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Two competitions push designers to build better

These aren't just thought exercises: The goal will be to reimagine construction in the age of superstorms and then put the ideas into place in three communities, including New York.

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One silver lining from the storm clouds of Hurricane Sandy is that the aftermath of the disaster is keeping architects, designers and planners busy. This past week, two major competitions have been announced to design buildings that can help protect against rising tides and future storms.

There have been a number of competitions and commissions so far to help rethink construction, and life, after Sandy, but perhaps none as big as the Rebuild By Design program announced Thursday by Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan.

"The competition process will deliver a better understanding of regional interdependencies and foster regional coordination and resilience across the United States," Mr. Donovan said in an announcement. "Natural disasters like Hurricane Sandy do not respect state or local borders, and we too must know no boundaries—both literally and figuratively—as we think about our plans for the future."

Initial proposals are due by the end of July. Between five and 10 teams will be selected to develop their ideas, with final projects to be completed by next February. So far, the guidelines are vague, with the hope of fostering as broad a range of ideas as possible, from new flood barriers to better coastal housing. The emphasis is on creating solutions, though, that go beyond the needs or challenges of any one town or city and could work throughout the Northeast and the country. Research is as important as implementation.

"We need institutional resiliency as much as building resiliency," said Ingrid Gould Ellen, director of New York University's Furman Center and a member of the HUD competition's steering committee.

The HUD competition is also intended to improve regional coordination. "Storms don't stop at jurisdictional boundaries and county lines," she said. "This is a chance for our regional leaders to get together and figure out what their real needs are."

The Rockefeller Foundation, which is tackling resiliency issues as part of its [centennial](#), is sponsoring the competition, and the National Endowment for the Arts will manage it.

"Putting the full faith and credit of the United States government behind this is fantastic," said American Institute of Architects New York Chapter President Rick Bell. "I don't want to say it's overdue, but it's due, and having HUD behind this really will attract the best firms, the best teams and the best ideas."

Architecture for Humanity, a well-known disaster recovery non-profit, and the AIA are also seeking nationwide solutions by focusing on three cities recently hit by disasters: New Orleans (Hurricane Katrina), Joplin (2011 tornado), Mo., and New York City, specifically the Rockaways (Hurricane Sandy).

The [competition](#) focuses on housing, though it presents an exciting opportunity for firms because rather than coming up with far-out concepts, the homes will actually be built in the three communities.

"Every city can learn from the successes and failures of these three cities and their response to disaster," aid Eric Cesal, Director of Reconstruction and Resiliency at Architecture for Humanity "Designers and architects have a responsibility to do more—and to do better."

That could be a lucrative opportunity, as well. While no one would have wished for this work, it comes at a time when architects are still building back their [practices](#) after the [real estate-led recession](#) —according to the Department of Labor, architects were the most unemployed industry in 2009.

There has been plenty of work to go around. In addition to these competitions, the AIA, the Bloomberg administration and a private developer in April launched one for a [large development parcel](#) in the Rockaways. Meanwhile, architects and planners have been brainstorming ways for the city to develop new [building codes](#) and [design models](#).

This is not the first time there has been a groundswell of architecture work after disasters. From the post-Katrina Gulf Coast to earthquake-ravaged Haiti, designers are usually first in line to rebuild. Much of it though is more hype than substance. Brad Pitt showed up in New Orleans with \$90 million to build edgy homes a dozen feet in the air. Yet much of the Lower Ninth Ward remains vacant and dilapidated.

The key will be to develop ideas that can be implemented and are helpful to the communities they are intended to serve.

"Architects are problem solvers," Mr. Bell said. "They'll have solutions no one else does."



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