

## A new professionalism?

Edge Debate 54, the Building Centre, London, 20 February 2013

*Concern about standards of professionalism is not new. If construction practitioners are to fulfil their crucial role in helping to create a more sustainable built environment in a situation of resource scarcity, then their voices need to be heard loud and clear. But do they know enough to help; and are their ethics, education and working practices appropriate? Cue the Edge Debate on “A New Professionalism” – a meeting of key actors who can shape the future of the built environment and the response of the construction industry to the challenges of climate change and sustainability.*

Understanding the context of any project is an essential part of being a professional practitioner. The context that underpinned the Edge Debate on 20 February 2013 is a steady shift in the UK zeitgeist away from polite reverence for professionals of all kinds towards, if not a downright distrust, then at least a growing preference for unmediated “opinion” and looking to markets for “solutions”.

In September 2011, the Edge debated the question: “What does it mean to be a building professional in the 21st Century?” Back then, we were wise to the machinations of professionals in the banking sector, but hadn’t realised the lengths to which some had gone in order to manipulate the Libor rate. We knew of the behaviour of MPs and their expenses, but Leveson was not yet a household name.

In 2013, public trust in organisations and professionals has waned further, with scandals at the BBC, the police force, the NHS and the food industry, while banks have hardly covered themselves in glory. As climate change bites ever harder, the environment slips down the agenda.

As Bill Bordass commented in his opening remarks, a decade ago the UK was focusing on Rethinking Construction, not building performance in use. At last the industry is coming to realise that, despite changes to building regulations, the introduction of off-site techniques and the adoption of new technologies, for too many new buildings dramatic “performance gaps” persist between design intent and what happens once they are completed and occupied.

The event, held at the Building Centre in London, began with the low-key launch of a Special Issue of Building Research & Information (BRI), with short presentations from the authors of some of the papers. This was followed by an hour-long debate, modelled on the BBC’s *Question Time* format, with Rab Bennetts, of Bennetts Associates, taking the Dimpleby role of chairing the discussion.

The Special Issue, guest-edited by Bill Bordass and Adrian Leaman, includes ten papers on a variety of topics pertaining to professionalism, from a study of the changing nature of UK construction professional service firms to research on the impact that digitally mediated project work (i.e. BIM) was beginning to have on the roles of designers. The contents list can be found at [www.tandfonline.com/toc/rbri20/41/1](http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rbri20/41/1). For a limited period, by a generous concession from the publisher, those present at the debate can also access the papers at [www.tandfonline.com/r/bri-41-1](http://www.tandfonline.com/r/bri-41-1).

Bill Bordass introduced the evening by quoting from Andrew Abbott’s 1988 book *The System of Professions*. Abbot saw society as institutionalising knowledge in three distinct and complementary ways: Commoditisation, Organisation and Professionalisation. While professionals had been holding their own, Abbott felt they might lose out to Organisation. 25 years later, Bill thought this had definitely happened to the building-related professions. However, by relinquishing too much to markets, regulations and corporations, society now seems to be ill-equipped to rise to the challenges of sustainability. Bill asked where was the intelligent customer in Government? Was it not time for the pendulum to swing back?

The authors of four of the BRI papers provided a good summary of concerns about the effectiveness of the building professions in responding to today's challenges. The papers were well received by the audience, which included representatives from construction industry professional bodies, academics, students, practitioners and well-known industry protagonists.

The first paper was from Stephen Hill of C<sub>2</sub>O Futureplanners. Declaring himself to be a practitioner not an academic, he went straight to the core of the debate - professional ethics. Referencing the banking scandal and Plato, he reminded the gathering that professionals are required to balance competing ethical demands over and above meeting the expectations of their clients. They have a duty both to their profession; and to accept responsibility for "the Other", to cite the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.

As Hill explained, this is particularly pertinent when it comes to sustainability. What happens after the professional's job is over? All construction projects are about deferred impacts and these impacts are inherently uncertain and unpredictable. How can a professional enhance the sustainability of a project by giving due consideration to the needs of "the Other"? Not, said Hill, by reference to the Codes of Conduct of professional institutions which, as Jeremy Till wrote were: "mainly concerned with reasonable standards of competence and diligence, keeping knowledge up to date, and prudent and honest business administration, mainly in relation to the interests of clients or other professionals".

Hill's solution, discussed in detail in his BRI paper with David Lorenz, Peter Dent and Thomas Lützkendorf, is to encourage professional institutions to work together to develop a strong voice in public life and to make ethical behaviour the catalyst for change. This requires not just change within the professional bodies themselves, but taking the conversation out to the next generation of professionals. Hill is doing his bit through a "manifesto for 2050" workshop for students on the Interdisciplinary Design for the Built Environment (IDBE) masters at the University of Cambridge.

