

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR



Scott L. Melnick

Updating Coverage

My hat's off to the editors of *ENR*. In their April 8th editorial, they took the general press to task for their sensationalist reporting of the World Trade Center tragedy. Led by the *New York Times*, there's a growing body of coverage attempting to call into question the safety of tall buildings. The *Times'* recent coverage highlighted the three most severe fires in high-rise structures and tried to relate them to the collapse of the World Trade Center. One article began this way:

"A New York City skyscraper burns out of control, fireproofing is absent or fails, structural steel warps and snaps, floors begin to collapse, workers in the building die.

"The date is Aug. 5, 1970. The skyscraper is called 1 New York Plaza, less than a mile from where the World Trade Center towers were rising into the clouds."

It's only when you read on that the *Times* finally reports that the building did not collapse—even after the fire raged for hours. And the deaths? Halfway through the article the authors finally explained them:

"Shortly before 6 p.m. on Aug. 5, 1970, an elevator carrying two security guards and a telephone technician opened unexpectedly on the 33rd floor of 1 New York Plaza, a 50-story skyscraper so new that some tenants were still moving in. The elevator had been called to the floor by one of the old-style buttons that lighted up from the touch of a warm finger. Flames and smoke rushed into the elevator and forced the men to the floor. Two died before rescuers could arrive."

In contrast, the editors of *ENR* had the most cogent response that I have read to date:

"Drawing parallels between the WTC fires and 'ordinary' fires is somewhat of a stretch in the first place. But characterizing the WTC systems as "failed" is seriously misleading. It implies poor design or poor maintenance.

"A better word is 'destroyed.' The towers were attacked by terrorists, crashing 500,000-lb planes moving at more than 500 mph, filled with some 10,000 gal of fuel. The WTC systems did not function because they were destroyed—absolutely, positively and without a shadow of a doubt. And the monstrous fires

finished off what was left. That is what happens in a war."

As *ENR* goes on to note, National Fire Protection Association data shows that high-rise buildings on fire are much safer than low-rise buildings. "From 1994-1998, there was only one civilian fatality in an office building, and that building was two stories high." And as AISC has repeatedly noted, prior to the WTC disaster, there are no reported fatalities resulting from structural failure due to fire in a steel-framed high-rise building in the U.S.

Staying Current

As I've said before, the Internet is today's most powerful tool for staying current. For example, earlier today one of my favorite West-coast engineers, Lanny Flynn, emailed looking for a list of steel service centers. I quickly referred him to www.ssci.org, the Metals Service Center Institute's wonderful website. It's members database quickly lets you find service centers—and it's searchable by type of material as well as geographic region.

And while you're online looking at service center information, make sure you visit AISC's newly redesigned site at www.aisc.org. Not only does the site have a completely new look and feel, but we've added some new features:

- Steel Availability—An online database of steel shapes and producers. The mills update the database themselves, so information is more up-to-date than ever.

- *Engineering Journal* articles—AISC Members may download individual *Engineering Journal* articles for free, while non-members pay \$10 per article.

- Steel Solutions Center—Browse for information by topic (e.g. bolts, seismic design, parking structures) and find all that AISC has to offer.

After you check out the new site, let me know what you think. You can email me at melnick@aisc.org.

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