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How building codes increase confidence in a community:

Building codes are rules that specify how a structure - be it a home, business, or public meeting place - can and must be built. Codes make sure that the building meets safety and structural requirements before people move in. Without these rules in place, construction would be much more hit-or-miss and every time someone entered a new building they could be hit by a rush of fear: Is it going to stand? Is it going to fall? How can I know it's safe? Building codes take away these fears and allow for a society that has complete confidence in its buildings - so much confidence that people rarely consider the codes that protect them.

In a small town in central Virginia there is a library. The building - a modern brick structure downhill from the town's courthouse - is a hub of activity year-round. It serves many roles: meeting place, technology hub, and landmark, in addition to its position as a library. Dozens of people pass through its doors every day secure in the building's durability. When people enter the library, the first thing they notice is the ever-present smell of books and paper, or perhaps the quiet chatter in the neatly arranged computer lab. Concerns about the building's integrity do not even cross their minds because they assume, correctly, that the library was built by and is maintained by professionals. Even though the library patrons don't know the exact requirements of the building codes, they are confident of their safety. The rules are like an invisible guardian, keeping the people safe day in and day out.

There is another building in the town, equally important to its visitors, that cannot claim quite the same level of safety. A church of middling size, with white concrete walls and a steeple pointing skyward, it is framed by two intersecting roads and a parking lot that is easily filled by the church's small congregation. When the church was originally constructed it met the "standards" of the era. The building codes were not as extensive then and - to hear the old-timers speak - were "just not that big a deal." Additionally, the demands on systems (electrical, plumbing, heating, and cooling) were much lower. Over the years, demand has grown: air conditioning, restroom facilities, microwave ovens, coffee makers, high-tech sound systems and computers all became commonplace. Volunteers were eager to meet the growing needs. Wires were pulled and fixtures places as the small church's funds permitted. AC was added following a generous gift and fundraising permitted an additional handwashing sink. The new appliances always seemed to work, and the lights still came on, so it was assumed that the job was well done! A half century of this DIY approach has resulted in a constellation of curiously placed holes, unaccounted for wires, and round-about plumbing. Now the church is focusing on modernizing its systems to meet Code.

While both structures are gathering places for the community - full of good people with good ideals - there is greater trust in the strength of the library facility. This is because of the security promised by building codes. Newer buildings - such as the library - are built to meet current building code requirements. Older structures, however, must work to keep up with the rules. If building codes are not followed - either during the construction or growth phases - the integrity of whole structure comes into question. Codes are necessary to protect the community and provide peace of mind. It is because of this that I am pleased to say that the church described above - my church - is actively taking strides to meet Code and update its wiring and plumbing so it is as safe as it is welcoming.