

Definitions: The Building Code Lexicon

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Dictionaries: I would venture to say that every adult and school student owns at least one of these books. The earliest form of dictionary can be traced back as far as the 7th century B.C. The library of Ashurbanipal, the king of Assyria, Nineveh (near modern day Mosul, Iraq), included clay tablets with cuneiform (wedge-shaped) inscriptions, or symbols, that represented words, sounds, and numbers.

If you're in a business that has a lexicon of its own, you probably have a special dictionary just for that business. Lawyers couldn't impart legal advice without Black's Law Dictionary, and physicians couldn't uphold their Hippocratic Oath without Stedman's Medical Dictionary on their shelf. Personally, I own two different construction dictionaries.

As a matter of fact, we couldn't communicate much of anything without knowing the meanings of the words we use. But we have a limited ability to remember all of the meanings to words we might encounter. The average person utilizes only a small portion of their brain's cognitive potential; some more, some less (No, I'm not going to tell you where I'm situated on that imprecise scale). As a result, we need a handy-dandy little "book of words" at our beck and call.

A similar requirement applies when using building codes: we couldn't use them properly unless we know the meanings of the special terms used within them. In most cases, the terms used by building codes carry the same meanings found in a common dictionary. In fact, up until the publication of the *International Building Code* (IBC), the *Uniform Building Code* established the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (editions varied depending on publication date) as the only source of meanings for words or terms not defined in the building code itself. The IBC has dropped the *Webster's* dictionary in favor of a broad statement that accepts the "ordinarily accepted meanings" for terms not defined in the Code.

The purpose of having special definitions for terms that may be found in the common dictionary is that those common definitions are typically too broad for a legally-based document such as the building code. Take the term "accessible" for example. According to my dictionary¹, accessible means, "Easily approached, entered, or obtainable." But in the context of the building code, you could ask this question: To whom does this apply? Prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a lot of people would have considered their buildings to be "accessible" to the public. But, with the passing of the ADA, the term "accessible" took on a new meaning that most dictionaries still don't include. Therefore, the building code has to define it as "A site, building, facility or portion thereof, that complies with this chapter." The chapter referenced in the definition is Chapter 11 entitled "Accessibility." In Section 1101.1, the scope of the chapter is to "control the design and construction of facilities for accessibility to physically disabled persons." Therefore, "accessible" under the building code applies to "physically disabled persons." A meaning that couldn't be legally obtained from the definition found in a common dictionary.

When using the building code, you have to be aware of the fact that certain terms carry very specific meanings. When you come across a term in the building code for which you know the "ordinarily accepted meaning," you had better check Chapter 2 of the IBC (Chapter 3 in the NFPA 5000) to make sure that the building code hasn't narrowed that definition to a more specific application.

Some examples to illustrate this can be found in the comparisons listed below of code-related terms as defined by the IBC and Webster's Dictionary¹:

- **Approved**
 - (IBC) Acceptable to the building official.
 - (Webster's) To confirm officially: ratify.
- **Court**
 - (IBC) An open, uncovered space, unobstructed to the sky, bounded on three or more sides by exterior building walls or other enclosing devices.
 - (Webster's) A courtyard. - courtyard: An open space enclosed by walls, within or adjoining a large building.
- **Dwelling**
 - (IBC) A building that contains one or two dwelling units used, intended or designed to be used, rented, leased, let or hired out to be occupied for living purposes.
 - (Webster's) A residence.
- **Exit**
 - (IBC) That portion of a means of egress system which is separated from other interior spaces of a building or structure by fire-resistance-rated construction and opening protectives as required to provide a protected path of egress travel between the exit access and the exit discharge.
 - (Webster's) A passage or way out.
- **Platform**
 - (IBC) A raised area within a building used for worship, the presentation of music, plays or other entertainment; the head table for special guests; the raised area for lecturers and speakers; boxing and wrestling rings; theater-in-the-round stages; and similar purposes wherein there are no overhead hanging curtains, drops, scenery or stage effects other than lighting and sound.
 - (Webster's) An elevated horizontal surface, as for speakers or at a railroad station.
- **Story**
 - (IBC) That portion of a building included between the upper surface of a floor and the upper surface of the floor or roof next above.
 - (Webster's) One of the horizontal divisions of a building.

As you can see from the few definitions listed above, the building code takes the definitions for common words a lot further than those found in a standard dictionary. Additionally, the building code user may have to look further for definitions of terms used within the building code's own definition. For example, see the definition of "dwelling" above. The building code's definition uses the term "dwelling unit," which is clearly defined in the IBC as:

A single unit providing complete, independent living facilities for one or more persons, including permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating, cooking and sanitation.

Another consideration to keep in mind is the location in which a term is used. The definition used in one code book may not be the same in another. To exemplify this, take the definition of “canopy.” In the IBC, a canopy is defined as:

An architectural projection that provides weather protection, identity or decoration and is supported by the building to which it is attached and at the outer end by not less than one stanchion. A canopy is comprised of a rigid structure over which a covering is attached.

However, the *International Fire Code* (IFC) published by the same organization as the IBC, the International Code Council (ICC), defines a canopy in a completely different manner:

A structure, enclosure or shelter constructed of fabric or pliable materials supported by any manner, except by air or the contents it protects, and is open without sidewalls or drops on 75 percent or more of the perimeter.

So, under the IBC, a canopy can only be attached to a building and is considered an architectural projection, whereas, the IFC may consider it to be a free-standing structure since it defines it as being supported “by any manner.” To explore the varied definitions between codes, here’s the definition of a canopy from the *NFPA 5000, Building Construction and Safety Code*:

Any fixed roof-like structure that is self-supporting in whole or in part, but having no sidewalls or curtains other than valances not exceeding 18 in. (457 mm) in depth.

As you can see, this definition is slightly different than that found in either of the two International Codes, but it is more closely aligned to the definition in the IFC. But, one structure qualifying as a canopy under the IFC might not qualify as a canopy under the NFPA 5000, and vice versa. This emphasizes the fact that the code user needs to review the definitions applicable to the specific code being used.

In a general observation, the IBC has made one improvement over the UBC in the area of definitions; and that is listing every term defined by the building code in Chapter 2. Even though the definition for a term may not be provided in that chapter, it at least directs you to the chapter where the definition can be found. This helps the low cognitive-potential people to find those obscure definitions quickly; I know it has helped me (oops!).

For a building code to be effective, it must communicate its intent to the user in clear, concise language. Words may have different meanings attached to them; some accepted by all, while others may have a regional influence. To ensure that the building code is enforced similarly, whether it’s in Alaska, Maine, or Arizona, building officials, architects, contractors, and owners need to be given the context in which every term is used. Vague and imprecise terms would lead to a broad range of interpretations that could inadvertently result in unsafe building conditions. Therefore, knowing the exact definitions of code terms, and the circumstances in which they’re applied, are essential in administering an effective building regulation program.

The End

(The point at which something ceases; conclusion)

¹ *Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary*, Berkley Publishing Group, New York, 1984.

The Code

Corner

To comment on this article, suggest other topics, or submit a question regarding codes, contact the author at ron@specsandcodes.com.

About the Author: Ronald L. Geren, AIA, CSI, CCS, CCCA, SCIP, is an ICC Certified Building Plans Examiner, and is the principal of RLGA Technical Services located in Scottsdale, Arizona, which provides specifications and code consulting services to architects, engineers, owners, and product manufacturers. A 1984 graduate of the University of Arizona, Ron has over 23 years of experience with military, public, and private agencies.