



BOOK REVIEW

What is a City? Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina

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Steinberg, Phil, and Rob Shields, eds., 2008. *What is a city? Rethinking the urban after Hurricane Katrina*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press. 216 pp. ISBN 978-0820330945.

In *What is a city? Rethinking the urban after Hurricane Katrina*, editors Phil Steinberg and Rob Shields present a collection of essays that use the shock of Hurricane Katrina as a chance to reexamine the underlying assumptions about what constitutes a city. The contributions come from a variety of disciplines including planning, philosophy, community organizing, sociology, and geography. What unites these disparate essays is the common theme that Katrina can be used as a fitting case study to rethink urban theory. Since the hurricane was a major disruption to life in the region, this context of its destruction is ideal for exploring the concept of resilience, defined as the ability of a system to respond to and absorb external shock.¹ Among the many questions the book raises, readers of *Critical Planning* should find three themes—community networks, flexible urbanism, and regional planning—particularly important as examples that militate against or work towards resilience in post-Katrina New Orleans.

In the introduction, Phil Steinberg attempts to connect all the essays by presenting a common definition of the city. The definition starts with the work of Lewis Mumford, whose typology of the city, according to Steinberg, serves as a “useful entry point to the numerous questions about cities that are raised by the experience of Hurricane Katrina” (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 5). Mumford’s “broad-brush historical approach” is useful in that it expands the definition of the city by declaring it an “architectural, natural, social, and/or cultural object” (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 5). But while this interpretation is useful in that it does not confine the definition of city simply to the built environment, for Steinberg the typology is inadequate because it does not address the larger social issue of power. Thus Steinberg argues that Mumford’s perspectives are “functionalist,” in that they focus on “something the city produces for society” (Steinberg and Shields

2008, 8), yet this emphasis on production ignores the struggle over who shapes and benefits from the city's function. For Steinberg then, we also need to know "who has the resources to leave their imprint on the city's landscape, its significations, its cultural institutions, and its social structures" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 8). Since social divisions based on unequal access are central to the book's subsequent essays, Steinberg incorporates the work of Henri Lefebvre to balance Mumford's definition; accordingly, a city is simultaneously "an arena of spatial practices...a space of representations...and a representational space" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 23). In incorporating Lefebvre's perspective, Steinberg expands the definition of the city by "allowing spaces of representations to be understood against the dominant background of official representations of what the city is" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 28). By combining Mumford's perspective with Lefebvre's terminology, Steinberg then is able to present his own definition of the "city as a mediator" between the natural and built environment (*Materialities*) and the flow of people and commerce (*Mobilities*), yet also between conflicting spatial representations (*Memories*) and expressions of power (*Divisions*). Each of these four expressions of the city is then explored in the remainder of the book.

There are multiple contradictions inherent in Steinberg's definition of the city as a mediator, however: "the contradiction between the city's natural and built environments, the contradiction between the ways in which a city fosters attachment and the ways it facilitates mobility, the contradiction between urban residents' desire to remember and their desire to forget, and the contradiction between a city's tendency to unite communities and its tendency to divide" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 4). The friction between

these conflicting forces means that the city is the site of constant change. As such, any static definition of a city is incomplete. Here the concept of resilience can be used to deepen Steinberg's definition of the city: if the city is the mediator between both anticipated and unexpected forces, so too is it continually having to reinvent its own space and representation. Resilience, which is predicated on systemic flux and adaptation, can be used to show how the contradictions in Steinberg's definition of the city play out.

Resilience as a framework was first developed in ecology. In the past, the focus of ecology was often on equilibrium, showing how ecosystems tended to flow towards a balanced, stable point. Yet recently ecologists have recognized that ecosystems are in fact characterized by flux, not constancy. Resilience, which stresses adaptability over permanence, has therefore gained credence (Holling 1973). C. S. Holling provides an ecological definition of resilience: "Resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes ...and still persist" (Holling 1973, 17). Though originating in ecology, this concept can be useful in other disciplines. Ian Scoones, for example, shows how resilience thinking can expand into the social sciences (Scoones 1999). And the essays in *What is a city?* show how it is useful to integrate theories of ecological resilience into questions of urban theory. If we take, as Charles Perrings does, that "resilience is the preferred way to think about sustainability in social as well as natural systems," (Perrings 2006, 417) then Steinberg and Shields' focus on Katrina as a tool for rethinking the urban becomes clear. Instead of sustainability, which suggests that systems should flow towards a stable point, the destruction caused by the hurricane elucidates

the necessity of adaptability in contemporary urban theory. By showing how New Orleans has responded to a massive external shock (often unsuccessfully), the authors demonstrate why resilience must be part of any definition of the city.

