



Scott L. Melnick

**A**s I sit in a hotel conference room in Washington, DC, listening to McGraw-Hill's economic forecast for 2006, I'm reminded of cyberpunk author William Gibson's famous quote: "The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet."

Gibson's wry observation is particularly true up and down the construction market, where decisions made a year or more ago are just starting to impact designers, detailers, fabricators, and erectors. And judging by the increased workload that many detailers are reporting, it looks like 2006 will be an up year. (The economists at McGraw-Hill seem to agree. According to Robert A. Murray, vice president of economic affairs, 2006 should see a 7% rise in construction spending on commercial buildings, with warehouses, hotels, offices, multi-story residential, educational, healthcare, manufacturing and institutional buildings leading the way. However, Murray and other speakers at the conference warned that labor shortages in the construction trades may impact construction activity and costs.)

So while Niels Bohr was undoubtedly correct when he stated: "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future," we still need to ask ourselves: Am I prepared for 2006? Am I up-to-date with the new steel specification (and the upcoming new *Steel Construction Manual*)? What—if any—will its impact be on my practice or business? Am I ready to adapt to the brave-new-world where interoperability is more than just a buzzword? Do I know enough about the current state of seismic design? What's going on in the world of coatings, joists, HSS, and certification?

Perhaps Malcom X said it best: "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today." But how do you prepare? Read. Talk to your peers, customers, and vendors. Get involved with industry organizations. And, of course, attend NASCC: The Steel Conference. This year's conference is scheduled for February 8-11 in San Antonio (the full program is bound into this issue and you can register at [www.aisc.org/nascc](http://www.aisc.org/nascc)).

If you've previously attended a conference, you know its value. This year we'll offer more than 60 technical sessions, a variety of short courses, and a wealth of networking opportunities. You'll also have a chance to hear—and

meet—Gene Krantz. If you can't quite place the name, think Apollo 13. He was the mission controller famous for saying: "Failure is not an option" (in the eponymous movie of the mission he was played by Ed Harris).

If you've never attended a conference, I urge you to ask one of your colleagues or friends who have attended whether it was more-than-worthwhile. The Steel Conference is designed to offer information usable in your daily practice. For engineers, it might be a session on making erection more efficient (and thereby saving money on a project), a look at the recent changes in the joist specification, or information on designing crane runways. For fabricators, we offer sessions on coatings, getting paid, and bar coding. For detailers, sessions run the gamut from file transfer protocol to finding and keeping manpower. And for erectors, sessions range from automated material handling to crisis management.

But it's not just the technical sessions. The conference offers a look at what's new from major vendors in all categories. It's a chance to talk with software vendors such as RAM International and RISA; with coatings suppliers such as Sherwin-Williams; with bolting and welding vendors such as Nucor Fasteners and Lincoln Electric; and more than 130 others. All of the major detailing software companies will be at the conference. And most of the major fabrication machinery companies bring their latest offerings—it's a chance to compare Peddinghaus with Daito or Ocean Machinery or any of the other companies demonstrating their latest products (and rumor has it that several of the companies will be bringing working prototypes of the next generation of fabrication equipment).

And lastly, the conference is a chance to network. Not just with old friends, but also with future colleagues, clients, and vendors. It's a chance to make connections and to exchange ideas.

Remember, as George Carlin famously suggested: "There's no present. There's only the immediate future and the recent past." Make sure you're ready for the future.

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