

Where does design fit in post-Harvey policy?

After Harvey, County Judge Ed Emmett, Rice University faculty Jim Blackburn, and others released lists of recommendations for rebuilding after Harvey. The ideas can be broken into three basic food groups.

Fortify.

This group is generally large in scale and expensive. The projects prevent flooding and, with the involvement of designers, possibly expand access to parks, trails, housing, and economic development. Projects include:

- Fortifying the coast with gates and walls
- Building a new reservoir in the northwest
- Widening bayous
- Rebuilding streets with better drainage and retention capacity
- Requiring more on-site detention from developers

Get out of the way.

This group is generally small in scale and paid out in small chunks, though it adds up. Designers can make the individual parts also add up into a greater whole. Policies include:

- Buying out or elevating properties that flood repetitively
- Stopping new developments in floodplains (or requiring them to meet much tougher regulations like higher base elevations and electrical systems out of harm's way)
- Redrawing the flood maps that inform regulations
- Creating carbon sequestration markets that preserve wetlands and prairies
- Reforming the National Flood Insurance Program to discourage vulnerable new developments
- Publicizing rather than hiding flood risks from those buying land and building on it

Coordinate.

This group has to do with sharing information and governing in a way that matches how water moves (without respect to arbitrary jurisdictional boundaries). Designers often are the ones who have to work across these systems and can quickly point to the breakdowns:

- Coordinating flood management across counties, cities, river authorities, the Army Corps, Municipal Utility Districts, etc.
- Alerting people about hazards at a dwelling-by-dwelling, underpass-by-underpass level of detail

Missing from proposals on the table is an explicit commitment to urban design, though the mayor's Complete Communities initiative, Plan Houston, Bayou Greenways 2020, and METRO capital planning are being discussed by leaders as a way to direct rebuilding.