From FEMA’s perspective, the creation of new community housing sites is an undesirable option, for a plethora of reasons. Creation of community sites is substantially more costly on a per capita basis than other temporary housing options (sites normally require the installation of water, sewer, and electric utilities; roads and walkways; and ongoing maintenance and operations costs). Acceptable sites that are large enough to justify the construction and installation process and provide adequate access to utility service, transportation, and community services and facilities such as schools, health care, and grocery shopping are very difficult to find. It is not easy to find landowners willing and able to lease land to the federal government for a housing mission of undetermined duration, with the result that sites are often drawn from the inventory of land that is owned by government agencies, typically at the state or local level. These sites are often inconveniently located and may have otherwise incompatible co-tenants (state prison grounds, military facilities, etc.). Finally, while the proposal to use sites often generates community resistance, just as often, there are situations in which the locations are unacceptable to the displaced population that the site is proposed to accommodate. Lack of access to public transportation, schools, churches, medical facilities, and other features of community social networks often creates resistance among those being relocated to temporary housing community sites.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the site selection process for temporary housing is driven primarily by the urgent need to house survivors quickly. There is usually only limited time for evaluating the trade-offs between an ideal or even a satisfactory local location and the need to quickly identify a site and start the installation process, which usually has a minimum of four weeks of lead time before survivors begin to be housed. The need for construction of temporary housing sites is driven by the absence of any other viable local housing options. This means that there are people in congregate shelters waiting for a temporary housing solution. The decision process involves players not accustomed to working together in an often politically charged environment accomplishing a task no one relishes. FEMA is the “developer” of community sites, but unlike traditional development processes, the developer in this case is completely at the mercy of others to select the site. The decision-making process by which this happens is diffuse, to say the least, and, as Aldrich and Crook have shown, politicians are often loath to incur the risk of strong leadership on this land-use decision. The pressure to act quickly after a disaster is intense and does not leave much time for careful and comprehensive consideration of alternatives.

This, in my view, is the real dilemma associated with this form of temporary housing solution—the necessity to balance all the demands of technocracy and democracy, including public participation in the decision-making process in a compressed time frame, over an issue (land use) that is controversial in even its most benign manifestations, and often with incomplete data and many unanswered questions (How long...
jurisdictions to hire contractors and have them make immediate repairs to electrical and heating systems and doors and windows to make it possible for people to remain in their homes in the short term, while long-term housing recovery options come into focus. The outcome of efforts to implement this approach in the aftermath of Sandy will provide valuable insights into its viability as an option to traditional temporary housing, including construction of community sites.

The repair of multifamily units was examined following Hurricane Katrina, and a variation of this approach was actually undertaken, whereby FEMA offered incentives, in the form of guaranteed number of renters, if building owners accomplished repairs sufficient to make units habitable. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 made substantial changes to FEMA authority and included authority for FEMA to pay for repairs to privately owned multifamily rental properties. This authority was further enhanced by Congress in the Hurricane Sandy supplemental appropriation, although the authority still suffers from a limiting condition that requires the owners of such multifamily buildings to have FEMA rental payments offset until such time as the cost of repairs have been fully amortized. This provision makes this approach unattractive to many potential candidates for the program.

It remains to be seen how successful these rapid repair efforts can be in reducing or eliminating the need for construction of community sites. The advantage that these repair programs bring is that affected individuals can stay in their own homes and neighborhoods in the short term, without closing off options for long-term housing that can be created out of harm’s way and avoiding the pitfalls associated with the relocation of disaster survivors to unfamiliar locations.