



Send Up the Drones

The Future of Building Façade Inspection

BY STEVEN CUTLER

Imagine a day when an owner or manager can inspect and photograph every inch of the façade of their building in one day, without the hassle, risk or expense of scaffolding.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), aka, drones, notorious today for their use by the military, will be a common tool used by every sort of industry before we know it. The FAA predicts some 10,000 of them could be in commercial use within the next five years. And what could be a more logical use for such an apparatus than sending it up the side of a building to inspect the façade?

“So, I bought one,” said property manager Greg Carlson, principal of Carlson Realty and ABO vice president.

Not everyone in the building trade will be thrilled with this new technology. “I mentioned this to my engineer,” said Carlson, “and he said ‘what are you trying to do, put me out of business?’”

It could in some cases. But building inspectors will likely come to embrace the technology. According to architect and building façade engineer Karol Kazmierczak of Building Enclosing Consulting based in Miami and New York City, “A knowledgeable and experienced inspector operating an unmanned

aerial vehicle can narrow the scope of the inspection by identifying those areas which will absolutely require human inspection, and consequently significantly reduce time, risk and cost of facade inspection. All we risk is several hundred dollars of equipment as opposed to human life.”

Without a doubt it could save building owners serious money. “Instead of putting up scaffolding — doing it the way we’ve been doing it all these years — you can literally just go up and down the building, especially on the higher floors,” Carlson said. “Instead of paying \$600 each time you do a drop, this thing [his new Parrot AR Drone 2.0] cost me just \$300.” A onetime expense.

“It’s a little helicopter,” he said, that “runs off the iPhone or iPad. You can either take pictures, videos or put in a flash drive you can pull out and put into your computer.”

Most of the media coverage on the private and commercial use of UAVs talks about privacy issues. “That is what I see that can squash the whole thing,” said Carlson. Governmental agencies are wrestling with the sorts of regulations that need to be put on the new technology. In fact, the New York State Legislature is considering a bill that would prohibit the use

of private drones “to conduct surveillance of or to monitor any individual inside his or her home or place of worship or within the closed confines of their property or other locations where a person would have an expectation of privacy.”

As for Carlson’s use, he said, “I understand about security and privacy, and that’s why I would give people advance notice — tell them to shut their blinds — just like I would if I were to drop a scaffold.” Plus, he added, “I spoke to the board president and he thought it was a great idea.” It could, after all, shave a substantial amount off operating expenses and prove useful in such matters as inspecting terraces to make sure residents are complying with house rules.

Carlson has not tried his Parrot yet and it might prove not ready for prime time. Some reviews of the product call it a sophisticated toy, with limited range, stability and durability. But units costing several thousand dollars are more effective. They are used today already by real estate brokers in states where they are permitted to provide aerial shots of properties. The technology is moving fast and prices are coming down.

“There are always improvements,” said Carlson, “just like with the first iPhone. I see this as just the beginning.” ○