

LIFE-CYCLING AROUND CAMBRIDGE: A QUEST FOR A 'PROFESSIONALISM' OF BUILDING

Michael Powell

Anglia Polytechnic University, Chelmsford and Cambridge, UK

The stance taken in this paper is that 'professionalism' is a perspective which we come to understand over a lifetime of experience, illuminated by reading and reflection. The notion of Building is that of academic discipline and practical occupation, viewed in a wide social context. The author develops his own 'professionalism' by reflecting on a career spent partly working in the central institutions of Building and partly in meeting people, teaching and exploring ideas in Eastern England, particularly in the vicinity of Cambridge. Such a 'professionalism' has both corporate and individual components.

Keywords: building, professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Some things we can just begin to understand after many years of experience, reading and thought. For me, the 'professionalism' of Building has been a quest and is only now, after 40 or more years, becoming a discovery. Such understanding as I have has come from letting experience and reading subconsciously merge with and inform each other. The individuality of experience has, as it were, been in dialogue with the literature. Cambridge, where ARCOM is meeting in 1997, has been one of the focal points of my experience and searching; other parts of Eastern England and Eastern and Central London have figured in the journey.

WHY HAS THIS BEEN A QUEST?

This has been an important and pressing quest, sometimes characterised by the need to reconcile perceptions that seemed to oppose or contradict each other. The first came to the fore very early in life. My father and grandfather were small builders in the Essex town of Brentwood. They were business men, in trade, proud of the independence from employers, government and poverty (in the 1920's) that their work gave them. Their approach to business was straight and honourable; they did a decent, appropriate job and expected (needed) to be paid for it promptly. Decently conducted small business was a far from easy way of life but it squared with their Congregational nonconformity (Christianity outside the established Church of England), which from the late sixteenth century has been one of the social and economic, as well as religious, strengths of Eastern England.

I went on an assisted place to Brentwood, an independent grammar school founded in the sixteenth century for local boys. There I encountered schoolmasters, a majority of whom were graduates of Cambridge University or of Oxford. Their outlook was that boys of average ability should seek careers in a profession, such as that of solicitor, or surveyor, or architect, or schoolmaster. There was an inference, intended or not, that

business was a less honourable and less significant occupation. The local builders, 'colleagues' and competitors of my family, who built a pavilion and a science block in my time at the school, seemed to be in a category with the greengrocer who supplied the potatoes for the dining hall. That is understandable to some extent because builders, able and responsible though they were, acted under the instructions and direction of the architects, at least one of whom was a much-respected Old Brentwood.

At that time, in the 1950's, there was a tension in English society between business and profession in terms of status and esteem; that tension was a fault line in me. My quest for a 'professionalism' of Building has been, in part, the struggle to understand and come to terms with that fault line.

DISCOVERING THE NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT

After Brentwood, I went to the Regent Street Polytechnic and, later, the Brixton School of Building (now, respectively, parts of the Universities of Westminster and the South Bank) to study Building Management. On completion of my studies, I came to East Anglia to work for a 100-year old, relatively large (300 direct employees) company in Norwich. That was a revelation and a partial relief. The company was treated with respect by its clients. It was consulted. Its advice was sought. In consultation with architects and quantity surveyors, it was trusted to prepare schemes of work and prices, and to put work in hand in advance of finalising figures. Suddenly, I felt like a professional; I was expected to be competent. I was working alongside people who understood the meaning of excellence in Building. And I quickly came to recognise that honesty and integrity mattered, partly for their own sake and partly because they were the key to continuing business. Some of the clients and architects, such as banks, the multiple stores and government bodies, came up to Norwich from London but they took local industry at its own evaluation of itself, which was proud and professional, in the sense of having competence and integrity. It was not easy then, and it is not easy now, to operate a building business in that kind of way, but seeing it happen gave me pride and self-respect.

