The Work and Influence of the UK Standing Committee on Structural Safety (SCOSS)

John CARPENTER
Engineering Consultant,
Secretary to SCOSS
Cheshire, UK
jzcarpenter@aol.com

John Carpenter received his civil engineering degree from the University of Leeds. He has been involved in bridge and building design. For the last 5 years he has been secretary to SCOSS and an independent consultant specialising in occupational safety management.

Stuart ALEXANDER
Group Technical
Coordinator, WSP Group,
London, UK
Stuart.Alexander@wspgroup.com

Stuart Alexander has been a practising structural and civil engineer since graduating from Cambridge in 1961. His interests include structural safety (as a member of SCOSS), tall buildings, floor loadings, and movements, cracks and leaks in concrete.

Summary

Failures of buildings and other structures continue to occur throughout the world. Many of these involve loss of life.

This paper outlines the workings of the UK Standing Committee on Structural Safety (SCOSS), a unique committee with a remit to identify practices and trends in structural engineering which might give rise to concern in respect of ensuring safety. Examples are given of the subject matter considered, with an emphasis on the people involved, the management of risk, and the products used. A scheme to allow the confidential reporting of matters of concern is also described and examples given of the data received.

Keywords: collapse, failure, safety, reporting.

1. Introduction

One only has to read the technical press and daily newspapers to realise that technical failures in structures occur around the world on a regular basis; they are not confined to the 'developing world' but include all the so-called developed countries. These failures are usually accompanied by loss of life, or injury, and economic loss.

In the UK, the 1960s and early 70s saw a number of high profile failures: in tall buildings, schools, and bridges. Temporary works were also affected. The classic 'Ronan Point' collapse in 1968 has since become a world renowned example of failure, alongside such international examples as the Tacoma Narrows bridge failure in 1940, which in both cases led to a step-change in the manner in which that type of structure was designed.

Following recommendations from two committees established to look into structural safety [1, 2], a standing committee was established in the UK in 1976 (The Standing Committee on Structural Safety, SCOSS) to "identify in advance those trends and developments which might contribute to an increasing risk to structural safety".

To that end SCOSS interacts with the professions, industry and government on all matters concerned with design, construction and use of building and civil engineering structures.

It has had some significant success over the years by encouraging the provision of guidance: for instance, in the fields of structural glass, temporary structures and maintenance of car park structures. It has lobbied for change: into progressive collapse measures, for example. It has also promoted debate: on subjects such as robustness of structures and risk management of the structural engineering process.

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