ALBERT VENTER CONSULTING (PTY) LTD

## AVC WHITE PAPER 04

# BUILT TO MAINTAIN

## Why Building Services Must Be Planned for Access, Replacement and Future Change

A practical paper for architects, engineers, project managers, developers, contractors, foremen, facility managers and specialist trades.

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AVC SITE TRUTH

***A service is not fully designed when it fits. It is fully designed when the next person can safely find it, isolate it, maintain it and replace it.***

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Based on nearly forty years of practical construction experience and more than twenty years of construction-control tool development.

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# About This Paper

Building services are changing faster than the traditional spaces used to contain them. Modern buildings carry more power, data, controls, security, water-management, HVAC, fire, communications and smart-building systems than previous generations, yet many projects still treat service routing as a late coordination exercise.

The result is often technically installed but difficult-to-own infrastructure: valves hidden above inaccessible ceilings, cables and pipes competing for the same narrow route, draw boxes buried in slabs, plant that cannot be removed without demolition, and service joints that become expensive simply because nobody can reach them.

This paper argues for a different design principle: permanent building fabric and replaceable services should be planned as different layers. Where services require inspection, maintenance, alteration or replacement during the building's life, access should be designed deliberately rather than discovered after handover.

The paper is practical rather than prescriptive. It does not prohibit embedded conduits, concealed pipework or ceiling services. It asks the professional team to justify where concealment is necessary, coordinate it early, preserve structural and safety requirements, and provide a realistic route for later inspection, isolation, repair and change.

# In This Paper



**COMPOSITE CASE NOTE**

The building scenario in this paper is a composite teaching example based on recurring construction patterns. It is not a finding on a named property, contractor, consultant or product. Any similarity to a current or past project is incidental. A real defect or compliance investigation must remain evidence-led and project-specific.

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# Executive Summary

Modern buildings contain more services than ever before. Electrical power is joined by data, security, access control, fire detection, automation, renewable-energy systems, battery interfaces, sensors, communications, specialist HVAC controls and increasingly complex water systems. The technical density has increased, but the physical planning philosophy often has not.

A service route is commonly judged successful if the contractor can install it and the ceiling, wall or slab can later hide it. That is an incomplete test. The building owner inherits the service for decades after the installer leaves. The route must therefore also be judged by whether the service can be found, inspected, isolated, tested, maintained, altered and replaced without unreasonable demolition or risk.

Whole-building guidance supports this lifecycle view. WBDG systems-integration guidance calls for building products and systems to be coordinated with operation and maintenance in mind, including easy access for regular maintenance and planning for eventual replacement of major components. AIA's Design for Change guidance similarly encourages accessible, adaptable systems and recognises that rapidly changing technologies should be replaceable as they evolve. ISO 20887 provides an international framework for design for adaptability and disassembly. [1][2][3]

The paper therefore proposes a clear separation between long-life structure and shorter-life services wherever reasonably possible. It introduces the AVC Service Avenue: an intentionally planned, accessible route or zone through which services can be organised, labelled, separated, maintained and expanded while remaining architecturally controlled.

This does not mean every pipe or cable should be exposed. It means concealment must be repair-aware. If a ceiling is used as a service zone, the ceiling should provide access. If a slab contains conduits or sleeves, the layout should be coordinated before reinforcement and concrete close the work. If a valve, junction box, damper or control point will require attention, its future access should be known before the space is finished.

## The Paper's Main Findings

- Permanent structural fabric and replaceable services should not be treated as if they have the same service life.
- Installation access proves that a trade can build the work; maintenance access proves that the owner can live with it.
- A clash-free coordinated model can still produce an unmaintainable building if replacement, isolation and working clearance were not tested.
- Service routing should be established during design and preconstruction, not left for the workface to resolve after drawings are effectively frozen.
- Embedded services should be deliberate, coordinated and justified - not the default destination for every new conduit, draw box or pipe.
- Ceiling voids used for services must be designed for inspection and access, not merely as leftover space above the finish.
- An accessible service route can reduce future demolition, room closures, trade interfaces, reinstatement cost and operational disruption.
- Future capacity should be designed where reasonable because technology and building uses will change during the life of the structure.
- AVC service-access hold points can preserve evidence and force the right questions before ceilings, walls and slabs permanently conceal the work.

