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ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigatory discussion on the strategies that were adopted during the aftermath of one of the most consequential natural disasters to occur in Brazil: the 2011 Disaster in the Rio de Janeiro Mountain Region. The main purpose of this discussion is to identify possible societal changes that have resulted from the adversities that characterised this event, which included, on one side, intense rain, landslides and floods, and, on the other, improper use of urban land by low income people and governmental connivance. Since early January, 2011, this multitude of tragedies is reported to have killed **910** people in **7** cities: 215 of these people remain missed. This paper is based on a field study that was developed by means of a survey with a group of experts who worked during the emergency situation and had the opportunity to participate in the recovery developments and handle efforts to avoid the repetition of such natural events' destructive impacts. The field research for this paper was conducted in the concerned cities **365** days after the outbreak of the disaster. Research refers to the contentious hypothesis that although, undeniably, a disaster is never justified, regardless of any possible positive externalities, situations like those observed in this region should be considered not only as a matter of public policy and civil co-responsibility but also as a unique opportunity to develop strategies for significant and long-desired changes in society. The study's conclusion points to the maintenance of this hypothesis and to the necessity of considering it under further scrutiny. However, the conclusion also indicates that expertise must be developed not only so that society can better respond to emergency situations but, primarily, so that society can also strategically consider opportunities that are presented. The paper is structured formally; it begins with an introduction that describes the 2011 Disaster and the cities that were affected by it. Paper presents interviews with the local seven municipalities personnel, State of Rio de Janeiro Civil Defence workers and journalists. It closes with a discussion based on the hypothesis that is adopted here. Theoretical aspects are highlighted throughout the paper.

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Introduction

The events that were used to evaluate the hypothesis this paper presents occurred in seven cities in the coastal state of Rio de Janeiro starting at dawn on January 12th, 2011. Main debate behind the events is based on the way urban land is legally or illegally occupied, how local government controls and monitors settlements and how population understand limits imposed by land legislation. In general, these cities are located approximately 100 km from the capital and may be characterised by rapid urban growth, high dependence on the capital city, and urban lands that are occupied regardless of technical and planning guidelines (Table 1). The terrain is mostly

characterised by valleys and slopes at high altitudes. The weather is tropical and is typified by high precipitation levels. In an environment of dense rain forest, the urban occupation of these cities provides room for (1) consolidated city centres housing most of the economic activities and rich dwellers and (2) fast-growing periphery for low income people. Tourism is an important economic activity that is based on the rain forest appeal, magnificent views and mild summer weather in comparison with those found in the coastal capital city of Rio de Janeiro. Despite different capabilities to respond to the disaster, adversity disrupted everyday life in a never seen social and spatial homogeneity.

Everything located in the region of the disaster was equally affected and destroyed: agriculture, public infrastructure (roads, bridges, and the electric network), buildings (houses, swimming pools, industries, and greenhouses). Nature's strength made no distinction among low and high income dwellers, between long-consolidated areas and those that were primarily recently occupied, or between rural areas and those located downtown. Everything was impacted and destroyed with no distinction. (MMA, 2011, p. 29)

[☆] The title of the article refers to the 910 people died in the 2011 Natural Accident that took place in the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Deaths were observed in 7 municipalities. Research presented in this article was developed on the 1 year anniversary of the adversity.

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Table 1
Rio de Janeiro Mountain Region cities with death toll due to the 2011 Disaster.

Cities/municipalities	No. of inhabitants	Death toll
Petrópolis	295,917	74
Nova Friburgo	182,082	426
Teresópolis	163,746	382
S.A. Pádua	40,589	2
Bom Jardim	25,333	2
S.J.V.R. Preto	20,251	2
Sumidouro	14,900	22
Total	742,818	910 people died; 23,315 people temporarily removed from their houses; 12,768 people lost their houses; 15 cities affected; and 215 people still missing one year after the disaster.

Source: IBGE, Censo Demográfico, 2010; Defesa Civil do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2011.

The 2011 Disaster affected fifteen cities in the region; deaths occurred in seven of them. Compared to their neighbours, these seven cities also had higher levels of destroyed infrastructure, longer periods of interrupted public services and more visible economic activity setbacks.

