The Architect, the Co 
the Lost Art of Comm 
If you’ve been a contractor for awhile (like me), it’s likely that you’ve come in contact with an architect. This likelihood increases further if you tend to do a lot of commercial work, where indeed it can be hard to swing a dead cat without hitting an architect. [Author’s note: Now, don’t go out swinging dead cats willy-nilly at architects; I know it sounds like fun now, but it’s probably illegal (check your local laws).] But regardless of the ways or means, the architect is an entrenched and integral segment of today’s building industry, and the contractor and architect enjoy a positive, proactive working relationship most of the time. But then there’s the rest of the time.

You know these times: You’ve just slammed the phone down in bitter disgust after the architect for the ranger station you’re building has just demanded you remove the (already installed) steel columns in the building. It seems, when he was out at the site, he had snapped one of the columns with his fingernail and felt the resulting “pinnnggg” that emanated from the column. This indicated (in his mind) that the “chromium content was a little low.” This actually happened . . . and no, we didn’t exchange the columns.

Later on in the project, I received a blistering memo from this same architect demanding that we remove the entire (and already installed) 90-foot hip roof system and move it three-eighths of an inch to the west. Apparently, this was half the difference of the horizontal measurement of the truss tails (soffit dimension) that he’d measured at the site. He went on in the memo to insist that “no additional work be performed until the situation was remedied to his satisfaction.”

Well, that sounded good to me . . . so we walked off the job.

Nine days later—and after many letters and phone calls (all from the architect; I did not respond)—we received a written apology from the owner along with a humble entreaty for us to return to the project. We went back the following day, never saw or heard from the architect ever again, and finished the job on schedule.

Searching for Answers

I have other stories similar to this one—and though extreme—the story above is not entirely unusual. Now, this may be a good time to mention that I remain fully (and painfully) aware that we contractors have our own malicious cast of characters whose antics most architects would be delighted to recount. But this doesn’t lessen the fact that the architectural industry definitely holds their own when it comes to harboring “unique thinkers” (wackos) and members who enjoy a (euphemistically) singular perspective on life and business.

Which brings me to my problem. You see, it seems that every day, all I appear to do is lock horns with architects and engineers over what (most of the time) ends up being petty, paltry and/or personal-pride issues. We just don’t seem to communicate on the same level, and that leads me to a couple of questions regarding the architect-contractor relationship:

1. Why do the contractor and architect disagree so often—after all, aren’t we really on the same team?

2. Why do the architect and contractor seem to have such a hard time communicating with one another?

Well, if the answers were simple, there’d be no need for this article. And, admittedly, I’m only able to offer a contractor’s point of view. An architect would almost certainly view the matter in a different light. But, for what it’s worth,
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A CONTRACTOR’S
VIEWPOINT
By S. S. Saucerman

let’s examine the contractor/architect relationship and some of the ways we communicate (and don’t communicate) with one another.

The Contractor and the Importance of Being First

Let’s discuss the contractor. Now, when I say contractor, I’m talking about general contractors, sub-contractors and pretty much anybody who performs the actual, hands-on construction of the building project. They’re the ones who get their hands dirty, who interpret the architect’s working drawings and specifications, and who must sort out (at times) erroneous and ambiguous information in the plans and specifications. And they’re also the ones who arrived last to the party.

What do I mean by last?

Well, it’s really quite simple: the owner likely came up with the idea for the project in the first place (so he’s first). He checks his coffers, decides what he can spend and moves on to solicit the services of an architect. After some negotiation, a deal is struck between the owner and architect (the architect is second). The architect now becomes, in essence, partners with the owner, united in an effort to acquire the most building for the smallest amount of capital from the-yet to be involved-contractors. The project is strategized, budgets are prepared, documents are created for bidding and the bidding packages are finally let out to bidding contractors.

Up until this point, the owner and architect have enjoyed complete control over the process. Together they’ve created the working drawings (blueprints), specifications, bid forms, unit prices, alternates, agreements and virtually all of the administrative and legal jargon that defines any future contractual relationship with the (yet-to-be) chosen contractor. The contractor has had little to no input or representation in the project thus far. With a total lack of platform on behalf of the contractor, the bidding package has transformed into a remarkably partisan vehicle that benefits the owner and the architect; a blatant bias that may range from subtle to insulting to the contractor.

Another Story . . .

Like this example (which is true): About two-thirds of the way through a museum project we were building, I received a memo from the project architect informing me that we were to supply, install and pay for (what turned out to be) a $3,300 window that the architect had forgotten entirely to include in the owner’s project. The owner noticed the blank expanse of wall one day as the project was going up and said he “remembered discussing it” with the architect in the early planning stages.

In a meeting shortly thereafter, called by the owner, I thought we were going to be discussing a change-order for the newly added window, since the window was never at any time ever mentioned in any documents we had. Instead, the architect calmly and assuredly explained to me that we (the contractor) were obligated by our agreement to purchase and install the window (with no remuneration) under the “architectural intent” clause in the specification manual. You see, it seems that had intended to put a in window, but forgot, so it wasn’t his fault.