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***The most expensive service is often not the one that fails. It is the one nobody can reach.***

# 1. Services Have Changed Faster Than Service Planning

The service load in a modern building is not the same as the service load of a building designed several decades ago. Even ordinary houses may now contain CCTV, Wi-Fi distribution, gate automation, access control, solar PV, battery storage, inverters, EV charging, smart controls, heat pumps, irrigation controls, additional pumps and multiple data or communication systems. Commercial and hospitality buildings add another layer of plant, monitoring, redundancy and specialist equipment.

Each new function wants physical space. It may need a conduit, cable tray, pipe, sleeve, valve, draw box, sensor, isolation point, controller, drain, access panel or future replacement route. If the project simply keeps adding these items to the same slabs, ceiling voids and wall cavities without redesigning the service strategy, congestion becomes the design.

The professional question is therefore not only whether the drawing contains all required services. It is whether the building has a coherent service architecture capable of carrying them throughout their lifecycle.

## The Typical Service-Congestion Chain

1. The architectural and structural concept is developed before the full service density is understood.
2. Each discipline then inserts its own routes, penetrations, boxes and equipment into the remaining space.
3. Late additions are accommodated locally because redesign would affect programme and approvals.
4. The contractor is expected to make everything physically fit on site.
5. The quickest buildable route becomes the installed route.
6. Ceilings, walls and finishes close around the services.
7. Years later, the owner discovers that a minor defect requires major opening-up simply to reach the component.

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***A building can be technically complete and still be badly designed for ownership.***

# 2. Permanent Structure and Replaceable Services Are Different Building Layers

A reinforced concrete slab, primary wall or structural frame may remain for generations. Many building services will not. Controls become obsolete. Data systems change. Pumps, valves and electrical components wear out. HVAC technologies are replaced. Water-treatment strategies change. Future owners alter room layouts and load requirements.

When short-life systems are embedded inside long-life fabric without a replacement strategy, the building effectively locks the service to the structure. The service may have a 10-, 15- or 25-year functional cycle while the concrete around it is intended to remain far longer.

ISO 20887 addresses design for adaptability and disassembly across buildings and building systems, while AIA Design for Change encourages projects to anticipate future uses, technologies and replacement cycles. The practical construction translation is simple: where a service is expected to change, the building should avoid making that change unnecessarily destructive. [1][2]

| Building layer | Typical characteristic | Design implication |
|---|---|---|
| Primary structure | Long life, difficult to alter | Protect structural integrity; coordinate penetrations and embedded items early. |
| Building services | Shorter replacement/upgrade cycles | Provide identification, isolation, access and replacement routes. |
| Controls / data / technology | Fastest change cycle | Prioritise accessible containment and spare capacity. |
| Finishes / access panels | Replaceable architectural layer | Use them to conceal services without permanently trapping them. |

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***Do not permanently bury short-life services inside long-life fabric unless the project can justify the consequence.***

# 3. Installation Access Is Not Maintenance Access

A frequent design mistake is to assume that because a trade could install a service, the service is accessible. Installation and maintenance are different conditions.

Construction access is temporary: walls may be open, ceilings absent and adjacent trades incomplete. A service that is easy to install before enclosure may be extremely difficult to reach once the building is finished and occupied.

## The Repairability Test

- Can the component be found without destructive opening-up?
- Can it be safely isolated from water, electricity, pressure, heat or other hazards?
- Can a person physically reach the service with the required tools?
- Is there working clearance to disconnect, rotate, cut, lift or remove the component?
- Can the component leave the space by a realistic removal route?
- Can the repair be completed while the building remains occupied or operational?