Concurrently, I was preparing for the final examinations of what was then The Institute of Builders, later The Institute of Building (IOB) and now The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB). In the one of the Norwich libraries, I found the Papers and Proceedings of the Duke of Edinburgh's Study Conference on 'The Human Problems of Industrial Communities within the Commonwealth and Empire' which had been held at Oxford (oh dear!) in 1956. This was the moment when I discovered that Management was not a sub-set of Building but a facet of the whole advancing human experience, from the UK - the home of the eighteenth century Industrial Revolution - to the new communities of Canada and Australia, and to the very different old but yet new communities of Africa, India, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

One could run a whole course based on these Papers and Proceedings but I draw out here one insight from a paper by D W Harding (1957), Professor of Psychology in the University of London: Harding drew an important distinction between the responsibilities of industry and industrialists and what he regarded as the equally important wider social and moral concerns of industrial society, that the industrialist had the vision and opportunity to influence. He felt that science and industry had progressed greatly, whereas society's ability to advance in areas such as 'mental

health, marital and family life, the relation between adolescents and older people, the arts, literature, drama and so on had not done so. We can make no confident claim to moral, religious or artistic advances.....' (Harding p196). I see a mature, developed, responsible 'professionalism' of Building as relating not only to responsibilities but also to the related, and sometimes consequential, wider concerns. My interest in the concept of 'Building and Society' stems from this insight. (See Powell, 1995a)

One Saturday morning - in 1962 probably - I came from Norwich on an IOB professional visit to the site of Churchill College Cambridge, a new institution, the foundations of which were then just peering out of the ground. As I recall it, the site had the marks of competent management but, as the builder and the engineer talked to us about the technological concepts and intricacies of the work, my mind must have wandered to the then growing, gnawing thought that, because I was the non-technical person I had come to know myself to be, I could not in all conscience hold myself out to be a professional Builder or Building Manager in the commonly understood sense. At best to do so would be misleading and at worst I would increasingly be an impostor. This was a dilemma of professional conscience in relation to one's own competence. Oddly, it was to be resolved through my joining the permanent London staff of the IOB, where my commitment to Building would grow but my everyday function would change.

A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE BUILDING

There is nothing new under the sun! The question of whether business can be properly regarded as a professional activity had been addressed, I was to discover in 1995, by the innovative United States management 'guru', Mary Parker Follett.(1868-1933) (See Graham 1995) In 1925 she had presented a paper 'How Must Business Management Develop in Order to Become a Profession?' (Graham, p267; lecture presented as 'Business in Society'). Follett saw life in society as exchange of services: 'A group of people settling in a new region first plant and sow. But other things have to be done. One buys groceries and sells to his neighbours. He does this expecting someone else in the community to build his store and house and keep them in repair, and someone else to make his shoes, and someone else to look after him when he is ill, and so on.' Business is service; each business provides a necessary function in society.

But, Follett argues, service alone 'narrows us down to too meagre an ethics'. In addition, we need the love of work, the joy in work well done. Her vision is 'that no occupation can make a more worthy appeal to the imagination, either from the point of view of the service it can perform or from the tremendous interest of the job itself, than of business management'. She argues strongly for the establishment of a professional institution for business management, whose purpose would be to establish, maintain and improve standards, to educate the public to appreciate standards and to protect the public 'from those individuals who have not attained standards or wilfully do not follow them'. Such an institution is the embodiment of a corporate responsibility.

Follett challenges business to learn from established professions, including architecture. She sees that there may be conflicts between the standards demanded by a profession and those of a firm but that is the further challenge : 'An architect feels primarily that he belongs to a certain profession..... he remains permanently bound to the standards of his profession. I recognize that there is very serious trouble when the

standards of one's firm and one's profession clash - there indeed is a difficult integration for you. What I am emphasising here is that..... one's professional honour demands that one shall make this integration'. At heart, it is a matter of loyalty. 'What then are we loyal to? To the soul of our work. To that which is both in our work and which transcends our work'. Thus for this little Bostonian lady back in 1925 there was a great challenge in the 'professionalism' of business management. Always at the heart of inspired 'professionalism' is a passion for the particular work. It is the work that is central. What to me is one of the most creative streams of thought in business and professional ethics is that which sees personal virtue in terms of commitment to excellence in complex and significant fields of work. This was discussed in my 1996 ARCOM paper. (Powell 1996b).

A PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTION, A STANDARDS COUNCIL AND A RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

To return to the main story. The person who showed me how to use the word 'Building' as a noun, sometimes with a capital 'B' (as I have been using it in this paper) was Sir Peter Shepherd. Sir Peter's native city of York is within Eastern England! I woke up one day to find myself Secretary to the IOB Practice Committee (later, the Professional Practice Board), which had been created in response to Sir Peter's far-seeing vision; he was its chairman and the president-elect of the IOB. Long afterwards I came to see that for him Building meant an academic discipline/ professional occupation, comparable with Law, Architecture, Education, Management, and so on.

When I became its Secretary, the Committee had just published the first edition of the Rules of Professional Conduct. At that time, in the mid- late-60's, building generally was getting a bad press. The Committee asked me to research the issue of the statutory or voluntary registration of firms or individuals as a phenomenon of some industries and some professions in some countries. The issue for us (we were an 'us', not members and secretary) was whether 'Building', of which the IOB was the embodiment and custodian, would benefit from registration in the UK building industry in general. Although the Committee decided to recommend no action, it had researched and thought deeply about the issue. To have done that was to have fulfilled an important part of the IOB's corporate professional responsibility as the embodiment of Building.

I moved to the what was then the National House-Builders' Registration Council (NHBC), later the National House-Building Council (NHBC), to be the Secretary to its Standards Committee, and for a while, one of its Regional Managers. Sir Peter had seen this move as my going from the 'theology' of Building as considered in the rarefied heights of the IOB, to the 'preaching' of hard, basic practicalities to 20 000 house-builders building 150 000 houses a year. I quickly realised that House-Building was a technologically complex and socially and environmentally significant discipline/profession in its own right. To be the producer of the 'good', in the economics sense, that ordinary people may spend most of their working lives paying for, is no small responsibility. The dilemma for NHBC at that time, and probably for much of the time since, was to walk the tight rope between exercising a strong discipline on House-Building standards without creating a closed shop. In the 1970's many people believed in the open shop for reasons of economic and political conviction. At the same time some of them, and some others, believed that the best interests of House-Building itself are served if the industry is open but with safeguards

to protect house purchasers against incompetence or unscrupulous behaviour. Seeking to understand issues such as this at the interface of profession or industry and society, is another component of an informed and involved 'professionalism'.

In most years, NHBC went on tour to meet House-Builders and discuss standards and other issues. I know we came to Cambridge, probably at least once to the University Arms Hotel! Touring was also part of my subsequent job in the 1980's as Research Manager for Building at CIRIA (the Construction Industry Research and Information Association). We came one year to Churchill College, by then a well-established building. The college let us meet in the pavilion on the sports field on a summer afternoon to discuss the current package of research projects and proposals. The majority of CIRIA members - companies, consultancies, local authorities, public bodies - had a strong engineering base. During my time at CIRIA, I learnt with difficulty to respect Engineers and Engineering. Engineers seemed to me to be more intense and less generally communicative than builders, architects, managers or surveyors. I have gradually come to see that each of the 'building professions' has its own culture, probably the consequence of the nature of its work and of its history. It seems to me that there are depths in each to which the others rarely listen long enough really to understand. An important part of the 'professionalism' quest is to seek to understand and to share the riches of the others. To guide research in Building Technology and Construction Management, we had an advisory committee. We made this inter-disciplinary and inter-professional. In its best years, for most of its members it was an experience of 'finding the others' of a special kind, to which I know they looked back with gratitude for a long time.

