

In Defence of Architecture

I am not yet a fully fledged architect. I have obtained my Bachelor of Architecture and several years of experience now in the field, and have a view to registering as an architect if any incentive remains to strive to achieve this goal after the Government's final verdict to either maintain, update or repeal the Architects Acts (other than perhaps my own commitment to my chosen profession).

It seems the bottom line of what the Commission is presenting to Architects is: ALL responsibility & liability, NO recognition, NO reward. The Commission suggests deregulation and proposes self-regulation as an alternative....keep the accountability but cloud the recognition. I suggest confusion will reign if the title of architect is allowed to be unrestricted for use by anyone. The distinction for consumers will be made more difficult than ever.

At the moment black is black and white is white...deregistration will be introducing various shades of grey. Why can't we call a builder a builder, an engineer an engineer, a designer a designer and an architect an architect; rather than an architect, architect, architect and perhaps registered architect.

Indeed anyone at present can call themselves an architect, if they go through the correct and recognised channels to do so. If they choose to become a builder or a draftsman, so be it, but they know from the outset it entails a different kind of career choice – there are distinct differences between each. They are also aware from the beginning they will not be entitled to call themselves an 'architect' unless they do the appropriate studies and gain the relevant experience, in the same manner as person pursuing a career as an architect will not be recognised as a registered builder unless they complete the prerequisites.

I find it rather bizarre that in this day and age where government bodies, companies, public and private institutions are demanding greater and further higher education for a more skilled work force, that the recommending body to the Australian Federal Government should be advising to lower these standards and effectively go backwards.

WHO PAYS?

The Productivity Commission argues that certification restricts competition to some degree, imposing costs on consumers, architects and non-architects, I suggest that costs will be imposed all the more on architects, non-architects and consumers alike if the requirement for certification is withdrawn.

I ask, what costs to the consumer does present regulation incur?

The answer is that currently registration bears no cost to the consumer as at present it is borne by architects themselves.

The costs at present are solely upon Architects not only for registration in the architectural industry but also to market the advantages of using an extensively trained, experienced and accredited practitioner in the field.

If one would care to rephrase the sentence from the Commission's report where it states 'the cost of restrictions on the use of the title architect and its derivatives does not appear to be large' (pg.xxvii) this could be re-written to say 'the cost of restrictions... is small'!

Costs, on the other hand would be incurred by consumers if the profession was deregulated for the search and find – who is a true 'architect'?

The Productivity Commission considers that a change to voluntary self-regulation would be unlikely to impose hardship on architects or consumers (pg.xxxv). I beg to differ. De-regulation would impose enormous and burdensome costs on architects for promoting the awareness of the value of employing a highly trained and skilled professional with tertiary level qualifications and in depth experience over and above the self-promotion of builders and building design firms which already have an extremely strong market base, clientele and audience. Building companies are obviously reaping a lot more than architects as attested to by their massive advertising and sales commissions budgets.

Furthermore, the numbers of architects is relatively small compared to say the Commission's example of self-regulated accountants, and due to the comparably small numbers would be at a distinct disadvantage in an economic sense and means with which to promote themselves.

There is strength and dollars in numbers, and it is quite obvious that architects would struggle all the more to make their presence felt and the create awareness of the valuable contribution to society they make (other than buildings speaking for themselves that is). I fear that the call of the qualified architect will be deadened by the yodels of those who possibly may be granted this title without having earned it.

Why should the title 'architect' be taken from being awarded, not even to being bestowed, but simply free for all to use and possibly abuse???

Are not the titles 'doctor' (medical or otherwise), 'professor', 'lawyer', 'electrician' etc, reserved only for use by those who have evidenced the competency, earned the approval and qualifications necessary for such practices? Titles like these also serve two purposes

1. To point to their area of expertise and skill and signal a recognised and certified level of competency
2. To protect the public interest in the supply of their services

Why should the field of science and art in building therefore be considered any lesser or differently from these other areas of expertise?

It must be remembered that the clients or consumers of architectural services are, in the end, not the only users, as the effect of architecture is far reaching and affects the lives of all those who live in, work in, play in, learn in and commute past the built environment.

ANTI-COMPETITIVE? NO WAY!

Trade Practices Act has already deemed the Architects' Acts not to be anti-competitive in nature. There is no restriction to prevent other people from practicing and competing in this market, there is no price fixing the architectural industry and no anti-competitive practices.

On the contrary, practices are extremely competitive, architects often finding they have to constantly undercut one-another, in order to obtain work.

The notion put forward by the Productivity Commission that architects 'rely on a legislated monopoly over use of title to protect them from competition' is ludicrous (pg.xxxv). Architects have earned and are deserving of their title and it does little to protect them from competition.

Furthermore, the suggestion in the report that some consumers may not be aware of the existence of other providers of design services other than architects, is nonsense (pg xxviii). Any simple man or woman can be flicking through Saturday's West Australian newspaper and be bombarded with advertisements for builders and building designers in the liftout sections. The community newspapers also list design and drafting providers at your service.

The proliferation of 'off the plan' houses popping up everywhere in growing suburbs and new estates in Perth indicates that the vast majority of house buyers buy from project home displays and from the folios of Perth builders.

Competition is highly intense already - particularly in the housing sector. Deregistering architects would only serve to disadvantage this profession further.

The Commission's reports states that evidence suggests many consumers in the residential and commercial sectors regard 'particular services' provided by non-architects as closely substitutable for those provided by architects (pg xix). Yes, 'particular services' perhaps, but show me a professional with a handle on all services, a one-stop shop for controlling construction from outset to completion, someone with first hand exposure to builders and the building industry, someone to communicate with and co-ordinate all consultants, someone with an extensive range of skills, training and ability to deliver a full range of services – and I'll show you an Architect!

