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October 2007

Expeditors: Pushing projects to the top of the pile

By Jen Benepe

Let's start with the old saw "time equals money." The lesson of 2007 has been that time equals more and more money.

That's due to the rising cost of construction. According to the Turner Building Cost Index, costs in the second quarter of 2007 jumped 7.6 percent over the second quarter of 2006.

For this reason, and because of the increasing complexity of building designs, expeditors are highly in favor with architects and developers to help get their project necessary permits from the city. Construction experts say that expeditors – often former Department of Buildings employees who combine technical knowledge, extensive experience with the building code and a high tolerance for standing in line – are still capable of making a project jump to the top of the pile.

Rick Bell, executive director of the American Institute of Architects' New York chapter, cites the interior stairway in the new New York Times headquarters on Eighth Avenue as a design that required the help of an expert in building codes. The stairway climbs through several stories using horizontal fire safety doors, a design that allowed the architect to realize a novel, open contiguous space. But it also raised tricky technical issues of knowing which parts of the code could be utilized to get the plan approved.

New construction and alterations can involve tens or even hundreds of permissions, starting with the plan approval and ranging through the razing of a building to its replacement's final design and construction. Sometimes, planning approvals have to be met through the city's Department of Planning even before the technical aspects of construction are considered.

"We probably have 15 projects under construction – some residential, some commercial, and some cultural and educational – and each building filing is a whole set of files itself," said Heidi Blau, associate principal at FXFowle Architects, who has used various expeditors for their specific expertise, such as Design 2147 for school and cultural projects, and Jerome Gilman and JAM Consultants Inc. for other large projects.

"In any one project, we have to have expeditors for the architectural, mechanical, fire protection, plumbing, boiler, fire protection system, demo permit and excavation permit," Blau said. Those permitting processes and approvals require someone with a broad range of skills and coverage with city agencies.

"We do read the code, but there are a lot of interpretations of the code," she said. With complex architectural designs, "there are ways to achieve the intent of the law without following its prescriptive path."

Birth of an expeditor



Michael Zenreich, principal of MZ Architects

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For this reason, many expeditors tend to hire from within the buildings department itself. Steven Salvesen, architect and president of R.I.P. Construction Consultants Inc., said he has hired people who previously worked in the Department of Buildings.

Like many other expeditors, Salvesen started working in the business while practicing as an architect, when he had to go down to the buildings department over and over again to submit filings.

One strength an expeditor offers is years of accumulated knowledge. The building approval process is rife with procedural history, and many layers of changes were passed down with new decisions that were subsequently codified. Those decisions have not been rewritten yet into simpler code, and their many intricate layers of precedent are retained in the brain trusts of experienced expeditors, said Michael Zenreich, principal of MZ Architects, an expeditor who has been navigating the approval system for 27 years.

"[An expeditor] might recall that something wasn't approved, and might try to explain why a new use of that design feature would work to the plan approver," said Bell.

No manual exists to learn how to navigate the department, the forms or the procedures for certain approvals, said Salvesen. "Most of it is interpretation of institutional history," said Zenreich.

To be effective, an expeditor has to deal with the city's DOB, ECB, HPD and DOT (Department of Buildings, Environmental Control Board, Department of Housing Preservation and Development and Department of Transportation), said Sam Pruyn, who runs expeditor firm Building Brothers Inc. with his partner, Matthew Calvo. Even the number of three-letter names is enough to drive the uninitiated crazy. Expeditors interviewed said despite any previous working relationships with people inside the department, they are not allowed to socialize with any of them.

Knowledge combined with economies of scale is also extremely important: Even if they could hire a staff member to keep up with all the changes, the big architectural and construction firms admit it wouldn't be worth it. "Somebody fairly senior would have to be tracking it down, which would take their time away from the project," said Blau, who added that the costs for expeditors' services are reasonable.

"My projects tend to range four to five years," said Bob Kilar, a project executive for Turner Construction. "So that would mean I would go down to the buildings department every five years." An expeditor's team, in contrast, "goes down there every day, and they know exactly what they need."

DOB reforms

The Department of Buildings itself has gone through many changes. Commissioner Patricia Lancaster, appointed in 2002, began ridding the department of corrupt practices after a scandal tarred more than half the department's plumbing inspectors. Now, most say Lancaster, who had worked with the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, has been largely successful in eradicating corruption and favoritism.

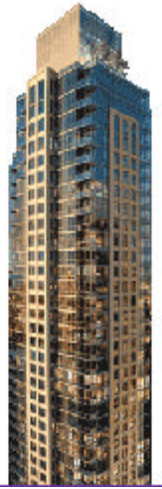
The process should become even easier in July 2008, when a new building code is expected to be finally effective, said Kate Lindquist, buildings department press secretary. "In the long run, the building code will be more accessible to the professional, and there will be the opportunity to take back some of the control," Lindquist said.

"It is no secret that since 1968, there have been incredible changes in the building code that have resulted in a complex, and often contradictory, document," she said. It has been this complexity, she noted, that provided part of the impetus for developing a new building code for the city.

In the meantime, part of Lancaster's efforts to reduce favoritism and "working the system" have included changing filing procedures, reducing the number of jobs an expeditor can file at one time, and assigning plan approvals and inspectors randomly. Salvesen, whose expertise includes the approval of nightclubs such as Crobar and Marquis, credits Lancaster with leveling the playing field. "When there is no corruption, everyone is treated equally," he said.

Next year's code

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The new codes that go into effect in July 2008 are expected to be vastly simpler. And in conjunction with streamlined processes for filing, electronic scheduling of appointments and other improvements, they should ease the approval process, said Lindquist.

Bell said that in theory, the city wants a young architect who is working on his or her first project, perhaps affordable housing, to be able to navigate the approvals process easily.

While architects agreed the new code might help make it easier to get approvals, they also said they will probably continue to use expeditors when the new processes are in place.

"An individual who is willing to spend the time to learn the process, and to learn the procedures, could do this," said Pruyn. "But most people aren't interested in investing that type of time."

Zenreich, who was chairman of the committee to develop the new code, thinks his four-year investment in that process will pay off down the road with additional business. "We expect to get much more business, because no one is going to understand the new code," he said.

Architects and construction specialists couldn't agree more. "I am concentrating on managing my project, so even if it were easier, I would not go down to the buildings department; it's a waste of my time," said Kilar. His expertise, he said, is "building the best building I can, not filing papers."

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