



www.buildingsandcities.org

**CALL FOR PAPERS: special issue**

## **The Complexity of Disaster Reconstruction**

**Guest Editor: Paolo Tombesi (EPFL)**

**Deadline for abstracts: 24 March 2025 (noon GMT)**

**How can the complexity and challenges of physical territorial reconstruction (after disasters) across diverse disciplines, stakeholders and governance be organised and synthesised?**

Do current debates and practices on physical territorial reconstruction (*i.e.* urban and rural built environments after destruction by hazardous natural disasters, warfare, conflict or industrial accidents) reflect the scope required to address the whole range of complex issues? Does the inherent complexity of the task cause the fragmentation of scholarship and knowledge into an array of disciplines and issues that must be partial in order to remain governable? Is there a need for a theory capable of composing and giving operational coherence and strength to separate efforts? Is there value in rethinking how knowledge can be managed?

### **Aims and scope**

The aim of this special issue is to probe the socio-technical, conceptual and organisational processes underlying physical reconstruction after disasters. The focus is on the integration of diverse knowledge domains in planning processes concerned with the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed urban and rural territories. Whilst recognizing the wealth of analyses and experiences focusing on distinct aspects of physical reconstruction, this special issue will explore the ability of different conceptual dimensions to be brought to inform one another, within a systemic view of the entire endeavour. By emphasizing disciplinary and methodological differences between contiguous efforts that might be better functionally connected, the special issue seeks to expose the complexity of physical rebuilding and social recovery processes whilst highlighting areas, gaps or links in need of scholarly or specialist attention.

This special issue has five strategic objectives:

1. to elucidate the epistemological and socio-technical complexity of reconstruction efforts
2. to explore the political dimensions of dealing with the same problem at different scales
3. to address the practical challenges of exploiting multi-disciplinarity within a landscape defined by advanced specialisation and knowledge fragmentation
4. to reflect on the transferability of lessons typically characterised by intrinsically idiosyncratic experiences
5. to discuss the role of theory in reconstruction studies and practice, as well as its relationship with data collation.

### **Background**

The term *disaster* is a term of common use in today's world, with hundreds of associable instances of major environmental damage or destruction recorded every year by dedicated international agencies. Disasters may arise from 'natural hazards' *i.e.* floods, fires, volcanos, earthquakes, droughts, etc or result from human conflict or significant industrial accidents.

The orders of magnitude embedded in these figures explain the logical development and importance of pre- and post-disaster science, by now mature domains of investigation that produce millions of web links per year, fed by scores of data-collecting organisations, and the work of armies of researchers either geographically or discursively situated (when not both). Indeed, an archipelago of scholarly specialisms exist for disaster mitigation, management and resilience, each with their own investigations, cultural dimensions and specific discourses.

Reconstruction studies follow this general pattern of knowledge fragmentation and specialisation, giving rise to disciplines made out of a gamut of subfields, with their own vocabularies and agendas. These straddle from political economy to building heritage, material supply chains to project management methods, community participation to post-occupancy evaluation.

But how do scholars and policy makers make sense of this multifaceted knowledge base? Does the abundance of data and discussions it produces facilitate fields of knowledge integration and use, particularly across scales? Does it permit the pursuit of best disaster response practices 'overall'?

## **Suggested topics**

Contributions on reconstruction are sought that address one or more of the above-mentioned strategic objectives and that provide analysis, synthesis or critical reflection. Explicit attempts at theory-building from empirical perspectives are welcome.

Given the desire for disciplinary synthesis, papers are sought on the practice of disaster reconstruction that draw attention to the variety of disciplinary bases and their relationship (or lack thereof), or speak of ways of procuring and organising knowledge, reaching and validating conclusions, evaluating the efficacy of procedures and tools, articulating lessons, assessing results, criticising methods, providing operative recommendations.

The following topics and questions provide possible entry points to such discussions:

### ***Role of history in reconstruction studies***

Is history a proper field of analysis to identify and appreciate the interplay of reconstruction elements?  
How have decisions made in the past about whether to rebuilt in the same existing location or relocate elsewhere?

### ***Definition of the 'heritage' in reconstruction***

How does an idea of heritage – a past either to recreate or to transcend – get constructed or prevail over possible others?

### ***Future resilience***

What role does future recovery ability play in reconstruction efforts and in the preservation of communities' identity?

### ***Reconstruction and the evolution of social structures***

Is reconstruction inherently transformative at a social level, or does it impinge on well-established social foundations?

### ***Opportunism in reconstruction***

Can reconstruction be used as a pretext to introduce changes to the affected environment that would have otherwise been impossible to carry out?

### ***Priority actions***

Does the success of reconstruction processes imply the respect of given decisional sequences? Or should actions reflect tactical understanding of the conditions on the ground?

