Work Placements For The Student's Benefit, Not Their Employer's

An essay addressing the skills shortage in the construction industry, focusing upon the lack of experience-based training during the early years of UK architectural education.

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The Challenge Of The Unknown

As a current Part Three student, I am approaching the end of a long qualification process. This essay contains my reflections on the process so far, and the change I would like to see, based on my observations.

The problem, is that architects are currently not taught how to deliver their ideas. It is my contention that this is sorely absent from the early years of architectural training, and it means that architecture as a profession is failing to match the growth and evolution of the wider construction industry.

When delivering any project, there are successes, mistakes and compromises. It is learning to adapt and deal with these peaks and troughs that makes a great architect. I'll admit this requires experience which in construction takes years to develop, and the process is ongoing. However by starting the process sooner in the education system, by changing the conversations in and around architecture schools, students could start to understand how architects can fully deliver the value they bring to projects.

How does this relate to the Skills Shortage in the Construction Industry? There is a disconnect between the way in which the architecture profession educates its students and how they can contribute to the construction industry. I propose the introduction of a placement system to teach architecture students about the industry sooner and in a more structured manner than what currently exists in their education.

Architects are revered by some but tolerated by many on construction sites up and down the country. It is my contention that if students were taught how to engage with other parties and stakeholders, they would have an appreciation of the processes and motivations beyond their own on a project.

Architectural Education Is Too Insular.

While design skill and creative thinking are the calling cards for the modern architect, a great idea is not worth the paper it is written on, unless the mechanism for delivery is clearly understood and then shrewdly implemented. For example, understanding how much fee a structural engineer is allocating to the project in proportion to the total contract value, can go on to explain where their priorities/incentives lie in relation to the project as a whole.

From £50k extensions to a £500m football stadium, it is a collection of people from an array of backgrounds that deliver a project. A thorough understanding of this ecosystem is essential. It is my contention that architectural education should mobilise a student's understanding of the construction industry at the advent of their training, not the end.

A concern that could be raised about my proposal is that immersion in the details of the construction industry too soon in a student's career hinders their creative development. However it is my contention that a design process without constraints is not reflective of the world in which we live and work. It may be affirming to those with great design dexterity to achieve great heights at university, but those who have succeeded are in fact those who made their ideas marketable and more importantly, deliverable.

I would hate to try and put hours to the time I spent (and my employer paid me for), learning how to plan a bathroom, how to draw a staircase, complete a fire escape plan.

These basic tasks are the bread and butter, but instead of learning them at University, the obligation is put onto employers. Young architecture graduates are made to serve the large commercial practice format, they aren't actually trained to be useful, fee-earning employees.

Architects should be in a stronger position in the construction industry and the built environment as a whole. We are often lead consultant, but our inability to adapt to the introduction of design and build contracts, the complexities of risk apportionment, amongst other things, have so far limited our capability to add value to projects.

The Problem - Too Much, Too Late

I am studying Part 3 this year, and I am enjoying the course; but I can't help feeling that the volume and intensity of information is too much, too late. We get saturated with information at a crucial stage of the training, overloaded by law, finance and management lectures. This is the learning equivalent of cramming for an exam. Just when we start to get some responsibility afforded to us at work, we are laden with legal jargon and are expected to process it in time for an exam and interview a few months later. What I propose aims to build a student's understanding of how we contribute to the industry sooner in their career.

Following the inescapable law of supply and demand, the education system is answerable to the job market. Students are moulded to fit the business models of the practices with highest buying power. However, it is my belief the profession is not doing enough to tell graduates what standards are expected of them, giving the schools permission to continue on a more academic discourse, while turning out graduates with limited technical and regulatory knowledge.

There are many different roles a new grad can step into once beyond university. But students come out of University and don't understand the processes and day-to-day undertakings of an architectural practice. This affects quality control and production methods of all practices, often requiring a square-one approach to training new staff.

Graduates do not have the relevant business or relationship skills.

Some students are fabulously talented, but if an idea cannot be communicated to its audience, it will not stick and it will not sell. There is a sector in architecture that gives a more charitable and benevolent offering to the built environment, but these are ultimately underwritten by capitalist enterprise. For example, the Foster + Partners teams working on issues affecting the developing world, such as power, infrastructure and sanitation. But these are only possible due to the initial capital being provided by a hugely successful, highly capitalist front for the practice.

Current Attempts To Resolve The Problem

21 Things You Won't Learn In Architecture School by Adrian Dobson is a fantastic book, which I thoroughly enjoyed reading as a Part Two Architectural Assistant trying frantically to work out what was going on around me. The items discussed are the pivotal elements of the profession and guide an architect towards their potential to affect change in the built environment.

But are we not to be trusted with the full picture until the very end of our training? The fact that **Dobson's** book exists in the circumstances in which it does, with the title it has, is frankly unacceptable. The question being, why don't we learn these things in Architecture School?

RIBA CPD Course for EU Architects is a course offered by the RIBA training EU qualified architects in the ways of the UK profession. Shouldn't they just be made to study the Part 3 Course? This is placing UK architecture students at a disadvantage over EU qualified Architects.

RIBA Future Leaders run by Nigel Ostime, an education programme for business-focused, post Part 3 skills for architects. Again, shouldn't this be engrained in the existing educational framework?

