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The independent role of the project manager

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Project management, in its broadest sense, implies management of a project from its inception as an idea, through predesign and feasibility studies, design, construction, commissioning and initial operation. The project-management organisation takes over the function of the owner, in the predesign stage – it provides, through its own organisation, or its own consultants, expertise in market research, demographic studies, feasibility studies, cost-benefit and investment analysis, and can thus produce a detailed brief for the design team. In the design stage, it can provide management for the design team, by design assessment and appointment of architects and other consultants. In the construction stage, it can provide construction management, and/or act as the client's representative in negotiation of contracts.

In effectively handing over control of a project to another party, it is essential for the client to fully understand the relative position of that party. Generally, in order to best be able to represent the client, the project-management organisation acts as an independent consultant and is paid a fee for its services. It has no vested interest in any of the contracts and, similarly, all 'risks' are borne by the proprietor and the contractors.

In this manner the advice given can be, and be seen to be, impartial.

Apart from expertise in areas not covered by the traditional services provided by the architect, perhaps the most constructive role that the project management organisation can perform, from the architect's point of view, is the formulation of accurate, dispassionate and realistic design briefs, by distilling and incorporating the myriad of client requirements, of which spatial and functional requirements are but two elements.

A seasoned project manager, manages and leaves to his specialist expert team members the required leeway to perform their tasks. Management, in itself, is an art form not to be confused with design or construction.

As an independent controller, the project manager can orchestrate the team with the view of extracting the best performance from each member. The project-management organisation should possess the expertise and willpower to act fairly throughout the project dispassionately, examining issues as they arise and providing expert judgement in the long-term interests of the client.

A typical example may be in assistance in the selection of consultants. Whereas a client may be attracted to low fees, an independent project manager should be able to analyse fee proposals in conjunction with other criteria, to ensure the most favourable long-term outcome for the client.

The architect-project manager relationship is often confused by clients groups not familiar with the complexities of modern project delivery.

The analogy with the film industry may help in describing the relationship between architect and project manager.

The project manager can be viewed as the producer, whereas the architect is the director. Both are working for their client, with different agendas but ultimately with a common goal – a successful project.

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