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What 'Game of Thrones' Teaches Us About Urban Resilience



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The show was never about which good-looking fan favorite deserved to lead Westeros. The show is about the past, how easily we forget it and how lessons are never learned.



Leadership is full of decisions. Photo credit: HBO HBO

There are many spoilers ahead about the last two episodes of Game of Thrones. Proceed with caution. Winter is still coming.

Millions of viewers tuned in to watch the finale of *Game of Thrones* last night. While there is an [actual petition](#) by angry viewers asking for a rewrite, much of what happened in the show's finale felt very right to me. The show was never

about which good-looking fan favorite deserved to lead Westeros. The show is about the past, how easily we forget it and how lessons are never learned. 🐦 The White Walkers were nothing more than a myth. The Wall and its protectors had become a joke, a place to put outlaws and the forgotten. Then winter came and we saw that all the old stories were true. Queen Cersei tried to apply lessons from the long-ago burning of Harrenhal by dragon fire and built giant crossbows to defend King's Landing, but it was clearly too little and much too late against her rival queen's full-grown dragon.

At its heart, the show was never the story of a charismatic leader's rise, but rather it was a masterpiece of [sociological storytelling](#) that showed us how people are shaped by the structures and institutions around them. We do see, however, that good leaders have a role to play in fostering those structures and ensuring that they institutionalize lessons learned from past crises (this should be no sweat for Bran the Broken who is, after all, the 'memory' of Westeros). So what can leaders in the real world do to ensure that those institutions promote resilience against crises like fire, war or Grey Worm on a revenge quest?



The city of King's Landing burns. Photo credit: HBO HBO

King's Landing, in particular, has a long road ahead to recover from the ashes of the Dragon Queen's wrath and build back better for a more resilient future.

Watching the beautiful city burn in the penultimate episode, I couldn't help fearing for the actual city of Dubrovnik, Croatia where the King's Landing sequences were filmed. Dubrovnik is a historical treasure of renowned beauty and a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). But is it a resilient city? Is it actually protected against dragon fire and other more worldly hazards? Could it burn like that in real life?

As it turns out, the city does list fire as one of their top hazards. I learned more about it last week when I had the distinct honor of sitting on a panel at the [Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) with Natasa Holcinger, the Senior Advisor in Preventive Measures, National Protection and Rescue Directorate of Croatia. On the panel, she addressed the work that Croatia is doing to ensure its resilience and later provided me with additional information about the plans for ensuring Dubrovnik's resilience. Reassuringly, Dubrovnik does take resilience quite seriously. Its leaders are no strangers to crisis, having faced the threat of [an actual fire in 2007](#), having suffered earthquakes and war in [recent memory](#) (the pictures are eerily similar to the *Game of Thrones* version), and having been absolutely [besieged by selfie-snapping tourists](#). They have signed [ongoing commitments](#) to defend their city against a multitude of hazards. The trouble is that preserving and protecting a heritage city is complicated and rife with tradeoffs.

We saw how complex it can be to respond to a fire in a historic site with the recent tragedy that engulfed Notre-Dame de Paris. In a recent piece about [the Notre-Dame conflagration](#), I discussed how heritage sites are uniquely vulnerable and underprepared. They are chronically underfunded and have few resources or time to invest in comprehensive preparedness and emergency response programs. The sites and treasures housed within them are often one of a kind and once lost are lost forever irrespective of whether or not they were insured. Protecting them may involve altering or otherwise damaging these historic places in order to install state-of-the-art protection systems. Notre-Dame was just one historic building, albeit a mighty one. What would happen to an entire historic city under duress?

I recently had the opportunity to speak about the subject with fire expert Christopher Wieczorek, Ph.D., who is Vice President, Manager of International Codes and Standards at FM Global. According to Wieczorek, it is essential that these heritage sites individually retrofit their sites to have modern firefighting equipment such as sprinklers, because protecting a city begins with protecting individual sites: “When a fire does happen, it can be contained to the location of origin, so that it doesn’t propagate first through the building and then through adjacent properties. As you know, historically there’s been some massive fires like the great fires of Boston, London, and Chicago. All of these big cities burn because the buildings are made of combustible construction, they didn’t have any after-fire protection, and the buildings were very close to each other. So to prevent that from happening, you need to make sure that you are protecting each building individually.” He continues by adding that “most of these historical buildings, no matter where they are in the world, are made of combustible materials. They were made hundreds of years ago and probably made of timber that is dry and does burn readily.”



Stone cities burn, too. Photo credit: HBO HBO

And in case you were wondering whether the stone city only burned because of the magical powers of dragon fire, that is unfortunately not the case. Stone structures can in fact cause a fire to burn hotter according to Wieczorek: “There

are aspects of the building that are stone and then there are the timber features that connect them, such as support beams, and it's when that timber burns that then jeopardizes the stone walls and causes them to collapse. When you have a stone building, the fire tends to get a little higher temperature because it's like a pizza oven. You're reradiating that heat, it's staying inside the building, which then causes the masonry between the stones to crumble, dry out, and that's why it collapses. The stone doesn't burn but the intense heat causes the masonry to become very brittle and collapse." Well, we had better put resilience plans into action all over the globe or we all risk becoming very brittle and collapsing like Brienne in her [weepy farewell to Jaime Lannister](#).

How do we do that? Resilient organizations, whether cities, businesses, or for that matter countries, are not built solely by strong leaders, although they are shaped by them. They require strong processes, institutions and a culture of learning from the mistakes of the past. For the fictional King's Landing, we ended the show with a meeting of the new small council discussing their priorities for putting the burned city and kingdom back to rights. The role of leadership was left to rest on the elected King Bran's origins story and will certainly not rely on any cult of personality as it would have with either Queen Daenerys or King Jon Snow. Ultimately, that's a good thing because our institutions need to outlast any single leader. For example, a stronger governance structure for urban resilience consists of collaboration and teamwork to assess the worst pain points and then prioritize plans for addressing them as shown in this fun video analysis of [Winterfell's resilience planning](#). We saw this in the closing scene with the small council, too, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way, when the surviving huddle of new leaders discuss whether rebuilding ships or brothels is a more urgent priority for the city's future. May they choose wisely.

Over its monumental eight-season run, *Game of Thrones* offered us all many leadership lessons in preparedness and with any luck we will heed the final season's warnings about the importance of building resilience. So many tragedies can be avoided with foresight, good planning and a solid understanding of our history. It's time for all of us to the 'break the wheel'.



The real Dubrovnik in all its glory. GETTY



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I am the president and CEO of Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRI), where I help organizations prepare for and recover from disasters both natural and manmade... **Read More**