

Partner Spotlight: Illya Azaroff

This month, FLASH interviewed NYC architect Illya Azaroff, AIA about building for a resilient future.

Born and raised in Nebraska with family ties to Russia and Germany, Illya Azaroff has been designing structures from his home base in New York City for more than two decades. With undergraduate degrees in both Architecture and Geography/Environmental Studies, he earned his master's degree in 1997 in Architectural Design at Brooklyn's prestigious Pratt Institute. Illya is a certified trainer for the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center (NDPTC) and the California Emergency Management Association for Safety Assessment Program Training.

***FLASH:** It is great to have you partnering with us, Illya. Please tell our readers how you got involved with FLASH.*

AZAROFF: A few years back, I was identified as a subject matter expert working on housing in the Northeastern U.S. I worked with several colleagues from around the country on the FLASH Resilient Design Guide. I remain involved with this project in an editorial capacity, in addition to attending and presenting at hurricane conferences hosted by FLASH.

***FLASH:** Your contribution to the Resilient Design Guide is valuable, and we also appreciate you sharing your expertise at conferences. Going back to the very beginnings of your work, how did you become interested in disaster safety?*

AZAROFF: While growing up in Nebraska, I saw a lot of tornadoes, flash floods, and other extreme weather events firsthand. I think this aspect of life in the area where I grew up deeply influenced the way I view the world. Additionally, my father was a war refugee, and so he had firsthand experience of *man-made* disasters. Imprisoned in a Nazi forced-labor camp during World War II, he experienced the worst of displacement, hunger, cold, fear, and much more. I heard about these experiences growing up. Our family history together with my childhood environment made the concepts of risk, disturbance, and resilience very real for me.

***FLASH:** Our childhood experiences certainly shape our understanding of the world and our place within it.*

AZAROFF: Yes. And gaining an understanding of the extreme needs of people around the world is not an isolated project. Our challenges are many. I have come to realize that we can all help lessen the effects of disaster and become more prepared through advocacy, training, better building practices, knowing your neighbor, and all sorts of ways to approach these issues.

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***FLASH:** What do you see as the future of resilient building?*

AZAROFF: I think the future of resilient buildings lies in rethinking how we build, where we build, and the arrangement of materials used in construction. There is so much great guidance and technical know-how available today that we can build extremely resilient buildings that will, in turn, make people, families, and communities safer. Given the economic and social losses that immediately follow disturbances to structures, I believe resilience is something we all need to take on as our minimum practice for building. Resilience includes health, safety, and welfare. It is necessary for architects, engineers, building codes, and code enforcement authorities to recognize that having resilient buildings and communities is a minimum standard in the 21st century.

***FLASH:** What do you think is moving the cause of resilience forward?*

AZAROFF: There are several elements that are moving resilience along. Greater recognition of risks and vulnerabilities across the world and acceptance of changes and challenges from climate change seem to be at the forefront these days. Recent meetings such as COP 21 in Paris, the Habitat III conference in Quito, and the New Urban Agenda on housing all are on the table for us to address climate change, housing, and the future.

Also, I believe the increase in disturbances coupled with where populations have been relocating over the past decade, and will continue to move into those areas, is a recipe for increased risk. To be clear, millions of people are moving to areas of known risks, or are becoming areas of risk, due to climate change and resource stress. That alone brings these issues of risk and resilience to the forefront for cities, states, and national bodies all around the world. Even in the U.S., we have millions of people displaced by hurricanes on the East Coast or in the Gulf Coast area. In addition to life safety, our immediate challenge is to mitigate the amount of time people are out of their homes and away from their businesses.

***FLASH:** Can you highlight a specific project you are working on in the resilience field?*

AZAROFF: I am working on several projects related to resilience to advise state and federal authorities. Some of these projects have to do with preparation and mitigation, and others have to do with the actual buildings themselves.

On the local level, we are working on the *#HurricaneStrong* home in Breezy Point, N.Y. It's a resilient and sustainable home for a client who lost her family home to Superstorm Sandy. It will be the latest in resilient technology and thinking from great industry partners. We are hoping that upon completion, it will help set a new standard for resilient home design and building techniques.

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FLASH: *Yes, it's a fantastic project with great partners and a promising impact on resilient construction for the future. What excites you about this project?*

AZAROFF: What I like about this project is that we are providing safety and security for a very deserving homeowner and demonstrating to the entire neighborhood how to rebuild better—more resiliently. This home will be impact-resistant, water-resistant, elevated, and protected from lightning. It is designed to have passive survivability regarding lighting and temperature regulation. The house also will have backup systems available in case of a power failure. It will have the ability to withstand much of what we have identified as the top risks for this geographic area.

FLASH: *Are there other projects currently on your plate that speak to these issues?*

AZAROFF: On the other side of the spectrum, I have been working with the federal government Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response on the National Disaster Resilience Framework. This effort focuses on resilience of critical facilities and infrastructure. Our work has been about how we assess those facilities, make them more resilient, and approach continuous operation before, during, and after a disturbance. It is exciting work and much is needed to guide us to a steady, resilient future.

FLASH: *It sounds like you are quite busy making the world a safer place to live and work. Do you have any other comments or words of wisdom for our readers?*

AZAROFF: Yes. I would like to address all your readers—not just architects, engineers or builders—but *everyone*, every stakeholder. I want to tell people that it is within their power to make a difference in building resilient to make communities, homes, and businesses much more resilient and prepared for disturbances. Having a close-knit community, knowing your neighbors, and understanding that you are not alone in this, is where we all need to begin.

And when you are approaching maintenance on your building or home, take a close look at how you can “step up” rather than just replace or repair. Whether it's better windows, better doors, better roofing, each presents an opportunity for incremental changes that will increase the resiliency profile and benefit the building or homeowner greatly in the long run.

A resilient home is a resilient family. A resilient neighborhood is a resilient community. What we are striving for is to lessen the effects of stresses caused by disturbances such as natural disasters. We won't be able to stop the disturbance, but lessening its effect and getting back to our normal daily lives is what we can all achieve together.

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