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ARCHITECTURE

## Future Dangers for a Maritime City

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From its description *Rising Currents: Projects for New York's Waterfront*, a six-month research program being inaugurated early next month at the Museum of Modern Art, sounds like the kind of dry, somnolent workshop someone would dream up for a convention of civil engineers. Conceived to address the potential effects of rising water levels and apocalyptic storms on the city, the program is modeled on the principles of "soft infrastructure," which proposes flexible ecological systems as an alternative to "hard" solutions like concrete dams and storm barriers.

But the program's real subject is frustration with the federal government's snail-like response to [global warming](#), the brutal effects of the financial crisis, wasteful infrastructure projects and squandered intellectual resources. Its aim is to prod government to think more creatively about our nation's crumbling and outdated fabric.

The idea began taking shape several years ago, after the prominent New York engineer Guy Nordenson visited New Orleans in the wake of [Hurricane Katrina](#) and was prompted to study the impact that global warming could have on a seemingly safe coastal city like New York. His findings were alarming: for example, according to a recent study by New York City's panel on climate change, even at current rates of global warming water levels will rise as much as two feet by 2080 as the atmosphere gets hotter. If the ice cap melts at a faster rate, Mr. Nordenson added, the figure could double. In that case a storm surge on top of that could put 20 percent of the city under water.

Mr. Nordenson's response was a 360-page blueprint, written with Adam Yarinsky and Catherine Seavitt, that draws as much on historical precedent as technological innovation. A dense network of piers, wetlands and oyster beds could project out into New York Harbor from the waterfronts on all sides, breaking up storm surges. An additional archipelago of small fingerlike islands could be built in the center of the harbor, and old subway cars could be dumped into the water to form reefs.

If implemented, the plan could psychologically shift the city's epicenter from Manhattan toward the waters to its south, with the waterfronts of Staten Island, Brooklyn, Manhattan and New Jersey reimaged as an interconnected ecosystem dotted with piers and public parks.

When [MoMA's](#) curator of architecture and design, Barry Bergdoll, saw the plan a year ago, he was intrigued. But he had thoughts of his own on the matter. After the Obama administration unveiled its stimulus package this year, he worried that its emphasis on shovel-ready projects would reinforce the problems of the city's existing infrastructure rather than give rise to new, ecologically sound models.

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The financial collapse also meant that work was drying up for a whole generation of midcareer architects. Why not use this dormant talent to push the project a step further?

Mr. Bergdoll decided to select four teams that would participate in a program to design four projects in New York Harbor inspired by Mr. Nordenson's guidelines. The teams, which will be announced in the next few weeks, will be provided with studio space on three floors of the [P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center](#), an affiliate of MoMA, in Long Island City, Queens. The designs could include anything from parks to public housing but must respond to specific site conditions. MoMA plans to exhibit the results next spring.

This is only the second time that MoMA's architecture department has committed to mount an exhibition of projects before they had even been designed — a risky proposition, since who knows if the program will produce memorable work?

Yet whatever the outcome, Mr. Nordenson and Mr. Bergdoll have already produced something of value. By drawing on the sudden wealth of underemployed brain power, the program takes advantage of one of the few benefits, if you want to call it that, of the financial collapse. And while acknowledging that the causes of global warming, crumbling infrastructure and a collapsing global economy are all connected, it brings these issues down to a manageable scale, one that the public can grasp.

Washington should be studying this program carefully as it evolves, and emulate it.