

Ethics are not just for Christmas



Do we still need a robust ethical context for professionals working for a more sustainable world? Or are political and commercial corporate values all that matter now? Fellow Stephen Hill argues that ethical values must link our professional and personal lives.

Puppies are not just being abandoned at Christmas. Since the credit crunch, animal refuges have been swamped with abandoned pets. When more difficult choices have to be made, we are choosing our welfare above our dependants'. How are we doing with the other big choices of the day? Clothes or holidays? Food or warmth? Compassion or self-interest? Honour or compromise?

Don't read JK Galbraith on *'The Economics of Innocent Fraud'* if you want reassurance about our ability to make the right choices. He quietly exposes our collective passivity in the face of commercial and political corporatism, and its legal but inexorable erosion of our public lives and spaces: 'innocent' it isn't.

Consider the recent furore in the architectural press about whether to work on the Beijing Olympics or in Dubai. Architectural celebrities traded ethical positions for a few weeks. But as the news on which celebrity feeds moved on, the froth fizzled away, and the debate crawled back into the shadows: leaving ordinary professionals where? Mute and frustrated observers confronted with much more real and everyday ethical dilemmas to tackle in silence and alone.

More or less everything we do has to be achieved through planning. Since 2004, the underlying principle of the new spatial planning system is 'to promote sustainable development': that's what Government says. Most of the professional bodies have worthy Victorian objects to serve the public interest, grounded in their patrician concern for public health. Sustainable development might be its 21st century equivalent, but with a far greater emphasis on social equity and justice.

These objects are often claimed to mean "Public first: Client second." Hand on heart, how many times have you heard a public, let alone a private client challenged in that way? What should we do when asked to do less than we know we could or should to get a planning permission? Whose is the 'innocent fraud' here? What is the role for professional bodies and peer support in ensuring that there is an open debate about what may be at stake, and how to negotiate contested ethical positions and opposing values?

Are professional values different from our personal values and self-interests? In that big planning application up the road from you, what are your expectations of the developer

and his professional team? What effects will their actions, and their indirect and often unseen impacts, have on the immediate quality of life for you and your family? Whose values prevail here?

The Professionals for a Sustainable World project is looking at three interlinked issues:

- The absence of a coherent new paradigm for sustainability in which to apply new knowledge and to redefine the public interest values that professionals need to reflect in their everyday practice;
- The weakness of action learning cultures, on-the-job and for sharing acquired knowledge and skills, with clients and across traditional professional interests, communities of knowledge and identities; and
- The erosion of ethical values and social context as the fundamental guiding principles for personal and professional behaviour.

Galbraithian innocence harks back to the Garden of Eden. But we know more stuff now: Eve's apple provided us with knowledge, but that wasn't enough. We know it falls to the ground when dropped. All that tells us is that we have to ask better questions. Come and ask better questions. Take cheer from Beckett's bleak exhortation "Fail again. Fail better"; and act.



Edwina Sandys sculpture in Windsor Park, Ontario

Get involved

If you are interested in taking practical actions in your own professional and personal life, you will find an extended version of "*Professionals for a Sustainable World...Are professionals smarter than slime mould?*" at <http://networks.thersa.org>

To access it, you must log-in, and register if not already registered, on

<http://networks.thersa.org/user/login?destination=frontpage>

Anyone can register. You don't have to be a Fellow.

Once you are logged in, you can search for it by clicking on or pasting this URL:

<http://networks.thersa.org/project/professionals-sustainable-world>

Or you can just email the RSA Networks team at

networks@rsa.org.uk

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