

How to break the cycle of simply 'cracking on'

Expert Opinion by David Frise in Construction News – 4 July 2017

We may not yet know the exact cause of the dreadful fire at Grenfell Tower but it has raised serious questions about our building processes.

The performance gap of our buildings is a problem that has been largely ignored. We have for a long time been assembling products, not building a product.

The Green Construction Board found that UK non-domestic buildings typically use around 200 per cent more energy than predicted.

I accept the arguments that this is complex, but were it even a quarter of that, it would still be bad. It tells us that, if the energy performance is out, you must also be out on smoke, fire and acoustics.

The construction industry is under the misapprehension that the customer wants a building. They do want a building, but primarily as an investment vehicle. An investment vehicle is required to be on time, on budget and on spec. Except the 'on spec' is optional, as long as the building looks like the drawing you put in for planning.

Investment vehicles also require quick returns on investment. We are all party to this; all our pensions are invested in these buildings.

A little means a lot

This culture drives behaviours across the whole construction industry, private and public. We "crack on" as quickly as possible and rapidly get into D&B mode with a good dose of value engineering because we are over budget.

If everyone on site breaks spec by a small amount, say 1-2 per cent, the cumulative effect is your 200 per cent energy miss. We assemble products – the equivalent to selling a Golf and delivering a Skoda – then say it's the same thing.

This was perceived before Grenfell as a victimless crime and government has set the tone by letting Building Regulations wither on the vine or failing to enforce them.

This 'crack on' approach with unrealistic programmes and budgets causes stress on the people we ask to construct them, contributing to mental illness, broken buildings and broken people.

System reboot

To break this cycle, we need to focus on delivering the product – a building as a system that meets the design. A solution to this might be an adjustment to planning.

To start the process off, a developer could be granted planning permission but would not be able to start on site until a notional amount had been designed, or perhaps a Regulation 38 Fire Plan had been signed off. This lends itself perfectly to BIM and digital construction, as it is easy to check.

As the freeholder, you would also be required to prove the building you ordered met the design submitted before the start on site. No value engineering to save cost at the reduction of performance.

Passivhaus is an example of an approach that makes us focus on the building as a system, a product. That approach would help us deliver buildings to programme, to budget and to design.

With less time spent on site, we would be safer, disrupt local communities less and we might also start to sort the industry's image problem out.

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