DEMB Working Paper Series

N. 63

Earthquake in the city: the people yet to come

Paolo Cardullo* and Margherita Russo**

November 2015

*Centre for Urban and Community Research,
Goldsmiths - University of London
email:, p.cardullo@gold.ac.uk
** University of Modena and Reggio Emilia
CAPP, Centre for the Analysis of Public Policy
email: margherita.russo@unimore.it

Earthquake in the city: the people yet to come

Paolo Cardullo[*] **and Margherita Russo**[^]

November 2015

[*]Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths—University of London,
p.cardullo@gold.ac.uk

[^]Department of Economics Marco Biagi—Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia,
margherita.russonimore.it

.

Abstract

The paper starts a critical reflection on the effects of disasters on urban change. It is a compendium of the discussions, meetings and fieldworks of the research team Energie Sisma Emilia at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy. The fieldwork included a one-day walking-and-photographs (April 2015) in the town centre of Mirandola. This is one of the towns that Energie Sisma Emilia chose to evaluate since it was heavily affected by the earthquakes of May 2012.

The working research question concerns post-disaster city change and possible gentrification of old town centres. Migrants—counted as much as one third of the resident population in our case study—found a sanctuary of affordable rents in old town centre of Mirandola, prior to its reconstruction. From discourse analysis of planning documents, there is a sense that a certain imaginary city was already in place *before* the earthquake. If this is the case, we consider the possibility that post-disaster politics might be determinant in displacement of migrant population.

The paper begins by looking at three frameworks drawn from the 'Sociology of Disasters' and by making a tempting parallel with three analytical perspectives on cities: city as a container, city of assemblages, and city as a futurity. In the central part, it opens to gentrification debate and to the multiple dimensions of urban displacement. The field notes and photographs of the walk in Mirandola are discussed at the end as very first empirical findings or, rather, initial scoping for a longitudinal research endeavour.

Keywords: Sociology of Disasters; Regional Economics; Gentrification; Displacement.

JEL codes: Z13 Economic Sociology, Economic Anthropology, Social and Economic Stratification; R58 Regional Development Planning and Policy

Issues and perspectives

Our working research question concerns post-disaster city change and politics of settlements in old town centres affected by the 2012 earthquake in Emilia-Romagna, Italy. We consider the possibility that post-disaster politics might be determinant in displacement of migrant workers and families who found affordable rents in *centri storici*, prior to their reconstruction. In order to understand trajectories of city change, we adopt a critical theoretical framework attentive to both the cultural and material sides of urban policy. From discourse analysis of planning documents, for instance, there is a sense in which an imaginary city was already in place *before* the earthquake. Further, the paper presents a first triangulation of fieldwork photographs, observation, and analysis of interviews conducted in the area.

The 2012 earthquake has shaken up collective understandings of a vast territory within the region of Emilia-Romagna. It struck the architectural and cultural heritage of 33 towns, the lives of half million people, and the economic activities of an area that alone generates almost 2% of Italian GDP. It also profoundly impacted social infrastructures, such as the local health system. Energie Sisma Emilia[1] started a multidimensional analysis of the fractures that the earthquake brought about, not only to physical structure of cities, but also to their socio-economic fabric. The underlying idea is that the earthquake set in motion transformations whose consequences are not easy to foresee: different agents, at different levels, taking individual and collective decisions, generate a cascade of changes that interact with the evolution path of local systems. Earthquake poses challenges, but provides unprecedented opportunities—strategic decisions by economic and political agents and newly available financial resources, among others.

In this composite scenario, the present paper wants to start a reflection around developmental trajectories of historic town centres. It is a compendium of discussions and meetings within the research team Energie Sisma Emilia at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (April 2015). The week-long

---

collaboration included one-day fieldwork in the old centre of a medium-size city, Mirandola. By drawing on critical urban and disaster scholarship, and by triangulating initial findings from different data points, we foreground a tension in the reconstruction process. This tension is palpable in *centri storici*: between conservation and redevelopment, but also—and complementary—between re-population and gentrification. Whereas *re-population* refers to politics of settlement for a generic 'working-class', which includes a sizeable presence of migrant labour, *gentrification* considers policy-led and capital-driven arrangements serving expectations of more affluent middle-class residents. Both terms confer the sense that class dynamics are central to the scopes of this paper.

We begin with an overview of three frameworks drawn from the 'Sociology of Disasters' and by making a tempting parallel with three analytical perspectives on cities: city as a container, city as assemblage, and city as a futurity. In the central part, we expand on urban change and gentrification, and therefore on the multiple dimensions, social and affective, of urban displacement. The field notes and photographs of the walk in Mirandola are discussed at the end as very first empirical findings or, rather, initial 'scoping' for a larger research project.

