Pan-professional Accreditation in UK Building Conservation Background, Development and Operation

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Background

In the UK the drive to promote a scheme of professional accreditation in building conservation was initiated as long ago as 1988. At that time, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) approached the Governmental historic buildings grant-giving bodies to enquire why only architects should be identified in official documentation to oversee Government funded conservation projects when, arguably, building surveyors were equally, and probably better, qualified to do the same work. The underlying point behind the RICS case was that numerous building surveyors across the country were involved in building repair, maintenance and conservation works on a wide variety of traditionally constructed buildings. And, as these buildings were inevitably of a similar construction and risk category as historic buildings, the surveyors' expertise should not be barred from taking a lead in historic building grant-funded projects.

Although initially rejecting this overture, the official Government bodies well-recognised the country-wide diversity of structures, traditional construction techniques and regional variations in the use of building materials, and the need for multidisciplinary working in carrying out appropriate conservation activities. Over time, they also increasingly recognised that there was a real need to broaden the professional criteria required to work in the field. A reappraisal of a resubmitted RICS case for individual practitioner peer-reviewed accreditation in building conservation, acknowledged that such an approach focused on achieving greater attention being paid to arresting the general deterioration of the historic building stock, and improving the need for more sensitive adaptations to traditional buildings.

Behind this recognition, a growing awareness had slowly been emerging that, since the 1960's, much of the countries historic building stock was being lost through demolition, decay, and a general lack of understanding of its value at all levels of society. As this tide was turning, in an attempt to reveal the true aesthetic value of such buildings, a vigorous campaign of repairing and cleaning buildings got underway - regrettably, and with hindsight, much of this was ill-informed. Significant damage was being done to numerous sandstone buildings in particular as a result of the variety of cleaning techniques that were being used at the time The consequential heavy commercial marketing of chemical consolidants, waterproofing agents and other surface solutions, were also subsequently found to be creating other damaging effects on many buildings through their in-appropriate use - frequently they were being applied by what became known as the untrained "cowboy builder", or "white-van man", of dubious provenance.

Of similarly concern, and of greater overall impact, was the emerging acceptance that the ubiquitous use of hard, un-yielding and inflexible cement mortar was creating major difficulties for the performance of traditional buildings and, in many cases, this had lead to their accelerated rate of decay. Related health and safety issues were also emerging as a result of old cement mortar repair applications separating from the underlying structure and

dropping from heights off building facades onto underlying pedestrian ways. Combined, these and other concerns revealed that there was a general lack of understanding of the properties of traditional building materials, and how they perform holistically in an integrated way. Further revealing this lack of understanding, during the 1980's and early 1990's a number of traditional Georgian and Victorian domestic buildings in London collapsed as a result of ill-informed decisions being taken as work was being carried out on them.

What emerged across the country was a growing recognition that the entire UK construction industry had majored its focus on new-build construction for over half a century, with little or no attention being paid to the needs of educating and training those who had a responsibility for the conservation, repair and maintenance of the existing building stock. Yet, being informed to carry out relevant repairs using appropriate skills and materials, and effecting proper and timeous maintenance, was beginning to be recognised as being part of the building conservation work portfolio.

Clearly, significant steps were going to be necessary to redress the imbalance, and the formal accreditation of building professionals to work in conservation was seen as one of the initiatives that would be required to drive up quality and standards in the sector.

Official Recognition of Accreditation Needs

Following a subsequent overture from RICS, official recognition was formally given to their accreditation scheme for building surveyors (supported by postgraduate conservation training at the College of Estate Management) that was launched in 1992. This was followed by a similar accreditation scheme, devised for architects, promoted by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) in 1995.

Both schemes required portfolios of evidence to be submitted by individuals to show that they had the specific competence to practice in conservation. However, these initial schemes were based on the need for individuals to submit photographic and drawing details of five building conservation 'projects' that they had been involved in. But, in recognising that 'projects' were the result of team effort, the question arose how would it be possible to interpret the competence of an individual, and what was relevant in the process of doing so, in assessing such omnibus information.

In the 1997 - 1998 Annual Report to the UK Parliament the then Historic Buildings Council for Scotland noted that "fundamental difficulties have been experienced in seeking to achieve appropriate quality and standards in a number of historic buildings repair grant scheme cases". It then went on to indicate, "Within a 3 to 5 year period, professional body accreditation should become a condition for lead professionals working on historic buildings repair grant projects". In their 2000 – 2001 Annual Report it was noted that they "understood that some bodies were not yet sufficiently comfortable with that prospect" and they hoped that the work "which Historic Scotland was undertaking with the professional bodies to ensure that a sufficient number of specialists had been endorsed to meet the level of work in the sector would enable accreditation to become mandatory for grant within the next 2 to 3 years".

