



# Building Codes for a Small Planet

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**Building Standards - November-December 2002**

## **Transitions**

While flying home from the 2002 Annual Conference in Fort Worth, I reflected on the many transitions taking place. Certainly the biggest is the ramping-up of the International Code Council' (ICC) and the winding-down of the three model code groups that built its foundation. There were many appropriate occasions at the conference for celebration and recognition, including the acknowledgment of two people who contributed anonymously but were not there to see their visions come to fruition-namely Bob Fowler and Bill Tangye. They were deeply missed but will not be forgotten.

Another kind of transition is the opportunity to begin looking beyond the huge, multiyear effort of creating the ICC and publishing the I-Codes' to the range of possibilities for the future. These necessarily include finding ways to address changing circumstances and increasing awareness of different levels and types of risk. They also include embracing the global scope of both the ICC and the impacts of the built environment, and finding appropriate ways to acknowledge and meet that larger set of responsibilities. Hopefully, we will also be open to emerging opportunities for building departments to partner with other groups more proactively in order to enhance their value as community resources, enabling the best practices and helping make our communities more livable, more vibrant and more sustainable.

A significant step in this direction resulted from the meeting in Fort Worth with ICC's becoming a member of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), and a commitment to create a strategic alliance between the two organizations. Several other important things resulted from a meeting between myself and Dominic Sims, one of the Senior Vice

Presidents of ICC. For example, we are working toward linking the USGBC's Greening the Codes Committee (which I co-chair with San Diego County, California, Building Official John Guenther) and ICC. Among the other ideas we explored were creating an ICC staff position for a green building/sustainability liaison; moving forward with a proposal to create a handbook for alternative materials and methods of construction for code officials; and developing strategic partnerships with the building science community and some of the national programs for improving construction, such as the U.S. Department of Energy's Building America Program.

On the global scale, the International Forum highlighted a variety of opportunities and challenges to be dealt with as ICC accepts a larger international role.

One of the first pieces of work related to that role will be the implementation of the Code and Safety for the Americas (CASA) Act that was just signed into law. This legislation authorizes the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide grants or enter into contracts with organizations that can help improve building safety in Latin American countries, including, specifically, the translation of the I-Codes into Spanish.

The Development Center for Appropriate Technology (DCAT), the non-profit organization that I head, has long advocated the need to ensure that codes originating from one place or culture that are applied to another be altered as necessary to make them appropriate. This is accomplished by adapting them to take into account traditional building development methods and patterns; infrastructure, legal and institutional structures; local and regional economics, workforce skills, resource availability, climate, seismicity and other conditions; and cultural and social factors.

Bob Fowler spoke eloquently on these issues in an interview that appeared in the January-February 2000 issue of Building Standards.

First, it's important to realize that many of the building materials and methods that we call "alternative" in the U.S. are actually mainstream in much of the rest of the world. We are offering our codes and standards to the world, and should acknowledge that it wasn't accidental that the word 'International' was picked for ICBO, or the International Code Council' (ICC), or the set of new national codes that has been in development over the past few years.

Most Americans are ignorant of the real situation in the world today. [...] Of the six billion of us who are now living on the earth, only about one-third are living in the kinds of buildings that our building codes deal with. Two billion others are living in earthen structures like adobe, rammed earth, or cob and such. The remaining two billion or so people are living in buildings made of other non-industrial materials, or buildings made from scavenged materials like tar paper, corrugated metal, cardboard, and shipping pallets; whatever they can find. [...] How do our codes and what we do affect those people? What do our codes reflect of this more common reality? Do we have the resources and environmental capacity for the other four billion people to have houses like ours?

This is a big vision of responsibility, but a necessary and crucial one if we are to fulfill the goal of building a safer world. In reality, the international work can actually help us understand and begin to deal with this set of responsibilities regardless of where we are working, at home or abroad. This is a great opportunity not just to transfer what we know to less developed parts of the world, but to learn from far more sustainable

practices that have been used successfully for millennia around the globe. This potentially mutual beneficial exchange would require us to reexamine how we think and what we consider important (and when faced with the reality of structures that have been continuously inhabited for hundreds or even thousands of years, we might also consider a bit of humility).

We are, as I recently heard someone say, confronted with "insurmountable opportunities." To take advantage of them, we must learn to embrace change without rejecting accumulated wisdom about what is tried and true. We have been given few tools to gracefully handle change, even when we know it is needed or when we are the ones promoting it. Yet, those skills are crucial for carrying out our responsibilities in this rapidly changing world.

Much of DCAT's work is in this arena: helping people see a bigger picture, connecting previously unrecognized consequences to actions to better inform the decision-making process. Ignorance may be bliss, but it does not relieve one of responsibility or lead to better decisions and greater safety in the long run. At a deeper level, we share our view that the work of building regulation is actually much more important than most people think it is because it not only affects the lives of those people in and around specific buildings but, ultimately, the lives of all of us, including the prospects of all future generations. Change is not easy, but it can have big rewards.

I am reminded of a management seminar I attended years ago. The instructor had each of us clasp our hands together so that our fingers were interwoven and asked us to note which thumb was on top. Then she instructed us to reclasp our hands so the other thumb was on top. We all did so and were amazed to find that, although easy to do, it felt awkward. The instructor then asked for a show of hands of those who originally had their right thumbs on top. About half of the group raised their hands. She said, "Whichever group you are in, look at the people in the other group. These people are uncomfortable with what you think is normal, and they find your way of doing it foreign and unnatural. This is just a physical habit you learned the first time you clasped your hands and, although random at first, you have reinforced it every time you've clasped your hands since." She then asked us to consider what other habits we might have, of thought or behavior, that make us uncomfortable and limit our ability to see or accept or be open to other points of view. This exercise provides a lesson worth remembering as we face the challenge of our new opportunities and develop transitional strategies toward a more sustainable future.

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