

## Life in Limbo: Design-As-Social-Discourse

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*There is quite a lot of work--for example Geoffrey Payne, Paul Oliver, Charles Correa--on how traditional patterns of living in "informal settlements" might inform new construction. This work should be noted, since the issues raised in this paper are not unique to disasters.*

One of the most debilitating effects of disaster is the violence perpetrated against the social forces of production. As such, socially established ways of life undergo a sudden change as family and community networks are broken or severely undermined, gender roles are often redefined or even amplified, and other social values such as a sense of belonging and history suddenly take on a critical function for the sustainability of recovery efforts. Although it is important that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster valuable time is not lost in weighing up the pros and cons of different ways to provide relief, whereby assistance would simply turn into an exercise in cultural relativism, it is important that all those involved in the relief effort don't take a one size fits all approach. There is no one universal characteristic defining how populations experience and respond to disaster and displacement simply because different cultures and societies have different histories, resources, skills, and experiences that inform and shape their ability to deal with and absorb crises as they occur. In the context of disaster relief, whereby people have already experienced a violent rupture in their way of life, presuming for instance what is appropriate for villagers in India will also work for an African American community of New Orleans, America is simply misguided.

That said, although there may not be one overriding definition of what we might commonly describe as 'population vulnerability' in the aftermath of a

disaster, there is a shared sense of how such vulnerability works and it is to this collective nature of the problem that we need to initially focus our attention. In short, disaster is indiscriminate. It debilitates social fabric, its economy and ecosystems. Responding to the challenges this produces, designers attempt to move beyond the immediate relief effort and create a sustainable community once more, in spite of the fact that the community along with the buildings and infrastructure of a transitional settlement are only ever intended to be temporary.

The question is how to create conditions in which subjects are able to include social values in a dynamic and sustainable way despite the transitional status of these circumstances? This question presupposes that the subject is socially produced and agency is conditional. Whilst this may seem at odds with liberal notions of the subject that take individual sovereignty, intentionality and choice for granted, as will be seen there is a deeper politics at work when designers reconsider agency as a contingent phenomenon. For instance, on December 26, 2004 the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake (what is commonly referred to as the Indian Ocean Tsunami) that measured approximately 9.2 on the Richter scale crippled some of the poorest communities in the world. Not only did the effected areas suffer terrible economic losses, for instance rice patties were filled with salt water and fishing industries were all but obliterated, survivors also had to face the difficult task of rebuilding their lives from scratch. As the world rallied around in support, offering funds to help in the relief effort, non-government organizations (NGOs) and government agencies worked tirelessly to quickly respond with medical relief, emergency supplies, food, and assistance in the

establishment of temporary shelters to house the thousands of displaced and homeless. To get a better picture of the task at hand, according to UN figures the tsunami left an estimated 170,000 to 250,000 dead.<sup>1</sup> Providing temporary housing under such conditions was certainly a challenge. As Toni Radler the director of communications for the Christian Children's Fund at the time explained, although his organization was able to provide fisherman with new boats to assist in revitalizing the local economy, one of the biggest hurdles to the livelihood and survival of the people he was working with, was shelter.

In some of the hardest hit areas along the Indian coastline there were, on average one hundred and fifty shelters per village established. The conditions inside were unbearable. Families were living in single-room corrugated tin shelters set on concrete slabs, measuring approximately eight by twelve feet. Basically, people ate, cooked, slept and took shelter in a windowless box. With an absence of ventilation along with the soaring temperatures that reached one hundred degrees Fahrenheit during the day, it is unsurprising that children were reported as suffering from jaundice, fever, sweating and respiratory illnesses as a result of heat exposure. Trying to alleviate the heat effect inside their shelters people began to cover the tin with dried palm leaves. Remarkably, by modifying their shelters the villagers started to resignify the design conditions given to them; in so doing they created new discursive realities that prompted designers to sit up and pay closer attention to the connection between shelter, violence, and power. The palm leaves resignified these shelters as aggressive structures, ones that were in stark opposition to what notions such as 'aid' and 'relief' commonly denote: benign, caring, and benevolent. This kind of modification is indicative of what Judith Butler might describe as an instance of performative subjectivity, in that the repressive function of the shelters produced a ground on which subjective agency was discursively asserted.<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that designers need to create repressive structures or conditions in order to enable agency; what it does imply though is that agency is not simply a matter of choice or intention; it is an effect of social discourse. From this standpoint, shelter modification is a mode of performative resistance. It constitutes a form of politics, because the villagers repeated the mini-

