

The New Black

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By John Spicuzza

[text omitted]

Lightweight Construction

Okay, I am going to get on my soap box on this one. Really? We need to be aware of **lightweight construction**, lightweight trusses, etc? This is where I think we fit in the category of slow learners. Newsflash! The **National Fire Protection Association** has just created a PowerPoint presentation on the dangers of lightweight construction materials under fire conditions (2013). The focus of this presentation is on the need for home fire sprinklers, but nonetheless it is talking about lightweight construction like it is a **new construction** method we have to worry about.

I started building and woodworking in 1970. I eventually obtained my contractor's license and built custom homes and additions. **I can tell you that I personally was installing engineered, lightweight, TJI floor joists on new homes in 1972.**

TJI floor joists have been around 50 years now, and the brand has been the most-often-used engineered I-joist in the industry for the past 14 years. Even Francis Brannigan in his 2nd edition on *Building Construction for the Fire Service* (Brannigan, 1982), mentions "chipboard" sheathing products, engineered floor joists, and gusset plates on lightweight trusses.

Let me make this clear. Lightweight construction is NOT new! We keep making it out like it is a new construction method. Stop it! If we haven't figured out that we have to deal with lightweight construction and its dangers over 50 years or more, what makes you think we will ever get it?

In Florida, we require certain structures to display a symbol on the front of their building to denote lightweight floor or roof construction or both. This is for our use to give us notice to be aware during a fire. Great idea, but the thinking was backwards. We should have had symbols displayed showing dimensional lumber or stronger materials being used alerting us that it will be safer to work a fire in and around the structure.

What has happened is that around 95 percent of all structures have these symbols. Of course they do. That is the norm. It is to the point that firefighters don't even see them anymore because they are on almost every building and they don't stand out. It is like expecting us to notice a mailbox in front of a house; we don't pay attention to it because it is part of the everyday scenery.

In my opinion, lightweight construction is the most popular subject that has been "in style" for way too many years. This is nothing new. All firefighters in the business have had to deal with it their entire careers, unless you have been in the business over 50 years.

Lightweight construction is *The New Black* that will never go out of style.

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Please understand that I am NOT advocating that we do things today as they were done in the past; I could not be more against that way of thinking. The one thing that gets under my skin more than anything is when you ask why something was done a certain way and you get the "Because-that-is-the-way-we-have-always-done-it" answer.

All I am trying to point out is that many techniques and tactics that are now considered "The New Black" in the fire service are nothing new; they usually just have a new name or acronym. All good, but keep it in perspective.

We have come a long way in many areas of the fire service and even improved on many aspects of the job over the years. This is the way it should be. This job has to be one of the most dynamic industries in existence. Almost every aspect of the job has changed to some degree (self-contained breathing apparatus, gear, construction, fire behavior, equipment, technology, etc).

The preceding are only a few "fashionable" examples that are still popular. I know there are more out there, and would love to hear about them.

What makes us progressive is the younger generations asking why and dissecting what we have been doing over the years and asking why we can't do it differently. This turns into progressive thinking that makes our job safer and more effective as times change. We have to change as an industry with the times or we will become a more dangerous profession. We have to change as individuals or we will become what some like to call dinosaurs. And we know what happened to them.

This is why it is important to decide if you want to be that guy with 25 year's worth of experience or one year's worth of experience 25 times. You decide if you want to be fashionable or to keep wearing the bell-bottoms. Oops. Seems that is the New Black in fashion. Wish I hadn't thrown out those pants with my paisley shirts and crushed velvet tie.

REFERENCES

Brannigan, F. (1982). *Building Construction for the Fire Service*. Quincy: National Fire Protection Agency.

Clark, W. (1974). *Firefighting Principles 7 Practices*. New York: Technical Publishing.

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