## Installation Access vs Maintenance Access

| Installation access | Maintenance access |
|---|---|
| Temporary openings may still exist. | The finished building may have no opening at all. |
| Several trades can work before finishes. | The maintenance team works around completed finishes and occupants. |
| Long components can be inserted before enclosure. | Replacement components must pass through permanent doors, hatches and routes. |
| Temporary lifting and scaffold can be available. | Routine maintenance may require safe permanent access. |
| A hidden connection is still visible during construction. | The same connection may disappear permanently after closure. |

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***If the future technician must demolish the building to reach the service, the service was not truly accessible.***

# 4. When Coordination Arrives Too Late

Service coordination is often discussed as a drawing or BIM exercise. Clash detection is valuable, but a route can be free of geometric clashes and still be impossible to maintain.

The deeper coordination questions include working clearances, isolation points, access-panel positions, removal paths, drainage falls, future expansion, segregation, fire-stopping interfaces, testing points and whether one trade blocks another trade's critical component.

The professional team should therefore coordinate not only where services fit, but how the building will be operated. WBDG project-performance guidance identifies maintainability, access, operational performance, constructability and adaptability for future change as project requirements that should be established early. [4]

## The Late-Coordination Pattern

| Stage | What goes wrong |
|---|---|
| Design intent issued | Primary layouts are developed but detailed access and service-life requirements remain implicit. |
| Trade drawings produced | Each specialist optimises its own route and available space. |
| Site conflict appears | The workface resolves the immediate geometry under programme pressure. |
| Local compromise accepted | The quickest route is built because redesign would delay several trades. |
| Work concealed | The compromise becomes difficult to inspect or challenge. |
| Operational problem occurs | The owner pays for demolition, access and reinstatement that were never considered in the original decision. |

## What the Professional Team Should Freeze Earlier

- Primary vertical risers and horizontal service zones.
- Plant-room and service-cupboard access requirements.
- Major valve, isolation, junction, damper and control locations.
- Penetration and sleeve strategy through structural elements.
- Required maintenance and removal clearances.
- Ceiling access-panel strategy and removable finish zones.
- Fire-rated penetrations and the inspection route to them.
- Future containment and spare-capacity allowances where reasonably foreseeable.
- Responsibility for final coordinated service-route sign-off.

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***A clash-free model can still be an unmaintainable building.***

# 5. The Slab Is Not a Service Dumping Ground

Concrete slabs inevitably contain certain embedded services, sleeves, conduits and penetrations. The problem begins when the slab becomes the default location for every additional service because it appears to offer an invisible route.

As service density increases, so does the coordination burden. Reinforcement, cover, structural zones, penetrations, drainage falls, electrical conduits, draw boxes and other embedded elements compete for the same depth. Late additions can create congestion that was never contemplated in the original structural or service concept.

This paper does not suggest that embedded conduits are inherently wrong. It argues that cumulative embedded-service density should be a designed condition. The structural engineer and relevant service designers must know what is entering the slab, where it is located and what later change will require.

## Questions Before a Service Enters the Slab

- Does this service genuinely need to be embedded?
- Is there an accessible route through a wall, riser, service zone or demountable ceiling instead?
- Has the route been coordinated with reinforcement, cover, openings and structural requirements?
- Are draw boxes and junction points being placed where they remain accessible, or buried where future work cannot reach them?
- What happens if the cable or service must be replaced, upsized or abandoned?
- Can spare containment be provided in an accessible zone rather than adding another future chase through structure?
- Has the as-built location been recorded accurately enough for later drilling, coring or alteration?

**DESIGN PRINCIPLE**

Embedded services should be deliberate, limited to suitable applications, coordinated before concrete placement and documented accurately. Where an accessible route can achieve the same function without unreasonable design penalty, the lifecycle advantage should be considered before the service is buried.

## The Structural Coordination Risk

A structural slab is not simply unused space between its surfaces. The structural design depends on reinforcement arrangement, concrete cover, effective depth, local stress conditions, openings and other project-specific requirements. Service decisions that affect these elements require competent structural coordination. AVC's concern is not to perform that engineering calculation, but to create the control question before the work is concealed.

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***The easiest place to hide a service during construction can become the hardest place to change it after handover.***

# 6. The AVC Service Avenue: A Better Routing Model

AVC uses the term Service Avenue for a deliberately planned, accessible route or zone that carries building services in a way that supports inspection, isolation, maintenance, replacement and future addition.