I was stunned. I responded with something to the effect that I had intended to be a millionaire by the time I was 30, but I wasn’t! It didn’t help. But still, confident that he’d made his point, that his logic was unimpeachable and that the issue was now settled, he moved on with other business. And the meeting was adjourned.

Well, we didn’t buy the window. I did send the architect an invoice for the
time that he had wasted in one of the most truly surreal meetings I’d ever attended (no, he didn’t pay it). We completed the project, got paid, and six months later we heard that the architect and owner were litigating one another over what each believed were the other’s broken promises. That was about eight years ago, and I had occasion to drive by the building the other day. The owner never did get his window.

**Weak in the Knees**

But, still and all, the lopsided packages are created and presented to the contractors as a basically “take it or leave it” proposition. This leads me to perhaps the most horrifying part of my narrative: The contractor accepts it! We don’t even put up a fight. Oh sure, periodically, we make minor stands and may even win an isolated skirmish or two along the way, but we don’t control the battlefield. Heck, half of the time we don’t even know we’re in a battle! Maybe we’re apathetic—or stupid—and slowly, bit by bit, our liability increases, our control lessens and our losses grow greater through cryptic and subtle passages that are inserted into page 13 of the supplemental general conditions.

But it’s the only game in town, and owing to market pressure and perpetually stiff industry competition, we accept the situation with, perhaps some trepidation and even less argument. Do we deserve what we get? You bet! We even try to justify it by telling ourselves that at least all the bidders are equally encumbered or that they don’t mean half of what they say in the bid packages because the architect and owner are just covering their butts!”

And the contractor is the last one to the party.

So, let’s review question #1 from above. No, we are clearly not on the same team.

**Social Skills**

So, we (the GC) prepare our bid, sorting through the pomp and formality of the plans and specifications that is inherently alien to the contractor. We wade through this sea of information and inevitably come across ambiguous or contradictory direction. The plumber calls and tells us that none of the plumbing plans match up. Indeed, upon inspection, it does indeed appear as though separate draftsman drew each page and apparently never got together to match them up. The result is a sink shown on one page and not the other, waste lines that go nowhere and an architectural symbol—that doesn’t show up in the legend—that no one has ever seen before. But the plumber doesn’t give up. He phones the architect to request clarification.

The following morning, the GC receives the following memo: “From this point on, we will no longer be accepting phone calls from subcontractors or suppliers on this project. All future correspondence shall be submitted, in writing, via the general contractor, at which time we will require five business days in which to respond. Thank you.”

Never mind that the bid is due in two days and there are many more discrepancies to sort out. All our estimator can do is shake his head, sigh and be content in the knowledge that he’s not in Kansas anymore.

**The Architect**

But, speaking of bias, I’m being just so . . . and it’s admittedly unfair. After all, architects do have their purpose. They also have a difficult and complex task to perform. Just for a moment, con-
Consider the scope and logistics of compiling and creating a discernable and logical set of working drawings and specifications for, say, a $1 million office building. Consider further that the entire project probably began as no more than conceptual conversation between the owner and the architect, with the preliminary variables running rampant (where, when, how, how much?). You can begin to empathize with this sizable undertaking.

The detail is staggering, and so is the responsibility. The architect must not only create, but also relay to the average trade person a set of documents that explains the structure, use, aesthetics. And this must be done in a way that is understandable, economical and expedient. Often, he works with outside assistance—such as mechanical, electrical or structural engineers—to accomplish this feat, but may (especially in larger firms) perform all of the work in house.

And with such a tremendous amount of information to be relayed to paper, it’s no wonder that it often can appear to the average contractor that the architect is cold, clinical and aloof in his everyday dealings. Perhaps there really is an “engineer’s mentality”

**The Lost Art of Communication**

But therein may lie one problem. Running the risk of sounding stereotypical, it has been my experience that most contractors prefer to perform the majority of their daily correspondence and interaction verbally—be it briefing the crews, negotiating the next job or reprimanding a slow worker. At the same time, architects tend to shy away from verbal commitment or explanation, fearing both misunderstanding and liability. The architect dogma seems to dictate that written instruction is solidly more concise and understandable. And for the most part, that’s true. That is of course, if that written communication doesn’t spin horrifyingly out of control.

The following is an actual transcript from a specification manual for a job that I’m currently bidding. It’s important to note that I did not go looking for this; it was in the first manual I
came to while writing this piece. I’ve seen many more like it over the years. It reads as follows:

“Imperative language is used generally in specifications. Except as otherwise specified, requirements expressed imperatively are to be performed by Contractor. For clarity of reading at certain locations, contrasting subjective language is used to describe the responsibilities that must be fulfilled indirectly by Contractor or, when so noted, by others.”

Well, I’m glad we cleared that up. And I believe this answers question #2 from earlier in this article. I’d call the architect to get a translation, but I’m not allowed to anymore. Well, maybe I’ll write him a memo. Give me a call in about five days.

About the Author
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