

ISN'T IT ODD.....?

BY Ralph Liebing, RA, CSI CDT, Cincinnati, OH

How come we have so many "funny" and quirky situations and conditions in construction? Is it lack of oversight, sloppiness, lack of discipline, varied vernaculars used by different parties and trades, or a plethora of standards (industry and otherwise) all of which have never ever been set down side by side for comparison?

How come hollow metal doors commonly are 7'-0" with a 2-inch head that never matches masonry coursing? How come when we specify 3,000 psi concrete, it usually tests out to 5,600 psi or so--but when we "really" want/need 3,000 minimum, it tests 2740? How come we have more custom windows now--is it because the stock windows of yesteryear never fit neatly into masonry walls (remember the old 3'-8 7/8" units?

Where is it required that exit signs be "over" the doors (regulations just say "at" the doors)? Why not place them at the base, since we're taught to crawl out of buildings? Or both places since sometimes we need to see them to route ourselves while standing erect? Why are exit routing devices (tape, etc.) required by the building code? Why are environmental requirements being inserted into building codes, when those instruments regulate minimal *safety* requirements (also back to the original "energy" codes)? Where have we lost our way in writing the code (including energy requirements, and other non-safety issues that overburden field inspectors and slow construction)? Why are specifications specifically defined as one of the contract documents, and yet are ignored, maligned and even summarily dismissed by even code officials? How do you comply with the Agreement by building "according to plans and specifications" if you don't read the specs?

Why is there so much irritation, animosity, competition, jockeying and vying for position among all parties to a project, who really have the same goal--a successful project? Why do many owners hire design professionals only to ignore their advice and demean them and side with the party to the "other" contract (the contractors) who complain about schedule, response time, etc.? Isn't it simpler, better and less costly to do what you're supposed to do than to obviate or duck requirements?

Is "better, faster, cheaper" a valid criteria or an inherent oxymoron? On the other hand, is "on time" and "on budget" attainable and valid? Which comes first, laying the carpet or touching-up the painted walls? Should the design professional's on-site rep and the contractor's superintendent be co-located? Isn't it odd that owners spend a lot of money for projects, but often refuse to pay for on-site, third-party oversight by the design professionals who act in their best interest?

How is it that architects have so botched up their presence and influence as to be but by-standers now? How does one become an architect without an education in the full range of services, skills and knowledge needed for proper construction? Why are registration requirements being reduced which in turn will produce less-qualified architects? Why is it that so many things seem "to come to us", created by outsiders who have their own agenda, but greatly impact us by their unilateral action (think BIM and LEED!) and we wind up in the position of having to comply and use them even though we don't fit that well! Whose running the ship?

Why do owners stridently refuse to spend nickels and dimes (like for document reproduction) but never blink at spending thousands on ill-advised meetings, silly amenities, and needless hashing around before committing to an obvious solution? We understand, to some degree, the need to vacillate and "massage" things these days, but we really need to talk turkey to clients about the fact that firm, well-conceived commitments on their parts are as much a factor of project success as anything else.

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And we, (be we individual, consultant spec writer or in-house specs manager) and the full CSI need to reassess and review where we are, how we do things, and how we can become better. We need to better understand our expertise, our influence, our impact and contribution, the lack of similar knowledge in others and the need we come to as professionals, to reach out to others in order to maintain what we have today. Stagnation is almost criminal, when there is so much to be done; inaction, stubbornness and reclusiveness are personal qualities not too often admired.

There is a very "collective" mentality and demeanor in spec writing, from all quarters. We love to interconnect (see discussion boards), quibble endlessly on minor things, predict the future, and dish clients, owners and others, BUT in the end, we belong to a singular group of people. In that we NEED to share what we have; what we have gained; what we see that is yet to do; and how what we do each moment of our professional life can and should have an impact on others.

Kings and Queens of the Hill? Absolutely not? We get put down enough to realize that. But, folks, if we are the "light on the hill" no matter the circumstances, then we are an indisputable something! Oddly enough, no matter our surroundings, we do not work in isolation, without impact and without contribution. We not flaunt that, but "showing" it ain't no crime!