

Rocking All Over The World

A few years ago, cost consultants were about as fashionable as tank-tops and Y-fronts. Now more and more countries are giving them rapturous receptions as QS mania sweeps the globe. Phil Clark reports on a new British invasion



FIVE YEARS AGO, *BUILDING* DESCRIBED QUANTITY SURVEYING AS "a profession on the brink". The magazine wasn't just pandering to the prejudices of the rest of the industry, which often regards a QS as someone who took the job because they found accountancy too exciting. Rather, it was expressing a fear that emanated from the QSs themselves. A survey of 12,000 of them had found that more than half thought their traditional cost-modelling role was under threat and three-quarters thought that accountants and management consultants could usurp their role. As the new century approached, the future was promising to be a grim struggle to stave off extinction.

Fast forward five years and the doom-mongers appear to have been way off the money. In the past three to four years, a revolution has taken place: the international expansion of quantity surveying. Whether it goes by that name or not, the basic tenets of the profession – independence, cost control and a the provision of a portfolio of complementary services, such as dispute resolution, have become a major export around the globe. The largest firms, from Gardiner & Theobald and Davis Langdon to Cyril Sweett, Turner & Townsend and EC Harris, are now spreading from their traditional territories in the Middle East and the Commonwealth countries to mainland Europe, China and North America. And there is the possibility of an eventual move into South America, India and Africa. Richard Steer, Gleeds' senior partner, speaking during a tour of Shanghai, sums up the curious position that the profession finds itself in: "Just as we're trying to lose the name "quantity surveyor" we are getting requests for QS services."

Nobody is more aware of this than the profession's principal institution, the RICS, which embarked on a drive to increase membership worldwide as part of its Agenda for Change, the restructuring of the body that was voted through in 2000. The policy has not been without its critics both home and abroad – when the RICS tried to poach Australian QSs in 2002, the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors accused it of practising a "new imperialism". The approach is, however, starting to reap rewards. Although 90% of the institution's members are based in the UK, there are now more new members joining from abroad than from the UK for the first time in the history of the RICS.

Carolyn Slater, head of the international division of the RICS, sees the appeal tapping into universal needs across the global construction markets. "There is a huge coming-together of big themes across the globe," she says, referring to the worldwide interest in sustainable construction, dispute resolution and adjudication, PFI procurement and the need for an independent voice in the construction process – all of which are now key parts of the QS' trade. "Professional ethics is back in fashion, which is part of the appeal of the RICS," Slater adds. This point is stressed by EC Harris chairman Richard Clare, who claims his firm has worked in 200 different countries during the past three years. "When clients go into developing countries they want to make sure there's fair play. It's an advantage of the QS system," he says.

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