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Introduction

The physical and emotional aftermath of disasters can echo through people's lives, months, years, even generations after the event. Disasters destroy not only things and people but also the bonds between them, unravelling the fabric of community. This book deals with one small but critical aspect of the disaster response: ensuring that the 'new' spaces and buildings – built for and with the survivors – will provide those survivors with the optimal conditions to overcome their loss and rebuild their lives.

The destruction or denial of the settings for people to meet their needs presents serious challenges. Places that are critical to our wellbeing such as houses, places of employment, education, socialisation and health care, and sites of spiritual or emotional value are destroyed or cannot be occupied. Further, logistics fail as roads, rail, seaports or airports are put out of action and the means of keeping them going is disrupted.

At a personal level, people lose the reassurance of knowing what their surroundings allow them to do. The familiar and valued settings that the survivors had built up to meet their needs, often over many generations, may be lost – as too may the symbols of a life's achievements. The survivors will be involuntarily projected into a new and unfamiliar relationship with their surroundings and will see those surroundings with new eyes, coloured by their experience of the disaster. Fond memories and other positive associations that people have with particular places may be overlaid with negative associations of loss and fear.

Many of the people who had critical skills or insights are unavailable to participate in the rebuilding process because they are dead, incapacitated (emotionally or physically) or displaced. Furthermore, the people to whom survivors would usually look for support – parents, partners or close friends – may