

Visiting a Construction Site

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Over the years, I've been repeatedly struck with how unprepared visitors are when they visit a construction site. Without meaning to be, they are unequipped, unknowledgeable, unsafe, impolite, and unlikely to ever be asked back again. Visitors are the bane and the butt of most every joke on the field (well, excepting for Assistant Construction Managers and they're just like visitors anyhow.)

What are needed are just a few, simple guidelines and these 'Observers from the Outside' can fit right in with the guys and gals who actually build the world that we live in. If you heed the advice in this article, you too can enter this surrealistic world perched somewhere between the Plan and the Edifice with assurance and safety.

General

The following Do's and Don'ts are guidelines only. Nothing can take the place of common sense and good manners. Safety rules vary widely and circumstances sometimes call for different actions. Never the less, many things are universal.

Be polite. You may represent the owner of the project, but you don't own the construction area. As an independent contractor, the General Contractor (GC) has the responsibility and authority in this area. If he or she tells you to leave - you leave (complain later.) Any other response opens you for delay and interference claims. No matter what the provocation, your company will not thank you for starting a lawsuit.

Don't get involved. When walking around (especially wearing a borrowed hard hat with the Construction Manager's or GC's label on the front,) don't direct any workers or even answer questions. Laborers don't know you from the GC and might act upon your "polite suggestion" as if it were an order. What seems like an obvious answer to you might cost the owner big bucks ripping it out later or might even get someone hurt. Just say, "I'm a visitor, go ask the Superintendent" and leave it at that.

No souvenirs. It's not junk. Scrap has recovery value, other items may cut, burn, etc. Don't get thrown off the site for petty theft. It's a real problem, costing the owner and GC a lot of time and money. You can't blame the GC for strict enforcement.

The loaner hat is needed for the next visitor who didn't plan ahead. Delivery persons are usually exempted from the need for a hardhat. You can just go to the trailer (say to deliver something) without needing equipment. It is best to still have boots on anyway as you can have mud even on sunny days.

It's not ready for occupancy. Don't use the toilets in the building unless told by the Supervisor that it is OK. They probably don't flush. Even if they do, there's no one to clean them, you are chancing damage before the warranty period begins, or you may ruin an in-progress punchlist.

Before You Go

Bring the phone number of your contact in case you can't find the trailer. Every site has a phone and with cellular phones, some sites have phones before they even have offices.

Find out who and where to report. Don't expect a carpenter to know where the Construction Manager's office is.

Go to the bathroom before you leave. You don't want to use the portable bathrooms at the site (if you can help it.) You will miss a part of the tour, or worse - the tour may stand right next to you while they wait. Many modern field offices have actual restrooms with privacy and a flushing toilet inside (paper towels, occasionally.) They are for the field staff, not the workers. Maybe if you're very pleasant, you can get permission to use them.

Acquaint yourself with the general layout. If you have them, bring reduced plans. Even though the reduced plans are harder to read than the full-sized ones, wind and field conditions make them easier to use.

Get and fit safety equipment. Call your field contact and ask what equipment is required. Find out if you can borrow the necessary materials at the site before you go. It's always best to bring your own. If the loaner equipment is missing (see "Souvenirs" above) or unusable - you won't be able to tour; period, no exception.

A pocket camera is useful for later reference. Keep a written log of where you were and what you shot as you go along. Remember that flash only reaches out 10-15 feet. If you need to shot further, turn off the flash and brace the camera against a wall for a longer exposure. If you intend to videotape, you should get permission from the Superintendent first. You will probably need a spotter to prevent you from walking into a hole or something.

A small flashlight is very handy. The buildings will probably not have electricity as yet and the temporary lights are just for the areas currently under construction. Enclosed rooms might not have lights, you may wish to look down through access panels, or in between walls which have not been closed-up as yet, etc. Oft times, the person who had the foresight to bring a flashlight ends up leading the tour.

A pocket roll-up ruler is often handy as well. It settles a lot of arguments and lets you measure the doorframe to see if your oversized world globe will fit through.

The well-prepared person has a wet wash cloth in a zip lock bag stashed in the car. Very often, there is no water available to wash your hands, even at the toilets. On a hot day, you might want to bring along drinking water. You might want to put your boots on before you leave. It can get messy if you park in the mud and your boots are in the trunk.

Required Equipment

Good shoes are important. Bring along some hard-soled boots to wear. Open-toed or open-heeled shoes such as sandals are out. Especially dangerous are high-heeled shoes.