The CIOB nominated Council and Committee members to both NHBC and CIRIA. In doing so, it was acting both on behalf of, and in the interests of, those professionally engaged in Building. Its corporate action was a facet of their 'professionalism'.

AN INTERNATIONAL FIRM WITH A CAMBRIDGE OFFICE

Arups is an international building organisation with its head office in London and one of its other offices in Cambridge. One of my privileges as an IOB staff member was to be present one evening at a small dinner party at which Sir Ove Arup was the guest. Arup, both literally and metaphorically, was a man head and shoulders above most. As I encountered him then, and as I have gradually learnt about his approach to both engineering design itself and to the creation of an organisation to carry it out and be a home for engineers of structural and environmental disciplines, and for associated architects, I have come to sense an outstanding example of a 'professionalism' developed in the context of Building.

In his autobiographical reflections an Arup engineer, Peter Rice, quotes one of Arup's last manifesto's to engineers. Arup sees a world with very little wild country left; all environments are to some extent built environments. He says 'Whether we like it or not, we are now burdened with the administration of the conquered territory. Nature reserves, landscape, townscape: they will all be wantonly destroyed to the ultimate ruin of man, or they must be deliberately planned to serve his needs.' (Rice p68). The facet of 'professionalism' that Arup gives us here, is that of seeing our work and our responsibilities in the widest perspectives of both space and time.

From Rice himself I will take just three insights. First he distinguishes very succinctly between architecture and engineering. Architecture is creative, while engineering is inventive. (Rice p72). Second, he reins in the view (of Follett and others) that industry

can easily be truly professional: 'The building industry has an enormous investment in the status quo and, like Iago, will use every argument to demonstrate that other choices are irrational and not very sensible. Only the engineer can withstand these arguments, demonstrate the wrongness of the position of industry and demolish its arguments'. (Rice p76). Thus, 'professionalism' in industry must be prepared to have limited vision pointed out and arguments demolished. Third, a 'professionalism' free from misguided constraints is free to surprise its clients: 'And, you know, gradually people come to you to buy surprise.....I'm actually quite often surprised myself by what the outcome is because I'm a bit like a hound following a fox..... I've got my nose to the ground to make sure I'm following it properly'. (Rice, plate following p191). That is a marvellous insight, from a man knowing he was approaching an early death, into 'professionalism', to know when to surprise and to follow the idea properly to fruition..

In 1993, Hamil published a case study of the Arup organisation. Among the main characteristics of the organisation he drew attention to these: It is owned by a trust and not by the partners; a young person comes into the organisation with nothing, may rise to be a senior partner, and will go out with nothing. The firm's commitment is to excellence in creative engineering and design. It aims to be human and friendly, as well as large and efficient. Largeness is not an aim and other organisations have never been acquired; all growth has been natural. Neither is profit an aim; it is the means to the end. Some profit is invested back into the firm and some distributed among all the staff. The staff are 'ends' and not means, Quality of working environment is regarded as important. Lateral organisation and self-imposed discipline help express the culture. The social purpose of engineering works is one of the criteria used in the identification and selection of work. In summary, the organisation is businesslike and profit making in the context of its only purpose which is the achievement of the highest quality engineering. That is the way in which it integrates the two main facets of its life.

UNDERSTANDING TRUST: TRUSTING IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND

In 1988, I came to teach, and to think, at what was to become the Anglia Polytechnic University, a joining together of the Essex Institute of Higher Education in Chelmsford with the Cambridgeshire College of Advanced Technology in Cambridge. Going round in my head at that time was a comment made to me during the CIRIA years by a man I much respected, a very untypical civil engineer and the managing director of one of Central London's oldest building companies, which to his chagrin had been taken over by a high pressure consortium. He now lives in handicapped retirement not far from Cambridge. His comment had been 'We must do something about trust in relation to the building industry'. To be trusted, I gradually came to see, was one of the essential characteristics of having a valid 'professionalism'. Two people heard my friend's cry and two papers were written, the Latham Report and my paper to ARCOM in 1990! (Powell 1990).

