

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

7<sup>th</sup> May 2014 – The Building Centre, London.

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## INTRODUCTION

“How can professionals working across the built environment and their institutions maintain relevance and deliver value to society?” That was the theme of this, the third session on the future of professionalism. And while the speakers may not have nailed down answers to what is invariably a highly complex question, no one was left in any doubt of the scale of the challenge. As the first speaker Barry Clarke, past president of the ICE summed it up:

*“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.”*

## Emerging themes

- Speakers were unanimous in their views that the professional institutions should represent society over and above their members
- 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 and increase their engagement with society
- Society doesn't appreciate the value of professions/professional bodies because it doesn't really know what they do – so how do we tackle that?
- It could help develop their roles as learned societies to engage in knowledge generation and dissemination in a digital world.
- There is no financial premium to being chartered in the UK – people can often practice as professionals without being so. Does this matter?
- Again – as raised in all the sessions – professional institutions rely on income from their commercial activities and subscriptions. Balancing income, voluntary contributions and output is the biggest challenge.
- Professions can make the biggest impact on society if they come together to tackle a big issue – like flooding. Sustainability in general is more tenuous. But speakers do not see it as the CIC's role to do this. [No-one to date as mentioned the role as the CIC as a umbrella vehicle for representing the professions]
- Does the nature of education of professionals in the built environment need to change to reflect changing nature and challenges in society – i.e. climate change?

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## SPEAKERS

### Barry Clarke, Past President Institution of Civil Engineers

According to Barry Clarke, a professional institution in the UK 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.

However, most built environment specialists in the UK can operate without belonging to a professional community where self-regulation applies.

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. He said. “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

He said: “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.”

Clarke said 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.

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### Sue Illman, President of the Landscape Institute (LI)

At the heart of Sue Illman’s speech was the notion that institutes can only deliver public benefit if the public knows what the institute does – which can be better served when professional bodies come together to tackle the big issues.

“Landscape architects are required under Royal Charter to ‘protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for public benefit....’ Said Sue Illman, “ 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.”

“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 they 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. This allows us to deliver a clearer message of who we are and what we do, to both the professions and public, although it may not make us either relevant or valued by them”.

Illman cited an interesting example of how public relevance and value can be both enhanced and reduced very quickly. She said: “The flooding 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.”

She concluded: “ So society recognises the importance of ‘big picture’ issues and the need to get them right, like the prevention of flooding, public health, clean water and air, sufficient good quality food and housing, a properly functioning transport system.”

“Delivering public benefit and maintaining professional status amongst society is not about dumbing down our role, but through example and explanation, making our contribution recognised and valued as being important.

So in summary, the professions must 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 they can contribute
- Secondly, to promote high quality outcomes across the built environment, that are relevant and meaningful to society, and 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, be flexible and responsive to society’s changing needs.

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#### Colin Haylock, Past President Royal Town Planning Institute

Like many institutions the RTPI's chartered object is to advance the science and arts of town planning for the benefit of the public. There is nothing there about our members and service to our members, it is about our service to the public. And a code of conduct about how we conduct ourselves professionally in doing that, a requirement to fearlessly and impartially exercise our independent professional judgement to the best of our skills and understanding.

We've been doing some work with our members about what they feel about the code, and they feel it to be very helpful.

Looking at the challenges for professionalism as we head forward, I think there are a number of areas concerning respect and value. There is a serious issue of respect for expertise and I find myself thinking in the age of the internet it's terribly easy for a lot of people to think they are experts and terribly easy to challenge someone who claims expertise. It's probably even more of a problem for the younger professions than the older ones, but I know all sorts of people who will challenge their doctors on diagnosis in ways that they wouldn't have done before.

And then there's the general professional respect to business in terms of values and partiality and independence in a fiercely competitive world. I am an architect as well as the planner and I find this remarkable situation that architects are asked to occupy in traditional contracts where they are the arbiter and administrator of a contract between a client and a contractor where they are paid by the client. If you really believe in those professional values and impartiality and independence, how could you ever go into a contract like that?