A Service Avenue is not one prescribed product. It can be a vertical riser, horizontal service corridor, demountable bulkhead, removable wall panel, accessible skirting zone, raised-floor distribution route, exposed-but-architecturally-integrated service spine, or another project-specific arrangement.

The principle is architectural as well as technical. Services do not have to be visually exposed to remain accessible. A building can conceal them behind intentional removable finishes instead of permanently trapping them behind plaster, masonry, fixed joinery or inaccessible ceilings.

## What a Good Service Avenue Should Provide

- A logical route that is easy to identify on drawings and in the building.
- Separation and organisation appropriate to the different service types and applicable requirements.
- Access to valves, joints, junctions, control points and inspection locations.
- Space for tools, hands and component removal - not only enough room for the service itself.
- Clear labelling and isolation information.
- Removable or demountable architectural covers that can be reinstated without destructive repair.
- Reasonable spare capacity for foreseeable future additions.
- Access points aligned with the actual items that require maintenance.
- Fire, acoustic, waterproofing and security performance maintained through the access strategy.
- A clear as-built record handed to the owner.

## Traditional Concealment vs Service Avenue

| Issue | Traditional late concealment | Service Avenue approach |
|---|---|---|
| Routing | Individual trades find available space. | Primary routes are allocated and coordinated early. |
| Access | Opening-up decided after a defect occurs. | Access is part of the original architectural/service design. |
| Change | New systems require new chases or demolition. | Planned capacity allows controlled additions where reasonable. |
| Identification | Hidden routes rely on drawings and memory. | Routes, zones and critical components are labelled and documented. |
| Repair | Finishes are sacrificed to reach the service. | Demountable finishes separate access from permanent fabric. |

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***Concealment should not be confused with good service design.***

# 7. Ceiling Voids Must Be Designed as Service Zones

Ceiling voids are attractive service routes because they can conceal pipes, ducts, cable trays and controls while leaving the occupied room visually clean. The problem is that many ceilings are designed as finishes first and service-access systems second.

A shallow void may physically contain the services but provide no usable working space. Valves can end up between framing members, access panels may be positioned away from the component, heavy services can cross the only opening, and several trades can layer over one another until inspection becomes impractical.

Where a ceiling carries maintainable services, the ceiling should be designed for maintenance. That may require larger removable panels, demountable ceiling sections, planned access strips, coordinated lighting positions, safe routes to critical components and sufficient void depth for the intended work.

## The Ceiling-Service Test

- Which components above this ceiling require periodic inspection or maintenance?
- Where exactly are the valves, junction boxes, dampers, drains and controls?
- Does each critical component have a usable access opening?
- Can a technician reach the component with normal tools?
- Can water or electrical isolation be achieved before opening the ceiling?
- Can a failed pipe section or device be removed without dismantling unrelated services?
- Can fire stopping and service penetrations be visually inspected?
- Will the ceiling finish survive repeated maintenance access?
- Are as-built photographs and coordinates available before closure?

**REPAIR-AWARE CEILING PRINCIPLE**

If the ceiling void is intended to function as a service zone, access is not an optional finishing detail. It is part of the service design.

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***A beautiful ceiling that traps critical services can become an expensive maintenance problem.***

# 8. The Hidden Lifecycle Cost of Inaccessibility

The visible price of a service component can be a small part of the real repair cost. When access is poor, a routine replacement can trigger demolition, protection, specialist access, multiple trades, reinstatement, cleaning, room closure and operational disruption.

This is particularly important in hotels, healthcare facilities, offices, retail buildings and high-end homes where finishes are expensive and occupied spaces cannot be taken out of service casually.

The design team should therefore distinguish component cost from access cost. A low-cost valve hidden behind bespoke joinery may create a high-cost repair. A cable fault beneath a finished slab may require tracing, opening, reinstatement and operational disruption that far exceeds the cost of the cable itself.

