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If you think the clerk of works role is an anachronism, a thing of the past, think again. At Pellings in the last three years we have doubled the number of clerks we employ, for one simple reason: the clients want them. So, raise a glass to the clerk of works.

In a post-Grenfell world, as we forensically examine what went wrong to cause this tragedy, there is a duty on all clients to ensure that site works are properly and safely undertaken. But, at the same time, the industry is being lambasted for its inefficiencies, for living in the dark ages, for being incredibly adversarial and not embracing modern technology. Mark Farmer implores us to “modernise or die” - yet if we modernise at the expense of safety and a job properly done we will have achieved nothing.

It is the clerk of works, a role of many centuries’ standing, who provides the client with the most likely chance that this will be done. Why? Because he or she is a human being, not a robot - the “eyes and ears” of the site. The clerk is not a mediator, arbitrator or an adjudicator, but the person who gets to know the bricklayers, the plumbers, the electricians, roofers and carpenters - the person who ensures that the job gets done and is done properly. The clerk has a rapport with these guys because, more often than not, they have come from one of these trades. The role seldom has any contractual powers, yet in some respects the clerk of works is the most powerful person on the job.

#### Regular presence on site

Pellings is able to offer this service to clients at not a huge cost but in the knowledge that clerks offer huge value with their commonsense understanding of construction, the respect in which they are held by the workforce and their regular presence on site. After all, if the client or its representative only visits the site once a week, how can they examine plumbing, soldering and electrical connections before they are sealed up by the contractor? And, when the contractor claims delays because of poor weather, there is one person who knows the veracity of that.



Comment

## Raise a glass to the clerk of works

CLIENTS ARE BEGINNING TO REALISE THAT TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION IN CONSTRUCTION NEEDS TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY AN EXPERIENCED HUMAN PRESENCE ON SITE TO ACHIEVE THE BEST RESULTS

**“No artificial intelligence, no robot, no collaborative relationship between client, architect, contractor, whoever, will replace that friendly tap on the shoulder”**

Until the 1980s, the role on public-sector projects would invariably have been in-house, but when Margaret Thatcher brought in her highly controversial right-to-buy policy, local authority housing departments were effectively consigned to the scrap heap. Now public-sector clerks are almost non-existent.

Moreover, until recently, the trend towards partnering contracts, such as the PPC2000 or NEC contracts, seemed to preclude the need for a clerk. With the client, architect and contractor

working together to agree the specification and build cost in tandem, there was a feeling of why the need for a “checker to check the checker”?

However, the industry has struggled over the years to totally buy into the ethos of Egan and Latham and has found in some circumstances that collaborative working relationships are too convoluted and laborious. There has been something of a return to the JCT fixed-price model where the clerk of works role comes into its own. A similar argument applies with design and build contracts. For example, there is the need more than ever to check whether the contractor is putting in a damp-proof membrane correctly or is storing timber doors and frames in the site compound properly.

#### Different types of construction

In my view the role of the clerk of works in the employ of a consultant brings another very positive dimension, because he or she will be working on several projects at a time - with a good oversight of the pros and cons of various types of construction. For instance, at Pellings we have monitored several Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) projects. Because everyone thinks it is the universal panacea for the failings of the industry, we have been brought in too late to prevent some issues such as defective installation of roofing membranes or inadequate ventilation to floor voids. These result from a lack of co-ordination between the module suppliers and the main contractor - something a good clerk of works will pick up.

In my opinion no artificial intelligence, no robot, no collaborative relationship between client, architect, contractor, whoever, will ever replace that friendly tap on the shoulder suggesting the plumber redo a solder that has been improperly applied. By all means use every technological trick in the book to make construction more efficient, but all onsite problems happen because of human error somewhere along the line - and it is only human input that can ensure it doesn't happen. ●

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