Alternatively, looking at statistics, how do we as a profession identify and counteract the points along the path to licensure when candidates may fall off? Keeping candidates on the path leads to greater diversity in the profession and helps build greater experiences for coming generations. This is just a very small snapshot of some of the work being done by this year’s Think Tank.

Most rewarding for me was being able to serve as chair of this year’s Think Tank after having served two years ago as a Think Tank member. Working with NCARB is always invigorating and constantly challenges us to participate in shaping our profession. We have the responsibility, no matter where we are in our careers, to keep learning while also holding out a hand to the generation behind us. We’re all in this together and the Think Tank is critical in keeping us relevant to the challenges of the licensure process so that we may better serve our candidates.

Please visit ncarb.org to find out more about the Think Tank and how to volunteer with NCARB.
The Rhode Island Waterfront House was built on the foundation of an existing underperforming and poorly constructed home. The existing structure was not worth saving, but reusing the foundation allowed greatly reduced site impact in an environmentally sensitive shoreline, and avoided the embodied energy of a new concrete foundation. Reusing the foundation required the new design to be contained within the existing 42' square footprint. The north side of the house was extended with a 3' cantilever, but otherwise held to the existing foundation plan and deck perimeter.

The client had a firm requirement to use only environmentally conscious materials to create a net-zero electricity house, with minimal future maintenance requirements for the exterior finishes. The wood structure is insulated with dense-pack cellulose and rigid polyiso insulation, resulting in a super-insulated structure with a very low infiltration rate of 0.56 ACH50.

The exterior finishes included factory coated aluminum siding and roofing, which are manufactured with recycled materials, and can be completely recycled at the end of their lifecycle. Domestic decay resistant wood products were used for the exterior decking to avoid washing harmful chemicals into the nearby bay. Interior finishes include low-VOC paints and sustainably harvested solid pine flooring.
XTCA: CROSS TOWN CONTEMPORARY ART

XTCA: Cross Town Contemporary Art is an outdoor public art exhibition of thirteen artists and architects that seeks to reveal our interconnectedness as citizens and to highlight the gateway district between downtown Amherst and the University of Massachusetts. This exhibition, presented by the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA), and curated by Loretta Yarlow and Sandy Litchfield Associate AIA, Assistant Professor Department of Architecture in partnership with the Town of Amherst, seeks to build an art and culture bridge — a series of public sculptural installations — to activate the North Pleasant Street corridor and connect downtown to campus. The goal of this XTCA is to generate a robust public dialogue about the value of art and culture in building community.

Sandy reflects upon the nature of public art: “I’ve learned some very important things from this project. First, that there is support for public art; there are opportunities to find funding; most artist are eager for the opportunity to contribute with their creative visions; and many unsuspecting people will volunteer their time, energy and resources to make it happen. But, there is also a lot resistance to public art; funding is limited and hard to secure; there are naysayers, people too busy or tired to be bothered with it; there are many of hoops you need to jump through. And in meetings after meetings, there is an abundance of concern, caution and even fear. Nevertheless, I still believe in public art because art moves us. It makes us feel more deeply, it helps us reflect on ourselves, and empathize with others.

It allows us to imagine other worlds, understand other realities other cultures, other people, people different from us. We believe in art because it also shows us how we are the same—how we delight in beauty, novelty, surprise, harmony, and justice. In this way art can have a tremendous unifying effect. It can bring people together, offer meaningful experiences. It can even help heal traumatic histories, by helping us remember the past, and speculate about what we want in the future.”

The exhibition features work by nationally recognized artists, local artists and members of the academic community and is on view through November 1, 2018.