mum requirements of what defines a shelter, as classified by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In so doing this performance exposed the oppressive experience such guidelines create.

In reference to providing shelter for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies stipulates:

Shelter must at a minimum, provide protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings, privacy and emotional security. Shelter is likely to be one of the most important determinations of general living conditions and is often one of the largest items of non-recurring expenditure. While the basic need for shelter is similar in most emergencies, such considerations as the kind of housing needed, what materials and design are used, who constructs the housing and how long it must last will differ significantly in each situation.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, the function of a transitional shelter according to this document is a physical intervention aimed to ward off exposure to natural elements and provide security. Shelter as such helps curb incidences of poor health and disease. Yet, if we take the tin box temporary housing schemes established in parts of India after the tsunami as our point of critical departure for a moment, then the social discourse defining the minimum requirements as laid out in the handbook is no longer so neutral and benign; that is, it has a sociopolitical undercurrent to it.

In such situations, deriving a sense of agency from the conditions of transitional shelters or settlements also entails establishing an opportunity that is culturally constituted. This means, aligning the design process with a primary set of material and historical conditions that together prompt sociality: social patterns, cultural value, available resources, historical conditions, and traditional typologies. The first point therefore is to address how social conditions construct subjects. A case in point would be the work of ARTES, a Chennai-based group of architects who have been involved with building shelters and settlements in response to Indian areas affected by the tsunami. According to Nandan, who works with ARTES, it is important that modifications to standard shelter layout are made with women and children in mind. For instance, providing children with their own space and private areas for women. Or, when shelters

are arranged in a geometric grid stacked in rows of ten with narrow eight by ten feet between each row, villagers are unable to keep the animals they otherwise would have had wandering around in the spaces outside of their homes and which they depend upon as part of subsistence farming efforts. In small compact spaces where people cook inside there are enormous problems associated with the accumulation of smoke. Using outdoor canopies or hut extensions, that draw upon traditional architectural typologies that often situate kitchens outside of homes, improves indoor air quality and prevents skin disease amongst children as a result of exposure to fumes.

Additionally, sanitation and health go hand in hand and yet the introduction of toilets and bathrooms may be an entirely foreign design solution for some communities. Nandan reports many villagers were unfamiliar with the idea of using a bathroom or toilet. He explains:

It is not really an issue of just providing the amenities. If one goes through the region, one can find abandoned bathrooms, abandoned toilets that are not used. Not the least because they are uncomfortable while using them in a particular manner. Now when we did a detailed study of this in this community for several months the major issue was privacy. And another major issue was the fact that there was not enough light in bathrooms. So, even if they have to use it after sunset or before sunrise there was a certain fear even to walk to those places and which is why they are abandoned. We thought of the idea of using solar lighting in these bathrooms. We tested it out in certain areas in Cuddalore and found out it was a simple intervention that allowed the community to use these bathrooms.<sup>4</sup>

What Nandan suggests that a greater sense of continuity needs to be established between pre-disaster and transitional shelter design.

