

Architectural specialisation and the death of architectural practice

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Abstract: In the past 50 years the traditional role of the architect to supervise and control projects has been eroded. The last remaining bastion maintain this traditional role of the architect is in small practice. Using a survey that firstly looks at how architects are engaged via either full or partial services we explore how architects identify with and deliver specialised services. The respondents in the survey were taken from a sample of 1200 Australian architects. Data was collected regarding specialisation, service provision, outsourcing and contractual arrangements. This is positioned alongside a historical account of the profession which suggests that technology and changes within legal frameworks, strategy, marketing, operations, project management, and finance are leading to the marginalisation of architects. We test this assertion by investigating evidence for these changes and the extent to which specialised architectural knowledge is being created in firms. For architects, specialist architectural knowledge is integrative and resides in the traditional service delivery particularly in the realm of housing. However, fee competition has hampered the ability of architects to specialise. As a result, in the future the role of the architect may be non-existent.

Keywords: Architectural practice; architectural fees; architectural knowledge; architectural specialisation.

1. Introduction

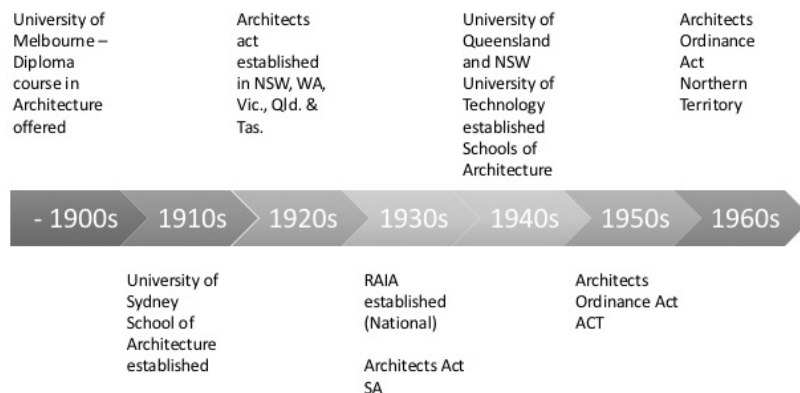
In the RIBA's report, 2011 *Future of Architecture (Jamieson, 2011)*, the RIBA explored how architectural practice would change in the future and in particular what it might look like in 2025. The report was a broad survey of different types of practices based on interviews with senior members of a range of practices, roundtable discussions and insights of industry leaders. In conclusion the report eschewed a singular conclusion as to how practice would develop in 2025. The report's nonetheless embraced a number of broad conclusions. The report's authors proclaimed that in 2025 architects would shift to a consultant style of practice, make a greater distinction between production oriented practices and design practices, and adopt networked working systems where services are outsourced across the

globe. These broad conclusions conclusion suggests the degree to which the architect's role and the scientific domain of knowledge that underpins architectural work is also in a state of flux.

Although in Australia many architects feel that there has been significant change to their role and a devaluation the title "architect" (both from an internal and external perspective), when we examine the historical development of the profession in Australia, we can see that it has been in a constant state of flux (figures 1, 2 & 3). Nevertheless, developments in technology (both for the production of documentation and construction materials and methods), business operations (trade practices, legal frameworks and liability for "risk"), and competition (specialised consultants working in the same area and globalisation) have altered the position of the architect in the construction "pecking order".

Because of this transformation and flux the role the architect may feel diminished and their position of power/responsibility in the construction industry is arguably eroded. This raises a number of questions. Firstly, will architects exist in the future or will they became specialised design consultants as the RIBA report suggests? Or are these changes freeing architects to do something better? In adopting, and shifting to new models of practice, to what extent is specialised knowledge being developed by architects?

Prior to the 1930s, architects in Australia were trained using a system of apprenticeship (as trainees who were articled to practicing architects). Eventually, by the 1940s, schools of architecture developed leading to university based training, followed by national registration requirements that protected the title 'architect' and developed into a representative body for the profession. With these developments and regulations came additional and trade practices designed to influence the method of operation for the architectural profession. Using various 'Architects Acts' these rules and regulations developed as a result of the application of competition policy guidelines and requirements for risk management and professional accountability.