Disrespect towards basic rules that concern land use legislation, natural conservancy interests and engineering principles and unprecedented levels of intense rains for a long period are largely considered to be the main causes of the 2011 Disaster. These set of causes are commonly mentioned in most of other similar natural disasters in Brazilian urban areas. Besides, high temperatures and high precipitation levels during summer times in densely occupied areas are now considered recurrent, sometimes recalling society previous mistakes in occupying urban land, sometimes announcing climate change as a new challenge for our urban management. However, although the so-called “natural” disasters are recurrent, so too is the feeling that lessons are far from being fully learned. In fact, when society discusses itself or the media takes on this task by analysing such events in retrospect, conclusions are easily constructed: very little has been done to cope with new adversities; emergency money has not been used wisely; and mistakes in the way that cities are built, maintained and monitored are still astonishingly deep-rooted.

During the week of the 2011 Disaster' one-year anniversary, major Brazilian newspapers were preparing themselves to revive the history of the disaster, fear for the disaster's repetition and, with disdain, evaluate what had been accomplished since the disaster. Ironically, when Brazilian society was starting to scrutinise the 2011 Disaster phenomenon, reality itself revived the catastrophe in a very concrete way, although not at the same biblical levels. In a “history repeats itself” manner, in January 2012, Brazil's most populated regions (the states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and São Paulo) coped again with floods, mud-rock flows and deaths due to a summer period of high pluviometric rates.

Table 2 presents the country's top five newspapers in terms of readers¹ and investigates how they discussed the situation. Material collected is that published on January, 5th, 2012, deeming the phenomenon importance (by presenting it on the front pages) and discussing reasons for the adversities. Major national media front pages were dedicated to the adversities not only on the day the research was conducted but also for the entire first two weeks of the year. Additionally, the focus of the criticism in all headlined articles was on misleading governments.

Not only the national media – believed to be more interested in discussing adversities with broader views – but also and mainly the

local media of cities in the affected area confirm an impressive disillusionment. Even in moments of more optimistic sentiment, when the media recognises that something was accomplished or visualises other urban agents to be blamed for the adversities, criticism towards government soon resumes.

Not so much has changed so far. In the Cuiabá Valley, in Petrópolis, for example, dredging work should be accomplished, but it has not been accomplished. Needless to say, this lack of work puts the entire local population at risk again. Something was accomplished, somewhat like cleaning the terrain, just to show governmental effort, but it did not really help; with heavy rains again, like those that we had last year, disaster will certainly occur again (Peixoto, 2012).

If not sharing exactly the same level of criticism towards governmental lack of action or improper initiative as the media repeatedly shares, all other professionals who were interviewed for this paper express the same disbelief in the public policies that have been carried out so far. At one extreme, people consider the total lack of priority that is demonstrated by local, regional and federal governments; at the other extreme, one looks for others to blame for the disaster and criticises the plagued community itself for insisting on disregarding urban law and adequate minimum engineering standard procedures. The fact that most of the population that was directly involved in the 2011 Disaster may be classified as low income somewhat frees them from more generalised censure for occupying areas that have long been known to be unsafe. However, this last viewpoint still leads to the concept of urban injustice, as presented by Lefebvre (1996), Harvey (1973, 1989, 1996) and Marcuse (2009).

In the first case, Lefebvre's late 1960s idea of the *right to the city* is still valid in Brazilian cities and the 2011 Disaster made this more perceivable. His idea that we are entitled to renewed centrality that will create places of encounters and exchange, which allow for the total usage of moments and places in the city in which we live, can be detected. If Rio de Janeiro Mountain Region cities may be far, in terms of time and space, from Lefebvre's Paris of the 1960s, the importance of discussing the city we want and the city we need is still and absolutely valid.² The 2011 Disaster strongly proved how weakly this right was appropriated by the cities' populations: not only was their public opinion delayed to be formulated due to the debris of the destruction but also their governments were not able to play an immediate catalytic role when the tragedy began. Taken as a limited flash moment, all these aspects may certainly indicate a very bleak situation; taken as a long process, some other positive factors gain relevance. Among these factors is the signalisation of long desired societal and institutional changes: subtle yet highly

¹ Every year, the Instituto Verificador de Circulação (IVC) publishes the names of the newspapers in the country that have the highest readership. The group of papers named in this paper refers to the 2010 list. In fact, these newspapers are those in circulation in Brazil's most populated cities or capitals.

² Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city as something that should allow the appropriation of everything that the city offers was later revised by David Harvey, who saw in the French author's proposal the need to decisively influence such an offer.

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