Both Frank Duffy (founder of DEGW, past President of RIBA, and co-author of a paper with Andrew Rabeneck) and Professor Will Hughes (University of Reading, co-author with Cathy Hughes) reminded the audience that the debate over "professionalism" is nothing new. Duffy entertained the audience with recollections from being RIBA President twenty years ago and taking the findings of its strategic study into the profession to the regions, where he found practitioners with very different priorities from their colleagues in London. Hughes reflected that business attitudes, CSR and technological changes, not least the Internet, had greatly changed the role of professionals and their institutions from the 1970s and 80s, when they were still the "guardians" of information and knowledge, Duffy drew attention to the sparse information base on how buildings actually worked.

Both agreed that the overarching sustainability agenda was a strong driver for interdisciplinary working and inter-institutional co-operation, but differed on the extent to which institutional change might be relevant: Hughes hinted that mergers should be considered; while Duffy focused on the practical aspects of a multi-disciplinary approach during the "blessed weeks" at the start of a project when no one is in overall charge and all parties can work together in harmony. Duffy also stressed the central importance of accumulating an evidence base on building performance in use and over time; and recommended a case study approach along the lines of those at the Harvard Business School.

In her presentation "Building professionals are the 'missing link(s)'" Katy Janda drew upon her paper with Yael Parag to identify the power of the professions, particularly when they work together. She argued that too many attempts to initiate change originate "top-down" (e.g with government policy edicts) or "bottom-up" (e.g. relying on individuals and markets), but tend to by-pass strengths that can emerge when working from the "middle-out". Those in the "middle" can provide vision and insight when society is deciding what to do. On the other hand, if it is not properly engaged and understood

when proposals are formulated, the middle (which tends to have a central role in actually getting things done) may also frustrate well-intentioned efforts. Where the middle has been properly involved, it can discover more effective ways of meeting agreed objectives and make outcomes more appropriate for their specific contexts of application. This middle-out concept seems so simple that it must surely have been tried before. Indeed it has (the BRI paper includes references from the 1970s), but the government seems to have lost sight of its potential.

In Janda's sandwich-like metaphor, the existing top-down/bottom-up approaches serve as the bread, while the filling in the middle is not a single flavour, but a rich combination of expertise, knowledge, and other "missing links", including the power of influence of the building professional. The paper identified three key ways in which those in the middle can exert influence (by enabling, mediating and aggregating), illustrating each with case studies. She introduced the significant idea that building performance in use needs to become a "socially accepted problem area", and distinct from that of construction itself: this concept had the most influence on the ensuing debate.

In the debate, panel members from professional organisations were invited to respond to unscripted questions from the audience. The panel consisted of Michael Brown (Chief Deputy Director of CIOB), Professor David Fisk (President of CIBSE), Keith Clarke (former CEO of Atkins and former chairman of the CIC), Harry Rich (Chief Executive of RIBA) and Kenneth Creighton (Director of Professional Standards at RICS). The discussion covered the general theme of professionalism, and explored some crucial aspects of "new professionalism" mentioned by the introductory speakers.

A strong theme in another paper, by Hartenberger, Lorentz and Lützkendorf was a need for the equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath to bind all building professionals together whatever their particular discipline, to help focus and integrate their education, and help to protect "the Other". Paul Ruyssevelt of the UCL Energy Institute said this was a good idea, but while medics know who their patient is, for building professionals "the Other" is more nebulous. Keith Clarke was quick to respond that the Hippocratic Oath itself was not as substantial as some might think. Nor was he convinced that design professionals would be prepared to step out of their comfort zones to take the necessary moral/ethical stance. Kenneth Creighton questioned whether a single oath was practical or appropriate: ethical standards vary across the professions, so a one-size-fits-all declaration was unlikely to work. In pointing out that "all accountants have an ethical code", he raised a hearty laugh from the audience.

Clearly, a code with no teeth is worthless. Harry Rich posed the crucial question: would institutions be willing (and able) to expel a member who did not conform to such an "oath"? From the Chair, Rab Bennetts said the UK Green Building Council did have the power to expel unethical members, though it had not yet had to exercise it.

Several panel members felt that risks of litigation created barriers to both ethical behaviour and to professional institutions taking a stronger lead. David Fisk confessed to institutional nervousness regarding insurance; while Rab Bennetts cited the difficulties encountered when design professionals are employed by contractors, where ethical expectations are somewhat different. The theme of connecting professional ethics with business drivers is picked up in several papers in the Special Issue, including those by practitioners Ilari Aho and Chris Twinn.

Who is "the Other"? Stephen Hill said only the Institution of Civil Engineers answered the question in its code of professional conduct, which clearly states that the "public good" overrides the requirements of the client, and requires members to "do the right thing". Harry Rich reiterated the dilemma of trying to serve both client and society, but thought the problem was not insurmountable. Law undergraduates, for example, are taught that they have a duty to the court as well as to their clients.

Speaking from the audience, Gavin Parker of the RTPI was in little doubt that, ultimately, “the client is the public”. Returning to the key theme for the discussion – the role of professional institutions – he said institutions needed to educate the public to have higher standards and expectations. Harry Rich touched on this too, alluding to the overarching problem of tackling carbon emissions, firstly by asking “is the outside world listening?” (answer: probably not) and secondly by identifying the core challenge for institutions: talk to the outside world, another theme picked up in the BRI paper by Chris Twinn.

