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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

Leaky condos affair has a positive spinoff

There is a silver lining in the cloud that brought the leaky condo crisis to the B.C. Lower Mainland. The residential construction industry has become much more sophisticated.

Builders have never before worked so closely with their architects, engineers, designers, product and materials suppliers and construction trades to ensure quality control and properly design and build new homes. Believe it or not, there wasn't a lot of collaboration in the old days.

I remember working on large multi-family condominium apartment projects a decade ago where the architects who designed the buildings and wrote the construction specifications refused to visit the job site. They feared taking on liability for how the project was built, believing they could avoid it by letting someone else supervise construction. In reality, regardless of their refusal to ensure that the building was built as they intended it to be, they shared in the liability.

That was then. This is now. Everyone has learned about liability the hard way. What might look good on paper actually has to be buildable and today architects and engineers are much more involved in what happens on-site.

At a recent Urban Development Institute seminar dedicated to exploring how the homebuilding industry has raised the bar in quality assurance for wood frame buildings, industry representatives talked about the importance of not only involving the design professionals in construction, but also the value of involving the building trades in design.

Polygon Homes' Vice President of Quality and Customer Service Bob Switzer said some of the best ideas for better construction methods and innovations in building products come from construction trades workers who are doing the hands-on work. Pierre Gallant, an architect and senior principal with the North American-wide engineering firm of Morrison Hershfield, pointed out that collaboration and the learning that flows from it must be continual because there are no "recipe books" for quality construction.

"Recipe books are for when you stop thinking," he warned.

He pointed out the need to review every step of the construction process. Review starts at project conception and continues through design, construction and after-sales maintenance monitoring. It even means destructive investigation, where walls are pulled apart and inspections confirm building performance long after the completion of construction.

Vancouver's biggest multi-family builder, Polygon, has adopted three key principles to ensure quality in their new generation of construction: climate sensitive design, sound construction methodology and after-sales monitoring and maintenance.

Polygon's idea of climate sensitive design focuses on using "umbrella architecture," designing large overhangs and complex flashing systems to deflect rain from the walls.

They've made the biggest strides in quality assurance in their construction methodology, rigorously ensuring a system of on-site testing and in-house quality reviews. They are building smarter, ensuring that materials are protected from the weather when they are stored on-site before being applied.

Polygon has also worked closely with their suppliers to improve products, like windows and doors. Switzer said the building materials industry has "answered the call" and invented new products that are more durable and can be installed with more confidence.

The third principle Polygon embraces involves a commitment to a comprehensive after-sales monitoring and maintenance program. They work closely with strata councils to ensure that the small things are attended to before they become big problems. An example is trimming plants that may have creeping vines, so they don't penetrate behind exterior siding and act as a wick for water. Technology is also being used to monitor building performance with moisture sensors built into wall assemblies.

The federal government's gum on building technology, C.M.H.C.'s Dr. Jim Robar, cautioned that the housing system in Canada is now highly developed, but it is not fail safe.

The leaky condo crisis scared everyone — including builders and their collaborators. Huge improvements have been made over the past decade in how new homes are designed and built.

The bar has been raised. Most importantly, the collaboration continues and further improvements will be made as more is learned.

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