

OWNER'S REPRESENTATIVE: THE MISSING LINK

Once upon a time ... most design teams included a professional called an owner's representative, or owner's rep as they are more commonly referred to throughout the design and construction industry. That time, however, is no more. Rather, the role of this individual in the design process, much like the way I began this column, is reminiscent of a fairy tale. Although the owner's rep was more commonly involved in larger or high profile projects, their role was (and still is) extremely valuable for projects of all shapes and sizes. Beginning in the 1990's, primarily as a result of pressure to cut development costs, the owner's rep was more frequently being excluded from the design team. Some experienced owners felt that they were able to manage those tasks typically handled by an owner's rep themselves, and in some cases they were right. As other developers caught wind of this trend, however, they also began to exclude the owner's rep even though they did *not* possess the necessary skill set to replace this professional. This second wave of developers realized initial cost savings for the development process, but what they did not understand was the long-term cost, or downside, resulting from elimination of the owner's rep.

I can tell you from personal experience that nearly a decade and a half after the elimination trend began, the all too common absence of this vital team member is taking its toll. The design process, in far too many instances, has drifted from organized effort into anarchy. It has become dominated by personalities, and not by issues. The communication, generally speaking, has deteriorated from its earlier state. What does all of this mean? Well, it means that coordination has suffered, more changes and conflicts arise in the field, and the cost of construction rises with each of these occurrences. In the end, the owner foots the bill. So what was really saved in the end? Was it worth it?

What is (was) an Owner's Rep

In a nutshell, the owner's rep controls the design and development process, making sure that the owner's best interests are at the heart of every decision made. These professionals are typically versed in both design and construction,

pulling from their varied experiences to solve problems and offer creative solutions. The owner's rep will control the overall coordination effort between the design team members, ensuring that the most important topics receive the proper attention and resolution. During the construction phase, the owner's rep will spend significant time on the construction site, again recognizing and solving conflicts. When complicated issues arise, the owner's rep will explore all of the options, distill the information, and provide the owner with a concise set of options, clearly defined, along with a recommended course of action.

You may be wondering why I am such a strong proponent of the owner's rep. Do I have an ulterior motive? Not really. My position on this subject stems from seeing so many projects go awry due to the absence of this critical team member. I have seen poor decisions made by owners simply because they did not fully or accurately understand the issues. I have seen landscape architects influence interior design because of their strong personalities, and not because of their skills in the area. I have seen qualified professionals retreat into doing only what they have to do, and not what they could do during the design process, fearing the potential fallout of future liability from their actions. An owner's rep is focused on fighting for the owner, making sure that the owner wins.

Tangible Example

On a recent project, our firm was asked to join the design team late – I mean *really* late – in the design process. The rest of the design team had just completed their 65% Construction Documents issue to the owner, with construction documents being the last major phase in the design process before submitting for final permit. In other words, the entire hotel was practically completed and we were just being brought on to *begin* our work. To further complicate matters, this particular property had an aggressive food and beverage program which, due to our lack of involvement to that point, had not been considered in the design effort.

When I first looked at the space that was earmarked for food and beverage functions (i.e. the kitchens, dining spaces, bars, and support spaces), it was

painfully evident that the space allocated was insufficient in size, configuration, and location. It was one of the worst spaces I have seen, and this sub-par design was clearly the result of our absence until such a late stage in the design process.

Though the situation was less than desirable, we had a job to do. We jumped in and began working with the owner to implement the desired food and beverage program in the designated space. The space was full of columns, had a single narrow access to and from the restaurant and banquet areas, and even had a stairway in the center of the space for access to a second floor mechanical mezzanine. As we began developing possible conceptual designs (yes, I said *conceptual* designs in the midst of *construction documents*), it was clear that the obstacles – or design drivers – in their existing configuration were too limiting. Something would have to change. The designs that we forwarded to the rest of the team were quickly met with resistance by the other disciplines. They were just about done with their work and did not want to make any changes to the drawings that, from their perspective, had been resolved long ago.

In one specific instance, I recall an inquiring phone call that I placed to the architect which quickly turned confrontational. One of our designs (which had received approval from the foodservice operator) would have required the relocation of a column in the kitchen. Though it was undesirable to relocate columns at this stage of the game, it could be done. In fact, several columns throughout the property were already being relocated at the time. I do not suggest relocating a column on a whim, realizing the impact of time and cost for all involved. In this instance, however, the relocation was justified. As my the architect grew more intense, and more heated, during our conversation, I tried to explain my justification for the design and the proposed column relocation. Following the presentation of my logic, I was met with a hostile “why should I move *my* column just to accommodate *your* ware washing layout. Whoa, whoa time out! *His* column? *My* soiled dish table? Isn't it the owner's? His response, whether he realized it or not, was a classic example of how the design

and coordination processes deteriorate when the owner's rep is removed from the equation. An owner's rep, had one been involved in the project I described above, would have redirected the team's focus based on the best interests of the owner.

Bring 'em Back

Maybe the layout I had proposed was so critical to the execution of the food and beverage program that the relocated column was justified. On the other hand, maybe the cost of relocating the column and the delay for re-engineering the building was *not* justified. I am less worried about the answer and more concerned about the process. In the example I have shared, the one who lost was the owner, regardless of the final outcome. Why were two members of the design team left to "battle it out" over an issue, isolated from the rest of the development team? Who is to say that we were basing our decisions on the most relevant criteria?

I believe that it is time to bring the owner's rep back, or at least someone qualified and designated to fill that role. Their insight, experience, guidance, and complete loyalty are essential to ensure that the owner's best interests are always the prime consideration for every decision throughout the development process. Even one of these issues can result in impacts of six, seven or eight figures. To be honest, I have rarely seen a project where a qualified owner's rep's fee was not justified. Excluding the owner's rep is short-sighted. Generally speaking, the quality of the design process has steadily declined since their widespread absence in the mid-1990s. I for one am anxiously awaiting the return of the owner's rep, the missing link.