disaster utopia. Did the architectural infrastructure of community lie dormant until a disaster “activated” it, or could the formalized architecture only follow from the unpredictable idiosyncrasies of disaster response?

Through this research, it became apparent that the latter scenario was more likely than the former. After all, any attempt to anticipate or mitigate disaster would likely support the status quo that funded it, rather than those most likely to become homeless after a disaster. This project, concerned as it is with deep and lasting change in the face of climate catastrophe, would have to oppose the status quo.

While the project became, in the end, less literal and more allegorical, it constitutes a serious engagement with the notion of change, both social and architectural. Because the disaster utopia would need to follow from the aforementioned “unpredictable idiosyncrasies of disaster response,” the simplest way to express this idea was through the use of a fictional design narrative in which the unpredictability of events (climate events and social responses) could be taken as given. In other words, the events depicted in the following narrative are not a prognostication, but simply one plausible sequence of events as a backdrop against which the themes of the project could be explored.

Site

The city of Eugene, OR was selected for two seemingly opposing reasons. The first is the ordinariness of the urban fabric at a glance, which would provide the setting for a broadly applicable narrative about climate change. Eugene-Springfield is, in this sense, the Springfield of The Simpsons: simultaneously anywhere and nowhere, neither large city nor small town, and typical in its problems (notably, housing affordability).

The second reason for the selection of Eugene is the city’s particular strain of radical politics. This will be explored in the next section.

Within the city-site of Eugene, three smaller sites were selected, which appear in the narrative in this order: a park (WJ Urban Plaza) next to a church (Fifth Avenue Church) and beneath an overpass; a typical neighborhood street (W Broadway between Taylor St and Almaden St); and a city park (Sladden Park) near the river. These are real sites used within a fictional narrative, but their true contexts are not significantly altered. Each site hosts underutilized spaces that can be differently used: the space beneath an overpass; the driveway; and the tree canopy, respectively.

Design

This thesis posits that informal changes enacted by citizens in the wake of disaster can transform into lasting, formalized changes in the built environment that speak to changing notions of privacy and sharing. The architectural interventions - a flexible community bench and table, a driveway bathhouse and kitchen, and a treehouse guesthouse - represent shifting ideas about community, amenities, and domesticity, respectively. These interventions correspond to the three aforementioned sites.

Eugene has been host to both anarchist ideologies and radical environmental movements,
most notably the Earth Liberation Front. (Eugene’s connection to the ELF is shown clearly in the 2011 documentary *If A Tree Falls.*) In a future in which the state is increasingly unwilling or unable to house individuals whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by climate events, it is easy to imagine how some citizens would turn toward radical action. Documents such as the Earth First! Direct Action Manual empower ordinary, unskilled individuals to build tree platforms, tripods, and other devices that enable them to blockade extractive activities such as old growth logging and coal mining.

This project imagines the intersection of these two worlds: squatting in order to house oneself in the wake of climate devastation, and squatting in order to combat the kinds of extractive activities that have contributed to that devastation. The project speculates that the knowledge base required for the “crude” building techniques commonly used in direct action (at its most dramatic, see the tree houses of Hambach Forest in Germany) already exists within Eugene, and would proliferate under the right conditions. Self-housing in the tall trees of leafy Eugene becomes, then, a not-utterly-fanciful proposition.

The project’s primary focus, the disaster utopia, is concerned with change directed by the citizens. Treehouses are merely a flashy examples of this, illustrative of the larger point. Each of the three design interventions follows from a humble, citizen-directed intervention that arises from need. The circumstances are explained in more detail in the narrative on the following pages.

The first intervention is a community table and bench. Its origin is the typical folding table such as those used by churches for events. The second intervention is a community kitchen and bathhouse that fits neatly in a driveway. Its origin is the RV, and fits a similar footprint. The final intervention, the treehouse guesthouse, has its origin in the aforementioned tree platforms.

**Narrative**

It is the opinion of the author that design, especially design fiction, can be over-explained. The following narrative is subtler than the typical design presentation, but far from cryptic. The author advocates for a more literary approach to this kind of design project, in which the viewer must locate their own point of view rather than simply decide whether they agree or disagree with the premise. While previous generations of architects have viewed design’s primary value as providing “solutions,” design fiction is meant to “suspend disbelief about change.”

It is “design with some of science fiction’s ontological awareness that reality is mutable.” Design fiction is not merely an academic exercise, but asks us to engage with a broader range of what is possible so that our measure for the efficacy of design “solutions” is based on a fuller contextual understanding and is therefore more accurate. In the coming climate crisis, which will shatter our notions of what is normal, design fiction will be an important tool for conceptualizing a new future.

The author does not intend to suggest that housing climate-displaced people in treehouses is ideal. Rather, the author suggests that what is ideal involves a whole host of sociopolitical changes that appear to be nearly impossible to achieve at this time. In this light, the following story presents one possible sequence of events among many, in which ordinary citizens attempt to change their built environment in the aftermath of disaster.

The main point of view which the author intends to express is that the actions of ordinary citizens can and should matter more in the next century. If institutions weaken, architects will have a difficult time helping ordinary people by partnering with institutions. Important architecture - that is, important to people rather than academic discourse - will happen at a smaller scale and in humbler settings.
(Narrative on the following pages)
Part 1: Return to Normal

“When will this end? You know, it just feels like it’s hard to see when it’s going to end.”

- Mary Saip, resident of Paradise, California

Welcome to the City. Today is the Sunday Feast, and it’s going to be even more lively than usual, because today is the 20th anniversary of the fire. Let us tell you our story.

When the fire came to the Town we lived in, we threw our bags in our cars and we woke up our elderly neighbors and said it’s time to go. A thousand cars turned onto the highway, slowing to a crawl.

