

REAL ESTATE

5 Resilience Lessons For Homeowners, Builders, Buyers From LA Fires

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ALTADENA, CALIFORNIA - JANUARY 19: Sisters sit together on what remains of their home in Altadena. (Photo by Brandon Bell/Getty Images)

I watched with alarm as the flames blazing across Los Angeles last January crept closer to my best friend's home. There were already massive fires west of him in the Pacific Palisades and east of him in the Altadena area. High winds were

pushing sparks across hills, house tops and highways, ever closer to the midcentury home where he and his family have lived for years. My suburban San Diego residence, 150 miles south, was their evacuation site if they had to leave in a hurry. This family was ultimately spared – *this time*. Sadly, thousands of others were not as fortunate.

According to [Redfin](#), 5,449 homes were destroyed in the two major Los Angeles fire incidents, and 905 more were damaged. What lessons can homeowners and builders take from this tragedy?

This is the first in a two-part series on insights and resources homeowners and homebuilders can take away from the fires to reduce their wildfire risk in the future and increase their resilience.

1. Rebuild With Health In Mind

Liz Miles, vice president of residential at the [International WELL Building Institute](#), was one of the Angelenos forced to evacuate during the fires but was fortunately able to return later to an intact home and neighborhood. Given her organization's focus on healthy homes and buildings, she observes that "There are growing concerns about how decontamination will affect air quality and the broader environment. While future rebuilding may seem distant, it's a critical issue that requires collaboration among communities, building experts and policymakers to ensure reconstruction is climate-resilient and safeguards people's safety, health and property."

Systems that monitor and purify air and water quality will be extremely helpful for homeowners in their rebuilt homes. IBWI's recent [WELL for residential](#) standards cover many points along these lines with advice homeowners and their construction teams can plan into their next home or restoration. That may be long months away, but planning can – and should – start as soon as one is able to do so.

2. Support Stronger Building Codes

Cal Fire, California's department of fire protection, has a proposal to beef up standards in the Wildland-Urban Interface code, which will be available in July and take effect January 1, 2026. After initial resistance, it is now strongly supported by the California Building Industry Association, which represents national and regional homebuilders in the state. (This major trade group presents its careful scrutiny of laws and regulations as a benefit to its membership.)

Geoffrey von Oeyen is an associate professor at the Los Angeles-based [University of Southern California's School of Architecture](#), giving him a front row seat to January's devastation. He has a list of features he'd like to see incorporated into building codes to make the average production home more fire resistant. He lists them in this order of importance: fire-resistant roofing, no ventilated attics (spray foam insulated roofing), fire-resistant exterior cladding, firefighting reservoir (pool or cistern) with generator, pumps and sprinkler system for rooftop and landscape, annually enforced restrictions on flammable materials in backyards and professionally-administered controlled wildland burns.

Oswaldo Joya, Irvine-based director of pre-construction at [LJP Construction Services](#), would like to see energy efficiency-enhancing exterior insulation (EIFS) for homes be more frequently fire-rated (to NFPA 285 standards). "For fire prone areas, NFPA 285 rated systems should be a requirement if exterior foam is part of the design." This is something to have your construction manager look at for your rebuild.

All of these changes can drive up the cost of rebuilding damaged or destroyed homes and building new ones in the state, undoubtedly costs that will be passed along to homebuyers and homeowners. "I would like to see tax incentives offered by the State of California and the federal government that are coordinated with fire resilient design into the building code," the professor suggests. These will save taxpayers money in the future, rather than drawing from emergency funds at the state and federal level. Both new and existing homes should be eligible, he

adds. “We have a problem with older homes that are at risk and should be made more fire resilient.”

3. Embrace Resilience

Jaime Matheron, a San Francisco-based principal and senior architect with [DAHLIN Architecture | Planning | Interiors](#) says fire resilient design principles have become a growing firm focus, especially in fire hazard severity zones. “Building designs include non-combustible building materials and fire-resistive wall and ceiling-floor assemblies. We’re also incorporating landscape design that creates defensible space zones through intentional plant selection and spacing,” she shares.

“Stucco is great, as it is one of the most common exterior materials for new homes in California and is both cost effective and fire-resistant,” Matheron comments. “Cementitious siding in panels or boards is another fire-resistant cladding material that has become very popular in recent years,” she adds.

