

## Architects Will Benefit from U.S. Building Code Consolidation

Excerpted and adapted from *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13<sup>th</sup> edition

Revised February 2007

*The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.*

### SUMMARY

Three U.S. model code groups worked together through the International Code Council (ICC) to develop and publish the International Building Codes (IBC), which now includes 13 different building codes. While U.S. building codes have been effectively consolidated, the hope is that the IBC will have international appeal and implementation.

Benefits of the IBC to architects include streamlined implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), state-of-the-art hazard mitigation, and the introduction of the performance code.

### THE END OF BUILDING CODE FRAGMENTATION

Ever since the development of the first American building codes early in the 20th century, building codes have varied significantly from region to region. With the publication of the first editions of the International Building Code (IBC) and the International Residential Code (IRC), the fragmentation of American building codes effectively ceased.

The international codes were virtually assured of adoption because the three U.S. model code groups—BOCA (Building Officials and Code Administrators), ICBO (International Conference of Building Officials), and SBCCI (Southern Building Code Congress International)—worked together through the International Code Council (ICC) to develop and publish them. At the same time, the three groups are maintaining their separate, regionally based organizations to serve the building code community.

### To what extent will the international codes be used internationally?

The codes are not really international, but there is hope they will become more widely used. "Calling it 'international' keeps it from being called the 'U.S. Building Code,'" explains Bill Tangye, SBCCI chief executive officer. "Some U.S. model codes are already used outside the United States. Bermuda uses BOCA, and Western Samoa uses ICBO."

Consolidation of the three U.S. codes also may increase the chances of their adoption by developing countries.

### HOW MANY INTERNATIONAL CODES EXIST?

The ICC has published the following codes:

- International Building Code (for nonresidential properties)
- ICC Electrical Code
- International Energy Conservation Code
- International Existing Buildings Code
- International Fire Code
- International Fuel Gas Code
- International Mechanical Code
- International Performance Code
- International Plumbing Code
- International Private Sewage Disposal Code
- International Property Maintenance Code
- International Residential Code (for hotels/motels, apartments, townhouses, and single-family homes)
- International Zoning Code

The American Institute of Architects has promoted development of a single building code since the 1970s. The benefits to the design profession are great; the design process is simplified, and the cost of producing design and construction drawings is often reduced. Companies that build in more than one region of the country or in foreign countries benefit from using a coordinated set of building codes.

The model building code groups finally embraced the idea of a unified building code in the early 1990s, motivated by fear of federal government action. In the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the North American Free Trade

Agreement, it seemed plausible that the federal government might intrude into the building code promulgation business to call for a unified code in order to maintain competitiveness in the increasingly global construction market. In defense of the voluntary code development process, the code groups embraced the single-code concept.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE IBC?**

For architects, the family of international building codes offers a number of benefits and opportunities:

**Streamlined implementation of the ADA.** One of the frustrations with the ADA has been that the Department of Justice (DOJ) hasn't certified local codes. With adoption of the international building codes, the DOJ could certify one model code, ending the confusion about what is required for ADA compliance.

**State-of-the-art hazard mitigation.** The most current wind, seismic, and flood criteria have been incorporated into the IBC and IRC. One of the biggest changes is the adoption of the more-stringent Southern Building Code wind provisions for low-rise buildings (up to four stories). Previously the one- and two-family dwelling code didn't have seismic and wind requirements, preventing its adoption in certain areas. The new residential code, which results from an effort to reach national consensus, has provisions for wind and seismic conditions and will qualify for the National Flood Insurance Program.

**Performance code.** The International Performance Code will provide additional guidance on the "alternate materials and methods" sections of the building and fire codes and ultimately could be the most significant element of the international building codes package.

**RESOURCES**

**More Best Practices**

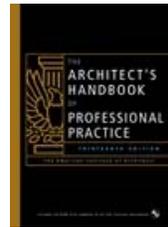
The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 15.02.01    Establishing Code Search Methodology and Process
- 03.03.01    Registration and Conduct Rules: Some Common Questions
- 13.05.01    Planning for Effective Project Closeout

**For More Information on This Topic**

See also "Code Compliance," by Ralph Gerdes, AIA, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 18, page 572.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org).



**Feedback**

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact: [bestpractices@aia.org](mailto:bestpractices@aia.org).

**Key Terms**

- Design
- Design context
- Regulations and standards
- Codes