14 Years Later, The Codes Begin to Follow Eisenberg's Lead

Published on **7 Nov 2011** | Written by **Jeremy Sigmon** | Posted in **Advocacy and policy**

Eisenberg advocates for a light straw clay construction appendix to the 2015 International Residential Code. Photo: D. Eisenberg

Just yesterday, the International Code Council's membership of code officials put the final touches on the 2012 version of the International Green Construction Code (IGCC). For David Eisenberg – Executive Director of the Development Center for Appropriate Technology (DCAT), former USGBC Board member, and long time chair of USGBC's Codes Committee – it was a very clear culmination of a chapter in his life story, and the product of nearly two decades of work.

"I've spent the last 17 years trying to get people to notice that there are other hazards that may dwarf the ones that we're focused on," David said to me over dinner last week in Phoenix after a full day of public hearings on the IGCC. "These hazards," he continued, "will do major harm in the long run, and will affect – in overwhelming ways – our children and our children's children."

We were in Phoenix reflecting on, as Jerry Garcia would surely have said, what a long, strange trip it's been in the evolution of code guidance for better, healthier, safer, greener building practice. David, a Tucson native and a self-described "recovering contractor," has made it his life's work to understand and communicate a far more comprehensive picture of what risks each of us should understand about our built world as we know it. His work with code officials began in Phoenix 14 years ago.

In the fall of 1997, David was already three years deep into this new work and passion. He was invited by Bob Fowler - Pasadena building official, friend, and visionary in the building safety profession - to present alongside him at the annual convention for the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO) in Phoenix. It would be David's first time addressing a group of code officials with his revolutionary message. Fowler had invited Eisenberg to call his community of code officials to a higher purpose – to discover the full potential of their charge to "safeguard public health, safety and general welfare from fire... and other hazards attributed to the built environment" as one of the most honorable roles in society.

He asked a question of the gallery of a thousand or so code officials. "What goes through your mind when someone comes into your jurisdiction seeking to do something crazy like build a house out of bales of straw? Or... harvest water off the roof and drink it...?"

"...My guess is," he continued, "that your first thought is: 'These people need to be protected from themselves.' Your next thought is probably: 'Not in my jurisdiction!'"

David then challenged the audience of code officials to think differently about the risks they were managing for the public good by illuminating that, "The vast majority of the people who come in wanting to do these things have made a critical discovery. They have realized that their lifestyle choices have consequences, many – if not most – of which are negative. Not negative for themselves, but negative for their children and grandchildren... and my children... and your children. These people are trying to take responsibility for the consequences of their choices."

"Is there anyone in this room who thinks this is a bad thing?" he asked.

Fourteen years later, most of us in this country still do not have this clarity of view. For the building safety professionals in Phoenix last week, it was clear that this recognition of purpose is still struggling to take root.

David's final question to that audience in 1997: "So what is your job as a building official? Is it to keep those people from pursuing their goal of taking responsibility for what they do? Or is it to help them find a way to do it well and safely?"

His '97 remarks were recognized by a loud and prolonged applause - an applause that I could still hear last week in Phoenix as this extended community of code officials brought in their first green construction code. This code will provide communities the opportunity to define minimally acceptable construction practice for commercial (unfortunately, not low-rise residential) buildings through a code framework that embraces the many tenets of green building. It is a watershed event that a national model code (and its Standard 189.1 compliance path) now explicitly charges designers, builders and code officials alike with a certain degree of responsibility to safeguard human and environmental health, and our collective future, too.

Congratulations, David. And thank you, Mr. Fowler, for enabling one of our movement's most prolific visionaries. There's good reason to celebrate, and yet still so much work left to do.

You can read David's full account of his first formal experience with ICBO (a legacy code organization that merged with others to found the International Code Council) in the August 2003 edition of Building Safety Journal. David's column was appropriately titled, "Building Codes for a Small Planet."

For more information on Bob Fowler, read this powerful January 2000 interview of Bob Fowler by David Eisenberg in Building Standards magazine. For more information on USGBC's work with DCAT and the USGBC Codes Committee, read Greening the Codes.

Jeremy Sigmon
Director, Technical Policy
U.S. Green Building Council

Chapter members, Member employees, USGBC staff

USGBC Articles can be accessed in the USGBC app for iOS or Android on your iPhone, iPad or Android device.

0 comments

Leave a comment

Leave a comment

Don't have an account? Create one

You must be signed in to leave a comment.

Email

Password

SIGN IN

Address
2101 L Street NW
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20037

Within the United States:
1-800-795-1747

Outside the United States:
1-202-742-3792

© 2012-2015 U.S. Green Building Council