

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 279: 1918 (LIFE SAFETY/PROPERTY PROTECTION)

By Richard Schulte

The eighteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association took place in Chicago in May 1918. Among the papers presented at this meeting was a paper titled "*Planning Hotels and Apartment Houses for Safety*" authored by an architect, Elmer C. Jensen. The following is an excerpt from Mr. Jensen's paper:

"At the outset the writer wishes to express his appreciation of the very valuable service the National Fire Protection Association has contributed to the architectural profession. Until your Association began its work, there was comparatively little being done towards defining the principles of safe building, measured in terms of safety to occupants and fire prevention. Serious fires, accompanied with loss of life, occurred, showing the necessity of improved building construction principles, and architects unselfishly contributed of their time and talent toward solutions of the many problems involved, but effective progress was not made until the many interests concerned found, in this Association, the means of genuine progress through co-operation.

Improvement in methods applied to building construction, as well as appliances for safety and fire protection, especially in recent years, has been marked and rapid, but there is still much that can and should be accomplished.

The two classes of buildings forming the subject of this paper have shown, until recently, probably less improvement than most others, and as a consequence there is in existence at the present time a very large number of apartment houses and hotels that are a distinct menace from the standpoint of both safety to life and fire protection.

Most of the improvements are found in communities where building construction is controlled by building regulations, and for this reason the promulgation of changes in old, and development of new, ordinances should not be neglected by those best qualified to secure the proper results.

Our larger cities are only fairly well protected in the matter of new buildings through more or less intelligent and effective building and other regulations having for their purpose safe building, but the smaller cities and towns have, as a rule, comparatively little or no protection other than that afforded by the character of the professional services employed, if any, or the wishes of the building owners. Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the necessity of every state having a building code that will at least require the recognition of those essential and common principles of safe construction that are now generally recognized by all authorities on building matters, and in this connection it may not be out of place to state that the American Institute of Architects has for a number of years had a Committee on Basic Building Code. Your Association could effectively co-operate in this most important work.”

[TEXT OMITTED]

“Safety of life should take precedence of all other considerations, even of fire protection, which in many cases would be considered simply as an additional precaution and having for its purpose an economic end. This statement is not intended to imply that fire protection is not a life safety measure, but simply to discriminate between that which is necessary as a life safety measure and that for the avoidance of property loss. The first should be required, to the fullest extent regardless of cost, while the second could properly be regulated or determined largely by economic considerations.”

This principle, carried to the logical end, might permit of the use of features which would not secure the maximum of protection against property loss but which would nevertheless be consistent if safety of life and damage to adjoining premises had been given full consideration.”

Of particular interest in the excerpt above is the expression by an architect of the sentiment that safety of the building occupants is of primary importance in the design of buildings and the promulgation of building code provisions. The architect further states that also of particular importance in building design and code provisions is the prevention of the spread of fire from one building to adjacent buildings.

In other words, the reduction in property losses from fire in the building of fire origin should not be the primary consideration in the design of buildings and the development of code provisions.

The sentiments expressed above were quite different from those typically expressed at previous meetings of the National Fire Protection Association since the membership of the NFPA primarily consisted of men in the fire insurance industry. Over time, the NFPA membership and the fire protection profession as a whole, would come to agree with Mr. Jensen's comments above.

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