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In Praise of Engineers — Some Thoughts

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Architects get all the credit. These are people who look at empty spaces and see opportunity. They have visions. They are entrepreneurial. I admire architects, but I don't admire our tendency to worship them as heroes. While they have given us the likes of the Eiffel Tower and the World Trade Center, they've also designed edifices that are either ugly or dysfunctional, or both.

Quietly standing behind architects are a cadre of engineers who are heroes in their own right, but who get much less recognition. These are people who look at empty spaces and see empty spaces. Give them a schematic drawing or a blueprint, though, and they will intuitively understand how to fill that space with something of lasting substance.

The thing I love about engineers is their understanding that every brick, every nail, every bit of plaster is important to the integrity of the whole. These are people for whom thoroughness and consistency is everything. They are plodders, and I love them for the plodliness.

Like most librarians, and most people in bookselling for that matter, I'm a plodder. It has to be that way: if the majority of people in these enterprises were visionary entrepreneurs, the output of bold ideas would far overwhelm our collective ability to bring any significant number of these ideas to fruition. (Having written that, I realize that's the reality we're all living, but I think it is driven by other factors.)

In serving library patrons, we should not overlook the importance played by the plodding engineers. While it may be the architects who envision things like a worldwide bibliographic database of cataloging records, or how to use the Internet to support online order transactions with suppliers, it is the unsung heroes of the engineers that actually bring these facilities to reality.


In the bookselling community, it's people like the sales and customer service representatives who deal with libraries' needs to get spe-

cific titles into their collections. It's warehouse employees and programmers who figure out ways to efficiently move hundreds of thousands of individual books to libraries all over the world without things going awry. In libraries, it's people sweating away in ILL departments and in cataloging to make items accessible to their patrons in a timely fashion. It's reference desk personnel assisting people in their pursuit of answers to a seemingly infinite number of questions.

When I read library journals these days, I'm struck by how much credence we give to the words and visions of the architects. Our admiration is vast. And, while I too admire the skills of anyone who can see opportunity where I might not, I worry that we vest too much credibility in the visions these people present to us. Their role is

important — I have no doubt of that — but I think it's time for us plodders to assert our own role in the fashioning of the future. If we cede this to visionaries alone, we may come up with structures that appear better in their description than they prove to be in real life. Since ours are practical pursuits, let's not forget

to make room for practitioners in the design of future models of materials supply and librarianship.

While the ideas of architects can be dazzling in their brightness, let's not let ourselves get hypnotized by that brightness like some roadside game staring into oncoming headlights. If our hero worship freezes us, encourages us to always look to visionaries for interpretations of our realities, our ability to manage our own future may slip away, like some road kill on a lonely country road. 



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