My paper was conceptual but it had a practical twin, on which, at the time, I chose not to publish anything. The twin project was a series of informal discussions with people in Cambridge and elsewhere in the East London and East Anglia. One discussion was with one of Cambridge's most respected building companies, that regrettably did not survive the subsequent recession but which was 'mourned' locally and in the wider industry as a firm whose commitment to the best was never compromised. Another discussion was with the Deputy Surveyor to the University, who spoke from the point

of view of someone concerned with buildings whose envisaged lifetime might sometimes be as much as 1000 years - some exaggeration perhaps, but the point was clear. That, it seems to me, is real Continuing Professional Development, to have spoken with people who have paid a very high price for their reputation and with others who have looked into the eye of the distant future and resolved, so far as they are able, to act responsibly towards it.

The third meeting in Cambridge on the subject of Trust was in King's College, in a garret up a winding staircase. My discussion was with Diego Gambetta, a scholar in the field of human behaviour who had edited the book (Gambetta 1988) from which much of my theoretical understanding of trust had been derived. I was a Builder and my sub-theme in our discussion was trust in the context of Building; he was an Italian and his sub-theme and current research area was trust in the context of the mafia; we had some common ground! Grappling with the work of theoreticians of various disciplines in order to understand some of what may be going on in Building can be part of the search for a deeply-rooted understanding of Building. To engage in dialogue with other disciplines is part of a developing 'professionalism'.

I was seeking to understand trust as a phenomenon of human behaviour, both in general and in the context of Building. That is the normal research process. But the mirror image, trusting in order to understand, is more than research. I shall never begin to understand matters such as Engineering, or Architecture, or Responsibility, unless I trust other people enough to listen to what they have to say. If, as a professional, I want to be committed to the good of Building, I have to learn, and in order to learn I have to trust enough to listen. Thus, trusting and listening are important professional attributes, which have to be cultivated over long periods.

Trust can be looked at as the fiduciary value. To work to be worthy of trust oneself and to be respecting enough to want to give trust to others, is to express a value. For me, it was a modest eureka experience to discover that the fiduciary value is one of a family of values that can be related to Building, others including the ethical, the economic, the aesthetic and the technological. That discovery gave rise to my 1991 ARCOM paper. (Powell 1991).

Architecture and Building

My first remembered visit to Cambridge was when I was about 14. My father had to come to a meeting at the Eastern Federation of Building Trades' Employers (now part of the Building Employers' Confederation, BEC). The family came with him. It was at the end of the day when he had joined us that we made our symbolic visit to King's College Chapel - if you have been to King's Chapel, you have been to Cambridge! This conjunction of a meeting of builders, no doubt discussing conditions of trade, and a visit to one of England's best known works of architecture, is poignant when looked back upon. I ask myself whether my concept of Building 'professionalism' points to business, or to architecture, or to both. Ultimately, if there is to be any inner coherence, it has to be open to both.

King's Chapel is an example of technological invention. 'The English invention of the fan vault led to the achievement of King's College Chapel at Cambridge, begun in 1446 ... This technical mastery was the result of increased professionalism and specialisation.' (Erlane-Brandenburg 1997 pp93-4). Here is the nuance that 'professionalism' includes competent, reasoned and highly-skilled innovation

Addenbrooke's Hospital, endowed by John Addenbrooke, was built in Trumpington Street Cambridge in the eighteenth century. We read further that 'Towards the end of 1767 a Committee was appointed "to examine the Underground Floor". James Essex (1722-1784), a builder and architect [my underline] who had been employed in the building of the Hospital was consulted and the plans he prepared were accepted.....'. I conjecture that in low-lying Cambridge, on a site that always had problems with drainage, it required both architectural and constructional skills to direct the project. But the point is that Mr Essex was builder and architect in one. (Rook et al 1991, p68).