Airtankers buzzed overhead; we watched them in our rear-view mirrors as they dropped flame retardant into the wind.

We escaped to the City and waited for things to return to normal.

We scattered to the designated shelters: churches, school gymnasiums, community centers. Some of us paid for hotels and motels if we could afford it. Some of us had campers. Some of us kept driving – to the airport or further on, if we had family in Portland or Seattle.

Fires were burning up and down the West Coast: it was a montage on TV, one big fire that never went out.

We anxiously waited for news and called our loved ones. By midday, we learned
that most of our Town had been destroyed.

We saw the drone footage, the burn scars where our homes used to be.

The stone fireplaces standing alone.

The twisted metal skeletons of cars.

There was an outpouring of support for us. Everyone in the City wanted to do something to help, even if they didn’t know how. They brought clothing and bottled water and shampoo or they made casseroles, and they brought it all to the Church.

There were so many of them, and so many of us, that we all spilled out onto the street and onto the lawn. They put folding tables under the overpass and laid out all the food and supplies. Food trucks came in and didn’t charge. Someone ordered fifty pizzas. This was the first Sunday Feast.

We were glad not to be alone in our grief. There was even something pleasant about it, about being bound together in a moment so unlike the rest of our lives.

Since then, we’ve had a Sunday Feast every week.

A small number of us would return home to rebuild our Town. We saw that the cleanup crews and the electric utility were cutting down huge numbers of trees to stop future fires, and the logs were piling up. We coordinated a donation to the Sunday Feast.
Fig. 8
Site 1 isometric (WJ Urban Plaza)
Fig. 9
Site 1 isometric - enlarged
Fig. 10  Table base process diagram

Fig. 11  Intervention 1 east elevation
Fig. 12 Bench and table use diagram
Fig. 13
Intervention 1 perspective
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The Disaster Utopia
Part 2: New Normal

“This is not the new normal, this is the new abnormal.”

- Jerry Brown, Governor of California, 2011-2019

Weeks passed. We called our landlords, our insurance companies, filled out paperwork, applied for federal aid. Many of us had been renters, and we had nothing. We'd worked in cafes and grocery stores or at the post office, places that suddenly didn't exist. We looked for work here in the City.

We grew to hate the shelters. We hated waiting around. We missed our privacy. Our belongings went missing. We woke up sick with norovirus.

Many of us left. We camped instead. Outside wasn't always better, but it was better because we chose it for ourselves. We camped under the overpass, down by the river, in parks, in fields next to box store parking lots.

We settled in next to long-established homeless camps, though we believed we were not the same as them. We thought, this is temporary.

Months passed. It was the end of the summer, the hottest on record again. Some of us saw nothing changing, so we bought houses in the city, driving up rents for the rest of us. We were fractured and separate. All the time, some of us were turning into them.

The City enacted laws to prevent price-gouging, the least they could do. We heard rumors that FEMA might be providing trailers, eventually, but we also heard that resources were being directed to a fire in southern California.
Then what federal aid there was dried up, and the shelters closed, and the police tried to clear us out of our camps. They wanted to push us out to the very edge of town, away from the jobs and the people and the places we’d begun to think of as home.

People protested, and people counter-protested. You heard people saying, “But when will things get back to normal?” You heard people saying, “This is the new normal now.”

We had allies. Since Vietnam, the City had been infused with a powerful strain of anarchist ideology. The counterculture had a stronghold here, their ideas reaffirmed after the Timber Wars. They said the neoliberal order had abdicated its responsibilities long ago, and that all forms of nonviolent resistance were therefore justified.

They told us stories of the Timber Wars, which we then traded amongst ourselves. Stories of large death trap structures that activists built and occupied to block logging and other extractive activities.

Stories of men and women living in enormous old-growth trees for months or years to prevent loggers from cutting them down.

The tradition of tree sitting was still popular here.

Stories of the Earth Liberation Front, who had burned down horse slaughter facilities, expensive mansions, a ski resort under construction. They’d existed underground in the City for years before the FBI brought charges against them.

Their strain of radicalism had never completely gone away. These days, it was even
gaining in sympathy. We took inspiration from these stories. We saw that there had been a time when the present was not acceptable and the future was not inevitable. We realized that we should not want to return to “normal.”

Throughout the fall, the police tried to evict us. Some of us went quietly. Some of us went into the trees. In the beginning, we built simple platforms from plywood and 2x4s, in the style of the tree sitters. We raised them into the trees with pulley systems and affixed them there with special knots we’d taught each other.

First we had only tarps to keep us dry. Then we began building tree houses, with old pallets for walls and discarded tin sheets for roofing. In every grove of every public park, and on every tree lined street, you could find our little homes suspended among the trees with box lashing, sometimes connected by crude rope walkways. We had a small network of allies – small businesses and homeowners – who made their bathrooms or kitchens available to us. Some people offered up their RVs, which would otherwise sit parked in their driveways for months at a time. But no one was allowed to live in the RVs; instead, each was shared by the local tree dwellers as a community kitchen and bath.

Now, the RVs have been replaced by community kitchen and bath houses. People offered their driveways in exchange for a break on their property taxes, and the units were brought in by truck or by train.

The Treehouse Agency administers these units – 4 to 6 households each. The restrooms are public, available to anyone.

That November was unusually cold. It snowed on and off for days all through the southern valley, and the police had to give up on us for a while. The City ground to a halt.
Cars got stuck at the bottom of every hill. Drivers stood to the side, surveying the mess, laughing at themselves before trudging up to their houses to put on a pot of coffee.

Children made snowmen and had snowball fights.

