

**Self-identification as a resistance strategy: The changing nature of  
architectural work and its relation to architects' identity**

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## Purpose

Architectural work, particularly in the last 20 years, has become overwhelmingly collaborative, distributed, dispersed, flexible and knowledge based (Deamer, 2014) with large projects being delivered using a myriad of specialists, including design architects, production architects as well as engineers, design managers and project managers. Design is no longer limited solely to conceptual, spatial and aesthetic considerations (traditionally the domain of the architect) but now extends to the fields of fabrication, construction and, significantly, management. In addition to this change in architectural work, similarly to other professions, architects face increased pressures to become “more managerial and bureaucratic to meet the demands for greater efficiency generated by growing competition and deregulation” (Malhotra and Morris 2009: 901) despite their resistance to do so (Pinnington and Morris 2002). As Pinnington and Morris (2002) explain, architects, in contrast to other market-based professionals such as lawyers and accountants, have preferred to pursue aesthetic goals through work to the detriment of economic considerations. The image of the architect-as-lone genius, akin to Howard Roark in Ayn Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead* (1943) is still tacitly embedded throughout the profession (Wiscombe, 2006; Cuff, 2012; Peklonen, 2012). This romanticized view of the architect as a creative individual ignores the fact that architecture has become an inherently collaborative endeavor and a product of its financial environment (Gutman, 1988; Cuff, 1991; Adrachuk et al, 2014). American sociologist Robert Gutman (1988) noted that even towards the end of the last century the reality of practice was very different from ‘idealized version of an architectural life’ that architects portrayed to their students and the world at large. He stated that architects still cling to an outmoded conception of social reality to avoid shattering myths about their autonomy and social status (see also Pinnington and Morris 2002). Significantly, almost 30 years on, most architecture schools still educate students as though every architect will be an individual who designs an entire project (Cuff, 2014; Fisher, 2015).

In this paper we explore the question of whether architects’ continuous self-identification as artists, in conflict with the changed nature of their work and practice, is a means of resistance to the increased bureaucratization and managerialism of architectural practice, and how the changing nature of architectural work challenges the architects’ and the

profession's identity. Defining the professional identity of architects in terms of a belief in the primacy of creativity as an *act of an individual*, with insufficient regard for matters of organization, is increasingly problematic because it restricts the ability of architects to engage meaningfully with contemporary conditions. By focusing on city-building architecture, we investigate what forms of resistance to the power of management discourses and practices are evident in architecture. We ask what competing forms of discourse are evident in architecture and what are their consequences for the organization of architectural work and for architects' identity?

### **Theoretical background**

Architecture became equated with the aesthetics of design during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; increasingly the professionalization of architecture relied on the significance of a signature 'style'. Style was understood as the "principal way in which buildings claim the status of architecture" (Larson, 1993:4). Style marked the distinction between architect and builder, in which architects were responsible for defining the 'design intent' and the contractor took responsibility for organizing the means and methods of construction (Bernstein, 2014).

Amongst the professions, while law is considered predominately normative in nature and engineering draws on a scientific body of knowledge (Malhotra and Morris, 2009), architects view their profession largely as artistic and thus creative (Blau, 1987) in which creativity is linked to design and style. While the disciplinary definitions of creativity remain ambiguous (Williams *et al.*, 2010), perceptions of creativity in architecture are built on the character of the individual genius in which creativity as viewed as a personality characteristic (Blau, 1987: 90). The emphasis on individual talent and design as form making, rather than on how architects demonstrate "objectively how they increase the value of projects that they design" (Gray, 2014), has led to a mismatch in professional practice because many architects aim to be successful designers or artists (Cuff, 1991). Competing perspectives in architecture underpin the ambiguities that many architects feel about their roles (Gutman, 1997). The primacy of design considered in terms of artistic value has created tensions between the market-oriented 'business' and autonomy of the partners who frequently fill the 'design' role in the firm.

