

Learning the Lessons of the Past – Opportunities and Obstacles

The paper discusses the applicability of past experiences of disaster to design and mitigation activities. A case study approach is used, a comparison being made between the US Embassy bombing in Beirut and the more recent bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. The theory of isomorphic learning is used to make the case that present design criteria can be improved by learning and applying the lessons of the past.

It is suggested, however, that while the theory of isomorphic learning is fine as a theory, its practical application is fraught with difficulties. Specifically, the desire to apply the lessons of the past may be foiled by interceding social, economic and political factors. It is suggested, for example, that once the heuristic value of a disaster (however horrific) fades, then the public and their political representatives lose interest. The political agenda moves on, and the opportunity to develop and implement better designs is lost.

To summarize, our capacity to learn the lessons of the past may be compromised by intervening social, economic and political factors. Money may not be available. Political priorities may change. The public may lose interest or focus on a more immediate threat to safety.