We strung lights up in our trees, and people came to pose for pictures in front of it. The snow week had all the best parts of a disaster; a moratorium on ordinary life, a strangely wonderful alternate reality.
Fig. 14
Site 2 isometric (W Broadway between Taylor St and Almaden St)
Fig. 15
Site 2 isometric - enlarged
Fig. 16  Intervention 2 elevation (on train car bed)

Fig. 17  Intervention 2 elevation (on site)
Fig. 20
Intervention 2 perspective
The Disaster Utopia
Part 3: Never Normal Again

“The truth is actually much scarier. That is, the end of normal; never normal again. [...] [T]he climate system we have been observing for the last several years [...] is not our bleak future in preview. It would be more precise to say that it is a product of our recent climate past, already passing behind us into a dustbin of environmental nostalgia.”

David Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth

Then, a warm December rain melted the snow, overtopping the dams and causing the valley’s worst flood in decades.

Thousands of people who lived along the river reluctantly abandoned their homes. Some of them went to friends’ houses, or reopened shelters, or hotels.

But some of them assembled in this park, below our treehouse village and just beyond the reach of the floodwater. We offered them shelter from the rain.

It was called a 500 year flood, which didn’t mean anything to anyone anymore. The designation was based on flood maps that had been drawn decades ago, based on climatic projections that no longer reflected reality. Few people had insurance, and the National Flood Insurance Program was nearly bankrupt now anyway.

After the flood, public sentiment really shifted. There was very little aid money, and the City was inundated with the recovery process. We were left to our own devices. In time, we established a Treehouse Trust.

In this village, the roofs of the houses form a series of treewalk platforms that
anyone can enjoy.

We keep this guesthouse so that anyone in the City can experience a night in the trees. There’s a long waitlist.

Don’t be alarmed if you wake up in the morning

and forget where you are.

Fig. 21 - Site 3 isometric - enlarged 1
The Disaster Utopia
Fig. 26
Intervention 3 east section - enlarged
Fig. 27
Intervention 3 south section - enlarged
Fig. 28
*Intervention 3 plan level 1*

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*The Disaster Utopia*
Fig. 29
Intervention 3 plan level 0

The Disaster Utopia
Fig. 31
Intervention 3 perspective 2
ENDNOTES

1. This is Bruno Latour’s term. I’ve chosen to refer to the New Climatic Regime, rather than the oft-mentioned Anthropocene, because this research concerns humankind’s collective awareness of climate change and the social and spatial outcomes this awareness produces. In short, the Anthropocene is a geological epoch characterized by certain human activities, whereas the New Climatic Regime is a geo-social era characterized by increasing economic inequality, neoliberal deregulation, and the public awareness/denial of climate change. Though no specific date is given for the beginning of this era, Latour argues that these three elements came together in the early 1990s.


8. According to the CRED, a disaster must meet one of the following criteria: “ten or more people reported killed”; “100 people reported affected”; “declaration of a state of emergency”; “call for international assistance.” Thomas Fisher, Designing to Avoid Disaster (New York: Routledge, 2013; 2012), 6.

9. This is my appropriation. Rob Nixon is not describing disasters in particular with this quote, but generally contrasting “slow violence” with more salient forms of violence, of which disaster is one. I cover this idea in more detail in later sections. Rob Nixon and Harvard University Press 2011-2012 eBooks, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.


The Disaster Utopia

Natural Resources Journal (1963): 412-441, 413.


15 “But can you actually stop the explosion of ‘is connected-to’-s? Think of a dictionary. The meaning of a word is a bunch of other words. And so on: you look those words up in turn. You keep going. What do you think will happen? Will you arrive back at the first word in a nice neat circle? Or will you journey look more like a tangled spiral? [...] And I think the same thing happens when we consider how lifeforms are interrelated.” Timothy Morton, Being Ecological (Great Britain, UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), 72.


18 Ibid., 11.


20 Ibid., 11.


28 Ibid., 9.


30 Ibid., 2-3.

31 Ibid., 5.

32 Ibid., 11.

33 Ibid., 23-24.

34 Ibid., 5.

Klein outlines the characteristics of corporatism: “huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security.” Ibid., 18.

Ibid., 9.


Ibid., 22.


Ana Jeinić, “Neoliberalism and the Crisis of the Project… In Architecture and Beyond,” in Is There (Anti-)Neoliberal Architecture?, edited by Ana Jeinić and Anselm Wagner (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2013), 70.

Ibid., 77.


Ibid., 1-2.

Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 3.

Ibid.

Ibid., 7.

“To ask how participatory culture can revive political life is, in one respect, to miss the point: it is political life. It tends not to involve political parties or elections, though it plainly influences both. It creates social solidarity while proposing and implementing a vision of a better world. It generates hope where hope seemed absent. It reinvets local government through practice. It allows us to reach across political divides to establish a common ground.” George Monbiot, Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017), 83.


Ibid., 25.
The Camp Fire

Nov 12 - 25, 2018
FEMA identified contemporaneous California wildfires - the Camp and Woolsey Fires - as one disaster:

“California Wildfires (DR-4407)”

Resources deployed

- 103 bulldozers
- 66 helicopters
- 622 fire engines
- 75 water tenders
- 5,596 firefighters
- 200 inmate firefighters working for $2 a day, plus $1 per hour actively fighting
- 80,000 miles of electrical infrastructure are fire-prone, out of a total 175,000 miles in California

Butte County: Camp Fire progression and resident displacement Butte County: after the Camp Fire

Gridley

Population scale

Yuba City

Coverage

Paradise

Evacuation

Magalia

Oroville

Concow

Chico

Progression time

Nov 8 - 9
Nov 8 - 9
Nov 9 - 13
Nov 13 - 15
Nov 15 - Nov 25

Tracking the displaced

Not all of the displaced register

PG&E files for bankruptcy.

A court finds that the Merced Property & Casualty Company is insolvent and will be dissolved.