The development of architectural practice over 50 years

Figure 1: Development of the architectural profession pre 1960s

By the mid 1960s, Project Management had been practiced in Australia for around 10 years, originating with the major industry employer – Civil & Civic. While originating in traditional military operations for specific construction and logistics, it was now being applied to the traditional peacetime building industry. By the 1990s the project manager as a producer of specialised knowledge had fully emerged and was in direct competition with, and to a degree has supplanted, the architect.

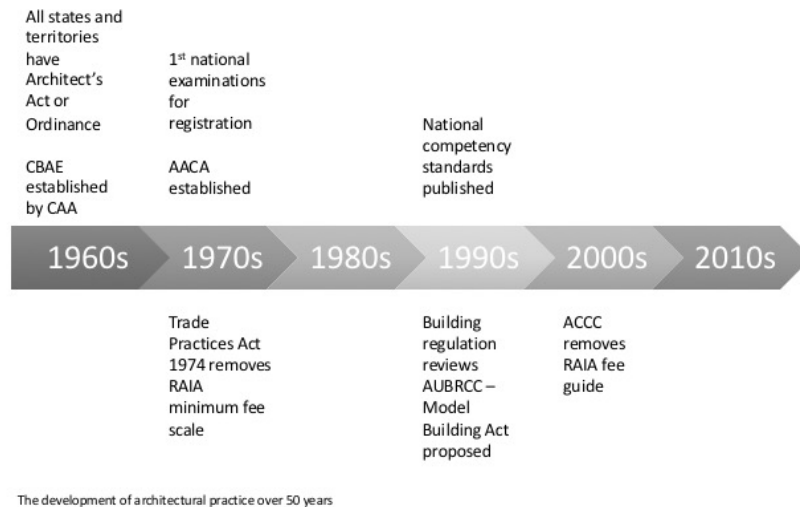


Figure 2: Development of architectural profession post 1960s

In the 1980s, as Duffy highlighted a number of problems for the architectural profession in relation to its traditional domain of knowledge emerged. He proclaimed, “design is often considered an optional extra”. Duffy argued that architects and been trained to “design within a wide programmatic range, but did not gain a mastery of the entire range of tasks performed by their predecessors.” (1986). This complex and complicated industry had for some architects meant they were unable to offer clients specialised skills and were unable to develop new consultancy services over time.

Since the 1980s numerous researchers have sought to examine the role of the architect in relation to other professional specialists. A central element of this discussion has been the relationship of architecture to that of the project manager which emerged fully in the 1990s. Traditionally architects by and large acted as project managers when providing a full fee service, including overseeing, administering and managing the construction process for a project.

Once a building contract was signed between the client and builder, the architect's role change from that of an agent for the client, to that of contract arbiter – outside the parties of the contract – and designed to act as an independent consultant to the contract parties. But, as researchers began to examine this issue it became apparent that the architect's role had shifted with the rise of project managers, alongside client demands for a single contact point for a construction package, (promoted by project managers) to provide more certain time and cost outcomes.

2. Research into the role of Architects

In the UK as Cohen Wilkinson and Finn (2005) note in their study that, along with the above developments, there was an increase in different procurement methods adopted for the industry over time. For example, in the 1980s 70% of UK construction in value was procured via traditional methods. However, by the 1980s “the contractor’s managerial role and the proportion of building work carried out by sub-contractors have increased”. Resulting from their study of forty-two UK architects they claimed that globalisation and technological change have altered the contexts in which professions such as architecture operate.

