Your Designer's Experience Matters…

and will save YOU Time, Money and Headaches!

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By Ken Newell

If your organization is planning to renovate or build a new Fire/Rescue station, is there really any benefit to using an architect who has significant Fire/Rescue station experience? After all, any quality architect should be able to design a station, right? Is specialization really necessary? Well, let's look at it another way. Would you go to a foot specialist for a heart condition? Both doctors were trained in medical school. Surely the podiatrist can figure out a coronary by-pass, right?

In the same vein, any good architect should be able to "figure out" how to design a station but there are many advantages in using a designer with significant Fire/Rescue experience. By far, the most important fact to keep in mind is that an architect with significant Fire/Rescue design experience will save you money and headaches! Consider a few points that make this statement true.

Better Pre-Planning Assistance

At the earliest stages, when you are trying to estimate building size, site size, project scheduling, etc., an architect with significant Fire/Rescue experience is much more willing and able to provide accurate planning data. Accurate pre-planning data is extremely valuable when you need to know or submit your plans or requests to your boards or officials. If the architect has a wealth of this data readily available, there may also be little or no cost to you for soliciting it.

More Accurate Project Cost Projections

The architect who is regularly receiving actual construction bids on station projects has a much better "data bank" to utilize in projecting anticipated costs for your project. This benefits you during the pre-planning phase when you are establishing your capital improvement plan. It is also helpful at every design phase leading up to the project bidding by updating your project budget with real time construction cost trends for stations.

Fire Station#5 in Bristol, TN.
The first new station for this community in 55 years.

Automatic Credibility

Like it or not, one of your roles during the course of the project is "marketer." Be it to governmental boards, administrative leadership, citizen groups, or others, your project will be presented at different phases for approval and information. When the designer standing next to you has designed hundreds of these facilities and can answer almost any question presented with that vast experience, the project automatically inherits a high level of credibility.

The apparatus bays may hold a variety of different "apparatus types"

ways compared to the average building project. Beyond this, there are codes and standards like NFPA, OSHA, ISO, and others that place requirements on stations not typically encountered in other buildings. An architect experienced in addressing these will be much more capable of satisfying special codes and standards.

Greater Knowledge of Station Activities, Program Requirements, and Trends

"What is an extractor?"
"What is PPE and how does it need to be stored?"

These are the types of questions that you DO NOT want to hear from the lips of your designer. If you find yourself having to teach your architect how to design a Fire/Rescue station, you know you're in trouble. The experienced designer will have worked on enough station projects to have a good understanding of what actually goes on in a firehouse and how that should drive the design. He should bring ideas and fire service trends to the table that you have not even thought about. This will help to assure that your station not only satisfies you program requirements, but is also on the cutting edge of developing service trends.

Extensive Knowledge of State, National Codes and Standards for Fire Services

Every project has more than its share of building codes that have to be applied. Sometimes it seems that every possible jurisdiction is lined up to hit you with their particular requirements, no matter the building type. But station projects have particular requirements that must be addressed in uncommon

Familiarity with Specialized Systems and Equipment

Decontamination, vehicle exhaust extrication, drainage, SCBA, cascades, emergency notification systems, extractors and more, are just some of the specialized systems or equipment to be addressed in the design of a modern rescue facility. Without prior experience with these systems the architect will likely need extensive instruction on what they are and how to design for them.

Experience With a Variety of Fire/ Rescue Station Construction Types

An understanding of the different construction types normally used for stations and how they may best fit your program needs and available budget is critical by the architect so that they can make the best recommendations for your specific project.

THOSE THAT ARE INVESTED IN YOUR PROJECT WILL FEEL MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE WHEN THEY UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS NOT THE DESIGN TEAM'S FIRST RODEO.

Prototypical Opportunities

When the architect has a large 'repertoire' of previously designed and built stations, there may very well be one that is similar to your program needs. If so, here is the opportunity for you to actually tour a similar model of what you are considering. You may even identify an existing design that will perfectly fit your needs, thus saving time and money.

Fire/Rescue Station Construction Administration Experience

The construction phase is the phase most likely to encounter significant, costly problems. Everyone has heard horrific stories of all the unnecessary change orders faced during the construction period. These can sometimes be the result of a designer not spending enough time coordinating all the tasks during this phase and not being familiar with the inherent challenges in construction of a Fire/Rescue Station. Anticipating and addressing problems even before they arise is critical in protecting your department's best interest and budget.

A Fire/Rescue Station should be designed and built to be a 50 to 75 year facility. Selecting the architect who is significantly experienced in this very specialized building type will be the most likely way to ensure the station's longevity and save your department money during construction and over the life of the facility.

Specialized locations within a Fire/Rescue station include decontamination and disinfecting areas

Bristol keeps their gear lockers in the apparatus bays

The kitchen has access to the concealed patio