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Natural disasters are becoming more frequent with far-reaching impact on cities. In historic cities, natural disasters disrupt lives and livelihoods through not only the damage they cause on the social and physical fabric but also trigger psychological trauma at deeper level. Buildings and monuments are commonly prioritized in post-disaster reconstruction but the role of historic urban spaces, along with other open spaces is overlooked. The paper therefore seeks to shift the focus from buildings to open spaces by examining how historic urban spaces interact with urban fabric and cultural practices to help build resilience. This shift has been an emergent theme in cultural geography through the acknowledgement of the role of open spaces in improving disaster response and recovery (Allan et al., 2013; Brosius and Michaels, 2020). Drawing on interviews with survivors and rescuers and field observations of earthquake-ravaged Durbar Square in Kathmandu, this paper links features of urban spaces with prevailing social and cultural practices that triggered specific community actions to understand how historic urban spaces have allowed local values to be expressed in the aftermaths of the disaster creating a coping mechanism. This layering of various personal experiences on the scientific inquiry allows us to first approach historic urban spaces as an object that enables user actions to emerge during disaster and be improvised in a certain way that helps to build resilience; and second to explore cultural and religious practices that link back to the objects and spaces to derive psychological recovery from the trauma. Ultimately the paper argues that urban spaces have inherent functional, performative and restorative qualities that play an important role in post-disaster recovery, and more attention needs to be given to them in planning and urban studies. In terms of methodological contribution, the paper is a critical enquiry into urban space as a conceptual category and an interrogation of its relationship with disasters and resilience.

References

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