

Making Assured Design Decisions



Photo: Matthew Trommer

Commissioning even a small built environment project is a significant responsibility, requiring a client to successfully balance time, cost, quality, and sustainability parameters to deliver an outcome that suits both their stakeholders and increasingly onerous societal needs. Larger projects become exponentially more complex in terms of decision making. Success, or failure, is very visible.

Few ‘ultimate’ clients are practicing built environment professionals, so naturally rely heavily on consultants – their architects, engineers, cost consultants and a wide range of specialists – to assure them they are commissioning a safe, statutorily compliant building which conforms to their functional brief. Even so, anyone who is accountable for commissioning a built environment project must make a series of decisions for which they take ultimate responsibility. Most would not consciously make decisions outside their own area of expertise without appropriate advisers.

But how can a built environment client be assured that they have engaged the necessary set of professional competencies – with no gaps in scope and no confusing overlaps – and that they will not one day become unwittingly liable for decisions they were not qualified to make?

To be comfortable in their accountability for project outcomes, most clients need to delegate to someone who has the skills and experience to maintain an overview of the project technical content on their behalf. Architects are trained to maintain the ‘big picture’ of a design project, and many client organisations either maintain highly skilled architects in senior roles or appoint them as advisory consultants in the pre-design stages. But what assurance do they have that architects are competent to advise?

Architecture is the only statutorily regulated profession’ in the UK construction industry, and the competence of architects consequently comes under more scrutiny than that of any other built environment discipline. Architects in-career education is always evolving, and several initiatives are currently underway aimed at further reinforcement of technical and professional standards. The Architects Registration Board [has recently completed the evidence gathering stage of a major review of the criteria for registration](#). The RIBA has announced the introduction of [mandatory competencies for RIBA members](#) starting with Health & Life Safety, followed by Climate Literacy. Reaccreditation of RIBA members every five years, as recently adopted by the medical profession, is under consideration. Accreditation of further RIBA specialisms - such as the new Principal Designer role being developed in conjunction with the BSI - defined by the Building Safety Bill, are likely. These measures are aimed at continuing to improve the confidence that clients and the wider public have in UK architects, both at home and internationally.

Well-informed early decision-making on design and technical matters anchors one end of the ‘golden thread’ described by Dame Judith Hackitt in her Grenfell findings. Defining the technical assurance needs of the project and identification of any gaps in the design team skillset or quality assurance processes is critical, as is ensuring decision-makers understand the design-related briefing information and data with which they are presented. It is in everyone interests that clients fully comprehend the consequences of their decisions and are confident to be accountable. Architects acting in an advisory role, such as RIBA Client Advisers, can increase client confidence in successful project outcomes long before any design activity starts.