SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION

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Abstract

The intricacies of the design and construction processes when compared to the linear and predictable operations of a vehicle production line have created a building industry that is unique in almost every aspect of its conception, planning, management and realisation. In addition, other influential factors such as the boom and bust cycle of the market economy, the growth of advanced construction technologies and techniques and the increasing level of specialisation within its constituent professions and building trades continuously reshape the landscape of the industry, particularly in Malaysia. Considering such a scenario, rapid changes are envisaged that may re-shape the overall structure and undertakings of the building industry. This paper looks into the outline development of the architectural profession in the past decade for the hope of identifying several issues that may determine the relevancy of current practices of the architectural profession.

1.0 The Profession: A Historical Introduction

Architects, in particular, have long been the mainstay profession in the building industry. As a professional institution, it has undergone various crucial phases in history to evolve into its current form and status. In the United Kingdom, the period leading into the 19th century saw architects primarily viewed themselves as artist and individualists and had the privilege of receiving commissions mainly through enthusiastic public patronage. They had been contented that the profession remained in the realm of the arts and were reluctant to be involved in any way with creation of professional or trade associations (Saint 1983). In the early part of the 20th century, the architects' position gradually developed into the status of a professional grouping as they establish themselves in special position within the growing middle-class through the undertaking of design and construction supervision of their social peers' building commissions. During this period, the architects' training became more formalised and they were required by statute to belong to recognised professional establishments in order to practice. From being individualist artists, they were by now more willing to undertake salaried employment while a significant number became involved in implementing the national social agenda by joining the government service. The period of post-second world war saw the formation of a generation of architects-entrepreneurs whose task was to lead the building design team in providing services to the competitive construction 'market'. Then, the building and construction industry was more akin to an industrial plant whereby the building team procures and assembles a 'production line' of human, material and financial capital in order to create buildings and civil works (Saint 1983). From these three distinct phases of the development of the architectural profession, history generally saw the architects operating as artists, social engineers and entrepreneurs.

2.0 Adapting to Changes

Saint (1983) further reiterated that despite the fact each of these embodiment of types being predominant in a particular period at a time, all three characteristics of the architect have usually been present throughout its existence to a greater or lesser extent. In addition, the continuously changing emphasis on these different dimensions of professionalism throughout history will most likely render the theory from certain quarters that the profession is adaptable enough for future challenges within the modern building and construction industry.

Changes in the construction industry have never been more rapid now than was two decades ago. Subsequently, they have caused constant redefinition of the role of the architect as with other traditional professionals such as the engineers and quantity surveyors. It was found that the scale of decline in the influence of such building professionals as architects as building team leaders has been unprecedented. Gray et al. (1994) had noted that as architects are losing the position and authority within the design team let alone the overall building process, other professions such as interior designers and services engineers are further reshaping the present design team itself. The emergence of specialist designers from various sub-contracting organisations has also meant that architects are even losing control over certain details of construction. In addition, the increasing degree of specialisations among the building trades has resulted in multiple control of the design and construction processes. This lack of single-point responsibility saw the growing influence of project managers whose task are to oversee the overall progress of projects on behalf of clients. The increasing complexities of the construction processes have resulted in clients having to place greater emphasis on the coordination and management of specialist designers and work contractors. As such, the influences these factors have upon the architectural profession have been significant.