## The Hidden Repair Chain

1. Identify the defect and locate the concealed route.
2. Protect occupants, furniture, finishes and adjacent operating systems.
3. Isolate electrical, water, HVAC or other affected services.
4. Remove ceiling, wall, joinery, flooring or other finish required for access.
5. Remove unrelated services that obstruct the failed component.
6. Complete the technical repair or replacement.
7. Inspect and test the surrounding system before closure.
8. Reinstate fire stopping, waterproofing, acoustic treatment or other interfaces.
9. Rebuild the architectural finish, decorate and clean.
10. Recommission the space and return it to operation.

## Lifecycle Questions for the Client and Cost Team

- What is the expected replacement cycle of the service or component?
- What finishes must be removed to reach it?
- What trades are triggered by the access route?
- Will rooms, production areas or guest spaces be taken out of service?
- Is a more accessible route slightly more expensive now but materially cheaper to own?
- Has lifecycle disruption been considered when choosing between concealed and accessible alternatives?

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***A cheap service route can become an expensive building-management decision.***

# 9. Safety, Inspection and Fire-Risk Visibility

Access is not only a maintenance issue. It is also a safety and verification issue. When services are congested and concealed, it becomes more difficult to inspect whether electrical equipment is appropriately protected from water exposure, whether supports have failed, whether leaks are reaching other systems, whether fire-stopping remains intact, or whether later alterations have compromised the original arrangement.

The paper does not attempt to declare compliance with any particular national code from a photograph or generic example. Applicable electrical, fire, plumbing, structural and occupational-safety requirements remain project-specific and jurisdiction-specific. The control principle is that the design should make critical safety interfaces reasonably inspectable.

WBDG commissioning guidance notes that design review should consider access points, testing features, maintenance capability and access planning. CIBSE Guide M similarly frames maintenance as a design responsibility and emphasises installations that are safe and economic to maintain through their full life. [5][6]

## Safety Interfaces That Should Remain Visible or Accessible

- Water-bearing services near electrical equipment, sockets, controls or cable routes.
- Valves, drains and joints above sensitive electrical or finished areas.
- Fire-rated service penetrations and fire-stopping systems.
- Electrical junctions, isolators and control devices requiring inspection.
- Pipe supports, hangers and restraints in congested service zones.
- Condensate, drainage and overflow routes that can wet other services.
- Flexible connections and vibration-sensitive interfaces.
- High-temperature services near combustible or heat-sensitive materials.
- Access routes needed for emergency isolation or incident investigation.

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***If a safety-critical interface cannot be inspected, the owner loses an important layer of risk control.***

# 10. Design for Change, Capacity and Future Technology

Every building changes. The question is whether the change is controlled or destructive.

AIA Design for Change specifically highlights rapidly changing technologies and encourages designers to consider accessible, reconfigurable and replaceable systems. ISO 20887 likewise treats adaptability as a lifecycle design principle rather than a late alteration issue. [1][2]

The practical response is not to oversize every route indefinitely. It is to identify reasonable future scenarios and protect the options that would otherwise disappear. A commercial building may need additional data capacity. A home may add solar, batteries or EV charging. A hotel may change room controls, water-treatment systems or guest technology. A healthcare facility may require new monitoring and electrical loads.

If every future addition requires chasing a slab, breaking a wall or removing a bespoke ceiling, the original design has transferred predictable change into future disruption.

## Future-Change Questions During Design

- What systems are most likely to change within the first ten years?
- Which routes could reasonably carry future power, data, controls or water-management additions?
- Where can spare conduits, tray capacity or accessible zones be provided without excessive cost?
- Can controls and technology be replaced independently of permanent finishes?
- Can plant be removed through the building after the original construction openings are closed?
- Are access panels and service zones sized for replacement components, not only current components?
- Can future alterations occur without compromising fire, structural, acoustic or waterproofing performance?
- Will the as-built information allow the next professional team to understand what already exists?

## The Five-Year / Ten-Year / Twenty-Year Test

| Time horizon | Likely change | Design response |
|---|---|---|
| 5 years | Controls, data, communications, minor equipment | Accessible containment, labels, spare capacity. |
| 10 years | Plant upgrades, room-layout changes, energy systems | Removal routes, flexible zones, adaptable interfaces. |
| 20 years | Major MEP replacement or building repurposing | Separation from primary structure, reusable routes, documented service architecture. |

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***Design the building for the handover day, but leave it capable of surviving the years after handover.***

# 11. Composite Case: A Premium Building with Congested Concealed Services

Consider a premium multi-storey hospitality building with bespoke corridor ceilings, high-value finishes, multiple water systems, electrical distribution, data, fire services and HVAC running through restricted service cupboards and ceiling zones.