Slick, leather 'dancing shoes' may be legal to bring but are treacherous on wet surfaces. Soft-soled shoes such as tennis shoes will not protect your feet from nails. Some sites require that the boot have a steel toe insert but this usually only applies to the workers.

If anything is above the height of your head, then you need a hard hat. Leave your father's WW II steel hard hat at home - only plastic hats are legal anymore. Adjust the internal band to fit before you arrive. You should be able to look straight up and straight down without having the thing fall off of your head. Adding a sticker with your company's name to the front only costs pennies (or you can just tape one of your cards on.) This way, you can grab yours out of a pile after the meeting in the conference room without replaying a Three Stooges scene.

Safety vest with reflective tape are very handy. Some places require them, others don't. I keep mine rolled up in my hard hat when not in use. Many sites now require safety glasses. Most of the time, your prescription glasses will meet this requirement but real safety glasses will fit over your own glasses.

Wear reasonable leg wear. No shorts. Preferable is blue jeans with no holes or tears. Women, don't wear short, tight-fitting shirts. Pants are best. Long, full dresses or 'blousy' clothing are just as dangerous as they will easily catch on the exposed surfaces. Some sites require all visitors to wear long-sleeved shirts as help against burns, scrapes, and sunburn.

Hearing protection such as the wrap-around ear muffs or ear plugs is sometimes required and always useful to have available, should you need it. You might want to bring along a pair of 50¢ ear plugs. Hearing protection is seldom available for loan at the site.

A handkerchief is useful. You can wipe off the yuck on your hands, or even use it to breath through while walking through an area where dusty grinding is going on.

State Highway organizations often require the use of a rotating orange light on top of your car, if you stop by the side of the road.

When You Arrive

Arrive early. The job site typically opens just after sunrise and closes in the mid-afternoon. Arrive at 4:30 in the afternoon and you can expect to be on the outside looking in.

Drive really slow. The recommended speed is 5 mph. Trucks and tractors (especially laden with a load) have the right-of-way. There is no excuse for an auto accident in the construction site. Don't park in the mud - you might get stuck. Don't block anyone with your car. The cars which are blocking each other in the corner all belong to the same crew. They arrived at the same time and will depart at the same time (if you're not blocking them.)

Lock your car (after all, you're still in America.) Leave your business card in plain sight on the dashboard so that someone can look for you by name if you are blocking operations.

Be sure to check in. Report to the GC's shed or office. He or she 'owns' the project and is responsible for your safety. They are your lifeline should you do something foolish and get stuck somewhere alone.

Don't carry loose paper. Instead, carry your papers in a closing folder. This is a dirty, breezy environment and loose papers will blow away easily. It's also best to have both hands empty.

Remember that you are a guest. Politeness easily overcomes ignorance. Report abusive behavior directed toward you to the Superintendent; don't deal with it directly. The Superintendent can and will make the offender much sorrier for their behavior than you ever could.

Be sure to watch where you step. There are nails sticking out of boards, strings stretched out an inch above the ground for elevations, low overheads, open holes, spills on the floor, and wet cement just waiting for you to come along.

Watch out for powered equipment. The operators are watching the load for clearances, not pedestrians. It is common practice on the field that all personnel look out for equipment, not the other way around.

Stay with your group. Ask the tour guide for detours, don't just strike out on your own. Don't track mud into cleaned buildings. Certain operations such as flooring require an absolutely clean floor to proceed. Mud belongs outside.

Read and obey signs. The Superintendent will post signs to warn people about closed areas, wet cement, spray painting in progress, loose boards, etc. Those signs apply even to you.

On Your Way Out

Thank your tour guide for putting up with you. He or she has a real job to do and playing Tour Guide just causes the work to pile up. Return any borrowed equipment. If you find that you forgot to do so, call immediately and promise a speedy return. This will save the lender from another unnecessary trip to the store to buy replacements.

Check out with the Supervisor. You don't want the GC to call your office to see if you are there. They won't leave the job site without knowing your whereabouts for fear that you might be trapped or hurt somewhere on the construction site. Don't make their safety job harder than it already is.

In Conclusion

The world of a construction site is unlike any other. It's exciting, wondrous, startling, and informative. If you ever get a chance to visit one - jump at the offer. And if you heed the advice that I've just given, you won't be sorry that you did.