



HARD HIT: Hurricane Katrina's devastation shows the need for tougher building standards.

Picking Up the Pieces

Rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast will require tougher standards.

With Hurricane Katrina still fresh in their minds, developers, architects, and government officials call for better planning, tougher design standards, and smarter development when rebuilding the Gulf Coast.

Architect Mark Humphreys, CEO of Dallas-based Humphreys & Partners Architects, says he knew something had to change

when he saw the destruction of a project he designed, the Legacy Condo Towers in Gulfport, Miss.

"So much of the development is at sea level, so there are things we must do in future planning to make it safer," Humphreys says, recommending building 10 feet to 15 feet higher than normal and putting parking below. He also calls on developers to add natural sand dunes as buffers, upgrade doors and windows, use

concrete for exterior walls, and build hurricane rooms.

Although the added safeguards mean extra money, Humphreys says his clients have been eager to comply. "The cost is not a problem because it is a marketing thing," he says. "Buyers, quite wisely, want to know that the project is built to protect them from hurricanes."

Humphreys isn't the only one who is proactive. In mid-

October, a team of 100 development experts met with government leaders for six days in Biloxi, Miss. Dubbed the Mississippi Renewal Forum, participants discussed how agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency can enforce tougher design standards, according to the forum Web site.

"The proposal we'll make to FEMA ... is that they write a performance code," says design team leader Andrés Duany. "The code is this, 'The building has to survive a Category 3 hurricane, and it has to dry out.' Whether you achieve that by building high or building well doesn't matter."

The forum's information will be given to local leaders during a series of meetings with 11 towns and three coastal communities, according to the Web site.

An October study found that the hurricane destroyed 228,000 homes, or about 45 percent of New Orleans' metro housing stock, according to the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

Brookings found that the storm wiped out 39 percent (120,000) owner-occupied homes and 56 percent (108,000) rental homes in New Orleans. The non-

profit suggests investing reconstruction dollars into building on higher land, encouraging new jobs in the area and redeveloping lower income neighborhoods.

Scott Schiff, professor of civil engineering at Clemson University, says owners should not cut corners to get the houses built faster because the tougher building codes will help prevent future devastation.

"You are replacing a home built 25 years ago with one that will require significant code upgrades," he says. "But people need these tougher standards.



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This is not the last storm to strike New Orleans. It is only the latest.”

Past hurricanes have shown that rebuilding will take time. It took 11 years to replace the 28,000 homes destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, but the building industry is optimistic.

"The economy has enough forward momentum to get through this crisis in pretty good shape," says David Sieders, the

chief economist for NAHB.

Some say the storm will be good for the housing industry in the Gulf Coast. "We will have to fortify the city better," says Peter Morici, an economics professor at the University of Maryland. "We rebuilt San Francisco after the earthquake and rebuilt Chicago after the fire. We are about to see the remarkable flexibility of American capitalism."