



Edge Commission on Future Professionalism

Speakers' Notes: Session 3 – Society

7th May 2014

Colin Haylock, Immediate Past-President – RTPI

1. The RTPI's Chartered Object to advance the science and art of town planning for the benefit of the public
2. A Code of Conduct requirement on Members to fearlessly and impartially exercise their independent professional judgement to the best of their skills and understanding.
3. Challenges - a series around respect
 - for expertise in a culture where through the Internet we can all think ourselves to be experts
 - for professional values in a fiercely competitive world
 - for planning as a discipline when so often kicked around as a political football
 - for a discipline where so much high profile activity can be adversarial between planners representing differing interests
 - for an Institute, profession and membership where there is no protection of title - leave alone role
 - and around valuing of the discipline and the professionals who practice it
 - by politicians
 - by central and local govt
 - and by wider society

All these, but particularly the last as part of the valuing of professions across the world of the built environment - a complex world with complex discipline overlaps

4. Maintaining relevance
 - core is commanding and accessibly applying expertise which is relevant to society, it's needs and concerns - and which effectively contributes to addressing the issues which it's varied members are facing.
5. Delivering value
 - applying this expertise in ways which are really useful to society - which it's members appreciate and value ---- and essentially, in one way or another, are willing to pay for
6. Some key steps
 - valuing ourselves
 - communicating our expertise and the professional manner of its application
 - benchmarking and assuring the expertise and conduct of our members
 - pushing forward the boundaries of the first and ferociously patrolling the second
 - recognising that in our complex world none of can cover everything or act in isolation
 - society distinctly unexcited by any spats around professional boundaries
 - mature, collaborative working relationships essential - but difficult in a business culture where we are all encouraged by our insurers to lay off as much risk as possible.

Professor Barry Clarke, Immediate Past-President – ICE

Introduction

The Edge Commission on Professionalism has set out the hypotheses:

- Professionalism in the construction sector is undervalued and under threat
- The challenges of the economy and the environment require a change in the values and standards of professionalism in the sector

There are many definitions of professionalism but, in this instance, it refers to the competence of a professional. Competence is the ability to complete a task successfully, which requires an appropriate level of skill and understanding to apply knowledge effectively.

The International Standard of Classifications of Occupations (ISCO88) has defined ten groups of employment according to their skill level: managers, professionals, technicians, clerical, agricultural, craft, plant, elementary and armed services. Professionals include those working in the built environment such as architects and engineers, as well as those working in healthcare, teaching, science, business, and communications, legal, sport and social sectors. Professionals are classed at level 4, the highest level as they require complex problem solving, decision making and creativity skills based on an extensive body of theoretical and factual knowledge in a specialised field. Professionals usually have completed a degree and, possibly, experiential learning to become qualified.

The ISCO88 helpfully defines a professional in terms of competence and job description, both of which are recognised in the UK. Thus, those working in the construction industry who meet these descriptions can be called professionals.

The ISCO88 makes no reference to values and standards, which are particularly important in the construction industry which has a major impact on society's safety, health and well-being.

Professional Communities

UK construction professionals created institutions to develop their discipline for the benefit of society. Some of them can trace their roots back to the 18th century but most of the major institutions were founded as learned societies in the 19th century. They were different from the many learned societies that developed in the 18th and 19th century where a public thirst for knowledge was the driver. Membership of the construction related societies was restricted to those operating as professionals in the chosen discipline. Many achieved chartered status becoming self-regulatory bodies. Given their charitable status and the consequences of catastrophic failure in construction, it became evident that these institutions had to introduce a means of publicly demonstrating competence. By the end of the 19th century, the concept of a professionally qualified built environment professional had emerged. Some UK professional institutions are both learned societies and qualifying bodies and some remained as learned societies. Internationally, the learned society and qualifying authority are often separate bodies.

In the UK, a professional institution is widely recognised as a community of experts which:-

- sets its own educational standards;
- has a means of dealing with conflict;
- has a means of dealing with disciplinary matters;
- operates a code of conduct;
- has a broader knowledge of the world in which its members operate;
- has a commitment to professional development;
- and a commitment to developing the knowledge of the discipline.