The Cohen *et al* study highlights the manner in which architects see themselves and their practices. They concluded that architects remain attached to the idea that creativity is at the core of the profession. It was noted that many of the architects in their study regarded this foundation of their profession as being placed under pressure by a, “raft of economic, political, managerial and cultural pressures.” Drawing on data generated in interviews with these forty-two architects, the study incorporated responses from varying levels of seniority across fifteen diverse organizational settings. The study captured how architects depict professional change: a profession under threat that sees its creative core as systematically undermined. However, this either/or view as reported in the study takes little account of how architects have incorporated these perceived professional pressures into the development of their profession. The researchers concluded that an analysis of individual architects and their perceptions of their work roles reveals a picture that is less about wholesale change, and more to do with negotiation and accommodation. It illuminates the elasticity of notions of professional work, and how individuals construct models which are flexible versions of their work descriptions and practices, and which make sense and are viable at particular moments in time.

Since the early 2000s there has been an emerging consensus that globalisation, deregulation, the diffusion of managerialism, rapid technological change, and an ever more knowledgeable and empowered consumer base, have significantly altered the contexts in which the traditional professions operate (Reed, 2000; Leicht and Fennell, 2001; Dent and Whitehead, 2002). One key study at this time by Chan *et al* (2000) reported on a study of the diverse ways professionals collaborate and overlap traditional work responsibilities – in a survey of 300 senior Hong Kong building professionals. They conclude that at that point in time in Hong Kong, among these professionals, there was ongoing structural change in their roles within built environment. Professionals were operating overlapping roles, and increased competition between different building professionals suggested that some building professionals were facing an “identity crisis.” They argue that project managers, at least in Hong Kong, were seen as a newly emerging profession, one that is the result of construction projects becoming more complex and that, “demand inputs from different disciplines of building professionals, the role of project leader traditionally belonging to architects is often shared or taken over by other building professionals”.

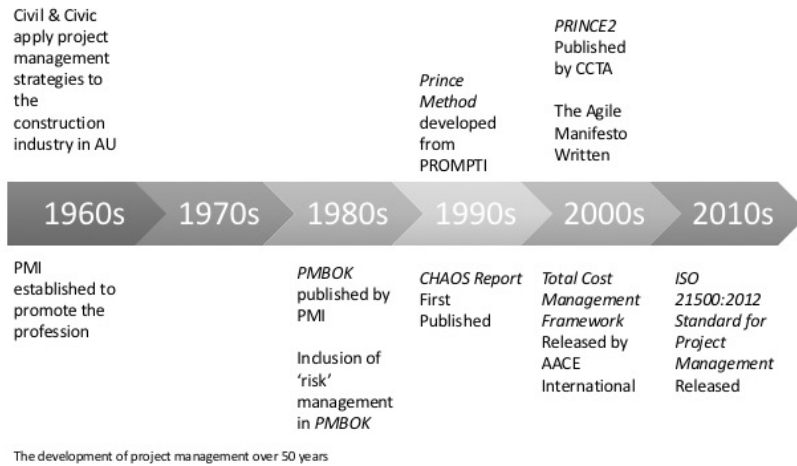


Figure 3: Development of project management in Australia

In Australia very little work has been done by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) or its predecessor the (Royal) RAI, in collecting data or quantifying how much work has been done or completed by project managers. *Take 5* a compilation of works around the issue of the future of a “sustainable architectural profession”, presented macroeconomic data on the professions position in the Australian economy. Tombs, Gardiner and Mussen the editors of *Take 5* present data that shows the number of registered architects in Victoria remained stable between 1995 and 2005 despite a marked increase in building output. Michael Jansen of Satellier, a leading offshore CAD and BIM partnering firm argues in an article on outsourcing, that the rise of off-shore services for a “new model” of architectural practice will evolve alongside the evolution of current design and implementation practices. Jansen claims that this evolution will lead to architecture firms emerging as “think tanks dedicated to high-end, value added design, with many of their traditional production and other operations delegated to workshare partners and contractors.” In another contribution to the same publication citing fee competition, client driven demands and managerialism, Hughes argues that the professions within the construction industry have been “fighting a battle of survival for decades.” Hughes contends that mechanical notions of productivity, quantitative benchmarking and targets, do not suit professional consultancies because such notions ignore issues of professional expertise, knowledge and judgement.

