

Dealing with Disaster. Learning lessons from past catastrophes

Session

Throughout time societies have been confronted with disasters, ranging from catastrophic incidents to reoccurring events. These were caused by natural processes, human-induced activities, or a combination of these. People faced with disasters were forced to respond, by adapting to circumstances, shaping their environment – or moving out.

An example of people adapting to their environment can be found in the Netherlands. Peat extraction for fuel was one of the foundations of the Dutch Golden Age (17th century). Starting from small surface extractions in the Middle Ages it developed into a large-scale often commercialized enterprise in the late-16th century, resulting in extensive landscape destruction and subsequent flooding. In response this resulted in attempts to balance exploitation and destruction, and from the 18th century peat extraction was accompanied with obligations to set up a financial guarantee to drain the resulting lakes and create new arable land. Comparable cases can be made for deforestation, river (mis)management and mining exploitations. In the end, they all create the challenge how to deal with disaster, either balancing exploitation and destruction, or leaving the rubble to a next generation.

Disasters like flooding, fires, explosions, collapses, landslides and the like are restricted in time and space, but their causes and after-effects are thus often directly or indirectly linked to long-term developments. The reactions to both types of catastrophe, protracted or momentary, can provide insights into patterns of learning, technology, and social organisation. These insights can contribute to solutions for present-day heritage preservation and environmental challenges.

In the session we invite contributions from various disciplines dealing with historical responses to disaster, resulting in analyses and actions taken to prevent further damage to cities and landscapes. Our key interest is in learning curves and learning patterns, and examples of historical data collection and analysis.

Motivation

The three of us are trained in archaeology, history, and architectural and planning history, and we are interested in the long-term development of landscapes and cities and its structural and social aspects. As such, we are interested in multi-disciplinary approaches focusing on urban and rural landscapes as a result of interaction between natural processes and human activity.

Target Audience

Scholars in architectural and urban history, landscape history, archaeology, urbanism, and heritage studies; policy makers in urban and landscape planning, heritage, and archaeology; urban planners and landscape architects.

Keywords

#heritage #landscape #catastrophe #resilience