

The New York Recovery Network: E-Bulletin

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Feature Copy

A competition aiming to “ignite innovation,” Rebuild by Design was itself groundbreaking in scope and execution. This special edition of the New York Recovery Bulletin offers three articles appraising the RBD competition and its emphasis on the communities.

Headlines

A retrospective on the potential pitfalls of design competitions

Architectural design competitions, such as Rebuild by Design, have been around for as long as people have been building, but they do have their detractors. This article discusses the successes and failures of past architectural design competitions to provide some perspective.

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Urban Institute: Resilience bar raised in Rebuild by Design competition

With support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Urban Institute conducted an evaluation of Phase I of the Rebuild by Design competition. This article discusses the findings of the evaluation and the potential impact on future competitions.

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How emphasis on community engagement proved critical to Rebuild by Design’s success

Rebuild by Design’s intense level of community engagement has been heralded as innovative, but is it a sustainable model? This article provides an overview of how RBD was structured, some of the challenges of the public participation process and how HUD is moving forward with new design competitions.

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A retrospective on the potential pitfalls of design competitions

Rebuild by Design, the competition, “dedicated to creating innovative community and policy-based solutions to protect U.S. cities that are most vulnerable,”¹ is HUD’s latest success story and one that was listed as an exemplary innovation by CNN’s 10: Ideas forum.² While design competitions have been around for as long as people have been building, they aren’t without detractors. Building design is a remarkably political enterprise.

The Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) conducted two studies to examine the success of the end product of design competitions. In the first, the EDRA compiled a list of 80 architectural masterpieces.³ Of the buildings selected the association noted only three were in part or whole created through the process of a design competition. In the second study, the EDRA compiled the winning and losing design from 25 competitions held between 1882 and 1996. Participants in the study were shown the winning and losing entries side-by-side and asked which entry they preferred. The non-architect participants chose the losing entry 59 percent of the time while the architect participants chose the losing entry 51 percent of the time.

One high-profile example of the precarious process of architectural design competitions is the one for the World Trade Center site. Following 9/11, then New York’s Governor Pataki announced the creation of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), a city-state corporation responsible for overseeing the redevelopment of the area. After a series of missteps, including presenting six designs⁴ that the public disliked, the LMDC announced an architectural design competition for seven Manhattan-based architecture firms to present master plans for the site. The winning firm, Studio Daniel Libeskind, originally presented a comprehensive, coherent design with five towers spiraling upwards to the sky arranged in an arc surrounding a memorial garden.⁵

Currently, the site is scheduled to contain seven buildings, a memorial, a museum and a transit hub designed by *nine* different architects.⁶ There are many different perspectives and aesthetics involved in the site, leading to an overall loss of cohesion.

Another example of a less than perfect winning design is that of the Millennium Bridge in London, England. After winning a competition, architects Arup, Forster and Partners, in collaboration with Sir Anthony Caro, produced their “blade of light” pedestrian crossing of the River Thames. Within two days, the bridge was forced to close to pedestrian traffic because

¹ <http://www.rebuildbydesign.org/what-is-rebuild-by-design/#rebuild-by-design-today>

² <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2013/12/tech/cnn10-ideas/>

³ <http://www.researchnews.osu.edu/archive/descomp.htm>

⁴ <http://www.renewnyc.com/displaynews.aspx?newsid=b3aa6fb4-ebb6-48e3-ba62-c92bce75a647>

⁵ http://www.renewnyc.com/plan_des_dev/wtc_site/new_design_plans/Sept_2003_refined_design.asp

⁶ http://cip.cornell.edu/DPubS?service=Repository&version=1.0&verb=Disseminate&view=body&content-type=pdf_1&handle=cpre.crer/1342144023#

people were inadvertently falling in step with the bridge's natural vibrations, multiplying the vibrations to the point that the bridge was noticeably swaying.⁷ The bridge was closed for just over 20 months as construction and retrofitting fixed the problem.

