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Architects as conflict managers

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Abstract: Professional practitioners each have a distinctive view of the world which determines and constrains their decision-making. Architecture is an inherently subjective process which, because of the complexity of modern buildings, cannot be reduced to a set of objective rules and procedures. Construction contracts often contain clauses which allow the architect to retain control over decision-making by subjective criteria, but fears of liability are reducing the use of such opportunities.
  The architect's role has reduced over the last two hundred years, and it appears as though there is little need for an architect's skills in many projects. Many of the developments in construction project organization have made the switch-over from architect's responsibility to fabricator's responsibility happen at an increasingly earlier point in the process. If architecture is to survive as a discipline, this trend needs to be reversed.
  In pure management terms, one of the most important and time-consuming tasks for a manager is to manage and resolve conflicts of various types. The central task of design management is similar. If architects are to maintain an influential role in construction projects, they must become adept conflict managers. This means they must also become good contract managers. The training and background of architects, and their supposed skill at using subjective processes to advantage, ought to put them in an ideal position for managing the whole construction process. Individual architects cannot rely upon their professional institution to take the kind of initiatives that are now required. Construction projects simply need people who can deal with conflict and manage contracts. Individual architects are in a strong position to compete for such work.

Keywords: Conflict, contracts, architect's role.

Introduction

The criteria involved in coming to decisions depend upon training and background. Professionals are appointed to exercise their judgment and discretion. Schön (1983) has shown that there are differences between practitioners in their use of media, language and the repertoires used to describe the different frameworks of reality within which each of them works. This is the cause of many of the difficulties confronting practitioners when trying to understand each others' role and value.

Architecture is a creative process, involving subjectivity. The training of architects is largely based around the exercise of subjectivity, involving whole tasks and critiques, rather than absorbing a series of techniques and concepts piecemeal. Indeed, for two hundred years the profession has focused upon architecture as an art. Bowley (1966) reveals how the organization of the building process was viewed as a chore by architects, and a waste of artistic talent, being a task that should be delegated. However, it is for their lack of practical knowledge that architects are castigated most frequently and severely.

Project managers, construction managers and quantity surveyors each work typically with very different agenda for decision-making. Their training is largely based around disaggregation and objectivity. Bills of quantity, BS 5750 (British Standards Institute, 1981) and other control documents are based solely on objective criteria, by their very nature. Indeed, BS 5750 begins by defining quality as 'conformance to requirements'. This definition dictates that requirements can be specified in some measurable way at the outset of a piece of work. The procedures of many construction professionals are often reduced to a set of formal, objective, procedures. For example, standard methods of measurement used by quantity surveyors in compiling bills of quantity.

Construction contracting in the UK is based upon the assumption that design and construction are two separate activities. The designers produce documents, and the contractor is obliged to produce precisely that which is documented (see for example clause 2.1 of the UK's standard form of building contract JCT 80). Where there is a need for subjectivity, discretion or judgment to be retained by an architect, phrases such as *subject to the architect's satisfaction* are used in the bills or specification documents. Such devices enable an architect to retain control over parts of the work which should not be left to the discretion of the contractor. However, they also render the architect liable when mistakes ensue. Amongst other influences, the current prevalence of claims against professional indemnity insurances has driven the RIBA to re-draft the standard contract of engagement for an architect (RIBA, 1992). This seeks to reduce the liability of professional architects, which is seen as a good thing, but it is done by reducing the authority of an architect, which, presumably, may be seen as a bad thing. This seems to be an example of the way in which an institutional reaction to threats tends towards the reactive and defensive. It forms a striking contrast with the concept of an entrepreneurial individual, responding to threats as challenges in a positive and pro-active way.

The changing role of the architect

The way in which the role of the architect has been successively eroded over the last two hundred years is interesting. Some of these changes have been brought about because of the demands of clients, some because of the demands of technological complexity and some because of institutional defensiveness. The progressive reduction in responsibility can be traced through the developments of general contracting, quantity surveying, town planning, accountancy, structural engineering, services engineering, project management, construction management and contract adjudication. A client who employs all of these specialists has little need of an architect, other than as an ornamental designer.

There is a well established pattern for construction projects to be designed by one person, then managed by another. As mentioned earlier, this is the basis of traditional general contracting. There is a point in the process when the lead designer effectively hands over responsibility for the project to a project manager or general contractor.

Newer developments such as construction management, management contracting, design-build and so on, tend to move this point to an earlier part of the process. Clearly, this is <u>not</u> the only choice.

Replacing the architects' central role with another profession may or may not be in the best interests of the client. In any case, merely switching roles emphasizes different agenda, but does it actually change anything other than turning the tables? Architecture is not just about satisfying client requirements for a particular project, but involves a wider responsibility. This has been called *social responsibility* by some commentators. Presumably, there are other facets to these wider issues.