The 86 victims

FEMA trailers, hotel vouchers from asylum centers: fairgrounds, churches, schools, and an airport

1,900 parking lot camping

camper vans

sleeping in cars

Chico Walmart, is forced to disband.
The company is insolvent and will be dissolved.

100,000+ refugees

incarcerated fire fighters working for the flag of Paradise, CA

The Humboldt Fire destroys 87 homes to the west of Paradise.

June

The Humboldt Fire destroys 87 homes to the west of Paradise.

June

A Butte County grand jury concludes that the roads out of Paradise are too narrow for a citywide evacuation.

Nov 8

The fire starts; a PG&E powerline is the likely cause.

2018 NOVEMBER 8

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The Disaster Utopia
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Cell towers damaged or destroyed, overloading existing infrastructure and hindering evacuation efforts

Butte County: Camp Fire progression and resident displacement

Evacuation
- official evacuation centers: fairgrounds, churches, schools, and an airport
- hotel vouchers from FEMA
- FEMA trailers

1,900
Butte County homeless population before the fire

Fire progression: coverage versus containment

Coverage (acres)

Total burned:
153,536 acres

The Disaster Utopia
Unofficial shelters

camper vans
parking lot camping
sleeping in cars
Airbnb free stays

From Nov 8 - 29, Airbnb allows users to offer space to evacuees and relief workers through the Open Home program, which was created during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

Walmart

Dec 1
“Wallywood,” a refugee camp in the parking lot of a Chico Walmart, is forced to disband. The company cites safety concerns and urges refugees to go to official evacuation centers.

Cost of property insurance in the wildland-urban interface (WUI, as compared to other locations

+40%

Dec 3
A court finds that the Merced Property & Casualty Company is insolvent and will be liquidated.

Merced was one of the last companies to provide fire insurance in the high fire-hazard severity zone.

Dec 8
Evacuation orders lifted across Butte County.
### Paradise, CA age distribution

#### The 86 victims

- 65-74 (33.3%)
- 45-64 (18.8%)
- 25-44 (4.3%)
- 0-17 (17.2%)
- 65+ (25.1%)

#### Paradise population (2010 Census)

- 45-64 (32.3%)
- 25-44 (18.4%)
- 18-24 (7.1%)
- 0-17 (17.2%)
- 65+ (25.1%)

### Chico, CA average single family home value (Zillow)

- The Camp Fire
  - 304k
  - 282k
  - 250k
  - 225k

$24,430 average annual income of a Butte County resident

### Tracking the displaced

Not all of the displaced register with FEMA: Chico city officials estimate the number of refugees in the city by measuring:

- garbage output
- sewer usage

Dec 11

Investigators identify a faulty PG&E power line hook as the possible cause of the fire.

Jan 14

PG&E begins filing for bankruptcy.

Jan 29

PG&E files for bankruptcy protections.

Jan 31

Last evacuation center closes, displacing 600 people.

### The Disaster Utopia

- 9,879 Single family residential
- 3,695 Mobile homes
- 276 Multi-family residential
- 514 Commercial
- 4,226 Other
- 11 Mixed commercial & residential

- Total burned: 150,000 (acres)
INTERVIEW WITH MARK ORME

Interview with Mark Orme, Chico City Manager

Interview conducted over the phone on April 4, 2019, almost six months after the Camp Fire. Edited for clarity.

BN: I developed a curiosity about whether or not you ever anticipated something like this – on a personal level. I mean, every summer you have these wildfire warnings. Did you ever think, “What if something like this happens?”

MO: Yeah. No, never imagined something of this nature would happen. It’s a worst-case scenario. Obviously, you try to figure out, what is the worst-case scenario in your city, and obviously you aren’t necessarily evaluating the worst-case scenario in a neighboring city. Well, their worst-case scenario hit, which, in the city of Chico, we didn’t necessarily calculate the cost of their worst-case scenario and the impact it would have on our community. Needless to say, we knew that if there ever were a major fire, or whatever type of natural disaster that occurred up there, that we would be able to help support them. We just didn’t realize that we would have to help support them to the degree that we are having to now. So, absolutely not. It’s definitely something that was unimaginable.

BN: I’ve seen that the numbers are somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 people, I saw one estimate that said 19,000. I have no idea how accurate these estimates are, but do you think that’s pretty close to right?

MO: I believe that when the incident occurred, we had well over twenty thousand people here. So in November there were well over twenty thousand. As time has gone on it’s whittled its way down. It’s somewhere between – in my opinion now – somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand. But it’s so hard to determine that unless you go around and try to take a census.

FEMA obviously does ask everybody to come and sign up for their process – and, candidly, not everybody does. So they’ve tabulated as much as they possibly can, but they haven’t actually given us a number in Chico. We have to do it by estimating two primary areas – of where we can estimate from that I can come up with, and they’ve really proven to be successful, in my opinion – is utilization of our sewer system; everybody has to use the bathroom. We’ve seen an increase of 16% in average daily flows in the sewer and we also saw a huge increase in solid removals; biosolids. Those two alone indicate that there are thousands of people here but we really didn’t have any way to delineate how many thousands. We just know that there’s a lot of extra people.

And in addition to that, the one that really was… You mentioned the 19,000. I was like, you know what, what’s one other way that we can try to determine how many people are here? Everybody has trash. We develop trash in our homes and we put it into our bins and off it goes to wherever it needs to go to – recyclables go somewhere, waste goes somewhere else, green waste to another location – so with that, I reached out to one of our refuse providers, the one that I felt there was the most population living within their territory. When we saw the increase in refuse that they had seen and they
tabulated it for us, it was very much evidence of the fact that the increase that's coming out of Chico, in just this one area of Chico, the tonnage was 62% higher year to year. And that was from December to February. They do have an estimation for population based upon amount of tonnage of refuse, and that 62% equates to the 19,000 population number that you referenced.