3.0 The Abolishment of the Mandatory Fee Scale and its Implications

In response to pressures from the government and public, many practices that were considered to be restrictive such as the mandatory fee scales were removed due to deregulation of the profession. It was apparent at this stage that the public sector was beginning to establish cheaper in-house professional and technical resources in response to such regimented fee scales. Other changes noted during the last decade also included the allowance of fee tendering for architects, architects trading as limited or public limited companies and architects becoming directors in contracting companies. As with other companies, architects' practices were allowed to advertise their skills and abilities to become competitive in the construction market (Davies 1991). The result of these reformations had benefited a number of architects' practices particularly during the 1980s period of economic upturn in which also saw them swelling in size and numbers. As with other establishments, managing this growth had been a problem for many. Things took for the worse during the downturn period of early 1990s as architects struggled to adapt to the reversal of economic fortunes in order to sustain growth and morale of the profession. It was interesting to note that despite the de-regulation of the profession, the initial effect had been detrimental to many small private practices that had failed to adjust to this situation as they operate at unsustainable levels and depressed market prices (Greenhalgh 1997). The architectural profession was not alone in struggling to adapt to the changes. Quantity surveyors, for example, also had to develop new skills and redefine existing ones due to the gradual shift of construction and building procurement away from bills of quantities-related works, which have been their backbone activity in the last decade or more (Greenhalgh 1997).

4.0 Constructing the Team and the Diversification of the Client

Nevertheless, it is important to note that to assess the architectural profession through its own point of view would be a narrow-minded approach in trying to comprehend its state of affairs within the proper perspective of the building and construction industry as a whole. Accordingly, one could not help but to examine the influential attributes of the industry in order that effective progress of the profession can be established and its future strategy mapped out. For this purpose, a series of industry reports will be appraised. One of its most influential, Sir Michael Latham's report in Constructing The Team (1994), has been foremost authoritative in promoting the growth of the building and construction industry particularly in the part of the UK Government as well as private clients within the industry. Latham was precise in acknowledging the growing diversification of the client base encompassing the likes of housing trusts, utilities companies, trust hospitals, grant-maintained schools and private Government agencies.

The Government use to be a unitary client. Now, the change enveloping had caused further fragmentation even in the public sector client base. The industry is also currently witnessing the diminishing influence of the professionally organised client bodies within the public sector as in the case of Scotland in the United Kingdom, where they had previously accounted, direct or indirect,

for 70% of all construction before 1980. This shift has been attributed to the growth of clients' in-house professional expertise (RIAS 1994). The disbandment and privatisation of the central procurement organisations such as the Property Services Agency effectively gave more power and freedom to local government offices in conducting its own affairs in terms of promoting the built environment. Apart from Government agencies, there are also the emerging voices of the private sector clients and firms through forums such as the British Property Federation, Construction Industry Council and the Construction Round Table in promoting productivity, competitiveness, teamwork, efficiency and fairness for the industry. Latham (1994) further recommended that the clients, divided into Government and private establishments, become an instrumental force in fostering good design that provide value-for-money both in terms of total cost and cost-in-use. The emphasis is therefore to derive holistic and comprehensive benefits of the construction processes as opposed to the current practice in which industrial performance tended to cease with the completion of the buildings or works.

5.0 Categorisation of the Client

Masterman (1992) highlighted the need for clients to be categorised in order to give rank to the myriad of client types and the differing complexities in their organisations based upon the level of construction experience. Naturally, professionals who often deal with these clients will need to be aware of the need for discreet solutions as to their procurement requirements. Hewitt (1985) had established that individual categories of clients view project success through different sets of criteria. As such, architects need to be aware of the three main client divisions into Public experienced clients, Private experienced clients and Private inexperienced clients. For the Public Experienced Client, the categorisation is further sub-divided into Primary (Central Government funded) and Secondary(central and local government). In retrospect, private clients are sub-divided into Private Experienced (both primary and secondary) and those who are generally Inexperienced. Masterman further noted, for example, the trend in public sector saw the clients' emphasis on minimum cost, public accountability, value-for-money and certainty of final cost and date. Within the private sector, criteria such as certainty of the construction completion date, the level of the client's involvement in the project, commercial accountability and value-for-money seemed to be of paramount importance. Thus, it will be interesting to see how architects respond to such clients' diversity in order that a more efficient and systematic method of procurement selection within the client-architect briefing process can take place. In contrast, the inadequacy of the architect in briefing and advising the client will lead to poor tender information and site performance thereby result in consequent delays and incurring unwarranted expenses.

