
Florida, Rose: Post-Harvey, the city must reset its development trajectory

By Richard Florida and Jonathan F.P. Rose | September 5, 2017 | Updated: September 6, 2017 8:45am

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There is little doubt that the Greater Houston area will rebound and rebuild after Harvey. This has long been one of the world's fastest-growing and most vibrant regions, with a population fast approaching 7 million and projected to pass 11 million by 2050. With an economic output of nearly \$500 billion, Houston's economy would place it among the 25 wealthiest nations in the world. It's a center of high-tech energy production and medical research.

Houston will come back from Harvey. The question is how.

Natural disasters confront cities with terrible tragedy, but they also provide an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine themselves, a chance to remake their economy and infrastructure in

more resilient and sustainable ways.

In his book "The Evolution of Great World Cities," civil engineer Christopher Kennedy shows how cities have reset their development trajectories in the wake of natural disasters. London's rise to global commercial dominance in the late 17th century, for example, was fueled by its response to the Great Fire of 1666, which led to sweeping changes in the city's building codes, the adoption of new building technologies and the widening of streets. This allowed greater density and ultimately put the city on the path to unprecedented success.

This is what Houston can and must do today.

In the short term, there is much work to be done to rebuild damaged homes, apartments, roads and commercial buildings. However, it would be urban malpractice if the region did not also take this opportunity to reimagine its future and create a long-term plan for greater ecological and economic resilience. The plan should be premised on the increasing frequency and volatility of weather events, and should aim for a more sustainable and inclusive development model that improves the quality of life for all Houstonians.

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Houston is widely admired for its entrepreneurial approach to land use and zoning, which has fueled its growth. But its lack of development guidelines has created a sprawling, car-dependent development model that leaves the city more vulnerable to devastating floods. The region now has the opportunity to rebuild in a better way.

For starters, Houston must make better use of its natural systems of flood protection and mitigation. It should look to Philadelphia, which is investing over \$1.7 billion in a green infrastructure plan. By building more parks, gardens and swales, the city plans to reduce its stormwater outflow by 85 percent, saving it \$7 billion in infrastructure costs. Rotterdam's climate change adaptation strategy uses undeveloped areas as "sponges" to absorb stormwater. Creating more green spaces in Houston will help absorb rainfall, reduce summer temperatures, and improve the quality of life, increasing its ability to attract the talent that powers today's knowledge economy.

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Houston should also rebuild in a denser way, with more high-rise apartment and office buildings that can withstand severe flooding. Green construction, energy-efficient building technology and distributed energy systems will not only increase the region's resilience to weather events but reduce operating costs and create new jobs in green technology.

It is also time for a thorough rethink of the region's transportation infrastructure. Houston's car-dependent road and highway system has enabled its sprawl and left it vulnerable to flooding. Its traffic congestion is notorious - the average Houstonian spends 74 hours stuck in traffic each year, the fourth most in the country. And its clogged roads and highways make it virtually impossible to evacuate the city.



It's time to invest in a true mass transit system, not just a few light rail lines downtown. Better mass transit would make the region more sustainable and resilient, and would massively increase the scale and scope of its economy. Using high-speed rail to link Houston to Dallas (as Texas Central Partners is attempting with the Texas Bullet Train), San Antonio and Austin would create an economic region of 20 million people with more than \$1.5 trillion in economic output, making it one of the world's 10 largest economies - bigger than Canada, Russia, Spain or Australia.

Houston can also use this opportunity to redress the growing gap between rich and poor while shoring up its middle class. For all the rhetoric about the city's egalitarianism, it has one of the highest levels of inequality and economic segregation in the country, ranking behind only New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Even as its urban neighborhoods have been revitalized, the region has become a patchwork of concentrated advantage and concentrated disadvantage. More than three-quarters of the city's closed landfills and nearly 90 percent of its hazardous waste sites are located in low-income, largely minority neighborhoods. Houston must create a more affordable and inclusive development model based on mixed-used development, affordable housing and better jobs.

Human civilization first emerged in the flood zones of river valleys, which had the most fertile soil. More than three-quarters of the world economy today is based around coastal cities. These are the planet's most innovative and productive areas - and also the most vulnerable to the effects of global warming. By moving toward a model of mixed-use neighborhoods connected by mass transit and beautified by abundant green space, Houston's rebuilding can make it a model for the world.

Florida, author of "The Rise of the Creative Class" and "The New Urban Crisis," is one of the world's leading urban thinkers. Rose is an urban planner and the author of "The Well-Tempered City."

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