### ***Decision-making geographies***

How does the location of decision-making power determine reconstruction results?  
How do multi-level governance influence the process?  
How does the involvement of other organisations (NGOs) and multi-stakeholder groups determine priorities?

### ***Understandings from case studies***

Is there a privileged information structure for overall reconstruction narratives that seek to build comparable data sets of prior efforts? A structure, in other words, which captures the essential whilst isolating the peculiar?

### ***Constants of reconstruction***

Are successful reconstruction processes subject to sets of established constraints, or do they require/allow adaptation to contingent factors?

### ***Determinants of specificity***

If the context of reconstruction is paramount, what are the aspects that determine the specificity of decisions against the transfer of knowledge from outside?

### ***Bounded rationality***

As resources are typically finite - is there a way to assess the efficiency of their use against the efficacy of the results? In other words, is conditional evaluation a necessity in reconstruction scholarship? And is it practiced?

### ***Effects of uncertainty***

To what extent and in which ways does the insecurity of the context affect post-destruction intervention landscapes? Is security (or confidence in the future) a precondition for effective reconstruction planning?

### ***Methods of comparative analysis***

If individual cases of reconstruction processes are complex and situated, how can their results be compared?

### ***Conceptual categories in reconstruction***

With territorial damage or destruction being the possible consequence of multiple causes, to what extent do associated reconstruction endeavours differ conceptually depending on circumstances?

### **Trans-scalar challenges**

Reconstruction implies interventions at multiple levels, often requiring different socio-technical alliances, processes and timeframes. What are the obstacles generated by the structural presence of multiple operational landscapes? And how can they be overcome?

### **Timescales**

How do short-, medium- and long-term priorities and responses become agreed and coordinated?

### **Reconstruction and computation**

Can the application of big data analysis to post-disaster action records help define successful patterns of behaviour in reconstruction policies? Can computational technology reveal useful strategies by scrutinising existing data in bulk? And can these data be made available?

### **Role of mitigation policies in reconstruction**

Disaster science dedicates much space to future mitigation measures. Should these measures be considered as gauges for rebuilding or are they rendered obsolete by the occurrence of the very events they are trying to minimise?

### **Planning autarchy**

Under what conditions can reconstruction efforts and strategies be based on the productive capacity of the affected area? Should recovery processes privilege local capacity building or actual rebuilding?

### **Knowledge and technology barriers**

Does technical communication occur efficiently across reconstruction processes and the multiple tasks or areas of expertise involved, or are there barriers in transferring knowledge? If so, what are these barriers the product of?

## **Proposed timeline**

<b>Deadline for abstract submission</b>	<b>24 March 2025 noon GMT</b>	<i>NB: authors can submit sooner if they wish</i>
Full papers due	05 September 2025	
Referees' & editors' comments to authors	16 January 2026	
Final version of papers	06 March 2026	
Publication of special issue	June 2026	<i>NB: papers are published as soon as they are accepted</i>

## **Briefing note for contributors**

We welcome contributions from the research community in both the Global North and Global South.

You are invited to submit an abstract for this special issue. Please send a **500 word (maximum) abstract** to editor **Richard Lorch** [richard@rloch.net](mailto:richard@rloch.net) by **24 March 2025 (noon GMT)**. **Your submission must include these 3 items:**

1. the author's and all co-author's names, institutional & departmental affiliations and contact details, email addresses
2. the question(s) or topic(s) in this Call for Papers that the abstract and intended paper address
3. the abstract (500 words maximum) defining the research question(s), scope, methods and results

Abstracts will be reviewed by the editors to ensure a varied, yet integrated selection of papers around the topic. Authors of accepted abstracts will be invited to submit a **full paper (6000-7500 words)**, which undergoes a double-blind review process.

*Buildings & Cities* is an international, open access, double-blind peer-reviewed research journal. Its focus is the interactions between buildings, neighbourhoods and cities by understanding their supporting social, economic and environmental systems. More information can be found online: <https://www.buildingsandcities.org/> & published papers are found here: <https://journal-buildingscities.org/>

**General guidance for authors** can be found at <https://www.buildingsandcities.org/pdf/Information-for-Authors.pdf>

## **Open access and Article Processing Charge**

*Buildings & Cities* is an open access journal and has an article processing charge (APC) of £1360 plus VAT. If you do not have institutional support, please contact the editor when submitting your abstract. We endeavour to assist those without funding.

## **Questions?**

The Editors are happy to discuss ideas with potential authors. Please contact: **Richard Lorch** [richard@rloch.net](mailto:richard@rloch.net) and **Paolo Tombesi** [paolo.tombesi@epfl.ch](mailto:paolo.tombesi@epfl.ch)