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Importance of owner's voice in improving design and construction - by Nancy Greenwald

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When asked what is holding back the design and construction industries from adopting new technologies and processes to improve both the process and the product, the panel of Visionaries at the Construction Institute's 10th Annual Visionaries Forum had a common theme – aversion to risk. Jon Pickard, principal, Pickard Chilton put it this way “If it hasn't been done 100 times or 1,000 times, nobody's going to touch it.” Fiona Cousins, digital services leader, Americas, ARUP concurred, “Nobody wants to be first. Everybody wants to be second.”

The Visionaries Forum, held on April 11, at the Mark Twain House in Hartford, each year brings together individuals on the cutting edge of the design and construction industries to engage the audience in a conversation about the future of the industry. This program was no exception. Chris Toomey, a vice president of major projects at McKinsey & Company, moderated the discussion, expertly drawing out the perspectives of each of the four panelists.

Fady Saad, co-founder & director of partnerships, MassRobotics and Roberto Bicchiarelli, lead concept designer - business development manager East, Permasteelisa North America discussed how risk aversion can also impede the development of technologies. According to Fady Saad, there are three challenges to the development of new technologies: (1) there is a disconnect between the producers of the technology and the users, (2) the “test beds” needed to test and to allow the technologies to mature are scarce, and (3) there is a lack of funding. Permasteelisa has developed innovative building envelopes, including the double skin wall, which has significant advantages for building performance and is capable of supporting diverse architectural styles. Again, risk aversion has been a barrier to adoption.

Engaging owners in the conversation about technology is one important key to adoption. As we know, 75-80% of the cost of a building is in maintenance and operation, not to mention 100% of its use. Everything that happens in design and construction has an impact on a building's operation and maintenance, as well as on the end users' experience. An investment in building technologies designed to improve performance and save energy returns value in multiple ways. First, by reducing

energy costs over the life of the building. The second and more immediate value is captured through increased productivity resulting from the increased comfort of the people working in the building.

How do you introduce technology to owners? Jon Pickard explained that he does not introduce technology as such. Rather, he focuses on the question “What is the problem?” and then he works through the solutions and risks with the owner in a collaborative process. The value of new technologies may be introduced during the course of that process. Fiona Cousins added that “There are many times when the owner does not know what you are doing.” Clear explanation of the process and choices is critical. Roberto Bicchiarelli emphasized that educating owners takes time and a consistent approach.

The Construction Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose members include every profession and group involved in creating the built environment. Its owner’s council and building information technology council are beginning a collaborative series of programs to advance the conversation about the best use of technology in the design and construction process as well as in the building itself.

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