

“To lead our collaborative future, architects need to decentralize or risk being further marginalized”

Context

Much of academic discussion about the role of the architect and its validity and future in post-recession Western Europe seems has been centred on our possible marginalization as a profession. As Randy Deutch accurately notes “*Architects are problem identifiers*”¹, and the causes of the dramatic drop in workload since 2008 were immediately sought.

It was blamed on the eagerness of practitioners for overly extravagant architecture² or at a smaller scale, the *boutique*. This was said to have alienated architects because it contained varying levels of superfluousness which was only of interest to other architects but paid for by the general public.

Those not involved in trailblazing didn’t escape criticism either. The developer’s architect went from successful business man to one of the principal culprits of the economic downturn.

Elitism and classism within the profession, the education of architects under scrutiny.

Even those who did nothing were at fault because we as architects failed to make changes in the way we work and therefore are losing ground to large construction companies and engineering firms.

That considered, every time an architect is quoted to suggest a new form of practice which appears to turn its back on the traditional role of the architect they are countered by older generations arguing that all of this has happened before, that this is a cyclical process. Circumstances are certainly distinct with each generation but many anecdotal similarities and evidence of sinusoidal public opinion remain true to the claim that we are in no worse a condition than in other historical economic scenarios. Many would argue that we are in fact better equipped to deal with situations seemingly out of our control.

Less than 20 percent of architects in ACE’s biannual survey of the architectural market between 2008 and 2012 felt they were well regarded by the general public while recent reports by the RIBA in the UK 2014 has seen a surge in architects workload confidence ratings.³ It may well be that architects getting hired again in most European countries and not too much has changed.

Collaborative Handkerchiefs

Our clients, for the most part, still see us as the managers of their aspirations. This is because we are capable of synthesizing the incredibly complex process of planning and construction in terms they can understand. The romantic image of the architect condensing a project into a single sketch no larger than a handkerchief for the client is

¹ “ *How we can make collaboration work*’ Randy Deutsch, *Design Intelligence* February 2014.

² For Example the Work of Santiago Calatrava or Peter Eisenman in Spain

³ RIBA Workload Trends Sept 2014

often real and necessary. It takes giant leaps forward in the decision making process without getting lost in nuance. These sketches are how we communicate with each other in the studio or with our students in university. We are visual communicators and it would be difficult for another profession to take our place.

*“Architects can lead collaborative teams by tapping into their ability to maintain two or more opposing thoughts until an amenable solution arises... Architects famously can simultaneously maintain two lines of thought”.*⁴

Construction Legislation, Building Regulations as well as basic structural knowledge are important pillars of architectural practice because as Jeremy Till points out “if the trust of the non-expert (client) is to be gained it is important that the professional’s decisions are based on certain principles rather than open interpretation.”⁵

In many ways the successful napkin sketch is the moment when these lines come together. In that sense the ability to synthesize the client’s requirements in a left-right brain double punch sets us apart from other professions who can simply offer expert *objective* knowledge.

*“Expertise creates and enhances the need of itself...Expertise becomes its own cause (rather than its own purpose).”*⁶

Recent legislation in Portugal is attempting to isolate the project Manager and its designer and effectively excludes the architect from taking on the project coordinator role. The *Decreto n.º 73/73 de 28 de Fevereiro 2009* essentially excluded engineers from signing architectural projects while the *Proposta⁷ de Lei 226+227/XXI* returns the favour excluding architects from fiscal and coordination responsibilities in the construction project. In Spain *LSP*, the law of professional services⁸ does almost the opposite by allowing certified engineers to sign architectural projects in a country where architects can also sign off on structural work. In both countries on each occasion architects protested on the street in the thousands.

In the RIBA Plan of Work, more relevant to Irish architectural practice, there are two places available for the architect, Project Lead and Lead Designer.

In a small project both roles would almost certainly be held by the same person mainly due to budget and limited fees although even if this were not the case it would be preferable to combine the two in order to ensure a quality product. God lies in the detail⁹.

On a medium size job an architecture firm would generally be responsible for both the projects management and its design. This however requires significant resources and excellent practice management.

On large projects, especially when working overseas, it is unlikely that the same firm will fulfil both roles. The lead designer of a certain package may find themselves answering to another architecture or engineering firm breaking the direct link with the client. The

⁴ How we can make collaboration work; Randy Deutsch, Design Intelligence February 2014.

⁵ Architecture Depends p159, MIT Press 2013

⁶ Modernity and Ambivalence p212; Zygmunt Bauman

⁷ Proposta means the law has yet to be passed

⁸ Real Decreto Ley 8/2011 -1st of July

⁹ Sometimes quoted as “God *is in* the detail” Mies Van de Rohe

executive architect may be working on a number of buildings for the same client and overlapping in project details can offer a significant saving. They may have specialized knowledge on both local building regulations and construction methods or on the particular building type eg. Stadium/ airport design.

