

# Build to weather the storm

Information gleaned from Hurricane Andrew's leavings clearly points to one major reason why so many houses in South Florida were destroyed: Shoddy construction and builders' shortcuts resulted in structures that were scarcely stronger than a house of cards.

Roofs not nailed to trusses, walls not tied into roofs, rebars not long enough to support walls, anchor plates not fastened down — all are deficiencies that most homeowners had no way of knowing about because they were not visible until the roof flew off or the walls tumbled down. But the people who built those houses knew.

A grand jury will be convened to place blame. Was the poor construction the result of fraud by builders, lax inspectors or insufficient code and inspection requirements?

Regardless, the housing construction industry clearly needs far more oversight than it is getting from building inspectors today. Dishonest inspectors should pay the price, but those trying to do a good job must be given the tools to exact compliance when they find deficiencies.

Too often, tough enforcement is regarded as a political issue — if projects are red-tagged, influential builders will yell. Building inspectors need the support of local elected officials if they are to clamp down on violators and they need manpower to catch people building without permits. Local governments strapped for cash and tempted to cut back on building inspectors surely now must see the folly of that course.

The greatest problem in destroyed South Florida neighborhoods, according to experts making preliminary conclusions, was not that building codes were inadequate, but that builders didn't follow the codes. ". . . If all the buildings had been done exactly to codes, there would have been considerably less damage. . . . We may have had half the loss," said Charles Goldsmith, a Largo architect who is national chairman of the Roofing Industry Committee on Wind Issues and who spent several days studying the destruction after Andrew.

Nevertheless, Goldsmith and other building experts intend to push for a few changes to the Southern Standard Building

Code, the guideline for building construction in the South, at the next Southern Standard Congress.

Goldsmith wants to address the issue of sloppy roof construction and seek the return of some fasteners that no longer are used in this age of particle board and staples. Others are calling for additional inspections at particular points in the construction process, so that inspectors can see items that now get covered up before the next inspection is called for. State building codes also need review in the wake of Andrew.

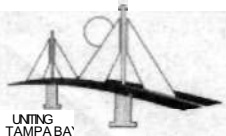
Especially troublesome is that the damage in South Florida was more pronounced in low-income neighborhoods. Affordable housing should not be a deathtrap in a storm. Code enforcement must be standard in all neighborhoods.

There also is plenty of evidence that treeless subdivisions are likely to suffer worse damage than neighborhoods where homes are protected by stands of trees. All the more reason for strong tree ordinances that forbid developers from bulldozing everything green and putting up houses on denuded land.

This isn't the first time that a hurricane has left messages scrawled in the landscape. The same sort of ineptness in building construction was observed after Hurricane Hugo hit South Carolina, and some experts called then for changes in the code and better testing of the standards for wind load. But there were few substantial changes.

Hurricane Gilbert hit Cancun, Mexico, as a category 4 storm in 1988, but experts found surprisingly little damage. They concluded that buildings weathered the storm because of common building practices there: handmade concrete blocks, small windows, interior walls made of concrete rather than gypsum panels, and roofs of steel-reinforced concrete.

This time, let's heed the message. Carefully built homes of quality materials, thorough inspections, and revised regional and state building codes that reflect our newfound wisdom are the best protection we have against nature's fury.



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