

editor's note



NORMALLY, WHEN A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYER MAKES AN OUTRAGEOUSLY STUPID COMMENT, I JUST CHALK IT UP TO THEIR PLAYING IN A SPORT WHERE CONCUSSIONS ARE RAMPANT.

But when the Pittsburgh Steelers's Rashard Mendenhall bleated about the World Trade Center, I took it more seriously (and not just because he's a graduate of the

same high school district as my children will attend). Rather, I was concerned that even 10 years later, the structural engineering community has not done enough to educate the public about that disaster.

While the collapse of the WTC was more dramatic than most, it's unfortunately symbolic of how the design community treats building failures: as something secretive. Fortunately, there seems to be a movement afoot to open up the process—or at least that's what I discerned from a recent conference I attended.

One of the themes explored at the recent ASCE Structures Congress was the reticence of structural engineers to discuss failures and problems that occurred either with the design or construction of a project. And even when the rare brave designer discusses a highly redacted forensic investigation, it's in a closed meeting room with no additional dissemination of the lessons learned. The problem seems to be a combination of fear of further litigation, contractual clauses that prohibit disclosure, and a desire not to harm future relations with contractors, owners, and other designers.

The Technical Council on Forensic Engineering organized a session focusing on the Legal and Business Challenges to the Dissemination of Failure Information. As one speaker put it: "What can be done to increase the release of information on building failures? It's unethical not to disseminate information." Unfortunately, when litigation is involved, the settlement often precludes discussion of the forensic investigation.

But as is often the case in the best sessions at conferences, it was the discussion from members of the audience that shed the most light.

For example, a representative from NIST reported that his agency is about to release 1.5 TB of data and pictures from the WTC investigation.

I learned that some engineers are starting to refuse to sign contracts to conduct forensic investigations if they cannot then share the valuable lessons with their peers. And that there is an effort to establish a database of failures and investigations in an effort to improve the state of the art of design and to avoid having designers repeat the same problems.

I learned that there is a tremendous fear of litigation. But there are also leading designers who are willing to share information, who think it's important that the same mistakes are not repeated.

We're all naturally willing to share information about our successes and a bit recalcitrant to discuss our failures. But we can often learn more from mistakes and I urge everyone to share these lessons. As the Scottish author Samuel Smiles is famously quoted as saying: "We learn wisdom from failure much more than success. We often discover what we will do, by finding out what we will not do."

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott Melnick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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