



IF the development of a clear program has long been recognized as an important precursor to a well-planned project, why is there often so much pressure to ignore it, change it mid-stream, or skip the step altogether? A colleague recently asked me to comment on our programming techniques for a book she is publishing. Her question about how our methods have changed in recent years made me stop to think about how seemingly unrelated trends in our practice have affected the programming process — and to question the importance of this step in what we do.

Anyone who has been part of a design-build team can attest to the multiple factors that can impact, support, or derail an otherwise simple project. Of these, three aspects of the process have clearly influenced the early stages of program documentation and project research in recent years. They are speed of delivery, integration of sustainable practices, and increased access to precedents. A brief look at this may help us make good decisions about how and when to modify our program methods.

Speed of Delivery

The ongoing need for speed in project delivery drives team members to take shortcuts where possible without compromising results. The average timeline for project programming through move-in gets shorter every year, and this pattern does not show signs of stopping. At the same time, business drivers are in a constant state of flux. Statistical needs, branding intentions, known building restrictions, and/or available project funding can change midstream due to a change in leadership, movement in the client's market, or a shift in the economy. Consequently, the program that we design to is often revised while the project is in process. The idea of a finite program that we adhere to religiously during design has given way to the need to manage flexibility.

To be effective, the programming process cannot be a static piece of documentation, but rather a means that will accommodate change and continue to serve as the basis of design during later stages of the project. Building Information Modeling (BIM) tools, such as Revit, help us manage programs that evolve, and offer the means for tracking changes to the program. When space planning occurs, closed rooms and defined areas are tagged according to the original baseline program. Revit is used to calculate and record the square footage of those rooms and areas. An overall program summary can

also be shown on the plan summarizing the program information. As plan changes are made, square footage assessments automatically update. So the team immediately sees the consequences of decisions for change in metrics that can be compared to the initial program.

Sustainable Practices

Another key trend in project planning is the integration of sustainable solutions into mainstream practice. At the turn of the century, some forward-thinking manufacturers were changing their process to offer more sustainable products and several organizations and agencies were working to establish better practices for renovation with respect to the earth’s limited resources. The public was ready for a more responsible approach and some, but not all, companies made green solutions a part of their project design criteria. Others asked for responsible design solutions as long as such solutions did not cost any more than the “non-green” solution. At the time, going green often cost more in the way of products with extra manufacturing steps or costly certifications. It also resulted in some non-standard means and methods for the trades during construction, which translates into added cost.

At that time, programming questions asked of an owner needed to include an assessment of goals relative to sustainable practices so the design team would know how to evaluate solutions on the owner’s behalf. This often included intentions about material reuse, long term commitments for use of the facility, options for investment in the future, and/or the use of local products. Now sustainable solutions are available on multiple levels without increasing project costs, delaying construction, or limiting aesthetic options. This means we don’t spend a lot of time asking ‘how green would you like to be’. Conscientious team members assume responsibility for responsible recommendations relative to good sustainable practices as a standard. The sustainable question in today’s program questionnaire is not a series of questions that ask ‘how green would you like to be?’, but rather a simple ‘are you interested in LEED or other certification of the project?’

Research Precedents

Programming is one part assessment of the metrics, one part inquiry for the vision, and one part research to see what has been done that can shed light on the design in the interest of success for the project. Our increased ability to gather information about other projects quickly allows us to provide insights that add to the program so that it becomes a stronger working model rather than a simple tally of user input. Relative success, and even the lack of success, in completed projects that have some similarities to the one at hand help us make good decisions about setting design criteria.

Increased availability of precedents through online tools continue to make programming a more transparent process. The evidence of effective change provided in white papers and other publications help each of us to see intelligent approaches that can apply to the project at hand. This access enables us all to foresee better results and makes the program a guide to which all team members can contribute. Such continued collaboration will be effective as long as the program stays in the forefront and there is clarity about which changes are approved as the basis of design. In other words, collaboration is the new program. 🌈



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