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The role of professional institutes today

Dr Anthony Mills + Eli Giannini

Dr. Anthony J Mills¹, President AIQS Victoria Chapter speaks with Ms Eli Giannini², President of the Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects

Introduction

Visibility is often considered one of the key aims of professional institutes. They strive to be visible to the industry, clients, and to the membership at large. The question however is, are professional institutes really only lobby groups for their members. If so, is this different to their function in the past, and what is the modern role of professional institutes today.

In a UK survey of Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) members undertaken in 1998 the most popular response was “promoting the core skills and expertise of the profession” (29%). Subsequently, the members were then asked what the RICS should spend money on and the members suggested the above issue to be the most important and further added “promoting the surveyors role in business”.

This is the dilemma that faces professional institutes today. The aim of this article is to begin discussion on the role that the professional institutes play in a dynamic contemporary society. It is clear that RICS members in the UK consider that promotion is the main objective, but what is the value of restricting membership to graduates of narrowly focused courses, and how serious should institutes be in maintaining Continuous Professional Development (CPD), or setting standards of professional conduct.

In a modern economy does the community derive benefit from restricting access to pools of skilled people who are all members of a professional institute? This question was put to Ms Eli Giannini, President of the Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA).

Interview

AM Do you believe the Institute should have a role in promoting its membership or is it more of a learned society?

EG I think it is both but definitely the RAIA sees the benefit of promoting the value of its architects and architecture. It is a difficult role because there are so many views out there amongst architects. There are many divergent views so how does the President and the institute promote such a diverse range of opinions. My personal view is that the Institute is there to promote the best that architects can offer, and the best of architecture. That doesn't mean that we only promote the best architects, but what it means is that we raise the bar, we try and lift the game. I believe we try to say to the public: here is a profession that has high skills, high level of education, high level of practical experience, and a profession that has a humanist and broad social knowledge base. So, we are not just technical people we are professionals, and we understand a lot about many things. The best way we can serve the community, and clients is to be the best that we can be.

AM CPD is an issue because it applies to all members and not just the best. Is that a concern for some members, and do you believe that the Institute should be policing CPD more heavily for example?

EG Obviously there has been a long debate about making CPD compulsory, it isn't at present but I am aware that it is mandatory in other professions. The view of many is that it should be made compulsory for architects because it is another way that the profession can demonstrate its commitment to excellence. Of course, I am sure it would be controversial with a lot of members, especially those with members that have had a long history of professional excellence, and they may be close to retirement and do not see the need for professional development.

I think we need to broaden what is understood by professional development by making it something that is multi-faceted and something that a lot of people can get benefit from and indeed can contribute to. Obviously the older more experienced members will be able to offer their skills and experience to...
bringing up the knowledge of younger persons. And, younger members can offer a
lot of new technology advice that could be useful to the older generation. This may
also be reflected in some sort of membership category.

**AM** A question about the registration of architects. Do you think the Architects
Registration Board assists the Institute? If the registration was repealed would the Institute
suffer as a result?

**EG** It might not suffer because one of the reasons that registration is under threat is that a lot of
people want to be called architects and architectural designers. Many people want
to have the status of architects and present that image in business. However, a process of
deregistration of architects may in fact produce a larger membership for the RAIA.
However, the whole basis of the Institute would have to be rethought completely, this is
because registration and RAIA membership is very closely linked.
If we open membership up to others we may no longer be able to be called a
professional institute in the sense that we know it today. If that were the case we may
become more like an industry organisation or lobby group.
However, that has different connotations because if the Registration Act is repealed in
part or in whole, then there is no educational standards for a lot of our members, and the
code of conduct would have to be reviewed. The nature of professional practice would
change completely, for instance the notion that architects act as impartial arbiters in some situations
would need to be reviewed, it may mean they could no longer act impartially.

**AM** Do you see any value in the RAIA becoming an industry association.

**EG** I don't see the value from the public's point of view. There are a lot of industry groups, the
building industry is represented by a very large number that all have various interests. But to me an industry
group is really only looking after its own interests. On the other hand, a professional
institute has a duty to the public, as well as a duty to its membership and that is the
way I see it. I believe that this is the way a lot of architects would see it. Consequently, I
don't know what the value would be in moving towards becoming an industry association.

