

editor's note



WHENEVER I VISIT ENGLAND, I ALWAYS EXPERIENCE A COMFORTING SENSE OF FAMILIARITY. Even though my forebears can claim no ancestry in the United Kingdom, I still feel a personal affinity. It's not just the language, but also the cultural touchstones.

On a recent trip, I had the opportunity to visit Stonehenge. It was easy to feel a sense of awe, of things that are both at once familiar and mysterious. I drew comfort knowing that the same solar equinox recorded at Stonehenge is the same one my children talk about at home. And I loved hearing about the myriad theories of both why and how the stonework was hauled to the site over hundreds of miles and constructed.

Stories of construction seemed to fill my trip. When I travelled to Bath to see the ancient Roman baths, I marveled to learn that the Roman pipes that carried the water to and from the natural hot springs still functioned. And I wondered how many current construction projects would be able to make the same claim in the next millennium.

Of course, not all of my visits were to ancient construction sites. I also was privileged to tour two of the U.K.'s top fabrication facilities. And as with Stonehenge, there was both the sense of the familiar and the foreign. Steel has become an international commodity and the shapes were more or less the same (though our wide-flange is typically produced from more than 95% recycled steel through the electric arc furnace process, and theirs comes predominantly from iron ore through the basic oxygen furnace process). We seem to use slightly more hollow structural sections while they seem to use an increasing amount of cellular beams (beams that have been sliced in half, round pieces removed from the web, and then re-welded). And the equipment is identical to that found in U.S. fabrication shops (primarily produced by Peddinghaus and Ficep; we seem to have more machinery competition here).

The biggest differences seem to be that they paint everything (they recognize it to be functionally unnecessary but like the aesthetic appeal) and they have a wholly different approach to sustainability.

While we of course emphasize the environmental aspects as well as the economic advantages of sustainability, they add a third leg: social. In the U.K., sustainability includes a focus on social issues, such as workforce training, community service, and even smoking in the shop.

The approach towards sustainability to look beyond simple material or energy use issues is wholly rational, and my guess is that the sustainability movement in the U.S. will soon move in that direction as well. The question about sustainability will go far beyond the fact that the U.S. structural steel industry has reduced its carbon emissions by 47% between 1990 and 2005 and has reduced its energy use by nearly a third over the past three decades. It will go beyond steel's obvious capabilities for deconstruction and material reuse. It won't just be concerned with emissions, energy efficiency, and related environmental concerns.

What intrigues me the most, however, is the question of whether we'll extend our concerns for sustainability to include not just what we're doing, but also what those we purchase from are doing. Will we start to hold overseas suppliers to our own sustainability standards? Will we look at their impact on the environment and on social issues? Will we start to demand that they reduce their environmental footprint, start paying living wages, and provide better health care?

I'll be intrigued to see if we're willing to pay more for a sustainable world. Because sustainability cannot be viewed as a purely local phenomenon. It's the same sun that rises over the U.K. and the U.S.; it's the same environment whether it's Sheffield, Seattle, or Shanghai.

SCOTT MELNICK
EDITOR

MSC

MODERN STEEL CONSTRUCTION

Editorial Offices

One E. Wacker Dr., Suite 700
Chicago, IL 60601
312.670.2400 tel
312.896.9022 fax

Editorial Contacts

EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Scott L. Melnick
312.670.8314
melnick@modernsteel.com

MANAGING EDITOR
Keith A. Grubb, P.E., S.E.
312.670.8318
grubb@modernsteel.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Geoff Weisenberger
312.670.8316
weisenberger@modernsteel.com

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Advertising Contact

Account Manager
Louis Gurthet
231.228.2274 tel
231.228.7759 fax
gurthet@modernsteel.com

For advertising information, contact Louis Gurthet or visit www.modernsteel.com

Address Changes and Subscription Concerns

312.670.5444 tel
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admin@modernsteel.com

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Betsy White
The Reprint Outsource, Inc.
717.394.7350
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