In a 2013 historical survey of the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (AACA) and its relationship to architectural standards of competency of Australia, Orr notes how the AIA argued that a singular model of practice should not be promoted through the competency standards determined by the AACA (2015). The AIA argued that the diversity of practice as a result of technology and globalisation amongst other things should be recognised. The AIA suggested that architectural competency, “can be acquired in a variety of modes of architectural practice.”

3. Survey questions

In order to investigate how Australian architects currently approach issues in relation to their role, disciplinary specialisation, competition and the future we surveyed 1200 practice based architects with a relatively low rate of 65 responses. The survey consisted of 26 questions and was delivered electronically via email to AIA members and via social media through the author's networks. The survey included questions about architect's current professional service offerings. In order to understand shifts in the services offered by architects, survey questions focused on perceptions of the changing role of architects in the construction industry. Questions regarding the types of services being offered and the degree architects were only offering partial services or outsourced current services were asked. Further, questions were asked about specialist expertise and knowledge within the practice and the degree to which respondent architects competed with other specialists. A number of questions examined to what degree architects felt they were being supplanted by other specialists. Finally, the survey also included questions focused on the degree to which architects were developing future specialist services and knowledge.

Overall the respondents were experienced architects who were directors of their own small practice. However, the response rate was low but this may be reflected in the relatively short time that the survey was available in June 2016. All of the respondents were in private practice. The majority of the respondents were small practices with 32% of respondents being sole practitioners and 38% responding practices that were 2- 5 staff. In answer to the question how long has your current practice been established 44% responded that they had been in practice for more than 20 years. 27% had been in practice for more than 10 years. Only 9% of respondents were responding from a practice that was less than 5 years old.

4. Results and discussion

Overall respondents offered the full range of architectural services with an emphasis on design services. Respondents were asked what services they normally provided and the majority of practices stated they provided Schematic Design (100%) services along with Design Development, Fewer practices offered feasibility (82%) or town planning services (65%). Most practices (69%) stated that they typically provided full services on any given project and 75% of practices argued that they charged a full fee on projects. Respondents stated that full fee for service projects constituted about 60% of their work as compared to partial services.

Architects responded that they outsourced services in order to account for resource efficiencies in their firms but respondents rarely, if ever, outsourced design services. However, occasional outsourcing was a feature of the way that respondent practices operated. Only 25% of practices responded that they outsourced on a regular basis. Nonetheless, practices were more likely to outsource Construction Documentation (58%) rather than Design Services. 25% of practices responded that they outsource work on a regular basis and almost would do so in the future (58%). Many of these services are outsourced to other practices or architects (43%) rather than specialist knowledge competitors. However, the predominant competitor to which architects reported outsourcing services to was Town Planners services (44%) and in this was presumably in order to take advantage of expertise they did not have. This was reaffirmed in open text response to the question "to whom do you outsource services to" in which many of the architects (37%) who responded stated that outsourced work to specialist consultant's especially urban planners and other related professional consultants such as town planning, and heritage experts.

Specialist services were a key component of the service offering of many practices with 85% of practices reported to have specialisations. However, these specialisations appeared to be based in, and reliant on, traditional architectural knowledge and expertise. Expertise in housing was a predominant response. The largest being in the area of bespoke housing (25 respondents), education (19 respondents) and interiors (15 respondents) and community buildings. As seen in Table 1. Specializations within the practice respondents covered a range of areas. Many of these areas such as accessibility, ESD, health, planning, retail, Sport and recreation, Transport and Urban Design were ranked low. No respondent architects offered highly specialized services such as seemingly scientific advice on materials or construction technology advice or consulting services or project management services.

