

the ink-to-stone letters



Estimating I

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- What Works Best for Your Property?, “Custom”: Costs and Schedules

Long ago, a **master builder** with credentialed experience was the way to build quality. Within that process, instincts grew and were passed on in buildings that endure timelessly. This success relied on integration of knowledge with instinct as instrumental, yet it took lifetimes of practice to gain. Bearing in mind the process of building didn't necessarily produce architecture, and the process of designing also wasn't a sure-fire component of building.

These days, the cost estimate's role is still the key in the building process which is derived from knowledge; with instinct, an art and science, it's still an **“estimate”**. Usually without detailed cost breakdowns, many planning decisions are based on simplified conceptual numbers, which may lead to problems. An experienced builder knows this too well and often must overcome challenges associated by lack of detailed information from design intentions. The values of a builder's cost expertise adds significant value if done in early phases of the design process, before the work starts. By contributing experience to this stage, the project and the client will benefit. Sounds simple, but it rarely is - because the needs to get started as soon as possible usually prevail, thus, **detailed** cost analysis usually follow design phases after their completion instead of during design.

My father was an estimator, the skills and abilities which he learned from his father, he then taught me, but it was in a very roundabout way. From 1923 to 1974 their company, A.F. Peaslee, Inc. started by my grandfather built museums, colleges, churches, schools, banks, hospitals, water treatment facilities, town halls, factories, office buildings, libraries, YMCA's, and homes.

So I grew up in a builder's home, heard many things about architects along the way, not all good. In fact - that may have contributed to my choice to study architecture because I knew it might make my father really mad. It was my form of rebellion. Years after AFP, Inc. closed its doors in 1974, I started

my own design-build operation and soon afterwards, I humbly went to my father and 'pressed' for him to teach me about estimating. Of course he would, he taught me the basics, but it was the insight and comments that were indelibly engraved like silver in my memory. The bond was special, a rare chance to learn from someone whose skill I always took for granted. As a kid, one is always asked, "So what does your Dad do?" After trying to explain repeatedly what an estimator does, I eventually just said he runs a construction company and that would be the end of it.

When my grandfather Arthur F. Peaslee started out, he probably intended for both of his sons to join him in the company. Eventually, only my father Stephen did, and as it turned out, Uncle Dave had a proclivity for nuclear physics. When Stephen went to work for Arthur, his father, he was 21, and right from the start, he was trained to estimate.

My grandfather evidently understood that this is the single most critical element to a construction company's survival and success, thus he focused on his most valuable asset to learn these vital skills for the business of making buildings, which depend on skills used in an extremely competitive process of estimating and bidding accurately.

Numbers, are far more than just analyses, which would be just too simple. Like a jigsaw puzzle, My Dad advised, gather the pieces, lay them out, and use your eyes to seek out relationships piece by piece. Think of doing this under a clock, in any weather, usually without cooperation, and making a profit to go ahead for the next one. Let's take it a step further, what about finishing ahead of schedule and under budget while the pieces keep moving about? Hmm, what a concept!.

I've learned this early design process is not a guarantee, but it does maintain cost accuracy and **streamline** a schedule. Over the next few years I called and spoke with my father often about many things personal, but it usually included something to do with project costs.

Once, when I faced a client's very tight budget, Dad's advice to me was: "...Sometimes you have to cut the suit to fit the cloth." Our special bond was growing, I felt blessed and grateful.

Yet it came to an abrupt end when he was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer, and passed on at 66. Overcome with shock and grief, I took solace in the fact I was offered a small window into

his world of knowledge, wisdom and integrity in estimating that I never fully understood growing up. It stays with me today, often I ask what would he do in this given situation on a project?

I use the “suit” phrase often as it echoes on in my heart and mind.

I share my father’s advice with clients, colleagues, and students or anyone considering a building project:

Preliminary cost estimates work.

The returns in value will be self-evident. It is a very good practice to do more analysis in early design stages. It’s an investment, but the results are well worth the efforts.

Many designers rely heavily on conceptual costs that do not consider unique conditions and circumstances specific to each project, which is an invitation for many of Murphy’s Laws

such as: Murphy’s Law # 537:

“Do square foot costs prevail over
long tedious research and calculations?
Well, you get to go home much earlier.”



In tribute: Estimator-in-Chief
Stephen C. Peaslee
1929 -1996

