



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

TITLE: An ideal city? Governing ‘communitas’ in the face of an urban disaster

Author/s: Peter Walters

Affiliation/s: The University of Queensland

I use the context of Brisbane, the third largest city in a well-resourced and affluent liberal democracy with strong institutions, to theorise the conditions that led to the emergence of a collective expression of solidarity as a temporary city-wide community during the 2011 Brisbane floods. The city responded to the flood in a number of ways. Perhaps the most celebrated of these

was the largely organic mobilisation of the ‘mud army’, where several hundred thousand volunteers from greater Brisbane came to the aid of those affected by the floods. They came in a carnival atmosphere, an opportunity to connect with friends and to immerse themselves in the glow of altruism. While the image of the mud army was almost uniformly positive in the public realm, the perspectives of the the targets of this collective effort were not uniformly positive. I use media reporting and case study data to examine sociological concepts including the classic theory of ‘the stranger’, the more social psychological idea of ‘collective norms’ as well as the notion of ‘communitas’ to critique the ways in which a city might be able to produce this form of response and whether it might be desirable.