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thought leader

## Globalized Ethics

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries international trade in land involved a European adventurer planting a flag on a piece of unexplored land on an undeveloped continent, and claiming it “for the king.” It is more complicated today in this age of globalization, in which large amounts of capital are exchanged through a myriad of marketing systems, investment, currency exchange and political consideration. Real estate professionals of all stripes are involved including lawyers, realtors, appraisers, agents, bankers and surveyors.

Laws and national policies on the land markets differ from country to country and require the careful research of the many professionals involved, a complicated but achievable process. What is not so easy is navigating the labyrinth of customs and ethical practices of the many cultures participating in international real estate mercantilism. The ethics of the professions, internationally, is a subject that has become of some considerable concern. Why that is so has been explained this way:

*Because real estate is integral to whole societies and economies, it shapes and influences the world we live in and represents a significant proportion of all global wealth. For this reason professionals have a duty to uphold the highest standards.*

Those are the words of the International Ethics Standards Coalition (IESC) who are in the process of developing an international ethics standard for real estate activity, arguing that

*Good business ethics are fundamental to professionalism and, like other global professions, real estate and related professions have an opportunity to develop transparency and increase trust.*

The IESC is made up of 50 (to date) international organizations of real estate professionals like FIABCI, the international appraisers, and the Royal Institute of Professional Surveyors and other property-related professions. A draft standard with the objective to “support the creation, maintenance and use of high quality, international and principle-based ethics standards through a transparent and inclusive standard setting process,” is due to be published by the Coalition this summer and distributed for comment.

The International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) will no doubt consider adopting the IESC standard which raises interesting questions: Will all the 100+ national surveying associations who are FIG members be required to adopt the standard individually? By the way, how is such a standard to be enforced? And how well will an international ethics standard be received in countries where graft and kick-backs for public contracts are considered normal business, and where graft and corruption are a government’s life blood?

It is common for American professions including engineers, lawyers and CPAs to adopt and publish canons of ethics specific to their own areas of practice. The NSPS Surveyors’ Creed and Canons call for the “utmost of performance,” “honest enterprise,” and “highest standards of professional conduct” with more specific statements, e.g., about accepting assignments only in the area of professional competence, rendering opinion without bias or personal interest and the confidentiality of the surveyor-client relationship.

As we know only too well, the surveyor has an ethical duty that goes beyond that of most other professions because everything she does for her client has a direct effect on her client’s neighbor. A surgeon only cuts one person at a time and a lawyer prepares a will for only one family at a time. A surveyor cannot retrace a property line for only one land owner at a time and that public duty is the principle justification for his licensure.

This might be a good time to return to the NSPS Creed and Canons especially now that nearly all the state surveying associations hold co-membership in NSPS. I doubt that any American surveyor will have a problem with the NSPS code or, for that matter, whatever standard is eventually adopted by IESC. But it might be interesting to have more discussion on the subject of ethics in our profession recognizing that it is a subject attracting international attention. ■

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