Table 1: What is your area of specialisation? (please select all that apply)

Specialisation	% of total respondents
Housing - bespoke	46.3
Education	35.2
Interiors	27.8
Housing – single dwelling/duplex	24.1
Community (e.g. public building such as community centres, public facilities)	24.1
Sport and recreation	18.5
ESD	14.8
Housing – medium density	13.0
Housing – high density	13.0
Accessibility	13.0
Housing – special needs	9.3
Hospitality	9.3
Planning	9.3
Health	9.3
Urban Design	7.4
Housing - public	5.6
Humanitarian	5.6
Retail	3.7
Transport	3.7

The above responses appear to paint a picture of a profession that is agile in regards to outsourcing and also secure in the knowledge that there is still a full fee for service market. However, over time in practice, many of the architects responded that there had been either high levels or very high levels of change in relation to: the architect's role (51%), their position in the hierarchy of power in a building project (41%), and demands for specialist expertise (41%). They also reported that architects controlled less power over building projects than in the past (42%) and that there was more competition for specialist services (52%). 60% of respondents reported that within their specialist area they competed with other specialists. This is perhaps why many respondents felt that there has either a high level of change or a very high level of change in the replication and delivery of other architectural services by other consultants (40%).

As one respondent stated:

As the focus of my current business (for the last 8 years) has been primarily large new houses I have been able to offer a 'traditional' architectural service on percentage-based fees. This market is being eroded by 'project builders' employing in-house 'architects'. I am able to make this work financially as I keep a tight rein on the design and documentation of projects. I do all of this work myself and outsource on a project by project basis to reliable drafts people to electronically reproduce my own hand drawn detailing. Previously I was working on multiple dwellings and mixed use buildings. That market is highly competitive and the fees were not sustainable and the liability was enormous. The role and respect for architects in those areas has dramatically reduced over the last 15 to 20 years.

Another respondent stated:

We see that conventional Architectural Services are not going to be sustainable in the future and are looking at other services and models of practice to survive.

These above statements point to why many architects (41%) responded that the fees they charged for traditional or partial services were not sustainable. Yet, in contrast only 18% of architects felt that the fees they charged for specialist services were not sustainable and 70% of respondents felt that the fees for specialist services were more sustainable. This may be because 30% of the architects were predominantly charging fixed fees for traditional services such as design, design development and contract documentation.

In terms of fees most architects appeared to charge a combination of either fixed fees (29%) or fixed fees with hourly rates for variations (37%) rather than fees based on a percentage of work. Fees charged on the basis of a percentage of the cost of works varied more and were reported to be: 22% for Schematic Design, 29% for Design development and 33% for Contract Documentation. This raises the spectre of fee competition is a key driver of why architects think that the fees they charge for the traditional services of sketch design, design development, contract documentation and contract administration were not sustainable. As one respondent proclaimed:

Specialist Services, sadly, are a precursor to the shame of an industry being eroded by the increasingly acceptable practice of piecemeal delivery; where each element that is considered and delivered in isolation simply contributes further to the deteriorating quality of our built environment.

Whilst respondents in the survey felt that fees for specialist services were more sustainable very few architects appeared to have strategies or programs in place in order to. Many architects believed that the development of specialist services within their firms had been as a result of informal practical research and random development (43%) rather than the result of ongoing professional development strategies and planned structural redevelopment (13%). 30% of respondents stated that they thought it was not worth developing new specialisations at present.

5. Conclusion

This suggests that for architects the primary basis, for the formation, generation and application of knowledge is through design itself as compared to applying forming and applying knowledge through other consulting or through the application of expertise and “scientific” knowledge. By and large architects are struggling to deliver traditional services in a sustainable fashion. Architects see the need to go “upstream” as a more sustainable way to support the profession. But, at the moment this is not reflected in firm strategies that seek to develop new knowledge and new areas of specialization through research and development or innovation. For the most part architects see their areas of specialisation and disciplinary knowledge as being embedded in their traditional service offerings. This approach is best exemplified in the area of housing. At some point architects must expand their capacity to develop new specialised services based on scientific knowledge and innovation rather simply seeing specialised services as the particular building type that they as architects focus on.

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