CITYLAB (From The Atlantic)
The Building Code Profession Is Dying Out, and That's a Problem
Many of the officials who check construction plans and inspect buildings for safety are on the cusp of retirement—and they're not being replaced.
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February 8, 2017
http://www.citylab.com/work/2017/02/the-building-code-profession-is-dying-out-and-thats-a-problem/515826/?utm_source=twb

At professional events, George Williams is used to being surrounded by people many decades his senior. The Salt Lake City-area building inspector is 34, which makes him a young gun in an aging workforce.

His role as the lone youth among venerable peers began when he first started attending professional networking and training events in 2010. Williams would walk into a continuing education course or an event held by the local chapter of the International Code Council (ICC) and he'd be one of the few people without gray hair.

"Without fail, I was the youngest person in the room, every single time," says Williams. "Not slightly younger, but dramatically younger than nearly everyone else."

In early 2014, his curiosity piqued, Williams asked the Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing if he could view their records on the demographics of the state's building code professionals. The department wouldn't give him names or addresses, but it emailed him a spreadsheet with the ages of every building inspector in the state.

A crisis in numbers

Upon crunching the numbers, Williams found a looming crisis. It turns out that 60 percent of the statewide industry is close to retirement. And Utah isn't an outlier, as he found a few months later when the ICC and the National Institute of Building Sciences released a report with disturbingly similar findings. "It comes as little surprise that the current workforce is aging and making plans for retirement," the authors write. "However, the actual numbers are a bit alarming."

That's putting it mildly. Eighty-five percent of the respondents to ICC's survey were over the age of 45. Only three percent were under 35. Most of them were looking to get out of the game in the near future: Eighty percent planned to retire within 15 years, and a full 30 percent within five.

Building code officials can serve as managers, plan reviewers (checking construction plans to make sure they're up to par), or inspectors—or they can wear two or three of those hats at once. Inspectors are tasked with ensuring that new buildings (and renovations of old ones) have been built safely and responsibly. They carefully check that everything is braced and wired and insulated to meet the requirements of the local codes.

Inspections protect against developers and landlords who endanger people by trying to build or repair a property on the cheap, or in ignorance of safety standards. Without them, the result could be a building collapse or faulty wiring that causes a fire. The Ghost Ship tragedy in Oakland last year underscored the importance of codes and inspections.

Not only does building inspection serve a clear societal purpose, it's the type of middle-class job that is in increasingly short supply. Only a high school diploma is needed for an entry-level position as a code official, and the median income is about $57,000 per year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The ICC survey found that the median salary range was between $50,000 and $75,000, with a fifth of respondents earning up to $100,000. Job security, pay, and benefits were the top reasons respondents gave for joining the ranks.

Construction rates are healthy—there is plenty of need for building inspectors' services. And theirs aren't skills that can be easily automated. So why are their ranks dwindling?

A low-profile job with less stability

Williams's explanation for his industry's grim state is multifaceted. For one thing, it simply isn't a job that very many people know exists. The profession is relatively small, with the BLS counting 101,200 "construction and building inspectors" in 2014.

It also isn't the most glamorous field of all time. "There aren't any grade-school children right now who are drawing pictures or writing papers about becoming a building inspector," Williams says. "I think this profession finds you rather than you finding it."

Like many of his compatriots, Williams found the job through the building trades. Historically, people have gravitated from the trades to codes work because it's steadier than construction, which is more vulnerable to the boom and bust of the real estate cycle.

The career wasn't one Williams intended to pursue at first. He started attending community college for construction management. When he got a job with a local engineering firm, they asked him to get further training so he could do building inspections for them. It took him two more years to get fully certified, but even then, it didn't seem like a long-term career.

"It thought it would just be a chapter," says Williams. "But in 2008 the economy was down, construction was down. The thought of entering a construction company as the low man on the totem pole was not very appealing. The stability did become appealing at that point."

Most code official positions are in state and local government. Williams is unusual, in that he worked first for an engineering firm and now for a building code consulting firm. By his estimate, 90 percent of people in the industry are employed in the public sector; both of his employers have received much of their work from government entities.

The industry is having a hard time attracting new recruits in part because the stability that attracted Williams is no longer the norm. The public sector took a beating after the Great Recession, with the number of government employees plummeting after the downturn and taking far longer to recover than private-sector employment did. Pay for those who remained actually fell. The benefits that compensate public workers for lower pay are coming under threat, too.

"During the downturn, cities were laying off some of their building department staff who had been there for 15 or 20 years," says Williams. "That historical sense that working for the local government is an incredibly secure job went out the window. The sense of permanence is no longer there. That's been detrimental to those switching careers [from the private sector]."

Countering the retirement wave

The ICC is trying to stave off an inspector shortage. It sponsors a program in technical high schools that teaches students in major construction trades—like electrical, plumbing, and mechanical—how to navigate the code. The program "incorporates a hands-on component to allow students ... to directly apply what they learn in the code book to an actual construction project," the ICC's vice president of membership, Ron Piester, writes in an email. The idea is to both improve code compliance and make the pipeline from the trades to codes roles more explicit. The organization has also launched an initiative to improve recruitment and formed an emerging leaders council.

In Utah, the regional manager of Williams' company reached out to the department of licensing and proposed an educational program to train more inspectors. The state already uses 1 percent of building permit fees to pay for continuing education for contractors and inspectors. Williams and his colleagues got $30,000 of it. They used that slim outlay to develop a test-prep series with 41 two-hour sessions spread over two years. So far, 36 people have been licensed through the program. (Inspectors are certified by the ICC and licensed by their state.)

They didn't stop there. This spring, Williams's company will launch an online Building Code Academy, which will offer test prep and training videos at $200 a course. The company has hired four inspectors under the age of 35 in Utah, and more in California.

Still, Williams is worried for the future of his industry. He believes that without returning to an employment paradigm closer to the pre-recession norm, the retirement cliff will continue to loom. It used to be that jurisdictions would hire a junior inspector to train under a senior inspector, whom they would eventually replace. Now that they want to do more with less, those junior inspectors aren't getting hired.

"The cities are trying to have smaller building departments and trying to accomplish more work with less people," Williams says. "As a result of that, the cities aren't willing to invest in an individual who does not have the training and experience. That's where this gap has grown."