One feature that’s out: “Wood siding – a popular option prior to the fires – is a non-starter for a material choice now,” declares Los Angeles luxury home architect [Dean Larkin](#). He notes that the fire was so traumatic, “Even a synthetic wood is too much, or a reminder to my clients of the danger of a material choice. Some clients are so traumatized that even the thought of a fireplace inside the home is too much for them,” he observes.

Larkin is part of a newly formed American Institute of Architects Los Angeles chapter committee on fire resilience. He shared that his [chapter’s site](#) and that of [AIA Pasadena & Foothills](#), where the Eaton fire burned, have resources for homeowners who lost homes in the fires.

Though not included in many recommendations because of current costs, porcelain exterior cladding is fire resistant and nontoxic, making fire recovery in the area safer for all. “Porcelain costs can come down if there is enough demand,”

USC's von Oeyen notes. (Demand has that effect and many more offerings have been available in the US market at recent trade shows!) "Ceramic provides many of the same benefits," the professor adds, "But yes, it exceeds all ICC Fire Resistance Requirements."

"For extreme protection at high-risk areas, an automatic fire sprinkler system can be incorporated into the construction of the home or adjacent perimeter, similar to a multifamily active fire management system," suggests Joya.

Sprinkler systems got a lot of attention at the 2025 International Builders' Show. "We've seen a 2,500% increase in inbound inquiries compared to this time last year," comments [Frontline Wildfire Defense](#) founder and CEO Harry Statter. Sixty-one of his company's installations were activated during the LA fires, he says, and 59 survived. "In multiple cases, the fire reached the perimeter of a property but stopped where the Frontline system had pre-wet the area."

He notes that the two homes that burned down were in neighborhoods that experienced water supply failures. "We do account for fluctuations in water pressure during a fire. The system activates well in advance of an approaching fire, pre-wetting the property early, so that if water pressure drops, the home is already wet." Biodegradable firefighting foam enhances the defense and backup water supply systems, like the home's well or pool, can also be brought into use. "Frontline is designed specifically to protect homes from windborne embers, which account for 90% of structure losses in wildfires, according to the Institute for Business and Home Safety," he points out.

4. Consider Resilience Benefits Vs. Costs

[Beazer](#) is one of the homebuilders with communities in the impacted areas. As a national firm, the lessons they learned from Los Angeles can benefit homebuyers in high risk regions across the country. "If there is one thing the fires have reinforced to us, it's the importance of acting proactively to incorporate fire resistant construction practices," comments CEO Allan Merrill. "New homes

today benefit from more stringent land use and construction regulations, making them arguably more resilient (but of course, not immune to) climate-related events such as fires.”

He attributes the \$50,000 to \$100,000 difference in new and existing homebuilding costs to advanced building materials and modern safety standards, (along with land use). These costs are painful, to be sure, but far less so than replacement.

According to [CoStar News](#), “The average value of homes destroyed in the Pacific Palisades exceeds \$4 million while homes lost in the Eaton fire average close to \$1.4 million.” While much of that is associated with land value, the cost of rebuilding these homes, (not to mention any coverage homeowners have for temporary housing during the rebuild process), will far exceed even the \$100,000 topline figure Merrill cites. And that doesn’t account for stress, educational loss and other non-property costs.

On a more positive note: “These enhancements also contribute to energy efficiency, durability, and long-term adaptability,” Merrill says. New Beazer homes with solar panels and backup battery systems may also contribute to fewer electrical disruptions when utility companies cut power to reduce risk, or when power lines are damaged in a fire.

5. Learn From Experience

“Recent fires—from Paradise and Boulder to Lahaina and Los Angeles—have accelerated learning and innovation,” Statter observes, adding, “We now have a clearer understanding of what works and what doesn’t. Structure loss in wildfires is a solvable problem, but the key is making mitigation technologies more affordable for retrofits and integrating them into building codes for new construction. While manual efforts have limits, innovation can help us adapt and live safely alongside fire.”

I couldn't agree more! We need to make our home building codes – [designed for survivability during a disaster](#), not outlasting it – more resilient and we need to communicate the many benefits of this potentially costly approach to homeowners, homebuilders and home buyers. Losing your home, or heaven forbid, a member of your family, is far more costly!

Note: All of the interviews were conducted by email in February and March 2025.