The Power of Disaster: Patterns of Rebuilding after Monumental Loss

In the face of monumental disaster when not only individuals but whole communities have lost everything, there is a question of where to start.

On May 22nd Joplin, Mo was struck by an EF-5 tornado with a path of destruction 22 miles long and 75 miles wide. This tornado resulted in the destruction of 8,000 homes, 450 businesses and the loss of 160 people. The total insured losses is estimated to be 2.2 billion.

Along with these tragic losses in many ways the community of Joplin is more unified and stronger as a result of disaster. The stories of tragic loss and miraculous survival unite in a way which was never possible before. Places that were previously mundane or generic are now infused with intense memory and emotion. This transformation of the community has the potential to be the most lasting impact of the disaster. What this will require is transformation of temporary community cohesion into a common vision for the future.

At the same time there are lingering scars: tremendous physical damage, the physical need for shelter and a population still psychologically damaged by the disaster.

In seeking a way of rebuilding that does not merely repeat the mistakes of the past, three patterns will be presented which deal with creating meaningful centers, developing community on the neighborhood scale and providing both psychological and physical shelter from future tornadoes.

Provide Shelter

Pattern: Layers of Increasing Safety

In order to experience well being, people that have experienced the trauma of a natural disaster need to feel a sense of security in preparedness for future disasters.

The need to provide shelter are twofold. Providing physical protection for the town from another tornado could greatly prevent the loss of life and tremendously expensive loss of property which occurred in Joplin.

Equally important is providing a sense of safety to the survivors of the tornado. For the people worst affected by a disaster, a safe place to go during every storm is essential to their wellbeing.

Design for both physical and psychological shelter. Provide layers of shelter which are easily accessible and clearly marked. Make these layers of shelter contained within each other such that an area of greater shelter is always accessible from an area of less shelter.

Create Centers

Pattern #1: Significant Events as Centers of Community

One of the problems of contemporary small towns is a lack of meaningful centers. The stories and artifacts which come to symbolize a disaster among a community can be used to form a new cultural landscape of significant places.

In a disaster there are countless stories each with deep meaning and emotion to individuals. Some of these stories come to symbolize the disaster for a whole community. The places were these were these stories take place and artifact which they involve have deep emotional significance and unifying power for the community. Yet in the rush to rebuild there is rarely even a lingering acknowledgement of the extraordinary events that took place in these ordinary places. This tendency to build over the past deprives a community of places which deep hold meaning. Places which provide unity and solidarity the collective remembrance of a common past as well a focal points as the community rebuilds.

Preserve places of special significance to become new community centers. Work with the community to memorialize these places in built form so that they will provide lasting focal points as the community rebuilds.

Develop Community

Pattern: Community Created by Disaster

The lives of those most effected by a disaster are forever changed. The tremendous immediate need of a disaster can create community unity and shared resolve. Unless this temporary sense of unity is embodied lasting in lasting community structures, the power of this new found social unity will be lost as things return to a pre-disaster state.

Look at the photo above and to the left. For a moment forget about the trees and focus on the people. A major disaster can create a deeper sense of community through mutual need and unity. Create small neighborhood housing which is grouped around the community centers in Pattern #1.