

ESSAY

# Professional Interaction: A Higher Calling

DesignIntelligence®  
Quarterly



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## Professional Interaction: A Higher Calling

*Re-examining the tenets of interpersonal responsibility*

**“I did not like the tone of your letter — please don’t ever write to me again.”**

So wrote avant-garde architect Cedric Price to Pat Enright, then a director of Murphy, the builder responsible for constructing the new InterAction Centre as commissioned by community activist Ed Berman in London’s Kentish Town. The issue at hand, inconceivable in this era of email communication, was Cedric’s insistence that Murphy should identify its correspondence by both date (day/month/year) AND the time of day. This he required to distinguish one letter from another when referencing replies to the many requests for information and clarification that were arriving daily during the early stages of the contract

General arrangement drawings for that project, as with all others, were drawn on an unusual paper size unique to the Price office (by memory, somewhere around 700 mm x 350 mm in dimension). “Details” were produced on A4 sheets that, after allowance for borders and titles, all too often yielded less than satisfactory space for the image.

Enright had responded to the request by suggesting that the project would progress with greater efficiency if the architect focused on the issue of timely information, rather than becoming preoccupied with administrative processes — hence the infamous “please don’t ever write to me again” retort.

I reference this story because, as well as the coincidental word in this article’s title to the name of Berman’s organisation (Inter-Action) and project (the InterAction Centre), it highlights the importance of constructive relationships in any kind of creative collaboration.

The title’s other word raises a second question — what is meant by “professional”? Lest arrogance or conceit be suspected, let me immediately make clear that builders can, and indeed should, conduct themselves in all aspects of their work in a “professional” manner. But in an age where the word professional has been so demeaned as to be virtually meaningless in daily parlance, what, we must ask, is meant by “professional”?

One definition I have used over the years in teaching “professional practice” to architects is that “professionals carry knowledge and skills that their clients do not usually possess. They offer this knowledge for a fee, albeit always with the client’s interest placed first and foremost.”

The patient therefore assumes, and codes of practice in my country certainly demand, that a doctor will prescribe with only the patient’s interests in mind: the medic will not, and cannot, take a second fee or commission from the drug

company. Likewise, the architect must select and specify solely in the client’s interest and cannot receive gift or favour for so doing. That, in essence, is the distinction between “professional” doctors or architects and quacks or spivs.

And that is why footballers cannot be professionals: they may be paid, and thus distinguished from amateurs, but have only self-interest to serve in the performance of their duties. Likewise, the second-hand car dealer, and so on.

Rewind some 80 years — to the White House. The date: 27 December 1941. Winston Churchill is in bed and worried. “I am so glad you have come”, he told Charles McMoran Wilson, better known as Lord Moran, who, as his physician, accompanied him on all engagements. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had laid on a splendid supper, but on retiring to bed, Churchill had suffered chest pains and breathing problems. The prime minister’s mission had been to persuade the president to commit America’s efforts to the European theatre — a commitment much threatened by the events at Pearl Harbor just 20 days earlier. As the physician knew all too well, the stakes could not have been higher.

### **“Is my heart all right?” asked Churchill**

Moran’s professional duty was clear and simple: it obliged him to hospitalise the patient — period. Remember the Hippocratic oath against which doctors are bound:

**“I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgement, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and**

## abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous.”

So, what did Moran do?

In full knowledge that the correct diagnosis was a mild heart attack, and that correct action was immediate hospitalisation, he told his patient “there is nothing serious.” As he later revealed in his biography (Churchill: The Struggle for Survival), “I determined to tell no one.” (Not even the patient!) In short, recognising the propaganda coup that would otherwise ensue for the German and Japanese high commands, Moran put the Allied war effort first. In attitude, if not physically, he propped his patient up to enable him to carry his American mission through to its successful completion.

Increasingly, construction professionals face the same dilemma: like Lord Moran, we have a higher calling that demands we put our world first, and where appropriate, ahead of the Developer/Client.

This increasingly requires new levels of professional interaction and shared ambition hitherto rarely seen — certainly outside the theatre of war. Essential to such professional interaction is design intelligence. We need to exchange ideas across professional disciplines; we need to use conflict and competition in constructive ways and as vehicles to test ideas and search out the truths that will inform strategy and direction; and, above all, we need to co-operate, both within our construction professions and across our professional construction disciplines, as well as beyond our traditional industry borders.



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*Now we have a greater calling as professionals, one that mandates a higher level of interaction than ever before seen.*

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Through all this, we, as construction professionals, need to distance ourselves from the path that law and finance have encouraged us to pursue — the path of abbreviated and ever-later information; of short-termism; of packaging and transferring risk “downstream” to those least equipped to assume it, be they suppliers or contractors, whose want is profit at any cost. Above all, away from the real problems afore us.

Striking in this respect is the dismay expressed by a senior executive of China State Construction Bureau 8, part of the world’s largest construction company, who once said to me:

**“Paul — you all do it wrongly! Your people identify and then pass risk to others ‘downstream’ who all too often cannot cope. We identify risk and share it together. We solve problems — you pass them away.”**

The message of this polemic is simple: “professional” conduct has always demanded attention to higher callings — beyond mere self-interest. Interaction with fellow professionals within our own and associated disciplines has always offered rich reward in terms of innovation and execution. But now, as the young Greta Thunberg has so aptly and effectively warned us, we sit at a nanosecond to midnight: the world will see 80 billion square metres of new building in the next 20 years — a built area equal to 60% of the existing global building stock. Now we have a greater calling as professionals, one that mandates a higher level of interaction than ever before seen.

Take a look Google Earth's time-lapse video entitled "Our Cities" published 15 April 2021 if you want a visual of what 80 billion square metres means and looks like.

Our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities. Do we have the design intelligence to solve this problem? Yes! Do we have the social, economic and political systems in place to facilitate the contribution that such design intelligence can offer? No! So, to where should we turn?

Governance aside, I suggest we turn to our instincts as professionals, that we lift our sights firmly towards the

territories of collaboration, sharing knowledge and creative discourse that can shape and offer that better future we know we can construct.

The platform for such effort that can connect that higher calling and combine it with the intensity of purpose and disciplined focus essential to any success is professional interaction. There, and only there, lies the combination of ethics and discipline that, together with knowledge and invention, will be critical to any collective success we might achieve.

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