I don't think it's necessarily 19,000. It's somewhere closer to 15,000, I believe. It's somewhere in there. Nobody's been able to tell us an exact number and I don't think anybody ever will be able to because candidly not everybody registers with FEMA and all of the extra people that have come in because of the situation – whether they be workers or other types of individuals, maybe some trying to take advantage of the situation – we'll never get a perfect calculus of how many people are here.

BN: Do you think it's coming down to where the number is going to stabilize, and these people are just going to become residents of Chico?

MO: Yeah, there's a “tale” of sorts that many go by, and I don't know how accurate it is, but what I've been told is that whenever there's a disaster, a third of the people want to stay and rebuild, a third of the people leave the area, and a third of the people, wherever they ended up after the incident, end up staying. I don't know if that will hold true here. I think because of the nature of where we sit geographically, I think that number is going to be higher than a third. I think a lot of the people that I've spoken to – and I know there's no scientific nature behind this statement – but the majority of folks that I've spoken to are saying, No, we've planted roots, we've bought a house, we're staying. So I think you're going to see higher than thirty percent stay in Chico. I just don't know where that's going to end but that's what my gut's telling me and the evidence that I have is leading me to believe.

BN: I have to think that most people just want to get back to normal as soon as possible and if that means buying a house in Chico they're going to do it.

MO: But isn't that human nature? I mean, we all desire stability. We all want to know what tomorrow holds to the best of our ability, even though none of us have that ability. [Laughs] To know what tomorrow may hold. But all of us desire that, that's a human quality. We want stability, we want a life that we can tell what our next step is going into. So absolutely, I think that's definitely the case, I think that's what these folks are desiring. I can't blame them; Chico's a wonderful place. I can't blame them for wanting to say, “You know what, I'm just going to buy a house here and we're just going to move forward from this point on.”

BN: If you'd been able to see one year into the future, what is one thing you would you have done to prepare?

MO: Well, I think I would have helped our neighbors to the east in their deliberations over how best to evacuate such a catastrophic incident. They had been practicing and trying to figure out ways of how best to evacuate. I think there should have been more of a collaboration with us and I think that whether that would have been instigated by us or by them, I think that that would have been really a wonderful opportunity. If there is a mass evacuation due to a disaster of this nature, how best is it to quickly go through and determine the best means of transitioning those four lanes going to Paradise into four lanes coming from Paradise – because you've got two going up, two going back. To practice that and just say, Hey, okay, tabletop exercise, how would we effectively put this evacuation plan in order?
I don't think enough communities are working together to deliberate over those issues. If I would have gone back a year or a few years I would have said, Hey, how best can we strategize regionally? And maybe that's a role the county plays, right, because they're over all of the local jurisdictions – not necessarily “over”, but they are the overarching government entity surrounding all of us – maybe that's a role they should play, and pull communities together. You know that there's wildlife and the wildland [urban] interface with all the trees and everything above Chico, up there in Paradise. Maybe that's where you pull them together and say, Hey, look, let's do a tabletop exercise. If the worst were to happen, how would Chico respond? I think that would have been a really cool exercise to do and it would have definitely helped in our preparations.

BN: If you're saying that then I have to imagine that other cities, in California and elsewhere, probably similarly are not communicating with their neighbors as much as they could be.

MO: You know, and candidly, you're the first person I've told that to. [Laughs]

BN: [Laughs] So we're just beginning to talk about this.

MO: Exactly. That's why you know, when you stimulate questions like you're doing, it allows one to sit back and take that global and that larger view, and that's when you come up with ideas like this that are necessary. Maybe some areas are doing it, but I can almost guarantee a vast majority are not.

BN: Right. Can you just describe what November was like for you? I guess what... Not in too granular of detail necessarily, but what were you preoccupied with most?

MO: Well in one word, the entire month of November was overwhelming, if I can describe it in one word.

Not to get too granular, like you're suggesting, but there was an ominous cloud that found its way and encompassed the entire skyline coming from the east and it was proceeding west – kind of a southwesterly direction – and it started to envelop the higher areas of the atmosphere above Chico, and it was just an ominous cloud of kind of brilliant orange and darkness. That day when I woke up and drove in, I was like, "Wow, there's a big fire going on, I wonder exactly where it's at," and so you come in, you see that writing on the wall – okay, we need to pay attention to this – not realizing it's as close as it was because it was moving so quickly – and I'm sure you've done your research and found out how quickly it was moving –

BN: Oh yeah.

MO: It was moving at a pace beyond anybody's imagination that a fire could. Obviously, we're there immediately getting in the mode of response, we need to help. It's heading this direction. Fire's up there, police have gone up there helping with evacuation. We've gone into response mode here. Public works crews along with PD getting the intersections set up so that traffic can flow out of Paradise. So it was just a rush of activity. And then [laughs] later on that evening I have to make the determination in consultation with my two chiefs – police and fire chief – to open the EOC [emergency operations center] because what was happening now is it was coming down into the canyon and gonna make its way into the city. It was a difficult decision but we decided to evacuate three areas of Chico and all those homeowners had to evacuate, and I'm
glad we did it, it was the right thing to do, even though it was difficult.

Needless to say, we were fortunate, we were able to stop the fire. It came into the city limits but it did not burn any structures. Even though it did come in, it breached our city limits, we were able to stop it there. That was tough.

So that first day was just torturous. It started out as an ominous cloud over the horizon, and us sending help, to help wherever it was at, to suddenly becoming our emergency at our doorstep. In addition to that, we had thousands of people who had basically lost everything. They didn't know it at the time. They probably imagined it. But we had a lot of psychologically impacted individuals that were expecting to get back to their properties within the next couple of days and that wasn't happening.