Adding to this Nandan suggests when new sanitary solutions and by implication physical changes are made, then design becomes a problem of 'how' to present a different social activity into the community:

The toilet and sanitation problem is really a complex one. I don't see it as an issue of only physical intervention or design solutions. It is really a social issue where in the context of a trauma we are also attempting to bring in new different, if the word is better, standards of sanitation maintained. Because we found most of the communities are

not accustomed or used to the idea of bathrooms or toilets. In that context, bringing in decisions, sometimes, and the manner in which it is brought, that was also critical.<sup>5</sup>

What this position does not consider are the political and cultural implications of introducing new sanitation habits into a community. Yet, the topic of cleanliness, which also encompasses the issue of how we clean ourselves, is in itself a cultural construction and one that can be used to pursue largely foreign cultural practices and ideals. When we perceive somebody or an entire culture as dirty and smelly we are in effect projecting our own deeper repressions. Despite Nandan's good intentions the bottom line is if villagers need disaster relief they can get this as long as they learn to live up to the designer's standards of personal conduct. By implication the introduction of toilets and bathrooms into the transitional settlement is just another way in which bodies are managed and behaviors are modified and disciplined. Design now takes on a political role as disaster relief prompts the separation of body from self, concomitantly producing the 'otherness' of the abject body of the survivor of disaster, all the while reinscribing that body into a bourgeois or middle-class definition of an orderly, healthy, and by consequence sanitary social pattern. Promoting a deeper sense of continuity therefore between pre-disaster and transitional shelters by teaching new habits is really only a mask for a deeper racist revulsion against 'unclean' or 'untouchable' social groups.

Shelters need to address existing social patterns and ways of life in order to be a sustainable solution, however this needs to be conducted with cultural sensitivity; what might otherwise be described as designing with transcultural social patterns. Here, the involvement of the community in building their own shelters as the Handbook for Emergencies also advises is important.<sup>6</sup> Further, using local skills, resources and typologies is critical, and when non-local skills and traditional building methods are used, training local villagers to participate not just in the design process but also the construction of their buildings means they not only develop a sense of ownership, they also learn new skills which can later be used to maintain their shelters if needed, in turn increasing the possibility that shelters will last longer. All in all, in this context design is clearly approached in terms of transcultural social patterning, more

than being just a physical intervention. According to this perspective, the social patterns that produce subjects provide an armature for design; there is always a large skill base already in place that designers can work with and doing so avoids taking a condescending approach to the subject of design, one that constructs the 'survivor' as vulnerable and in need of saving from an outsider and by implication, 'stronger' entity. This now brings us to the next issue: being sensitive to how subjects are constructed by social norms.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the issue of global climate change started to enter the social imaginary as a reality and not just as an ominous possibility, one that could potentially threaten future generations. The more the issue entered circulation the more it became a normative concern not just for how governments would plan their economies and put new technologies to work, but also for how governments and large international aid agencies would respond to disaster. Honestly, the figures on the increasing number of natural disasters worldwide are certainly alarming and they prompt us to seriously consider not only measures that need to be taken to mitigate the process and effects of global climate change, but to also address how we as human beings are going to turn these constraints into creative opportunities. On August 9, 2007 Margaret Wahlström, the United Nations Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, reported at the UN Press conference that between 55% and 65% of all annual global disasters are weather-related. For the period 2004 to 2006, there was an annual increase from 60 to 100 floods; the overall number of weather-related emergencies rose from 200 to 400; and approximately 500 million people are being negatively affected by these trends on an annual basis.<sup>7</sup>

Statistics not only inform design initiatives for sustainable development aimed at providing a realistic approach to the environment and local climate conditions, they are also used by government and international organizations when representing the interests of what they perceive to be social groups especially vulnerable to climate change and the demise of natural resources. What this means though is that the social issue of climate change has also become a political category and in an ominous way there is a whole new world order emerging out of the environmental threat. For ex-

ample, after the tsunami, the Indian government engaged in a series of preparedness planning initiatives aimed at minimizing unnecessary exposure to natural hazards, such as those associated with global climate change, which eventually will result in sea levels rising. Given the mounting threat of natural disasters in the region and the social and economic hardships these produce, for many this may seem to be the most responsible course of action to take; yet for the locals who survived the tsunami this approach did not seem to be so self-evident.

