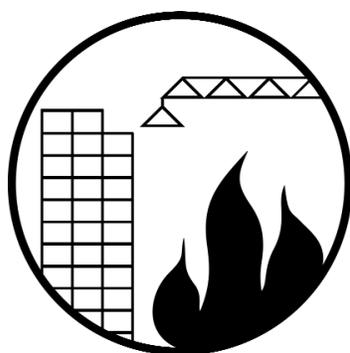


BUILDING AND FIRE RESEARCH AT



NBS/NIST 1975-2000

NIST BSS 179

Richard N. Wright

**Building and Fire
Research Laboratory**

December 2003



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ABSTRACT

In the last quarter of the 20th Century, building and fire research programs at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, formerly the National Bureau of Standards, provided one of the most significant sources of technology, measurements and standards for the construction and fire safety communities of the world. These communities are of great social and economic importance. The built environment shelters and supports most human activities. Its functionality, safety, environmental quality, aesthetics, and economy are important to everyone's quality of life and productivity. In the United States, new construction, renovation, operation and maintenance of constructed facilities amount to over 1/8 of the Gross Domestic Product, and the costs of fire protection and losses to unwanted fires exceed \$200 billion, annually. This history summarizes the technical accomplishments of these programs and their impacts, the existential and management challenges faced by the programs, and the visions and efforts of the staff.

KEY WORDS: Building and fire research, built environment, codes, earthquakes, economics research, environmental systems, fire-hazard assessment, fire simulations and suppressants, life-cycle cost methods, materials, measurements, refrigerants, smoke detectors, standards, structures, test methods, wind.

FOREWORD

In April of 2000 Richard Wright suggested that his colleagues on the staff of the Building and Fire Research Laboratory, current and retired, update the history of the Laboratory. The history of building research would be from 1974 when the last history was produced to 2000. The history of fire research would be from 1968 to 2000. The date 1968 is that of the first of a flurry of legislative actions that ultimately established a separate Fire Research Center (this was the title in the law; NBS always called it CFR) at the National Bureau of Standards. Until 1968 fire research for buildings had been part of the broader program in the Building Research Division. Here we have the result of the efforts of a great many people. Read and enjoy it.

The years 1968 to 1977 or so encompassed the formation and maturation of the independent fire research effort at the Bureau. This was also the time when the consumer movement in the Nation peaked and began to decline, most notably, for CBT and CFR, in terms of appropriated budgets. This lack of budget support was odd in that whenever management needed examples of NBS work done with an impact on society the examples were very often drawn from the building and fire programs.

The budget difficulty became worse for both centers during the Reagan Administration when, at one period of several cycles, the budgets were zeroed out by the Administration. The Congress restored the funds but each time we lost a little more so that at this writing the staff level of the programs is way below what it was in the 1960s.

(However, the Congress is injecting large sums into BFRL, as this is being written, for investigation of the collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001. The nature of this work is not new for the BFRL, only the magnitude of the collapse, and the losses involved.)

Much of the work of the two programs was and is hands-on engineering whether in drafting proposed design standards, developing and proposing methods of test,

and, often, investigating disasters. In investigations the centers have been expected to analyze their findings and to draw conclusions as to likely causes and to recommend improved practices. These activities placed the two programs in the thick of controversy over the proper design of structures and the best use of materials and systems. Some of the investigations were done in the spotlight of the news media and under the control of the court system. Examples include the, collapse of the Skyline Plaza complex during construction in 1973, the 1975 study of fire safety in the D.C. metropolitan buses and subway cars, the Harbour Cay condominium (Cocoa Beach) collapse during construction in 1981, and the walkway failure in the Hyatt Regency Hotel at Kansas City in 1981. This building was in service at the time of the failure.

NBS through CBT has responsibilities for earthquake hazard mitigation working with three other Federal agencies and the states. The reports of findings from studies of several major quakes brought CBT and NBS before the Congress and into the media frequently and in a very positive light. CBT also has played a significant role in wind hazard studies; e.g., Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew. These activities are primarily the exercise of professional skills and responsibilities and are not primarily research. NBS has been asked to do this work because of its reputation for even-handed, unbiased work.