6.0 The Importance of the Briefing Process

Graham (1983) had identified that 52.9% of clients' briefs were considered fair or poor. Clearly, the level in which clients' requirements had not been properly analysed and, to a certain extent, overlooked by a significant number of architects suggest to us the lack of experience and understanding in the briefing process. Architects need to be aware of the fact that clients have become more experienced with the construction processes. This type of clients now account for more than 75% of the total project clients (HMSO 1989). As such, they will expect better performance from professional consultants and contractors. In recent times, the construction industry as a whole have come under much censure from these clients due to below par performance in delivering work. Mobbs (1976) and British Property Federation (1983), for example, have been particularly critical of the industry's failure to fulfill the aspirations of clients. This had subsequently influenced the conduct of the building professions and the industry itself. In response, the building industry attempted to acquire greater flexibility in organising business and have become more diversified organisational-wise to serve those needs. Despite all these undertakings, certain quarter within the experienced clients' circle no longer seem to feel confident to make a direct approach to a professional for project advice, preferring to deal with one of many variations of the 'professional client' such as Stanhope and British Airports Authority Plc., a new commercial development process which puts heavy emphasis on an experienced developer's skills in bringing together teams of consultants and specialist for the development a project (Greenberg 1993). Greenberg also suggested that due to this new development, professionals such as the architects, engineers and surveyors may eventually confine themselves into

providing services in the supply side of the commercial building and construction industry equation like any other contractors as opposed to traditionally acting as the intermediary between supply and demand and between developers and user clients. Although this method is practiced only by highly experienced client on complex commercial projects, the implications for the all traditional professions are profound.

7.0 Factors Affecting the Delivery of a Project

Since professional practices are likely to be business enterprises, there must also be deep awareness within the architects' profession on the attributes of their clients' organisations. This is important in order to ensure that architects are dealing with reliable clients whose profile and character could enhance the consultants project delivery performance. Kometa et al (1994) had conducted a survey listing such important attributes and found that the client's financial stability, project feasibility, duties and responsibility and project characteristics are highly ranked by consultants due to their crucial importance in determining project success. Under the factor of financial stability, clients are primarily expected to be creditworthy while maintaining satisfactory level of current liabilities and assets. The clients' active contribution to the feasibility processes of establishing project priorities, site study and project personnel appointment are seen as very crucial together with the responsible discharge of duties in project definition, formulation, finance, planning and implementation. This study also confirmed Walker's (1996) proposition that a project's favourable outcome is highly dependent on its characteristics that are a function of time, type of project, cost, complexities, size and location.

Latham (1994) also reasoned about the importance of the formulation of project and contract strategies as well as the client briefing process. It had been acknowledged that there had long been complaints by the industry of the clients' indecisiveness in making decisions particularly those pertaining the successful and effective start to a project's briefing process. This stance will undoubtedly lead to serious cost and programming implications. The report required the clients to formulate the project strategy to define the need for new construction or refurbishment. An internal assessment should be made to consider the benefits, risks, financial constraints as well as options for the execution of the project, possibly through the service of an external advisor prior to the likely appointment of a project manager proper. By this time, the client will have decided in principle as to the feasibility and viability of the project. Once these have been clarified, the task of producing the following project brief now becomes easier. Subsequently, the client will also be advised to conduct an internal risk assessment in order to obtain the best procurement and contract strategy and by establishing the amount of risk the client is prepared to accept. This is crucial in that different contracts have different levels of risk apportionment between the client and the contractor. Some contracts like Design-and-Build puts the burden of risk almost squarely on the contractor while in a management contract, the client retains the bulk of the risk to enable greater control and involvement in the construction process and outcome.

This methodical approach is a stark contrast to the current practices of project teams whose start on project developments are frequently based on the inappropriate assumptions that the client's requirements data have always been adequately formulated (Walker 1996). In the report, Latham (1994) had clearly identified the role of the project manager in assisting the definition of the client's need. This role could either be undertaken in-house or through external professional consultants such as architects who must be ready to acknowledge that he or she may or may not be retained in that capacity once the client formally confirms that a project is feasible. Essentially, architects must adopt the disciplined approach to client briefing. Not only will it help the client achieve purposeful direction in organising a project, it can also be a tool for the architect or project manager to determine the nature and extent of potential parties and resources which will be of assistance during the subsequent design and ultimately, the construction stage of the project.

