

DISSIMILAR SIMILARITIES

by Ralph Liebing, RA, CSI
Cincinnati, OH

Obviously common threads run through a great many things in our lives. And we also frequently encounter situations where we see or need to use dissimilar similarities!

Let's go right to project documentation. The vast number of projects are documented in very much the same manner. Oh, things vary like which software system is used, what size paper is utilized, what font is used in the Project Manual and such as that. But in the larger picture, projects are documented in a combination of drawings and specifications. This concept is rather universally accepted and has long been the norm in the professional design offices. Variations may abound, but at the root level the two sets of documents are created and are expected by the contractors in the field. We could get into, here, a discussion of these documents--but just accept that they both exist.

In reality what is contained in project documentation for a project in Idaho, is very much what the similar documents will show in a Virginia project--except for some relatively minor aspects they can be interchanged! The thread of commonality in content, approach and methodology is extremely strong, highly traditional, and time tested--i.e., the projects are successfully built.

Where design offices practice over a wide range of regions, or in fact nationally, their approach to project documentation is the very same. Content may change to some degree to reflect project requirements, but overall document production does not. What though has been changing from locale to locale, is the regulatory process--even in the face of the change over to the relatively universal use of the International Building Code. In the past, different regulatory (code) agencies required compliance with different regulations--and in that required completely different documents specific to their individualized regulations. Hence the design professionals had to product two distinctly different sets of drawings; e.g., one complying with the building code, and the other with NFPA 101 (as they were administered by two different agencies in the same state) in order to acquire the multiple permits required . Certainly an imposition! in effort and cost, to say nothing of differing requirements on the very same portion of work.

Now, more and more, and perhaps even for fairly valid reason, code agencies are demanding even more differing dispositions of construction information. Specifically, for their own convenience in reviewing and retaining information, they demand that much of the specified data regarding fire-ratings, and other instances of code compliance issues be "culled" from the specs and placed on the drawings. That's one major problem for the design professionals. The other is that there is no uniformity in these requests, between jurisdictions and hence every set of documents is open to a new scenario and new format to satisfy the code agency involved.

Although there may be financial issues on both sides of this situation, it is a gross imposition on the design professionals, who must operate on a profitable basis to stay in business, to continually make revisions in their documents, when indeed, the correct amount and type of information is available in their documents--it is only the location that is at issue. The impact of revision here is far more imposing than in the code agencies which usually operate at a "break-even" or non-profit level. The matter is NOT one of convenience for some, but rather whether or not the code compliance is portrayed in the project documentation. And how the specifications can and do contribute to that very thing--and hence, need to be utilized in all reviews of projects.

Partly this is matter of the need for parallel/cross training and of understanding each other--need for a collective, mutual-satisfying resolution for this situation, to which all concerned will agree and comply.

A matter for another day, hopefully in the offing very soon!