

## Viewpoint / Pilarin Ferrer, AIA

### Nowhere To Run

On a beautiful starry January night, I was enjoying dinner and the company of fellow architects at a reception hosted by the St. Thomas USVI Chapter of the AIA. The dinner was at the spectacular 200-year-old de Jongh House that is perched on a hill overlooking Charlotte Amelia Harbor. Sitting there overlooking the harbor, I had a moment of reckoning. Colleagues from Florida, who were at the event, were astounded at how this delicate house, perched atop a steep cliff, had withstood the battering of many fierce storms. My revelation was that this wooden house still stood, just as it had for over 200 years, passed from one generation of the de Jongh family to another, with no one ever wondering if it was strong enough to brave a storm.

Last year I watched television with horror, just as the whole world did, at the damage caused to the Gulf Coast of the United States by hurricane Katrina and all the other storms that followed. So many questions occurred to me, like why doesn't help get there sooner? Why are people dying from hunger, thirst and lack of medicine in the richest, most powerful nation in the world?

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*The image we all got was that we were not looking at pictures of the US, but rather of refugee camps in a third world country.*

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I could not understand how people were forced to leave million dollar homes to get to safer ground. How could such expensive and luxurious homes not withstand the brunt of a storm? How can anybody live in an unsafe structure or on an unsafe site? These are questions that I don't believe any homeowner should have to ask. In the public realm, I wonder why hospitals would ever need to be evacuated when a hospital should be designed to function under severe conditions with redundant backup systems.

The answer to these questions is sim-

ple. People who live on the mainland of the United States have places to run to. They can move to higher ground to escape a storm.

When you live on an island, you have **nowhere to run.**

With this in mind, islanders, and I believe I speak for most residents of the Caribbean Islands, have learned what measures must be taken in order to survive a storm. We have learned these things simply because we have nowhere to run, no higher ground, no other state, no highway to take.

Since we have nowhere to run, our homes are a safe haven. Experience has taught us many things, but first and most important is that a home is not a disposable commodity. You build your home to last, to withstand and to protect. Whether it's constructed of wood or concrete, it has to be sound and you never build in flood-prone areas. An islander's home has to provide all the basic necessities one might need to survive during periods of electrical outages, water shortages and post-storm recovery.

Every year when hurricane season comes around, we check for flashlights, batteries and medicines. We empty our freezers in case of power outages, check our storm shutters, stock up on non-perishable food, store water, gasoline or diesel. We dispose of anything that could turn into a deadly flying projectile, trim trees, check roof drains and hope for the best. Public schools go through drills in case they have to be converted into temporary shelters. Red Cross offices stock up on blood, mattresses, blankets, food and clothing. Emergency power generators are checked, as well as water supply tanks and cisterns. In other words, we do everything possible to ensure our survival, including the sick, elderly, those who live alone and our pets.

In Puerto Rico, we've seen how much damage a major hurricane can cause. We've had our share of misses, near misses and hits that have turned us into experts on preparedness.



Photo by Rosario Fernández El Nuevo Día

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*We are very proud of the fact that when Hurricane Georges hit in 1998, not a single life was lost and, for the most part, we all braved the storm in our homes because our homes were the safest places to be.*

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For me, the important lesson in all of this is that a person's home has to be a secure haven, no matter its cost. In addition, some areas have to be declared unsafe places to build and flood maps have to be respected. Hospitals and schools have to be capable of functioning no matter what nature throws at us and we must take care of those who are not able to take care of themselves. We must live as if we have nowhere to run. We islanders have unconsciously adopted the same attitude towards impending storm systems as Sir Winston Churchill did when he refused to abandon London in the face of the threat of German bombardment during World War II. Churchill said, "Let them do their worst, we will do our best." That's what we do in the islands because we have no choice. We have nowhere to run!

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Pilarín Ferrer, AIA, CAAPPR, was the 2006 President of the AIA Puerto Rico Chapter.