

thought
leader

How Good is Good Enough?

We are constantly confronted by new conceptual expressions. Some are merely expressions of enduring practices or Ideas, like “environmental pollution load,” which is a fancy way of quantifying a condition of unacceptable things like dirty water and air. The term “spatial analysis tools” sounds very technically advanced but simply refers to analytical processes we are well acquainted with.

The expression “crowd sourcing” speaks of an e-process made possible by the internet connectedness that brings us all together in a manner similar to the current social networking phenomenon. Crowd sourcing makes it possible for participation of almost unlimited numbers of people in a project, like a community mapping effort, toward which contributors are invited to volunteer their knowledge and information that may not be accessible from official public sources.

“Social tenure” is a concept important in the study of occupation and possession of land in informal systems.

“Sustainability” has reached nearly cliché status. Everything today is judged for its sustainability, from the water supply in California’s Central Valley to the financial/economic system of Greece and the EU. The earliest application of the sustainability concept was in the context of the environment. We were urged to utilize our resources to meet our needs such that future generations would be able to meet their needs, as well. (Nobody talked about the fact of our generous use of resources to satisfy our wants as well as our needs.)

An expression that may be especially interesting to the United States surveying profession is “fit for purpose.” This expression, in the context of surveying, expresses an objective of a process that is just right for the intended application. On its face, this does not seem to be anything new; surveyors have always applied their processes keeping in mind how the results of their work will be applied by their customers. But fit for purpose means not only of an acceptable quality e.g., good enough, but a result that is no better or greater, nor no more accurate than is needed for the intended application in order to limit cost. Therein lies the problem.

One well-respected surveying organization has as its motto, “There is no such thing as *good enough*.” Indeed, it is in the DNA of surveyors to be always striving for improvement in what they do. One of the basic tenets of the QA/QC movement is identification of the weakest element of a process, and to improve it, on the observation that there is no perfection in any process and there is always room for improvement. This rule applies to surveying as well as to the auto industry and neurosurgery.

The fit-for-purpose doctrine has been expressed by that community of surveyors/mappers/GIS specialists and members of the broader “spatial data infrastructure.” It is an attempt to distinguish between the tendency of the property surveyor to *go to any lengths to get it right*, and the compiler of a regional or national cadaster, for instance, to control cost and time. We are accustomed to spending hours researching and analyzing land tenure documents indoors, then exhaustively searching out evidence of title claims and possession in the field. The construction of a national cadaster with four dimensional characteristics cannot tolerate the kind of attention to detail the surveyor is accustomed to in her work as she exhaustively studies a single parcel to determine precise position and relationship to surrounding parcels.

The following statement taken from an article in *GIM International* is illuminating: “Official cadastral surveying provides authentic and certified data with a guarantee of the

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required geometrical and attributive accuracy. This official guarantee needs to be retained since the data is essential for a country's economic development; numerous political and social decisions depend directly on it."

The American surveyor is accustomed to attaining geometrical and attributive accuracy parcel by parcel in his proprietorial work. (We are cautioned by our professional liability insurers to never offer guarantees for our services, by the way.) Rather than political and social decisions being dependent on his work, his client depends upon the surveyor's work product in order to make decisions regarding the use and marketability of the parcel in question. Therein lies the difference between the work of the typical American property surveyor and the modern cadastral surveyor: precise parcel by parcel application by the American surveyor vs multi-parcel multi-dimensional concentration by the cadastral surveyor. Which is not to say the American surveyor is not qualified to do cadastral work; but in order to do so, she must adopt the radically different "fit-for-purpose" mind-set in place of her accustomed "no such thing as good enough" ethic. ■

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