The XTCA Artists are: Roberley Bell, Sarah Braman; CLOK (Collective–LOK: Jon Lott, William O’Brien Jr., and Michael Kubo); Naomi Darling AIA; Tom Friedman; Harold Grinspoon; Josephine Halvorson; Benjamin Jones; Joseph Krupczynski; Pamela Matsuda-Dunn; Gary Orlinsky; Rob Swainston; and Erika Zekos Associate AIA.
This month, we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the East Longmeadow based firm, Architecture EL. Architecture EL, Inc. was founded in October 2008. A firm with diverse experience, including residential, commercial, childcare, municipal, historic, and accessibility projects, Architecture EL works in both the public and private sectors. With over 20 years of professional experience their projects range from small to large. Kevin Rothschild-Shea AIA, the firm’s Principal Architect, is licensed in MA, CT, VT and NJ.

We asked Architecture EL about some of their recent work:

“We have provided design services on a wide range of single family and multi-family projects, recently completing a partnership with non-profit Home City Development, Inc. of Springfield, Mass on E. Henry Twiggs Phases I & II, a scattered site residential renovation project, consisting of extensive renovations to 135 housing units, with a total construction cost of 25.8 million. We’re in the beginning stages of a similar residential revitalization project, working with The Community Builders, Inc., another non-profit, where we will be completing Phase 2 of work to revitalize several residential apartment buildings in and around Lyman Terrace in Holyoke, Mass. With a total construction cost of 22 million. We’ve also worked closely with several western Mass towns designing Handicapped Accessible Improvements and Sprinklers for the Hatfield Town Hall, an addition to the Town Hall in Hampden, additions and renovations to the Town of Hampden Fire Department, and Façade restoration of the Westfield Whip Museum. Currently AEL is working with the town of East Longmeadow to design and develop a Veteran’s War Memorial on the East Longmeadow town green.”

“Ten years ago when I launched ArchitectureEL, Inc., I had a simple aspiration to design beautiful buildings for the people and businesses of Western Massachusetts,” said Kevin Rothschild-Shea AIA, President and Lead Architect. “What we’ve grown into today... well it’s far surpassed my dreams, and we can’t thank the community enough for their continued trust in our work and support of our designs.”

“Architecture EL has a staff of committed and hard-working professionals who pay close attention to the critical aspects of every project and pursue each problem to a satisfactory resolution,” said Tom Kegelman of Home City Development, Inc.”

“I have collaborated with Kevin and AEL, Inc. since it’s beginning on many and a wide range of projects,” said William A. Canon, Landscape Architect. “I have enjoyed working with Kevin and his professionalism of embracing the expertise that other consultants bring to the project team which is always restful and appreciated. I have been impressed with Kevin and the development of AEL, Inc. into a respected practice.”
Forty five years ago, as a minor and an immigrant, I landed at Kennedy Airport on a TWA flight from Athens. I was a refugee from behind the iron curtain, smuggled under the back seat of a car trailer across the border between Bulgaria and Greece. But when I set foot on US soil and was greeted by the soaring wings of Eero Saarinen’s terminal – a marvel of sinuous lines, expressionist structure and jet-age splendor – I was bedazzled. The glamour of that first experience of American architecture is with me still. It sustained me through more than a decade of studies, a rocky start as a professional in NY during the real estate crisis, and the collapse of the iron curtain, when Bulgaria established its first democracy.

In 1996 I was working with John M. Y. Lee/ Michael Timchula Associates when Edward Marwell, President of Curtis Instruments called with an unusual request: did we know of any Bulgarian architects? Both of the firm’s principals had worked with Mr. Marwell on factories in the US and in China, but this commission was special – the Bulgarian factory team of the joint venture Curtis/ Balkan, under the management of Peter Popov, insisted on working with an architect who would be sensitive to the local environment and context, and could serve as a bridge between the two cultures of the partnership. And there I was - in charge of my first project as a lead designer and flying back to Bulgaria, but this time as a professional.

