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New Habitat

Imre Szeman

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IMRE SZEMAN

I was crossing a small square wrapped inside of a cluster of weighty Victorian buildings (known collectively as the Exchange Flags), when it flashed up at me: the word “resiliency” written on the outside of one of a group of tents plopped in the middle of the square. I was visiting Liverpool to attend that city’s biennial and had followed some locals on a path that I had hoped would be a shortcut to Chapel Street, where my hotel was located. The inverted V-shape structures—not true tents, but white sheets of plywood on simple frames—blocked my path. But then that was their intent: to force pedestrians to wind their way through them, slowing down long enough so that they might become intrigued and duck their heads in to see what was inside. “Resiliency” was not the only word on the skin of these simple structures. Other tents were tagged with “micro self-sufficiency,” “cultural preservation,” “affordable technology” and “sustainability.” I could not resist. I wanted to see what I might learn inside the tent about resiliency, and so maybe, too, about these other concepts to which it was connected.

The interior of each tent had a brief text and accompanying architectural images. I had accidentally bumped into a display of the work of the socially engaged Taiwanese architect Hsieh Ying-Chun, whose aim is to build structures that embody the ethic and politics named and claimed by those stenciled catchphrases that drew my attention. Inside “Resiliency” we are offered a brief description of a project named “New Habitat” (all errors of grammar in the original):

New habitat addresses the issue of China’s decreasing agricultural land, the structure can be built in lower lying areas that are cur-



Fig. 1. *Resiliency 1*. Photograph by author.

rently only used for agriculture due to the risk of flooding. As the majority of the houses are on the second level and above inhabitants will remain safe in the event of a flood.

After the mega structure is built, individual houses are constructed through a process of collaborative building. Communal spaces are designed around public facilities and platforms and designed to allow natural light in on every level adding to the agriculturally available space of the site.

The poor quality of the written text left me flummoxed. Is the idea that these structures *enable* the use of land that is currently at risk of flooding, and so free up space for agriculture that would otherwise be used for dwellings? Is this a way of encouraging inhabitants to farm where they would come to live, that is, on a floodplain? If most but not all of the houses are on the second floor, what happens to those who draw the short straws and have to live on the ground floor? “Mega structure,” “collaborative,” “communal,” “public”: one of these things did not feel like the others. The images of the mega structures on display—evocative more than explicit, in the way of much contemporary design—seemed



Fig. 2. *Resiliency 2*. Photograph by author.

unappealing, inhumane, and modernist (in the architecturally bad sense of this word) despite Hsieh's intent that his dwellings exemplify forms of open and sustainable architecture. They looked to be structures that would grow block by block into something akin to the widely critiqued concrete council flats with which the British state replaced Victorian streetscapes and the communities that lived in them in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

In *After Globalization* (2011), Eric Cazdyn and I begin with a stark phrase: "Nothing will save us."¹ We don't mean this as a concession to the multiple horrors and recurrent (and ongoing) crises of the era, but as something like a critico-theoretical mantra to remind us that no political scheme, scientific discovery, urban fantasy, singular critical intervention, or religious prophecy will be sufficient to solve our ills. The desire to be saved remains an enduring part of our political landscape, whether we put our faith in science, religious figures, or in politics (only Americans—or, to be fair, their media—could expect a new president to turn their world around in 100 days following an election). "Resilience" can mean something as simple as: this building can withstand

the floods that are likely to come. It can also name the willingness to throw oneself into the labor of making a new world, in full awareness of the immense complexity of the social and physical structures already in place, which make this supertanker called modernity difficult to push in the direction one might want. And it can name the ethos required to do this work without the comfort of knowing in advance where one is going or what one is likely to accomplish.

Self-sufficiency, cultural preservation, affordable technology and sustainability: who could disagree with the political impulses contained by these words? But of course one can disagree, one should disagree. The problem with such concepts is that they cannot help but imagine that the future, however changed, will largely be an extension of a present whose excesses can (miracle of miracles!) be reigned in and whose sharp angles can be sanded smooth. After visiting Hsieh's tents, I'd rather "resiliency" *not* be included with these other terms, beloved of architects, urban planners and even some environmentalists. I'd rather it name what is needed for a protracted fight rather than the wherewithal to accommodate ourselves to floods and other disasters.

NOTE

1. Cazdyn and Szeman, *After Globalization*, 5.

WORK CITED

Cazdyn, Eric M., and Imre Szeman. *After Globalization*. Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.