To scaffold company executives like William T. Ayres (left), of Power Climber, and William Gaston, of Saf-T-Green, the knowledgeable and safe approach to scaffolding is the most economical.

SCAFFOLDING: The Essential Element

For Most Wall and Ceiling Jobs, the Scaffolding is an Essential Element in the Bid—But It Must Be Done Right

To the average wall and ceiling contractor, it’s an essential component of every bid—and one that must be done as efficiently and as economically as possible.

It’s scaffolding that has so much contractor interest. And the economics and technology of scaffolding—not to mention the OSHA involvement in safety—has become so critical that contractors are literally going to school on the subject.

Two individuals with a high stake in scaffolding are Bill Gaston, of Saf-T-Green, a frame scaffolding manufacturer in Atlanta, GA, and William T. Ayres, of Power Climber, in Los Angeles. Gaston is president of the Scaffold Industry Association and Ayres is chairman of the SIA’s Swing Stage Committee.

Both scaffolding executives made themselves available to CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS during the SIA’s recent annual convention in Denver, CO, as described as the largest and most representative convention in the organization’s history.

Gaston came into leadership in his own company after experience in banking and real estate development. He’s a native of Chester, SC, and graduated from Presbyterian College in South Carolina.

Ayres took over as general manager of the Los Angeles firm in 1976. A native of San Antonio, TX, has has spent most of his career in construction and is deeply involved in making scaffolding products and techniques compatible with today’s contractor needs.

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“The first thing a contractor should do is call . . . and . . . hold seminars to instruct his personnel on how to use safely all scaffolding equipment.”
resolve that problem.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS:
When it comes to putting a craftsman into a position where he can work, what are the newest developments?

GASTON: The most rapidly developing industry—the one enjoying the biggest increase in use—is the aerial platform industry . . . scissors lifts and booms.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS:
What? How can this contribute to productivity improvements?

GASTON: Equipment like the aerial platform allows the user to enter work area at ground level and then transport men and materials to the work area simultaneously. Once the individual is in place, the platform can be moved along at the appropriate work height.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS:
Yet you mentioned that this equipment is potentially very dangerous. Would you mind explaining that?

GASTON: Again, it’s a question of misuse . . . lack of information. Many people look at an aerial platform and instinctively feel that they know enough to operate it.

Consequently, you run into situations where the platform has been run too close to high tension electrical lines, smashed into people and objects not only at the work level but at ground level too.

AYRES: The thing to remember on a piece of equipment like that is your vision is obscured. Operators often tend to forget that . . .

GASTON: . . . that’s right. And they often operate under unsafe ground conditions.

Accidents with aerial platforms can often be traced back directly to the fact that operators don’t read and adhere to the instructions that were given to them when the equipment was delivered. Again, SIA members are available to instruct operators when such equipment is delivered. They hold teaching seminars—and contractors should indeed look into the advisability of having someone on their staff attend.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS:
The insurance aspect? That certainly has to enter this whole equation?

GASTON: It does—and showing that you’ve received instructions in the proper and safe use of scaffolding,

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“The best protection in a lawsuit is to be able to demonstrate that you’ve made an effort to instruct employees in safety, that you’ve made a serious effort to enforce safety rules.”

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platforms and similar technologies can help to reduce a contractor’s liability insurance premium as well as reduce workman’s comp.

AYRES: There’s another element that enters into this. Traditionally, a contractor has been protected from liability suits involving the state workman’s compensation laws.

But in several key states—in California, for example—a worker under certain circumstances can include his employer in the suit. Now these suits can often produce settlements in the millions of dollars. Some eight to 10 states allow this inclusion—so it would behoove a contractor to check out his state laws promptly.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: Given your premise that safe and competent scaffolding is vital and that contractors should opt for the long-range view, what is the practical approach toward the competitor who chisels on his scaffolding requirements to get in the low bid?

AYRES: The answer is still: train your people to obey the safety rules in scaffolding.

GASTON: That’s the only response. Regarding the chiseling—and I recognize that can be inordinately difficult—contractors simply must change their attitudes about scaffolding. They must make their own commitment to do it right—and then put on peer pressure for their competitors to do likewise.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: Isn’t that a bit idealistic. There’s the old expression, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Chiselers don’t give in too readily to peer pressure.

GASTON: People aren’t dogs and education isn’t a trick. Every contractor needs some training and safety programs. There has to be continuity because employees come and go and the turnover means new training needs.

Unless you have a commitment to training and continuity you can reach a point where you have a workforce largely untrained in scaffold safety. That’s when an accident becomes more probable.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: In falls—the major danger of a scaf-
fold incident—there is no such thing as a minor accident, is there?

AYRE: That’s absolutely true. They’re like motorcycle accidents where every one involves injury—and usually serious injury.

And the best protection in a lawsuit is to be able to demonstrate that you’ve made an effort to instruct employees in safety, that you’ve made a serious effort to enforce safety rules.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: If you had to provide a 1-2-3 formula for a contractor to follow about scaffolding, what would the recommendations be? What sequences are involved?

GASTON: The first goal would be for the contractor to educate himself. . . to know what equipment he has or will be dealing with and what’s required of him to be able to manage it well . . .

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: . . . and then? What’s the next step?

GASTON: Make a habit of monitoring scaffold safety habits when he goes to the jobsite for an inspection. Let your employees know that you’re deeply concerned about safe scaffold and platform working practices and that you’re keeping an eye on that end of the business.

Third, a contractor should meet with his employees, especially his supervisors, and establish—in concert with them—just what constitutes good scaffolding practice.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: Sort of let everyone know that the boss is concerned that they be concerned?

GASTON: That’s right. People don’t respect what you expect . . . only what you inspect. A contractor should keep at it—and good, safe practices will inevitably follow.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS: Where can a contractor turn if he needs information . . . assistance . . . that sort of thing with his scaffolding operation? Is the SIA ready—and prepared—to help?

GASTON: A contractor needs only to ask his local scaffolding dealer, or he can give Vic Saleeby a call at SIA headquarters in California at 213/782-2012. Vic is to the scaffold industry what Joe Baker is to wall and ceiling contractors and he’ll be quick to provide aid and assistance.

For this industry—and I mean construction—to respond to its own needs and the needs of its customers and users, we all need to work together. Each part goes into the whole—and today’s employers more than ever before are responding to their employees’ needs and safety.

In the final analysis, getting the job done well—and safely—is the test. Chiselers won’t be able to stand up to that kind of commitment.