



Getting to know our members

An Inspirational Leader



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Construction Manager (Member of the CIOB), a Professional Quantity Surveyor (Member of the Canadian Institute of Quantity Surveyors) a professional member of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors), a licensed RICS APC Assessor and Founder of Urbanis Limited (UK)/Urbanis CM LLC [US].



Could you tell us about your childhood and what influenced you?

I grew up during the 1970s in an area of the UK that suffered from extensive and wide-scale poverty. Hackney, based in East London, was considered, at least statistically, one of the most deprived wards in the country, and yet I had no idea of this stark reality as I grew up. My parents both worked and instilled the value of education in my siblings and me, from an early age.

By doing well in education, we were rewarded accordingly. I lived on a large estate called Kingsmead and was well known for having an extensive collection of LESNEY model cars and one of the largest sets of LEGO. It was the countless hours of playing with these toys that forged a lifelong fascination for the construction process amidst the wider construction industry.

Could you tell us about Urbanis and its objectives?

Following my formal post-qualification of the RICS APC process back in 1999, I was empowered following a trip to the US, to return to London in 2000 and start my firm offering traditional PQS Services. This venture failed largely due to a lack of 'small business' support and the oversight of supplier diversity, across the 'procurement' of corporate professional services. In 2003, I reinvented myself as an 'educated' contractor offering two principal services.

The first was small scale construction management incorporating my QS background, which was the 'value add'. The second was an attempt to demonstrate a moral compass by engaging with and serving the needs of those within urban inner city and hard to reach communities. I wanted to reach out and get these often talented individuals involved in the delivery of large scale CapEx/public sector refurbishment programmes. There have

been many failures with this outward-facing business model, but many successes too!

What is DiverseCity Surveyors (DCS)?

Otherwise known as the RICS BAME Network, this was and remains the culmination of a 12yr conversation with my professional body (RICS) which revolved predominantly around my industry experience as a black professional. To be told, in 2005, that I was one of two companies led by a qualified Surveyor, and then advised in 2017, that only 1.2% of qualified members are from a BAME background, was totally demoralising.

Thanks to various 'Diversity & Inclusion' Champions, during that period (since my profile by the RICS in 2005), the request from the Senior Management Team led by Matthew Howell (and Lucile Kamar, Equalities Manager) to set up a network for BAME professionals (specifically Surveyors) was a very easy decision, given that I had already started this aspiration in 2006, when I registered the web domain name. Essentially, the DCS Network is a forum that seeks to promote excellence amongst built environment professionals (specifically Surveyors) and progress 'the conversation' around diversity in construction (in particular ethnicity) with the wider real estate and construction industry...

"...Talent really has no boundaries, so to attempt to restrict any deserving opportunity 'to excel' to those 'that look the part' or have emerged from the 'right' background, is at best morally bankrupt and, at the very least, a derogatory affirmation..."

"...as we go about our daily, client-facing duties "to be yourself and remain whole in the workplace" should mean the same thing for every real estate and/or construction professional, across the globe..."

What brought you into North America?

The lack of supplier diversity on the professional services side in the UK, coupled with a barren landscape of successful black-owned micro businesses/boutique SME firms, as well as progressive individuals and role models, led to major frustration so, in August 2000 I had to realise my aspiration by networking with these same individuals and organisations - who were all based in North America, with a particularly relevant concentration in Atlanta, Georgia - where we now have an office, some 16 years later.

Why did you obtain the PQS designation?

During September 2015, I met up with Professor of Practice, Mr Brian Bowen (Ex-President of Hanscomb, USA) and Professor & Chair of School of Building Construction Dr, Daniel Castro. My specific ask to them was "... where is/was the pipeline of talent for QS's/Cost Managers in Atlanta?..." It then became apparent to me that the pipeline was largely non-existent and, as a consequence, I agreed to help them establish an academic offer - at the Georgia Institute of Technology (GT) in Advanced Construction Cost Management. Three months later (December 2015), the CIQS and RICS entered into a reciprocity agreement. It was and remains a strategic acknowledgement/aspiration, in seeking to 'expose and market' the commendable work of both the RICS and CIQS into and across the United States of America. I applied in July and became a Professional Member (PQS) in September 2016.