These are all fantastic initiatives but if, by the RIBA's own admission, the size of 75% of practices in the UK is under 10 staff, then shouldn't these skills be getting passed on much sooner and in more formal terms within a student's education? While the argument may be that we don't want to mislead students into being too business/services focused and forget all about design, it is my belief that to overlook this area completely is wrong.

The degree should remain loose and free, like it currently is, but this knowledge should be made to be passed on nonetheless. No matter what size of practice a student ends up working for, the practical skill set will be necessary. Does the student understand the client group dynamic? Or how the project is funded? What contracts or appointments are in place? These can fundamentally change the way in which architects behave in the wild, and we are not being given the basic tools and understanding soon enough.

The Solution - Placements For Students, Not Employers

Currently, I would leave the timeline required for education as is, but in addition I propose to create a new infrastructure for work placements conducted during academic holidays. These would be based on four weeks a year, while studying for both Part One and Part Two, making twenty weeks in total over the course of the five years spent in full-time architectural education.

The Part Three is a hugely valuable process as it allows students to focus on the experience-based learning and reflect about these times. As such, I would leave this unchanged.

Learning is an iterative process, and we learn best by comparing experiences to one another. Construction/Architectural projects take a long time to develop and deliver. It is very difficult to conduct meaningful critical analysis of one's own studies within such a short time frame, because things just haven't had time to pan out fully. Placements would allow students to see more approaches in a shorter space of time, improving their base knowledge of the profession and the wider construction industry.

If you start to pay interns, you are sending the message that they are in that office for the office's benefit, rather than their own as a student of architecture. Not paying them, and having short placements in one or two week increments, undertaken during the academic holidays would mean that they are there for their own benefit. It is of course highly likely that if they can be made to be useful and perform worthwhile tasks for the practice, all the better and practices could be allowed to remunerate them accordingly. However it is my contention that the balance should always be in favour of the student.

It should be written into the RIBA Code of Conduct that architects need to commit to the development and education of the future members of the profession. We should be enforcing these sooner in the education system. Practice management, resourcing, and finance all need to be engrained in the rhetoric of architectural training.

Giving students large project briefs at university only engenders a desire to approximate and rush as their experience does not allow them to fully comprehend constraints involved. It takes a long time to learn anything in Architecture, and this process is never ending.

Architects should be passionate about educating their next generation. The sooner we can start students on this path, the sooner they will be able to make meaningful contributions to the profession, the construction industry and their future clients.

The Method

The link between students and real professional practice has grown weak. This is how I propose to strengthen it.

RIBA

- Maintenance of a placement database, a new website/online system perhaps, but it can be spliced onto the existing education pages.
- Some infrastructure will be necessary. This should be picked up the RIBA, as they are responsible for regulating the education system.

Universities

- Investment of time in recording feedback from Students and the practices they visit. This could be organised via an online platform with digital forms sent to both parties, allowing for analytics and reporting on both.

Architects

- Would be required to invest their time and their expertise when a student is with them on placement. The architects would not be committed to employing young people, or paying them.

Students

- Invest their time during the holidays, but would get exposure to a lot of different offices in the meantime. Important for them to have this experience with the relative safety-net of full time education, compared to committing to a part-one job after Uni, and get stuck due to fear of moving job/instability. It is a placement, not a job.

Let students shadow architects and assistants. Have the architects quiz them as they go through day-to-day tasks. Sit in on meetings with consultants, design teams, clients and contractors. Go to site visits and observe all the perks and travails of life as an architect.

Online feedback forms for the students and practices would be completed and reviewed by the Universities. The placements would be defined by sector, and students should reach certain quotas in each sector/practice size during holiday times. These would be mandatory, and it would be the student's responsibility to put themselves forward for seeing practice. Universities would be required to monitor them.

Placements by sector and by practice size:
0-9; 10-19; 20-49; 50+

Further Suggestions For Improving Student's Practical Knowledge

MCQ Exam - This would be set by each university and would form the basis for a students training in areas such as Contract Law, Building Regulations, Regulatory Framework etc. at the Part 1 and Part 2 levels. Student projects should be made accountable to the regulations to which they will be bound in their future careers. Otherwise what are we doing here?

Make PEDRs prerequisite for proceeding to the next stage of Education. This would hold students accountable for maintaining high standards of professional record-keeping. With no current incentives or consequences for delivering on time, why, when every other aspect of their professional life is thick with paper trails and accountability, would they prioritise these documents?

Conclusion

The skills shortage in the architectural profession stems from architect's own failure to prepare students for what is expected of them and how the profession uses its staff and skills. The proposed work placement structure is a low cost mechanism for engaging students of architecture in the profession at an earlier stage in their training. It is based on my own experience in architectural education and practice.

The system would empower young architects to understand the profession and how it contributes to the wider construction industry. What has become clear to me in these early years, is the volume and breadth of knowledge and experience that exists beyond our own profession. Architects inhabit a privileged position in construction, where materials, methods and people can be synergised to create something greater than the sum of its parts. It is my belief that immersing students in this process sooner, will reinforce the value of collaboration between disciplines and ultimately create better buildings and better cities.

Implementing this framework will empower young architects, and by extension, the future of the profession, to better understand the industry with which we must collaborate in order to deliver great ideas on time and on budget.

In construction there is an overarching commitment to delivering buildings fit for purpose, we should be educating our architects in the same vein.

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