



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Resilience Lessons From Unexpected Places

Kresge CEO addresses Municipal Art Society of New York's 2013 Summit for New York City.

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Good morning.

Following Judy Rodin [president of the Rockefeller Foundation] is a real challenge. She's one of the most brilliant thinkers our sector has seen in a long time and a pioneer in the art and science of building resilient cities.

My lessons of resilience come from a slightly different platform – from cities like New Orleans and Detroit. They're cities that by virtue of their multifaceted adverse realities are constructing resilience frameworks that encompass not just environmental sustainability, but also economic vitality, social cohesion and equity and inclusion in a full-spectrum conception of resilience.

Yes, these dimensions of resilience are in play here in New York, too. But unexpected places cast these considerations in bright relief. I want to mention five lessons that are emerging, lessons I believe are relevant to cities everywhere.

Lesson 1: Building resilience requires viewing the present and future concurrently.

Some of you may recall that in Madeleine L'Engle's classic children's book, "A Wrinkle in Time," a device called a tesseract allows the characters to travel through time. We may accept that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but if we think a bit outside the box – or, rather, the space-time continuum – we can bend that line back on itself, bringing the two points together, collapsing the present and the future. It's not a bad metaphor for the perspective we so desperately need as we think about

resilience.

Politically, technically, emotionally, it's an unnatural act for us to behave in the here and now in ways that take their bearings from a distant horizon. The current Washington environment is a painful reminder of that. But climate change has set in motion forces that will forever change the nature of life in America's cities. It's a tesseract moment for municipal leadership. We have to summon the creativity and vision to act in a way that does dual duty, simultaneously ameliorating current crises and preparing ourselves for the challenges climate change will visit on us in the next 10 to 20 years – to say nothing of the next 50 or 100.

In a landmark report last month, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assigned global society a carbon budget we must stay within if we hope to avoid a level of turmoil that would overwhelm even the most sophisticated resilience plans. We've spent half of that budget already, and our current rate of emissions puts us on track to hit the ceiling – that is, to have released all the carbon we ever can – in 2040. The trajectory has to change, and the only way to do it is to create constructs that live at once in the present and the future.

That's what we in Detroit have tried to do through something called Detroit Future City. It bears some resemblance to PlaNYC as a vision document, decision-making framework and investment blueprint to reimagine Detroit. But because of the land-use realities of Detroit – with nearly 40 square miles of vacant and blighted land – and because of the socioeconomic circumstances of the city's residents, it's quite different.

The plan offers a syncopation strategy: It is a guide to how we can emphasize the city's strong beats by concentrating investments in nodes of commercial and residential vitality, while attending to the weak beats by reimagining underutilized land to move parcels from the liability side of the ledger to the asset side. The *Detroit Free Press* wrote: "The ... framework is more than a plan for stanching the city's infrastructural bleeding – it's a blueprint for how a decaying city can reinvent itself. It's not a patch; it's a revolution."¹

Part of that revolution is a reconceptualization of what the future postindustrial city will look like and how it will function. The decisions we make today have to move beyond lifting the city out of a state of extremis toward creating the foundational elements of a city that is stable, vibrant and sustainable.

The plan accordingly contemplates climate resilience. It embraces the opportunity to think now about how the city – which will be relatively well positioned in terms of temperature and water access as climate change progresses – can prepare to absorb people displaced by heat, drought or sea-level rise elsewhere.

Similarly, the plan proposes short-term investments in blue-green infrastructure – from reforestation to water management – that position public systems for long-term sustainability, greenhouse gas mitigation and affordability. Kurt Vonnegut suggested, in his “Armageddon in Retrospect,” “There should have been a Secretary of the Future.” In effect, Detroit has that. It bears watching.

Lesson 2: Building resilience requires that we reinvent municipal governance models.

People living in New Orleans know the fate of their city is tied not only to the levee systems and the accompanying drainage and pumping systems, but also to the wetlands that line the Gulf Coast. Those wetlands are, in turn, inextricably interwoven with coastal restoration and land-use plans – which, in turn, exist within a broader system that includes the politics of community engagement in the Ninth Ward and every other ward of the city, as well as the surrounding parishes.