In Australia, the design and construction of Federation Square in Melbourne was rife with obstacles. The Lab Architecture Studio design was controversial from the beginning as many conservatives objected to the placement of the 'free-standing shards' called for in the winning plan. A change of government during the construction phase further compounded issues at the site due to many requests for extensive revisions. The budget spiraled out of control and there were lengthy delays to the construction, resulting in a final price tag that was more than 400 percent greater than originally estimated.

While design competitions seem to more often inspire controversy than public satisfaction, it is worth noting that there have been some exemplary successes. The Sydney Opera House and the ANZAC War Memorial in Australia and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris are all buildings that resulted from design competitions. When British architect Richard Rogers collected his Pritzker Prize in 2007, the jury extolled his Centre Pompidou design as having "revolutionized museums, transforming what had once been elite monuments into popular places of social and cultural exchange, woven into the heart of the city."

Hopefully the Rebuild by Design projects will elicit similar kinds of praise in coming years, especially as organizers infused [public engagement](#) at the onset.

⁷ <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7064/abs/438043a.html>

Urban Institute: Resilience bar raised in Rebuild by Design competition

Despite “flying the plane as it is being built,” a recent Urban Institute evaluation found the Rebuild by Design competition, launched to ensure that rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy incorporated designs emphasizing resilience, was innovative in meeting its goals.

The evaluation of the first phase of RBD explores how the competition, an initiative of President Obama’s Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, was designed, carried out and could be replicated in other contexts.

The report notes that RBD team’s efforts to motivate design firms to develop innovative designs while incorporating “environmental, regulatory, financial, political and social realities have resulted in many proposed advances for resilient infrastructure design in general and for Sandy-affected populations in particular.”

The Urban Institute was given financial support by The Rockefeller Foundation to evaluate the competition’s Phase I and assess what worked well and what should be improved. The Rockefeller Foundation gave RBD Phase I a \$3 million investment.

Among the evaluation’s key findings are the following:

- RBD demonstrated many of the best aspects of a design competition by introducing research, public engagement and practical implementation stages, often in collaboration across teams.
- The nature of HUD funding regulations and protocols played a heavy role in helping to define RBD’s competition structure.
- RBD’s management existed parallel to, but separate from, the traditional federal grant solicitation and award processes that are often highly regulated and lengthy.
- There were some challenges in RBD’s planning. The model’s creators did not establish a clear administrative plan before execution which resulted in crisis-driven management. The original RBD vision was more “aspirational than operational.”
- RBD administrative staff exhibited “efficiency and grit” despite tight schedules and little or no pre-existing management plan.
- The limited timeframe of 10 months the teams had for research, design development, media outreach and community engagement was taxing.
- Community groups showed willingness to participate and support early development.
- Despite meager resources the design teams showed perseverance, goodwill and creativity.
- The individual teams spent well more than the allotted funds, typically three to six times more than allocated.

- RBD laid the groundwork for producing long term innovation through increased community awareness, a reconsideration of regional connections policy makers and an emphasis on engineering and environmental benefits.

After funding agreements are reached, the report recommends that continued investment be made during the implementation process to ensure that RBD's design projects remain innovative, communities remain engaged and the wealth of knowledge acquired during Phase I is sustained.

The report recommends assessing local, political, financial and regulatory terrain earlier in the process. These suggestions can be applied to new competitions, like HUD's recently announced National Disaster Resilience

Competition. http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2014/HUDNo_14-109

The complete evaluation may be accessed

at: <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/uploads/files/4decd6ef-e199-429e-9323-258926ca44d2-rbd-phase-i.pdf>

For a recent new release on the evaluation: <http://www.rebuildbydesign.org/urban-institute-and-the-rockefeller-foundation-release-evaluation-on-phase-one-of-rebuild-by-design/>

How emphasis on community engagement proved critical to Rebuild by Design's success

Hurricane Sandy made one thing clear: *we have to prepare for more severe weather and rising sea levels*. As part of this effort, the presidentially-appointed Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force launched the Rebuild by Design (RBD) competition in June 2013 to promote resilience in the aftermath of the storm.

