Hard to believe, it’s been
ten full years since I took over this
column from John Casey, a mentor and
colleague. I’ve enjoyed every minute of
the assignment and while I may threaten
to transfer the workload, I’ll hang on for
a while longer because of the benefits. I
get to read a lot of books and share my
perspective. I choose which books I re-
view although many are suggested to me
by publishers. Occasionally, a volunteer
reviews a book and I provide editorial
guidance, but that’s it. If you have the
urge to write a review, don’t be bashful;
it’s rewarding. If you don’t know what
to read, e-mail or call me and I can help
you find a book to suit your needs.
To start the new year I suggest two
books: one that’s mostly operational and
one that’s mostly design and construction;
two from APPAs main subject areas. Both
provide solutions to our everyday work.
Best wishes in the new decade.

THE UNTHINKABLE: WHO SURVIVES WHEN
DISASTER STRIKES – AND WHY
Amanda Ripley, Crown Publishers,
New York, 2008, 207 pages, hardcover,
$29.95 (softcover, audio, and Kindle
editions also available).

Emergency preparedness has become
yet another job requirement for
the modern facility officer at a college
or university. Some have procedures in
place that are better than others, just
look at how well the
University of Texas
at Austin respond-
ed on September
28, 2010 when they
had a shooter on
campus. They
learned from their
own sad experi-
ence in 1967. But
not all of us have
the opportunity to learn from personal
or institutional history. And besides,
do we really want to learn the hard way
every time?
So the norm is now, being prepared
for an emergency. Whether it’s a hur-
rricane, flood, tornado, shooter, vehicular
accident, explosion, or other event, we’re
all expected to respond quickly and ef-
cfectively to protect the institution and its
occupants. If we don’t, an endless line of
reporters asking why we hadn’t foreseen
the problem; why we didn’t respond more
quickly; or why we didn’t have effective
procedures to shelter in place, shelter off-
site, evacuate, or other means of refuge.

In The Unthinkable, Amanda Ripley
draws from several news accounts and
digs into the details of the event, what
when wrong, what when right, and why
it mattered. How were people saved and
why the deeds of heroes and ordinary
folks mattered. In some cases, disasters
are chronicled (how many people died,
was the death preventable or inevitable).
In most of the cases prevented the deaths
could have been prevented had people
paid attention to the emergency plans,
and followed them.

Sadly, many of the examples are too
real. They are also frustrating because
they could have been prevented had
people reacted differently; paid attention
to announcements, followed instruc-
tions, or acted rather than procrasti-
nating. In other cases, people survived
because their primal instincts took over
and they were protected because of a
primitive response to danger. However,
a primal response doesn’t always work in
our modern, technological society. Plans
and contingencies must be practiced
over and over again.

Like you, I’ve attended periodic
emergency scenarios conducted by our
police department, the unit charged with
coordinating many emergency manage-
ment responses. These are somewhat
routine for me because I’ve learned how
to respond to emergencies the hard way
– several fires, floods, auto accidents, and
falls, some resulting in death.

Others in these practice sessions don’t
do so well, they’re bosses who think
they know how to lead people even in
an emergency (news flash - they’re not
facilities people and they don’t handle
emergencies well). The practices are
important for me and for them: they
gain a greater understanding of what it
means to operate a facility in all condi-
tions, and I develop new connections
with folks when they see how things are
done working through the scenario with
the cops. It’s a good system.

I’ve also received the introductory
FEMA training plus some other training.
Every time, the importance of practic-
ing these different scenarios comes up.
It may seem dull at first but it’s just like
an athletic talent, if you don’t practice
and hone the skills you won’t win when
it’s time to perform. Unthinkable is a
valuable book for the doubters and the
believers. It’s good for the “pointy-
haired boss” who thinks he knows what
to do in all cases. More importantly, it’s
important for the individual who thinks
all planes are alike and they don’t need
to pay attention to the FAA required an-
nouncements before every take-off.

If you read this book, you’ll be a
survivor. Not the TV kind, but a real,
emergency situation, never-happen-
again-in-your-lifetime, survivor. I want
you to be a survivor.

THE OWNER’S DILEMMA: DRIVING
SUCCESS AND INNOVATION IN THE DESIGN
AND CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY
Barbara White Bryson with Cana
Yetmen, Greenway Communications,
Atlanta, GA, 2010, 237 pages, softcover,
$29.95.
When I was studying architecture, the movie *The Towering Inferno* appeared on the big screen. It was the time of disaster movies and here was another one where a poorly constructed building catches fire and the architect uses his intimate knowledge of the building to save as many people as possible. What a crazy story—no architect knows a massive building to the level of detail needed. That’s Hollywood for you.

Buildings are complex and construction projects don’t run smoothly without a lot of care and attention. The challenge is managing the risk and the owner has the most at risk. The building must fill the need or a great deal of money will be wasted. In the case of a university, the owner is not the occupant(s) who may have been involved in design reviews. The oversight board is the owner, and most of the time they’re not involved in the process, where the risk is the greatest. The board relies on the project management staff to deliver the complex project on time, within budget, and to the satisfaction of the occupants.

*The Owner’s Dilemma* makes the challenges abundantly clear. Why would anyone want to assume the pressure of managing a risky construction project for a board that wants to make sure there are no mistakes. Of course, many of us are in the position, or have been, and want to make sure the board members are happy while keeping the occupants happy, too. It’s a tough balancing act and one which requires many skills. These skills are articulated in the later chapters and thoughtful examples of construction projects appear at the end of each chapter.

While the book rose out of an upper-level course that the author was challenged to teach, it does an excellent job of putting the problems and risks in perspective. Clear recommendations are provided with examples. While many of the examples are a record of personal experiences in a somewhat rarified setting (Rice University), they are not unique. We all experience many of the problems presented, but may not have succeeded as well as the author and Rice University have under her leadership. Therein lies the lesson. This is a book I’ve enjoyed reading and learning from. You will too.

Ted Weidner is assistant vice chancellor of facilities management & planning at the university of Nebraska–Lincoln; he can be reached at tweidner2@unlnotes.unl.edu.