

THE DANGERS OF EXCESS QUALITY

Too much quality seems a strange thing to have to protect ourselves against, but its main problem is simple—we can't afford it.

Sometimes excess quality is laughably absurd—in the midst of soaring energy costs our cities replace existing streetlights with new sodium vapor streetlights (yeah, those queasy-feeling yellow ones) because they're "more efficient" and give more light for less energy. Yet what almost always happens is that they use the same wattage bulbs and end up with excess lighting instead of achieving the same lighting levels with smaller wattage bulbs.

Far more serious is the imposition of professional quality standards on housing, sewage treatment, medical care and legal services. Testimony before the Senate Banking Committee recently predicted that the median price for a new home in the U.S. will hit \$90,000 by 1986. Even disregarding what that means in interest payments, there's no way most Americans can afford the electrical, plumbing, spatial, thermal and structural standards that underlie that cost. We don't need garages, we certainly don't need garages with concrete floors (required). We don't need electrical outlets every four feet on every wall, and we certainly don't need to impose the same standards on owner-built housing, where people build for the way they want to live, as on speculative building. Sewage treatment is an excellent illustration. Septic tank systems, costing around \$1500, replaced the outhouse, costing maybe \$50. They, in turn, are being outlawed by requirements for sewer connections at a cost in excess of \$4000 per house. Yet owner-built compost toilets can be built today for less than \$50. There is a convenience benefit to the expensive systems—but only if you can afford it. When little or no risk is imposed on other people, and when individuals prefer or can only afford the tradeoffs of simpler and less costly systems, it seems we have no right to impose excessive standards and costs on each other. —TB