8.0 Management of Design

Other crucial issues raised by Latham (1994) included the management of the design process, an area that had traditionally been the bastion of the architectural profession. Nowadays, the growth of technology, transportation and communication imply that the construction processes are becoming faster and more sophisticated with large pro-

portion of its components are made in factories and assembled on site. In contrast to the traditional handcrafted techniques and site-based methods of the old, the modern construction site is becoming more like a large factory production line with numerous activities occurring simultaneously. This necessitates the need for highly effective coordination and management of the various construction tasks. Likewise, the design team also needs to be coordinated and managed so as to assist the careful integration of design tasks with the procurement and construction processes (Gray et al. 1994) and check the adverse effects of fragmentation within the industry that have been a barrier to an efficient future (CSSC 1988). Latham (1994) also recommended the use of Co-ordinated Project information (CPI) in preparing necessary information for the builders. CPI enables the preparation of full set of required documents to be made as part of the conditions of engagement of the designers. The specific signing off of these documents thereby instills a sense of awareness and responsibility upon both the client and designer of the consequences for the construction programmed in terms of possible cost and delay. This legally binding document can prevent willful and unnecessary amendments by the client and encourages the architect to submit full and completed design by tender stage. Furthermore, it reduces the penchant for over specification that could ultimately incur unnecessary costs

9.0 Project Management as a Unique Discipline

Another issue that has challenged the architectural profession is the emergence of a separate discipline of a project manager. Inadvertently, its introduction into the design and construction establishment as a mainstream profession had worsened the fragmentation of the building team. Much of this argument hinged upon the dichotomy of roles between the architect, who is entrusted by statute to perform the task of a quasi-arbitrator in overseeing an entire or a particular portion of a building project, and the project manager, who is unequivocally the client's operational 'arm' when it comes to managing building projects. The Latham Report (1994) had justified its recommendation due to ever increasing complexity of modern construction techniques and the demand for better coordination, control and management of the building trades and consultants. The traditional architects' mode of work and the extent of professional liabilities have made their task of being responsible for all aspects of design as well as contract administration increasingly difficult for large and complex projects. Thus, the need for a single point responsibility for projects like these has long been the requirement of particularly the experienced clients. They have looked to project management as a way to pull all the design and construction process together. The emphasis is therefore on management skills and experience. This is more of an area of opportunity for the architects rather than a barrier for the growth for the profession. RIBA had agreed in principle of the possible return of project management as a separate appointment to the existing Conditions of Engagement for the architect (RIBA 1996). If this idea successfully materialise, then one would see further redefinition of the architects' role in the construction industry.

10.0 Conclusion

Core issues such as the client's role, the emergence of the separate discipline of project management, CPI and management of design are critical determinants of the future of the architectural profession. What architects lack are proactive and long-term strategies that can provide the essential strength and stability for the growth of the profession. Such strategies are crucial in enabling the profession to contribute more effectively towards the immediate environment it serves, which are the construction industry and the public in general.

However, in the effort to ensure the basic survival of the profession, architects are in danger of ignoring the calls for a more fundamental reform of the construction industry. Most notably, critical reports by Banwell, Latham and Egan persistently demanded the integration of the fragmented construction industry. Architects need to identify and address the variety of issues, problems and opportunities that may influence the effort to integrate the profession and the industry. The understanding and analysis of those subjects and any subsequent recommendations must be comprehensive in order to accommodate the various interactions and relationships that exist within the construction industry. Evidently, such tasks will not be easy. In particular, it involves reconciling both the needs of the profession and the construction industry. It is hoped that by incorporating the wider scope of interactions, the architectural

profession will be able to formulate a more effective and practical framework of operation, particularly within the field of design and overall project management. Hopefully, this effort will help shape the future role, relationships and responsibilities of architects.

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