REBUILD BY DESIGN

Meet the Director of the Bay Area Resilient By Design Challenge:

ALEX ZWISSLER

Starting in 2017, the Bay Area Resilient By Design Challenge will invite global design experts to collaborate with community leaders, government agencies, and the private sector to develop visionary, realistic, and implementable built solutions to respond to the effects of rising sea level on Bay Area neighborhoods, the physical environment, and infrastructure.

The Bay Area Resilient by Design Challenge is modeled after the success of the "Rebuild by Design" competition that followed Hurricane Sandy. This Challenge will capture the creativity, imagination, and entrepreneurship of the Bay Area that will make a lasting impact on their shared future.

Alexander Zwissler, Principal of Einstellung Labs LLC, has been appointed as the Director of the Bay Area Resilient by Design Challenge.

Zwissler will lead the project's development and implementation. He brings over 25 years of senior executive level experience in both the nonprofit and for profit sectors. In 2013, he was appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to serve as a Commissioner on the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). He is Co-Chair of the Gateways Eastbay STEM Network, on the Advisory Board of the Climate Readiness Institute, and on the Board of Cool the Earth.

Fun Fact: Alex rode 200,354 vertical feet on his mountain bike last year.

Q: What would a resilient Bay Area look like to you?

A: Boy, this should be an easy question, right? I've come to appreciate over time that the word resilience takes on so many different meanings. There is the physical resilience to withstand or adapt to changes in our environment such as to sea level rise. But that's just part of the picture, since what we are seeking to make resilient is at the end of the day some element of community, whether that is a residential neighborhood, a wetland enjoyed for recreation or a piece of infrastructure necessary to make the region function, like a bridge or an airport. So really it is about people, not just places. Therefore for me, a resilient Bay Area would be one in which the people of the Bay Area can continue to thrive and grow. But what exactly that looks like is up to them. That's one of the reasons I'm so excited about the Bay Area Resilient by Design Challenge, in that it will rely heavily on the engagement of the community to come up with these answers.

Q: What is the single biggest challenge/opportunity in the Bay Area?

A: In the context of resilience to climate change, one of the biggest challenges is our disjointed nature...nine counties, 101 cities, countless agencies, districts and stakeholders. Therefore, in terms of governance it is very difficult to get things done, particularly when you cross jurisdictional boundaries, as sea level rise does. The opportunity is that there is a growing awareness of this challenge, and folks are starting to think more regionally. The best example of this is the passage of Measure AA last month, where for the first time all nine counties voted in favor of a parcel tax to provide funding for the health and resilience of the Bay.

Q: How does your experience in outer space ground you to what's happening here on earth?

A: This is funny...I'm guessing this in reference to the fact that I was the CEO of the Chabot Space and Science Center for the past eight years. Ironically, my experience there did ground me on Earth. We made a strategic decision to focus on earth systems and in particular climate change education as one of our core competencies. Working with Bill Nye and many brilliant scientists and educators, we developed a number of programs to educate and inspire our youth to tackle the challenges of climate change. By the way, I know almost nothing about astronomy.

Q: Why is this work important to you?

A: As I came to learn more about the challenges of climate change, and the need to both mitigate its impacts and adapt to its outcomes, I felt a growing need to be an active participant in both of those efforts. I care about our future and am determined to make a contribution to that future, Finally, I grew up here in the Bay area, and while I've lived many places, this is home...I take this personally.

Q: The Rebuild by Design competition model brings together the talent of the world and connects them with the talent of the region. When designers visit the Bay Area, what should they see that would not likely appear in a travel guide?

A: Oh I love this question. Being a "homer" I'd have to say the town I live in, Fairfax, even with only 7500 people, has a remarkably rich cultural life and history. Fairfax is home to the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, has fantastic restaurants, pubs and bars that play live music nightly (and claim to have done so continuously for the past 50 years) and sits at the gateway to both Mt. Tamalpais and beautiful, bucolic West Marin. The variety store sells bumper stickers that read, "Fairfax...Mayberry on Acid".