The building operates successfully at handover. Several years later, repeated plumbing repairs begin. The visible technical fault may be a leaking fitting or deteriorated pipe joint, but access exposes a second problem: services were routed through extremely congested spaces with limited inspection openings and little room for removal.

A repair that appears local begins to affect ceilings, access panels, electrical isolation, fire-stopping inspection, adjacent pipework and hotel operations. The cost and risk are no longer determined only by the defective component. They are determined by how the building was organised around it.

## What the Investigation Finds

- Valves and joints located where hands and tools cannot work comfortably.
- Several service types occupying the same narrow route without a clear maintenance hierarchy.
- Ceiling finishes that must be cut or dismantled to inspect routine service interfaces.
- Electrical items in congested areas where future water leakage would be undesirable.
- Fire-stopping and penetrations that are difficult to verify once the ceiling is closed.
- Replacement work likely to require multiple trades even where the failed component is simple.
- Very limited spare space for future systems or rerouting.

## The Hidden Remedial Consequence

1. Investigate and identify the failed service.
2. Open premium finishes to establish a workable repair route.
3. Temporarily isolate water, electrical and other affected systems.
4. Protect occupied areas and manage noise, dust and access.
5. Remove obstructing services or finishes.
6. Replace the failed component.
7. Inspect safety interfaces and reinstate any disturbed fire/acoustic/waterproofing work.
8. Rebuild bespoke finishes and return the area to service.

**PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY**

This composite scenario does not establish non-compliance, causation or liability on any real project. In an actual investigation, the evidence may implicate design coordination, installation, later alterations, maintenance, product failure, system deterioration or several mechanisms. The responsible response is evidence-led inspection and competent specialist review.

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***The visible leak may be local. The access consequence belongs to the whole building.***

# 12. The Pre-Closure Services Access Gate

Service work should not be concealed merely because the programme date for ceilings, walls, screeds or concrete has arrived. Before irreversible closure, the project should pass a readiness gate that tests routing, safety interfaces, access and future maintainability.

| Gate | Minimum evidence before release | Responsible confirmation |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Routes coordinated | Approved coordinated service layout; primary risers, horizontal zones and structural penetrations fixed. | Design team / lead coordinator. |
| 2. Critical items located | Valves, junctions, dampers, drains, controls, test points and isolation devices identified. | Relevant service designer / contractor. |
| 3. Access proven | Access-panel positions, working clearances and removal routes checked in the actual space. | Project manager / contractor / FM input where available. |
| 4. Structure protected | Embedded items, sleeves and penetrations reviewed against structural requirements. | Structural engineer / relevant designer. |
| 5. Safety interfaces checked | Water/electrical interfaces, fire penetrations and other critical interactions reviewed. | Responsible disciplines / competent persons. |
| 6. Testing complete | Required pressure, electrical, drainage, controls or other pre-closure tests completed and recorded. | Relevant specialist trade. |
| 7. Evidence captured | Photos, labels, dimensions, coordinates and as-built deviations recorded before concealment. | Contractor / QA / AVC-style site control. |
| 8. Closure released | Named authority confirms the area may be closed. | Project-defined release authority. |

The gate does not replace design responsibility, statutory inspection or specialist certification. It is a control point that prevents the programme from concealing unresolved service risks.

