The 1980s: FEEL THE BURN

by Kathy B. Sedgwick

The overbuilding of the late 1970s had produced a glut of primary office space, creating approximately 20 percent more than the market could absorb. New residential construction ballooned 26 percent, outpacing the population’s 11 percent growth.

Yet the wall and ceiling industry sector wasn’t affected immediately. In fact, the association’s 1981 business volume survey showed members had enjoyed a whopping 46 percent increase in dollar business during the previous two years.

In spite of “Black Monday,” the October 1987 stock market crash, experts (quoted in a January 1988 Construction Dimensions article) advised readers to “expect about 18 months of continued good, steady times in the economy—and in construction—generally.”

The energy crisis of the 1970s had created a strong focus on energy efficiency, and residential and commercial retrofit would become the bright spot in the construction market. By the end of the decade, residential remodeling would lead the construction industry in a period of slow growth.

Association Accomplishments

During the first half of the decade, membership in AWCI had increased, passing the 1,000 mark by 1985. Other accomplishments included establishment of the Foundation of the Wall & Ceiling Industry’s library in 1981. A 1982 change in the by-laws made association members eligible to serve on the AWCI Board of Directors.

AWCI sold its Washington, D.C., headquarters on K Street for $2.5 million in 1985, and moved into its new headquarters at 1600 Cameron St. in Alexandria, Va., in the fall of 1988. In 1989, AWCI’s 72nd Annual Convention & Exposition in Las Vegas broke all records, with over 3,000 in attendance.

Executive Vice President Joe Baker celebrated 30 years with the association. Baker was hired by Ed Venzie in 1955 at a salary of $7,500 a year, when CPIA dues were $65 and the association had about 200 members.

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The AWCI headquarters building on Cameron Street, during and after.

Saying Goodbye

In the 1980s, we said goodbye to celebrities, heroes and heroines, villains and world leaders. Some retired: Walter Cronkite left CBS in 1981; in 1983, Johnny Bench retired after 15 years with the Cincinnati Reds, and M*A*S*H ended after 11 seasons.


Some met violent deaths at the hands of others: John Lennon in 1980; Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981; in 1983, Benigno Aquino Jr. was killed as he stepped off a China Airlines flight at Manila International Airport. He was coming home to the Philippines after three years of self-exile.

The world was crisscrossed by violence. In April 1981, Ronald Reagan became the fifth President to be shot. On May 13 that same year, Pope John Paul II was shot at St. Peter’s Square. (Seven months later the Pope visited the assassin in jail and personally pardoned him.) In 1983, the United States invaded Grenada. In October of the same year, a suicide truck carrying 2,000 pounds of explosives crashed through the walls of the Marine barracks at Beirut International Airport, leaving 240 dead.

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But the 1980s weren’t all tragedy. These years saw lots of lucky starts. For example, in 1981, Prince Charles of England wed Diana in a fairy tale that set the world’s romantic side ablaze. (Considering what happened later, maybe this isn’t such a great example. But, at the time, who knew?).

Sandra Day O’Connor became the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice in 1981. In 1983, Sally Ride became the first woman in space.

And there were other events that gave us cause to cheer. In 1980, the U.S. Olympic hockey team won the gold medal in Lake Placid, N.Y. On Jan. 20, 1981, we welcomed home 52 American hostages who were released after 444 days of captivity at the hand of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Stephen Spielberg turned on our “heartlights” in 1982 when a wrinkled alien named E.T. finally managed to phone home. In 1985, perky Mary Lou Retton scored a perfect 10 on the vault during the Olympic Summer Games in Los Angeles.

Feel the Burn!

When describing the fads of the 1980s, masochism seems to be the key word. Solving the puzzle of the Rubik’s Cube, with its 43 quintillion possible combinations, became the latest way to give yourself a headache. Thousands suffered through a long summer of reruns, pondering the eternal question: “Who shot J.R.?” The jogging and aerobics craze took firm hold as workout wonder Jane Fonda encouraged us to “Feel the burn!”

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