



Are Architects Still Relevant?

by Jim Kissane, RedVector Fellow

A 3rd grader at a school in New York State was asked to describe an Architect, to which she responded "An architect draws things and gives the drawings of things to other people who build buildings." Although simplistic, this paints one simple but not uncommon perspective of the field of Architecture.

Here are some perspectives from the viewpoint of a professional Architect.

- Provides Expertise: Systematic body of knowledge, skills, and theory
- Has Autonomy: Objective expert advice to the client and/or the users
- Sense of Commitment: Selfless dedication to the work done on behalf of their clients and society
- Is Accountable: Aware of responsibility for independent and critical advice

And another set of perspectives, from people unacquainted with the details of what architects do.

- "Draws pretty pictures!"
- "Dreams up schemes of grandeur!"
- "Chooses nice color combinations!"
- "Like an engineer, but with an attitude!"
- "An expensive aesthete with no sense of time or money management."

Is this view correct?

In 1991, Christopher Alexander published his famous manifestoⁱ declaring the collapse of the mainstream theory of architecture arguing that "architectural profession is not only suffering from a theory that fails to solve massive problems it ought to solve, it has maintained itself in a way that must frankly be admitted to be ugly in spirit".

One can look at several surveys and indicators that seem to indicate that poverty and inadequate housing is increasing worldwide. Indeed, in our own back yard, while the architecture profession seeks to expand, troublesome issues abound regarding housing affordability and homelessness in the United States. Does the profession have any responsibility to address these serious social ills?

Further, what do these issues say about the relevance of the profession?

Frequently, Architects are characterized in "pop culture" (television, movies) as:

- elitist
- stylish
- independent
- creative
- fun
- wealthy

But is this perspective an accurate view that benefits the profession?

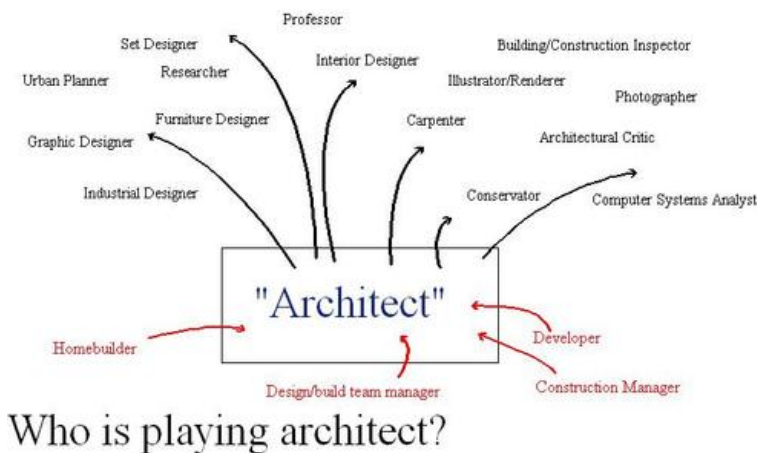
Not according to George Heery, FAIA, RIBA, FCMAA, an internationally recognized leader in both the construction program management and architectural professions, as he describes the extent to which the Architecture business is changingⁱⁱ.

Mr. Heery, founder and former CEO of Heery International, and author of "Time, Cost and Architecture"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ observes and asserts that architects have ceased to represent the cutting edge of construction technology and the most practical way of building buildings. And that knowledge, he claims, is not even found among contractors anymore. In his view, construction technology today lays mostly among specialty subcontractors and product manufacturers.

He goes on to say that:

- The past fifty years has seen the architectural profession relinquish control of the means and methods by which a building is constructed
- Construction documents, as we know them, detail the finished product and leave the sequence of its fabrication to be determined
- This process fundamentally separates the building's design from how it is built sequentially, both in time and form, resulting in discrepancies and change orders during construction
- As the current process moves forward, the separation between design and knowledge of specific building components grows larger

In this void, other players are asserting that they can provide design services more effectively than architects. At the same time, architects are dropping traditional practice in favor of more lucrative and stable "niche" roles.



Why are these "competitors" (or "imposters" if you will) succeeding in encroaching on architects' territory?