A project which not managed by an architect may be controlled instead by criteria dominated by client interests. Such a project needs external control in terms of architecture. This is the kind control which is applied by town planning legislation for example. This raises the question of whether 'architecture', as opposed to 'architects' can really be external to the project. Replacing the architects' central role, therefore, needs to be considered in terms of 'architecture' (whatever that may mean). In other words, the issue is whether architecture should form part of the internal project management function, or the external control of the construction industry. Projects which are controlled by criteria dominated by architectural considerations are internally controlled in terms of architecture. Obviously, this has been the situation for over one hundred years and it reflects the dominant position of RIBA as one of the senior chartered societies in UK. However, we do not need to look far to see the effects of not controlling the process in this way (pre-mid-nineteenth century in UK, other countries which do not enjoy the same political power structure in their industries). It would be interesting to compare the output from different systems in architectural terms.

The identity of the profession

One of the key features of the two sides of this debate is the accessibility of architecture. When the process is deregulated, it may produce buildings which are more readily identifiable and accessible by their users. This is the immediate appeal of quality control as envisaged by the BSI (British Standards Institute, 1981). Perhaps an internally controlled profession becomes so inward-looking that it is in danger of becoming too esoteric and impenetrable to the uninitiated. In this sense, the deregulation of architecture should be welcomed.

The deregulation of architecture brings with it another set of issues. What are the consequences of doing away with the architect's subjective dominance during the fabrication of the building? Alternatively, what are the advantages of the architect's leading role in the process of fabrication, and what are the advantages brought by those who would seek to compete for this role?

These issues may cover some emotive ground for a profession which, as a whole, has habitually led the process. The current vogue may seem to be something of a threat to those who are theoretically, but not practically, qualified to run a building contract. This

role is no longer an automatic assumption, but has to be competed for, even though the design commission has been won.

The fact that many people are successfully taking over this part of the architect's traditional role is symptomatic of either (a) clients perceiving an advantage in having someone other than the architect manage the contract or (b) clients are simply being misled in to believing that the traditional way is worse.

Designing a central management role for construction projects

The discussion so far highlights the kinds of problems associated with dealing with the problems at the level of the professional institution. It no longer makes sense to conduct business as if the members of any one institution are all equally able and accomplished.

The claim to authority of a professional discipline, or its claim to expertise in a particular area, is substantially based upon its ability to demonstrate its specialist knowledge in its interactions with its clients (Schön, 1983). For many years, architects have been the first port of call for clients. Inexperienced clients most commonly make their first approach to the industry through an architect (NEDO, 1983). Clients may find themselves less than satisfied with the service they receive from the industry, but Bresnen and Haslam (1991) confirm that a process of habituation ensures that traditionally selected arrangements are often favoured for no other reason than a wish to avoid the uncertainty and disturbance which might follow any departure from 'normal practice'. Indeed, it takes a considerable amount of dissatisfaction before a 'critical mass' accumulates and precipitates the kind of moves made by the British Property Federation ten years ago (British Property Federation, 1983). In their manual for a building procurement, they attempted to re-define the traditional roles of the professionals, notably the quantity surveyor, and these proposals were met with howls of derision and pessimism from the professional institutions. The objections of the professional institutions were predictable. It is an inevitable consequence of institutionalization that ultimately an institution becomes very concerned about self-preservation. This is often concealed behind the facade of service to the client. Thus, any perceived threat to the traditional power base of a profession will automatically be attacked as counter-productive, ill-considered and misguided.

Since the current trends in business favour individual initiatives and freedom to trade openly in an unfettered market, it is worth considering how we might dispense with the tired clichés of construction organization, and think about what is truly needed to improve the service offered by the construction industry to its clients.

An interesting view of the processes currently taking place is given by Williamson (1975), who makes it clear that all clients interact with the market in pursuit of their objectives. In our terms, they interact with the construction industry when they wish to procure a building. Small firms, and inexperience firms, are forced to rely upon what the market offers them. Thus they approach the industry in the traditional way.

However, larger and more experienced clients, particularly those who build frequently, can afford to develop their own methods of doing business with the industry. This often involves either the development of in-house expertise, or the utilization of design team leaders who are not architects. This happens so frequently that construction managers, project managers and other specialist managers are increasingly been perceived as a better answer for the experienced client. The surge in popularity of management contracting and construction management forms of procurement in the UK, and of construction management in the USA, show that this phenomenon is no mere passing fad. The problem facing architects is that as the phenomenon grows, the threshold of experience, at which clients turn away from traditional solutions, lowers.

