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Barack Obama's economic stimulus package aims to help the world economy, but could be aimed squarely at regenerating ailing US urban centres

JAFFER KOLB

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The toll is rising. There are estimated to be 9,000 architects in the United States newly jobless, and that number could reach 10,000 in the coming months. Right now the profession's greatest hope lies with the US\$ 787 billion (£558 billion) American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which President Obama signed in February. The act has been described – both by supporters and deriders – as the New New Deal, referring to the legislation passed by Franklin D Roosevelt during the Great Depression in 1933.

But where the New Deal was designed around a series of monumental public works projects, ARRA is structured around investing in numerous smaller projects, upgrading existing structures and enhancing energy efficiency. 'You won't see big iconic structures out of this plan, but the impact of new sustainable technologies on society will be enormous,' describes Andrew Goldberg, senior director of Federal Affairs at the American

Institute of Architects in Washington, DC.

Depending on how the funding is distributed and how programs evolve, there could be an extensive amount of built work to help buoy the profession and impact the built environment, particularly in urban regeneration and transportation.

Olympia Kazi, executive director of the Institute for Urban Design, says that it's still too early to judge the effect ARRA will have: 'The first money to arrive will go to the ready-made projects. Right now the priority is to create jobs and so many of the projects we'll see are not new.' Goldberg adds: 'The biggest impact will come out of the effects of a healthier economy. This is a good first step, but if you look at the overall need in investments, this is just a down payment.'

These projects and the vision are very much rooted in urban centres, primarily in housing, infrastructure, healthcare and education facilities. While there is money

earmarked for all of these sectors, it is divided in different ways across the country. 'There is a historical conflict between federal, state and local governments. Transparency is a goal, but the funding process is likely to be very fragmented,' Kazi says. Goldberg adds that for the short term, **the biggest opportunities for architects will be in federal and healthcare buildings, as this is where the majority of funding is allocated.** However, architects will have to justify that new buildings will be more beneficial than securing jobs, for example.

Kazi and many others are hopeful, however, that cities will be safe in the context of this new administration, even if monumental structures aren't immediately on order.

On the green front, President Obama has earmarked US\$ 5 billion (£3.5 billion) in tax credits to assist property owners to weather modest-income homes and make them more energy efficient. Some feel that this optional initiative may be too hands off. Energy

efficiency must also be achieved in buildings funded by the US\$ 13.1 billion (£9.3 billion) for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the estimated US\$ 44.5 billion (£31.5 billion) healthcare-related pool (including new buildings and upgrading/maintenance), and US\$ 1.3 billion (£922 million) for university research facilities. But some worry this isn't enough.

'The application of green tech to private homes is a good idea, but my impression, especially with the economic crisis taking centre stage, is that anything environmental will be assigned to the back-burners in popular consciousness,' says James Wines, founding director of SITE, an environmental art and architect organisation in New York.

Of the US\$ 26.6 billion (£18.9 billion) earmarked for transportation, the funding will be mostly dedicated to highways and bridges, and less to public transportation, according to Goldberg. While the former is necessary, the latter is paramount in ushering in an era dedicated to low-carbon efficiency.

Fortunately, the individuals President Obama has chosen to oversee many of the upcoming programs are people deeply connected with urban development and architecture. The new Housing and Urban Development (HUD) secretary, Shaun Donovan, previously headed New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. He trained in architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and practiced in the US and Italy as an architect. Additionally, President Obama has chosen Adolfo Carrión to head his just-established Office of Urban Affairs. Having served two terms as Bronx Borough President in

New York and holding a Master's in urban planning from Hunter College at the City University of New York, Carrión understands quality in the urban realm.

Certain funding mechanisms are further developed than others. For example, of the US\$ 13.6 billion (£9.7 million) earmarked for HUD, the organisation had already allotted 75 per cent to recipients within a week of the Act being signed. With stipulations for new housing stock, it seems this would ensure more work for architects. Unfortunately, because the new projects are public sector, they are only open to firms who are approved for government contracts, a process that involves a procurement process through the United States General Services Administration (GSA). While there are opportunities for smaller, less-experienced firms through the GSA, the hassle might overwhelm firms with limited resources.

While budgets are still being ironed out, it remains too early to know exactly what effect ARRA will have on the American built environment. The earmarked funds show concern over updating the infrastructure of both society and transportation, but potentially without earth-shattering changes to the built environment. Architects may find it difficult to secure new work at the moment, but there is much to be done to manipulate and ensure quality in existing fabric, from updating public housing and health centres to retrofitting homes for better energy performance. This pragmatic work could be this generation of architects' greatest contribution to the sustainability and quality of American cities.

