

Remnants of the city

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to what has historically happened with earthquakes that have repeatedly destroyed several cities in Chile, the 2010 earthquake was followed by an unprecedented and fruitful reflection that, from various disciplines, has tried to understand the phenomenon in a new socio-cultural context. Within the framework of this trend, this article explores various uses and representations associated to debris produced by destruction, questioning the traditional approach that conceives them only as useless material whose removal becomes urgent in order to reach the much desired normality. Along these lines, attempts shall be reviewed that try to start a discussion about debris, suggesting new connotations such as possibilities of recycling; evocative force and, therefore, significance as objects of memory

and commemoration; or other ways of looking at it linked mainly to art which emphasize the creative and experimental possibilities of what has been destroyed.

Every catastrophe, every earthquake, has been understood in a different way throughout history. Every epoch approaches these events from its own concerns, beliefs and knowledge. Every period builds its own fabric around the catastrophes: it tries responses, explores alternatives and behaves in relation to them risking its particular system of values and beliefs. Chilean history shows this very clearly. Every earthquake has questioned its historical moment, showing its problems in a new light, challenging possibilities and showing limitations that until then had not acquired their full importance.

This was particularly evident with the 2010 earthquake, the first of great magnitude since the one in 1985, when Chile was under a dictatorial government. Twenty five years later, many big cultural changes have taken place, which have become evident in the way to face earthquakes and the multiple tools that have been used to try to understand and assimilate them. Unlike other earthquakes, this one has caused innumerable art manifestations almost from the moment it happened. Reviewing them, even briefly, would greatly exceed the scope of this article and would not be more than an incomplete effort. However, in general terms, two facts clearly stand out. In the

first place, it is evident that the various art formats developed in the national environment in the last decades, as well as the experimenting of Chilean artistic culture at various levels after the dictatorship, were evident after the 2010 earthquake, which could be said that became a source of art as it had probably never been seen in our country before.

On the other hand, the evaluation of the catastrophe has changed. Undoubtedly its quality of "revealing moment", in which not everything is negative, has been stressed. During the emergency period, it was possible to accommodate experiences or manifestations of artistic quality. A particularly relevant case was the Meeting Point project of Radic, Puga and Sotomayor. Although it was done for an exhibition organized by the Chinese government in relation to the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008, it clearly shows the atmosphere of ideas also generated in Chile in 2010. It is a new initiative that has to do with architecture as well as with sculpture, installation or even art action. Starting from a sort of huge deep red inflatable hanging bag, the intervention intended creating a meeting and orientation place for the people of the city hit by the earthquake, that is to say, building a public space that would approach the nature of the ruined city from technology as well as formally, in way completely different from the normal city.

In addition, Sebastian Lelio's film *El año del tigre* (*The year of the tiger*) should also be mentioned, with whole scenes filmed in situ in places immediately after the catastrophe, that remind us of the Italian neorealism as well as the "truth camera" techniques of Dziga Vertov⁽¹⁾. But, unlike what happens in the work of the latter, in *El año del*

tigre the fictional dimension of the story is not rejected, as it is immersed in the catastrophically real landscape that permeates and shapes it.

This new sensitivity to face the catastrophe, which relates to the tools with which it is recorded or it is tried to be intervened, as well as a wider and more complex appraisal, may be detected also in the multiple research and academic works provoked by this earthquake. Various ideas raised in the 90s and the first decade of the 21st century were reviewed in the light of the catastrophe and this, in turn, was considered one of them. This has resulted in a great variety of approaches to this phenomenon, which begins to emerge from a new set of categories of analysis such as gender studies (Reyes Muñoz, 2012), landscape (Villagra, 2011), urban resilience (Villagra, 2011; Ducci, 2011) or interdisciplinary approaches (Cisternas, 2011). In that sense, the system of incentives to research developed by the Chilean State in the last decade has been an important platform for catastrophe knowledge, information which was not available before and thanks to which the phenomenon has begun to appear in its complexity.