So it was really a torturous circumstance where service delivery-wise we were flying around like crazy. And from a humanistic perspective, we also had to care for huge numbers of individuals that really were psychologically being impacted by something they have never thought they would ever imagine dealing with, and that's almost getting burned up on their way down.

So that's — in a nutshell, “overwhelming,” that's the one word I would give it. It was an overwhelming day.

BN: That's powerful. Thank you for sharing that.

MO: You bet.

BN: So, has your role changed in a fundamental way since then? Or is it all the same problems, just a greater scale of magnitude?

MO: Yeah, I think the role has changed. Obviously I still have the responsibility, the obligation, and the duty to fulfill my job, and that's to operationalize the policy of our city council. So you still have to do the regular stuff, but the role has changed in that I never thought I would be in so many engaging meetings surrounding resolving issues of — not just response, because we did that - but now it's all about recovery and that recovery is not only happening where the structures were burnt, but that recovery is happening here. So this position has transitioned into focusing on a lot of areas that cities aren't used to managing; that's really the social and health type components that — usually those are run through the county, that's where all the funding comes into for behavioral health or social services and you go down the list of all those things.

We've really become the epicenter of managing — helping people manage through this devastation — and obviously, I mean, let's just take a simple example: police and fire response. When they're going out to these calls, we wouldn't have expected the mental conditions of some of these people to be a priority call for us. You know, we were running out to our own issues in Chico. Now you've got a huge population of people that are trying to deal with the devastation, and now that is at the forefront of us, so we have to manage these much differently in that we're seeing, obviously, you know, there's gonna be [an] uptick in suicides, people that just can't handle the situation as it was. We've already seen a number of those.

And just issues that you see, but not to the degree that we believe we're going to continue to see them. They're just going to increase. So that's trying, because those are really social and behavioral health type issues that we're not used to — in city government — dealing with, because the county usually is helping to manage those
Anyway, I don’t know if that frames it well enough, but yes, the position has changed, managing that type of stuff, whether it’s through homelessness issues – and we were already dealing with issues there, but now it’s just really changed. The dynamics have changed. It’s a different type of scenario.

BN: What is the use of running some of those issues through the county? I mean, do you think that was effective before?

MO: Yeah, I mean to a certain degree, because obviously they’ve got offices in the city of Chico. Behavioral Health and all these other service delivery systems through the county of Butte, they have offices here in Chico. But their folks, the people working for the county, are the primary engagers, typically, in that, and we’re kind of a secondary or tertiary support system here in managing and helping to deal with some of those issues. Well now we’ve kind of become primary, and fortunately – here’s a real fortunate and I think proactive thing that the city of Chico did is, we already worked out a deal with Behavioral Health. We embed Behavioral Health officers with one of our police units when we engage with those in the community that are dealing with mental constraints, oftentimes in the homeless community, so fortunately we had already developed a model that was working really well prior to this.

If we wouldn’t have been proactive just because of the issues that we were dealing with, particularly as it relates to the homeless situation, I think that this would have been a lot more difficult, to try to create a new program. So fortunately, that was there to where we can work collaboratively with the county to help deal and manage some of these issues that I think are going to become more and more prevalent as the months go on. I think what FEMA has seen in any major disaster is they see an uptick in mental health issues – particularly suicides and things of that nature – six months and out is when it really starts to hit peak – six, seven, eight months – and people through desperation or through whatever way they manage it, end [not being able to manage] it any more. So I’m glad we have these kind of partnerships in place already. We’ll see if we can continue to grow those in a way that’ll be productive, to help us.

BN: You’ve described – in an interview, and I know this was a while ago now – but you’ve described Chico as “a city within a city” right now – or then, perhaps, and maybe it’s more integrated now, and enough people have left – but do you think there is a real sense of separateness between people?

MO: To a certain degree I do believe there is a sense of separateness, but it is changing and it’s not as stark, because what you had is you had a scenario in that first couple months where people were literally camping waiting to get back up there. They were camping wherever they could, whether it be in an RV or just with a tent, and they were kind of sprawled throughout the city and it just… There was a definite separateness. I mean, obviously, when you bring somebody in you want to be hospitable, you want to be able to make sure that they have a stable living condition. So the Red Cross came in, they were trying to put up all of their places, all the hotel rooms were filled, so it was just crazy, and I think people were so desirous of just getting back up that that led to this kind of like, You know what, yeah, we do have a city within a city.

What you see now is a lot of those folks saying, You know what, I’m just going to stay here. You’re starting to see that separation start to
really come together. I think you’re seeing that start to lessen, which is a good thing.

But you also know that there are people that can’t wait to get back up there. They don’t want to be in Chico. They’re in Paradise because they wanted to live there. So there’s always going to be that slight divide with some, but I think that you’re seeing the hospitality of Chico really bear a lot of kindness. People realize that, Hey, we’ll do whatever we have to, to make this stay, however long it is, as accommodating as possible, but we realize you want to get back, so we get it, we understand it.

BN: You don’t see too much resentment.

MO: No, not as much. I think that what you’re seeing – the frustration and anger that you’re seeing, and I’ll say this from the Chico perspective – is people don’t like increased traffic, people don’t like increased waits. People don’t like increased anything that changes the quality of life that they were used to, and why they’re here. And so that’s where I think a lot of anxiety and frustration comes in is just the magnitude of the impact that the city felt. A lot of the citizens are like, Okay, well, we need some help here. And so that’s why [Cal] OES, as a city agency, continue[s] to press into FEMA, Can we access some revenue so we can increase our infrastructure improvements so that traffic flows can go better? Put an ITS [intelligent transportation system] so that we can better deal with the traffic flows. I mean, there are basic thing that you can do – they cost money – in order to help everybody here, the survivors and the citizens that are being hospitable at the time. So yeah, it just puts more burden on us to try to have these partnerships to get things going.