It is not possible for a professional to operate in a regulated environment unless they are licensed to do so. However, most built environment specialists in the UK can operate without belonging to a professional community where self-regulation applies. Many built environment specialists are members of learned societies even though they are not professionally qualified which implies they have a commitment to developing their knowledge.

In some countries, a licence to practice is required to 'sign off drawings'. However, not all specialists require that licence even though they practice. Those without a licence cannot 'sign off drawings'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, within engineering communities, civil engineers are more likely to be licensed than other engineers because of the public safety issues associated with publicly funded infrastructure projects. In the UK, the Engineering Council suggests that the number of engineers exceeds six million, whereas membership of the professional institutions is about two hundred and twenty thousand.

The Challenges

The professional institutions were founded during the Industrial Revolution at a time of great change driven by developments in technology, society's aspirations and the emergence of consumerism. 1829, the year of the Rainhill trials, was the year the world took off. It signalled the start of mass transport, allowing 50% of the UK population to live in urban areas. Much of the infrastructure created in this period still exists today, though it has been adapted to cope with changes in technology, regulations and the environment.

If 1829 was the year the world took off, 1945 was the start of the anthropogenic age when the world accelerated: the rate of increase of population, GDP and carbon emissions accelerated. The world entered an age when its future depends on what we do. The debate about climate change is the most visible evidence of this but pandemics, natural and anthropogenic hazards, population growth, resource security and urbanisation are placing greater demands on built environment professionals. For example, Engineering UK estimates that the number of professional engineers in the UK has to double by 2025.

The environment in which the built environment specialists operate is changing. Knowledge is growing exponentially, codes of practice and standards cannot be developed fast enough, design is moving from code based to risk to adaptive design. There is a move to evidence-based political decisions; the emergence of big data as a design tool as the concept of smart cities develops is creating opportunities to tackle the global challenges. Professional institutions are increasingly re-engaged in political and societal debate. Thus, the educational requirements and attributes of built environment professionals are changing.

However, the public has limited knowledge of the built environment and the professionals who create the world around them. Indeed, the image of the construction industry is often a low skill, low quality sector. It is only when it fails do the public begin to understand how reliant they are on a fully functioning built environment; how important it is for their safety, health and well being.

The value of the built environment profession is realized at a strategic level but not necessarily at a community level. Adapting the built-environment to cope with a low carbon economy, population growth and the changes in society's expectations and technology are placing greater demands on the built environment professional which requires greater engagement with society in order to help society appreciate the world they live in and the difficult decisions they face in the future.

The future of the built environment depends on the ability of the specialists to deal with the pace of change and help create a resilient society. The specialists have to create expert communities that meet the characteristics of a profession and they have to publically demonstrate that they are competent to support society in the development of the built environment. Therefore the hypotheses are correct.

The existing professional communities, the professional institutions, may not represent all of the specialists working in the built environment but they are, currently, the only independent bodies that can meet the requirements of professional communities needed by society. They are undergoing change as democratic bodies but the pace of change may not be sufficient to meet the rising demands on the built environment. The institutions rely on the time and knowledge volunteered by their members who in turn rely on the goodwill of employers. They also rely on income from their commercial activities and subscriptions. Balancing the income, voluntary contributions and output is challenging and, at a time of declining numbers, loss of experiential knowledge and a shift in attributes of the built environment professional, the value of the institutions to society may not be fully recognised.

The Conclusion

It is imperative that a community of specialists exists in order to generate and disseminate knowledge. The community has a role to play in validating the knowledge. The community may be in its current form – numerous trade bodies, learned societies, professional institutions and umbrella organisations – or in a single institution as in the medical profession.

Historically, knowledge dissemination included oral and paper processes which were validated by the community. The digital age has created a wealth of knowledge but its value is variable; peer assessment is not applied. This is a role for the learned societies.

The public assumes that the built environment professionals are competent. Self-regulation has worked but it will be challenged as built environment professionals increasingly engage in societal and political debate.

Therefore, if professional institutions are to survive and meet their charitable objectives, they have to:-

- be clear about their strategic aims within the context of the emerging society;
- be clear about their value proposition that attracts the community;
- increase their engagement with society;
- develop their roles as learned societies to engage in knowledge generation and dissemination in a digital world;
- develop appropriate standards for the emerging built environment professional;
- recognise how the changes in education and training impact on the formation of the built environment professional;
- and recognise how the low carbon, digital, knowledge-based economy impacts on the competency requirements of the built environment professional.

