

Due diligence on the Road to Damascus

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Having spent the past couple of weeks wading through content for the next *IJGlobal* magazine – out in digital format, 13 July (God willing) – it has provided a rather nice Road to Damascus experience for this grizzled infra hack.

It's a curious experience to spend days writing "nice" things about people, organisations and projects... the sort of experience that threatens to have a lasting impact.

What a revelation, people actually rather like it when you say nice things about them. Who'd-a-thunk it?

Taking a break from writing the latest advertorial – on Arup, SocGen, SMBC, Citi, A&O and ACWA Power (delete as appropriate) – one cannot help but reflect that it's rather charming to pull together a piece that celebrates achievements and toasts the roles people and organisations play in the delivery of such key projects around the world.

Without revealing the winners – though clearly the cat's out of the bag on 6, having just named them – one of the greatest losses for IJ (not just financial) from the coronavirus pandemic has been our inability to host awards nights in London, New York, Singapore and Dubai.

For us, these 4 events are the crowning point of the year – a time when we celebrate the successes of the previous calendar year, and sometimes even celebrate until the wee small hours with the industry (those still talking to us).

Vague memories return from a night on the tiles with an exceedingly exuberant MottMac team after the Singapore awards – an even match between it and Arup – until the judges chose Motts based on the amount of passion they had put into the submission.

Meanwhile after the New York awards night, the team tends to be a bit tapped out having just re-created the delights of the classic 80s movie *Weekend at Bernie's* in Miami for the preceding few days.

London on the other hand tends to be an exercise in futility as people emerge jubilant (or otherwise) from the glorious venue that is the Natural History Museum (the spiritual home of IJ awards) in the dead zone of South Kensington, Perspex award tucked under arm, saying: "OK – where to now?"

The best advice is to grab a taxi and head into Soho, because there's sweet Fanny Adams to do in South Ken. Though, having deserted some revellers last year and jumped into an Uber for home, it was irksome to receive cheerful pictures on WhatsApp from those who persisted, clinking bottles of beer in a late-night dive bar they had stumbled over.

Writing nice things...

The magazine tends to be a vehicle for the nicer things – award winners, league tables and the likes.

Meanwhile the website is where we vent our true natures and (hopefully) write things that some people would rather we'd kept under wraps... which is precisely where they wanted it kept for all times, or at least until its impact has diminished with time.

And this is something that most hacks don't really get... and this hack certainly didn't until stepping away from journalism for a few years to work as a rec con at One Search.

Goodness, but that was an eye-opener.

First thing, you don't know how many enemies you've made until you take a more commercial role in the industry and find out from your new boss – Dan McCarthy – just how many people had strongly advised him to steer well clear of me!

In so many of these cases, you're left scratching your head, wondering what the heck you'd done between 2004 and 2014 that had so upset some folk – some of whom you don't even know – to have such strong feelings about you.

And then you start dotting the lines and working out that, mostly, they were offended on someone else's behalf and that they bear a grudge for a chum who they felt had been ill-treated in a story. Thinking back, they're probably right.

As journalists tracking a market, one tends to forget the impact of stories on the individual and, the older one gets, the more one mellows on this front. But then, you have the maxim that we live by and we have to stay true to that: "If this was about one of your rivals, you'd want to know about it, wouldn't you?"

The end result is that we smile less as we do what we have to do... but do it, we will.

Over the years, you look back on the stories you've written on teams cratering or offices being shut down and we tend to forget that people's lives are impacted by these decision and that by alerting everyone to them being out of a job, it changes the dynamic when they call a contact up for "a chat".

This brings to mind a certain bank in the teeth of the GFC when we wrote that it was closing the London office and retreating to the home market (which happened quite a lot in those turbulent years).

A German banker (who will remain unnamed) replied to the newsletter (which went straight to spam) explaining in as many four-letter words as he could fit in (and he had an extensive, if rather graphic, vocabulary) that we were wrong and that taking the story down would be an excellent idea.

This was followed later that day by more direct communication (one that didn't involve spam filters). "I take it you have seen my email," he growled down the phone.

"Ah... no..." says I, furiously searching inbox and then rooting through the spam filter.

It's funny how those conversations go. They usually start with the journalist being 100% in the wrong and descends into admission that "yes, but that is not the message we want to send out the market at this time".

Not that we haven't been completely wrong on many occasions. I once wrote that I'd eat my hat if they ever started on Crossrail.

I do, however, maintain that:

- HS2 is the single most ridiculous project in Europe
- high speed rail will never run the length of California
- we will never see the year that infra takes off in America
- Stretto di Messina will never be built... even if it is an EU priority project. It's just silly
- Desertec was a genius idea... but the North African Super Grid sucked
- nothing that claims to be green is truly green
- PPP is not mortgaging the future, it's paying for it as you use it
- renewable energy should be financed based on its own merit, not on an incentive scheme
- there is too much dry powder out there
- hyperloop is a glorious folly... but just so glorious
- core plus holds up better in the Covid-19 world than many true infra assets (so stop being such an infra snob)
- hydrogen will throw a spanner in the works for electric vehicles
- if biomass is your thing, you're doomed to hell
- if you're waiting for a PPP programme in England, you'd better buy a sandwich (IPA has the right to reply)
- when will Austria do the other 4 motorway PPPs they promised?
- availability-based roads are better than real toll
- Heathrow will never have a third runway – get over it
- Swansea Tidal Lagoon will never happen
- merchant power projects are teetering under the pressure of coronavirus and many are being scrapped
- none of us are going back to 9-5 Monday to Friday
- never invest in ferries
- Sunda Strait Bridge connecting Java and Sumatra over 29km is a terrifying prospect
- road bridge between Scotland and Northern Ireland is rank lunacy
- the foundations for Mexico's folly airport – Nuevo Aeropuerto Internacional de México – will make an awesome go-kart track
- gas is dirty

And perhaps most important, something I poo-poo-ed earlier this year – organisations will actually be judged for the way they treated their staff during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Working for an organisation that has behaved impeccably throughout coronavirus, the shoddy treatment of many by their organisations has been all the more stark by comparison.

For the next 3 years, one of the most commonly asked question from candidates when hiring will be: “How did you treat your team during coronavirus?”

And that includes the start of 2021 when the organisation that say they won’t fire in 2020 will spend the early days of January hosing blood out of the foyer.

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