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***A ceiling date says when the area should close. A release gate proves whether the services are ready to disappear.***

# 13. The AVC Service-Route Control Pathway

The Contractor's Control Toolbox can carry service-access thinking from concept through handover so the issue does not disappear between the professional team, site management and facilities team.

| Stage | Control action | Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Owner requirements | Define maintainability, access, change and operational priorities. | Owner's requirements / brief. |
| Concept design | Allocate risers, service avenues, plant access and major removal routes. | Concept plans and service strategy. |
| Design coordination | Resolve interfaces, clearances, penetrations and future capacity. | Coordinated drawings / BIM / design reviews. |
| Preconstruction | Test the routes with specialist contractors and facilities input. | Shop drawings, mock-ups, access review. |
| First fix | Install to approved routes; record deviations immediately. | Daily records and marked-up drawings. |
| Check and hold | Inspect access, critical interfaces, tests and concealed work. | Signed pre-closure checklist and photographs. |
| Close and finish | Proceed only after release; preserve required access points. | Closure release record. |
| Commission and hand over | Label systems, provide as-builts, O&M information and access map. | Systems manual / handover file. |
| Operate and learn | Record recurring access problems and feed lessons into future projects. | FM records and lessons-learned note. |

## The Five Questions That Should Follow Every Concealed Service

1. Can the next person find it?
2. Can the next person safely isolate it?
3. Can the next person inspect and work on it?
4. Can the component be removed and replaced without unreasonable demolition?
5. Can future change be accommodated without destroying the surrounding building?

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***Plan the service from the future repair backward, then control the installation forward.***

# Practical Design-Team Checklist

Before freezing service routes, ask:

- Have the owner and facilities requirements for maintenance and access been recorded?
- Are primary vertical and horizontal service routes allocated rather than left to individual trades?
- Have permanent structure and shorter-life services been treated as different lifecycle layers?
- Are major valves, junctions, dampers, controls and test points intentionally located?
- Can major plant and components be removed after the building is enclosed?
- Have access panels been coordinated with the actual component positions?
- Is there enough working clearance, not merely enough installation space?
- Have water, electrical, fire and other critical interfaces been reviewed together?
- Are embedded services coordinated with structure and accurately documented?
- Is reasonable spare capacity provided where future technology or service growth is foreseeable?
- Can the building be altered without unnecessarily destroying premium finishes?
- Has facilities-management or operational input been obtained for complex buildings?

# Practical Site-Control Checklist

Before concealing services, ask:

- Do the installed routes match the latest coordinated drawings?
- Are valves, isolators, junction boxes and other critical components labelled and reachable?
- Are access panels installed in the correct positions and usable sizes?
- Can a technician use normal tools at the service point?
- Have required tests been completed and recorded before closure?
- Are fire-stopping and penetrations complete and photographically recorded?
- Are water-bearing services arranged so obvious leakage risks to electrical equipment are minimised and inspectable?
- Are supports, hangers and restraints complete before the area is closed?
- Have all as-built deviations been marked up?
- Have photographs been taken with enough context to locate the service later?
- Has the named release authority signed the pre-closure gate?

**AVC SITE TRUTH**

***The cheapest time to improve access is before the finish hides the problem.***

# Conclusion

Building services are no longer a secondary layer that can be fitted into whatever space remains after the architecture and structure are decided. They are a major part of how modern buildings function, adapt and survive.

The old measure of success - 'it fits and it works' - is too narrow. A service should also be judged by whether it can be found, isolated, inspected, maintained, replaced and changed without forcing the owner to dismantle unrelated parts of the building.

The professional team should therefore plan service architecture early. The structural engineer should know what is entering slabs and structural zones. Architects should integrate removable access into the finished design. MEP designers should coordinate maintenance and removal clearances, not only geometry. Project managers should establish pre-closure hold points. Contractors should resist unrecorded workface routing that solves today's clash by creating tomorrow's maintenance problem.

The AVC Service Avenue is one practical way to frame the issue: create deliberate, accessible routes through the building for systems that will evolve. Use permanent structure for what must be permanent. Use demountable architectural layers to conceal what must remain serviceable. Record what is hidden. Preserve the route for the next change.

This is not about making buildings look industrial or exposing every pipe. It is about recognising that good architecture and good engineering continue after handover. The owner should not have to destroy a finished building to perform predictable maintenance.

**AVC SITE LESSON**

***A building is not fully designed until the team understands how its services will be inspected, maintained, altered and replaced.***

# Continue with AVC

Read AVC White Papers 01 to 04 together. They develop the wider Contractor's Control Toolbox philosophy from project control, through daily site management and sequencing, to lifecycle access and maintainability.