New Orleans faces a set of interconnected social, economic, ecological and political systems interacting in unpredictable ways that defy the rigid, narrow, static approaches that serve as society’s default settings. As Timon McPhearson, who will be speaking later today, has noted, “it turns out that you can’t understand the behavior of a system by studying its parts; you need to study the whole thing.”²

Some of these parts fall within the city’s boundaries, some reach into the county and others are in the control of state and federal agencies. Both built and natural systems are implicated, and actions of the public and private sectors matter enormously. Conventional governance structures, it goes without saying, don’t lend themselves to navigating this kind of terrain. As we craft resilience plans, therefore, we should ask what disciplines, what sources of knowledge and what geographic scope we need to consider. In a word, what is the full sweep of the “problem-shed,” and how will we align systems accordingly?

Lesson 3: Resilience is not an end state, but an approach.

Climate change is not like an infection cured with an injection. It is a chronic disease requiring ongoing care by a team of skilled healers. Building resilience is an ongoing process, not a shift to a new stasis. There is no new normal.

In a VUCA world – where things are increasingly volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous – we need a new cadre of professionals who understand the true dimensions of climate change, particularly as they relate

to our social and economic fabric. We need professionals who are capable of teaching the habits of adaptive management.

Far more challenging, though, is the need for an evolution in the mindset of current professionals of all stripes. In effect, most jobs will become climate jobs over the coming years, whether or not people describe them, or even conceive of them, that way.

Each one of us has an obligation to proceed in our personal and professional lives armed with an awareness of the nature and severity of the climate challenge – and the disproportionate impact it will have on the most vulnerable. We all need to adopt the habit of asking how our decisions will affect our climate as well as how climate change will affect the viability of our decisions. And we need to ask whether, when viewed through this climate lens, those decisions are still wise.

Lesson 4: Building resilience requires that we view local residents as assets with essential knowledge, not as victims to be protected.

In her book “A Paradise Built in Hell,” Rebecca Solnit describes a curious disparity in the effects of the Chicago heat wave of 1995, which killed more than 700 people:

“Though Latinos were nearly a quarter of Chicago’s population, they represented only 2 percent of the deaths. ... African Americans in one poor neighborhood were 10 times as likely to die as Latinos in the equally impoverished adjoining neighborhood. ... The difference was in the quality of the neighborhoods themselves.”³

The evidence is clear that social capital – the informal networks that bind a community – contributes in times of disturbance to more effective dissemination of information, improved mutual support and reduced mortality.⁴ One researcher puts it this way: Social capital matters more than “such factors as greater economic resources, assistance from the government or outside agencies and [even] low levels of damage” in facilitating “recovery and helping survivors coordinate for more effective reconstruction.”⁵

As a result, urban resilience hinges on municipalities and community development organizations including residents in designing the future of their neighborhoods, community health organizations providing safe and healthy housing, human-service organizations strengthening the supports families need to get back on their feet following crises, and arts organizations using cultural activities to contribute to the revitalization of

neighborhoods.

It also depends on the community centers and churches, synagogues and mosques – even the neighborhood busybody. Viewed from this perspective, local residents come into focus as leaders with distinctive knowledge and critical roles in building resilience, not as passive victims who need to be protected.

Lesson 5: Resilience gains will be fleeting and ephemeral if they're not grounded in an ethic of equity and inclusiveness.

The impacts of climate change pose the greatest threat for low-income and other vulnerable populations. Jacob Remes, a historian of disaster response, observed: “Disasters are not blind. We have this rhetoric of disasters affecting rich and poor equally and that’s just not true.”⁶ Disasters reveal our deepest fault lines of inequality and economic vulnerability. The transition to greater resilience must occur in ways that don’t further compound the hardships facing disadvantaged people already at greater risk.

By and large, urban, regional and hazard-mitigation planning efforts have not sought the perspectives of low-income residents in the design of resilience measures. Nor have they ensured that these residents benefit meaningfully from the implementation of those measures. As a result, the unique knowledge and needs of low-income populations are routinely overlooked in both resilience planning and disaster preparedness.