And for many of the institutions, there's a real challenge in this business of commanding respect in a position where there is no protection of title let alone the role. Non-professionals, non-chartered professionals in those sorts of situations can very easily bring professions into disrepute.

And in the built environment world, the really great difficulty of valuing the professions when you are working in an incredibly complex world with incredibly complex overlaps between professional disciplines and the areas that individual professional bodies are protecting.

Haylock said it was important for institutions to ferociously patrol conduct. "I think that distinguishes people who claim professionalism, claim chartered membership from those who merely act in the area and will represent themselves".

He added: "This means things about professions which are hard to get into and hard to stay in."

But that all sounds terribly elitist. It's very important that that elite stuff gets done unchallengingly well in a world where people will readily challenge. That elitist side though - it needs to be played out in a world where it is accessible to people and professionals are approachable."

Haylock said society would expect the professional bodies to collaborate. "They would expect the professionals in the built environment to understand that they work in a complex multidisciplinary world, and they would expect us to find mature ways of working with each other. And that's really quite challenging in a situation where I am sure they would probably tell us to limit our liabilities, very carefully control what we do, and lay off as much risk to others as possible."

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#### Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive RSA

I wanted to suggest a theoretical framework through which we might look at this question of professionals and professional associations.

So the theoretical framework is a very simple framework - think of social power having three dimensions:

- Leadership and fellowship, which is about things like authority, bureaucracy and strategy;
- Solidarity, which is about membership and shared values, community; and
- Individualism, which is to do with acquisitiveness, but also enterprise, creativity and risk.

Obviously they are rough categories but I would argue that they are fundamentally where social power derives from and therefore there is an obvious thing that one is searching for when one thinks about an organisation, a nation, or even a human being which is how can you combine these three sources of social power.

Anyway, three very simple kinds of dichotomies. When it comes to the domain of leadership and authority, I think there is a choice between a model of control and power versus a model of influence and convening. So I think that forms of leadership and authority that work in the modern world are more to do with influence and the capacity to convene than to do with raw power and exercise of control. That's to do with all sorts of things that are changing in the world, the pace of change for example. Secondly in the domain of solidarity, the critical dimension there, often when I talk to people who are left wing they think solidarity is a left wing idea. It's not left-wing at all. I mean UKIP is about powerful solidaristic voice for example; solidarity is about membership, it's about tribes. So the critical question with solidarity is it an exclusive or inclusive form of solidarity, and this goes to the point Colin made: is this a kind of closed shop solidarity, the solidarity is those within, or is it a solidarity which invites other people to participate if they share the values of the organisation? That's part of the journey the RSA has been on.

The third dimension, at the risk of sounding pious, is really a notion of individualism as being positioned in professional creativity versus a notion of individualism positioned in commercial acquisitiveness.

Now this is not to say that I'm against commerce at all, but I think in as much as professionalism is about some notion of public interest it should be that the promotion of the peak of professional success lies in the expression of creativity rather than the achievement of great wealth.

I'll just close then I think by saying that my sense is that the kind of questions you are facing here are big questions and they probably require systemic reform. They require a rethinking about what professionalism is about and what professional institutions are about. I don't think the kind of shifts that I'm talking about are accomplished by piecemeal reforms. Well, they may be piecemeal reforms but they need to be piecemeal reforms with a very clear and very different destination in mind. I think that the ground is shifting beneath our feet very rapidly and we therefore need to be equally able to think quite radically

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## QUESTIONS

**Question:** *How can society ever value built environment professionals when society's image of our industry is so bad, and society has little or no idea of what we do, let alone about what values we hold?*

**BC:** I think it's curious, if you go back, Robert Stephenson built a railway line from London to Edinburgh and the missing link was the high level bridge on Newcastle, and when he opened that he could get on a train and six hours later be in Edinburgh which had never been done before. The Mayor of Newcastle held a dinner on the station platform and there were 800 guests, it was a headline in the London Gazette. In the 18th century, our professions were valued, people knew exactly who we were and what we did, for many reasons. One major one of course is that we transformed society, we allowed them to go places they couldn't go before. So moving onto today, one of the roles that the professions should have and do have is how can we address climate change, how we can address resource scarcity? We're going to need professional people to address that. So perhaps in this time of change, we've got to stick our heads out above parapet, which we have failed to do in the last 50 years or so.