A particularly interesting project was the study in 1986-87 of the structural integrity of the newly built and unfinished Moscow chancery building of the United States Embassy complex. A team of specialists went to the USSR in the dead of winter at a time when tensions were high between the two countries. The team climbed all over the structure, both inside and out, and concluded that the structural problems could be repaired for a reasonable sum of money. However there were issues with respect to security that held up the repairs.

The work in standards and codes is less dramatic and garners little publicity outside the trade press. But it is this work that ultimately produces changes in design practices and leads to safer more durable structures, products and systems. Sometimes it will take years or even decades to effect a major change and only an organization with the characteristics of NIST has the funding and the patience to follow through on a proposal. Examples in both fire and building work will be found throughout this history. The fire program, for example, struggled for years to limit the use of a horizontal tunnel test to specific constructions. The test had been incorporated by reference into the building codes throughout the country. It took many years of presentations and argument to make the change. Similarly CBT had studied energy use in buildings before the 1973 oil crisis but many years went by before CBT's conclusions were adopted in the appropriate model codes and standards.

Underlying this work has been a solid program of scientific research. The fire program benefited a very great deal by the Congress' transfer of the package of National Science Foundation grants in the fire area. These were mostly at universities and the transfer brought to CFR a group of distinguished academics. The best-known fire researcher was Professor Howard Emmons of Harvard whose work on modeling fire in enclosures was seminal. The studies of fire deaths and injuries carried out at Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory provided the basis for NBS' program on the toxicity of fire gases. The fire program had lacked sufficient research; the transfer from NSF at a stroke provided this necessary ingredient.

A second transforming event was the establishment by management and Congress of what we came to call the "NBS Competence Fund." In this effort the Bureau was allowed to invest a few millions of dollars a year in projects of scientific research not specified in the appropriation request but decided upon internally. This program was especially beneficial to CBT, which had a small fraction of direct appropriations. Both CBT and CFR benefited. Pay-off from many fundamental programs often takes years. Examples are the fire modeling from first principles by Howard Baum and Ron Rehm; work that was supported early on by the Competence Fund and later was continued by regular funding. This work began in the 1970s and con-

tinues to this day. Studies of wind damages and earthquake phenomena have had the same long lives. NBS work on polymer structure vs. thermal stability, originally started in the 1960s in the NBS polymer program, has been extended elegantly in the fire program. CBT carried out fundamental work on details of Portland cement hydration for high-performance concrete. Bruce Ellingwood led a program to introduce into building codes and standards probability-based load criteria for use in structural design. This new concept is now broadly accepted. One last example is Emil Simiu's studies of chaotic dynamics, work supported in part by Competence funding. This phenomenon is best exemplified by the galloping failure of the Tacoma, Washington Narrows Bridge many years ago. The work indicates the conditions under which this phenomenon is likely to occur and guides the designer away from the danger zone.

The reader who was there during these times will enjoy the refreshing of his or her memories; for those who were not there, this history is full of interesting stories that will increase their appreciation of the role these two programs play in our National life.

John W. Lyons
Director (Ret), National Institute of Standards and Technology

REPORT CONTRIBUTORS

Many persons contributed to the preparation of this history. Without them, this account could not have been possible. The following persons made substantial contributions to this history.

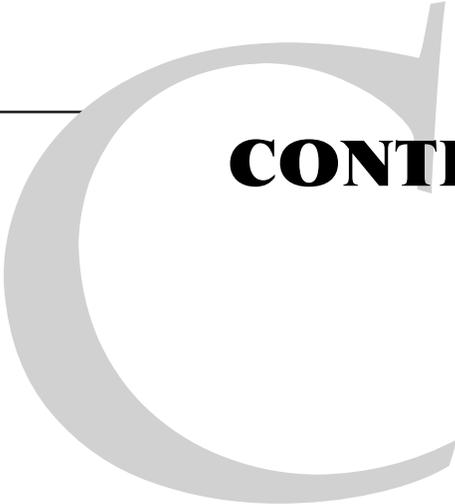
Chapter 1	Richard Wright
Chapter 2	John Lyons, Joseph Clark, Robert Levine, and Richard Wright
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Chapter 13	James Pielert, Jonathan Martin, Walter Rossiter, Mary McKnight, and Geoffrey Frohnsdorff
Chapter 14	James Gross, James Pielert, Robert Dikkers, and Richard Wright
Chapter 15	Bruce Ellingwood, Nicholas Carino, Emil Simiu, John Gross, and Richard Wright

