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YEARS
LATER:

**REFLECTIONS
FROM THE
DESIGNERS**

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Prepared for

**REBUILD
BY
DESIGN**

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On June 20, 2013, the Rebuild by Design (RBD) design competition for rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy was launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force. The competition asked multi-disciplinary teams of architects, planners, designers, engineers and academics to work with the Sandy Region to develop innovative solutions to the challenges of post-disaster rebuilding. Now, five years later, the designers involved in the original design competition were asked to look back and answer: *What has been the impact of participating in the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition on your professional practice?*

The findings are derived from 30 interviews conducted by McGill University's School of Urban Planning with 33 Design Team members of Rebuild by Design's Hurricane Sandy Design Competition. Members of all ten teams were interviewed, and the designers span a range of disciplines including architecture and urban design, water management and engineering, and urban planning. Results from the interviews fall into five main themes: resilience practice, professional networking, community engagement, knowledge mobilization, and lessons for next time.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF RESILIENCE PRACTITIONERS



Because of our work with Rebuild by Design and our work within the state [of Mississippi] with the National Disaster Resilience Competition, we are seen on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and in the state in general as being a leading organization around resilience.

– David Perkes, Director, Gulf Coast Community Design Studio

Nearly every respondent became a more effective and more frequent resilience practitioner due to participating in the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition. Some designers had previously worked on resilience projects, while others had not, but both groups report that the experience has impacted their practice. Nearly every respondent (31/33, 94%) has worked on resilience projects since the conclusion of the design competition, and many report a deeper understanding of resilience in their subsequent work.

A number of respondents also suggested that their experience with the design competition has increased their reputation and professional visibility in the field of resilience planning and design. While nearly all respondents have worked on resilience projects since the end of the design competition, a strong majority of respondents (24/33, 73%) also say that their experience with the design competition has led directly to them doing more resilience-related work. According to Stephen Whitehouse, Principal, Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architecture, "I think it has helped redefine the scope of what we do as a firm, and the projects which we are considered for."

INTENSIFYING AND EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

I think that what Rebuild accomplished was really exciting in terms of the level of academic and professional reach. It created quite a Rolodex, and we all have a shared family tree where we look to meet and collaborate with each other.

– Richard Roark, Partner, OLIN

In the last three weeks, I have referred people or recommended that we gather a group of people for a talk, luncheon, discussion, or project proposal, probably with five different people I met during Rebuild by Design.

– Allison Anderson, Principal, unabridged Architecture



Every one of the 33 respondents describes having their professional network expanded or deepened through their involvement in the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition, and these networks continue to thrive. While many respondents report that existing professional relationships were strengthened through participation in the competition, the most common form of professional network development reported by respondents was making brand new connections. Seventy percent of respondents (23/33) describe meeting contacts during the design competition with whom they have had a subsequent professional relationship. Richard Roark, Principal, OLIN, calls this “quite a Rolodex,” while Matthijs Bouw, Principal, One Architecture and Urbanism, describes the professional network he developed as “a huge academic network, a huge professional network as well as a whole range of clients and stakeholder networks that developed.... It has doubled my contact list.” Most respondents who discussed their expanded or deepened networks described contacts with other design professionals. Though several respondents who work in the area of community engagement likewise report that their connections with local community leaders and stakeholders were deepened through participation in the design competition in a way that has yielded ongoing professional benefits.

A shared experience highlighted by several respondents was that the intensity of the design competition experience facilitated deeper relationships than would be typical for a project. While most respondents discussed their expanded professional networks in terms of developing new colleagues, a number of respondents also identified participation in the design competition as having expanded the network of people who recognize their work. For example, Nanco Dolman, Leading Professional Water Resilience in Urban Areas, Royal Haskoning DHV, stated: “I think in your records of reference projects, this really stands out. This is an iconic project that you’ve done on your CV, so I’m very proud of it. I think it helps...to make your professional network stronger.”

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COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES



[Community engagement] is something that we use now in every project. Our attitude towards planning with the community is always very open, very informal, very inviting. We have those field trips and all sort of fun events, bike tours and stuff like that. And I think we took that from Rebuild.

– Kobi Ruthenberg, Associate Director, Organization for Permanent Modernity

I think it's why we have such a great relationship with the community in Bridgeport—because of how we've made things didactic, how we've engaged them in this process, how we've really been visual in everything that we're doing.

– Roni Deitz, Project Lead, ARCADIS

Nearly all participants (31/33, 94%) identified community engagement as a distinctive and important aspect of the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition, and a large majority (28/33, 85%) said that they have applied lessons learned about community engagement from the design competition to their subsequent professional practice. In some cases respondents reported incorporating a greater focus on the engagement process in general, and in other cases they reported bringing specific approaches learned during the competition into subsequent work. Matthijs Bouw, Founder and Principal, One Architecture & Urbanism describes how “because of the positive experience here, [we’ve] doubled down on community engagement in other projects, and I think it’s going to be more intensive.” Several participants also reported learning ways of adapting to local politics and dynamics which have been helpful in their subsequent work.