**Question:** *Which means having an institutional point of view on something?*

**BC:** Yes and which may not be aligned with all of the members' interests

**SI:** As some of you may know, I was in contact a lot with the Prime Minister during the recent flooding. But what was interesting was the outcome of that, was that 20 odd institutions got together to actually talk about the issue, and that's now happened twice in roundtable sessions with a mixture of the built environment professions and the environmental professions. We are now looking at how institutions can come together on the subject of water and flooding. I think that we can do it, but actually, somebody, whoever, ourselves as catalysts in the institutes in the first instance, took on the issue because it was so important that it couldn't be ignored, or we felt it couldn't be ignored, and thankfully enough people agreed to join in.

**Question:** *I've listened to the three debates and this is not meant to be harsh but I'm none the wiser as to what you believe the institutions are actually trying to do to improve their role in society. I feel like the point is being missed here that if we want society to value the professional engineer or whatever profession we have, then the commodity that the Institutes need to get better at selling is attention. It's not about our competence, we already have plenty of information about that, it's the ability to sell attention and get attention by the societies. Barry do you know how many followers the ICE has on Twitter, just as a matter of interest?*

**MT:** There's also the unusualness factor. As the cliché goes, dog bites man isn't a story but man bites dog is a story, and one of the problems in terms of public opinion and public interest here is that, what is interesting is that professional say things which sound difficult for themselves, and generally professional organisations are profoundly averse to ever saying anything which is going to be challenging to their members, because they don't want to lose the members. So most of what professional associations pump out is of absolutely no interest to anybody because it is entirely predictable

**BC:** If this was a debate being driven by the engineering community, it would be very different. The engineering professional bodies work in a number of ways through collaboration. I have set up an organisation to support the CIC to try and bring the built environment professionals together. The professional bodies in the engineering institutes are tackling this business of raising the profile of engineering, because the engineering community works together. We as civil engineers have a real problem, we are engineers, so we as engineers are much further ahead than built environment professionals in collaboration and influence, because we work as a team. I think the other thing that might be worth thinking about, we're talking in this room about our professions and our members, it is estimated, and this is some recent work, that there are 6 million engineers in the UK, people who call themselves engineers, but there are only 220,000 in the professional bodies. So the professional bodies are a subset of the whole community. And I suspect that that also applies in other areas

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in the built environment. There is a large number of people who are not part of an institution. So it's not answering your question directly, but it's giving you an indication of how we're trying other ways to engage.

**Question:** *I think there is a general agreement that societies need to now cross-discipline. So how do we restructure ourselves to be able to give good cross discipline advice, experience, and become a front of knowledge or recognise the front of knowledge in six hours say, given our current structure?*

**CH:** It's quite interesting about that speed of response thing because probably each individual institution has grappled with that and has probably found its own way of dealing with things. You know do we have a collection of experts in particular topics on hand ready so that they can make a response; do we have a way of filtering it to make sure that it isn't a completely wacky response. To try and do it across the disciplines it is really challenging.

**MT:** But I think you're getting fixated on the wrong thing. It depends what it is; it could be six seconds if it's the one kind of question, six years if it's another. I think that it depends what it is people are asking for, and I wouldn't get too hung up on the daily news agenda. This is about developing a story, a narrative, a way of being and that will take a long time to evolve. And the important thing actually is not pace, its alignment. The important thing is whether or not everything that you do lines up with what you say; so for example in the corporate sector those companies that talk about corporate social responsibility, the only ones you should listen to seriously are those ones that have fundamentally rethought their business model. I wouldn't worry too much about speed, I would worry about whether or not all the messages you're giving out are messages which seem to reinforce a core story of public value

**CH:** I would like to think that if we recognise these things cross discipline, that if our built environment professions together collectively work out things with regards to the longer term agenda, then it actually becomes easier to deal pertinently and appropriately, with appropriate consideration and reflection, on the things that come up that require reactive response, the proactive builds the base to deal sensibly with the reactive.