Sue Illman, President - LI

'How can professionals working across the built environment and their institutions maintain relevance and deliver value to society?'

As landscape architects, we are required under our Royal Charter to 'protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for public benefit....'. So we can only deliver public benefit, and be relevant to society if people value what we deliver, and to value what we do, they have to understand what it is that we do, and therein lies part of the conundrum.

There is an inherent appreciation that Institutions regulate, educate and set standards for their membership, but it is the public-facing aspects where we can struggle. The older professions are more clearly recognised by the public, and whilst their perception of who they are, and what they contribute may not be completely correct, there is a basic understanding of their role in society. This value is diminished when the work of the professions is seen as elitist, whilst high quality but more populist work, can gain very strong public support and recognition, a key factor being public usability and communication.

The younger professions often struggle to achieve a broad public recognition, and tend to only be understood in more specialist sectors, and by the professions with whom they most directly communicate. Their value is therefore perceived as being less except to the 'informed minority'.

In recent years the number of professional organisations also seems to have mushroomed. Whilst an ever more complex world, with ever more complex problems to solve requires specialists, the professions in general appear to have responded not just by specialising, but by creating new institutions for each and every specialism. This compounds the problem of society understanding what we do, and therefore valuing it.

In the Landscape Institute we are trying to buck that trend, by becoming a broader church of professionals, where areas of expertise are defined, but any individual may work in 3 or 4 different areas depending on the project requirements, their own particular interests and skill set. We have also developed our most recent Public Health Position Statement as an evidence-based document, specifically demonstrating through supporting research, how landscape can improve public health. This allows us to deliver a clearer message of who we are and what we do, to both the professions and public.

Over the last few months, we have seen an interesting example of how public relevance and value can be both enhanced and reduced very quickly. The problems in Somerset gave high relevance to the various professions involved in the management of the Levels, some being vilified for their work, or perceived lack of action, whilst calmer voices appreciated the longer term balanced approach. Ultimately, all recognised the need for specialist professional advice, and the professions recognised the need to articulate what they did and why. An important outcome has been that most people throughout the country now appreciate that inappropriate development can lead to downstream flooding, and are looking to the professions to assist them in understanding their local problem.

So society recognises the importance of 'big picture' issues and the need to get them right, like the prevention of flooding, promoting public health, providing clean water and air, sufficient good quality food and housing, a properly functioning transport system; those are the easy subjects, and individual professions each stake their claim in providing the answers, although the lesser contributors are frequently overlooked.

Society's appreciation of the longer term 'bigger picture' issues of economic and environmental sustainability is more tenuous, and whilst the professions at the institutional level are good at promoting a clear message, this isn't carried down through the ranks very effectively on a day-to-day basis, and even where it is, the rationale often isn't clearly articulated. Again we see public appreciation of the professions' contribution only when disaster strikes. The professions should be clearly leading the way, both individually and jointly, as we have the opportunity to add significant value (or make the problem worse).

Social sustainability is becoming increasingly important, with grass roots input facilitated by the professions often providing surprising and innovative outcomes. Here the value of the professions to society can be clearly appreciated at the community level, which though small scale, can ultimately be highly effective.

So in summary, the professions must work together to find a common voice on matters of most importance to society, and work at all levels:

- Firstly, to understand and articulate the larger, longer term issues of sustainability that society needs us to address, and explain why and how we can contribute
- Secondly, to promote high quality outcomes across the built environment, that are relevant and meaningful to society, that deliver their needs
- Thirdly, to find effective ways of explaining their role and its relevance to people's everyday lives more clearly
- Fourthly, to work with communities to deliver locally important projects,
- And fifthly, to be flexible and responsive to society's changing needs,

all whilst maintaining the expected standards of professionalism.

Delivering public benefit, and communicating the outcomes effectively is not about dumbing down our role, but through example and explanation, making our contribution recognised and valued as being important, which in turn will uphold our professional status.

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive – RSA

Matthew Taylor spoke without notes.