MOBILIZING KNOWLEDGE



[The design competition] definitely strengthened my view that interdisciplinary teams are essential to working on design projects, and that the sooner everybody gets together, the better.

– Christina Kaunzinger, Assistant Research Professor, Rutgers University

The Hurricane Sandy Design Competition was deeply interdisciplinary and involved academics in substantive roles both on the individual design teams and through Rebuild by Design’s Research Advisory Group. The evidence suggests that these approaches had a lasting effect on design competition participants; almost three quarters (24/33, 73%) of respondents report having expanded their way of thinking on the basis of interactions between professionals and academics.

Several respondents who themselves work as academics or professional researchers also identified positive impacts of the design competition on their own work or on the broader field. One respondent, a university professor, stated that as a result of his involvement with the design competition, he has become much more involved with the public and applied aspects of ecology. In his lecturing, he has shifted from what he described as “straight and nerdy ecology” to incorporating more design examples. Another respondent, Jesse Keenan, Lecturer in Architecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, argues that the involvement of researchers in the design competition has had a broader impact on academia in the United States: “I think when universities around the country saw Columbia, Yale, Rutgers, Stevens Institute, and Penn really mobilizing a group of faculty, I think it was a bit of a wake up call that everybody else better catch up.”



LEARNING LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE



By and large the feedback from respondents was positive. However, several respondents mention difficulties transitioning from the end of the competition into implementation. This transition coincided with the transfer of project authority from the design competition to the city and state governments tasked with implementation, so it is predictable that there would be hiccups. But it is notable that designers specifically discuss transition problems related to the things that proved transformative for the designers in their own practice. In particular respondents identify community engagement and the cross-disciplinary vision for the competition and their designs as suffering during the transition into implementation. One designer observed of their own project's transition: "It switched from the people who were holding the vision and the design and really interested in the project to engineer-led teams selected in a public procurement process. While these large engineering firms were vital to implementing large infrastructure projects, I really think that a landscape architect or an architect would have been a better lead for the project."

Each of these issues point to an area where the aspirations of the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition were not followed through after the competition concluded. Respondents noted that there needed to be future exploration of how the holistic, interdisciplinary approach from the competition could continue during local government implementation and how expectations are communicated for the post-competition period, particularly concerning questions of post-competition government procurement and clarity if the teams involved in the competition would also be involved in implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

I think, in the largest possible way, Rebuild By Design fosters an optimism about design—the main reason that myself and two or three of the other people I work with do design.

– Glen Cummings, Partner, MTWTF

Overwhelmingly, respondents identified major positive outcomes and impacts on their career from their involvement with RBD. Interestingly, this is true even in some cases where respondent involvement in the process ended sooner than they would have liked, because their team's design did not progress or because their firm ceased participating in project implementation. The previous sections on resilience, network, knowledge, engagement, and lessons identify the key themes that emerged from the interviews. Many respondents, however, summed up the impacts of participating in the design competition more holistically. One respondent, who recently decided to leave his previous firm for a new opportunity, directly attributes his decision to the experience he had in the design competition. Kobi Ruthenberg, Associate Director, Organization for Permanent Modernity, describes a lasting impact of the design competition on his firm's process: "The competition challenged us to think about the enormous scale in a real and urgent way.... The first things we did for RBD, more or less, became our working process now."

David Perkes, Director, Gulf Coast Design Studio, describes the design competition as a "pivot, where we really began to talk about resilience as being the way to think." He continued: "So clearly the timing of Rebuild by Design for me personally, and for our program here, was really formative—to be able to see such a clear difference between how we were talking and working after Katrina and how we were talking and working after Sandy."

Finally, at the conclusion of her interview, when asked if she wished to add anything else to the conversation, Roni Deitz, Project Lead, ARCADIS replied: "Just really making a plug for how great the Rebuild by Design process was and how really having a mission to drive innovation and design in a community post-disaster has created this community of engineers, designers, architects, planners, scientists, researchers, you name it. I almost feel like it's a family that has come out of Rebuild by Design."

METHODOLOGY

The results of this study are derived from 35 interviews with 36 respondents representing all ten Hurricane Sandy Design Competition Design Teams. Pilot interviews were conducted in March 2018 with five designers. All 239 members of the original ten finalist design teams were invited to participate in an interview with researchers from McGill University. Ultimately, 33 designers provided feedback across 30 separate semi-structured interviews in May and June 2018. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences in the Hurricane Sandy Design Competition and the impacts their participation in the competition had on their subsequent career.