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The Impact of Our Decisions

Have you ever thought about the true impact of your decisions? Often these are not fully understood until later in our lives. Some of these are seemingly small things at the time but can turn out to have a great influence on others and ourselves and may even define us.

I remember several years ago when I took a short business trip to Washington, DC. My son (age 14 at the time) begged to come along to visit museums, especially the Air and Space museum. It was a very busy time, but I decided to take the extra time to make a weekend of it. We had a really great time, visiting the Smithsonian, the Air and Space museum, and some of the monuments. He even asked me to show him some of the buildings I had built early in my career. Overall, the trip was more valuable to him and me than I could have imagined. We had great discussions, and I caught a glimpse of the man he would soon become. I didn't realize it then, but it would be one of the

few trips he and I would get to take by ourselves. It helped define both of us and our relationship.

We often think about the *now*, and don't always realize the greater significance of our decisions, or their long-term impact. This applies to construction as well. What, and how we decide to build, will have a huge impact on others, society, and the environment for years to come.

When my son and I visited some of the projects I had built in the early '90s, I wondered: Who works inside these structures now? What do they do? How does the building affect them? Do they like the buildings? One project is an apartment building on Pennsylvania Avenue, which of course is constructed with precast concrete. It looked as beautiful today as it did back when we built it. I wondered if the people who lived in it felt as good about living there as I did about building it. A structure's aesthetic design is one of the things most people identify with. My son said, "This building looks really cool," and I realized one of the effects of what we had done.

A key part of that final impact comes from the materials we select. How will they withstand the test of time? How do they affect the indoor environmental quality? How do they affect the overall environment? As designers, these are some questions we must ask.

For example, when we select/approve combustible materials for a building's structural or enclosure system, we create additional future risk. From a fire-safety perspective, the industry has become more reliant on active fire-suppression systems. But structures made of combustible materials typically need extensive remedial work and often must be completely rebuilt after a fire event.

A similar result holds true for storm or high wind events. Most combustible construction is not resilient enough to withstand these types of storms. This lack of resiliency often requires additional materials to be harvested to rebuild structures, thereby increasing their impact on society and the environment.

The common practice of focusing on first costs, in the "now," can result in dramatic consequences later. High Performance design challenges us to truly optimize a structure based on its life-cycle costs. To be good environmental stewards, we should extend a structure's life cycle as far as possible. What will your structures look like in 20 years? Will they still make you proud? If there were a disastrous event, how will your structures fair?

Asking question like these can help bring to light how the decisions we make today will impact the future. With any luck, those decisions will ensure the next generation thinks the buildings you built were really cool. **A**

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On the cover: Nordstrom The Woodlands, Texas (see page 30). Photo: Connie Zhou/OTTO.

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