A clear example of this is the new environmental sensitivity developed in various fields, in culture in general as well as in scientific thinking, and which has derived into policies and actions at various levels of depth and efficiency. Among these, the topic of the environmental footprint left by human activities, strongly linked to the capacity to give an adequate response to the enormous waste production that industries at planetary scale demand, has been one of the concerns that has reached more visibility. The possibility

of "sustainable city" has also been discussed, among other factors, by the capacity to manage waste of all kinds produced by it.

It is not strange, then, that a greatly emphatic view of these concerns has been cast on cities and towns destroyed by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in 2010, stressing the action of the State in general (Fariña, Opaso, & Vera Puz, 2012). As it is well known, one of the serious consequences of a catastrophe of this kind is the generation of tons of building debris and everything that conforms the material reality of a home. The city, reduced to rubble, is a recurrent image of Chilean history. These materials are raw material of a landscape marked by tragedy which has come back rather regularly since the country has a memory of itself. However, from the historical point of view, we do not know much about this particular matter produced by the catastrophe. There are few records regarding the destiny of debris. The media of the time, particularly the press, generally worry about and follow the removal of debris, but the final destiny is usually uncertain, which is surprising given the magnitude of the material rubble generated by an earthquake. For Fariña, Opaso and Vera Puz, for example, the issue of debris

"Was undoubtedly a major problem of difficult solution after 27f, when in the emergency, large volumes of material had to be removed and transported from one place to another. There is no official information specifically regarding the quantity of rubble in all the damaged cities and regions and, until today, only disconnected data can be obtained from specific studies done in some locations" (2012, p. 54).

The material of whole cities has disappeared throughout history in Chile, almost without leaving any trace. The custom would seem to be to forget, and going back to normal (which never happens) becomes a general obsession, an imperative greater than the stories and memories damaged together with architecture. Thus, when there are traces of debris and ruins, they do not constitute a manifestation or a memorial, but simply the remains of an unfinished restoration.

Until the 2010 earthquake, the only expectations regarding them was that they should disappear as soon as possible. Reports on earthquakes used to describe the progress of debris removal by the authorities. Every cleared street was a little victory over the catastrophe and that was the way the press used to present it. It is a need that goes beyond the simple practical use that clearing the circulation ways might have. The wish to erase the spectacle of the city and the home itself in ruins is something that seems, in one way or another, to make a deep impression on each person. A woman, living in Talca, talked about her experience the day after the earthquake that destroyed most of the historic centre of the city in February 2010:

"What affected me most was the visual mess, the aesthetics of disorder, the mud, the dirt, the rubble everywhere. The only thing I wanted was a spade to collect the dirt and clean the dust" (C. Concha, personal communication, 29 July 2013).

In this quote we can see a solitary figure facing the chaos of massive destruction, the small individual effort in front of the major disorder of the city in ruins but still inhabited by people who want to

return to their condition of inhabitants. A minor effort, but probably essential for many people who even without planning it saw in it a way of not being dominated by chaos. A photograph taken in those days, also in Talca, shows a woman sweeping the floor around a bed where a person is resting, giving the impression of a small island of cleanliness and order among mountains of rubble and would-be constructions. This woman also decided, as a line of action in front of the catastrophe, "to sweep the dirt and clean the dust". It is evident that this action is claiming for a higher scale report, a massive cleaning operation that allows individual effort to return to its previous efficiency and restore the family space not now as an island threatened by vast chaos, but as a plot within other plots.

The cost and the many consequences of the major operation of the removal of debris of the destruction, was never properly evaluated until the 2010 earthquake. Or perhaps we should say that it was not the object of a systematic or expanded reflection by more or less scientific disciplines involved in the earthquake. After 27⁷ there were certain attempts requesting the debris not to be considered as simple "waste", but as material that could be reused, starting by a cataloguing and transforming work that would allow its reincorporation into the productive world by recycling it or using it as landfill material.

Following a line already tried in other realms of consumption and production, some proposals emerged that aimed precisely at recycling the destroyed city, taking into consideration economic reasons, in principle, but also leading to more rational post-earthquake operations. The initiative of the Intendencia of the Metropolitan Region,

not concretised later, to carry out a plan to create debris parks, commissioned at the time to architect Consuelo Bravo, was along this line, partly already developed in cities like Berlin, with World War II commemorative parks⁽²⁾, or Nueva York, that built Freshkill Park with the rubble produced by the attack to the Twin Towers.


