



On September 2008 Richard Sullivan of Sowinski Sullivan, Sparta, NJ shared his views on some key topics of interest to owners. We've worked with Rich and his firm on a number of projects and are happy to share his comments here in some detail.

His Philosophy and General Perspective

Rich says that it important to always start every project from the perspective of the client's values and real needs. His firm is fully committed to working on projects where everything is done from the perspective of sustainability – 'green' if you will. He also shared his views that keeping owners, architects, engineers and contractors in boxes hurts the timeline, which has major bottom line impact on the cost of a major project. There is now technology which allows everyone to work in a collaborative fashion, saving time on a major, complex project – which is the big cost for his clients.

Trends that are Changing How Construction Projects are Designed and Run

Rich called attention to these trends:

1. Increasingly well informed clients who see the value of buildings designed and constructed with sustainability;
2. Technology that is enabling design and construction management to be a more and more collaborative function, with dual benefits
 - a. Speeding up construction from concept to completion, and therefore removing major costs of financing a project by shortening the period before it generates commercial results; and
 - b. Allowing the modeling of the impact of material, equipment and design choices on the cost of ownership
3. Sustainability and 'green' are here to stay and owners with intent to own and hold value the return to their bottom line
 - a. USGBC is driving the standards – LEEDS is the platform now
 - b. Success in this new market needs 'bottom up' buy-in for contractors, backed by training

Rich says that use of BIM and REVIT help their firm to work in real time.

- BIM is a real time, three-dimension building information modeling system for the life-cycle.
- REVIT helps automatically disseminate or coordinate any changes throughout the design.

Rich says that this latest introduction of these new tools has the potential for larger learning curve associated with it than the earlier move from the drafting table to AutoCAD.

There are clear benefits of using these technologies.

1. A contractor can be selected earlier at the schematic stage to provide real time material choices and cost input. This collaboration through technology makes the contractor an integrated member of the team, with more opportunities for smoother and higher impact input where it is most beneficial.
2. The later that changes are offered up, the more expensive it is because it loses time.
3. With technology, early stages of work can begin while the design for other parts is completed, thereby speeding up completion.

“The finest structures we build are relationships”



architect interviews

- a. Rich spoke about a series of hold points that allow parts of the project to start before design on future aspects are completed.

This changed approach requires a lot more planning.

Rich says there is a trend away from traditional ‘value engineering’. Traditionally, you created a design, and then the owner hired a construction manager to ‘beat up’ the contractor to cut costs, he said. Rich feels that this may actually have added costs over the long run, by ignoring the long term performance of the building. He used as an example the following cycle of immediate cost cutting with long term negative impacts:

1. Some diffusers are removed from the \$50K HVAC system to save money.
2. Over the long run, deterioration in air quality affects employee health.
3. Over the long run energy use is actually higher.

Rich spoke about how owners are much more informed about the value of building energy efficient and sustainable buildings. His practice’s focus is on owners and not developers, so quite naturally owners who intend to hold and occupy a building over the long run care about cost of operation and maintenance, in addition to first cost. In fact, owners who work with Sowinski-Sullivan architects also care about how quickly they can get a new building or renovation into operations to limit the need to carry it for the long run. Time is where they want to save so that their property goes into productive use as quickly as possible. He feels that his clients know the right questions to ask to assure that their projects are designed and built with the right vision and criteria in mind.

Advice to Clients about Selecting Contractors

While Rich believes in due diligence, he thinks it’s best to start with a gut feel. The relationship among the owner, architect, engineer and contractor lasts for months, so these need to work at the personal or cultural level.

He thinks that it’s important that everyone be a team player, with no tendencies toward finger pointing. As Rich put it, “every single project has a problem” so the “best team members come up with solutions.”

Rich says one of his early questions to vet contractor candidates is: “Do you like architects and engineers?” He says it usually doesn’t take long for real attitudes and anti-team work tendencies to come out.

The size and scope of projects Rich’s firm works on also puts a demand on contractors to be able to work with BIM and REVIT and understand sustainability in depth. Same or compatible working methods across all team members are very helpful.

He and his clients work with firms already known to them or very carefully selected on both private and public projects.

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architect interviews

Keys to Construction Project Success

In Rich's view, the owner really sets the tone for any program. He shared some of the key ingredients for a successful project:

1. Laying out clear goals at the start and making sure everyone knows them, and then when issues arise, going back to the goals to resolve them
 - a. An example is laying out the performance criteria that will drive design, material choice, positioning on the site, etc.
2. Schedule buy-in so there is team wide collaboration toward that end
3. Same working method among the participants
4. Consistency from day to day and week to week so things run smoothly
5. Clear assignment responsibility for each decision – who the 'decider' is must be known
6. Gathering documents as you go so that successfully closing out the project and commissioning the building goes easily – Rich calls this 'advanced commissioning'
7. Frequent meetings to resolve issues has a big pay off in schedule adherence
 - a. Resolve issues as they occur
 - b. Set meeting frequency to suit the needs of the project but at least weekly
8. Squeeze the schedule by putting in place controls at the start
9. Put in place controls so all bids are on the same page and there are no low balls
10. People who represent the participants need to be proactive, particularly the persons managing the overall project for the owner and for the contractor
11. The architect needs to stay involved throughout to provide continuity

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