

Hot's on the Left

I remember well the slight flash of anger that welled up inside me when I heard the often-quoted phrase, "Hot's on the left; cold's on the right." The reason for my irritation centered on the person speaking those words. He was not a plumber. He was an architect, and he wasn't able to finish the phrase (nor can I, not in print anyway) because he was at a meeting with the owner, the general contractor, and the MEP design team—polite company, so to speak. Did I mention we were in a church? One of the owners of this project is the pastor of a local parish, and we were meeting to discuss his congregation's new church.

The owner called the meeting to assemble the church's building committee along with the design and construction teams to go over the project, discuss plans and specs, address any concerns, and outline the construction schedule. The owners were under a certain amount of pressure to sign on the dotted line, and they wanted to better understand exactly what they were buying.

I sat patiently and silently as the architect described the overall building design and layout. The general contractor went over the site work, permit requirements, and so on. It was then time for the MEP design team to address the group. We had been chosen by the general contractor to design and build the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems for the project.

When it was my turn to talk about the plumbing, I walked to the front to address the group. That's when I heard him: "Yeah, yeah, we know. Hot's on the left; cold's on the right..." As his voice trailed off, I looked across the table and said, "And?"

"And what?" he asked.

"You didn't finish the saying," I replied.

"Well, you know..." he began, and then stopped. He was stammering a bit now, and I could tell he wasn't quite sure where I was going with this. "Would you like me to finish it for you?" I asked. "Sure" he replied, clearly relieved that I had let him off the hook. He was probably wondering how I was going to get around using the "s" word in a church.

I said to the pastor and his wife, "The saying goes like this: The hot's on the left; the cold's on the right; the *effluent* flows downhill; and that's all you need to know about plumbing."

My new friend the architect relaxed to a spattering of nervous laughter, and I proceeded to explain the plumbing systems to all who would listen.

HOT'S ON THE LEFT AND UNDER MY COLLAR

That meeting was weeks ago, and I still get irritated when I think about it. Someone thinking that the plumbing trade can be reduced to some silly old adage just doesn't sit well with me.

I remember wondering if that architect had ever held a pair of 24- or 36-inch pipe wrenches, one in each hand, and attempted to crack open a 4-inch union that had been untouched since the Truman Administration. I wondered if his hands had developed any calluses from using a hand shovel to shape the bottom of a ditch to accept the slope and fittings of extra-heavy cast iron pipe.

How many crawl spaces had he worked in, installing pipe in claustrophobic conditions while the critters watched? Did he realize that it takes a good amount of skill to install waste piping at a constant slope so that the waste flows at 2 feet per second,

no more and no less? Would he know how to make a lead and oakum joint? Had he ever used snap cutters? Had he ever been burned by hot molten solder?

I assumed that the rest room facilities at his office were somewhat nicer than the portable johns that field plumbers are made to use. I also assumed that his average workday was spent in temperature-controlled comfort. Plumbers seldom enjoy the creature comforts offered by a completed building. I can remember standing on the sixth floor of a new building that was nothing but slabs and steel. I was operating a core drill to drill holes in the slab for the storm risers. It was January—windy and cold! The wind whipped around the building, freezing the tears to my cheeks. I thought that day would never end.

I wonder how well my architect friend could work if he had to wear a hard hat, safety glasses, ear plugs, gloves, and steel-toed boots, regardless of the temperature.

IT'S JUST A TINY BIT MORE COMPLICATED

Don't get me wrong. I understand that many of us chose to go to college and graduate school to avoid doing manual labor to make a living. I have great respect for those with sheepskins on their office walls, using their brains to conceive and design living and working spaces for all of us.

I also believe that some of us could be a little less dismissive when we talk about plumbing contractors and the field personnel they employ. Today's plumber is required to have a good deal more technical knowledge than years past. Consider backflow prevention. My company spends plenty to keep a number of our field plumbers certified in the backflow preventer testing that is now required by most jurisdictions. We also have several employees certified in the installation of medical gas piping. The green building industry will rely heavily on the plumber's knowledge of water conveyance to move forward and perfect water reclamation and conservation techniques.

And don't forget the potable water supply. Everyone involved in this trade needs to worry about liability when it comes to delivering safe drinking water to the general public. With that in mind, it's a very good idea for plumbing engineers and plumbing contractors to take the time to get to know each other a little better. I intend to keep using this space to try to get us all to mentally walk a mile in each other's shoes.

Meanwhile, I must admit that my new friend the architect was right. It is hot on the left and cold on the right. But trust me, it's just a tiny bit more complicated than that. **PSD**



MICHAEL E. SMITH, CPD, is a plumbing/piping designer/draftsman for Southern Air Inc., a design/build-MEP firm in Lynchburg, Va. His work in the construction trades includes surveying, carpentry, masonry, concrete, and drywall mechanic/finisher/foreman. To comment on this article or for more information, e-mail articles@psdmagazine.org.