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Built Outcomes of Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction: Comparison of Post-Blitz London (1945) and Post-Earthquake Port-au-Prince (2010)

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Extended Abstract Text (500 – 800 words)

There is much debate, literature, and discussion of reconstruction in the Global South with cautious relation to the resilience of the Global North, if at all. However, cities of the Global North have also experienced great catastrophes to their built environment. The wealth and resources available to the Global North today were once less abundant and international aid was also fragmented before the end of World War II. Although their geography, economy, political structure, and cultural dynamics are completely different, this paper will compare reconstruction in London after World War II and the current earthquake reconstruction initiatives of Port-au-Prince. Often, we hesitate to make such a comparison because of the obvious differences. London is, and at the time was, a developed center of world trade connections. Haiti, on the other hand, is known throughout the world to be an underdeveloped city with limited resources. The two periods of reconstruction are also due to different types of disasters – conflict and natural hazards. Despite the countless disparities, can the process of reconstruction in history and today inform future recovery efforts?

This paper is to compare the planning process and outcomes of London after World War II and the current reconstruction planning of Port-au-Prince. Although the focus is on post-conflict London and post-natural disaster Port-au-Prince, the history of both cities experienced natural and conflict disasters. Previous reconstruction efforts will also show how the history of each city contributed to their vulnerability. The comparative analysis will also review common problems faced during the process of reconstruction. “As was demonstrated in London, the power of property rights to stabilize the forms of cities – or stymie their evolution – cannot be overemphasized.” (Vale 2005) The challenge of reconstruction in Port-au-Prince is partially due to understanding who owns what land, and/or the building on the land, and what rights do they have. This comparison of London and Port-au-Prince follows a method discussed by Anthony Oliver-Smith and Kathleen Tierney as a systematic comparative focus by taking into account factors that contextualize recovery within broader global and societal conditions. These factors of comparison include the pre-disaster conditions, disaster impacts, post-disaster responses, and post-disaster variables that impacted the process of recovery in both cities.

The differences and commonalities of the pre-disaster conditions and trends between London and Haiti interrelate. While both had an overwhelmingly high population growth far exceeding their capacity, this phenomenon occurred because of different reasons. London’s industrial economy was growing; attracting people to the city, while Port-au-Prince’s economy was struggling, yet still attracting people to the city as the rural areas suffered more than the urban areas. Exacerbating the vulnerability of both cities was the role of their governments in economic growth and the management of assets, such as land and housing. However, it is an overgeneralization to assume government structure of pre-war London was similar to that of pre-earthquake Port-au-Prince.

In order to address recovery, both cities needed to understand their individual problems that need to be addressed as priority. Port-au-Prince had four, among others, immediately identifiable issues to allow for recovery. Two of them – ‘debris removal and safe shelter’ – were critical to improve the immediate conditions of lives and livelihoods. The other two issues – ‘land tenure and capacity building’ – were critical future issues that have impeded the long



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term recovery of Haiti (Olshansky and Etienne 2011). In the case of London, the County Plan of London identified traffic congestion, poor housing, the destruction of the East End, 'inadequate and maldistributed open spaces', 'indiscriminate mixed development', 'lack of coherent architectural development', as major the defects to be addressed in recovery (Abercrombie and Foreshaw 1943). Furthermore, the paper analyses how the post-impact responses in both London and Port-au-Prince were influenced by the "post-disaster variables such as the quality of governance; institutional capacity; civil society-state relationships; systems of social provisions; the appropriateness, coverage, and equity of recovery aid; and post-disaster trends and events that occur independently of disasters but that also shape recovery processes and outcomes." (Tierney and Oliver-Smith 2012)

Each recovery and reconstruction is carried out in a different way, preferably, or not, to the benefit of those who have been impacted by the disaster. The elaborate 1940s plans of London illustrate the visions of various stakeholders. With the number of different international efforts to rebuild Port-au-Prince, do these plans convey how the inhabitants envision their city in the future? Or rather, how did they picture their city and the history that created it? Finally, the comparative analysis of London after the Blitz and post-earthquake Port-au-Prince aims to understand how people's perspective on place reshapes cities in the process reconstruction.

Roundtable theme

- Disasters in urban context
- Housing and beyond: reconstructing lives, reconstructing cities
- Linking a past, present and future: histories, urban imaginaries, urban design and its influence on urban recovery
- Supporting urban risk reduction through reconstruction
- Relocation from hazardous areas