A critical theoretical framework to disasters

As a starting point for our case study—the town of Mirandola in Emila-Romagna, Italy—we use Michael Guggenheim's critical overview on disasters: 'Disasters radically question the composition of the world, in all its technical, natural and social forms' (2014:2). The first, predominant, framework in study of disasters considers these as an important test for societies being affected. It draws a comparison between a *before* and an *after* of disaster. According to its critics, this framework considers society as a mechanical construction: 'It is as if societies were like cars in that we could learn a lot about them by testing them to destruction' (Dickie et al., 2002, p. 7). The obvious emphasis here is on whomever has the responsibility and power to fix society, such as reconstruction policy.

The second trend considers materiality of disasters as central to the rupturing event in itself. Prevention and response imply a thoroughly understanding of technical solutions (machineries, emergency tools, drills, measurement equipment, and so forth): for instance, movements of soil are to be taken into

account together with the preparedness to respond to disasters. Clearly drawing on Actor-Network Theory, these formulations understand disasters as collapse of individual networks. Disaster, it is however argued, is an event that cannot be disentangled in micro-processes, since they imply failure of all networks at the same time (see Schrank & Whitford 2011; Guggenheim 2014). In addition, multi level interacting agents must be considered in order to grasp both context and power (Bonifati, Forthcoming).

The third framework for the study of disasters considers these as profoundly social events. Disasters do not have a specific ontological consistency, but they are rather part of what happens in the world anyway, just with a much higher intensity. In this sense a disaster is not a particular natural event, nor it is defined by its effects or responses. It is rather a continuation of structural determinants within specific societies (Guggenheim 2014:3). It follows that studying disaster should maintain a sceptical relativism, in the sense that it needs to look at specificities of different territories and forms of political interventions. In other words, the socioeconomic and cultural context within which reconstruction takes place and the institutional structures through which reconstruction is pursued are crucial factors for any evaluation of disasters (see Dickie et al., 2002).

From this initial overview it appears that politics has a determinant role in the formulation of disasters. Politics both shapes and is created by disasters: a valid example of this is Chubb's longitudinal study of three Italian territories affected by earthquake, first, and by reconstruction policies, later: 'while an earthquake is a natural event, a catastrophe is a social, political phenomenon' (2002, p. 186). Guggenheim further argues that politics, as a mode of ordering the world, can produce disasters 'for its own purposes and according to its own rules' (2014:6). On the converse, disasters are productive of a relevant politics of responses, emergency, and reconstruction: 'Whether the trigger event is natural or social is only one variable among many that go to describe a catastrophe' (Dickie et al. 2002:4).

While these theoretical insights frame our research trajectories around response, reconstruction, and development happening in post-disaster Emilia-Romagna, we want to expand these with a critical understanding of dynamics of urban change.

For our focus, most disasters affect urban living, social cohesion and movements of population within 'city walls'. Whether by political intervention or natural catastrophe, or any combination of the two, affected cities are going to be changed forever. The next section overviews recent debates on city change, asking how to map disasters upon the 'problem' of urban process (Harvey 1978).

A critical theoretical framework to the city

We have suggested that a critical approach to the study of disasters is entangled with the study of politics, as both cause and effect to occurrence of disasters. In order to contextualise the research questions, we now shift our focus on urban development. We would argue that allocation of resources for policy intervention also depends on cultural processes. These, for instance, contribute to a vision of future city which decision-makers actualise in the reconstruction process. To address the sense in which the imagined city has the same constitutive strength of the built city (see Keith 2005), we need a holistic approach that considers *both* material *and* imaginary elements to the making of the post-disaster city.

We suggest that most of the relevant effects of earthquakes are felt and fought back in the city. There is no intention to flatten the complexities of urban change *vis* disasters to a unique scheme of thought. Neither we want to suggest 'the urban' as a category of its own which needs specific methodological tools and theoretical framework. However, thinking in terms of urban change brings to the fore scholarship that has urban complexities at its centre. Categories of urban change involve, for instance, deployment of resources, novel mapping, planning for reconstruction, or temporary habitable solutions. Most importantly, they often imply an idea of what city might be like or likely to become. Before, during, and after complex decisional process, a 'future city' eventually rises from rubble and destruction. This temporality suggests that post-disaster intervention (the cure, so to speak) is contiguous to the way in which the city is made readable (the symptoms of a malaise). Such hypothesis can be grasped by triangulating theoretical insights and different data points we discuss in the final part of the paper.

Thinking of disasters as rupture of society's mechanic functioning—from which the relevant 'fixing' is implemented—recalls a view of the city as a container. This

idea has a long tradition in urban studies, and we want to remember here scholars from the Chicago School. For Burgerss and Park, struggle for scarce urban resources, especially land, would lead to competition between groups and ultimately to division of urban space into distinctive ecological niches (Park et al. 1968). In these 'natural areas', people share similar social characteristics because they are subjected to same ecological pressures. When Park et al. drew the city as an organic totality mapped onto concentric zones, they had in mind a societal ordering that found its ideal, or natural, becoming in an already planned and organised city. The ecological determinism implicit in this formulation has been criticized by several authors (Gottdiener 1994; Gross 2004; Low 1996; Tonkiss 2005), more recently as a form of sociocultural spatial clustering determined by software-based analysis (Parker et al. 2007). This determinism bears an easy slippage between geographical belonging—coming from a district with high poverty rates—and moral geographies around individuals' own culture—the reasons for being poor (see Hayward 2012).

