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New methodologies bring responsibility back to all players involved in a project

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What most clearly distinguishes the current era of building and construction practice is the tendency for the distinct members of the process, i.e. - design professionals and consultants, general contractors and sub contractors, owners and clients, to eschew overall responsibility for the completed product and stay within the narrow scope and liability as defined by their clearly delineated contractual parameters. If we go back far enough in history, to when the master builder was an active and clearly identifiable character in the design and construction of buildings, there was a clear responsibility and ownership of all facets of both the design and construction process - which rested almost entirely within the realm of the master builder himself, but at the same time was implicitly shared with the owner. Engrained in that responsibility was an understanding of the historical and cultural layers, both aesthetic and planning based, which were inherently incorporated into the project's scope and parameters.

While these might appear to be somewhat esoteric issues, there is a significant impact that this phenomenon has had on a very simple, practical concern - that is the quality of the built environment in which we all live. Previously, whether by indigenous practices which by virtue of practical necessity and collective memory incorporated substantial quality standards, or by virtue of design whereby the desire for the expression of status and power to be projected into the final image and outcome of a built project imbued a level of quality, there was intrinsic to most common building practice a built in level of quality standard.

However, what we have seen develop over the last few centuries, in part because of our increased knowledge and control over materials and their limits due to engineering and technology, as well as the nature of mass materials' production and distribution, influenced by ever-skyrocketing labor costs, is an overall decrease in the quality and character of our built environment. The average construction project is fraught with the complex challenge of creating a building of significant quality in an atmosphere inclined against that very end.

Again, at the crux of this issue is the question of ownership and responsibility, laden with the added weight of trying to navigate a complex set of variables both economic and conceptual, through a design and construction process that in itself has become extremely inefficient. This very inefficiency appears to be both cause and effect for the phenomenon that has unfolded. Design professionals have worked very hard to protect themselves from potential liability and have carefully drafted and implemented contract language which has separated the lines of design from construction; general contractors and construction managers have also drawn their lines in the sand, utilizing contract documentation as a billing instrument, rather than its originally intended purpose as a guideline for the construction of a complete delivered product.

Hence, we have the one side, where design professionals hide behind the veil of 'Design Intent' and

the other where contractors build their great wall of protection out of 'Means and Methods'. Caught in between is the owner or client, who in turn exacerbates the situation, albeit unintentionally, by playing the two sides off each other and using the competitive bid marketplace to bring the project in at the lowest price. All this really accomplishes is to marginalize the delivered product, since the contractor will utilize the change order process to the greatest extent possible to compensate, while delivering the minimum contractually delineated product. Design professionals begin the process in a vacuum for the most part, essentially guessing how the desired design concept will be physically realized and are thereby forced to perform complex programming and design gymnastics to deliver a quality product.

Therefore, though the time of the master builders is obviously behind us - in order to see significant improvement in the construction industry, projects will need to be delivered in a fashion which allows responsibility to be taken back by all parties involved - designers, owners and constructors alike. Much has been written about the role of BIM technology and alternate project delivery systems to reduce inefficiencies in the design and construction process. All of which should be studied further and carefully - particularly focusing on compensating for current deficiencies and how these new methodologies can be utilized to bring responsibility back to all of the players involved, but most importantly thereby positively empower the new entity that has begun to emerge - the collaborative 'team'.

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