At the same time of these attempts, another appreciatory look at the debris was given from a different point of view, taking into consideration, in most cases, the "memory" still contained by it. Concern for the memory is precisely one of those period topics that are strongly present in the analysis of the 2010 earthquake. Memory of the earthquake itself, but also memory of what the city was. The rubble of destroyed constructions may speak in both ways. This operation of making debris speak, of extracting meaning from a big or small portion of a destroyed building, that has been present in architecture since its formulation as a discipline in the Renaissance, and has been recreated throughout modern history, has learned in 2010 innumerable expressions and strategies, some more politically loaded than others.

Among other experiences, it is worth mentioning the efforts of Fundación Alto Río⁽³⁾ to preserve the remnants of the homonymous building, which were removed particularly quickly. A fragment of these remnants was placed as a Memorial on the Plaza de Tribunales of Concepción and later moved to the Museum of Natural History. It constitutes what Fundación Proyecto Memoria⁽⁴⁾, linked to Fundación Alto Río, has defined as "symbolic debris" (Basoalto & Mora, 2012), that is to say, construction remnants raised to the category of commemorative monuments

which as such, demand respect and institutional acknowledgement (Roca & Cáceres, 2014), even aspiring to a kind of supposedly "new" beauty. This kind of experience seeks to install in the public debate, from a set of strategies centred on material debris from buildings, not only the subject of urban memory, but also the management of the catastrophe and, finally, the future of the city itself. Material debris, in this sense, also appears as the bearer of a message for the future, a message that is fundamentally constructed as public.

Other strategies, without abandoning their epicentre on these remnants, try to make a link with personal processes of deepening into the catastrophe, which as we have seen, also involve actions in relation to the destroyed environment. They are often art operations in which the quality of debris is not denied, assuming the irremediable loss it represents and without intending it to be a lesson for the future. It is a more complex view of the catastrophe that does not look for solutions nor new "beauty" ideas, as in the case of the Proyecto Memoria case, but only understand or suggest a reflection never totally oriented. The collages done by Lorena Pérez Leighton using the back of wallpaper from Talca houses destroyed by the 2010 catastrophe, intend to do this, showing what was never visible, but that the destruction made available. In that sense, more than a memory of the house, they store the memory of its destruction.

But, can debris and buildings in ruins ever constitute a space of representation and meaning for a major population? Is it possible for these reflexive actions around destruction, about "what does not work", to stop being isolated manifestations and only of reactive character in front of major disasters? The answer certainly transcends the

earthquake as an event and throws us into the complex and uncertain symbolic fabric on which the city and the modern modes of habitation are built. In the same way we are ashamed of and hide our daily waste; as we fight or reject the deterioration of things and the built environment (Lynch, 2005); or without going any further, the same way we avoid everything related to our own physical and mental deterioration and separate from our everyday life everything that reminds us of our death (Elias, 2011); in the same way, debris and ruins are uncomfortable traces that momentarily interrupt the linearity of progress, the utopia of modern dwelling. Under the analogy of the city as an organism, with its organs, tissues and arteries, what has been destroyed would not be but the remnants of a city that sooner or later must be rejected and forgotten to continue living (or growing). 

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NOTES

- (1) Editor's note: Dziga Vértov (1896-1954) was a Russian film director that revolutionised the documentary genre. He rejected conventional film elements such as previous script writing, the use of professional actors, filming in studios, decorations and lighting (source: Wikipedia.org).
- (2) Editor's note: In Berlin there are ten hills made with debris from World War II, all of them in parks, some of which are Teufelsberg, Rixdorfer Höhe, Insulaner, Kleine Bunkerberg, Mont Klamott and Humboldthöhe (source: Wikipedia.org).
- (3) The President of Fundación Alto Río is Mónica Molina; its Vicepresident is Victor Orellana.
- (4) The President of Fundación Proyecto Memoria is Hilda Basoalto; its Vicepresidente is Leonel Pérez.