The second large frame of analysis around disasters considers these as rooted in (dis)assembling of technical and material determinants. Emphasis is therefore put on prevention apparatus, resilience, environmental sustainability: disaster is a result of techno-scientific processes, rather than natural or political ones. This perspective understands city as multiple and partially localized assemblages built of heterogeneous networks, spaces, and practices of humans and non-humans—from nature, socio-technical networks, hybrid collectivities, physical artefacts and historical legacies, all the way to an imagined city. As a consequence, different technical narratives have the power of making 'visible' different cities. Similar to how Marco Polo narrated his Venice to the Khan (Calvino 1972), we can read the same city dissected as a specific problem: sewage, educational provisions and services, electric grid, transports.

ANT approach, however, lacks of a vision of totality. A powerful disaster, such as an earthquake, forcedly reproduces this totality by way of damaging all the networks at the same time: 'disasters are precisely those events that cannot be disentangled and that act and are experienced as one big entity' (Guggenheim 2014, p. 5). The city as assemblages therefore has the problem of scale, which planning interventions and politics of reconstruction might bring us back to.

Further, a technical vision of urban change due to disasters tends to attract resources on more 'tangible' outcomes, such as: physical resilience of the new city, environmental impacts of its reconstruction process, and structural issues underpinning its economic success. Critical scholarship has started unpacking symbolic value and limits of the 'resilience discourse' in regeneration policy (see Slater 2014).

A third possibility, which by no means is exhaustive on its own or exclusive of the other two, is that city is a complexity in constant evolution. Cities are always suspended between the real and the imaginary, the material and the symbolic, the affective and the political (Keith 2005). The difference from previous formulations is that we cannot know *a priori* what kind of conformation city might take: this is rather an evolving process, also driven by a radical politics of rights and demands to the city (Marcuse 2009). In other words, city space is always being made. This is the lesson we can derive from Michel de Certeau (1984) and Henri Lefebvre (1996; 1991). City space is made through structures of power and through the activities people engage in. People therefore make cities as much as architects and planners do.

Contextualising disasters within urban theory is a necessary step to exploit this rich scholarship: whether determined by earthquake or de-industrialisation, by politics of intervention or global flows of financial capital, city change can be framed by adopting the lens of critical urban scholarship. Who benefits from the reconstruction process? What kind of new arrangements are put in place for residents? Who has been displaced by whom?

Before entering our case study in more details, we next take a necessary detour to further explain urban change: in particular, the connected issues of gentrification and displacement.

Displacement: now you see it, now you don't

Gentrification—as firstly observed by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1963 Islington (London)—is a process of class-based urban change, in which more affluent residents, middle-class, displace working-class residents (see Hamnett 2008). This is where most of the agreement between scholars ends. For instance, how to define social class? Does gentrification still occur if geographic displacement (or

eviction) of working-class residents does not occur? 'Displacement'—its definition, effects and geographies—is therefore crucial to the study of urban change.

The early gentrifiers that Glass observed were typically households who 'pioneered' in inner-city neighbourhoods, often buying their home for life, and spending a considerable amount of money to renovate it. They often did the upgrades by themselves, it was part of their experience and urban lifestyle. Citing Loretta Lees, one of the most prolific scholars on gentrification, 'it was largely liberal lefties who moved back into the inner cities, and living among the working class was part of the appeal'[2] (Lees 2000; Butler & Lees 2006; Lees 2008).

Islington, the smallest borough in London, set in-between three major railways, returns often to chronicles and studies of gentrification. Less than two decades ago, it gave birth to Tony Blair's political career, what the media called 'New-Labour': 'synonymous with the new middle class, the party of sundried tomatoes and holidays to Tuscany'.[3] Something didn't quite fit into a 'supply side' explanation of gentrification. This advocates urban change to differentials of rent, or 'rent gap' (Smith 2010). People moving into a specific inner-city neighbourhood were not doing so by way of responding to a lure for profit (or at least not only to that). They were also, and significantly, reacting to their own self-generated demand for housing, that is, to their structure of preferences, taste, and sense of aesthetics (see Bourdieu 1984). Studies in taste and lifestyles became the focus of subsequent analyses, what is referred to as 'demand-side' gentrification (Butler 2003). Further, local authorities and decision-makers sometimes advocate gentrification, suggesting that this brings positive returns to historical residents by way of generating a 'critical mass' for new services (see Keith 2008a). In the gentrification debate these new or better provisions have been named 'trickle-down effects'. For Newman and Wyly (2006), local authorities rather become more responsive to a vocal, visible, and demanding class of residents, the educated and media-savvy middle-class.