When thinking of our collaborative future there is more than the critical relationship with our client to be nurtured and in order to validate ourselves as a profession we need to rethink our position as design team leaders and “decentralize” whenever appropriate. How do we somehow remain team leaders, that is design champion and expert problem solvers or do we risk “marginalization” by becoming simply design consultants on a team of engineers who are also expert problem solvers?

Procuring Leaders

“There is often an underlying basic contradiction in clients searching for both the characterful individual and the safe string team”¹⁰

The architectural competition, apart from being a well-established procurement instrument, has been also effective in sharpening architects traditional creative process and presentation skills which sometimes become dulled during prolonged periods of construction. In effect we are almost alone in these periodic actualizations of the profession. A single project put to competition can sharpen the skills of up to 1,700 practices worldwide (as seen in the recent Guggenheim contest). While CPD is present in other professions it is not as pragmatic or media friendly a format as the architectural competition which in a way retrains its members and also markets the architect as visionary once again among the general public.

The fact that many competition winning schemes sometimes fail as projects is that they mostly take for granted that a traditional form of contract is required in order to achieve the quality promised by often untested architects. The advice of Deutch here to *decentralize* may be relevant here for the following reasons:

- 1) Competition winning schemes almost always receive a complete redesign following preliminary budgets and changes in client requirements.
- 2) The architects are sometimes the least experienced members of the design team because the decision to bring other specialists in is based almost entirely on their previous works whereas the choice of architect is largely based on their design and only partly based on their experience.
- 3) During the preparation of the competition entry the architect is the designer of every aspect of building and in the aftermath may find themselves attempting to control every detail in tender and construction stage. This is not necessarily a good idea, perspective and time on the more important issues can be lost and relationships in the design team can be strained even before the building goes on site.

A collaborative design effort is key even if the architect has already earned their place as lead consultant. The role becomes motivating the parties to find the best solutions

¹⁰ RIBA Booklet 2 June 1999

for the project even if it means delegating or releasing responsibilities and control to other consultants.

Of course many architects will not find themselves in this situation because even participating in competitions generally requires alternative sources of income or previously acquired financial stability. Faced with this reality a newly formed practice will need to make a series of alliances in order to be even considered for new work of a certain size. Public procurement in most countries makes it almost impossible for young practices to engage in the tender process by placing prerequisites achievable only to more established architectural offices, engineering or construction companies.

The only solution therefore is to collaborate with other parties with valuable experience different to your own. As opposed to a post competition winning formation of the design team, young architects will need to understand precisely what motivates each figure both inside and outside of their own studios in order to form collaborative handkerchief sized moments which secure the commission.

Motivating Collaboration

Incentive is all about the reward, motivation is about the person. An architect's incentive for working on a project could be his fee, access to larger projects thereafter, publicity, public relation benefits etc. These are an important part of motivation but a collaborator can be motivated by other factors which are not clear benefits as such and it is important for architects to understand what motivates the different figures in a design team because we are very seldom responsible or resourced for providing incentives as such.

We are however in position to identify incentives in any given project so we can create successful design teams made up of team members especially motivated by the task at hand.

A lot of the motivation theory and its derivatives which we may be exposed to today in forms of books and seminars have their origins in the work by American psychologists such as Abraham Maslow & Frederic Herzberg. At the time they were investigating the reason why some workers or collaborators were more efficient than others under the same conditions.

One of the most accessible ways of understanding motivation is described in five areas¹¹ forming the well-known Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The base need is Physiological i.e. Air, Water and Food followed by Safety, then Love/Belonging, Esteem, and Self Actualization.

Douglas McGregor developed this theory describing motivation as being made up of intrinsic and extrinsic factors¹². Intrinsic types of motivation are internal reasons for doing something which are driven by feelings of self-development and the satisfaction of learning or carrying out work. Extrinsic factors are reward based and depend on external influences to provide an incentive such as a salary (positive), or avoidance of punishment (negative), in exchange for work or desire behaviour. McGregor's Extrinsic

¹¹ "A Theory of Human Motivation", Abraham Maslow Psychological Review 1943

¹² "The Human Side to Enterprise" Douglas McGregor 1960

Factors are the bottom two tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy, Physiological and Safety while his Intrinsic Factors encompass the top three.

At this stage we can assume that all actions are carried out for a combination of reasons with one or more acting as the overriding motivation. Many architects will be familiar with the time/cost/quality triangle which is used to identify the client's principal concern in order to choose the appropriate procurement method with which to run the project.¹³

In the same way we need to be conscious of what is motivating each party in the design process at each level; what motivates employees or potential employees to come and work for us, why a different architectural or engineering firm may decide to join our design team or not, how to get the best out of the team during the construction, getting the right mix for the ambitions of our client and what motivates us as architects to go looking for that client in the first place.

