

Nirvana in Leicester

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From leaving school with just one qualification to founding his own practice, one building surveyor has seen how the profession can support diverse communities ? but he argues that surveying must do more to reflect our multiracial society

After leaving school in 1985 with only a grade 1 CSE in art, I had a bit of a wake-up call and went to college to take O-levels in English, maths, sociology and economics. However, I still ended up working in various unsatisfying and low-paid jobs with no career prospects. Although I was artistically talented, I wasn't able to consider a career working in the built environment ? that was, until I applied for a 2-year training programme with Leicester Housing Association (LHA).

While I was working in the housing management, property and letting department, LHA's lead architect decided to invest some time in me, and I began to help him carry out a measured survey. After first drawing up plans of existing building layouts so that he or the senior architectural technician could produce the required work, I started to develop the detailed drawings, compile the specification of works and contract documents, and run small housing refurbishment projects on site.

Towards the end of my training my contract was extended for another 2 years, but before it finished I successfully secured a position as a trainee architectural technician in the city architects department at [Leicester City Council](#) . I then worked my way up to the position of senior architectural technician while also completing an HNC in building studies. But although my talent lay in architecture, I became more and more interested in how buildings work, why defects occur and what remedies can be used.

My interest led me to continue my education and enrol on a building surveying degree at [De Montfort University](#) . Thanks to my HNC I was able to start at year 3 of the 5-year part-time course; but I still had to fund myself and take annual leave to attend the course 1 day a week, after being told that the qualification was above what was required in my post.

When I completed my degree, I had to decide whether I wanted to continue to work as an architectural technician or change direction and pursue a career in building surveying. The decision was a relatively simple one: there was no further career path for me at the council, and the prospects for progression as an architectural technician appeared quite limited compared to those for a chartered surveyor.

So, after 8 years' service, I left the local authority to take up a position as building surveyor at [Warwick District Council](#) . After 2 years, I also passed my APC. However, the travelling began to take its toll financially and didn't leave me with much time to spend with my newly born son, so I started looking for positions back in Leicester.

This initially proved difficult because most of the medium or large surveying and building

consultancy firms in the area are based in Birmingham or Nottingham. But eventually I came across an advert for a small surveying practice in Leicester that mainly worked on schools and churches. It was an ideal opportunity for me to consolidate the experience I had gained as an architectural technician and my recent work as a building surveyor. I continued to develop as a building surveyor, first at EC Harris ? now [Arcadis](#) ? and then at [CBRE](#) before moving to [Pick Everard](#) until, with 25 years of experience as an architectural technician and building surveyor, I decided to take the plunge and establish my own practice, One Building Solution, in November 2015.



Figure 1: Advice from surveyors enabled Leicester Nirvana FC to win planning permission for comprehensive redevelopment of ground and facilities.

In January 2016, the firm started work on a project with Leicester Nirvana Football Club (see Figure 1), a voluntary organisation that emerged from the Red Star youth group in the mid 1980s. The club has strong links with the local community, especially the BAME community, representing parents and children from multiracial backgrounds. The club is also close to my heart as I played for it as a boy on an inner-city park, and my son decided to follow in my footsteps by playing for the team a couple of years ago.

One Building Solution worked with the club on proposals to develop its site to include a full-size, 11-a-side pitch along with dugouts, floodlights, hardstanding areas, post-and-rail barriers, a stand and perimeter fencing. Planning permission for the final agreed scheme was sought from the local authority and, once received, allowed development of working drawings and a specification of works. The club sourced quotations from specialised contractors, and

works soon commenced.

My connection with the club has continued: in 2018 we sponsored the under-16 team, and are now sponsoring the under-18s for the 2019/20 season.

Reaching out

RICS is a global brand working in diverse communities around the UK, and this needs to be properly reflected both in accredited firms and in building consultancy more generally. There is a pool of talent in diverse communities who may be perceived as being hard to reach, but who should be sought out. As well as enabling better representation at all levels of the profession, this work is necessary to identify potential surveyors in these communities who would not usually consider the career without prompting or guidance from RICS.

While I myself face similar issues to any other small business ? maintaining cash flow, complying with the General Data Protection Regulation, anticipating future uncertainty, securing a pipeline of work and repeat business, maintaining a work/life balance ? there remains the challenge of overcoming the institutional and covert racism and inequalities that persist in the industry. I have embraced this challenge all the same, and it has not stopped me from enjoying and continuing my career.

[The Reach Society](#) is an organisation I have worked with that provides support and role models, and puts on events for young black and dual-heritage people across the UK. For instance, One Building Solution exhibited at an employability day held in Leicester in May, and I also sat on [an expert panel](#) taking questions from attendees.

The society gives RICS a platform to exhibit at careers fairs and employability days ? as it did in Leicester ? where future talent may be discovered. Those attending can also consider a surveying career, with professionals offering direction, advice, links and possible partnership arrangements with the diverse community. This is one way to counteract institutional racism and help promote diversity in the profession.

As the society normally works in the London region, a Foundation of the Reach Society Leicestershire is also now being set up, and will follow the model of running inspirational events in the county. I am helping organise an event for the May 2020 half-term break, where large, small and medium-sized business will be exhibiting. I am aiming to invite RICS-accredited firms, particularly those with a commitment to diversity and inclusion, that run training or talent identification programmes and may be interested in supporting an internship.

I will continue to work with the foundation, and with RICS head of future talent Barry Cullen and Bola Abisogun OBE, founder and chair of [DiverseCity Surveyors](#) , to seek out and inspire those from the BAME community to pursue careers in surveying, as well as promoting diversity in RICS and building consultancy generally.

Learie Gonsalves is a director at [One Building Solution Ltd](#)

Further information

- Related competencies include: [Diversity, inclusion and teamworking](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS [Built Environment Journal](#) (November/December 2019)
- Related categories: [Equality and social inclusion](#)