**Question:** *Is it not time for institutions to really address the big picture and really challenge global airport expansion?*

**BC:** One of the things I have learnt in our institution is that we employ people who are experts in communicating with media and with politicians but they are professionals, not engineers. And what we've learnt is that in order to give a view, we have to undertake a, if you like, public enquiry. So for example, last year it was water, this year it's transport, this year we're looking at the nation's infrastructure, how many potholes have we got. What we're doing is we don't just get our people inside the building to do this, we call upon our members and people outside the profession to give their view; we call upon people to come and present their ideas. And from that we distil it down to a report, which can be read. We write it in a language that people can understand, that is based on hard evidence from the institution.

**Question:** *Could you actually form the view as an Institute, that airport expansion is a good thing or a bad thing? Could you actually do that?*

**BC:** We have done that in other areas, yes.

**MT:** I think the way forward for professions in regard to the very difficult issue about that is to seek to identify the possibility of new solutions. The assistance you give to your members is to help them not live in a world of black-and-white and right and wrong, which puts them in a very untenable position, but to identify the possibility of them as professionals providing leadership, identifying new ways to do that.

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**Question:** *I know that politicians are very short sighted because they have a very short time to do things that they've promised, and I understand that people at the head of institutions have an even shorter time to do those kinds of things, to form relationships with politicians. Is there a need for long-term positions in order for you to form those relationships with each other and politicians and then to be able to chase those objectives?*

**PM:** I think there's another issue there which we can enlarge, which is of the business of a balance of power between members and secretariats, which is an issue in institutions. Longevity comes from a permanent secretariat, does that actually become the voice? Or does everything get overturned every two years or three years or sometimes one year?

**CH:** I think there's another layer in here, which is that you'll have a president for one or two years, these people have profile and influence during that period, but they have probably been embedded in the organisation for quite some time. It is a group of active and heavily committed members who stay there for quite a considerable length of time, they're the sort of people who get drawn on for the expertise across the various sectors and so on, and quite often they have quite reasonable relationships, not just inside their own institutes but probably with people working in overlapping disciplines in other institutes. So there are a number of planners I know well who know quite a lot of Sue's team quite well, and that relationship lasts a lot longer than Sue's two years or my one year.

**Question:** *Back on the airport question, of course it's a very complex issue and I do understand that, but isn't everyone pussyfooting around a bit? I mean all credit to Sue for her water thing and getting people together, it's genuinely a big achievement, but presumably one reason why that was possible was because for all those institutions it was either a neutral thing for them to do or their members might even see some work on it whereas the whole point about making a statement about airports is that one is threatening engineers architects etc. who would get their work from designing them and then that's the fundamental conflict isn't it?*

**MT:** Can I just say on this issue of whether there is a kind of choice, it's a perfectly reasonable position to adopt if you believe a, the consequences are B, C, and D, and if you believe b, the consequences are E, F and G, and you can take the position which says if you care about these things, this is what you do, and if you care about these things, that's what you'll do. And we as a profession can tell you the consequences of the options you choose. That's a perfectly reasonable and important role to play.

**Question:** *We have a terrible challenge in our industry attracting young people into it, and I find that much of what the Institutes advocate or promote is not necessarily very appealing to younger people. What do you think the Institutes are doing, or are they doing enough to ensure that we are self-sustaining in the industry? I think that's quite important for society.*

**SI:** I completely agree. I can't really comment from our own perspective, we certainly are in the process of looking at how we engage, because I mean most universities have suffered huge depletion in the numbers, with the issues of fees, so all of the courses, a lot of the courses are having to look towards are they going to carry on? So I think that we are responding, as so I think the RTPI are, by looking at things like alternative routes of entry into the profession, and a way that we can actually set up new educational models to allow people to come through different routes. But at the grassroots level we've got to look at part-time earning, working in practices, and putting that together with some academic input to actually move forward young people into the future

**BC:** One thing that we do rely on is our members, who are volunteers - so in a way we're talking about the survival of institutions. If institutions disappear all this activity we talk about goes with it. So there is a duty upon institutions to be forward thinking. As a whole, society as a whole adds to importance of the institute, of the membership, of what they do, and the benefit they do.

