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CTBUH New York Chapter Joins Debate: Were Engineers Better In 1818 Than 2018?



Thursday, 21 September 2018

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NEW YORK CITY – On September 21, 2018 at Arup's New York City office, CTBUH and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) co-sponsored a debate, in partnership with the Structural Engineers Association of NY (SEAoNY) and the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). This debate was hosted to celebrate the 200-year anniversary of the Institution of Civil Engineers. After a networking reception, members and friends of these groups participated in a friendly, spirited debate with a live audience of fellow industry professionals. Participants debated the question, "Were engineers better in 1818 than 2018?"

Anthony Cioffi, Professor, City Tech, and David Caiden, Director, Arup, represented the "for" side, arguing that 1818's engineers were indeed better. Temoor Ahmad, Associate Principal, Grimshaw, and Liam Dalton, Vice President, Design-Build Project Director, HNTB, argued that 2018's engineers are better. The debate was moderated by Richard Giffen, Associate Principal, Arup.

"Engineers of 1818 were pioneers" who developed, calculated and refined standards, and established key precedents and structures that we still use in 2018, as Cioffi said. "They were not guided by a code, but guided by their intuition" and "not by existing methods...they had to create their own."

Also impressive is that 1818's engineers were intelligent and skilled enough to design excellently without the level of technology and other tools that 2018's engineers often rely on and take for granted. As Caiden also noted, "They dared to try, they took risks, they had failures and tried to improve, and had outstanding accomplishments. You can't possibly compare them to today's computer-bound engineers. 1818 engineers were heroes and pioneers."



Richard Giffen, Associate Principal, Arup, moderates the debate about whether engineers were better 200 years ago.

However, not everyone expressed agreement, or even thought this was a debate we should be having in the first place. "It's like comparing apples and sofas" or "saying music was better in the past"—said Ahmad, arguing for the other side. Then he added that music "was better in the '80s," which got applause from a few audience members, and illustrated his point that, just like with music, it's quite subjective to judge engineers

of different eras.

"Basically the idea is that the more you learn, the more you realize you have to learn, and the more you realize you don't know--and that's what progress is," Ahmad added. Later he noted the impressiveness of Egypt's ancient pyramids, as well as the much-more-recently-built Burj Khalifa.

Dalton emphasized, "We shouldn't confuse better with smarter. Today's engineers are making better use of their time" and are more effective and efficient, which means they can "develop a higher quality," and that's what makes today's engineers better, he said.

This debate was hosted to celebrate 200 years of the Institution of Civil Engineers.