There was considerable disagreement among panel and audience as to the degree to which appropriate change was already happening, particularly regarding standards and regulations, which in his introduction Bill Bordass thought were not well enough grounded in the realities of building performance in use. Audience member Gregor Harvie then asked, “Have buildings got better?”, which momentarily silenced the room. First to reply was Kenneth Creighton, giving a firm “yes”, but with the caveat that it was the result of standards and regulations, not the action of professionals. Cue much consternation from the audience and panel members alike – many of whom have notched up years of dedicated service to helping to develop said standards. Creighton’s point was that the results came more from individual dedication than strategic action by the institutions. This strengthened Harry Rich’s premise that the institutions are not talking enough to outsiders, including stressing the important roles members play in standards bodies and government review panels.

The debate also discussed the need to bring about change in education to improve (nay, introduce) teaching the ethical aspects of building design and construction; and several times touched on the thorny question of what it means to be a “professional”. Keith Clarke’s answer was profound: professionals had the “privilege and honour of being obliged to think”. Ethics are principally a matter for the individual – they cannot leave it to their institution - though they can clearly be inculcated through education. Going further, Andy Ford of Mott MacDonald and immediate past President of CIBSE warned of the dangers of selecting a particular stream too early: he was a “professional engineer” before he joined an institution. He also cited the example of engineers in Canada who wear a special ring to signify their commitment to high ethical and professional standards.

Thinking of society more broadly, environmental psychologist Henry Pelly commented that the media have, over time, shifted public value structures towards self-interest. A role of the professional was to counteract the culture of self-interest and individual gain. Engineer Will Ray said that the public and clients alike were desperate for “trust”; and without clear professional guidance would turn to crowd-sourced opinion, for example TripAdvisor.

The debate moved on to new technologies, primarily BIM. Will Ray suggested that ‘today’s professionals are tomorrow’s algorithms’. Bill Bordass disagreed: while some things professionals now do will inevitably become more automated, new areas of uncertainty will open up that will be in need of professional independence and judgement. Algorithms had also proved disappointing in their ability to take account of context, something that was really important in relation to the built environment.

Michael Brown described BIM as “perfect information”, drawing a parallel with the retail industry, where interrogation of vast databanks can quickly influence marketing decisions that cascade along the entire supply chain. In his opinion, “the Internet and speed of information is competition to professionals”. Several participants were however concerned that new technologies (primarily BIM), would improve the process of information production and management, but might also squeeze out some of the genuine value added by professionals – the victory of Organisation augured by Abbott. This subject is dealt with in the BRI paper by Jaradat, Whyte and Luck – “Professionalism in digitally-mediated project work. The argument could run and run.

Richard Lorch, editor of BRI, rounded off the debate session with a question aptly worded to pinpoint a fundamental issue: Do professional institutions need to focus on what happens after the building is handed over? With time running short, the answers were brief, but pertinent: Harry Rich reminded the audience that this is already covered in the RIBA Plan of Work, which is being modified for compatibility with BIM working practices; Rab Bennetts stressed the importance of publishing post-occupancy research; Kenneth Creighton said that RICS members are ideally placed to influence building use throughout the whole life cycle; and David Fisk emphasised the need for “infinite commissioning” and closer integration with facilities managers.

Michael Brown, however, recalled the earlier presentation by Katy Janda to underline one way to address the problem: “Can poor building performance become socially unacceptable?”

This was an open-ended debate, with no votes for/against a motion. However, the Guest Editors were asked to draw out some conclusions. Bill Bordass stressed the importance of engaging building professionals as individuals and not just their institutions. He finished by reviewing the light the discussion had thrown upon the four points from the Special Issue that had been highlighted in the announcement of the Debate.

- *A shared identity and vision.* This had been covered and needed to be taken forward.
- *Better procurement processes.* This had not arisen in the discussion, but Bill felt the industry and government were too focused on “means” (getting things built) and not ends (what they were for and how they worked) - “the bit the algorithms don’t reach”.
- *Increasing the amount of knowledge about the performance of building in use.* This emerged frequently in the presentations and the discussion, as it had in the 2011 debate.
- Katy Janda’s suggestion that building performance in use should become a socially-accepted problem area reinforced Bill’s and Adrian’s view that it was a separate knowledge domain from building production, in need of strong representation through an independent body that could both support and challenge the industry, perhaps an *Institute of Building Performance*.

Bill had also been working with The Edge on ten principles for new professionalism. Although not formally tabled, they were supported during the debate, but with a comment that they could be more forward-looking. The Edge may need to review them as it digests the outcomes from the debate.

The last word must go to Adrian Leaman. Summarising the threads of the discussion he said: “It is more than just a question of ethics; it is about moving from a supply-side culture to a demand-side culture”. He cited the title of a book by Michael Ignatieff, saying that it was every professional’s responsibility to think of “the needs of strangers”. If building professionals were to do this, they would at last be equipped to answer the question “have our buildings really got better?”.

The Edge thanks Melanie Thompson for drafting this article for us.