

History Lessons

Evaluating the Past to Improve the Future

By Joe Whitefield

It is amazing how history comes alive for me when I visit the site of an historic event. As my eyes process the sights, my mind's eye looks back and recreates the events searching for clues as to what took place and a deeper understanding of why. This was definitely the case when I recently visited Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, where President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. I was able to look upon many areas that I had only read about in books or seen on television. Looking down on the motorcade route from a window on the sixth floor of the Book Depository (now a museum) was like looking through a lens on a scene from 50 years ago. The whole experience provided answers to some of my questions while it introduced me to new thoughts, curiosities, and questions.

HINDSIGHT

In a similar way, the facility managers typically are in the unique position of being on location with the facilities we manage and the constituents we serve. This is a tremendous advantage because we operate and maintain facilities and can measure their performance and functionality over time.

Every day, I look at the campus footprint—the facilities, infrastructure, technology, people, etc.—and contemplate how to best provide the services under my responsibility. There is no doubt that the ease or difficulties in meeting today's obligations were heavily influenced, if not totally determined, by decisions made in the past. Being on location provides some historical perspective to the circumstances involved in yesterday's decisions. This contributes to the undervalued form of knowledge known as hindsight.

LEGACY ISSUES

All facilities managers are dealing with various issues associated with legacy systems. Older facilities often have poorly functioning systems that are some combination of inefficient, difficult to maintain, and costly to operate. As frustrating as it can be for facilities personnel to work on these systems, it is often worse for the building tenants who live with the consequences of these underperforming systems.

In our struggle to deal with the problems, it is all too easy to criticize the designers and decision makers of the past. What could they have possibly been thinking? I have had that thought on more than one occasion. Perhaps it is time to do more than simply criticize those who have come before. Let me suggest we take an historical view and consider three ways to take advantage of the benefits of hindsight that come from being on location.

THE HISTORICAL VIEW

First, learn the lessons of history. Decisions are always a result of a process of trade-offs. When investigating the history of a problem, look to determine the conditions and constraints that were present



at the time of the decision. Were they budgetary in nature? Was form valued over function? Were there cultural influences? What role did tradition play? Where there technological or other forms of obsolescence?

Once understood, determine how similar they are to the conditions and constraints present today. No doubt many things change over time. Some things do not. The key here is to not throw the baby out with the bathwater. When addressing the problems of today, be sure the other relevant factors are adequately addressed.

Second, examine your own track record of success. This is where it gets a little personal. What problems today are the results of decisions that you had a hand in making? Armed with the results of today, surely we can effectively evaluate our past decisions and the circumstances at the time. Was the information sufficient for the scale and impact of the decision? Were future costs and various risk factors adequately considered? Where too many dynamic factors treated as static? Who hasn't planted a small tree too close to a building, causing problems later when it grew? Honest self evaluation can lead to self improvement.

Third, improve decision making today in order to leave a better legacy for the future. This is really the application of lessons from above. After all, what good is it to not learn from history and continually repeat its mistakes? Experience is a great teacher. The goal here is to look at the experiences of the past—others, or your own—and seek to learn from them. Then you can advance this knowledge forward in the projects and processes we are designing today. How will future generations of facilities managers judge the decisions you are making today? Hopefully, they will realize the benefits of many good decisions that were based on proper priorities and a complete consideration of the trade-offs.

College and university campuses have great history. Working on a campus

affords a unique opportunity to be on location with our facilities. That, in turn, allows us a great opportunity to develop more of an historic perspective when considering how to address the legacies of older facilities. Don't miss the opportunity to learn the history lessons that are readily available and that can

improve today's decisions. The benefits can be realized in both the present and the future. ☺

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