Architects, however, have remained ambivalent about the consequences of equating architecture solely with the aesthetics of design. While this equation has been considered as limiting the demand for architecture services (Gutman, 1988), there is also the ennui experienced by many architects that is “brought about by design’s remoteness from production, the effect of which is to make design an unnecessary luxury” (Deamer, 2011). There are a number of important discussions in this area (Larson, 1993; Stevens, 1998; Deamer 2010) that point to an architectural profession that is stratified, segmented, and sparsely populated at the elite end of the market. The disconnection is mirrored in the organizational structure of architectural practice: production staff in a firm are often at the bottom of a hierarchical structure and therefore separated, financially and aesthetically, from both the process and from other players (Deamer, 2011).

Although the work of professional architects is typically designated in terms of creativity, implying variation and innovation, it is inherently at odds with ‘practice’, which is premised on organization and routines (Brown *et al.*, 2010). As architects cease to be sole practitioners but become incorporated into larger design studios they are increasingly subjects of and subject to organizing. The term organizing has traditionally been used in relation to sociology, economics and management where it refers to the mechanisms that govern bureaucratic social, economic, and political processes (Pelkonen, 2012); however, the growth of large scale architectural practices, organized as firms, means that these architectural firms increasingly have to address organizational strategies in business. Moreover, in contemporary practice, project work is frequently carried out over a long period of time and involves various alliances, joint ventures and service packages. Of particular note is that the focus is now, to a greater extent than previously, on the ability of architects to manage and organize diverse contributions as well as handle the plethora of information channels (drawings, consultant reports, material models; 3D models, etc.) with which they must deal, giving design a significant organizational dimension. In contemporary practice, architects engage in a social world beyond that of a paying client, in which they collaborate with collective organizations rather than uniquely individual clients, including the AEC team. Architectural design is socially and collectively produced (Deamer, 2011; Cuff, 1991:154).

Traditionally there has been a resistance in the profession to placing design and management functions in the hands of one individual primarily because these are thought to be contradictory behaviours; hence, splitting the activities between different actors should be required if both functions are to be undertaken effectively (Irwig, 2011). However, management is an unacknowledged but significant aspect of everyday architectural work. The traditional organization of architect's offices is no longer relevant as, in most offices, sequential drawing production has given way to working on virtual 3-D models. Doing this, using BIM (Building information modeling) technologies enables all the consultants and clients to 'see' the building. Increasingly therefore, newer forms of management relate to architectural practice. In this new reality of design, architects are required to organize the process of design, as "practice cannot be realised without sound management of its organization" (Deamer, 2011).

### **Research gap**

Despite increasing research showing that the diffusion of managerialism, among other forces, undermines the power and status of professional workers, much of the existing research focuses on the macro system or the organization, leaving individual sense-making relatively unexamined (Cohen et al 2005). As Cohen et al (2005: 776) point out, "What is largely missing, then, is an understanding of how differently situated professionals account for the work they do in their changing contexts, both in terms of what they see as its fundamental purpose and how they see it as being enacted on a day-to-day basis", further stating that architecture in particular has been neglected in research on professions. While Cohen et al (2005: 793) provide an important account of the different discourses used by architects to "construct versions of their work that make sense and are viable at particular moments in time", they do not explore whether certain discourses and forms of sense-making are a form of resistance by architects, and how these influence the architectural profession, the focus of this paper. In line with Thomas and Davies (2005), this paper will provide a micro-political account of resistance by focusing on "struggle and tension and on the everyday forms of maintenance and control" (p. 701). In doing so, we discuss how architects' unchanged self-identification enables the perpetuation of the profession's identity but also challenges the profession's standing in its relations with other professions and occupations.

## **Approach taken**

We adopt an interpretivist approach (Smircich, 1983). The subjectivity of architects cannot be taken-for-granted or ignored (Alvesson, 1990) in looking at their professional practice because of the emphasis that needs to be placed on *how* sense is made rather than *what* sense is made (Feldman, 1995). Sense-making is viewed as being intra-subjective (personal) and inter-subjective (through interaction and dialogue) as a collective activity using publically available language and concepts grounded in social activities (Weick, 1995). In exploring how architects perform and talk about their everyday work, this research will focus on how work patterns and identities (individual and collective) are revealed through practices and talk, thus incorporating elements of interpretivist and discourse analysis studies.

