

# Driving Innovation in a Traditional Industry



By **Marty Wilson**

**T**his Supplement Issue is dedicated to the CICA award winners. But it is also appropriate to recognize the significant changes and contributions the Commercial Interiors & Tenant Improvement industry — led by our award winners — has brought to all types of building and commercial construction.

The general contractor (“GC”) specialty of Commercial Interiors & Tenant Improvement (“TI”) construction is relatively young. When I founded my former interiors company CIC Associates in 1978, very few TI contractors existed.

But in the 30+ years since, Interiors & TI contractors have been vanguards of major changes to project delivery and client services that have been adopted by commercial, industrial and institutional general contractors industry wide:

**Specialization:** Contractors have traditionally used in house workmen to “self-perform” all carpentry, laborer and demolition items. Consequently the established shell & core general contractors initially derided TI contractors as simple “Broker” contractors because they subcontracted most, if not all of their work to specialty subcontractors in lieu of self-performing it.

But TI contractors did so because on mid-sized and larger projects, specialty subs can build more economically, faster and with better quality than a GC’s in-house workmen. This specialization brought significant economies to projects.

This approach encouraged the expansion and broad utilization of the specialty subcontracting industry. Consequently many shell & core contractors now use subs exclusively to provide even the traditionally self-performed trades like framing & concrete.

**Schedule Durations:** One of my company’s first major business park assignments came at the expense of a large general building contractor who took 20 weeks to complete a 14,000 sq ft interior office space — at the same time we completed a 16,000 sq ft office space in just 12 weeks. (Today most TI contractors could complete that space in just 9 or 10 weeks).

By moving all the sub trades onto the critical path and eliminating lag time in schedules, interior contractors were able to expedite and reduce traditional completion schedules by 33% — 50%!

In response to those successes the general building industry has applied similar techniques to compress their own shell & core delivery schedules.

**Quality:** The status of a project’s Punch List at scheduled completion is the best standardized indicator of a contractor’s quality control. Traditional contractors not only accepted lengthy punch lists, they actually programmed them into their schedules well beyond the completion date of the project.

But in the late 1980’s interior and TI contractors began to propose — and deliver — “Zero Punch List” and “Zero Defect” delivery of projects — all within the scheduled completion dates.

This very non-traditional approach required much more quality control and inspection throughout the project, starting on day one. But the benefits were substantial and easily offset the added supervision requirements.

Consequently general contractors of all types now typically offer “Zero Defect” delivery philosophies and features.

**Project Close Out & Wrap Up:** The bane of clients and GC project managers alike is the interminable delay in finalizing and wrapping up projects.

Because interior & TI projects are relatively short lived, a TI general’s final payments are a substantial percentage of the project cost and are frequently delayed by incomplete “close-out” items.

Consequently there is a major incentive for TI contractors to manage and complete their close-out responsibilities far more quickly and efficiently.

These same approaches have been adopted by the shell & core industry, yielding far shorter project close out timelines to the benefit of both clients and contractors.

Although there are other innovations developed by the interior and TI industry contractors, the above have had the most far reaching impact. I’m sure that as this industry continues to mature we will see more innovation and improvement in client services and associated project benefits.

My congratulations to all the 2010 CICA winners!

## About the Author:

Marty Wilson founded and managed the TI general construction firm CIC Associates, Inc. Marty is now a Principal at MDW Group, Inc. which provides 3rd party Project & Construction Management services. He was also one of the organizers and the MC of last year’s CICA ceremony.