



## vantage point

# In and Out of the Box

**W**e seem to live in a world defined by boxes, being either inside or outside of them.

Most of the time we hear that we should think outside the box more frequently, but there are positives and negatives for either side of the walls. On the one hand, we want to stay within our expertise and avoid extending our liability. On the other, we severely limit our personal and professional growth if we don't try anything new.

A few years back, I attended a workshop on low impact development (LID), with a focus on stormwater management. The participants included engineers, surveyors, planners, landscape architects, architects, and community officials, so questions asked during the presentation covered a wide range of approaches to the topic. Then we were broken into random groups of about eight and given a site plan to which we were to apply LID concepts to reduce both onsite flooding and drainage to adjoining sites.

The two engineers in my group decided to take over and promptly began drawing weirs on the creek through the site and installing pipes and culverts. They conceded to the rest of the group's efforts to at least plant some trees, but for the most part we were talked over or ignored. When it came time for each of the groups in the workshop to present our design outcomes, most of mine sat tight-lipped and grim-faced as our two steamrollers presented their traditionally engineered approach. The instructor was diplomatic but firm in his admonition that more of the LID alternatives he had presented could and should have been incorporated. Whether due to personality

or inability to think beyond what they were used to, these two engineers had failed to change the walls of their familiar professional boxes to incorporate pervious pavement, rain gardens, green roofing, or a variety of other possible newer alternative approaches to the scenario.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who fully embrace the concept that if we do not stretch, we will never grow and advance. For the most part, this is an encouraging development in surveying, which for many years was dominated by practitioners who believed that our only means of livelihood was small lot surveying. During my presidency of the New Jersey Society of Professional Land Surveyors, I was asked more than once what I was going to do to assure this line of practice remained sustaining. Those interrogators were not willing to think outside of their own comfortable "This is the way I've always made a living" boxes, while others were already beginning to incorporate GPS and GIS into their practices. New tools and technology help us apply our surveying knowledge in so many ways above, on, and under land and water. We can be indispensable to practitioners in an increasing variety of fields and to individuals with so many new and stimulating challenges to solve in our rapidly changing world.

There is, however, a limit to what we should take on professionally, or at least in deciding when to expand our boxes. Gradually taking on a broader scope of work as we learn is smart. Hoping to learn on a job we have just been awarded is a different matter. I know this happens because I get calls and emails from people who are either confused about how to undertake a job they

won or have gotten themselves into a bind because they muffed new and unfamiliar tasks. I have had calls asking where to find Elevation Certificate forms, and whether it is necessary to use the current version rather than the one the caller's office has modified and uses. I've been asked what a Letter of Map Amendment is, after taking on a project in which completing an application for one was a specific contract requirement before the rest of the project could proceed. Why did these people take on these particular jobs if they didn't even know the basics about what the work entailed? Learning from scratch is not optimal under pressure of deadlines and budgets.

The surveyors who contact me acknowledge they either lack important information or that they have a problem, and seek help. That's good. I'm more concerned about those who either don't recognize problems or are too proud (or afraid) to ask for help. We are licensed in order to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public; I wonder how many members of the public who relied on the presumed expertise of overextended surveyors have been misinformed or misguided.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine some years ago reminds us of repercussions. A man stands glaring down at his cat, which is sitting next to the litter pan, and says, "Never ever think outside the box." Weigh your own decisions carefully. ■

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