

November 2009 newsletter from Building Diagnostics

Welcome to the inaugural issue of this newsletter. I hope that you find this at least a little useful and maybe even interesting.

Expect to see a different content focus each month, but overall the topics will stay in the realm of energy and buildings. Your feedback will be the most important driver. The more I hear from you the better the content.

I invite anyone who is a member of a group with related interests (energy, building, general environmental) to submit event announcements. Anything submitted will be included solely at my discretion.

This Month's Topic: Lessons Learned (again).

There are very few of us who are able to live the lessons we learn for our whole lives. Sure there are a few things that stick with us, usually from traumatic or wildly impressive events; I haven't jumped off the back of a moving vehicle since I was seven and spent a week in the hospital as a result. I got that one.

The ones that slip away may be just as important, but the results aren't always so obvious. Often there are messages around us that contradict these lessons, and even though we know the truth of our experience, the results are not as immediately catastrophic. Recently I found myself ignoring a lesson I learned nearly 25 years ago; so for therapy I will share it with you.

In the mid '80's, when I was a full time contractor, I had the opportunity to do a major addition and whole house remodel for an engineer who worked for a major defense contractor. This guy was the model for stereotypes of engineers, very orderly, slightly obsessive and very compulsive. He also had access to a computer CAD (Drawing) program, which he used to design the addition.

He drove me crazy; I wanted to do a sketch in a notebook and order lumber. He wanted to plan every detail. Short story, his money, we did it his way. We talked framing; he drew; heating, more drawing; plumbing, back to the computer. In the end he delivered a set of plans that had every framing member, every duct, pipe and wire accounted for and placed; I rolled my eyes.

I did notice however, that this job went very smoothly. I had the right materials, so did the subs. Installing the ducts didn't involve any reframing. The plumbers and electricians didn't fight over rights to joist bay space. I made money and

kept my sanity for (most of) the whole job. The lesson? Don't rush; thorough planning is time well spent, even when you have a solid knowledge of the process.

As you know there is a huge influx of money into the energy efficiency and alternative energy fields. New programs are being created, old programs are expanding and more and more people are getting into this field. I view all of this as positive as long as we get it right. I am a little troubled that we may not be devoting the time to really thinking about what it is we are doing and that we may be squandering long term potential by ordering the lumber too soon.

Earlier in the year I was approached about a business venture that potentially could have resulted in a lot of work and money. As the discussions progressed it was clear that there were significant differences about procedures and desired outcomes that I couldn't quite accept, although I have to confess that the money that was on the table was tempting. What ultimately made the difference was when I asked about setting up a planning session. Don't need it, I was told; we'll work through it as we go. I was a little unsure about my work prospects at the time so I was ready to ignore my ideals and take the money; but that planning thing kept bothering me so I elected not to participate.

It seems that what I saw was just the tip of the iceberg; there are new businesses, new people and new products filling my inbox and flooding the message boards on LinkedIn and other sites. I hope that there will be enough willpower among those of us with a bit of experience to resist the trend to consider efficiency as the latest fad and source of quick bucks. With the additional resources available to us we can really move this to another level. Or, we can do a lot more of the same and let the quality slip. I think the difference will be in the planning.

Oh, that house I did in the '80's? I stopped there this summer and talked to the current owners. They haven't changed anything other than paint and paper and they say it's the best house they have ever lived in. I just wish I could say I'd planned it that way.

Energy tips:

If you're serious about making your building very low energy you need to have a low infiltration rate and good ventilation. Even so you have to dig into the details to keep away mold and other bad things. One ongoing challenge is a buildings windows. Even "good" windows can have condensation in chilly weather and potential mold growth as a result.

I have the same challenge in my house, so when it came time to order a few new windows for parts of my house I looked for very high performance levels and found SeriousWindows <http://www.seriouswindows.com/>. I was not able to vet them as much as I would have liked, I couldn't find any local installs, but I have ordered five for my second floor remodel. They are expensive and the financial payback is longer than others but as I tell people, comfort and health have a value too.

I hope to have them installed in December, I'll give you my initial evaluation after that and I'll try to provide some long-term evaluations as we live with them.

I chose fiberglass windows because they should last longer than vinyl and require less maintenance than wood. There are other manufactures of high quality fiberglass windows but I wanted to stick with double hung windows to maintain the character of the house. Most window companies do not seem to offer their best performing glass in a double hung configuration. One other benefit, double hung windows with exterior screens do not have as many bird strikes, and the screen may cushion those strikes that occur.

Blatantly Commercial Content:

I do have to justify the time spent on this effort, so I am charging myself an exorbitant fee to sponsor this newsletter. I get one ad per newsletter and free coffee refills in the kitchen.

Business update: I continue to do a mix of residential and commercial energy consulting work; I'm looking for more of both. Please visit my website, <http://www.buildingdiagnosticsnh.com/> for information on my capabilities and background.

I will have some more website updates within a couple of weeks. The major overhaul for the site is simmering on the back burner currently. The update should still happen this year (not a promise!) but I want to get it done right (see planning, above).

Closing thoughts:

As mentioned above, I need feedback for this little venture to succeed. I would like to include notices for events that relate to energy, the environment and community building, so if you have any announcements please send them in to newsletters@buildingdiagnosticsnh.com. I also welcome rebuttals and amplifications for anything I write.

Please forward this to anyone who you think would like it, if you don't like it use the email address above to unsubscribe.

Thank you, I'll see you next month.