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An antidote to disaster despair: Art and community

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By Katia Tynan

Over the past two years, communities across British Columbia have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 heat dome, forest fires, landslides, and flooding. As climate change continues to increase the frequency and severity of climate-related hazards, and many communities in BC face significant risk of damaging earthquakes, it can be hard to feel hopeful. Yet hope is integral to our ability to pursue resilience, respond to these devastating situations, and recover from them afterwards. Hope motivates us, catalyzes transformational change, and soothes us. So how do we find hope amidst these overwhelming realities? If our

existing frameworks are inadequate in meeting the challenges we face, how can we work in fundamentally different ways?

Dominant, formal governing institutions in the risk and resilience sector have largely relied on the expertise of scientists, emergency managers, urban planners, and engineers. However, other professions offer rich perspectives and unique skills that can transform the way we think about hazards and risks and plan for resilience. In particular, artists offer an incredible opportunity to infuse hope into this work. In a sector that often focuses on potential or realized destruction, artists are creators and act as a counter-balance. Artists are skilled in interpreting complexity, navigating uncertainty, finding meaning, and integrating play and wonder into processes. When artists and disaster risk practitioners work together, we produce new knowledge, new approaches, and most essentially, hope and inspiration that motivates us to take action.

Artists and understanding risk

The integration of arts and creative practices into this sector is not necessarily new, but it has not been widely adopted – particularly within government agencies. Practitioners often come from similar educational and professional backgrounds, which can lead to an overly homogenous understanding of risks within the sector. These uniform perspectives can reproduce the same conclusions about risk reduction mechanisms and overlook the needs of vulnerable community members. According to Slovic, “Whoever controls the definition of risk controls the rational solution to the problem at hand. If risk is defined one way, then one option will rise to the top as the most cost-effective or the safest or the best” (1999, p. 689).

In recent years, there have been some attempts at bringing together artists, scientists, urban planners, and risk management professionals to interpret and communicate risk. For example, the Understanding Risk Community incorporates arts and artists into their annual events (Adam and Power, 2019). As the challenges we face grow and change, art offers one way to fundamentally reimagine risk and our solutions for addressing it. Artists are perfectly positioned to stimulate change and revitalize hope.

The role of artists in fostering empathy and connection

A significant part of reframing the way we understand risk and plan for resilience is by centering new voices in these conversations. Artists have unique abilities in bringing together diverse groups that connect us both to ourselves, to each other, and generate hope in the process (Captstick, et al., 2017, p. 325). In fact, art is a “powerful means of building empathy, creating a sense of belonging, and activating the social imagination and civic agency necessary to make real change,” (United States Department of Arts and Culture, 2017, p. 2).

Engaging diverse people in processes that centre the humanity and emotional wellbeing of participants can be “great source of inspiration for politicians and activists who work to

transcend the polarizing populism and stigmatization of other people, positions, and worldviews that is sadly so endemic in public discourse today” (Eliasson, 2016, p. 1). Using arts-based methodologies opens up a more imaginative space for people to explore contentious issues and play with solutions that might seem far riskier in more traditional planning processes. Art is not only decorative, it is a powerful way “to challenge dominant cultural norms, historic exclusion and long-held ideas of who is at the centre,” (City of Vancouver, 2019, p. 15).

Case study: Creative Lab on Disaster Resilience

One example of how artists and arts-based approaches can be incorporated into disaster risk and resilience work took place in June 2019 through the Creative Lab on Disaster Resilience (City of Vancouver, 2019). This Lab was a collaborative effort between the City of Vancouver’s Resilient Vancouver team, Resilient Melbourne, and Arts House Melbourne, modelled after Arts House’s **REFUGE**, an experiential, artist-led rehearsal of climate-related disasters. Artists and practitioners from the REFUGE and Resilient Melbourne teams generously shared their approach and knowledge to deliver a two-day event suited to the local context.



Dr. Jen Rae explains the Creative Lab process for participants of the Creative Lab on Disaster Resilience. Photo by Tim Matheson. © City of Vancouver, 2019, reproduced with permission.

Seventy people including Indigenous knowledge holders, artists, emergency managers, resilience practitioners, scientists, and community members came together to share in one another’s invaluable knowledge, find hope, and build community. The agenda included a welcoming ceremony, an overview of REFUGE, and presentations from experts on local hazards like earthquakes, climate change, and oil spills. To disrupt this heavy subject matter,

artists led sessions in which participants sang about hope together and learned breathing techniques to combat stress and anxiety. The second half of the Lab involved a panel discussion by Indigenous Knowledge Holders, another panel of local artists, and finally, participants got together to work through disaster scenarios – mixing all types of practitioners at tables to co-create solutions and inspire action.

Closing and recommendations

Integrating artists and arts-based practices into disaster management presents an opportunity for imagination, creativity, and connection within a field of practice that is so often focused on tragedy. Artists can bring new lenses and ideas to this work, foster deeper connections with ourselves and our communities, and surface the needs of the people most impacted by disasters. For those feeling despair but seeking hope, look to artists for answers.



Artist and facilitator Vanessa Richards leads participants of the Creative Lab on Disaster Resilience in a song. Photo by Tim Matheson. © City of Vancouver, 2019, reproduced with permission.

Bio



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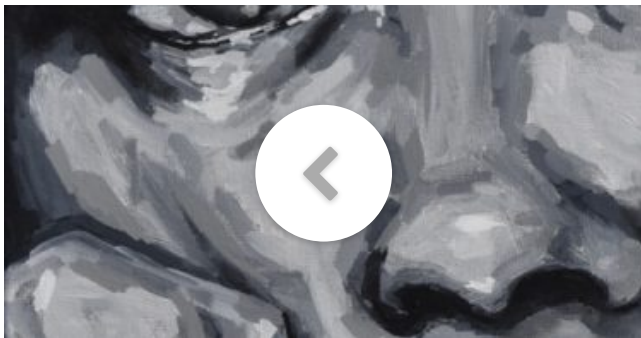
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