

Security on the Web

Recently, I talked to the owner of a new building project and advised him that the bid sets for his newest building were “flying out of my shop,” and it seemed that more people than ever were ordering plans. At least 25 percent of the bidders were arriving with CDs, requesting plans to be printed. When I explained to the owner that these subcontractors downloaded these files from the World Wide Web, he stopped and asked who had asked his permission to put his plans for his building on a website that all the world could access.

He was, to say the least, upset and immediately contacted the web site owner (a local building plan exchange room) and demanded that all his building files be taken down. He then contacted the architect who sent the plans to this building exchange and proceeded to threaten a lawsuit if anything serious happened to his building in the next 30 years that could be traced back to any unauthorized person who had access to his blueprints.

Before the events of 9/11, this type of verbal exchange between architect and building owner might not have happened. For hundreds of years, plans have been issued by architects for bid and unused plans returned for the actual construction without any problem.

In the past—up to around 1995, before the Océ 9800 was around—plans were produced using either Vellum originals or sepia intermediates. The amount of copies could be controlled by the owner of the original. No more. High speed xerographic printers have now taken this control away from the architect (and owner), and contractors and subs can print any set of plans and specs anywhere, anytime (as long as a Kinko’s 24-hour store is nearby). And now things are getting even more out of control when it comes to document security. Websites are allowing plans and specs to be downloaded anywhere, anytime for just about anybody on this planet who owns a simple PC connected to the Internet. And this is opening up a host of security issues we all need to be aware of.

Let me first explain one thing. There are basically three types of websites, each with different security problems. The one at most builders’ exchanges allows the membership (who do pay for this service) to download and print at full size the plans and specs. The second allows people to download PDF files that may or may not allow the recipient permission to actually print the file.

The PDF file can, in fact, be viewed, but not printed if the website owner sets it up right. The third type of website allows the member to view and zoom in to the drawing, but not download or print the plan.

In this case, the person must order the plans which will be printed by the reprographer and sent to the person who has issued some type of payment. The reprographer will also provide the architect, contractor, or owner with a list of who actually ordered the plans. Usually, but not always, people must have a user name and a password to enter these sites. This is issued by the owner of the website. This is where the problem lies: The actual owner of the building rarely hears that his plans are being uploaded to any website, and that persons unknown to him now possess his electrical, HVAC, plumbing, structural, architectural, and security system plans. And he will never know. Because there is no paper trail to let him know who downloaded his plans and redistributed them without his permission.

The problems with this type of uncontrolled electronic web-based plan distribution plan are obvious but let us nevertheless review them:

1. **Terrorists getting hold of the structural plans** can better understand where to position bombs for maximum damage.
2. **Terrorists getting hold of HVAC plans** can find the best place to release poisonous gas into a building for maximum death results.
3. **Terrorists getting hold of electrical plans** can shut down elevators and security systems and enter buildings illegally.
4. **Terrorists with plumbing plans** can more easily shut down the sprinkler systems and maximize their efforts to blow up and burn down buildings more efficiently.

And then there is always the problem with the basic garden variety thief who just wants to enter a building to steal. Corporate espionage is getting more popular these days. There is the prankster teenaged hacker who will download plans and, you got it, sell them on EBay. Golly, who wouldn’t want a set of plans for the new Green Bay Packers football stadium for \$100!

Ask your self these questions: Would you buy or rent a building whose blueprints had been compromised this way? Would you feel safe in any building if you found

out that anyone from Baghdad to Bali could have downloaded the important structural plans for your building?

But this is happening every day now. Architects are routinely sending plans for bid to builders' exchanges and reprographers who are now given "Carte Blanche" permission to print for profit the copyrighted plans without restrictions (in most cases) to any person who requests them. And the owners are not being informed of this!

So what happens if something disastrous happens to the building and investigators find out that the plans were legally gotten hold of by the "bad guys?" Who is responsible? The reprographer who printed the plans? The website owner who uploaded the plans? The contractor or architect who allowed the plans to be so haphazardly distributed in such a way? The owner who didn't know what was going on at all?

I call for the following changes to be made to correct this situation before it is too late:

1. All owners must be notified in writing as to how their plans will be distributed.

2. No plans allowed to be uploaded to websites that can be downloaded and routinely printed.

3. Only websites that are secured—no downloading of digital plans permitted—and that will only allow the viewer to see a "thumbnail" sketch of the plan be considered okay to use.

4. Reprographers issue plans to only authorized subcontractors who properly identify themselves with photo ID before picking up plans.

5. All plans be issued with deposit and that plans be returned after the bidding process is over. After construction is over, any plans should be returned as well.

6. Owners be notified by the reprographer as to who got a set of plans.

This era of "mass distribution of plans" must end. A more controlled process of providing contractors and subs must be found and implemented before a tragedy occurs. I, for one, do not want to be counted as someone who did nothing and allowed a disaster to occur. Who else out there is with me? ♦

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