After Steinberg lays out his framework for the book in the introduction, each subsequent chapter engages one of the key aspects of change in the post-Katrina landscape of New Orleans. As Daina Cheyenne Harvey reminds us in her chapter entitled, “Remembering the Forgetting of New Orleans,” “certain spaces in the city are more vulnerable than others, not only physically but also discursively” (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 129). The principal example of this vulnerability is the city’s historically disadvantaged neighborhoods. In Chapter 2, “New Orleans’ Culture of Resistance,” community organizer Jordan Flaherty explores the significance of what he calls “resistance” by looking at this neighborhood scale. Flaherty defines resistance as community-building efforts in response to exogenous control. He argues that the plight of New Orleans residents predates Katrina because of the government’s “abdication of responsibility” in flood control measures (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 30). For Flaherty, the community network has filled the gaps created by an indifferent government at all levels. While Flaherty defines this network of extended families as a “culture of resistance,” I argue that he misses an important point: community building is also an example of resilience because it has been an important agent in adapting and responding to Katrina’s colossal disturbance. Since the residents of New Orleans’ underprivileged neighborhoods learned early to organize themselves endogenously, they have been able to use these informal contacts as the official government response struggled to respond to the hur-

ricane’s disruption. Perrings argues that, “one critical indicator of the resilience of systems is their diversity” (Perrings 2006, 424). By describing an alternative path to recovery not based on government action, Flaherty also shows how a culture of resilience has formed at the community level.

Flaherty is right to emphasize the importance of community in the rebuilding of New Orleans where the ability of neighborhood social networks to adapt to change—a central component of resilience—is crucial to any serious recovery. In contrast to the rest of the book’s authors, it is refreshing to see Flaherty work with actual residents from the city’s poorer neighborhoods. I see his work as espousing resilience: each time an individual family moves back to the city is a micro symbol of recovery. One problem with Flaherty’s argument, however, is that pre-Katrina New Orleans also had systemic problems that vitiated the vigor of community networks. Economic stagnation, racial segregation, and the state’s lack of investment in education dampened the city’s ability to respond and recover from Katrina. Additionally, the disaster destroyed the sense of community when it was most needed, as local social networks ruptured when residents were dispersed across the southern states. The prominence Flaherty gives to the resilience of communities is well justified; his argument would be stronger, however, if he addressed ways to ensure the stability of these networks in moments of systemic disruption.

A second essay that also builds upon the theme of community is Chapter 11 by Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, entitled, “On Street Life and Urban Disaster.” Here Anjaria draws an interesting parallel between major flooding in Mumbai and Hurricane Katrina that oc-

curred just one month later. Like in the Gulf Coast, the flooding in Mumbai demonstrated the failure of infrastructure and institutions in dealing with a major shock. But unlike the turbulent aftermath of Katrina, Anjaria argues that the relative tranquility seen in Mumbai was due to a sense of community that could be expressed through public space. While in New Orleans the vast majority of people evacuated before the storm, most Mumbaikars stayed. The city's public spaces, often threatened by plans for development, became sites of cooperation, selfless acts, and aid. Here the work of John Friedmann can help identify the importance of place-making, or local attempts of humanizing the neighborhood, for community building. Contrary to the recent focus on macro processes such as globalization, in "Place and place-making in cities: A global perspective," Friedmann looks at the local scale, or the smaller spaces of the urban. He defines place as a "small, three-dimensional urban space that is cherished by the people who inhabit it" (Friedmann 2009, 6). An additional component to place-making is what Friedmann calls the "centering of place" (Friedmann 2009, 8), where the existence of a central space for both formal and spontaneous assembly is key in creating a cherished place. Anjaria's account of the Mumbaikars' use of public space during the flood exhibits all of Friedmann's criteria of place-making. Thus the argument that the layout of the city and use of public space can augment community resilience is intriguing, though Anjaria must be careful to avoid determinism based on physical form. Similar to Flaherty, Anjaria sees the community as a way to partially absorb the shocks of a disaster, though for Anjaria it seems as if the community is inscribed in place.

In addition to community networks, the works in *What is a city?* also show how the concept of flexible urbanism uses nature as a path of urban resilience. "Flexible urbanism" is defined simply as an "urbanism that works with, instead of against, nature" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 24). Or, as Fernando Lara asks: "Instead of attempting to abstract the built environment from nature, what if cities were designed to enable us to navigate *through* nature? Likewise, instead of designing architecture that is conceived amid the assumption that nature exists in a constant (i.e., controlled) state, what if architecture were designed to adapt to shifts in the surrounding nature?" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 60). In his chapter "Delta Cities," Rob Shields suggests that the shifting qualities of nature are especially apparent in delta cities such as New Orleans, which are particularly unstable and vulnerable to flooding. Take, for example, the chapter by Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley, aptly titled "On Flexible Urbanism." Here they argue that New Orleans is a rigid and manufactured landscape that stands in stark contrast to the constant dynamism of the Mississippi delta. Starting with Anglo settlement and continuing up to the present, New Orleans has been developed as a "fortified metropolis" that seeks to force the river to stay in one place (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 68). This planned rigidity in the face of constant change means that even the slightest shock to the system leads to catastrophe.

