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THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2001

A City Changed Forever? Maybe Not

History Reveals a Resilience Born in the Tumult of Crisis

By KIRK JOHNSON

It has become a widely repeated cliché in New York City in the last few weeks that the future can no longer be predicted because everything has changed. Amid all the losses after last month's terrorist attacks, there is a feeling that the city has lost its compass and its map to the future, too.

But there is also a deep and substantial body of scholarship about how cities work in times of catastrophe, and how humans make decisions through the tumult of crisis and its aftermath. The inescapable conclusion of that research, the experts say, is that there are patterns to the events that unfold — a sort of rough guide through the wilderness.

Cities, by and large — with plenty of room for caveats and special circumstances, researchers say — tend to be stubbornly resilient. The long-term historic momentum of a metropolis, as a collective human creation of ambition and energy, is a force that is far more powerful than the short-term chaos of disaster, however horrific or heartbreaking.

By that body of evidence, which experts say has largely been validated in disaster-damaged cities as diverse as Miami and Kobe, Japan, there is reason for optimism.

New York, before the attack, had become a global magnet for immigrants and strivers, and a high-energy playground for millions of tourists, who began to arrive as the crime rate fell in the 1990's. Its population, after decades of stagnation or decline, had risen. And it had retained much of its role as a linchpin of global capitalism. Broad social trends like that can stall, researchers say, but hardly ever do they screech to a full stop.

"Disasters don't alter the course of social change," said Kathleen Tierney, a professor of sociology and director of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. "They may accelerate trends, but you don't see a reversal of what was already happening."

Professor Tierney said that based on the patterns of disasters past, New York — barring future events that no one can predict — will probably resume its previous trajectory.

Other experts say that while the optimistic generalizations may yet hold true for New York, the wrinkles and idiosyncrasies of a living city — and the differences between what happened in Lower Manhattan and the pattern of natural disasters that have mostly been studied — will also color the city's recovery.

Most disaster research, for example — from the Chicago fire of 1871 through the 1964 Alaska earthquake — has focused on local trends that were heightened, and in many cases

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accelerated, by disaster. People who might have changed jobs, say, or moved, or bought or sold a business — but had not done so yet — are often galvanized, or forced, into action by disasters, researchers say.

After Hurricane Andrew in 1992, for example, an already noticed ethnic trend in southern Florida — white residents moving out of Miami-Dade County into nearby Broward County, more Hispanic residents and immigrants moving in — sharply intensified as families lost homes, built homes and made new choices. In Japan, the shipping port at Kobe was losing ground to Asian rivals like Pusan, South Korea, when an earthquake hit in 1995. The trend continued and intensified.

In other cities, like Chicago in 1871 and London in 1666, where vast swaths of urban landscape were destroyed by fire, upward economic momentum was so great that many residents and businesses could not be bothered with the grand redesigning plans that were put forward — they rebuilt largely as before because commerce could not wait.

New York in 2001 does not exactly fit any of those models, partly because the local and global are so mixed together. Guessing where the economy might go even before the disaster meant taking into account the sales revenues at the corner deli as well as the Shanghai Stock Exchange. And the nature of the damage that occurred — from a deliberate surprise attack — has also become part of the equation, embedded into the discussion from Washington to Walla Walla about how the nation should deal with terrorism and the new issues of security.

That newfound symbolic role could be positive for New York to the degree that rebuilding the city becomes an expression of patriotism or national political policy.

"I think there are some lessons we can learn from other disasters, but it is important to recognize the differences in New York as well," said Stephanie E. Chang, an assistant professor of geography at the University of Washington in Seattle. Professor Chang, who studied Kobe after more than 6,000 people died in its 1995 earthquake, said that in most natural disasters, older, weaker buildings and small businesses are hit hardest, and damage is usually widespread geographically.

The New York experience was completely opposite, she said. Damage was concentrated in a high-rise complex, and the businesses immediately affected were not the poorly capitalized, underinsured mom-and-pop companies that tend to be wiped out by natural catastrophe.

The World Trade Center attack also connects to national and global trends in ways that most natural disasters usually do not.

Travel and tourism around the world have been battered. Patterns and levels of immigration into the United States could be next. Some politicians in Washington, even as they appropriate money to rebuild New York, are talking about restricting the flow of immigrants as part of the nation's antiterrorism strategy. Peter Marcuse, a professor of urban planning at Columbia University, said he believes that a key difference in New York is that rebuilding will not simply be a matter of engineering or design, as is usually the case in disasters. London city planners did not need to think about the possibility of another German blitz in rebuilding the city after World War II, he said. And when earthquake-damaged San Francisco rebuilt after 1989, the likelihood of more earthquakes was certainly there, but the response lay in better understanding of how buildings function, not in contemplating security or how symbols of global power might be seen half a world away in a terrorist training camp.

Other experts say that focusing only on rebuilding misses much of the social picture of where New York was before the attacks, and thus where it might be going. "People equate recovery with physical reconstruction, but there are all these other dimensions that go on," said Professor Tierney. "There also is social recovery to communities and ways of life, and psychological, emotional and spiritual recovery of a sense of place."

Some economists and planners say, for example, that social inequality in the city could be heightened in the trade center aftermath, if many residents with the means and inclination decide to move out of New York. Already, many economists say the effects of a downturn are likely to be felt disproportionately by the city's less affluent residents, many of whom work in service industries like restaurants and hotels that have seen their business sharply decline.

Others say that the symbolic importance that has been attached to New York, through the images of the disaster burned into the consciousness of millions who watched news coverage on television, has created a vast political momentum of its own that will not be stopped.

In the 1970's, when New York teetered on the verge of bankruptcy, the federal government declined to bail out the city and the nation did not seem to care. In an era when the people of Lubbock, Tex., can send a mural of sympathy to Pennsylvania Station, the winds have changed.

"This country has never been in these waters before, so there could be some danger from generalizing," said Dennis S. Mileti, director of the Natural Hazard Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, which has one of the nation's largest research libraries of disaster research, with more than 27,000 bibliographic entries. "And there will be shifts and changes at the micro level. But if I were a betting man, I'd bet that if you come back in X years, New York will be right back where it would have been if this hadn't happened."

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