As with all histories, important facts and key people are inadvertently omitted from the account. For the missing content and failure to recognize human resources during this 25-year History, the author regrets the omissions.

Noel Raufaste edited and formatted the History for publication, and worked with contributors to identify text and to prepare the many illustrations. In addition, he made great career contributions to the History. For example, the general interest documents, Project Summaries, and Publications reports that he prepared over the years of the History were vital sources of information for its preparation.

Disclaimer

Certain trade names and company products are mentioned in the text or identified in an illustration that helped adequately specify the experimental procedure and equipment used. In no such case does such identification imply recommendation or endorsement by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, nor does it imply that the products are necessarily the best available for that purpose.



CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Foreword	v
Report Contributors	ix
Contents	xi
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Objectives	1
1.2 Organization	2
1.3 Top Accomplishments	2
1.4 Top Disappointments	3
1.5 Acknowledgements of Staff	4
1.5.1 Support Staff	4
1.5.2 Administrative Staff	6
1.5.3 Technicians	7
2. Center for Fire Research in the 70s	9
2.1 Creation of the Center for Fire Research	9
2.1.1 The Flammable Fabrics Act	10
2.1.2 The Fire Research and Safety Act of 1968	11
2.1.3 The Ad Hoc Panel on Fire Research at NBS - the National Research Council	11
2.1.4 The Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974	11
2.1.5 A Long-range Plan for NBS Fire Research - Fire Scenarios and Intervention Strategies	13
2.1.6 Technical Challenges for Fire Research	13
2.1.7 Organizing the Research	14
2.1.8 CFR Acquires NSF's Fire Research Program	14
2.1.9 1975 Accomplishments	15
2.2 Events and Progress Throughout the 70s	15
3. Center for Building Technology in the 70s	21
3.1 Background for 1975	21
3.2 1975	25
3.3 1976	27
3.4 1977	29

3.5	1978	31
3.6	1979	32
3.7	1980	33
4.	Center for Fire Research in the 80s	37
4.1	Overview	37
4.2	1981	38
4.3	1982	39
4.4	1983	40
4.5	1984	41
4.6	1985	42
4.7	1986	43
4.8	1987	44
4.9	1988	45
4.10	1989	46
4.11	1990	47
5.	Center for Building Technology in the 80s	51
5.1	Overview	51
5.2	1981	52
5.3	1982	54
5.4	1983	55
5.5	1984	58
5.6	1985	59
5.7	1986	61
5.8	1987	63
5.9	1988	64
5.10	1989	66
5.11	1990	68
6.	Building and Fire Research Laboratory in the 90s	71
6.1	Overview	71
6.2	1991	72
6.3	1992	74
6.4	1993	75
6.5	1994	77
6.6	1995	80
6.7	1996	82
6.8	1997	84
6.9	1998	87
6.10	1999	89
6.11	2000	91
6.12	Construction and Building Subcommittee, National Science and Technology Council	92

