FROM RESPONSIBILITY TO ACCOUNTABILITY

This paper considers the attitude of the British architectural profession to the growth of competition from other professions and to the loss of some of its skills to such new functions as project management. It refers to the transformation of the organisation of building design and construction which has taken place since the late 1960s and speculates on the possibility of further changes. Consideration is given to the ways in which these changes have reflected the fortunes of the British economy during this period. An important influence has been the growth of anti-professional values, but this is not to say that professionalism itself has disappeared. It seems rather that certain professions have shifted their ground. The paper attempts to explain the steps by which this transformation of the building task has come to pass in the Britain of the last twenty-five years. It invites debate on the benefits which may have arisen as well as on the losses which have been incurred.

The argument of the paper is that architects were unprepared for rapid changes in the level of demand for building services, that they were insufficiently skilled in the identification of newly emerging user requirements and that they found it hard to cope with a new fluidity in cultural expectations. The paper sketches a theory of how new sub-professions, such as project management, could first be allowed to emerge, then welcomed and the feared. The newcomers were first seen as no more than specialists within the another profession, then they became useful bearers of responsibilities architects were loathe to carry, and then finally they were seen as competitors for one of the architect's prized professional duties.

The study undertaken by Austin-Smith and others (R.I.B.A., 1962) was concerned only with the architects' function as a designer of buildings. It asked what sort of work was done in an architects' office and how the efficiency of the architect could be raised. Yet its conclusions implied that practice was already changing. It suggested that small jobs should have a different fee scale from large ones, that a new sub-profession was needed on the technical side, that local authority architects had interests in common which did not concern the private sector, that there could be more research on the time spent on different stages in the design process and that architectural education should be diversified. Significantly in view of future developments, it also suggested that new forms of contract could be developed and the code of conduct liberalized. Most revealingly of all, it estimated that productivity would have to rise by up to 63% over the nine year period 1961-70. The study "did not find any evidence that management consultants had penetrated far into the complexities of the design process or the organisation of the design group". The research team had found that almost every office they visited was in need of advice and that "it should not be impossible to make a (service organized by the R.I.B.A) self-financing in the long run".

In periods of economic expansion buildings are created more quickly and with more innovative technology than was known in the past. Criticisms of poor performance are perhaps inevitable. Certainly what Esher (1980) described as "the moral revolution of the seventies" hit architects hard.

In 1968 a new town planning act was passed, allowing for strategic thinking as well as mere development control. A record number of new housing unit completions was recorded (414,000) and plans for a totally new Third London Airport were considered by the Roskill Commission. Expansion was still in the air. Yet the criticisms of architectural production with which the public is now familiar were just about to emerge.

The collapse of the Ronan Point housing scheme in East London became symptomatic of a wider malaise. In 1969 the Skeffington Committee recommended public participation in town planning and Colin Buchanan's 1971 note of dissent to the final Roskill report threw the values of bureaucratic decision-making into question. An academic dimension was eventually given to the debate by Watkin (1978), with his trenchant criticism of Pevsner and the other apologists of the International Style.
If management consultants were already beginning to make an appearance on the construction industry scene, it was hardly surprising that designers as well as owners and users were pleased to be offered a chance to pass some of the responsibility for risk-taking to them the next time round.

Much the same story can surely be told of the 1980s. The development of London’s Docklands which began in 1979 has become a symbol both for the significant expansion of building activity which took place throughout Britain in this period, and for poor quality design. But by this period the professional situation had already been transformed. Dowson’s (1989) phrase “we were all design consultants by then” provides a neat summary of the changes which had occurred.

III

In periods of recession, all professions, including those concerned with building, must seek to diversify their skills and establish new ways of marketing them. Even those coming from quite different backgrounds may find themselves offering to undertake the same work.

Lyall’s (1980) review shows how, after the “official end of the modern movement”, the architectural profession departed “in search of new opportunities”. In 1972 Gordon’s study of long life and loose fit design laid claim to a new understanding of user requirements. In 1973 Essex County Council’s Design Guide reassessed the role of architectural design in town planning. The R.I.B.A permitted architects to advertise their services after 1977; an even more marketing-oriented approach was taken by the Association of Consultant Architects after its establishment in 1980. The clearly declining economic situation was met by an expansion of the use of design-build contracts. Even Jencks’ (1979) theories about the new possibilities for architectural expression may be thought to have been laying claim to the attention of different classes of client.

During this period engineers, surveyors and other potential project managers were also not inactive. They built on building owners’ need for expert advice on the repair of refurbishment of the poorer structures of earlier years to secure a place in those areas of design briefing and construction site supervision in which architects were trying to reestablish their credibility.

Similar diversification is no doubt taking place today in the activities of the architectural profession and of its existing or potential competitors.

IV

The design professions have not been able to sustain their view that overall control of a building process should be entrusted to only one profession. By 1990 the R.I.B.A. had to have a marketing department and a list of publications covering topics such as “how to identify potential clients”, “quality assurance”, “architects’ skills and client needs” and “market opportunities for the decade”.

A recent study by Seidel (1992) asked the principals of British architectural firms to agree with statements that they had received adequate training in various aspects of their work. In round figures, only 9% were happy about their preparation for marketing, 10% for accounting, 10% for facility management, 12% for real estate development, 13% for budget management, 14% for office management, 20% for project management and 30% for construction management. If architects wish, or need, to retain or establish a place in these areas, they will surely find the competition stiff. And indeed, gossip suggests that as internationally known firms of accountants find their core business declining, they are more frequent to be found offering pre-design services to the construction industry and its customers. “Plus ca change, plus s’est la meme chose”.

V

Have architects lost the argument that the control of design is a single function which must be followed through into the details of a project if the highest levels of quality are to be maintained? And if so, does it matter? Accountability for the quality of building design may have many facets and be achievable by numerous routes. An anthropologist like Geertz (1983) might say that we cannot say. We do not really know how design quality is achieved. To quote: “We know very little about what it is like, these days, to live a life centred around, or realized through, a particular sort of . . . . creative activity”.

178
REFERENCES