The following year, in 2002, English Heritage publicly stated that "The grant recipient must engage a competent professional, that is, a registered architect, RICS conservation accredited chartered building surveyor, or chartered engineer, or team comprising of such professionals, with appropriate conservation knowledge, ability and experience to plan and specify the work in detail, and to inspect the works whilst they are in progress". In doing so, both grant-giving bodies set in motion considerable drivers to encourage the uptake of the, then, two professional body run accreditation schemes that were in place.

The Scale of Conservation, Repair and Maintenance Work

Subsequent researched investigations in the UK's skill base started to confirm that the construction industry actually operated in almost two equal halves (new-build, and repair and maintenance) yet only trained for one sector - new-build. Exploring this identified concern, a series of published reports released over the last 10 years, have persistently noted that conservation, repair and maintenance was not being taught in undergraduate professional education, and identified that related activities on over 6 million traditionally constructed properties accounted for almost 50% of all construction industry work activities, with an overall UK value of £6 billion per annum. The clear message was that the quality, value and needs of the existing built heritage was not being recognised by the education and training worlds, the industry, or professional bodies.

It was also established that building owners had a low expectation of seeing effective conservation, repair and maintenance work being carried out on their property, and had difficulty in finding expert guidance to inform them. At the same time, the various professional institutes offered little support for conservation specialists, and had an unsatisfactory, non-transparent means of offering advice to clients on choosing appropriate professional agents.

In terms of training, it was openly revealed that the majority of architects, building surveyors and engineers working on traditionally constructed historic buildings had no specialist postgraduate qualification in conservation. In 2002, an analysis of the 5,400 RIBA registered architectural practices in the UK revealed that up to a third of the firms professed some interest, experience of competence in building conservation - yet the professional body had no clear, transparent, and independently assessed means, of demonstrating this. Essentially, untrained practices were promoting themselves in a process of self-certification.

Related Drivers for Change

Since 2005 a number of other drivers for change have emerged. Building upon the two key Government heritage bodies requiring accreditation as a condition of grant-aided project work, there has been a steady dawning in the awareness of professional bodies regarding the growth of conservation, repair and maintenance needs. This has been encouraged by the variety of report findings producing alarming statistics to reveal the scale of the deficit mismatch in activities, along with their associated recommendations. In addition, a growing current awareness of pressures from the sustainability and climate change agendas, coupled with the emerging carbon neutral and energy efficiency demands, flag up the need for a more rigorous approach to conservation. The existing building stock will remain under considerable pressure to accommodate inevitable changes to the way they perform well into the foreseeable future.

As these demands emerged, a number of basic challenges were identified as having a bearing on the accreditation initiative. The most fundamental was to improve the abilities and competence of individuals currently in practice, and to devise appropriate structures and guidelines for accreditation schemes to follow. Taking the view that the peer-assessment process for practitioners working in the field was the best way forward, there was a need to establish and appoint assessor's with a 'client perspective' in mind, to encourage the various schemes to become established, and work to a common assessment procedure. This called for the identification of a range of appropriate 'evidence' to be compiled, and submitted, by the individual in their application to their professional body for peer-review assessment.

Various parameters were identified to establish common intentions, aims and objectives, and to find and adopt a common denominator to span across the professional disciplines. In helping to enable a relevant dialogue across the disciplines, Historic Scotland established and supported a UK wide pan-professional body that became known as the 'Edinburgh Group' - fundamentally because it regularly met in the City of Edinburgh.

The Edinburgh Group and understandingconservation.org

The initial purpose of the Edinburgh Group was to address how the different accreditation schemes had been set up with a view to determine and endorse the degree of commonality that existed between them. As a result, it reviewed existing scheme documentation and any guidance that was prepared for applicants and assessors. It subsequently enabled discussion between the different professional bodies from a client's perspective to help ensure that, whatever professional appointment was made, the individual was competent across a common field of understanding in conservation activities. The most significant output from the Group was the development of an accreditation support mechanism in the form of the web site – www.understandingconservation.org

This site built upon the explicit values of the 1993 ICOMOS Guidelines on Education and Training and recast them into five relevant subset activities upon which accreditation submissions and assessments could be made on a common footing. These address the topics of -

