



Q2 INFLUENCE: RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility and Authority: A Necessary Connection



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Paul Hyett

PPRIBA, Hon FAIA
Vickery Hyett Architects, Founder–Partner

Paul Hyett examines duties that transcend contractual obligations

“You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.” Abraham Lincoln’s words have never been more appropriate.

For the architect, the terms “professional” and “authority” are synonymous with responsibility. The former establishes the obligation, the latter facilitates its dispatch.

In its narrowest sense, “professional” relates to the standard of service expected in the contexts of law and ethics. The opening lines of any barrister’s examination of an architect in an English court will run something like, “... and you were, at all times during the service you provided, a professional, registered architect.” This sets the benchmark against which the service delivered is to be measured — that of a reasonably competent architect. Not a brilliant architect, just a reasonably competent architect — albeit often, where the appointment terms stipulate, one that carries expertise in the design of buildings of similar scale, complexity and function.

Yet, against the limited confines of contractual duty, there is a higher calling to which architects should aspire. I was alerted to that calling on day one of my architectural training, when our tutor threw down a gauntlet: he *demand*ed that we never forget, beyond any contractual duty to clients, that we would carry a responsibility to the users of our buildings and to the public who pass them by, every day, evermore.



You have no right [to] ask me to bear responsibility without the power of action.

- Winston Churchill

I have never forgotten those words. How important they have proven to be in the context of the two biggest external factors that have affected my career to date: climate change and the Grenfell Tower fire.

The former is universal in its relevance; we live in a finite environment and the collective impact of the buildings we design must be controlled in terms of its effect on the environment. Thankfully, we all know this now and surely accept it. Nevertheless, against the undeniable progress within the construction world, we also know there's still a very long way to go: Despite having reached a tipping point of awareness, we have only just begun the journey.

Irrespective of contractual duties to individual clients — those who pay us — we designers have a wider duty to the public

and future generations to ensure our buildings are ecologically sustainable. The problem with this responsibility is that while we can encourage their interest, we don't have the authority to impose sustainable architecture on our clients. This is why enlightened and progressive building regulations are so desperately needed. The architect has a standing obligation to comply with code: Therein lies the authority to ensure that design solutions are responsible relative to the eco-agenda. While this may matter little to the paying client, or those we are contracted with, it matters greatly to the wider public and to future generations to which we owe a duty of care, despite having no contractual obligation.

Here in London, a recent dreadful tragedy has sharply focused the responsibility my tutor insisted was ours to carry evermore on behalf of those who actually use our buildings. The fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 has led to the largest and most far-reaching inquiry ever undertaken in the UK (and probably worldwide) into the function and operation of the building industry. Its chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, and the inquiry panel will be formulating recommendations as part of the next stage of work, and while it is not for me to predict what they may comprise, we can safely anticipate that the recommendations will be as wide in scope as they will be profound in impact.

Many observers expect that whatever recommendations are forthcoming, the issue of authority will come to the fore because responsibility for the design, sanction, construction and inspection of any building must carry with it the authority necessary to ensure that the standards of safety, as set, are delivered. Witness Winston Churchill's words, equally apropos in this context: "You have no right [to] ask me to bear responsibility without the power of action." For power of action, take authority.

All this brings me to the responsibility we architects carry as leaders — in our firms and within our industry — to those we train and employ. To act on this responsibility, we must ensure, through our education programs and within our offices, those coming into our profession are properly equipped to discharge their duties competently and effectively. That means they have the know-how, as well as the time and the fees, to enable them so to do. But it also means they have the authority to ensure proper delivery of their work and critically — back to my tutor and his “call to arms” — that they have, inculcated within them, that wider sense of commitment that goes significantly beyond any contractual obligation to a paying client.

We owe that to all who use, and will use, our buildings.

Paul Hyett, PPRIBA, is a past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, principal with Vickery-Hyett Architects and a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.