Well, according to the book ["In the Scheme of Things: Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture"](#) by Thomas R. Fisher, AIA, a growing number of players have been able to convince clients that they can produce a functional building/interior as well as an architect can, and feel they can come closer to meeting the client's schedule and budget.

Mr. Fisher is rather knowledgeable about this matter. He is dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota, and coeditor of *Architectural Research Quarterly*. His essays have appeared in *Design Quarterly*, *Architectural Record*, and other leading journals.

He indicates that these new players have been able to convince clients that they can establish a project team and manage the building process more effectively than an architect, justifying their fees by eliminating those of others.

He cites traditional thinking, which separates design from construction, relinquishing control of the means and methods by which a building is produced as one of the reasons for this disconnect.

Why isn't this extensive expertise in coordination and communication more valued by our clients and society at large? Fisher also argues that:

- Architects de-emphasize written and verbal communication and put too much trust in drawings and models

- Architects underestimate the importance of a working understanding of economics, finance and management
- Art and Analysis are thought of as mutually exclusive
- Architects work individually and competitively rather than collaboratively, and resist sharing a common professional knowledge base

Is Perception - Reality?

In a publication entitled "Will Architects Become Irrelevant?"^{iv} Phillip G. Bernstein FAIA, LEED AP, RIBA and a Vice President of Autodesk Inc. offers some eye-opening statistics:

- 40% of an architect's salary comes from construction documents
- 60% of construction documents hold no value to the project
- 70% of clients believe document quality is decreasing
- 60% of building clients are convinced that those drawings are completed by subs and consultants

One relevant example of the previously referenced skills gap, relating to why building information modeling (BIM) isn't working...yet:

Ken Sanders, FAIA, the CIO and Managing Principal of Design and Delivery Systems at Gensler weighs in - "Trying to implement BIM without first focusing on organizational transformation is like trying to drive a car on an ungraded, unpaved road: It's a long, hard slog."^v

So if these perspectives do in fact represent core challenges to the business of Architecture, demanding that architects "upscale" their skillsets to become more broadly based, there are key areas where development outside of the traditional design education could benefit firm owners and architectural professionals:

1. Communication Skills to enhance interpersonal, presentation and co-ordination capabilities.
2. The Business Skills void could be lessened by increasing training and development in the areas of Management, Finance and Organizational Theory.

It can be a daunting task for principals and architecture professionals to locate, schedule and complete the training needed in these vital areas. Yet the future is increasingly dependent upon having these "in-house" skills. Firms looking at bolstering this side of their "skills portfolio" often cannot find this type of program in the "lunch and learn" medium, when it is needed, and voice concerns about the need to strike a balance between lost billable hours (sending people offsite) and the necessity of accomplishing this needed professional development.

The solution increasingly is being found in "distance-learning" technology that provides a way for professionals to access high-quality training without the expense and schedule disruption of traditional offsite training. Online education providers like RedVector.com offering accredited Architect-specific Webinar and learner-paced courses are being more widely used by A&E firms that seek to prevent market "irrelevance." RedVector touts a catalog including over 1500 hours of AIA accredited architect-specific online learning content, as well as hundreds of hours of online courses in the areas of Communications, Business Skills and Management/Organization.

Is the architecture field destined to a diminished future? Not according to Jim Kissane, a RedVector Fellow who says successful Architecture firms have come to understand that "you pay for this training, whether you do it or not."

i Alexander, Christopher, "Perspectives: Manifesto 1991" *Progressive Architecture* (July 1991)

ii George Heery, "How Do They Get Those Commissions?" *Architectural Record* (January, 1990).

iii Heery, G.T., "Time, Cost, and Architecture", McGraw-Hill,. New York (1975)

iv Bernstein, Philip G., "Will Architects Become Irrelevant?" *The Architects Newspaper* (March 2005)

v Sanders, Ken, "Why building information modeling isn't working ... yet", *Architectural Record* (September 2004)

ⁱ Alexander, Christopher, "Perspectives: Manifesto 1991" *Progressive Architecture* (July 1991)

ⁱⁱ George Heery, "How Do They Get Those Commissions?" *Architectural Record* (January, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ Heery, G.T., "Time, Cost, and Architecture", McGraw-Hill,. New York (1975)