7. Architecture, Environmental Psychology and Acoustics	97
7.1 Stair Safety	98
7.2 Security	98
7.3 Human Response in Fires	98
7.4 Energy Conserving Design	98
7.5 Color and Safety Signs	99
7.6 Lighting	100
7.7 Building for People	101
7.8 Acoustics	101
8. Construction Integration and Automation	103
8.1 Information Exchange Standards for Construction	103
8.2 Construction Site Metrology	105
9. Economics	107
9.1 Overview of Economics Research for Building and Fire Programs	107
9.2 Economics of Energy Conservation	111
9.3 Standard Economic Methods	113
9.4 Cost-Effective Compliance with Life Safety Codes	115
9.5 Economic Impacts of BFRL Research	116
9.6 Applications of the Analytic Hierarchy Process	118
9.7 BEES: Building for Environment and Economic Sustainability	120
9.8 Uniformat II Elemental Classification for Building Specifications, Cost Estimation, and Cost Analysis	121
9.9 Baseline Measures for the National Construction Goals	123
9.10 Bridge LCC	125
10. Environmental Systems	127
10.1 Insulation	127
10.2 Weatherization	129
10.2.1 Criteria for Retrofit Materials and Products for Weatherization of Residences	129
10.2.2 GSA Weatherization Demonstration	130
10.2.3 Criteria for the Installation of Energy Conservation Measures	130
10.3 Moisture	132
10.4 Appliance Test Procedures and Labeling	133
10.5 Total Energy Systems	136
10.6 Building Thermal Environment Analysis	138
10.7 Simulation of Mechanical Systems Performance	142
10.8 Controls and Cybernetic Building Systems	144
10.9 Alternative Refrigerants	150
10.10 Indoor Air Quality	154
10.11 Building Envelope Performance	156
10.12 Performance Criteria and Standards for Solar Energy Systems	157
10.13 Plumbing	163

11. Fire Safety Engineering	169
11.1 Flammable Fabrics	169
11.2 Fire Scenarios	172
11.3 Fire Research Information Services	173
11.4 Fire Investigations at NIST	175
11.4.1 Introduction	175
11.4.2 Nursing Home Fires	175
11.4.3 Fire Investigation Handbook	176
11.4.4 Advent of Mathematical Post Fire Analysis	176
11.4.4.1 Beverly Hills Supper Club, 165 Fatalities, May 18, 1977	177
11.4.4.2 MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada, 84 Dead, November 21, 1980	177
11.4.4.3 Hospice of Southern Michigan, 6 Dead, December 1985	177
11.4.4.4 Dupont Plaza Hotel, Puerto Rico, 90 Dead, December 31, 1988	178
11.4.4.5 Hillhaven Nursing Home Fire, 13 Dead, October 5, 1989	178
11.4.4.6 Happy Land Disco, Bronx, New York, 87 Fatalities, March 25, 1990	179
11.4.4.7 First Interstate Bank Building, 1 Dead, May 4, 1988	179
11.4.4.8 Oil Fields of Kuwait	179
11.4.4.9 Oakland Hills	180
11.4.4.10 Post-Tsunami Fires, Hokkaido, Japan	180
11.4.4.11 Post-Earthquake Fires, Northridge, CA	180
11.4.4.12 Post-Earthquake Fires, Kobe, Japan	181
11.4.4.13 Cherry Road Fire, Washington, DC, 2 Firefighter Fatalities, May 30, 1999	182
11.5 Smoke and Fire Detectors	183
11.5.1 Operation Breakthrough	183
11.5.2 Hurricane Agnes	184
11.5.3 UL Standard	184
11.5.4 NFPA Standard	185
11.5.5 Indiana Dunes Tests	186
11.5.6 Regulatory Actions	186
11.5.7 Further Studies	187
11.6 Wood Heating Safety Research	189
11.7 Fire Safety Evaluation Systems	190
11.8 Smoke Management	192
11.9 Software for Fire Hazard Assessment	193
11.10 Large Eddy Simulations of Fires	196
11.10.1 Introduction	196
11.10.2 Fire Plumes	197
11.10.3 Outdoor Fires	198
11.10.4 Industrial Fire Control	199
11.10.5 Acknowledgements	200
11.11 Fire Fighter Equipment	201
11.11.1 Fire Department Ground Ladders	201

