Which little pig do you want to be – in hindsight? - by Vince Capogna

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Vince Capogna

In the summer of 2005, while on vacation at his Crawford Texas ranch, then President George W. Bush began reading a newly published book on the 1918 flu pandemic. Alarmed by what he read, he advocated for a “strategy to prevent and protect the American people from a possible outbreak.” On November 1st, 2005 in a speech at the National Institute of Health, he plainly stated, “One day many lives could be needlessly lost because we failed to act today.” Similarly, during the Obama administration Bill Gates warned in a ‘Ted talk’ that the world is not prepared and that, “This should absolutely be a priority. There’s no need to panic…but we need to get going because time is not on our side.” Funny thing about hindsight. Is there a lesson here?

For many, the memory of the devastation thrust upon us from Superstorm Sandy is all too fresh, but while devastating, Sandy came ashore as a tropical storm; nothing in comparison to the 1938 Category 3 hurricane labeled “The Long Island Express.” Hurricane season began on June 1st and NOOA’s Climate Prediction Center expects the 2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season to be “more active than usual.” Here’s hoping our luck doesn’t run out. How will this look in hindsight?

Much of the news today is still focused on the Coronavirus outbreak, but the past few months have also seen a troubling amount of life and property loss. In an instant countless lives are forever and unnecessarily changed following each event, when quite frankly there are solutions to preventing such devastating loss. While we can never absolutely prevent a fire, flood, or hurricane from striking, we can absolutely protect all inhabitants by choosing to modify how we build the structures that are supposed to protect us. Hindsight is an infallible teacher but the lessons do not have to continue to be so painful.

Doubtful that anyone today would choose to purchase a car that didn’t include safety features such as air bags and anti-lock brakes. Auto manufacturers have continuously raised the bar, and marketed these advances to a willing public including collision avoidance systems, crumple zones, lane departure warning, and even autonomous driving options. So why has the building industry’s advancement in safety most closely resembled simply adding seat belts? That’s what I am reminded

of when I see little strips of metal ‘hurricane straps’ that attach one piece of framing lumber to another—it’s simply not nearly enough—just ask the second little pig.

There was a house made famous after FEMA had taken aerial photos showing it as the lone survivor among blocks and blocks of bare foundations where their neighbors’ homes once stood (Sundberg Katrina). The singular difference may lay in their decision to construct a reinforced concrete home using insulated concrete forms (ICF) as opposed to wood. A home constructed in this manner can withstand winds well over 200mph and protect its occupants from flying debris and fire. But a home built in this manner not only offers safety and security during a natural disaster; it is also many times more energy efficient saving money each and every day as well as natural resources. We hear terms like ‘sustainability’ and ‘resilience’ loosely and often thoughtlessly thrown around: Homes built like this can easily serve as definitive examples.

There isn’t an area of the country immune to devastation from natural and man-made disasters. The answer is an all-hazard design response that provides a resilient and sustainable solution that is relatable, attainable, and affordable for all. I was fortunate to be involved in the construction of a new ‘model’ home, built to replace a home destroyed in Breezy Point post Sandy, aptly termed “Hurricane-
Strong.” The house provides 4-dimensional resilience and is a prototype or artifact that can be cited as an example, serve as a platform for further innovation, and studied for long-term performance against shocks and stresses, along with energy savings. The project plans, as designed by Brooklyn based +Labs Architect, have been made available free to anyone in hopes of finally changing the way we build. We can’t always run and we certainly shouldn’t bury our head in the sand; if this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the need to be able to shelter-in-place is real and we must be able to recover quickly for everyone’s benefit.

Some may suggest that I have a vested interest as someone that builds reinforced concrete structures with ICF exclusively. Yes—absolutely. I will remain ever thankful that when my wife’s car was struck some months ago, flipping it over, it’s superior construction allowed her to be rescued with not so much as a scratch. My hope is that the structures we build today provide similar blessings. There is a better way to build. Have we learned anything from the past? Have we forgotten even one of the first lessons taught to us in the most palatable form of a fable? I don’t know of anyone building straw homes. Are you still building homes framed in sticks?

As we begin to slowly crawl out of our homes and get back to work, maybe we should reevaluate the work we do. With history and hindsight as a teacher, the most basic and fundamental question may simply be, “which little pig do you think you should be?”

Vince Capogna, LEED AP, GPRO CM, is president of Synergy Green Building Group, Inc., New Hyde Park, N.Y. and New York ICF, Corp.