Our role becomes what Jeremy Till describes as "*a move from the idea of the architects as expert problem solver to that of architect as citizen sense maker, a move from a reliance on the impulsive imagination of the lone genius to that of the collaborative ethical imagination.*"¹⁴

A Team within the Team

The cost of employing graduate architects has fallen in the last decade. Many of these young people are more motivated by the experience to be gained in their first years of practice than by high salaries. Once basic needs are satisfied, they are willing to sacrifice luxury in order to move up Maslow's triangle. It has also been shown in a study using a given task which required a creative solution that financial incentive actually stunted creativity while in tasks which required a mechanical approach incentives improved efficiency¹⁵.

The creative team is the core of the design lead practice but there are many other figures which are essential for the development and growth of the business. In the typical design team each firm is brought in for its expert objective knowledge while the architect will lead by seeing the complete picture. Within his own practice the architect will also need to look at the wider context in order to create a balanced business.

Meredith Belbin's work seeks to demonstrate that *the success of teams depends not so much on the qualifications, the intelligence, and the energy of its members but more upon their contrasting behaviours fit into the team mix*. He identified nine team roles¹⁶ each with a distinct contribution on any given project but also an *allowable weakness*. An entire chapter could be dedicated to relating this research to an architectural office or a design team although here a summary example should suffice.

The *Plant* is the team member who generates ideas and solves difficult problems, is creative, free thinking and imaginative. Their weaknesses are that they are too

¹³ This is generally associated with Construction Management (time), Design Build (cost), Traditional (quality) although alternatives to these procurement methods such as Integrated Project Delivery have been developed in order to reconcile two or more the Cost/Time/Quality Triangle

¹⁴ Architecture Depends p151, MIT Press 2013

¹⁵ Sam Glucksberg, Journal of Experimental Psychology 1962. Vol. 63, No. 1, 36-41

¹⁶ Plant, Resource Investigator, Co-ordinator, Shaper, Monitor Evaluator, Team Worker, Implementer, Completer Finisher and Specialist taken from Management Teams, Meredith Belbin 1981

preoccupied to communicate properly and tend to ignore incidentals. The *Monitor Evaluator* is a strategic thinker but lacks the drive and ability to inspire others. A *Shaper* thrives on pressure but often prone to provocation and can hurt people's feelings.

If an architectural office was only made up of one kind of role or behaviour their weaknesses would consolidate into failure to function properly. While working with a glazing subcontractor during my training I would often hear contractors or other subcontractors speaking this way about certain offices; "They are very creative but are always late or disorganized"; "They get the job done but produce very dull work" etc.

For small offices some roles can be attributed to the same person however it is important to accept the weaknesses of each member and look to counter them with action by another team member. It is vital not to expect that a team member should be able to consider all of the aspects of a project equally because it would be extremely difficult to complete any one particular task well. It also creates incredible stress on the individual and can lead to easily avoidable mistakes.

Our Duty of Care (not to ourselves)

The same logic can be applied when to the role of the architect in the design team. We must ask ourselves how we can best contribute to each project on an *individual* basis.

The fact that each project will have a different site, design team members, site, budget size and program means that creating a one size fits all approach will not be calibrated to the client's needs. This means that from time to time we may not be the design team leader for the good of the project. Instead we may assume the *critical friend* role, advising on others work rather than delegating responsibilities. We are a stakeholder in the construction process and not a controller of it. As previously stated, one figure attempting to control all aspects of any project inevitably leads to mistakes and inefficiencies. We need to think holistically but not micro manage.

Speaking about micro management, it may be noted that in this essay I have not once mentioned BIM. These programs are excellent coordination tools if used correctly although they require significant investment if they are to be of any benefit to a small practice. The problem as Randy Deutch points out is that it forces us to jump to the 1:1 scale, in situations where previously we would be able to *work it out on site*¹⁷. It means that the wider context is essentially ignored aside from the simple environmental analysis tools it offers. BIM programs entirely depend on *expert objective data* and hopefully the arguments in this essay demonstrate that in order to properly collaborate there are significantly more factors which require more our judgement as architects than computational analysis.

We should not fear marginalization because the skill set of the profession is vital to the construction process. As mentioned before, each of the other professions work in isolation using their objective knowledge and are not trained to see their work in a wider context. Architects think in terms of systems. We work at 1:1, 1:20, 1:100 and up to 1:10,000 scale. We are pragmatic.

¹⁷ " How we can make collaboration work' Randy Deutsch, *Design Intelligence* February 2014.

We work this way because we have a duty of care to a far greater population.

Our role is to *facilitate* collaboration. To be a leading collaborator means at times having the ability to take a back seat.

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