Reluctant to let surviving villagers rebuild on the same oceanfront sites they inhabited prior to the tsunami, the Indian government announced it would enforce protective setbacks anywhere between two hundred and five hundred meters. As the villagers rely upon manpower alone to launch their heavy boats into the ocean, this would make it virtually impossible for them to drag their boats that far to the shoreline each day. The economic consequences of the decision are dire, not to mention that the timing was inappropriate. Villagers would be stopped from putting the few remaining assets they had (natural resources and skills) to productive use at a time when their other physical assets, such as their homes and belongings along with their psychological strength (loss of friends and family, traumatic memories) had already been compromised. In an appeal, the villagers explained they would not be able to continue fishing if they were relocated that far away from the shore. In this case, global climate change became both a political category (used by the government) and a universal representation (absolute truth), and both these uses assumed, what Theodor Adorno might have described as, a 'violent and repressive character.'<sup>8</sup>

Overall, there are serious cultural implications associated with the Indian government's decision to permanently relocate the tsunami survivors away from the ocean; traditional fishing skills that were handed down from generation to generation would be lost and heritage ties to the land would be broken. To simply see this situation as a sociopolitical phenomenon and not a cultural problem is to ignore the ethical implications of cultural practice. For instance, why not place the new settlements on the waterfront and design the village in such a way that the buildings are conceived of as part of

a much larger ecological process. That way, as sea levels rise when the time comes for the villagers to relocate they simply dismantle their homes and rebuild them further inland using the same materials. The work Oxfam carried out in Sri Lanka offers us an opportunity to toy with this idea.

After the tsunami many people in the Sri Lankan coastal village – Tangalle – took shelter with other family members or friends. However, there was a group of seventeen families that did not. The families wanted to remain in the vicinity of the rest of their community, but there was no land available. It was eventually decided that a transitional settlement would be established in the middle of the village on the site of the children's playground. For Oxfam, the siting of the settlement was critical in maintaining ties with the rest of the village and this also allowed easy access to its infrastructure. The result was a series of affordable units that each cost only \$580, a 'safe shelter that would enable' the villagers to 'store their belongings securely and would be spacious and cool enough to carry out everyday tasks, such as mending nets or drying fish.'<sup>9</sup> The overriding design principle was to produce housing that could be dismantled and reused again for permanent housing. This meant timber joints were bolted together and rather than having a cement slab, removable cement tiles were used instead. Finally and most importantly, the design was the direct outcome of group discussions with the villagers, local government and Oxfam.

Or, there is the case of the Safe(R) House that Harvard Graduate School of Design in collaboration with SENSEable City Laboratory at MIT devised in an effort to safely relocate villagers along the waterfront. After the Sri Lanka Public Security Ministry decided on January 17, 2005 to implement a 100-Meter Rule, prohibiting the construction of houses within a 100 meters from the sea in the southwest of the country or 200 meters in the northwest, many of the 800,000 villagers who were projected to be affected by the decision refused to abide by the new rules. The Safe(R) House used local materials and construction methods but it was designed in such a way that it could resist both flooding and the full force of a tsunami. The design was simple and affordable and therefore easy to reproduce. Instead of using four solid walls as the traditional dwellings

had the Safe(R) House uses core columns to create greater porosity that enables the structure to be more resistant to the force of a wave. A 400 square foot home and 1,000 square foot civic center prototype were found to be five times more resistant to the impact of a tsunami than the current homes. As of 2007 the Prajnopaya Foundation was involved in the construction of over 1,000 of these new homes in Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup>