**CH:** From the planning perspective, there's always been a long history of involvement in environmental education. And this year, the Institute's hundredth anniversary, we produced a program of planning ambassadors. Every man and his wife as little children want to be architects. A lot of the



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architecture courses I know of are bursting at the seams and I'm thinking, what is it? I think we probably need some smart ways at universities to teach architecture and other things to capture those people, and then actually over the first year to get them interested in the broader built environment, actually turn them on to other disciplines, where they probably have better prospects.

**PM:** When people in Europe complain as they do about the whole idea of charters, they are told by the government don't worry, they are only symbolic. And yet a huge amount of what we're talking about is about serving the public interest. We talk about charitable objectives and so on. If you really focused on what your clients need, and took a long-term view of that, what would be lost? Would you give up on the charitable associations? What would actually be the big difference between a professional institute that was totally focused on what its clients needed, as opposed to feeling bound by a thing that we can't even pin down called the public interest? I'm just interested in how different you feel your institution should be, and what would be lost.

**BC:** Within the construction industry there are some 250 organisations, and many of those organisations most of them are not chartered bodies, most of them are set up to protect the industry, protect their particular section of the industry, and are therefore for the benefit of their employers [not necessarily their clients].

**MT:** Legitimacy is what is lost. And legitimacy is an incredibly important attribute. Your legitimacy is derived from the fact that you believe you're in the business of balancing professional interest and public interest, and if you abandon that or even the pursuit of that, you abandon your legitimacy, and you become simply a trade association. Trade associations have their functions to play, but they don't have the legitimacy that we're talking about here, they are explicitly in the pursuit of the interest of their members and nothing else, and wouldn't pretend to be about anything else. Whether or not this balancing act that we talking about is done well is another matter, but if you give up on the very idea of pursuing that balance, you give up your public legitimacy. And that is in short supply. You have to keep refreshing your mandates, and how you achieve that balance

changes all the time.

**Question:** *The legitimacy of the institutions, I think is becoming increasingly difficult as more and more conversations are being held behind closed doors. I mean how does the public legitimise that?*

**MT:** Let me give you an example of what's demonstrably not happening. The Police Federation is an example of an institution, a professional association, which completely lost sight of any notion of public interest, with absolutely disastrous consequences for the reputation of the police force. So if you can know what it isn't, that implies that you might also know what it is. And what it is, is an institution that takes seriously the question of how you balance public interest and professional interest. And while that might not mean that the rubber hits the road in terms of what you tell people to do now, it may do in terms of the climate of opinion that you create which shapes future patterns of business and behaviour.

**BC:** Just on the topic of 'behind closed doors,' perhaps we misled you. Everything is not done behind closed doors. We have no problem challenging politicians in public, which we have done. So I think 'behind closed doors' is more about the proactive work to help inform political decisions. You see government papers being released, if you actually read the references, you often see the institutions are there. So it doesn't disappear into black holes or anything. So it's not all secrecy.

**CH:** One thing that we haven't quite touched on here, we've been talking about what professionals do for society, there's also this business about what professions and being professional does for us as professionals. I have to say I derive very considerable comfort from a feeling that I'm part of a family of people whose commitment runs beyond simply serving the client. And it might be terribly difficult to define what that wider public interest is, but is something that motivates you to do more than absolutely necessary, it motivates you to talk to your client hard about things that the client might not immediately want to do but might be encouraged to do or might be encouraged to do next time and so on, and it is this delightful feeling that I'm not on my own in doing it.