**AM** The RAIA has a role to set entry standards for membership, but to what extent do you think the institute
should control student numbers? For instance, are there too many undergraduate places being offered by
universities?

**EG** That is a really difficult question to answer because in a way there are always too
many places because not all undergraduates become registered architects. Many go
to other disciplines and that is part of the beauty of being an architect: It has broad appeal
in terms of its education. There have been terrific photographers, and musicians
for instance. It's good to know that those people have gone on to do other different things
even though they have studied architecture as a starting point. Also, if you compare Australia
with other countries, and I can only compare it with Italy

**AM** Another question about universities, do you believe it is appropriate to broaden entry to the
profession from non-cognate areas. For example, graduates from industrial
design or interior design. Do you see that as a priority, an issue, or a benefit?

**EG** Traditionally things like industrial design especially in some countries that haven't
had industrial design as a degree course, have used architects as industrial
designers so it is naturally quite a happy relationship. Also, I think that in a way it is
very difficult to categorise what architects actually do. Obviously we are business
people and we have to be to be able to function in the

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Building industry, but we are also creative people. There is a lot of creative work in all professions, but this is especially important in architecture. Architects like to associate themselves with the arts, so I feel that our professional body is really cutting off half of what we do. The institute doesn’t relate to the arts at all, unless we call ourselves an artist and architects society. Which then cuts off the business part, and the two parts are really integral to each other. You can’t do a building without understanding the budgets and the construction process as well.

**AM** Architecture is a profession that straddles both the arts and technology but are you comfortable with that?

**EG** Most architects especially the successful ones, have to be comfortable with that. They need to understand that the two things really go hand in hand, but outside architecture it is common to label people as either technical or artistic. To bring the two concepts together is difficult in some people’s minds. I think that’s why a lot of clients have opted to appoint project managers, because they see it as simpler to understand. This then implies that certain people look after the money and the program, and someone else looks after the artistic merit of the project. In my opinion it doesn’t work best that way. The two have to be overlapped and the more successfully they integrate the better the end product will be. When you separate the two you can get budget blow-outs and all sorts of undesirable things.

Successful projects are about good project team communication and this creates a happy connection between all members. In my experience it is often difficult for architects to get others to understand this complexity.

**AM** How should your institute communicate with other professional groups?

**EG** I think all professions benefit from having friends in other professions. I know that this is very important for us. They might not necessarily be in the building industry, for instance they might be lawyers, or they might be someone who understands our business needs. It is the same as people who become our advocates. I think that this is very important because people who are advocates for our profession can explain to their own membership in ways that non-architects can understand. Without those friends we are acting on our own. And like quantity surveyors, we don’t have a huge membership so our sphere of influence is going to shrink unless we make an effort to have friends in other professions. I would like to see the RAIA give honourary memberships to members of other professions that have championed architecture and architects. Also, I like to see architects successfully championing their own cause too, so that other professional groups can honour architects if they have contributed greatly to the benefit of others. Architects, actually really enjoy working for the benefit of others, that may be because of the idealistic ethos that exists within our profession. Anyway that’s how I see it.

**AM** Finally, what do you think the RAIA members most want from the Institute?

**EG** In my opinion, members always want the Institute to be more prominent in the way it represents them. To reach out to the public and to reach out to Government. Like all professions, architecture is being assailed from many angles. Practising architecture is hard enough without having to worry about the long term sustainability of the profession. I think that is why RAIA members look to the Institute to ensure the continuance of architecture into the future. Architects believe that it is important to act as effectively as possible. So the RAIA considers it important to represent members’ opinions on government reviews and industry bodies where architects want to see the right kind of regulations and the right kind of guidelines being proposed, rather than just something that doesn’t make sense. Most of all I think the membership has always wanted the Institute to be active in the public sphere, to represent the benefits of architects to government and the community. In other words, look after the membership interest as well as the public interest. In my view that is what the Institute is there to do.

**AM** On that note, Eli thank you for your time.

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