

The Usable Buildings Trust and new professionalism

Bill Bordass of the Usable Buildings Trust writes for *Impact* on the need for building performance evaluation as it becomes a growing priority

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, new and existing buildings need to perform much better in use: as sustainable assets, for their occupiers, and for the environment. For example, UK government policy is for new buildings to be zero carbon within a decade, and for the energy and carbon efficiency of the existing stock to improve dramatically. However, at present there are major credibility gaps between expectations and

and electrical systems intended to meet exacting performance criteria and which can benefit from tune-up in operation. There needs to be follow-through and feedback.

The Usable Buildings Trust (UBT)

UBT became a UK charity in 2002. It was set up by people active in evaluating building performance in use, who had become concerned that government industry and research policy was concentrating on rethinking construction, and taking little or no account of how buildings actually worked in use. UBT promotes building performance evaluation, extracts the lessons, and takes findings to people who can make a difference: clients, designers, builders, managers, policymakers and postgraduate students, both directly and via our website.

worked with large clients, but found their procurement departments were largely focused on delivering projects on time and to budget and had much less interest in performance in use. Clients and government were also reluctant to pay, saying “why doesn’t the industry do this anyway”, without realising that industry, clients and government have become lockstepped into a dysfunctional system, from which nobody can readily escape. Even facilities management companies can find it difficult to advocate tune-ups: why hadn’t they been doing this already?

Soft Landings

UBT was unhappy with the “buildings should be like cars” analogy in the 1998 Rethinking Construction report. Buildings are not mass produced on production lines all ready to go, but are custom products more like ships, and need the equivalent of “sea trials”, in which designers, builders and operators all go out for a shakedown cruise. The sea trials idea converged with a similar initiative called Soft Landings, which UBT helped the originator Mark Way to disseminate and develop. In 2008



outcomes. For example, it is not unusual for a new British school to use three times the anticipated amount of electricity, for occupant satisfaction levels to be poor, and operating costs to climb into the sky ... and now money is short.

To respond to these imperatives, the construction industry will need to provide a very different service. At the moment, designers design (and sometimes inspect), constructors build, and everybody usually melts away after a building is handed over. This makes no sense where all the talk is of innovation and where buildings contain increasingly complicated mechanical

Making building performance evaluation routine

One of UBT’s objectives has been to make building performance evaluation a routine activity for design and building teams, so they can understand the consequences of their actions; help clients, occupiers and managers to get the most out of their buildings; and carry back the knowledge to the future benefit of their organisations, the industry and the wider community. We started by talking to designers, but they were reluctant to participate unless somebody paid them to do it and did not blame them for what they found. We



BSRIA, the Building Services Research & Information Association, joined in and hosted an industry group, where practitioners exchange information and experience and develop practical support. The Soft Landings Framework was published in 2009: this and other information can be downloaded free from www.usablebuildings.co.uk or www.softlandings.org.

Soft Landings is about changing attitudes of mind. Its activities can run alongside any procurement system, for any project, in any country. They reinforce existing processes at five critical stages:

1. Inception and briefing: setting the tone and establishing a focus on outcomes.
2. Design and construction: maintaining the focus on outcomes and managing expectations.
3. In the run-up to handover: ensuring better operational readiness, and engagement of occupiers.
4. In the first few weeks or months after handover: providing aftercare and fine-tuning.
5. In the first three years of occupation: monitoring, post-occupancy review and feedback.

Soft Landings focuses on users, managers and outcomes. It benefits from champions who can take it forward and essentially help to reinforce the “quality” leg of the quality-cost-time tripod. While cost and time tend to be the immediate concerns for builders and project

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mangers, what endures is the quality of the outcome.

Case studies are beginning to show that, once clients and design and building teams are up the learning curve, Soft Landings becomes win-win-win and

save-save-save. Construction costs are less, because you don’t spend money on things you don’t really need and instead get the essentials to work better. Running costs are lower, because buildings can become less complicated, and more usable and manageable. Better-tuned systems use less energy (some case study schools halved their electricity bills) and help occupiers to be more comfortable and productive. In spite of all this, it has not been easy to get client buy-in in this age of austerity, where anything new is seen as an unaffordable extra and government in particular finds it difficult to invest to save.

A new professionalism?

How can we get what seems to be essential and cost-effective to happen when people think it can’t be afforded? UBT thinks the answer is to get to where markets can’t reach: in other words, professional ethics. The purpose of any profession is to supply disinterested counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation wholly apart from expectation of other business gain, in order to protect society’s larger interests. This means a responsibility to do “the right

thing”, which goes beyond the obligation to the person paying the fee.

The idea of professionalism may seem dated, because the social and political culture in the past thirty years has been to see professions as just another business. However, professional institutions already require their members to understand and practice sustainable development. Surely this must include a focus on outcomes? Otherwise, we are flying blind into the future, and risk producing buildings which not only fail to perform as intended, but could even prove too complicated and expensive for us to look after. UBT is currently exploring whether some general principles of the new professionalism would obtain widespread institutional support.

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Bill Bordass will be speaking in the carbon debate at ACE’s annual conference.



Getting back to business

ACE Annual Conference 2011

Marriott Renaissance St Pancras Hotel, London
25 May 2011

Speakers include:
Paul Morrell, Chief Construction Adviser
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