

WILL YOUR HOUSE LAST?

Lightweight materials can often provide the most heavy duty performance, standing up to the harshest elements.

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When people inspect a home, you'll often find someone doing the "knock test". This is where they literally knock on the walls to see if they're solid. It's a throwback to a previous generation where people believed that strong houses had to "sound" like they were made from a dense mass.

Fortunately, times have changed and smart home buyers know that the old-fashioned knock test reveals little about the durability of house. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of lightweight materials shows that more home buyers understand that lightweight materials can provide heavy duty performance.

While it's important to choose building materials that are resistant to fire, termite and moisture damage, you also want a house made from materials that are going to withstand the ravages of nature – such as hurricanes and floods.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast with 225-kilometre-an-hour winds and a surge nearly two storeys tall, 300,000 homes were destroyed

and 770,000 people were displaced.

Countless residents had no homes to return to. They lost everything. The site was a disaster zone. So when Larry Martin and his wife Kim tentatively returned to their home in the coastal town of Bay St Louis, which was only about 300 metres from the beach, they expected it to be a sea of debris – just like the other buildings in the area. "We thought we would come home to nothing," says Martin.

Instead, the couple was greeted with a sight they would never forget. "We were amazed that day. Our house was actually standing," says Martin. "Compared to other homes in our area this close to the beach ... most aren't even standing. They're just obliterated."

The house survived being swamped by nine feet [2.7 metres] of water. The Martins credit this to their choice of building materials. "My wife Kim and I looked at each other and said 'I'm glad we got HardiPlank®' because there's no telling what would have happened [if we didn't]," says

Martin. "The brick house down the street ... the brick collapsed."

While the neighbours are rebuilding – and piecing their lives back together – the Martins don't have to. "I'm not replacing the HardiPlank in this house," says Martin. "This thing's intact. If it had been some other siding [weatherboard] or brick I'd probably have to replace the whole thing. If you're going to build a house, you want it to last. Invest in something that's going to make it rock solid." ■

Stylish strength

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, US architect Marianne Cusato designed a series of cottages now known as the Katrina Cottages. They were initially created as a practical and affordable option to replace the huge number of homes lost in the disaster.

The cottages – all made from James Hardie building materials – have gained popularity not only among hurricane survivors, but also home owners looking for a stylish and strong solution for their homes. You can read more about the innovative Katrina Cottages on page 88.