---

2   See The Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/09/blair-corbyn-islington-north-london-labour.
3   http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/09/blair-corbyn-islington-north-london-labour.

Gentrification—whether helped by complacent local authorities and deregulated market for housing or spin off by a demand for places from more affluent buyers—is a progressive change in the residential base of cities, or parts of them. More recently, Islington gentrifiers have been replaced by 'super-gentrifiers', the global elite. This is the outcome of combined forces: steady inflationary and speculative rise of house prices, growing appeal for certain areas of city (refurbished city centres, for instance), and improvement of service provision (Butler & Lees 2006).

In recent years, a rather stagnant debate on gentrification, mostly supply- *versus* demand-side gentrification theories, has been revitalised. The changing face of gentrification has to be found now in construction on unoccupied sites and in redevelopment of abandoned industrial areas or 'brown-fields'. Local authorities and developmental agencies contend that such a form of intervention is not gentrification *per se* since it only implies minimal (geographic) displacement of working-class residents. This policy-led and private-developer-delivered gentrification has been called 'new-build gentrification' (Davidson & Lees 2010). Because the size of operations usually requires large corporate developers, 'new-build gentrification' is predominantly driven by capital (Warde in, Rerat et al. 2009; see also Harvey 1978).

Other scholars further deny the displacement effects of gentrification suggesting the main factor in the gentrification of London, and other large cities, has been the disappearance of traditional manual labour (Hamnett 2003). From this perspective, gentrification is not a policy-made disaster but a natural phenomenon, mostly attributable to organic changes in social class composition. No working-classes, no displacement; therefore, no gentrification. Hamnet's research was a turning point in gentrification studies, because epitomised a change in perspective. Slater suggests that Hamnet's argument evicts class struggle, which was crucial to the gentrification debate, with demographic 'replacement' of some residents with others (Hamnett, 2010, 2003; Slater, 2010, 2009).

Drawing on Peter Marcuse (1985), Slater's argument is rather simple as it is fierce. Marcuse introduces the concept of 'cultural' or 'indirect' displacement. This is a mix of psycho-social conditions and demands brought by changing

composition of own neighbourhood and impossibility to choose where to live: shops become expensive, neighbourhood is felt as less friendly because attitudes change, spaces are sanitised, and previous social networks get dispersed. New middle-class preferences, alongside the rising importance of the 'sign economy' (Lash & Urry 1994)[4] recast urban living in a completely different light. From now on, what is eaten, visited, practised, watched, or chosen is equal to, or more important than, any economic asset that one might be able to mobilise. Gentrification is never neutral and it foregrounds class struggle fought also at the level of the symbolic: middle-class preferences, habits, and social networks displace working-class people's cultural values (their way of being) and material social practices (their uses of place) (Skeggs 2004).

This broader definition of displacement makes a valid argument for a different meanings of class. This has less to do with occupation and income than with cultural aspects of subjectivities, sets of preferences, affective responses and everyday social practices. Displaced people are dispossessed when 'the whole structure of attachments through which purposes are embodied' (Marris, in Slater 2009) have been disrupted, for instance by changes in their 'up-and-coming' neighbourhoods. Displaced residents are rather trapped into an alien place.

Since Hamnet's study is based on Census statistics, it also re-proposes the issue of methodology in class studies. Even considering changes in the structure of production, office towers in financial districts still need to be cleaned, policed, serviced and catered for by an army of subaltern employees. That is, cities attract an increasingly affluent population but they also need to reproduce themselves (Harvey 2012; Keith 2008a).[5]

Case study and methodology

This overview on the gentrification debate serves the double purpose of casting sociological approaches to disasters and highlighting measurement issues for urban change. We started by outlining a suitable framework to disasters in city

---

4 An economy that relies mostly on semiotics and in which objects, activities, social and consumption practices are all powerful signifiers of social position (ibidem).
5 The problem seems to be the disappearance of manual work from public representation (Strangleman 2008; Sekula and Buchloh 1995), rather than the disappearance of working-class people *per se.*

which concurrently takes into consideration how these are imagined and the subsequent policy of intervention. In our approach, the role of politics—as cause and effect of disasters—is therefore central. We then considered risks implicit in urban change driven by capital and led by complacent state intervention, so-called 'third wave' gentrification (Hackworth & Smith 2001).