In place of the "protective muscularity" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 74) of the Army Corps of Engineers,² Manaugh and Twilley propose a more flexible urbanism that recognizes change as a natural process. An example of this flexible urbanism is what they call "architectural buoyancy" (Steinberg and Shields 2008, 73), a fascinating and somewhat futuristic urban form

where the built environment can adjust to rise with the water. With sea levels expected to rise due to global climate change, this maritime urbanism is all the more relevant as an illustration of a resilient city. The focus by Manaugh and Twilley on flexible urbanism therefore is quite applicable to a constantly changing world; as shocks (be they in the form of disasters, climate change, or any other number of man-made transformations) increase, so too does the need for the system to absorb and respond. One critique of Manaugh and Twilley's focus on flexibility in the New Orleans setting, however, is that they leave the principal question of recovery unanswered: perhaps the simplest example of flexible urbanism in the delta would be just to abandon the city for a safer environment? It is clear that New Orleans is situated in a precarious, rigidly controlled natural environment. But is it really possible to plan a major American city based on buoyancy? Perhaps a more practical strategy is needed to make the built environment of New Orleans more resilient.

A final theme in *What is a city?* that connects the effects of Katrina to the discourse on resilience is that of regional planning. Lacking from all the other contributions, Hugh Bartling's chapter, "Mobility and the Regional Context of Urban Disaster," brings a much needed regionalist perspective to the issues surrounding Katrina. As Bartling argues, Hurricane Katrina was a regional catastrophe first because the storm ignored political and social boundaries. Additionally, the storm affected not just Orleans Parish, but all of the New Orleans region and even the entire Gulf Coast through direct consequences such as flooding and indirect effects such as dispersion. Thus Bartling counters the weakness found through the remainder of the book that limits the scope of analysis to indi-

vidual neighborhoods or just New Orleans proper. The second component of Bartling's argument about the regional nature of Katrina is his examination of mobility inequities across the region. Here he shows the history of geographically uneven development, where regional planning subsidized by federal money facilitated the mobility of suburban whites while inhibiting that of African Americans in Orleans Parish. When it came time to evacuate the city, this disparity in mobility became readily apparent. Those with the means were able to adapt to the oncoming storm while those in the central city, lacking personal and public transportation options, were often forced to absorb the full impact of the storm. To exacerbate this problem, the poorest areas were also the most prone to flooding. There was nothing "natural" about the fact that the most underprivileged populations lived in the sections of the city that flooded the most; we produce our geographies and a history of exclusion and unequal access led to a concomitance of poverty and vulnerability. Linking ecology to the social sciences, Ian Scoones illustrates how a natural disaster becomes a reflection of culture: "physical spaces and bio-physical features becomes socialized and institutionalized over time, and localities are produced... Through such a lens, therefore, ecological patterns and processes are seen as deeply embedded in social and institutional ones" (Scoones 1999, 494). Bartling's discussion on discrepancy in mobility and geography in New Orleans shows that resilience is also closely tied to income, race, and class.

While Bartling's point on the regional nature of Katrina is vital to understanding the rebuilding process, it may be that his analysis misses some of the major advantages of a regional framework. For example, Bartling admits that reconstruction presents a unique

opportunity for rethinking regional planning and addressing environmental issues, but the regional plan that he refers to fails to change the fact that the fragmentation of the city-region leads to weak regional governance.³ In response to the inaction engendered by fragmented governance, Bartling could have included discussion of a regional level of government better able to respond to environmental issues such as flood control, as well as social inequalities such as the discrepancy in mobility. Additionally, his essay could benefit from the recent emphasis on coalition building at the regional scale (see Soja 2010, for example) that could unite the neighborhood scale of, say, Flaherty, with his more regional outlook. Perrings argues that, “systems that are resilient at one spatial scale may not be resilient at another spatial scale” (Perrings 2006, 424). The inability to achieve multi-scalar resilience is apparent in Bartling’s discussion of unequal mobility, where certain sections of the New Orleans regional population were less able to respond and recover than others. Combining the various community and grassroots efforts into a regional coalition would decrease the incongruity of being resilient at multiple spatial scales. Such multi-scalar environmental and disaster planning would present a strong example of what a resilient city could look like in the future.

The diverse contributions in Steinberg and Shields’ *What is a city?* constitute a valuable multi-disciplinary effort to show how a city changes in response to a major shock. A common theme uniting these accounts has been the investigation into how New Orleans has or hasn’t adapted to systemic change; the examples of community networks, flexible urbanism, and regional planning all highlight the potential and challenges of making a city resilient. The points raised by these eclectic works help stimulate further discussion about

what constitutes a city and should lead to further investigations about the components of a truly renewed and resistant city. As global issues such as climate change are expected to transform the increasingly urbanized world, the lessons drawn from resilience thinking consequently have relevance beyond just New Orleans. In this regard, the essays in *What is a city?* show the necessity of a theory of systemic resilience in contemporary urban thinking. As such, this book’s rethinking of what being a city entails helps to add resilience to any definition of the city.

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Notes

¹ See Holling (1973).

² In 1879 the Army Corps of Engineers was given control of flood protection on the Mississippi River. What followed has been an attempt to control the river by buttressing the levee system.

³ He refers to the Duany Plan, which was developed by the Congress for New Urbanism and Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour.

Lead Photograph

Cranes over the London Ave canal, which breached on both sides during Hurricane Katrina, destroying much of the surrounding neighborhood. New Orleans, Louisiana (2006). Photograph by Madeline Brozen.

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