A competition created to ignite innovation and inspire bold design, RBD would itself be groundbreaking in scope and execution. Specifically, RBD's emphasis on public engagement *during* the design phase was an [innovation for design competitions](#), according to a June 2014 report by the Urban Institute. The report, "Evaluation: Rebuild by Design Phase 1," was commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided RBD with financial support.

The competition required a considerable amount of public engagement during the design process in great part because it was funded by HUD's Community Development Block Grants - Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program. The award for winning designs would be directed to CDBG-DR grantees, usually a state or city government, which would ensure implementation of the plans. RBD design teams were therefore responsible for demonstrating support from government officials and the public during the design development stage.

The RBD design brief explains how contestants that passed the initial qualification stage would need to propose an implementation strategy that identified key partners, funding sources and a project timeline. To help, the design development phase would involve a "facilitated, iterative community engagement process with all levels of government." This process was intended to mitigate the risk that designs would be abstract, impractical and/or detached from local community needs.

Since CDBG-DR funds had never been part of a competition before, the team steering RBD engaged in an iterative process of its own. As the Urban Institute report noted, the RBD vision was more "aspirational than operational." The steering team did not have a clear administrative plan prior to execution despite its goal to inspire "big thinking" in how to build regional resilience against severe storms and climate change.

For design contestants, this meant conducting research, design development, jurisdictional negotiations, media outreach and community engagement in 10 months as opposed to a more traditional time span of two years in the face of ever-changing deliverables. To accommodate the requirements and ensure public support for design proposals, contestants spent three to six times more than their allotted \$25,000. The funds were used for the logistical costs of events and to provide subgrants to local community organizations hosting events.

RBD staff went on to organize site visits to impacted communities and would connect design teams directly to local community leaders, elected officials and municipal staff. The 10 finalists

would also hold or participate in more than 37 design charrettes and “Scale it Up” events, a series of performances, presentations and short-term installations.

In many cases the public engagement process worked as it was intended. In one example, cited by Justine Shapiro Kline in her master’s thesis “The Impact of the Public Process in Rebuild by Design” for Columbia University, the BIG Team embraced a more nuanced social and political context than anticipated. With five public meetings over two months in the Lower East Side, the team fine-tuned its “Big U” design proposal, adding more recreational space after discussions revealed children’s playfields were being used as staging areas for the East River Waterfront Esplanade project. Ultimately the City of New York was awarded \$335 million to implement the LES portion of the BIG Team’s “Big U” design concept.

While it is clear public engagement helped shape design proposals, it is uncertain that the intensity of the process is a sustainable model. For many of the RBD’s 10 finalists, the public engagement requirement was seen as an important, albeit cumbersome, step. “[I]t’s easy to get caught up in logistics and funding, but the network will be an important legacy,” as one interviewee tells the Urban Institute.

Still, at least for some of the teams, the requirement was cost-prohibitive. Carlos Martin, a spokesperson for the Urban Institute, recommends a “more thorough and appropriate time allocation” if the RBD model is replicated. He also recommends providing “more reasonable prizes to all design teams so that the smaller teams are less disadvantaged and stretched thin.”

Kai-Uwe Bergmann of Bjarke Ingels Group, the relatively large architectural firm leading the BIG Team, estimates that competing for RBD took tens of thousands of hours with 25-30 staff dedicated to developing their Big U proposal. He wouldn’t have it any other way: “Competitions are the mana for our souls. They have always been and will continue to be vehicles to test out ideas and concepts.”

HUD recently announced the [National Disaster Resilience Competition](#), which will make \$1 billion available to rebuild “stronger and smarter” from a major disaster in 2011, 2012 or 2013. Like RBD, the competition is in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation and is designed to generate innovative design solutions to the increased risks for severe weather. Unlike RBD, eligible applicants include states and localities that received a presidential disaster declaration.

The Rockefeller Foundation will convene resilience workshops to help communities develop their proposals for NDRC. This “framing process,” like RBD’s design development process, is set to help communities understand their risks and vulnerabilities. While taking a different form, the public engagement process RBD spearheaded will stand as its legacy.