From discourse analysis of a publication from Regione Emilia-Romagna that marks the second year from the earthquake (2014). This seems to reveal how planners and technicians associate part of the 'problems' town centres were facing *before* the earthquake, with sustained presence of migrant labourers and their families:

> *Many historic town centres in Emilia-Romagna were already in a situation of decline before the earthquake: few shops, low trade. The town centres mostly hosted elderly people and migrant families (ibidem:17).*

The cure for the 'renaissance' of old town centres therefore passes through creation of a critical mass for services and trade: in other words, a more wealthy and sophisticated clientèle (*ibidem*, p. 18). With direct reference to the city of Mirandola, we have a similar report about the crisis of its town centre:

> *'In a town in which, thanks to the development of the manufacturing industry, the percentage of foreign population hits 16% (much above the provincial and regional average), the share of foreign residents in the old town is double, 32%, obvious sign of a drop in the value of housing, a loss of interest from house owners to refurbish their properties. Therefore, we need not to remaster this situation as it was before the earthquake, but to use the reconstruction process in order to build new attractive capabilities. (ibidem:27)*

The mayor of Mirandola suggests that the earthquake has hit migrant residents particularly hard, their number shrinking from 17 to 15% on an already diminishing population [interview coding]. However, we don't know the causes of such a change: would this be an indicator of displacement from affordable dwellings in the *centro storico*?

There is a crucial issue at stake here: what kind of methodology is more useful in producing evidence in this field of research? Displacement is, at the very least,

about people who moved away, particularly poor people. In this context, snapshot surveying cannot be fully representative because displaced residents, those in unofficial and in precarious employment, and illegal or semi-legal inhabitants, are difficult to track down or unwilling to be accounted for and less prepared to resist in a gentrifying neighbourhood (Watt, in Slater 2009). Atkinson has referred to the attempt at quantifying displacement as 'measuring the invisible' (2000). Newman and Wyly show how Census data may produce very different results in the same neighbourhood, if compared to participant observation and textual analysis (2006). Our different data points show exactly how difficult is to pin down reliable statistics on migrant population (the publication from Regione Emilia-Romagna, for instance, estimates it at more than double than the mayor of Mirandola does).

A comprehensive study of disasters would benefit from a holistic approach to urban change which includes people's expectations, residential choices, affective reactions to change, and everyday stories of getting by. We address these issues in a complementary research, in progress, based on 400 interviews at families (sampled out of the families in four of the 32 municipalities affected by the 2012 earthquake). The visual exploration suggested at the end of this paper foregrounds this sensibility, attuning the reader to more subtle categories of thought, such as cultural and material displacement.

We position our research in spaces and in geographies of the everyday, rather than in the area of planning and mapping. As De Certeau (1984) argues, this regulating logic, while destroying and creating urban space, completely overlooks space itself, in the sense of the experienced space of the very familiar city. Radical geographers exhort to read displacement from the perspective and experience of displacees (Lees 2000) since 'still we don't know how gentrification is experienced on the ground. An important point that gets overlooked is that gentrification is everyday and enduring' (Paton 2014:1). Qualitative research with interviews, walking tours, and photo elicitation are able to pick up on the complexity of human situations, on the variety of stories told, and on the texture of place. Surprisingly, in a huge literature on gentrification, there are almost no qualitative accounts of displacement (Slater 2006:749).

Cities are, first of all, made of people who decide to live in there. People move about, remember, and imagine place (Knowles 2010). Bodies and experiences of urbanites remain vital tools for understanding social forms of the 21st century city. Bodies are the most affected by materialities of city change, including disasters: dust, noise, unavailability of public spaces or services impact on people's everyday social practices and abilities. In order to account for this complex entanglement of infrastructures, events, built environment and social practices, we need to equip ourselves with a different notion of space/place—not the Cartesian/Euclidean dimension of maps and territory, but rather the profound social dimension of space (Lefebvre 1991) and trajectories of power-geometries there embedded (Massey 2005)—and with a different epistemology. Walter Benjamin's writings on and experiencing of cities are illuminating in this respect because Benjamin gives equal attention to 'the totalities of the panorama as well as [to] the *sensorium* of the streets' (Keith 2008b:432). His was an exploration made of abstract theories as well as of long city walks (Dobson 2002). Attentive to the tiniest detail in street furniture (1999), Benjamin saw in cities the social totality in miniature (Gilloch 2013:19).

Photography, as a practice-based strategy of gathering 'data', favours this alternative position. There is in fact an intrinsic specificity to photography, in its

potentials of putting, in the same frame, the very particular and the broader social landscape (Knowles & Sweetman 2004). Photography is a powerful tool for unveiling dynamics of lived social space, its material texture and evocative

dimension.

We would contend that promoting visual-based analysis combined with the practice of walking the city is not just a methodological issue, it is rather a theoretical node for the current debate on urban transformation. On the one hand, photography can convey an affective space grounded on footsteps, encounters and personal experience—fragments of past everyday practices intertwined with phenomenological dimensions of city life (Cardullo 2011; Cardullo 2012). On the other hand, walking frees photography from predetermined scripts, giving it the discontinuity and the strength of utterance (de Certeau, 1984). Walking makes space. It reshuffles and juxtaposes layers of experience, practices, and memories that ultimately give meanings to cities: 'History begins with footsteps', de Certeau reminds us (ibidem).

