



**The American Institute of Architects New York Chapter  
Testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Recovery and Resiliency on  
Build it Back  
September 25, 2015**

Good afternoon, Council Member Treyger and members of the City Council Committee on Recovery and Resiliency. My name is Illya Azaroff, AIA, and I am the founding co-chair of the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter (AIANY)'s Design for Risk and Reconstruction Committee (DfRR). I am here to offer testimony on the City's Build it Back program.

AIANY represents over 5,200 registered architects and associated design and construction professionals. DfRR aims to foster awareness of the necessity to anticipate risk for communities, buildings they occupy, and regional plans by educating professionals and the public on designing to mitigate natural and man-made disasters, through preparedness, relief response and recovery, and reconstruction. DfRR advocates for improving the ability of the built environment to aesthetically, functionally, technically, and economically serve and protect the health, safety, and welfare of inhabitants.

In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, federal, state, and local efforts to administer relief and organize rebuilding coalesced rapidly. Many individuals, businesses, and communities throughout NYC benefitted from the actions of those agencies and governing bodies. The Build it Back program, one of three rebuilding programs founded during that post-Sandy period, formed public-private partnerships that would, through the redirection of resources, funding, and personnel, rebuild in the zones most affected by the storm over the course of three years.

We have continued to support this type of comprehensive approach to rebuilding, and AIANY applauds the noble objectives of rebuilding neighborhoods even better than before and helping owners reoccupy their homes, but AIANY recognizes that the program has not met public expectations. As of March 2015, 30,000 New Yorkers from affected areas were still living in temporary accommodations, including hotels. Although every project under the Build it Back program was set to break ground by May 1st, 2015, teams of contractors, architects, and engineers are still waiting for confirmation four months later.

Architects, working alongside City agencies, have played a key role in rebuilding efforts, and we have witnessed firsthand the bumpy path to recovery. A lack of oversight and complications with the administration and implementation of Build it Back have prolonged the process. The uncertain timelines have put stress on the small businesses contracted to do this work and our clients – building owners and community members. They have incurred additional costs in terms of business continuity and social equity.

The program's constantly shuffling case managers is a primary cause of administrative delays. Case managers are essential to the completion of a project. Ideally, they see a project from start to finish and are able to liaise between relevant stakeholders. Case managers, however, are reassigned frequently, causing confusion among the clients and design professionals. When case managers are changed out, participants are often required to resubmit documentation, thus interrupting progress. Many clients have worked with seven or eight different case managers over the last three years. In addition, contractors often arrive on site to complete demolition, but nobody arrives afterwards for construction, leaving homeowners in the dark. These unexplained holdups speak to the need for more direction from the administration.

Despite initial efforts, there is also little or no impetus to build back better than before. Build it Back has not consistently encouraged property owners to embrace resilient building measures, which can range

from elevating entire homes to prohibiting occupation of basements below the flood elevation. Architects have experienced the frustration of working with clients who do not properly consider the grave implications of inadequate construction in areas threatened by future storms. Build it Back intended to hold recipients to quality design, but has failed to do so during implementation.

In order to improve Build it Back and make it viable and productive in achieving its goals, AIANY advocates for certain adjustments to the program's policy and execution. By addressing the inconsistencies, the program can become more efficient and successful.

- Publish rebuilding timelines to increase public awareness and transparency. Knowledge of when and how Build it Back will assist owners, residents, and communities in planning their futures is an important first step. Public posting will also hold the City accountable for following through.
- Establish regulated projects schedules. All players are required to start and finish jobs within the stipulated timelines. Community members and contractors benefit from keeping projects on track from demolition to construction.
- Expand cooperation with design professionals. Architects are generally nimble and can adjust schedules and delivery expediently. By allowing architects more independence over projects, they can service clients better. Unnecessary administrative barriers have kept talented architects and professionals from getting involved, or staying involved, in this essential work. Oversight by the City would primarily pertain to ensuring that architects remain within funding streams.
- Increase available resources and staff. With more people and power, Build it Back can get back on track.

In closing, homeowners are desperate to complete their recovery. Architects are ready and capable to be part of the solution. Our collective goal is to support vibrant communities that are productive, resilient, and look to the future. AIANY looks forward to working with the community stakeholders and governing bodies to achieve this.

Respectfully submitted,

Illya Azaroff, AIA