

Setting the Standard for Building Safety

“Setting the Standard for Building Safety” is a phrase that ICC prints on letterhead, embroiders on hats and streams across banners. We identify with it so strongly that we registered it as an ICC trademark. A worthy mission it is, and a substantial one.

How do we approach such an undertaking from a truly “International” viewpoint? Are the solutions the same for us in the U.S. as for emerging nations? Is safe, affordable housing according to U.S. standards achievable in the majority of the world? Are there more sustainable ways to regulate construction here? What is the future role of the code community in facilitating alternative, appropriate technology? These are complex questions which will take time to answer. Hopefully, this issue of *Building Safety Journal* will provide some constructive contributions to the discussion.

Among the articles in this issue is an update on straw-bale construction by California structural engineer Bruce King, who has the distinction of having written an article on the subject that was published in the first-ever feature on alternative materials to appear in a model code group magazine in September 1998. That first feature not only initiated a valuable trend of providing access to information outside the current mainstream, but also provided a different frame of reference within which to consider our work and responsibilities.

There is a common thread running through the articles on alternative materials, green building and the Global Policy Summit on Performance-Based Building Regulations featured in this issue and through most of the related features and articles published since 1998. That thread is the influence of a small, non-profit organization in Tucson, Arizona: the Development Center for Appropriate Technology (DCAT). DCAT’s contribution to the codes community hasn’t been limited to its work with our publications, but extends to a deeper kind of influence which helps reconnect us with why we do this work.

My first direct experience with DCAT occurred in St. Louis five years ago while attending an educational session by Bob Fowler and David Eisenberg entitled “Building Sustainability Into the Codes.” David’s work had a profound impact on Bob, and together their presentation dramatically affected the way I would think about the future of building construction. I now consider connections, responsibilities and unintended consequences of “business as usual” that I never did before. That broader sense of context informs David’s recurring *Building Safety Journal* column, “Building Codes for a Small Planet,” and was no less apparent at a summit held in



BY ANNE R. VONWELLER

Washington, D.C., last November on the subject of performance-based building codes.

Brian Meacham has contributed an article about the summit, the official title of which was “The Global Policy Summit on the Role of Performance-Based Building Regulations in Addressing Societal Expectations, International Policy and Local Needs.” While the name did not exactly lend itself to a catchy acronym, the conference itself was outstanding. With a diverse group of nearly 100 experts on codes and regulations, risk, and global trends, we were treated to two and-a-half days of informative

and often thought-provoking perspectives from around the world. James Lee Witt served as a keynote speaker, and I was honored to have the opportunity to give a presentation.

In his comments during the closing of the summit, David Lucht of Worcester Polytechnic Institute again connected to DCAT, stating that after three decades in the industry, David Eisenberg’s presentation had recalibrated everything for him. Along with another presentation from South Africa, David had illuminated a set of issues that we in the U.S. don’t typically consider, but which seriously impact everyone everywhere.

Among the things that David pointed out in his presentation was that the work DCAT carries out is based on deeply conservative values. In fact, he included a quote from the 18th-century British philosopher and statesman, Edmund Burke, who is widely recognized as the father of modern conservatism. Burke believed that conservatism was based on a “societal contract” between “those who are living, those who are dead, and those yet to be born.” He saw this as an essential partnership because the aims of science and art cannot be achieved without deep regard both for past generations and those who will follow.

David cited another quote that I thought was especially relevant to our work in safeguarding the public health, safety and welfare: Burke believed that government or any other entity “possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in [the public] trust.” We all must remind ourselves of that reality as we go through our day-to-day challenges, balancing the interests and welfare of our communities today with those interests in the future, with deep regard for what we have inherited from those who have gone before.