Walking and photography are 'combined practices' which support and re-orient each other. They are an attempt at mapping earthquake effects from the perspective of city dwellers. As a practice-based exercise of urban research, we set on foot through *centro storico* in Mirandola, one of the target city of Energie Sisma Emila.[6] The first thing that lens picked is that renovation of historic and religious buildings juxtaposes with signs of re-population in the old town. In this sense, the photographer's quest for traces of migrant presence appears a less eccentric research practice. Clues of presence and absence mix in front of the lens: a halal shop and names on doorbells are fragments which open up to complexities of city living. For instance, they invoke much thicker layers of meanings for cities of Northern Italy, where a large number of migrants have settled in the last 15-20 years.

---

6   The photographs of the walk are available from Energie Sisma Emilia website:
    http://www.energie.unimore.it/a-mirandola/

We would like to stress the importance of a critical perspective on migration and reconstruction. Previous examples of disasters in cities around the world provide anecdotal evidence to the critical picture we are trying to build. In the New Zeeland city of Christchurch, for instance—despite this being very badly damaged by the 2010-11 earthquakes—we witness to a surprisingly low rate of abandonment: the resident population has shrunk by only 2%. This might be due to the support of migrant workers in the construction industry. Contracts deemed to last for 10 years or more might attract networks of migrants who eventually settle in the area. In Christchurch, Irish families are now said to become a sizeable part of its urban population (Business Desk 2014). In the Italian city of L'Aquila—also heavily affected by earthquakes in 2009—the value of new built houses in the historic town centres is showing steady falling prices, due to lack of demand for housing (Calafati 2012). At the same time, the construction industry has recently been allocated funding for the second stage of reconstruction, thought to last at least a decade. In L'Aquila too, it becomes important to assert the impact of construction workers, and among these of migrant workers, to the general narrative of post-disaster city. Will these favourable trends generate a new demand for housing, at least in town centres? Who will fulfil it, this time? Would 'city renaissance' rhetoric rather initiate a new process of gentrification of this town centre?

If we put together theoretical insights on cause-effect of disasters with the perspective on gentrification previously outlined, we might start building a different picture. The analytical framework driving these photographs shifts to typologies of intervention: private contractors, renovation for betterment of previously distressed buildings, and intervention driven by religious authorities (around churches, for instance). Here, 'everything as it was and where it was' approach seems to rule. This approach reinforces the preference for 'recuperation over reconstruction'. Moreover, rebuilding old town centres, where substantial population loss is already under way, creates not just high costs and longer time span, but also excess capacity in housing provision. Similar housing dynamics have been observed by Chubb (2002) for other earthquakes in Italy and, after L'Aquila's earthquake, by Calafati (cited). More importantly for the focus of this paper, a conservationist approach can create a 'heightened sense of ethnic identity and a renewed appreciation of traditional cultural values and architectural forms rather than their destruction' (Chubb 2002:208).

In this respect, it is important to reflect further on what the mayor of Mirandola says in his interview:

> *'I remember that we had to manage Ramadan under the tents, it has been a very interesting experience. We had no problem, apart some organisational ones: imagine to have two kitchen under a tent!'* [interview coding]

This appears as a laudable effort, especially because the term 'disaster' suggests that 'the threat seems to come from outside society, thereby helping to fix the limits of the community at a time of crisis (Dickie et al. 2002:8). To my mind, the mayor recalls 'Ramadan under the tent' to symbolise civil society's openness towards the most vulnerable part of population, at a time of severe disruption of daily life. Islamic religion, however, seems to have become the testbed for inclusive politics: 'We had no problem'. Religion, a specific one, is *both* the meter for measuring alien culture *and* the hosting society's acceptance of it. Beyond emergency response, we would need to know more on longer term dynamics of affordable housing provision.
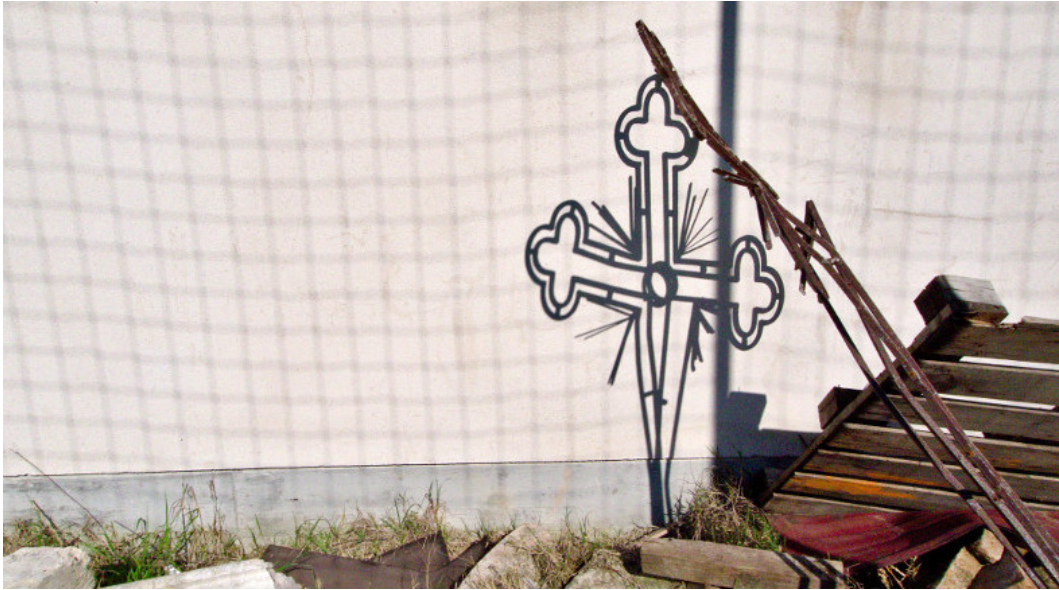
Conclusion

