

## Peers, Beers, and Building Science

by Dan Kolbert

A few years ago, my crew and I sat down for an informal lunch with our friends at Horizon Residential Energy Services, a local energy auditing company we work with frequently here in Portland, Maine. We were brainstorming about how our companies could better collaborate when the subject of frequent challenges came up. The more we talked, the more we realized the issues our two companies face are the same ones that all local companies working on energy efficiency and “green building” face.

So why, we wondered, are we working in isolation? All of us work on the same housing stock, confront the same economic pressures and client expectations, and use the same available technology and techniques. Wouldn't it be more productive to get together as a community of designers, builders, and consultants to share our successes and failures?

Many of us are direct competitors, but we have more to gain by banding together and raising local standards than we do by working in isolation.

### An Enthusiastic Response

I volunteered to look into putting together such a group. Through the state chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, I heard that Steve Konstantino, a board member, had had a similar idea. Steve owns Maine Green Building Supply, a retail and wholesale store devoted to energy efficiency, healthy building products, and renewable energy. This meant he had a nice warehouse that would be perfect for gatherings if we timed them to coincide with low points in the inventory cycle. We decided to explore our idea together.

Both of us put the word out, to immediate enthusiasm. He and his staff offered not only to host, but to put together an email list, send out invitations, and — perhaps most important — set up a grill. On June 23, 2009, we had our first meeting of the Building Science Discussion Group. The invitation read, “An informal discussion for building professionals to ask, learn, debate, knock around, support, agonize over, ridicule, flog, and answer the challenges and concepts of the best building practices.” The first topic was “Vapor barriers — what, where and how.”

I can't remember exactly what emerged from that meeting — we don't take notes or attempt to come to any consensus. But 35 people showed up, we had a lively discussion and a good time, and we were off to the races.

### Good Connections

Since then, we've met monthly (except for a skipped session or two in the summer) and have covered topics ranging from window technology to Passive House to Maine politics and its effects on our businesses. We've even had meetings devoted to critiquing specific projects someone is brave enough to bring to the group.

Turnout has varied from a low of 10 to a high of 65 (for a session on our state-run Efficiency Maine program). We occasionally have a brief presentation, but mostly it's a free-for-all in which people challenge each other in a spirit of mutual benefit, not one-upsmanship. As moderator, I manage any conflicts, ask questions to keep the conversation moving, and try to make sure that everyone gets a chance to be heard; mostly, though, I use a light touch and let the discussion go where it will.

We have a loyal core that shows up religiously, and a larger group of people who come when they can or when the topic is of particular interest. The participants include architects, energy auditors and modelers, and various contractors (insulation, heating, weatherization, renewable energy, and — of course — general). Among the many benefits has been the opportunity to make new connections — I've found several subcontractors I hadn't worked with before. I haven't heard of any romances yet, but we're hopeful.

**A good idea for any community.** As someone active in several online forums, I know how valuable it is to discuss issues with others around the country and around the world. But nothing compares to being in the same room at the same time with colleagues facing similar challenges. Contractors who want to learn more about building science should consider getting a conversation going in their communities by launching their own version of our group.

It's true that companies in southern and coastal Maine might be more interested in the topic than companies in other areas — we have old housing stock, so weatherization and retrofits are big issues, and we were a site for the pilot program of LEED for Homes. On the other hand, Portland is a small city (under 70,000) in a sparsely populated state. If we can attract as many as several dozen attendees to our gatherings, it shouldn't be too hard to put together a similar-sized crowd in other more densely populated locales.

### A Multitude of Benefits — And a Risk Worth Taking

If you can get a dozen people together, you can have a good discussion. And when word gets out, don't be surprised if you need more chairs.

Here are some of the ways I have benefited from the group:

**Better understanding.** In order to articulate my beliefs and prejudices, I have been forced to think them through more thoroughly. Listening to well-informed debates on various topics has provided me with good information and exposed me to other people's real-world experiences, all of which now helps guide me in my decisions.

Being a part of the group has also given me more confidence in discussing these issues with clients, knowing I've talked them through in front of others with expertise on the subject.

**Professionalization of the community.** If I meet someone in construction or design who seems interested in building science, I make sure he or she gets on our mailing list. I want us to have new participants, both to share what we've learned and to make sure we don't become an echo chamber, simply parroting accepted wisdom back and forth to each other.

Feeling like you're part of an engaged community — actively working together to improve the quality of everyone's work — is exciting. The more people involved, the better.

**Networking.** As I mentioned, I have found several new subs at our get-togethers. As a general contractor, I consider it a big plus that a sub would be interested enough in the subject to show up (though the free beer may be an inducement as well). I believe that participants have a certain level of credibility with each other. At the very least, we know we speak the same language.

**Exposure to new ideas and opportunities.** We're lucky to have some high-powered people in our group who are generous with their knowledge and experience. I've learned about new materials, building techniques, emerging technologies, financing opportunities, and design ideas that I might not have known about otherwise.

One of the obvious risks is that many of us are direct competitors. We have multiple insulation contractors, GCs, solar energy installers, architects, and energy auditors who attend regularly. Yet no one seems reluctant to share information — perhaps because we don't talk money much, if at all. I think we all have a sense that we have more to gain by banding together and raising local standards than we do by working in isolation against the level-in-the-rifle-rack crowd.

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