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LESSONS THAT CHALLENGE THE IMAGINATION AND ENGAGE LEADERS

I love TED talks. I have for years now. In my mind, TED lives up to its tagline, “Ideas Worth Spreading,” by inspiring, challenging, entertaining, and stimulating, all in less than 15 min. I know that I am not the only one who likes TED. Even my fellow Washingtonian, Bill Gates, has curated his favorites into a playlist (Gates 2013). The top spot on both our lists is Hans Rosling, the maestro of data and statistics.

You can imagine my surprise when, a year ago, I opened my computer to see: “Skyscrapers of Wood—Michael Green at TED 2013 (Green 2013). Really. Wood. On TED?”

Many of you likely know that Michael Green is a renowned architect from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, my neighbor to the north. He has now become something of a celebrity of mass timber construction. To date, Michael’s TED Talk has garnered nearly 1 million views. Not enough to rank him in the top 10 of 2013, but not far out either.

So what is my point here anyway? Believe it or not my objective is not to expound the virtues of TED Talks, nor Michael Green, nor mass timber construction for that matter. Rather, my goal is to dissect how this video was able to get 1 million people to dedicate 15 min of their entertainment time to learn about wood and what lessons we might take to move our profession forward.

For me the three take-home messages were: 1) connect to big ideas—“Ideas Worth Spreading”; 2) stir the imagination; and 3) reach past our own discipline or science and engineering for that matter.

IMPACTFUL IDEAS

Michael spent the first third of his talk connecting the use of wood to relevant societal issues including rising world population, homelessness, climate change, food security, and deforestation. Whether you are a social scientist, agronomist, economist, environmentalist, architect, or simply a concerned citizen, you do not need to listen long to see that there is something here for you. Best of all, WOOD is part of the solution.

IMAGINATION

Tall timber buildings. Skyscrapers from wood. Wood construction does not really need to go tall; there are plenty of markets and frankly more impact at low-rise buildings. However, these are ideas that make you go WOW or maybe just HOW. Either way, they capture your imagination and more importantly, they capture the imagination of people who are not wood scientists. I have seen the same response in our biofuels project, NARA tag lined “Wood to Wings” (NARA 2013). Students and stakeholders from every walk of life are interested, intrigued, or challenged about how one would make jet fuel from slash piles in the forest. It evokes many opinions and ideas, not always the ones we want, but that is exactly the point.

TRANSDISCIPLINARY

This talk is not aimed at the converted, but rather at reaching people from every walk of life. In doing so, Michael used science, data,

and engineering, but also he invoked concepts of art and business to sell his thoughts. In fact, one of his enduring messages was how Gustaf Eiffel used an art piece, the Eiffel Tower, to inspire confidence in tall steel buildings and “transform the skylines of the world.” Engineering progress inspired by art and design.

LESSONS THAT CHALLENGE THE IMAGINATION AND ENGAGE LEADERS

Our SWST Board of Directors has been talking about these same concepts. As a Society we wonder:

- How do we reach more people?
- How do we develop a more impactful academic journal?
- How do we become a more vibrant and influential profession?

Several years ago, SWST leaders took a huge risk and moved our meetings to international venues. This year, we have seen the fruits of that insight with over 200 applications for presentations in Zvolen, Slovakia. Now our challenge is to follow this lead and step outside ourselves by providing content and venues that engage a wider audience while maintaining the rigor, integrity, and relevance of our profession.

As a Board, we are optimistic about our future and excited by our direction. In 2015, we commit

to bring you, our members, a new Annual Meeting in an engaging physical and natural venue, the historical Jackson Lake Lodge in the famed Grand Teton National Park. More importantly, we are committed to delivering a program worth attending. In selecting this site, we understood that great discussions are facilitated by great places, physical and natural.

With this inspiration we are challenging ourselves to conceive and develop platforms, real and virtual, that engage a wider audience and deliver thought toward innovations that push the bounds of our material and strengthen our profession.

However, we need you to engage in this future. Get involved, wherever you live, bring us your ideas and passions, and engage your friends and colleagues who think similarly.

MICHAEL P. WOLCOTT

Washington State University
SWST President
E-mail: wolcott@wsu.edu

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