- AVC White Paper 01 - Why Modern Construction Needs a Control Toolbox.
- AVC White Paper 02 - From Toolbox to Daily Site Control.
- AVC White Paper 03 - The Cost of Getting the Sequence Wrong.
- AVC White Paper 04 - Built to Maintain.
- The Contractor's Control Toolbox manuals, printable checklists, holding points and practical appendices.
- AVC independent construction assessments, defect investigations, site-control support and non-accredited practical workshops.

**Visit albertventerconsult.com for current resources, manuals and contact information.**

# Source Notes and Further Reading

These sources support the lifecycle, maintainability, adaptability and systems-integration principles discussed in this paper. Project-specific compliance must always be checked against the applicable contract, drawings, specifications, product data, local law, current standards and responsible professional instructions.

[1] International Organization for Standardization. ISO 20887:2020 - Sustainability in buildings and civil engineering works - Design for disassembly and adaptability - Principles, requirements and guidance. Published 2020; reviewed and confirmed in 2025. Provides a framework for integrating adaptability and disassembly principles into design for buildings and building systems. https://www.iso.org/standard/69370.html

[2] American Institute of Architects. Design for Change - AIA Framework for Design Excellence. Current guidance accessed August 2026. Encourages adaptable buildings, future-use planning, accessible/reconfigurable systems and consideration of replacement cycles for rapidly changing technologies. https://www.aia.org/design-excellence/aia-framework-for-design-excellence/change

[3] Whole Building Design Guide. Ensure Appropriate Product/Systems Integration. Current guidance accessed August 2026. Promotes integrated design across affected systems and consideration of operation, maintenance, easy access for regular maintenance and eventual replacement of major components. https://www.wbdg.org/do/functional/systems-integration

[4] Whole Building Design Guide. Determining Project Performance Requirements. Current guidance accessed August 2026. Identifies maintainability, access, operational performance, constructability, testing and adaptability for future change as project-performance requirements to be established early. https://www.wbdg.org/building-commissioning/determine-project-performance-requirements

[5] Whole Building Design Guide. Commissioning Documents: Process, Contents, and Acceptance. Current guidance accessed August 2026. Notes that design review should address adequate access points, testing features, controls, maintenance capability and maintenance-access planning. https://www.wbdg.org/building-commissioning/commissioning-documents

[6] Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers. Guide M: Maintenance Engineering and Management (2023). CIBSE describes the guide as helping building-services designers provide installations that are safe, economic to maintain and operate, and capable of satisfactory performance over their lifespan. https://www.cibse.org/knowledge-research/knowledge-portal/guide-m-maintenance-engineering-and-management-2023

## How the Sources Were Used

- ISO and AIA guidance were used to support adaptability, future-change and lifecycle design principles.
- WBDG sources were used to support integrated systems design, maintainability, access, project requirements and commissioning review.
- CIBSE guidance was used to support the principle that maintenance safety and economy are part of building-services design.
- The Service Avenue concept, pre-closure gate, practical checklists, service-routing examples and site-control interpretations are AVC-developed practical frameworks and should be adapted to the actual project.

## About Albert Venter Consulting

Albert Venter Consulting (Pty) Ltd is an independent construction-specialist consultancy and knowledge platform built around nearly forty years of practical site experience, technical investigation, site-control development and project close-out responsibility.

AVC provides independent construction assessments, building-defect investigations, practical site-control support, evidence-led reporting, remedial pathway guidance, contractor-development resources and non-accredited practical workshops.

## The AVC White Paper Series

The AVC White Paper Series develops practical construction-control ideas that can be applied across different countries, project types and professional teams. Each paper addresses a real construction problem, explains the control principle in plain language and connects the reader to further AVC manuals, checklists and services.

# Professional Position

AVC is not a structural engineer, architect, quantity surveyor, building-services engineer, fire engineer, electrical engineer, materials laboratory, statutory inspector, manufacturer authority, accredited testing body or legal expert. Where design, certification, testing, statutory approval, contractual interpretation or specialist installation authority is required, the appropriate responsible professional or technical authority must be appointed.

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