- 1. Cultural significance
- 2. Aesthetic significance
- 3. Investigation, Materials and Technology
- 4. Social and Financial Issues
- 5. Implementation and Management of Conservation Works

Set out in the form of structured CPD activities, the aim of the site is to offer assistance and guidance to practitioners who are presenting their experience to various professional institutes to gain accreditation in building conservation skills. It is not a formal course as such, nor does it provide an easy route to accreditation. What it does seek to achieve is to influence the way potential applicants think, and it provides a self-assessment regime that

will assist them in compiling an appropriate body of evidence for submission to demonstrate their accrued knowledge across a range of projects. Now administered by the Conference on Training in Architectural Conservation (COTAC), over the four years that this site has been in existence, it has received more than a third of a million hits - clearly satisfying a need that, at the moment, is not provided anywhere else.

Although much remains to be done in promoting the various accreditation schemes to ensure a steadily increasing number of those being accredited, some related issues still need to be addressed. These include the provision of suitable regionally-based CPD support and availability, addressing the underlying question of who 'educates the educator' and 'trains the trainer' in the supporting educational establishments, and avoiding allegations of 'closed shop' activities in the operation of the schemes. To date, however, progress is being make towards the ultimate ideal of having fully accredited professional teams working on conservation, repair and maintenance projects.

ICOMOS Guidelines on Education and Training

A key element underlying all work carried out to date has been the recognition of the value and relevance of the internationally accepted "ICOMOS Guidelines on Education and Training in the Conservation of Monuments, Ensembles and Sites", dating from 1993. Adopted by all the building professional bodies that have devised a conservation accreditation scheme, this document succinctly sets out the qualities and criteria required to operate effectively in the area. Specifically, it states that conservation work should only be entrusted to persons competent in specialist activities, including the ability to properly read the asset being worked on; understand its history, setting and technology; and absorb relevant information to understand and analyse its behaviour through a diagnosis of the different causes of decay.

In doing so, the Guidelines also require the need to make emerging reports readable to a wide variety of audiences, whilst also incorporating international charters and conventions in the work approach, and through adopting a process of making balanced judgments on what is required, recognising the need to obtain more specialist advice if that is necessary. In pulling all this together to give expert advice on strategies and management policies, the Guidelines further identify the need to properly document the work, likely to be carried out by multi-disciplinary teams operating with a wide variety of interested parties.

The UK Building Conservation Accreditation Schemes

Incorporating the ICOMOS requirements, six UK-based professional accreditation schemes were devised during the period 1992 - 2010, with an additional scheme emerging in the Republic of Ireland. These are run by -

- Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors: (RICS) 1992
- Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland: (RIAS) 1995
- Architects Accredited in Building Conservation: (AABC) 1998
- Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland: (RIAI) 2001
- Conservation Accreditation Register for Engineers: (CARE) 2003
- Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists: (CIAT) 2008

• Royal Institute of British Architects: (RIBA) pending 2010

Each of these schemes is supported by a specific website where background information, guidance, and application forms can be found. Relevant introductory web pages for the various schemes are -

http://www.rics.org/site/scripts/documents_info.aspx?documentID=315&pageNumber= http://www.rias.org.uk/content/default.asp?page=s6_17 http://www.aabc-register.co.uk http://www.riai.ie/consumer/protected_structures/conservation_accreditation/ http://www.careregister.org.uk http://www.ciat.org.uk/en/Join_CIAT/conservation_register/

In continuing this process, the RIBA released a Press Statement on its website on 23 June 2010 to announce the latest scheme that offers an incremental accreditation route for Conservation Registrants, to develop into Conservation Architects and, ultimately, Specialist Conservation Architects. See –

http://www.architecture.com/NewsAndPress/News/RIBANews/News/2010/RIBAtolaunchCon servationRegisterinautumn2010.aspx

In creating this progression, the UK's principal professional body for architects have recognised the significant value of the entire conservation, repair and maintenance work sector to the profession's work portfolio. In an associated supportive statement from English Heritage, this principal grant giving body fully endorses the value of the RIBA scheme with regard to accredited Specialist Conservation Architects working on their grant-aided projects. Since this announcement, UK architects have showed considerable interest in the RIBA scheme, and it is anticipated that interest and uptake will develop significantly over time.

Conclusion

Combined, the outcomes of all of the UK building conservation accreditation schemes will do much to improve the overall quality and standard of those working on conservation, repair and maintenance activities. As a result, more effective recognition will be given to the relevance of the built heritage, its future will be better assured through more appropriate decision making and project management, and its value considerably enhanced.