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## CANADA'S CONSTRUCTION FUTURE: GROWING THE MASONRY INDUSTRY

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On behalf of all of the members of the Canadian Masonry Contractors Association I would like to extend to Dr. Elwi and the symposium committee our appreciation for the invitation to come and be with you in beautiful Jasper, Alberta. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to have an opportunity to present some thoughts and opinions on the masonry industry here in Canada and where we appear to be heading.

Over the past twenty-three years of active involvement in the masonry industry as a contractor and as an association director, I have watched some very fundamental, systemic changes in the Canadian masonry marketplace. Clearly the dynamic of our industry and its most important asset is its people. From the skilled hands that mould a design into a reality to the keen mind which takes an empirical model and builds a possibility; each of these plays an integral and interdependent part in the greater whole known as Masonry. The entrepreneurial spirit of taking off quantities and putting a lump sum price together; the constant effort to see the product lighter, more efficient; the long hours spent in an applied science laboratory on a fixed budget looking for a better way of designing or defining a masonry wall. Our industry is a unique collection of people who have strived to make an honest living and at the same time leave something that has meaning and value.

The technology of our industry has changed over these past twenty-three years. We have moved from composite brick walls to composite brick and block walls to rain screen cavity wall designs, and we now look towards slender warehouse walls and even walls which "breathe and move". What began as vermiculite insulation in the block cores has become chemical composite rigid board insulations with mechanical fastening systems. Mortar mixed by hand using slaked lime has become weight batching on-site silos with automatic mix proportioning and water/volume ratios. Everything that has changed has come out of a genuine effort to improve and grow the market.

For many years in Canada we relied on an immigrant workforce where the masonry skills learned in a far away homeland were packed alongside a suitcase and became the means to a new life in a young country. From the Friulis of the north of Italy to Glasgow Scotsmen to Portuguese from the Azores, each of these came with their skills and we made use of their abilities. As the technology has changed so has our need to adapt. We have moved from building walls with brick and block together to building walls from the block back-up out. What began as two withes of brick with brick culls inside has given way to a block inside withe, reinforcing, air barrier and insulation, brick or stone cladding exterior with mechanical ties or anchors each requiring a separate lift of scaffolding, each requiring a specific level of expertise and knowledge.

What I have tried to describe to you has been change. It is our collective response as an industry to the needs and the demands that were placed in front of us. I firmly believe that one can never understand where one is going without having a firm grasp on where it is one has been and a dead reckoning as to where one is presently positioned.

*So where are we? There are some realities we must face.*

Most market studies clearly confirm that the buyer of construction is a lot more value conscious and has a lot more information at his/her disposal. They have more choices available, more hard data to compare, and are clearly open to the idea of newer more "advanced" products or systems. They understand that a building today must be functional and adaptable and yet must still be aesthetically pleasing. The concept of value engineering is well understood and is applied as readily to the choice of structural or architectural materials as it is to the purchase of the family car.

Our governments are slowly coming around to the idea that the "great unwashed" are not as naive or complacent as was once thought. They ask hard questions, know honest answers and demand accountability from their public officials. They also have come to expect that if it got paid for by tax dollars it had better work and do what it was supposed to do. If it does not they want some heads to roll. Masonry designed buildings have to meet up with that expectation and accountability.

Our designers are no longer satisfied with the promises of better products and highly skilled trades. Everybody is moving to Missouri the "Show Me State" when they insist on a system, a whole entity. They want a warranty that does not have their lawyer looking for, who made the block, who supplied the mortar, who mixed it, who made the wire, who made the brick, who laid it? They are demanding accountability and reliability and the assurance that "I built it for you today and I will be here tomorrow".

The skilled tradesperson of the past is getting on in years. Demographic studies would indicate that the average age of a bricklayer in Canada is about forty-seven years. He still has the skills but it takes a little longer to get up on the scaffold. Immigration, which as previously mentioned was the supply end of our skills resources has given way to a need to train. We can no longer rely on people coming with their skills. We are going to have to invest in developing them.

We are in a state of flux. The Baby Boom generation know that they will inherit their parents money but they are going to be vastly different in the attitude they have about spending it.

A little over a year ago I had the opportunity to travel across Canada on a speaking tour as president of C.M.C.A. On that tour I was able to see first hand the kinds of problems and the competition we within the masonry industry are facing.

EFIS cladding in British Columbia. Stucco on residences in Calgary and Edmonton. Steel warehouses in Saskatoon and Tilt-up wall systems in Ontario. We are facing tremendous pressure for what was always our niche in the construction marketplace.

As a director I have had the opportunity to review where we have invested in research and codes and standards. We the stakeholders within the industry, the manufacturers and suppliers, the contractors and tradespersons, have not done a proper job in many ways of supporting and encouraging you the academic community to work with us and help us with new ideas and meaningful research. What began as bursaries and research initiatives in the early seventies has given way to lethargy and lack of financial resolve in the nineties.

In a more sensitive vain we as the masonry industry have chosen to do our laundry in the public rather than private forum. We have unions fighting with management, management fighting with manufacturers and even unions fighting within themselves. All of this has weakened our position and made us vulnerable.

Everyone of the points that I have raised are of genuine concern and must be properly addressed but I respectfully remind you about a statement I made earlier concerning our most valuable asset, our people.

### ***Where are we going?***

I believe necessity is the mother of invention. I believe in what a noted American historian Turner called the "Principle of Frontierism"; looking out over a vast sea of unknowns and believing you could conquer them. It is the same spirit that conquered the west and the same vision which allowed a railroad to be built across Canada and brought people into the Rockies where we sit today.

I believe in the members of my association the Canadian Masonry Contractors Association. I also believe in the hard work ethic of the manufacturers and suppliers and their ability to see a problem and fix it. I also believe in the principle of "synergy"; that the sum of the parts is greater than the value of each of them independently; in other words "one plus one equals three". I believe that within the confines of this meeting there are real benefits and advancements that can and will be made for our industry in every facet including engineering and ergonomics.

The key to any future success however, will not come from our ***knowing***. It will come from our ***doing***.

*So what do we need to do?*

We need to:

- A) Stop doing our laundry in the public forum and speak to designers, government, and the buying public in an honest, unified voice, recognizing that we become an industry by being together;
- B) Promise what we know we can deliver and present ourselves on the strength of what we are, not in hiding what we are not;
- C) Get past all the rhetoric about why we cannot do something and make the decision that we simply must do something and leave something of value for those who would chose to make a career within the industry, be they engineer, architect or bricklayer;
- D) Invest in the harvest of new ideas and creative thinking that comes from understanding your problems and wanting to see them corrected;
- E) Recognize that it takes money and resources to make the necessary changes and set about to make that money available now, even though it hurts;
- F) Agree that status quo is not good enough, and that the act of omission is every bit as damaging as the act of commission;
- G) Believe in ourselves and the goals we are setting for the future of the masonry industry.