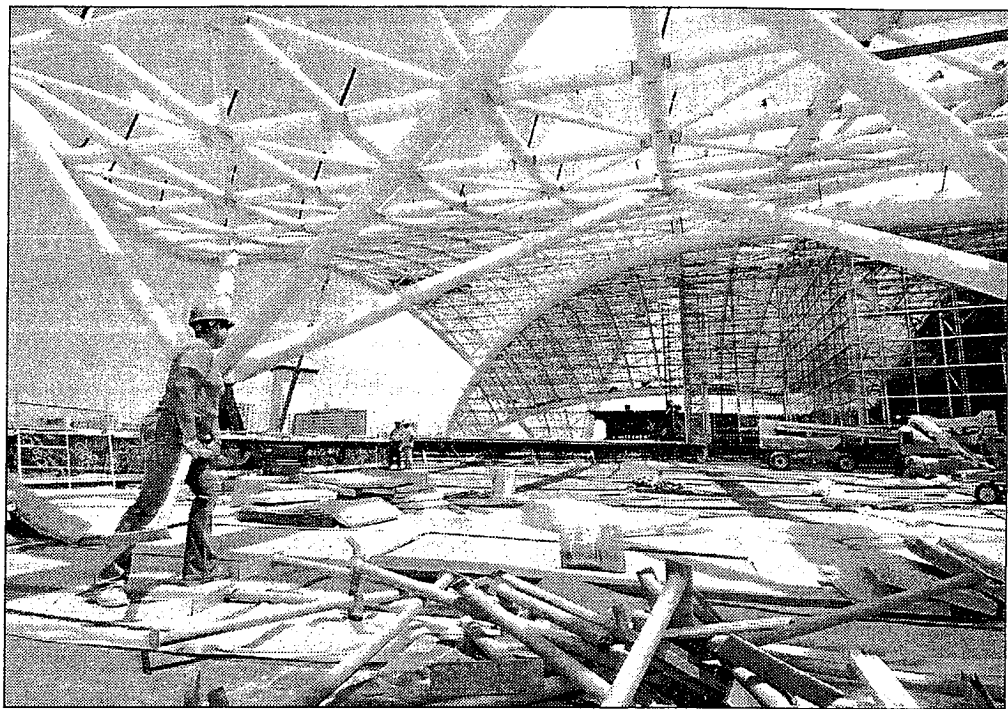


The San Juan Star ^{45¢}

THE ONLY PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING PUBLICATION IN PUERTO RICO

Readers' Viewpoint



STAR FILE PHOTO

A convention center in Isla Grande is shown under construction in this March 30 photo.

Disasters-in-waiting

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina as it tore across the Gulf coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi is truly lamentable, a real shame, an unnecessary disaster, mostly because the havoc it caused had been predicted and was preventable.

In the case of New Orleans, the people chose to ignore the basic laws of nature and built their homes below water levels of surrounding areas, or of materials not up to the task.

Scientific American, in a comprehensive technical article in their October 2001 issue, stated: "A major hurricane could swamp New Orleans under 20 feet of water, killing thousands. It is a disaster waiting to happen." The National Geographic issue dated October 2004 made the same point. Congress could never get around to appropriating the funds needed to properly address this disaster waiting to happen and according to standard procedure, the Commander in Chief, where the buck stops, now must carry the cross.

A similar situation has just been created in Puerto Rico. The people, through their elected government, chose to build a new convention center in Isla Grande. The structure, architecturally speaking, is as magnificent as any. Its dome, designed like the wings of

glassed in front of the building is unique. It's a building to be proud of... if it were not for hurricanes.

A category 4 hurricane over-heading Ponce could easily generate steady 150 knot winds from the northeast, precisely the direction the convention center faces. Like New Orleans, it is a disaster waiting to happen.

We who live in the tropics can't escape the fact that sooner or later a storm will try to blow us away. Even today, the builders of homes in Florida, as those along the Gulf coast of Mississippi, never learned this lesson or, more probable, knew well what they had to do but ignored the obvious need to build sturdy homes.

When I built my first home, I was fully aware that it sat within the hurricane belt. We poured 53 cubic meters of concrete, and each weighs in over a ton, into the slanted roof slab. The house has endured 17 category 3 and above hurricanes with no damage. All of the majestic mango trees that surrounded it are gone, but the house remains in use today as the Cultural Center for the Reparto San Agustín, near Havana, Cuba.

The laws of nature will ultimately dominate all.

William Butler Salazar