

Earthquake reconstruction and disaster fix in Talca, Chile

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The earthquake on February 27, 2010 (27F) in Chile had a magnitude of 8.8 on the Richter scale and VIII on the Mercalli. The earthquake and the subsequent tsunami caused the deaths of over 500 people and devastated much of central Chile, the area where the majority of the country's population lives. In a country where the urban population accounts for approximately 90% of the population, the cities of this area became the epicenter of the devastation.

Talca, an intermediate city in this area of Chile, was negatively impacted both by the earthquake and the ensuing reconstruction process, whereby the preexisting neoliberal developmental regime was maintained. The earthquake left more than half of Talca's downtown homes destroyed or badly damaged. Reconstruction policies, meanwhile, have facilitated the expansion of real estate dynamics in the city selectively producing sprawling, gentrifying, and rapidly deteriorating neighborhoods. Many urban poor residents have been either forced or bought out from their neighborhoods and relocated to remote areas where employment, public transportation, and basic services are limited. Through collective action, the community has resisted these changes, both in visible ways—holding public demonstrations, producing an alternative master plan, and demanding the reconstruction of public buildings—and in less conspicuous ways—devising new creative ways of using state subsidies or discarding them to rely instead on the self-management culture that originated their neighborhoods. Today, the disaster effects linger in Talca morphing into worrisome development trends. This article analyzes the dynamics that have led to these conditions and the alternative community development initiatives that could have allowed Talca to redevelop in more sustainable and equitable ways, had them been more extensively supported by the state.

We suggest that Talca has suffered a 'double whammy': one with the

earthquake, and the other, which could have been avoided—and still can to a certain extent—with the acceleration and intensification of a model of neoliberal urbanism (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner, 2009) maintained as ‘inevitable’ to respond to the crisis. As counterpoint, we analyze examples of some community-driven interventions in housing and reconstruction planning that repealed the notion of the inevitability of neoliberalism in order to respond to disasters: the cases of the community-based Reconstruction Plan for Talca, the inclusionary housing project Los Maitenes, and the reconstruction of public buildings that had been targeted for removal and/or concessions. These examples show that it is possible to develop design and planning models where the needs of the inhabitants of Talca are better served, the benefits of investments more fairly distributed, and the public-private-community partnerships more just. We identify how the disaster enabled a variety of actors to advance their aims—including private developers, the state (local and national, and within them, different agencies) and, albeit not as comprehensively as it could have been, some citizens. The experiences in Talca revealed that only with active citizen organization after disaster did positive outcomes result, when they invested in cross-sectorial coalition building (including professional, academic, and real estate businesses), training in technical and political skills for engagement, place-based proposal-making, multi-scalar solidarity, and media savvy. They also demonstrated that the flexibility and collaboration of the state are necessary elements to mediate market forces and produce more sustainable and just projects within neoliberal frameworks.

This study builds on more than 5 years of ongoing academic and advocacy involvement in Talca’s reconstruction after the earthquake¹. It also builds on site visits around Talca, participant observation in reconstruction planning, focus groups, and interviews conducted with representatives of the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism MINVU, Maule’s Regional Housing Authority SERVIU, the local NGO Surmaule, other

¹ Particularly with the NGO Surmaule, which developed a permanent work supporting landless victims in Talca. It collaborated in the creation of the first housing committees and promoted community building processes in the neighborhoods most affected. Furthermore, it generated multiple spaces for debate on the reconstruction process integrating lay people and academics.



NGOs and community groups, and multidisciplinary academics (historians, sociologists, urban studies scholars, planners, and architects) from Universidad Católica del Maule in Talca and Universidad Católica in Santiago. We also performed in-depth site and community surveys in Talca's central neighborhoods, as well as geospatial mapping and analysis of academic, governmental, professional, media, and NGO literature related to the reconstruction process in Talca and Chile.