One of the most urgent tasks for any manager is the resolution of conflict and change. This *takes up the largest single chunk of managerial time and energy, and is not always well done at the end of it all* (Handy, 1986). Conflict is a tremendous source of dynamism and creativity within any organization (Pascale, 1991).

Are architects resolvers of conflict? The current stereotypical image of an architect is outdated. Most of the caricatures are based on the concept of an architect as a designer who produces images and models which are to be fabricated by expert builders, and controlled by expert controllers. The stereotypical process has missed the point that the management of the design process is a continuous resolution of *necessary conflict.* Interestingly, the management of the fabrication process is also a continuous resolution of conflict, although the extent to which some of this is necessary is a moot point. Clearly, there are different kinds of conflict. For example, much conflict arises due to the way in which change emerges on a project, but it also arises due to different interest groups rightly and properly defending their interests. Conflict also appears in different levels. Gardiner and Simmons (1992) give a very useful description of different kinds and levels of conflict (see table I). This shows quite clearly that conflict has a central role to play in the construction process.

The art of leadership is not merely a question of accepting a stereotypical role arising from a reflex action of a client. Certainly, it would be wrong to select automatically a project organizational structure which reduced the architect's role to that of an ornamental designer. But the pressure for the latter is growing. Prince Charles' views on architecture strengthen the hand of those who wish not to be aesthetically challenged. And accountants are increasingly important in determining the priorities for construction projects.

Table I: Different types of conflict (after Gardiner and Simmons, 1992)

Latent conflict This refers to the source of a conflict. Due to the nature of the work, certain conflicts 'should' occur. There are three basic types; (i) interest group conflict, (ii) authority conflict and (iii) co-ordination conflict.

Perceived conflict This generally follows from latent conflict. It is the fist stage of becoming aware of a divergence of views, but as yet involves no emotion. When a conflict is only mildly threatening, it may not go any further than this.

Felt conflict When perceived conflict grieves the parties involved, it becomes felt conflict. This involves not only emotion, but also stress and tension.

Manifest conflict This involves openly aggressive behaviour. It involves a conscious decision to obstruct another parties' goal achievement in order to achieve one's own goals. It can happen in a construction project when any of the parties allow their own organization's goals and priorities to take precedence over those of the project.

Conflict aftermath This is the response to, and the outcome of, conflict and it may involve change. If a conflict is resolved then the parties feel more satisfied, but often the resolution involves merely a reversion to an earlier stage in the conflict escalation process which results in grudges and dissatisfaction.

Conflict management and contract management

Conflicting requirements will always need to be resolved in complex projects. Therefore, conflict cannot simply be disinvented. Like cost, or time, the thing to be controlled is a resource to be expended as wisely and effectively as possible, not a phenomenon to avoid. The aim must be the resolution of conflicting requirements such that the project represents the best compromise from amongst the alternatives. This is the inherent nature of the design manager's role (Gray *et al*, 1993). Perhaps it could be suggested that the failure of architects fully to grasp this idea has precipitated approaches which circumvent the traditional authority of the architect. The need to resolve conflicts effectively, and neutrally is the same during the design stage as it is during the construction stage. Indeed, the ambiguous role of an architect under many building contracts, simultaneously acting as employer's agent and independent certifier, is exactly designed to deal with this situation. Unfortunately, too few people appreciate fully the reasoning behind this role.

The latest development in the progressive reduction of the role of the architect is *contract management adjudication* in which all independent decision-making is assigned to another professional consultancy (Baden Hellard, 1988). Whilst this move successfully eliminates the role ambiguity, it also means that the agenda for such decision-making may not be primarily driven by architectural considerations. Under such circumstances, the design philosophy can easily become secondary to other exigencies. Clearly, if architecture has a role to play, it is in establishing a comprehensive design philosophy for a project, and ensuring that this philosophy underpins every decision on the project. This is why the skills of a good conflict

manager are equally applicable to contract management. Therefore, an architect who cannot manage a building contract is not an architect at all. Architects are singularly failing in their duties in discharging contracts, as many lawsuits have shown. Obviously, the professional title of the person exercising this role is of little consequence. What matters is the skill and experience they bring to the project, and the framework of criteria they establish for effective management and control.

Conclusions

The effective modern architect, then, has to do many things. Vigorous marketing is needed to assuage those who feel that architecture is too *arty*. Architectural ideals must be communicated more effectively across the divide between those who do, and those who do not understand the language of architecture. The image of an architect as resolver of conflict is an image which will help to propel individual people into the commercial realities of managing long and complicated processes. It embraces the idea of individuals exercising their unique skill and judgment, rather than acting as institutional clones. This requires central and urgent attention to effective conflict management to dispel the popular image of the architect as an 'arty' designer uninterested in commercial realities.

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