

# AIA Houston Reacts to Hurricane Ike

Contributed by AIA Houston

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## SUMMARY

When Hurricane Ike struck the eastern coast of Texas on September 13, 2008, AIA Houston staff and members reacted immediately creating Houston Disaster Action (HDA). Through HAD, volunteer architects surveyed over 400 homes or buildings in the Houston region in three months. They assessed building damages and provided information on ways to deal with insurance and contractor issues. After completion of the three-month volunteer survey a disaster assistance report was created to document the process and aid in future disaster action plans.

## IKE TOUCHES DOWN

Hurricane Ike struck 29 Texas counties in the greater Houston area during the early morning hours of Saturday, September 13, 2008. It has been called the third most destructive hurricane to hit the United States, after Katrina (2005) and Andrew (1992), with damage estimated at \$32 billion. Approximately 138 lives were lost in the U.S. Winds up to 113 mph were recorded in the center of Houston leaving power outages that lasted as long as a month for some residents.

## A QUICK RESPONSE

The AIA Houston office along with downtown Houston was closed for one week following the hurricane as emergency crews readied the area for use. On Friday, five days after the storm hit, AIA Houston executive committee members met for several hours, and with the help of Yvonne Castillo of Texas Society of Architects (TSA) and Disaster Action Inc, developed the basic foundation of a program for AIA Houston to respond.

AIA Houston received financial commitments from AIA National and three components to immediately launch a volunteer relief and assessment effort.

By Monday, program staff members were hired, a project director was selected, and short-term office space was located. The relief project was titled Houston Disaster Action and within 48 hours a logo, fliers, and a call for volunteers were prepared. Two weeks after Ike struck Houston, the Houston Disaster Action office was up and running.

## THE ORGANIZATION FORMS OVERNIGHT

A number of decisions were made right away such as limiting the program to three months. Disaster Action Inc, informed HDA of the rules for volunteers to be protected under the Texas Good Samaritan Law, stating a 501 (c)(3) non-profit charitable organization had to administer the program. Disaster Action, Inc or the Houston Architecture Foundation were options for the umbrella non-profit organization, the latter was chosen. The director of the Houston Architecture Foundation was also the director of HDA, by combining forces daily tasks such as running payroll were more easily administered.

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

Initial attempts to work with FEMA to pass out HDA fliers were fruitless. Since FEMA was uncooperative HDA reached out to the Houston Bar Association to distribute assessment fliers. The Houston Bar Association had access to local FEMA sites and was willing to distribute the HDA fliers understanding the importance and opportunity the assessments provided.

Houston Disaster Assistance organized announcements on local radio stations stating phone numbers to call for assessments.

## THE FINAL TALLY

When the three month assessment period came to a close 543 requests for damage assessments were received, however 155 cancellations were made due to several factors such as the requests were for houses no longer standing; owners did not show up so assessments were cancelled; or owners completed repairs before volunteers could meet. In total, 144 volunteers participated in the assessment program. Pairs of volunteers assessed an average of 6.5 houses per day in approximately 60 days.

Damage assessments were divided into five categories from minor to severe for reporting purposes: Minor (72), Minor-Moderate (21), Moderate (207), Moderate-Severe (49), and Severe (174). Seven assessment areas were identified Beaumont (1%), Bolivar (5%), Galveston (18%), and the Bay Area mainland near Galveston (23%), Houston inside Loop 610 (8%), Houston between

Loop 610 and Beltway 8 (26%), and Greater Houston (19%). These figures show that 47 percent of the assessments were essentially done in areas close to the Gulf coast and 53 percent were done in the greater Houston area. The worst damage was seen along the coast, and had the fliers been better disseminated in those areas, the number of assessments along the coast would likely be higher.

### **DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS**

Assessments were completed by the end of December 2008, the same time the temporary office closed. One staff member was employed an additional three months to write the Texas Architect's Handbook for Disaster Assistance, compile and write a final report on Houston Disaster Action and work as an AIA liaison to activities in Galveston. The most important accomplishment by this program was the opportunity to write a new Texas Architects Disaster Assistance Handbook and have it published.

### **RESOURCES**

#### **More Best Practices**

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 22.07.06 Architecture DC magazine: Producing a Popular Resource
- 22.06.05 A Partnership for Architectural Awareness in Columbia, SC
- 22.06.03 AIA San Francisco Celebrates Architecture

#### **Feedback**

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#### **Key Terms**

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components
- Disaster assistance