Our research hypothesis is specifically around politics of settlements in *centri storici* in Emilia-Romagna. In this paper we address the case of Mirandola. Discourse analysis of planning documents delivers the sense in which politics and disaster intertwine, but also that imaginary and real city play together on mental maps and charts of city administrators. In the imaginary framework in which planners move—and that will inevitably inform the politics of reconstruction—'renaissance' of old town centres is meant to inject 'new life to urban places of identity, which will be given back to citizens and community' (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014:7). To 'give back' implies a previous act of dispossession or deprivation. Who took 'places of identity' away from the 'community'? It is as earthquake becomes carrier of a moral project made of inclusion and exclusion (see Back 2009).

From our initial findings on the post-disaster city, it emerges that mechanism of exclusion or containment of working-class residents might currently be in place. This is because the future city is *somehow* already imagined: sustained migrants' presence has been detected as an indicator for stagnant, or declining, urban condition in need of regenerative intervention. Conversely, there is a possibility that post-disaster politics might be determinant in displacement of migrant population who initially found a sanctuary of affordable rents in *centri storici*. The question we ask in this paper therefore concerns with the *after* of disasters: a tempting answer, we would argue, needs to be found also in the imaginary process that constitutes city *before*.[7]

We maintain that earthquake is not just a rupture in societal functioning but also an *intensification* of the structural (both material and imaginary) processes that constitute city—at least within the imaginary of place as expressed by local administrators, decision-makers, and technicians. What becomes evident is that the disaster has been framed as an opportunity of renewal, which 'would be impossible to realise in normal conditions': in the same passage and in other parts of the Regione's document, regeneration is compared to a 'cleaning operation', needed because over time cities accumulate elements no longer desirable whose removal would be prohibitively expensive (2014:28). If the general aim of the reconstruction process is laudable—to build more functional and lively cities

7   On temporalities and disasters, see Mike Michael afterwords (in Guggenheim 2014).

using resources and energies unlocked by the earthquake—there are doubts around some of its objectives. Although long-term socio-cultural trajectories are uncertain and in need of more informed longitudinal studies, our research question is reinvigorated: gentrification or re-population of *centri storici*?

References

Atkinson, Rowland 2000 'Measuring Gentrification and Displacement in Greater London' *Urban Studies* 37/1:149–165

Back, Les 2009 'Researching Community and Its Moral Projects' *Twenty-First Century Society* 4/2:201–214

Benjamin, Walter 1999 *The Arcades Project* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press

Bourdieu, P 1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press

Business Desk 2014 'Changing face in Christchurch as rebuild continues' *The National Business Review* Available at: http://www.nbr.co.nz/article/changing-face-christchurch-rebuild-continues-bd-152068 Accessed 6.2.2015

Butler, Tim 2003 'Living in the Bubble: Gentrification and its "Others" in North London' *Urban Stud* 40/12:2469–2486

Butler, Tim & Lees, Loretta 2006 'Super-gentrification in Barnsbury, London: globalization and gentrifying global elites at the neighbourhood level' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31/4:467–487

Calafati, Antonio 2012 *'L'Aquila 2030'. Una Strategia di Sviluppo Economico* Ministro per la Coesione Sociale

Calvino, Italo 1972 *Invisible Cities* London: Vintage

Cardullo, Paolo 2011 *Walking on the Rim: Photos, Encounters, Objects* London: Blurb

-- 2012 'Walking on the Rim: Towards a Geography of Resentment,' Goldsmiths London: University of London

de Certeau, Michel de 1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life* Berkeley: University of California Press

Chubb, Judith 2002 'Three Earthquakes: Political Response, Reconstruction, and the Institutions' in J Dickie, J Foot, & FM Snowden eds. 2002 *Disastro!: disasters in Italy since 1860: culture, politics, society* New York: Palgrave

Davidson, Mark & Lees, Loretta 2010 'New Build Gentrification: Its Histories, Trajectories, and Critical Geographies' *Population, Space and Place* 16/5:395–411