11.11.2	Fire Fighters' Turnout Coats	.202
11.11.3	Fire Fighters' Protective Clothing	.203
11.12	Fire Sprinklers	.205
11.12.1	Introduction	.205
11.12.2	Full-scale Fire Suppression Experiments	.205
11.12.3	Sprinkler Research Areas	.207
11.12.4	Predictive Methods	.209
11.12.5	Summary	.210
11.13	Oil Spills	.213
11.14	Zone Fire Modeling	.218
12.	Fire Science	.221
12.1	Fire Grants	.221
12.2	Measuring the Toxicity of Fire Smoke	.222
12.3	Measurement of Heat Release Rate	.225
12.4	Smoldering Combustion	.228
12.5	Advanced Fire Measurements	.229
12.6	Fire Safe Materials	.231
12.7	Carbon Monoxide Formation in Fires	.235
12.8	Less Fire-Prone Cigarettes	.238
12.9	Alternative Fire Suppressants	.242
12.10	Furniture Flammability	.245
13.	Materials	.247
13.1	Construction Materials Reference Laboratories	.247
13.2	Service Life Prediction of Construction Materials	.249
13.2.1	Introduction	.249
13.2.2	Standard Practice for Development of Accelerated Tests	.250
13.2.3	Reliability-Based Approach	.251
13.3	Corrosion Resistant Reinforcing Steel	.254
13.4	Roofing Research	.255
13.5	Lead Hazard Control in Residential Buildings	.259
13.6	High Performance Concrete	.260
14.	Standards and Codes	.269
14.1	Housing Standards	.269
14.2	Mobile Home Research	.271
14.3	Building Rehabilitation Standards	.273
14.4	Detention and Correctional Facilities	.275
14.5	National Conference of State on Building Codes and Standards	.276
14.6	Metrication for Construction	.277
14.7	Modeling Standards	.280
14.8	Fire Standards	.281

15. Structures	283
15.1 Structural Failure Investigations	283
15.1.1 Introduction	283
15.1.2 Skyline Plaza Apartment Tower and Parking Garage	284
15.1.3 Cooling Tower at Willow Island, WV	285
15.1.4 Harbour Cay Condominium	285
15.1.5 Kansas City Hyatt Regency Walkway Collapse	286
15.1.6 Riley Road Interchange Ramp, East Chicago, Indiana	288
15.1.7 Structural Assessment of the New US Embassy Office Building in Moscow	288
15.1.8 L'Ambiance Plaza Building Collapse	290
15.1.9 Ashland Oil Storage Tank Collapse	291
15.2 Disaster Investigations	292
15.2.1 Introduction	292
15.2.2 Wind Investigations	293
15.2.3 Earthquake Investigations	294
15.3 Structural Reliability	296
15.4 The Maturity Method	300
15.5 The Impact Echo Method	302
15.6 Wind Engineering	304
15.6.1 Engineering Micrometeorology	304
15.6.2 Extreme Wind Climatology	304
15.6.3 Bluff Body Aerodynamics and Wind Tunnel Testing Criteria Development	304
15.6.4 Wind Loads on Low-Rise Buildings	304
15.6.5 Structural Dynamics	305
15.6.6 Structural Reliability and Post-Disaster Investigations	305
15.6.7 Glass Behavior Under Fluctuating Wind Loads	306
15.6.8 Development of Criteria on Tornado Wind Speeds and Tornado-Borne Missiles Speeds	306
15.6.9 Development of Performance Criteria Assuring Higher Safety Levels and Lower Costs for Structures Subjected to Wind Loading	306
15.6.10 Education and Practice	306
15.6.11 Awards	306
15.7 Chaotic Dynamics	307
15.8 The National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program	309
15.8.1 Background	309
15.8.2 Establishment of NEHRP	310
15.8.3 Seismic Standards for Buildings	310
15.8.4 Interagency Committee on Seismic Safety in Construction	311
15.8.5 Earthquake Engineering Experimental Facilities	313
15.8.6 Standards for Lifelines	314
15.8.7 NEHRP Management	314
15.9 Earthquake Research	315
15.9.1 Soil Liquefaction	315

15.9.2	Bridge Column Reinforcing Requirements	316
15.9.3	Precast Concrete Frames	317
15.9.4	Rehabilitation of Welded Steel Moment Frame Connections	318
15.9.5	Test Methods for Passive and Active Seismic Energy Absorption	318
Appendix A.	Budget History Fiscal Years 1975-2000	321
Appendix B.	CBT/CFR-BFRL DOC Awards	323
INDEX		329

