

Morrell: Ten years to save industry professions

Former construction adviser says in Edge commission report that professional bodies must find common voice and leadership or risk being irrelevant

By Joey Gardiner

Former chief construction adviser Paul Morrell has warned that professions within the built environment are in danger of losing their status within a decade unless they get together to respond to changing ways of working.

Morrell (pictured) was speaking in advance of the publication next week of a report on the future of the professions that he has written for built environment think tank the Edge. It is set to highlight a loss of respect and trust in the industry's traditional institutions, the rise of mega-consultancies and changing patterns of employment as presenting a huge risk to the status of construction professionals such as architects, engineers and surveyors.

The report, called Collaboration for Change, will recommend that professional institutions develop a standardised ethical code of conduct across built environment professions (see story below), give greater focus on the quality of education, and collaborate to give shared views on the most important matters in the public interest, if they are to continue to be of any value to their members.

It will say that the threat to the professions from the changing industry are "not yet existential, [but] are real and profound, and demand change".

However, speaking to Building, Morrell said: "The professions have proved themselves to be adaptable in the past, but they are now facing a moment where it is increasingly difficult to set professions apart from other people and companies offering similar services. If they're not careful then within 10 years they'll just become servants of a construction delivery process which they're no longer able to control.

"If they do nothing then in 10 years they'll be screaming because government is cutting them out of policy decision-making, but their right to be heard and their right to demand a certain fee will all be lost."

Professional institutions were largely developed in the Victorian

IT IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO SET PROFESSIONS APART FROM OTHER PEOPLE

PAUL MORRELL



period to give customers a guarantee of quality while helping to protect fee rates for qualified members. They include the RIBA, the RICS, the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Royal Town Planning Institute.

Morrell said their "gold standard" status was being undermined by the growing power of contractors set against a failure of the professions to work together on uniform education, ethical, and enforcement policies that justified their status to prospective clients.

Morrell said the problem was exacerbated by the failure of the institutions to collaborate on common public responses to major built environment issues - in particular climate change, the gap between as-designed and as-built performance, and wider industry reform. The report will call for the collaborative response from the institutions to be led by a

"rebooted" Construction Industry Council, which is the existing umbrella body for built environment professionals.

It will say: "The Construction Industry Council [CIC] can and should be developed and empowered as a shared vehicle for joint initiatives, and encouraged to initiate the consideration of issues beyond those passed down from individual institutions."

CIC chief executive Graham Watts said he accepted the professions faced challenges, but that they were nowhere near as severe as suggested by the Edge's report, and that professions were already working on many of the issues identified, such as a common ethical code. Watts said: "This says a lot of things we'd agree with. Morrell is right to create an agenda for change, but to say that in 10 years time it'll be a life or death situation is a huge exaggeration."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

- Develop and standardise a national code of conduct/ethics across the built environment professions
- Make public and clear the procedures for complaint and the institution's sanctioning process, details of members who have been sanctioned, and the grounds for doing so
- Commit to a cross-disciplinary review of the silo nature of the education system, to encourage greater integration
- Improve the 'guarantee' of a particular quality of individual - for example by benchmarking the expertise of members
- Become agents for disclosure as guardians of quality
- Establish a think tank to pool the resources of the institutions to conduct research and develop policy
- Develop and empower the CIC as a shared outlet for joint initiatives and announcements, lobbying and campaigning
- Present a shared view on matters that are too big for any one institution, such as industry reform; performance of built assets; and the impact of the built environment on climate change.



Times are changing

Joey Gardiner on the challenge facing construction's professional institutions

It's a cliché to say that a crisis presents both a challenge and an opportunity, but this is effectively what the Edge commission's report says the built environment professions are facing.

Report author Paul Morrell - not the type to shrink from conflict - is careful to say the institutions do not yet face a threat to their very existence, but it is clear that this is the direction in which they are heading if nothing is done.

The report has been shared with many of the industry bodies over the last few months, and it is not surprising that some have - apparently - reacted somewhat defensively to the prognosis it contains. Others may feel the

commission's discussion, which includes moral philosophy around industrial ethics, is too airy-fairy to be relevant to the modern contractor-dominated industry.

But dismissing the Edge commission's analysis because of pique, or on a "not invented here" basis, would be a dangerous thing. There is no doubt that there are challenges to the institutions' relevance, with young graduates starting to question the need to pay dues to institutions when the brands of the large mixed-use consultancies that employ many of them are the guarantor of quality clients look for.

It is no coincidence that, with power continually moving to contractors, the government's

Construction Leadership Council (CLC) - its main forum for interacting with the sector - largely sidesteps professional institutional voices in favour of experienced constructors like Laing O'Rourke and Skanska.

In order to meet these challenges a basic precondition is for the professional institutions to have an offering that individuals, clients and the wider public can quickly understand. However, the CIC, which could organise this, isn't currently empowered enough by its members to do it.

So whether it's 10 years or 20, it's hard to argue with the idea that the future looks difficult unless co-ordinated action is taken.

Construction needs shared code of ethics to 'secure confidence'

The UK's professional institutions need to develop a shared code of ethics with robust enforcement if they are to remain relevant, according to the Edge commission report on the future of the professions.

The report, authored by former chief construction adviser Paul Morrell, will say that while each individual professional institution has its own code of ethics, what these codes contain varies, meaning

there is no common sense of what conduct clients and the wider public can expect from individual professionals.

In particular, different institutions have a hugely varied understanding of the extent that professionals have a duty of care to the wider public interest, as well as the specific client that is paying their fees.

The report will say: "Institutions should resolve the

confusion between ethics and the public interest, by clarifying and codifying a rigorous, shared understanding of expectations."

It will add that transparent processes for sanctioning professionals that fail to live up to the standards and ethics expected by their institution are needed "to secure increased client and public confidence".