BN: At the same time, hasn’t the tax base gone down?

MO: Yeah, absolutely. I mean we potentially would have gone down even more if the state wouldn’t have come through and backfilled our property tax. We were going to lose about $800,000 to a million dollars in property tax. Fortunately, the state and the governor and everybody came in and dealt with that, but we believe there is going to be an impact in TOT. […] Once you’re over thirty days’ stay in a hotel room, you’re no longer paying that TOT – transit occupancy tax – so we expect to see a decrease there. That’s a large percentage of our general open budget, and obviously, we saw an appreciable downfall in sales tax generation in December because people were just in shock. They just weren’t out shopping. But we don’t know how that’s going to pan out ultimately in the end. But we saw an initial decrease and a hit and we don’t know to what degree. We’ll know here in the next few months.

BN: What concerns from the community are you prioritizing right now, and what, conversely, are you saying, That’s really just not something we can deal with or need to deal with right now?

MO: Housing has been a hot topic. People want to ensure that – I mean when 10% to 15% of your workforce – It was really a bedroom community, Paradise – 10% to 15% of Chico’s businesses, their employees were up there. Lower cost of living, beautiful place, and so with that, housing’s been a huge topic of discussion. In conjunction with that, the houseless, the homeless, has become a big discussion, because people have seen an increase in the homeless population. And I think that may be attributable to just those that wanted to take advantage of an opportunity to come up. There were a lot of donations. Maybe folks from throughout the state or the West Coast figured, Hey, let’s go visit Chico. That’s an assumption, but unfortunately it’s evidenced by the frustration of many members of the public.
who believe that to be the case.

And then crime: violent crime has gone up for who knows what reason. Not necessarily because of the Paradise people but just because of the increase in population. When you have a city that just exceeds the 100,000 population because of the influx of people, well, crime increases. Unfortunately, violent crime is the one that’s been increasing here. And then I think, yeah, those are kinda some of those that have been prioritized and people are saying the most about and the Council is reacting to the best they can and giving us some direction on what to do there.

The concerns that have been pushed down to the bottom, well, [laughs] everything else. Really, there’s nothing that can be pushed to the bottom to the degree that would make it easier on us because we still are expectant to fulfill our responsibility to meet the needs of the public, even with the additional burdens and prioritization of other items. So, it’s a toughie, but I would say, you know, things that are kind of lingering down that need some attention: the parks, the streets, the roadways. So, it’s a tough one.

BN: What is Chico’s biggest challenge in 2019?

MO: [Chuckles] Maintaining a reasonable level of service to our citizens. Police response time, fire response time, public works, getting out, filling potholes, ensuring that the parks are clean and maintained beautiful, so just basic service delivery at a reasonable level with the increase in population and no increase in city staffing. So that’s, I think, the biggest challenge for us in 2019. How can we manage to sustain a reasonable level of service delivery to our community.

BN: How do you think the city needs to change over the next twenty years? I don’t know if you, personally, in your role, have to look at that horizon in the day-to-day, but perhaps you’ve just thought about it.

MO: I think a more sustainable model of development. I think being proactive with the limited resources. I think what you have to do is, you have to find ways of being more proactive on retrofits and redevelopment of areas that have particularly older housing stock, so that the concern of potential buyers, or devastating events that could occur, are lessened by development standards that are at the higher end. Those types of things, when you look at the twenty-year horizon, you’re going to want to mitigate that because the resources just are becoming more and more finite, more and more limited, so you need to be more proactive on mitigating potential impacts.

So I think [those are] probably some of the things that, when I look twenty years down the road, hopefully we’ve gone in and we’ve helped property owners, business owners, help manage their properties in a way that they become more sustainable and less of a potential issue.

BN: So obviously some of these initiatives would be spearheaded by the federal government or the state government, so you’re kind of limited in what you can do – especially since you’ve just told me everything you’re dealing with in a day-to-day – but are you optimistic that the city will be able to change?

MO: I think so. Yeah, unfortunately that’s my personality type, I’m an optimist by nature, but I hope it’s not for naught. I am optimistic. I believe that working with the partners at the state and federal level, we will find ways of trying to manage these issues in a way where they can be fulfilled, but obviously at the state and federal
level, they're also limited when it relates to resources, so we also have to be cognizant of that fact. So yeah. But I am still optimistic.

BN: In a spatial sense, are there some neighborhoods within the city that are managing better than others? Either managing population flux or just the way city resources are strained – I guess that's an open question.

MO: Yeah, I would say so. I would say that I think some of our neighborhoods, some of the newer developments are managing a little bit better. I think that some of the older neighborhoods are struggling a little bit more. I would say that some of the impacts, particularly with regard to the increase in homelessness, are kind of more impacting the downtown area. There's a lot more concern over that.

[...]

It's kind of a hard question because everybody's struggling to try to figure out how to manage in this situation, so nobody's got a perfect reality, but I think there are some areas, some of the newer development areas, that are managing it better.

BN: And do you think that correlates pretty well with financial resources of individuals?

MO: I think so. Absolutely.

BN: What kinds of new policies are being developed? That's also an open question.

MO: Yeah. Obviously, the ones that we've already implemented have been a priority. There was a price-gauging ordinance that we put in place to ensure that it overlapped with the state law. The disaster recovery permit process we put in place so that we can internally, staffing-wise, authorize uses for people to have kind of a livable space during this time period and we're actually going to be bringing that back to Council at the next meeting, next Tuesday, to enhance it and make a little bit more viable. So things of that nature. Trying to find ways of protecting the survivors in this time when they could easily be taken advantage of. Those are the policies that are being developed and also there's – the Council's been looking at a low-barrier shelter that's going to be brought forward here at this next [meeting] to get people that are stuck on the streets off the streets. So those types of things, it's really livability, those have been the focus, and not allowing these folks to be taken advantage of.