Dickie, John; Foot, John & Snowden, Frank M eds. 2002 *Disastro!: disasters in Italy since 1860: culture, politics, society* 1st ed edn New York: Palgrave

Dobson, S 2002 *The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin: Lessons for the 21st Century* Goldsmith's College

Gilloch, Graeme 2013 *Myth and Metropolis Walter Benjamin and the City.* Hoboken: Wiley

Gottdiener, Mark 1994 *The Social Production of Urban Space* University of Texas Press

Gross, Matthias 2004 'Human geography and ecological sociology' *Social Science History* 28/4:575–605

Guggenheim, Michael 2014 'Introduction: disasters as politics – politics as disasters' *The Sociological Review* 62:1–16

Hackworth, Jason & Smith, Neil 2001 'The Changing State of Gentrification' *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 92/4:464–477

Hamnett, Chris 2003 'Gentrification and the middle-class remaking of Inner London,

1961-2001' *Urban Studies* 40/12:2401–2426

-- 2008 'Gentrification, Postindustrialism, and Industrial and Occupational Restructuring in Global Cities' in G Bridge & S Watson eds. 2008 *A Companion to the City* Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 331–341

-- 2010 '"I am critical. You are mainstream": a response to Slater' *City* 14/1:180–186

Harvey, D 1978 'The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2/1-4:101–131

-- 2012 *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* London: Verso

Hayward, Keith J 2012 'Five spaces of cultural criminology' *British Journal of Criminology*:azs008

Keith, Michael 2005 *After the Cosmopolitan?: Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism* 1st ed edn New York, NY: Routledge

-- 2008a 'Concepts and Models of Urban Regeneration in Thames Gateway' in 2008 *London's turning : Thames Gateway-prospects and legacy* Aldershot Hampshire England ; Burlington VT: Ashgate: 53–66

-- 2008b 'Walter Benjamin, Urban Studies and the Narratives of City Life' in G Bridge & S Watson eds. 2008 *A Companion to the City* Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 410–429

Knowles, Caroline 2010 'Mobile sociology' *The British Journal of Sociology* 61:373–379

Knowles, Caroline & Sweetman, Paul 2004 *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods in the Sociological Imagination* New York: Routledge

Lash, Scott & Urry, John 1994 *Economics of Signs and Space.* Thousand Oaks Ca: Sage

Lees, Loretta 2000 'A Reappraisal of Gentrification: Towards a "Geography of Gentrification"' *Progress in Human Geography* 24/3:389–408

-- 2008 'Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?' *Urban Studies* 45/12:2449–2470

Lefebvre, Henri 1991 *The Production of Space* Oxford: Blackwell

-- 1996 *Writings on Cities* Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell

Low, Setha M 1996 'The anthropology of cities: Imagining and theorizing the city' *Annual Review of Anthropology*:383–409

Marcuse, Peter 1985 'Gentrification, Abandonment, and Displacement: Connections, Causes, and Policy Responses in New York City' *Washington University Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* 28:195

-- 2009 'From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City' *City* 13/2:185–197

Massey, Doreen B 2005 *For space* SAGE

Newman, Kathe & Wyly, Elvin K 2006 'The Right to Stay Put, Revisited: Gentrification and Resistance to Displacement in New York City' *Urban Studies* 43/1:23 –57

Parker, Simon; Uprichard, Emma & Burrows, Roger 2007 'Class Places and Place Classes. Geodemographics and the Spatialization of Class' *Information, Communication & Society* 10/6:902–921

Park, Robert E; Burgess, EW & McKenzie, Roderick D 1968 *The City* Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press

Paton, Kirsteen 2014 *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective* Farnham, Surrey, UK ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate

Regione Emilia-Romagna 2014 *Informazioni sulla riqualificazione urbana e territoriale*

Rerat, Patrick; Soderstrom, Ola & Piguet, Etienne 2009 'New Forms of Gentrification: Issues and Debates' *Population, Space and Place*:335–343

Schrank, Andrew & Whitford, Josh 2011 'The Anatomy of Network Failure' *Sociological Theory* 29/3:151–177

Skeggs, Beverley 2004 *Class, Self, Culture* London: Routledge

Slater, Tom 2006 'The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30/4:737–757

-- 2009 'Missing Marcuse: On Gentrification and Displacement' *City* 13/2:292–311

-- 2010 'Still Missing Marcuse: Hamnett's Foggy Analysis in London Town' *City* 14/1:170–179

-- 2014 'The Resilience of Neoliberal Urbanism' *openDemocracy* Available at:
https://opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/tom-slater/resilience-of-neoliberal-
urbanism Accessed 8.2.2015

Smith, Neil 2010 *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*
London: Verso

Tonkiss, Fran 2005 *Space, the city and social theory: social relations and urban forms*
Cambridge: Polity Cambridge: Polity