## **Methods of analysis**

Following Cuff's (1991) methodology, this research employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative ethnographic methods (observation, observant participation) and semi-structured interviews will be used in order to describe the nature of architectural work. In addition, data collection is complimented by analysis of internal documents, project reports, working papers, publications and other relevant documents.

The architectural firms for the present research have been selected based on their size and the diversity of projects undertaken. Access has been gained to two large, globally operative architectural firms. These firms vary in orientation, size, and organizational structure. Over the past two months, the first author commenced intensive field research and is conducting direct observations of architects in their daily work, including observations of meetings with consultants and stakeholders, as well as internal team meetings, participation in site visits, design meetings, presentations and management meetings. Observational fieldwork is being coupled with conversational interviews with architects, consultants and stakeholders. It is envisaged that data collection will be carried out over a period of six months; following Silverman (2014), the aim is to access as much naturally occurring data as possible.

Both firms have been established for over fifty years and have won numerous national and international architecture awards. They have offices in several locations worldwide. Each firm is owned and led by 25-32 directors or principals. They employ around 700 to 900 staff each, globally. Both firms are renowned as ‘strong idea firm[s]’ (Larson, 1993:100) and one firm was led until recently by a charismatic founder. All the owners are also leaders of the firms and share an equal status. The distinctive structure of ownership and authority is considered a key-defining characteristic of these organizations (Hinings et al., 1991). Both firms refer to their offices as the studio. These firms are inter-disciplinary design practices as their services encompass the disciplines of architecture, urban design, interior design and landscape architecture.

The transcripts and meeting notes are organized and analysed using QSR software, NVivo 10. We draw on the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) wherein initial coding is open, allowing themes to emerge from the data. The analysis of the data proceeds by reading and re-reading interview transcripts and field and meeting notes with the purpose of identifying the nature of current architectural practices, changes to these practices, the driving forces of such changes, and the architects reflections on these changes. Early codes will be used to direct and focus on further data collection. Over several iterations codes will be abstracted to higher order codes or categories in order to build theoretical understanding as part of the interpretive tradition. Next, the in vivo codes will be connected to a higher level of abstraction categories and examining these in light of theories that might provide explanatory power (Locke et al., 2008).

## **Main findings**

Initial findings indicate that architectural services on large and complex projects are increasingly segmented into packages and phases in which architects are often engaged solely to define the project or negotiate and facilitate relevant approvals and “detail design moves away from the architect and towards manufacturing” (Tombesi, 2015: 94). Secondly, retaining professional and therefore design control remains problematic particularly when projects take a long time between conception and implementation, as well as in the case of overseas work. Thirdly, the normal design process in which drawings were the domain of the architect and a linear production has changed to the production of 3-

D artifacts in a process of *organizing and managing* the sharing of cumulative knowledge of the AEC team, which now includes manufacturers and fabricators. Thus, architects are no longer engaged in providing creative architectural solutions to clients; rather, their main responsibilities have shifted to managing the high number of collaborators, negotiating aspects of projects, and ensuring that projects meet the economic imperatives of clients. In short, architects are becoming managers rather than being artists. Being often overwhelms becoming in terms of self-identity, however architects continue to see themselves as artists and there seems to be a lack of reflection on what these changes in their work practices mean for their identity. Of particular note is that, despite technological advances and recourse to outsourcing, the profitability of architecture firms has not improved (Gray, 2014). The lack of recognition of the changes in practice is reproduced in the realm of professional formation: architecture's professional and educational institutions do not as yet either recognize or reflect this significant shift in architects' practices (Deamer, 2014: 34). Based on these findings, we discuss what are some possible implications for the profession of architecture and outline directions for future research.

## **Contributions**

This research will contribute to research on the professions discussing how professionals react to the increased pressures of bureaucratization and managerialism. It will provide insights on the micro-politics of resistance and the role of self-identity.

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