All of us – elected officials, resilience practitioners, philanthropists – need to become more fluent in the interests and needs of low-income communities, and this requires more than just dialogue. Individuals affected by disasters – and by the responses to those disasters – need to be at the tables where response plans are drawn. Local residents hold knowledge essential to effective responses and, ultimately, they will own the work.

This is particularly important insofar as resilience will – unfortunately, but inevitably – give rise to winners and losers: in the effects of climate change, to be sure, but also in our efforts to prepare for and recover from those effects. We need to acknowledge that publicly. We also need to ensure that the processes that determine the distribution of costs and benefits are transparent and fair. Which neighborhoods will be protected? Which won’t? Who decides?

We also need to consider how the losers should be compensated. Without explicit, careful attention to issues of social and economic justice, we will fail to build the broad-based political will required to make the massive changes and investments in resilience needed in cities everywhere.

Conclusion

We at Kresge believe that climate change and society's response to it will define the future of cities. If we care about cities and the well-being of the people who live in them, we must act today to avoid the unmanageable at the same time we make plans to manage the unavoidable. Resilience measures taken absent dramatic greenhouse gas reductions are a mirage. As one observer has noted, "The hallmarks of resilience are redundancy, adaptation and flexibility, but also the foresight and good judgment to avoid the brawl in the first place."⁷

Mary Robinson, former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and president of Ireland before that, describes climate change as "the biggest human rights issue of the 21st century."⁸ This compels us to ground our work in an ethic of equity and inclusiveness. We need to elevate and celebrate urban leaders who show courage in addressing climate change and building resilience – and, given what is at stake, we also need to ensure there's a political liability in failure to show that courage.

Which brings me full circle, to resilience in unexpected places. It turns out that healthy, socially cohesive, economically stable, culturally vibrant, opportunity-rich communities will be more resilient in the face of climate change and other disturbances. That is Kresge's aim in the work we support in New Orleans, Detroit and other cities across the U.S. But it strikes me that it is also what Rockefeller's 100 Resilient Cities program proposes to do and what so many of you in this room are trying to do every day. Thank you for your work.

¹*Detroit Free Press*. "Editorial: Detroit Works Offers a Blueprint for Taking Charge of Shrinking City," (January 8, 2013). www.freep.com/article/20130108/OPINION01/301090005/Editorial-A-blueprint-for-taking-charge-of-shrinking-city.

²Timon McPhearson of The New School noted in a recent article concerning the impacts of Hurricane Sandy, "All social-ecological systems are marked by interconnectedness. ... Systems thinking is crucial ... because no problem exists in isolation, all are part of a larger system of interacting networks; social networks, biogeophysical networks, political networks and economic networks. Interestingly, it turns out that you can't understand the behavior of [a] system by studying its parts; you need to study the whole

thing.” McPhearson, T., “Wicked Problems, Social-Ecological Systems and the Utility of Systems Thinking,” *The Nature of Cities: A Collective Blog on Cities as Ecological Spaces*, (January 20, 2013). <http://www.thenatureofcities.com/2013/01/page/4/>

³Solnit, R., *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (Penguin Books: 2010).

⁴See, e.g., Berkes, F., & Ross, H., “Community Resilience: Toward an Integrated Approach,” *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal*, Vol. 26, Issue 1 (2013). www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08941920.2012.736605.

⁵Aldrich, D., *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (University of Chicago Press: 2012).

⁶Interview with Remes in Edelson, J., “Disaster Capitalism Doesn’t Work,” *Salon.com* (November 2, 2012). www.salon.com/2012/11/02/historian_jacob_remes_disasters_arent_natural/. See also Remes, J., *Disaster Citizenship: Urban Disasters and the Formation of the North American Progressive State* (forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press).

⁷David Orr, professor and special adviser to the president, Oberlin College.

⁸See, for example, interview with Robinson on *Democracy Now!* (December 4, 2012). www.democracynow.org/2012/12/4/fmr_irish_president_mary_robinson_climate.