It was a heady experience – learning how to speak Bulgarian as an architect, working with management to develop the program of requirements and optimize the manufacturing process workflow, and interviewing multiple firms in order to put together the design and construction team. Curtis/ Balkan had purchased a long and narrow land parcel on the southwest outskirts of Sofia in a leafy neighborhood on a major boulevard. The site had many mature trees and dropped about 10’ from the front to the back where a loading dock could be developed onto a road that served other industrial facilities. The new two and a half story and 20,000 GSF facility could thus be sited to retain some of the existing landscape. It included a half story for the loading dock and service areas; a ground floor that was dedicated to manufacturing and had a two-story entry atrium, and a second floor with administrative offices and a central court/ winter garden that could serve future growth needs. The front façade and base of the building was clad in gneiss, with stucco for the back and side walls – a durable local exterior finish; and the blue of the window frames and aluminum curtain wall was a signature Curtis color. The concrete structural grid was designed on a module that was optimal for the manufacturing process. And after many discussions and debates, the team agreed to take a risk on installing a ground source heating pump HVAC system that utilized an existing water well with a ground temperature of 57 degrees F. The budget prohibited installation of PV panels on the glass roof over the winter garden, but they owners were proud to have an energy efficient system and utility bills about 20% lower than average.

This past summer I visited the facility, 20 years after its construction, and met again with Peter Popov, eager to hear how it was performing. The factory is thriving – they are proud to have what they now call a green building. The winter garden was converted to another level of manufacturing within 5 years of its opening and they wish they had built a full basement floor; the pumps are operating well, and the atrium now houses some of Mr. Marwell’s art collection. And most satisfying to me, they are now working on options to install PV panels on the roof.
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In Biblical fashion, more than 34,000 residential foundations in Connecticut and Massachusetts were built on sand between 1983 and 2016. Not literally, but many if not most residential concrete foundations containing pyrrhotite aggregate from Becker’s Quarry in Willington, CT and mixed by JJ Mottes Concrete in Stafford Springs, CT will need to be repaired or replaced eventually. Those that contain pyrrhotite and have not (yet) shown evidence of failure will remain suspect and likely impact the value of the real estate. This article focuses on the single-family residential sector but the problem may be wider. ConnDOT asserted that pyrrhotite concrete has not impacted its structures. However, there is visual evidence that some commercial and multi-family residential structures are showing telltale signs of pyrrhotite deterioration.

What is known is that thousands of pyrrhotite foundations are crumbling in a slow motion disaster. The cost of correction currently ranges from $150,000 to $350,000, for lifting and fully replacing foundations. The economic impact on the region is immense. Connecticut officials have already identified approximately 50 towns affected by pyrrhotite foundations. Only about 700 buildings have been officially reported to date in Connecticut. However, Governor Malloy estimates that over 34,000 homes might be affected. Massachusetts is quite behind the curve in determining the scope of the disaster. State and local officials in MA have no clear idea of how many homes contain pyrrhotite concrete, although the now defunct JJ Mottes Concrete company did extensive business in Massachusetts. One estimate used by CT officials is that as many as 10,000 homes in Massachusetts have pyrrhotite concrete.

Owners, through no fault of their own, will lose their equity and perhaps default on mortgages. Even where a particular foundation shows no signs of the telltale pyrrhotite “map cracking” and horizontal cracks, insurers and lenders will redline properties containing pyrrhotite foundations. Buyers will seek disclosures and representations resulting in a loss of marketability. This is not speculation, some lenders in Massachusetts are already requiring a core sample test to prove the absence of pyrrhotite before closing a loan.

The math is stunning: 34,000 homes at $225,000 repair cost equals $7.65 billion. In comparison, hurricane Irene caused damage of $15.8 billion in New England and Superstorm Sandy caused damage of $65 billion across a large swath of the Northeast. The downstream consequences are even more alarming. Insurers have thus far maneuvered to avoid coverage on homeowners policies. Connecticut legislation has barred insurers from cancelling policies for pyrrhotite but Massachusetts has not. Banks will increasingly be saddled with foreclosed properties that have zero value. Municipalities will suffer revenue loss due to tax abatements and in many cases need to deal with permanently abandoned, deteriorating homes.