It was only with the foundation of the RIBA and of the CIOB in the mid nineteenth century, that in England the master builder, the architekton (Gk), became a visibly and publicly split personality, one half scholar/artist/designer and the other practical fabricator/business manager. Over the last 150 years much has been learnt in these two branches of Building. That learning must be evaluated, conserved, integrated and used. At one level, this integration is taking place partially and piecemeal in procurement methods such as design-and-build and construction management. That may be profound, pragmatic or superficial. The deep, long term professional responsibility is scholarly in nature. For the sake of the future of Building in the most inclusive sense, the history must be unravelled, understood and written. It is only through seeking insight through the construction of long perspectives that we shall understand.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER: 'PROFESSING'

I come last to the idea itself, to the idea of 'professing'. In the seventeenth century, some from among our East Anglian forbears, many of them nonconformists, emigrated to New England. It just so happens that a book by an American scholar, Bruce Kimball, has recently captured for me the origin and essence of 'professing'. He states that 'By the sixteenth century "profess" was employed..... in the sense of any vow or affirmation, including "to declare oneself expert or proficient in" some craft or art.' (Kimball 1991 p19). While the idea of 'professing' was religious in origin, in that crucial period in American history it was used comprehensively and not selectively. The inference is that each person can make his or her 'profession' or vow with the same notion of commitment as is identified with 'profession of faith'.

CONCLUSION

For Kimball, the ideas of 'profession' and vocation or calling are the same. The writing of this paper has made me want to look at calling in a different way. While I am more than happy to say that Building is my calling, I also want to say that it is Building that has called to me, saying 'Here is something in which you have roots, something whose good you can seek, something broader and deeper than you ever conceived it to be, something which can link you to the future, something that demands your competence and integrity equally, - all that and provide you with scope to earn a living.' Seeking to understand and create a 'professionalism' of Building, is a quest but it is also a 'being found'. And this combination of quest and 'being found' have as their focus a city in the English Fens that has two universities, where it is delightful but crowded in summer and extremely cold, but quiet and peaceful, in winter - and where many conferences are held!

REFERENCES

- Erllande-Brandenburg, Alain (1995) *The cathedral builders of the middle ages thames and hudson*, London.
- Gambetta, Diego ed (1988) *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Graham, Pauline ed (1995) *Mary parker follett: prophet of management*, Harvard Business School Press.
- Hamil, Sean (1993) Building on ethics: ove arup and corporate social responsibility in 'good business?: case studies in corporate social responsibility', School for Advanced Urban Studies, Bristol.
- Harding, D W (1957) Values in industrial society: a comment, *Duke of Edinburgh's Study Conference*, Oxford University Press, **2**, 191-6.
- HRH the duke of edinburgh's study conference on the human problems of industrial communities within the commonwealth and empire oxford 1956 (1957)*, **1 and 2**, Oxford University Press.
- Kimball, Bruce A (1992) *The "true professional ideal" in america: a history*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Latham, Sir Michael (1993) *Trust and money*, London: HMSO.
- Latham, Sir Michael (1994) *Constructing the team*, London: HMSO.
- Powell, Michael (1990) Building trust proceedings. In: *Sixth Annual ARCOM Conference*.
- Powell, Michael (1991) Axiology (the science of values) related to building. Proceedings of *Seventh Annual Conference of ARCOM*.
- Powell, Michael (1995a) The building business and society: explorations with building management undergraduates. *Proceedings of the International Association for Business and Society*, 718-723.
- Powell, Michael (1995b) Reading building management: towards a humanities based approach. *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Conference of ARCOM*.
- Powell, Michael (1996) Building ethics: towards an aristotelian approach. *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Conference of ARCOM*.
- Rice, Peter (1993) *An engineer imagines*, London: Artemis.
- Rook, Arthur et al (1991) *The history of Addenbrooke's hospital*, Cambridge University Press.