What are your thoughts on Fairness, Inclusion and Respect [FIR]?

A FIR agenda was established in the UK on the back of my 2-year Chairmanship of the EHRC Inquiry into 'Race Discrimination in the UK Construction Industry'. The objective back in 2011, was for the industry to attempt to 'rebrand' itself, given the findings of the inquiry as published in 2009. Essentially, the industry was predominantly white, male and very unwelcoming towards BAME built environment professionals and female graduates. FIR can only be implemented with successful outcomes if the 'moral compass' of the owner/instigator is implemented with conviction and measurable outputs/KPI's. Tokenism often does more harm than good.

How can Canada learn from the lessons out of the UK and USA?

What a great perspective to even consider! Perhaps, you (Canada) should observe what has served and worked well for the populace. Whatever is found to have failed or fallen short of industry wide expectation(s) should be dispensed with and replaced with 'tried and tested' inclusive strategies that stem from 'inclusive leadership'. As for diversity, I can see that Canada has sight of the issue and keeps the dialogue front of mind; so not much to learn from abroad. Perhaps the concept of 'positive discrimination'/affirmative action, will emerge over time? It should also be noted that Canada is a world leader in all things P3.

Both the North American market and much of Europe has adopted this 'tried and tested' form of project procurement. As a Chartered Quantity Surveyor, I am a huge fan of whole life cycle costing which is the cornerstone and bedrock of any successful P3 venture. I think that the P3 'delivery model' has been and continues to be a great Canadian export, particularly in the United States of America, where the emerging contract opportunities are creating significant commercial opportunity for quantity surveyors/cost consultants/cost engineers and project control professionals to lead the design team from a commercial perspective.

What are your current initiatives, thoughts and expectations for 2018 and beyond?

I remain totally conscious of the fact that the global construction industry is still largely a laggard when it comes to technology and very much 'the stumbling block' to its own success. The paradigm shift, quietly taking place, through the use of technology will only increase and the short question is, "where will you be when the 'business case' to disrupt the industry becomes normalised and rampant".

I continue to embrace every available technological platform with a view to reinventing myself and my commercial offer in the market, whilst simultaneously attempting to ensure an enhanced value-proposition is offered to my clients, underpinned by a genuine willingness to 'learn and fall along the way' as an early adopter. I am also extremely clear, in my own mind, that I must not get left behind through fear of the unknown journey ahead

- it's an exciting time to be a construction professional, in an industry that needs to prepare to leap into the 22nd Century!

DiverseCity Surveyors, successfully launched at an event hosted by RICS, during the 30th Anniversary of Black History Month at RICS HQ in London, with a 2nd event held in November 2017, prior to thanksgiving in Atlanta, GA (USA). It is, of course, a career long aspiration to 'continue the conversation' with the industry around the key themes and challenges that are presented to BAME surveyors, on a daily basis.

Can you tell us a little bit about your hobbies and pastimes?

Outside of work I enjoy plenty of sports with my three sons. My two youngest excel in football and taekwondo. I have been blessed with five, yes 5, beautiful children and a wonderful wife. My principal pastime is spending time with my family. I work extremely hard and travel extensively, frequently on international business. I love to cook with my children and catch up with my parents and siblings at the weekend.

Outside of my family, I do plenty of work in the community with young people, particularly young black men. I visit prisons, local schools and colleges and seek nothing more than a positive dialogue that will inspire and equip them to raise their game and think BIG!

Would you have any concluding thoughts?

Life is short, live everyday as though it were your last and remember, we are all on a journey of finding 'ourselves' and 'our purpose'. When you find your purpose, know that this is in fact your calling to commit to helping others find theirs too... that way, the world will always move in the same direction, with a common purpose - an awareness and mutual respect for each other's difference(s). 



About the author

Interview conducted by Arif Ghaffur, PQS, Editor of *Construction Economist*

