

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 176: 1922 (THE LUMBER INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING CODES)

By Richard Schulte

The National Fire Protection Association's campaign to encourage the use of incombustible (noncombustible) building materials and fire resistive building construction obviously had an adverse effect on the lumber industry. Hence, the lumber industry's report at the twenty-sixth Annual Meeting of the NFPA held in 1922 is of interest. The following is the transcript of the Lumber Industry's Report:

"Report of the National Lumber Manufacturers' Association.

Mr. L. Kraemer: Through constructive, practical building code activities, which have been in complete harmony with existing local conditions, the National Lumber Manufacturers Association has furthered the cause of fire prevention, during the year 1921 to a far greater extent than it has ever done before. Fire prevention measures written in simplified building regulations so they may be easily interpreted and enforced, and written in such form that they cover the types of construction common to American cities, have been the underlying principle of our activities.

Two years ago we began a field survey of the building code situation in all sections of the United States in order to become conversant with all variations in construction due to variations in climatic conditions. This survey involved personal visits to over six hundred cities. Within a very few weeks after this survey was begun we found it necessary to extend our research work to cover not only variations due to climatic conditions but to study the effect of different building regulations on development, the extremely limited means available for code enforcement and the variations and confusion in the requirements for accepted types of construction.

To take up these points in order we found that, while a building code is adopted for the purpose of improving types of construction and reducing fire hazards, a great many of our cities in attempting to regulate the type of construction of buildings for certain occupancies were causing the builders to evade the issue by erecting buildings of types not so thoroughly regulated. By way of illustration, I have in mind a city of nearly 200,000 population which placed such stringent regulations on three-story apartment houses that, while the three-story building was desirable, the regulations imposed upon it caused the builders to discontinue all three-story construction and revert to two-story construction, which was given very little thought in the building code. We have information from building departments of many other cities citing other instances of law evasion.

The next question which we found needed study was what sort of regulations would prove of greatest value to a city in view of the fact that the office of building inspector was more or less of a political plum, the inspector being changed with every new administration. The position of building inspector in a city where this condition prevails, is not at all attractive to a man capable of properly conducting the office. While as a whole, these political appointees seemed to be fairly successful in enforcing construction regulations we came to the conclusion that their efforts could be made more effective by simplifying the building code of their city to such an extent that the least informed contractor in town could read it and get a very definite idea of what the city required him to do.

The next question was that of the confusion that exists in the terms appearing in building codes. The "two apartment house" or "two flat" so common in western sections of the country is called a "duplex" farther east and the "duplex" of the west is called a "double house" in the east. The mill construction of the Pacific Coast is ordinary construction in the central states and so on through almost every section of a building code.

To remedy these extremely undesirable situations, the National Lumber Manufacturers' Association formulated a building code which it believes meets these ever varying conditions. This building code is based largely upon the regulations found in the building code of the National Board of Fire Underwriters and upon recommendation of other nationally recognized authorities. It permits the freest use of all materials consistent with safety to life and the fire hazard involved. It does not eliminate the use of any material but regulates the use and quality of all materials. It insures that open competition between material manufacturers, which we believe is so essential and which will have a greater effect in keeping up the standards of manufactured products, than any attempt to set standards by legislation.

The year 1921 has given us great encouragement in our activities. We have letters from city officials, real estate boards, chambers of commerce and building code committees that assure us that we are accomplishing our purpose of correcting the faults and reducing the fire hazard, in the types of construction that make up over 90 per cent of all the construction in the country.

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