

EMERGENCY HOUSING FOR NEW YORK CITY



Thad Pawlowski
@ethaddeus @ColumbiaGSAPP
**Managing Director-Center for
Resilient Cities and Landscapes,
Columbia University**



Cynthia Barton
**Urban Resilience and
Post-Disaster Consulting**

The era of sudden flash flooding means more New Yorkers are finding themselves suddenly without a home. In a city of acute housing scarcity, there are no easy answers, but there is more we could do. After Ida two weeks ago, the Red Cross sheltered 350 displaced people in congregant and non-congregant facilities, and the need will grow as mold begins to spread in inundated homes. After Hurricane Sandy in New York City in 2012, there was a mad dash for housing. The City sheltered over 3,000 people in hotel rooms, ultimately spending more than \$70 million over the course of the next year. It also worked with FEMA to set up a Rapid Repairs program that allowed thousands of households to “shelter-in-place” by turning back on the heat, electricity, and hot water. Rapid Repairs set the groundwork, so to speak, for the \$3.4 Billion Build it Back program, which elevated many of the same houses above the post-Sandy floodplain, leaving behind a lot of questions about the inherent inequities of post disaster recovery programs. It’s reasonable to expect that each new disaster will tighten the housing squeeze on working New Yorkers, especially those without intergenerational wealth: Black households, recent immigrants, and all people struggling for opportunity.

Fifteen years ago, after witnessing

Hurricane Katrina displace half the (mostly minority) population of New Orleans, the NYC Office of Emergency Management hosted a prescient design competition for post-disaster provisional housing. The competition asked where people would live if their neighborhoods were suddenly and completely destroyed. The ideas competition yielded one clear but challenging result: the City should work with the FEMA to build a supply chain for rapidly deployable emergency housing at scale. It can be done. There is a prototype between OEM HQ and the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge that was meant to be relocated to a FEMA site in Maryland to show that this type of housing could not only be deployed quickly, but redeployed. It is still there, used as office space.

As with most post-disaster housing, what is intended to be temporary is so often permanent. A supply of code-compliant, permanent-quality, eco-friendly housing could go up in a few days in a variety of locations: parking lots, along highways and boulevards, or on land reserved for future development. The housing would need to sit lightly on the ground, with solar panels and batteries for more frequent blackouts. They should keep people close to home, to their social networks and neighborhood services, they should be

designed with care for both common and private space. In theory, having a safe supply of temporary housing would allow time and space for rebuilding the neighborhood, not just how it was, but better for everyone inclusively.



Is it expensive? Relatively no, the prototype cost roughly the same to build as other affordable housing in the City, about \$1 M for a three-story building with two two-bedroom units and a one-bedroom unit on top, a lot of that in site preparation. The benefits could be much greater over time, and every single dollar would be used toward increasing long-term housing supply instead of tightening the housing squeeze. Would it be so nice that people might just stay there? Maybe, there would have to be a public discussion about that, but it's not crazy to imagine these modular buildings weaving into the fabric of the city like the "quake shacks" around San Francisco that were given out to survivors after the 1906 earthquake.

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Disaster housing programs are designed to make homeowners "whole," but shouldn't we demand our public money be used for making our communities whole? Either we learn from our mistakes, or we keep allowing each successive disaster to accelerate the divide between those who have access to a safe, secure, and healthy place to live and those whose options are getting smaller and smaller.



Drawings of temporary housing and a resilient recovery for Prospect Shore by Jeff Shumaker