

From Amish Construction “Barn Raising” to Integrated Project Delivery – Have We Really Come Up With Anything New in Construction Phase Services?

By Eric O. Pempus, AIA, June 6, 2015

The Wall Street Journal’s August 2008 article, “From Barn Raising to Home Building,” discusses how the Amish have long been famous for community barn raisings. Barn raisings and modern project delivery methods, such as Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), have some interesting similarities and differences. The Amish community often can erect a better-built structure faster and for less money than architects, engineers, construction managers, and construction contractors, frequently using simpler methods like wooden pegs in lieu of bolted steel connections and metal fasteners. The Amish involve their neighbors and use family members as workers, keeping their overhead low, while utilizing the various skills of community members. Few Amish use computers or go through the added expense of hiring non-Amish to do three-dimensional drawings or models of their hand-drawn sketches. And while few have insurance or sign construction contracts, they certainly can manage to immediately correct problems without finger-pointing when issues arise during construction. The idea is simple: correct the problem and work towards completion.

Barn Raising and IPD Delivery Methods

Amish barn raising and IPD methods have similar characteristics. The intent of the AIA’s Single Purpose Entity Agreement for Integrated Project Delivery C195 (2008 edition) is to “achieve its object and purpose in a collaborative environment.” Likewise, the Amish people work in a community/collaborative environment when raising their barns. The members of the IPD team (Owner, Architect, and Construction Manager/Contractor, together with their consultants and subcontractors through “joining agreements”) are “expected to contribute their knowledge, skill and services” and “to bring to bear their collective expertise at the most opportune time.” The Amish as well utilize the various skills of their neighbors and community members. With IPD, “the successful accomplishment of the Project is paramount and takes precedence over individual concerns or desires.” The IPD team members “acknowledge and agree that success or failure shall be shared and measured not in individual terms, but upon meeting the specifically defined and agreed-upon Project Goals.” Similarly, the Amish share in the success of building better-built barns on time and on budget.

However, despite the similarities between Amish barn raising and IPD, there are some significant differences. The Amish delivery method is likely a verbal arrangement and a handshake, whereas the AIA C195 itself is an 18-page contract,¹ not counting the other associated and related AIA documents. The barn-raising plans are likely a hand-drawn sketch compared to IPD’s Building Information Modeling (BIM). Members participating in a barn raising receive modest pay, but enjoy a sense of community involvement and the satisfaction of helping a neighbor. With IPD, “Goal Achievement Compensation” means payments made to the members for achieving Project Goals in the Target Cost Amendment.

¹ The document has important legal consequences. Consultation with an attorney is encouraged with respect to its completion or modification.

Despite the differences between barn raising and IPD, have we really come up with a new way to deliver our projects? Haven't collaboration, collective skills, and resolving problems without litigation always been keys to successful project delivery? As was written in Ecclesiastes 2300 years ago, "There is nothing new under the sun."