The policy to permanently relocate Indian villagers away from the shore made no room for the idea of design-as-social-discourse, a mode of design practice that the above Oxfam example works so hard to instigate. In this way, the notion of agency which occurs at the limits of design language, whereby those limits are not always negative constraints but possibilities for creative change, is oppressed by the very terms used to articulate the meaning and value of safety, protection, and wellbeing. Embedded within the government's decision was an official language, no different to the minimum shelter classifications supplied by UN-HCR, that objectified the material affects of disaster and how these impact upon a given subject or collective. For example, the government did not adequately recognize the desire for populations to return to and rebuild upon sites of disaster, regardless of the rubble and debris it left behind and also in many ways this was in spite of the possibility of future natural disasters ravaging the area. It is therefore imperative we recognize this longing to return to the shore not simply as a melancholic gesture. It is a yearning to recover the power that emerges out of very deep connections between history, landscape, and the body. This connection is largely affective and the desire to return is intrinsically related to a deeper will-to-survive that emanates out of the utopian potential implied within the debris.

As Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace considers the outside as implied within the inside and by consequence this implication constitutes the productive dimension of the outside; so too, the debris left behind after the tsunami carried with it a positive value. For the villagers, to rebuild on the shoreline was an affective investment not in the past – as melancholic longing or the concept of nostalgia implies – but in the future. The rubble provided a language that stirred forth a utopian promise for the future. In this way the past was

not reified, as the theory of melancholic yearning presupposes, rather it reawakened the possibility to hope once more. As such, the debris, the past, and the will to return meant that the oceanfront site had become a political ground through which agency was produced. In looking to the shoreline the villagers saw in the wrecks the storm had left behind, the potential to recuperate the past as a way of surviving against all odds. Indeed, the specificity of this area of land came from all the traces of history embedded within it and the powerful affect this created. That affect was primarily irreducible and resistant to reification. In this light, the concern over the land being used for waterfront real estate development was symptomatic of a deeper worry that the area would be reified and its affective dimension compromised. The longing to return was the very antithesis of such reification and the subsequent commodification of the site that this would prompt. In a nutshell, the rubble provided the material ground out of which a utopian promise for the future could emerge and the longing for it was not one that could be summarized as pure nostalgia or melancholia.

Instead of relying upon the concept of a transparent and fully coherent subject whose interests can be represented, the social and ethical value of cultural practice surfaces once culture recognizes subjects can never be fully represented. By acknowledging design does not emanate out of a set of individual beliefs and principles, it is socially constituted – social energies and affects, social norms, social relations of power and how these work with or in resistance to the environment, natural resources, and historical conditions. There is a materiality to the language of design and its organization, one that extends beyond just the materials used, the durability of the structure, and the demographic behind the labor used to construct these. That materiality consists of historical ties and the affects these produce throughout the collective body.

## ENDNOTES

1. 'Southeast Asia Tsunami (December 2004)', United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <http://ochaonline.un.org/News/Emergencies/NaturalDisasters/SouthAsiaTsunami/tabid/1350/Default.aspx>. Accessed on August 20, 2007.
2. See Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
3. UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies, (Geneva: UNHCR, 2000), 144.
4. 'Shelter: Little Problems Need Big Attention', Nandan interviewed by K P Sasi and Max Martin for Tsunami response watch.org, <http://www.tsunamiresponsewatch.org/2006/11/02/shelter-little-problems-need-big-attention/#more-724>. Accessed August 17, 2007.
5. Ibid.
6. UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, 144.
7. 'Press Conference by United Nations Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator on Recent Floods in South Asia', United Nations Press Conference, 9 August 2007. [http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2007/070809\\_Wahlstrom.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2007/070809_Wahlstrom.doc.htm). Accessed on August 13, 2007.
8. Adorno, Theodor, W. *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 30, cited by Butler, Judith. 2003. *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt*. Adorno Lectures, 2002 (Frankfurt: Institut für Sozialforschung an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 2003), 13.
9. *Architecture for Humanity* (ed.), *Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 98.
10. Tsunami - Safe(R) House: A Design for the Prajnopaya Foundation, <http://senseable.mit.edu/tsunami-prajnopaya/>. Accessed on August 18, 2007.