

'And Now for Something Completely Different'

By Tony Frost, AIQS

As a local authority quantity surveyor, employed by Avon County Council Architects' Department, it was certainly "something completely different" to be asked to act as project manager for the construction of a Chaplaincy Centre on the campus of Bristol Polytechnic.

The circumstances were as follows: Members of the campus had, for some time, felt the need for a permanent centre as an office for the Chaplain and as a centre for the Christian community on the campus. In addition it was hoped to use the building for various other events such as lectures, recitals, discussion groups, film shows or folk evenings. These might be sponsored by the Chaplaincy or the building hired to outside organisations providing the use was not contrary to basic Christian ideals. In this way it was hoped to broaden the appeal of the centre and attract people into making day to day use of its facilities whilst at the same time attracting a modest income.

By the end of 1977 the Chaplain and others had advanced to the point where they had formed a trust organisation to further the project. The trust in turn had appointed a full-time appeal director to procure funds, had collected some 25% of the building cost, arranged, or rather reserved, a site and obtained promises of professional help from the county council whose architects' department had prepared a scheme design.

However, despite the apparently excellent progress, the future of the project looked bleak as the rate of donations to the appeal fund decreased and inflation began to erode the value of money already received.

Consequently, the trustees, upon the initiative of the appeal director, decided to apply for a grant from the Manpower Services Commission. If obtained, the grant would pay the estimated labour cost of the project on the condition that the labour used was to be recruited through the job centres and that nationally agreed wage rates were paid. Any additional wage rates or overtime worked would be the responsibility of the trustees.

The County Architect was asked to provide the estimates of the cost of materials and labour and to give an indication of the time likely to be required to carry out the work by "job creation" labour, this information being required as a basis for the grant. Avon C.C. also agreed that if a grant were obtained, management and supervision could be provided by the County Architect.

The Project Manager's role was to organise and co-ordinate the construction



Tony Frost relates the problems and rewards in project managing a unique scheme for Bristol Polytechnic.

of the building, to liaise with Manpower Services Commission and other external organisations and to provide regular cost and progress information to the trustees. The building was to be provided within the budget and by an agreed completion date.

The building was designed by an architect in the County Architects' Department and the project manager was responsible to him for the quality of materials, workmanship and progress in much the same way as a conventional contractor is responsible to a job architect. Also information on cost that he would normally expect from his quantity surveyor was to be provided. The architect was responsible for liaison with the client. Since the architect concerned was a colleague working in the same building a much closer working relationship existed than would normally have been possible between builder and architect. Day to day site supervision and control was delegated to an Avon C.C. clerk of works who was termed site agent and made responsible to the project manager. Despite the comparative formality of the structure outlined above the actual division of roles was much less formal and on several occasions the architect spent a day acting as site agent whilst on other occasions the site agent might suggest a design detail.

Other management services normally provided by the main contractor were provided by the county council and co-ordinated by the project manager. These included: insurance, wages, ordering of material, accountancy services (inc VAT), personnel, safety health and welfare, admin/clerical.

County Councils are normally considered as bureaucratic and inflexible

organisations. Avon proved that this need not be the case, not only in allowing various departments and officers to provide help but also by actually performing the various functions without becoming encumbered by the legendary red tape.

The trustees, who were the nominal employers of the labour and sub-contractors, set up a project management group to meet with the architect and the project manager on a monthly basis and to represent the trustees' views generally during the construction period.

Many local organisations, merchants, suppliers and sub-contractors generously helped with advice, equipment and contributions to the appeal. Discussions with the unions and the Health and Safety Executive were successfully concluded and by March 1978 the stage was set and the project ready to start. Recruitment of labour began in the first week of April.

The men who were recruited as a consequence of the MSC grant impressed enormously. They became enthusiastically involved in the progress and the quality of the job and were always willing to do anything they were asked. Several managed to secure permanent employment whilst working on the scheme and one joined one of the large local engineering groups as a technical trainee. The social aspect of the scheme could thus be said to have been a success. It was sad that when the scheme ended it was not possible to employ all the men elsewhere although efforts were made to arrange jobs with local builders and this was partially successful.

The building was conceived and the initial design approved by the trustees before it was known that job creation labour would be used. That design included an octagonal main hall with a dual pitch slated roof with a central octagonal roof-light, an attached flat roofed area including kitchen, toilets, study, quiet room and entrance lobby. The hall was to be heated by underfloor heating system and the remainder by radiators all using hot water from the main polytechnic boiler plant.

The architect's problem was to retain as much of the design as possible but to detail the work in such a way that it could be carried out on site by relatively unskilled labour. The reason being to maximise the use of "free" labour funded by the MSC and minimise the costs to the trustees. Thus trenches were dug by hand to avoid costs of machines and roof trusses were made on site. The building stands witness to the architect's success.

Space and time do not permit a descrip-