PYRRHOTITE AGGREGATE GEOLOGY

As the name suggests, Pyrrhotite is a naturally occurring iron sulfide (Fe\text{1-x}S). Most people in Western Massachusetts are familiar with Brimfield, the town famous for its massive antique shows. Fewer are familiar with a geologic feature called “Brimfield Schist.” According to the Geological Society of America, “rock aggregate in the failing concrete foundations was largely mined from a single quarry, working a stratified metamorphic unit in eastern CT mapped as Ordovician Brimfield Schist. The gray, rusty brown to orange yellow weathering rock, is a medium to coarse grained, interlayered schist and gneiss, composed of oligoclase, quartz, K-feldspar, biotite and commonly garnet, sillimanite, graphite, and pyrrhotite.”

According to Trinity geologist Dr. Jonathan Gourley, in the presence of moisture/air and calcium, the sulphur in the pyrrhotite reacts and transforms to several secondary minerals, and associated changes in volume lead to a loss of structural integrity. While current science is unable to predict whether any given concrete foundation containing pyrrhotite will fail, recent developments relying upon the magnetic properties of pyrrhotite have greatly lowered the cost of accurate testing.

On September 17, 2018, Dr. Gourley presented some of his work at the Monson Public Forum on Crumbling Foundations. In terms of risk assessment, he identified 4 important factors: 1) the percentage of pyrrhotite; 2) the source of the aggregate; 3) the interaction of the foundation with water; and 4) the age of the foundation. He added that other factors may be in play including variability in the initial concrete quality, and the water added to the original mix (related to ultimate compressive strength).
Until the predictive science advances, even very low percentages of pyrrhotite in aggregate from Becker’s Quarry will place an economic cloud over tens of thousands of properties. There may be a safe level of pyrrhotite but that amount is not known yet.

SLOW MOTION DISASTER . . . AND RESPONSE
This local disaster did not really start making the news until 2014, although there were earlier complaints. Connecticut is at least two years ahead of Massachusetts in attempting to address this problem. Federal aid is uncertain other than a “safe harbor” tax provision for deducting pyrrhotite repair costs as a casualty loss. There has been no FEMA disaster declaration.

In August 2015, CT Governor Malloy ordered an investigation into reports of failing concrete foundations. A report was released on December 30, 2016. The investigation was thorough. A scientific study was conducted by Kay Wille and Rui Zhong in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at UConn. In addition, approximately 70 potentially affected homes were inspected. Roughly 90 contractors identified by consumer complaint forms were interviewed. The Department of Consumer Protection conducted 85 interviews with experts involved in residential construction and foundation installation. The investigation found that: 1) pyrrhotite must be present to result in the observed deterioration; 2) the minimum amount of pyrrhotite needed to trigger deterioration is not known; and 3) Becker’s Quarry (the main source of aggregate used by JJ Mottes Concrete) is located in a vein of rock that contains significant amounts of pyrrhotite. JJ Mottes Concrete previously operated in Stafford Springs, CT, on the Massachusetts border. Connecticut agencies such as the Department of Housing (DOH) and the Department of Consumer Protection have established informational web pages.

Massachusetts legislators and agencies can study the efforts in Connecticut for guidance. Local State Senators Lesser and Gobi are active in this effort. In July, MA created a $50,000 program to help homeowners pay for inspections (compared to $5 million program in CT) within 20 miles of JJ Mottes as well as a commission to study the problem and develop solutions. The currently-forming commission would bring together the Massachusetts governor’s office, lawmakers, state banking and insurance regulators, the attorney general’s office, and others. Under the statute, Governor Baker is entitled to appoint 7 individuals to the commission.

A CALL FOR COLLABORATION – LOVE IT OR LIFT IT
Solutions to the pyrrhotite disaster puzzle have many moving parts: design, construction, science, financial, tax, legal, and more. I recently spoke with a building code official from the Massachusetts Office of Public Safety and Inspections to ask whether design and construction professionals had already formed a working group to consider code exemptions, waivers, or modifications that could streamline the repairs. The lack of effective action in response to a crisis prompted this article as a call for collaboration.