BN: I know that you've been in government for a long time, so you must have a pretty specific idea about the role of government, or perhaps some kind of underpinning philosophy. I'm curious, when it comes to disaster relief, if you would say where local government ends and the private individual – their role – begins?

MO: Yeah, it's a tough one. There are systems in place within government – obviously FEMA is the most readily evident one for disasters at the federal level. Cal OES is the readily evident one at the state level. And here at the city level, you know, you've got our police and fire departments that are first responders, but for the long term, obviously government has to play a role when there's a major disaster, and that's where FEMA and Cal OES play a huge part.

So I would say that their role is necessary and essential, but also on the private side, when does the private citizen, their role, begin? Well, they have to have the responsibility to ensure that they have proper insurance on their property, right? That'll cover a tremendous amount of cost that the taxpayer wouldn't have to if there were properly insured properties and such, so there's this interesting kind of divide between where the government is able to help and when
they should help versus where the private individual has to play a role of responsible party. And obviously that role not only goes from insurance, but it's ensuring that their property is properly maintained so that, you know, there's not a bunch of stuff around so that - let's just talk specifically to fire – that a big pile of stuff doesn't catch fire and burn the house down.

So there is a lot of personal responsibility necessary and government plays a role and I don't think that government should infringe upon the rights of individuals to maintain their property. There should be standards, but they shouldn't overreach on that. But on the other side, there is the responsibility of the individual to also be cognizant that how they maintain their property and insure it does have an impact down the road if an incident were to occur.

So, I don't know if that frames it well enough for you but I believe that there are two distinct roles that we both play and there is a line eventually where the government shouldn't come in and babysit and manage the responsibility of what the individual has to take care of their own property. But in an instance such as this, that's why FEMA and Cal OES are there. They will then leave, and it's that private individual that has to pick up and build from there and take care of business, and hopefully they were properly insured to do that.

BN: If you have these criteria laid out, do you feel like everybody rose to the challenge, more or less?

MO: Yeah, absolutely, one comes immediately to mind. There was a local husband and wife that saw the need of getting more police resources on the ground. They knew that FEMA and Cal OES weren't going to give us the money to get additional service delivery resources, so they gave a half million dollars and they said, This is to hire another police officer. And to get at least one more set of feet on the ground.

So that in itself is just extraordinary. And you can hear time and time again, story after story of people bringing people into their home that they don't even know. I'll give you an example of a neighbor of mine just three doors down. They're a retired couple, they encountered another senior citizen, […] I don't know where they met her at – “How are you doing?” “Oh, I need a place to be.” They brought her into their home. They didn't know her from anybody. Not only did she come along but also her son (or son-in-law, or something like that). Those kinds of stories are prevalent throughout this community. The compassion, the willingness to help has just been... the outpouring of
resources and love that this community’s given has just been astounding and in my mind it’s just overwhelming. You can even go to the star range as well, and you can look at like Aaron Rodgers and him giving a million bucks and getting it started to where people are going to give money towards directly helping those that were impacted. It’s just astounding how kind people can be. And we really saw that come through here during this incident.

BN: That’s really encouraging. It sounds like those stories are not so uncommon, which is also encouraging.

MO: No. They’re prevalent.

BN: How would you characterize the national media coverage? I don’t know if you paid a lot of attention to it – you were busy.

MO: [Laughs] Yeah, I was busy. I was busy doing interviews but I never really got to see any of it.

I think that they were here in full force – I know that they were because they were all at our doorstep. I think that the national media coverage is what it is and that is, they’re there for the story, they’re there to ensure that they are first to whatever aspect of the story that they want to be first to and then as soon as the next disaster hits they’re down there. That’s just the nature of it. That’s the nature of media, obviously. I do see some national media folks still interested in the story up here. That’s heartening to see that because obviously there’s still a tremendous amount of impact still being felt, particularly here in Chico.

It’s unfortunate that the attention goes away so quickly but that’s just the reality of our soundbite [laughs] news showing each and every day. I mean, you try and find the new latest greatest issue that they can kind of promote and then move on to the next one. So that’s just the nature of it. But I thought there were a number of stories that did a wonderful job of ensuring that the story got out there. There was a 60 Minutes piece that I just really thought they did a fantastic job on. I think they did an admirable job, but it’s unfortunate that they’re always off to the next thing.

BN: [Laughs] Well that’s a whole conversation unto itself, I think.

MO: It is.

BN: Last question. What has been your most surprising revelation from this whole experience? If you can say [just] one.

MO: [Pauses] Yeah… Most surprising revelation would be the resiliency of mankind. I know people that lost every single thing that they had besides the shirt, the socks, the pants, and the shoes that they were able to run out of their house with – and they’re just fine. They’re doing great. They have memories of what was but they’re more focused on the memories they’re going to have of what will be. That human condition, that human resiliency, that inherent quality for us to be resilient I think is the thing that is the most astounding thing that just catches me by surprise every time some major issue occurs. It’s a beautiful thing. That revelation, that the human condition is such that we can turn the page and move forward regardless of the catastrophic event that just occurred in front of our eyes, I think that’s just a revelation that we all should recognize is out there. It’s there and I think a lot of it has to do with people’s faith. To see that is a beautiful thing.
PRECEDE NT STUDIES
The Disaster Utopia
The Disaster Utopia

Framed - Honeycomb Housing

Modular, Hexagonal Pods on Scaffolding Structure
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The Disaster Utopia
The Disaster Utopia

H & F ARCHITECTS - Toilet Block for School - Utopia
"TOILETATION"

Plan View

- Concrete Base
- Steel Framework
- Glass Panels

Section View

- Steel Frame
- Wooden Deck
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Details

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The Disaster Utopia