

Hurricane Sandy: Aftermath

Along the battered Northeast coast, contractors assess the damage — and get to work

by Ted Cushman

For storm watchers, 2012 was a quiet year — almost. The hurricane season had been active but harmless; plenty of big storms formed, but they all stayed out at sea.

Then came Sandy.

Officially only a Category 2 or 3 hurricane, Sandy was an exceptional case: Sucked into a low-pressure trough moving through the central U.S., Sandy morphed into a one-of-a-kind “super-storm.” Its high winds spread to cover an unprecedented expanse (even as they dropped below hurricane strength) and pushed a tidal surge capable of dealing far more damage than wind alone could do.

The warnings were stern. Tropical weather expert Jeff Masters predicted that Sandy would be a billion-dollar disaster. Ordering evacuations of New York City’s low-lying “Zone A” neighborhoods, Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, “If you refuse to evacuate, you are putting not only yourself at risk, but also the first responders who would have to help you.” New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was blunt: Defying the orders, he said, would be “both stupid and selfish.”

As always, some people viewed the warnings as an excess of caution. A Brooklyn remodeler *JLC* talked to before the storm said, “The media always hypes these things.” But Sandy lived up to its hype — and then some. The surge flooded tunnels between Manhattan and Brooklyn, put subway lines out of commission, and knocked out power to lower Manhattan. Barrier-island communities in New Jersey were hammered, with boardwalks, homes, and bridges washed away. Long Island’s south shore



Nate Dorr



Nate Dorr

In Brooklyn and Queens, beachfront houses were totaled by surge flooding, basements and first floors were flooded, and cars were swept away.

went dark. Dozens of residents stranded on Fire Island changed their minds and asked to evacuate — after it was too late for authorities to help. The Queens neighborhood of Breezy Point — itself home to many first responders — caught fire at the height of the flood. Hampered by waist-high water and without hydrant pressure,

firefighters had all they could do to rescue trapped residents. A hundred houses burned.

The low-lying Brooklyn neighborhood of Gerritsen Beach was officially in the “B Zone,” not under evacuation orders. That didn’t matter to Sandy. A surge wave washed down streets there, trapping res-



Eric Borden



NOAA



Eric Borden



Mark Olson, USAF

New Jersey took the direct impact of Sandy at landfall. The storm surge cut through the barrier island at Mantaloking, and undermined or swept away houses at Seaside Heights, Normandy Beach, and all along the shore.



FEMA



FEMA

Along the Connecticut shore, the storm surge on the Long Island Sound destroyed shorefront houses.

idents. In the aftermath, a resident told reporters, “I found fish in my basement. Fish from the sea.”

JLC readers and authors found themselves in the direct path of the storm. In Toms River, N.J., builder Eric Borden helped elderly clients evacuate as the storm approached. At landfall, Borden

says, “We took the Barnegat Bay through the back of my house.” Borden moved in with his daughter, running the house off a generator, and buckled down to the huge task of repairing his beachfront community. “Every house I’ve built in the last 15 years has been damaged,” he says.

In Levittown on Long Island, N.Y.,

contractor Mike Sloggatt lost power but stayed high and dry. But a friend’s house was flooded. “I called him to check and he said, ‘I think we’re okay,’” Sloggatt recounts. “Then he saw the wave come up the street and he said, ‘Wait a minute. We’re not okay.’ I told him, ‘Get over here.’ I think he’ll be staying with us for a

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while, because his house is ruined." In the days after the storm, Sloggatt was in a new world with no power, no fuel, and spotty communication. "We have no phones, no Internet, no TV," he said. "We don't know what the outside world knows."

Long Island remodeler Sal Ferro runs Alure, one of the nation's largest remodeling companies, in densely populated Nassau County. Two of Ferro's employees lost their homes in the storm. Ferro was busy before the storm. But in the aftermath, he says, he knows his existing business will take a hit. He's pivoting toward insurance work — not his company's bread and butter, but a niche in which they do have experience. "It's not an adversarial thing," he says. "It's about, how can we work together to fix things." Insurance work will probably be less profitable than his regular business, he says. "Cash flow is everything in remodeling. With insurance, it can take time to get paid. That's going to be a problem." But making money in the storm's aftermath is not his top concern. Many of the losses in his area won't be insured, he knows. "We have to rebuild our whole community," he says. "We're going to have to work together. And we're going to need help."

Long Island remains in worse shape than New Jersey or the Connecticut coastline, where most damage occurred in prosperous second-home shore towns. Weeks after the storm, tens of thousands of Long Island electric customers were still blacked out. But even Long Island's problems pale by comparison with hard-hit low-income neighborhoods in the New York City boroughs of Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Queens, where volunteer groups have been working to augment an official response that residents say is barely adequate — if that. Upstate New York remodeler Rick Stacy was called up with New York's Naval Militia to support National Guard operations in New York City. Days after the storm, he says, "we had to help

a 90-year-old woman down 12 flights of stairs. She had been alone for 10 days with no lights, no water, and no heat."

This coverage of the Hurricane Sandy aftermath is adapted from twice-monthly special issues of the Coastal Connection

newsletter, which is written by JLC contributing editor Ted Cushman. Look for continuing coverage of the Hurricane Sandy recovery and rebuilding in future issues and at jlconline.com. To subscribe to the Coastal Connection newsletter, go to coastalcontractor.net.

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