Almost all news reports describing the necessary repairs state something to the effect that “currently the only solution is to remove and replace the entire foundation.” This appears to be the State of Connecticut’s official position. According to the CT Department of Housing, the source of this recommendation was an analysis by the Army Corps of Engineers. Strangely though, the CT agency leading the pyrrhotite response did not have available and could not produce any engineering reports from the Corps.

Lifting and full replacement might make sense once actual collapse begins. Some of the most dramatic photographs in the news show severely crumbling and bulging foundation walls. There are videos of homeowners crushing pyrrhotite concrete chunks with their bare hands. Where a foundation is no longer able to carry its design loads, any competent contractor or design professional would recommend immediate shoring. In such advanced cases of deterioration, the building may have already settled/shifted and would need to be lifted back into position. In such cases the only remedy may be full foundation replacement.

In other cases when pyrrhotite is present with telltale “map cracking” and horizontal cracks appearing, but where no significant settlement has occurred, less drastic repairs may be adequate to permanently preserve the building without the expense of full replacement. As a former builder who has litigated all manner of construction defect cases for the past 26 years, I am not alone in thinking that universal full replacement is overkill. Initial discussions for this article with two licensed professional engineers, an architect, and several experienced contractors suggest that other options exist to meet codes and provide the same service life as a new foundation – without removing the defective concrete.

Foundations, which have not yet lost structural integrity, can be left in place and used as the exterior form of a new concrete wall poured on the inside, on new footings, and designed with sufficient reinforcement to resist all forces. A variety of techniques can be used to transfer loads from the sill plates, which would require careful detailing in conjunction with a structural engineer. In functional terms, the existing defective wall may or may not eventually fail. For lack of a better term it should be coined as “Becker’s Backfill” material and left in place.
Case by case solutions may not require detachment and lifting of chimneys, loss of landscaping for a complete perimeter excavation, detachment of utilities, or myriad other costly complexities.

The purpose of this article is to challenge people in the design and construction industry to find alternative ways to mitigate this disaster. I urge design and construction professionals to collaborate with universities, code authorities, insurers, lenders, and government officials to mitigate the impact of this slow motion natural disaster.

There are several compelling reasons for design professionals, contractors, scientists, and building code officials to collaborate to develop adequate repair solutions short of full replacement.

1. Most homeowners can neither afford repairs out of pocket nor borrow against a worthless asset. Insurance may not be available.

2. If all or part of a foundation can be permanently shored or repaired, the repair costs would be substantially lower.

3. Is it justifiable or economically wasteful to spend $250,000 to repair a building with a $250,000 market value?

4. If foundation repair plans and specifications are designed and stamped by a licensed professional engineer, if those plans fully function to meet relevant building code requirements, if the plans are executed by a competent contractor, and finally inspected by the design professional and code enforcement officer, is the building still defective?

The last question is critical. Further scientific study may develop accurate predictions of structural failure based on varying percentages of pyrrhotite and other measurable factors (e.g., compressive strength).

Predictions and statistics alone may not remove the perception of defects. Aside from a complete government bailout, wherever possible we need to devise repair solutions that are economical.

As professionals involved with the built environment, we must help drive the debate to convince the public that there are options short of throwing good money after bad.
STEVEN J. O’NEILL, ATTORNEY AT LAW

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STEVEN J. O’NEILL lives close to pyrrhotite ground-zero in Monson, MA. Prior to 26 years of law practice focusing on design and construction issues, he was a licensed builder and construction manager. He can be reached at soneill@attorneyoneill.com. For more information and updates see https://attorneyoneill.com/pyrrhotite-foundations/.

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Jonathan A. Wright, Wright Builders
Monday, October 29 | 4:00-5:15 | 170 Design Building UMass/Amherst
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Zac Bloom, M.S., LEED Green Associate
Monday, November 26 | 4:00-5:15 | 170 Design Building UMass/Amherst
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