WHAT IS AN ARCHITECT?

The Productivity Commission's report takes an extremely simple definition for an architect from a concise dictionary and then charges the Australian States and Territories with having altered this definition (pg xvi). The definition chosen is certainly not just or comprehensive enough to classify (even in a succinct manner) what an architect is. One should rather turn to a more universally recognised definition of 'architect'.

I therefore to refer you to Practice Note AN03.01.704 July 1997 published by the RAlA Practice Services. Herein it states the fundamental requirements of an 'architect' as classified by the wider world community beyond the shores of Australia:

(a) Definition

The fundamental requirements for registration/licencing/certification as an architect are those skills and abilities that must be mastered through education, training, experience and verified by examination, in order to be considered professionally qualified to practice architecture.

(b) Background

In August 1985, the Commission of the European Communities adopted Directive 85/384/EEC (now transposed into national law in each EU member state) which sets down those fundamental skills and abilities:

- Ability to create architectural designs that satisfy both aesthetic and technical requirement;
- Adequate knowledge of the history and theories of architecture and related arts, technologies and human science;
- Knowledge of the fine arts as an influence on the quality of architectural design;
- Adequate knowledge of urban design, planning and the skills involved in the planning process;
- Understanding of the relationship between people and buildings and between buildings and their environments, and of the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs and scale;
- Understanding the methods of investigation and preparation of the brief for a design project;
- Understanding of the structural design, construction and engineering problems associated with building design;
- Adequate knowledge of physical problems and technologies and of the function of buildings so as to provide them with internal conditions of comfort and protection against climate;
- Necessary design skills to meet building users' requirements within the constraints imposed by cost factors and building regulations;
- Adequate knowledge of the industries, organisations, regulations and procedures involved in translating design concepts into buildings and integrating plans into overall planning

If the European Communities deem it necessary to legislate rather than allow self-regulation, why is it that the Productivity Commission doesn't?

SPECIALISED EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

In preparing myself for the examination by the Architects Registration Board of Australia, I have undertaken to study the contents of the 4 lever arch volumes of the RAlA Practice Service Notes to equip myself to best answer any questions posed. I have heard that the exam is tough and for fear of failing and losing hard-earned money invested into sitting the exam this is enough to drive myself and other graduates I know to stretch their knowledge as far as possible to maximise the chances of passing.

You cannot tell me that the compliance with the requirements of the Log Book of Architectural Practice (required by the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia to assess eligibility for the exam) and the successful completion of the exam does not set architects apart in a unique league of educational standards, both academic and practical. To even be considered for the examination for registration, prospective architects have to demonstrate a high level of accountability and of mastering a wide range of tasks and instruction and leadership roles. See Attachment A.

How can one be so blinkered or blind to believe that 5 years of study, accumulated experience under a registered architect and competency exhibited by the successful passing of an examination cannot be in the best interests of the public?

PROTECTION OF THE CONSUMER

Architects are charged and engaged to act in an unbiased and unprejudiced manner in on behalf of client and protect the clients interests whilst being fair to the builder concerned. They directly represent and are of first-hand benefit to the consumer. Acting in contract administration on behalf of the client as the mediator between the client and builder, the architect can ensure certain standards of quality are maintained by the builder which oftentimes is not the case in a direct client-builder contract. Builders in many cases have a distinct knowledge advantage over the client and often fall short in standards of finishes or disappoint and cost the client dearly when works are not completed to time with little to no liquidated damages clauses. The client, all too often, is trapped into ignorantly believing they are adequately covered right from the outset under the guise of a simple contract.

Consumers are often unaware of their contractual rights and responsibilities when it comes to building. Architects are there to enlighten and administer contracts in a fair and just manner, and to ensure certain standards are met and builders kept accountable.

In short, Architects protect the consumer.

ART & SCIENCE INTERTWINED

Architecture is an age-old expression in the art and technique of building.

The Grolier Encyclopaedia says of Architecture:

Architecture is probably the oldest of the fine arts (see art). Certainly it is the most useful and in some respects is a prerequisite for the other arts. Most early sacred texts associate buildings with deities; architecture was not only considered the highest art form, to which other arts were adornments, but some buildings were viewed as representing another, higher realm. In medieval illuminated manuscripts, God was frequently shown armed with compasses and a mason's square, as Architect of the Universe...

...The names of architects first began to be known in Italy during the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries. The idea of a professional architect with formal training and academic qualifications is a product of the 19th century. In 1819 architecture courses were instituted at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Paris; in 1847 a night school was established at the Architectural Association in London; courses in architecture were first offered at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1868, at Cornell University in 1871, and at the University of Illinois in 1873.¹

The recommendation of the Productivity Commission that formal architectural training, experience and qualifications should no longer be required to call oneself an 'architect' and his/her profession 'architecture' is taking us back to the 1700's.

¹ Grolier Encyclopaedia CDRom 1997

The role of the architect, I believe, has been over simplified and diminished in this report. Architects do more than just design, document and administer projects. Architects have constantly embraced the changing faces of society, and worked with technological innovations to stretch and advance the boundaries of building technologies. Incorporating new materials and exploring their maximum potential - one example being the steel beam and column with its spanning ability and freedom from the traditional load bearing wall prompted architects to experiment with, explore and introduce significant advancements in architecture to the benefit of all society.

The Commission's report devalues the appreciation of the art in architecture and the skill required to develop such.

Every work of art has two aspects: it is a present experience as well as a record of the past, and it is valued, preserved, and studied for both identities. As present experience, artworks afford people the pleasures, the tensions, the dramas, and ultimately the satisfaction to the senses of pure form – in the visual arts the relationships among colours, lines, and masses in space.²

Architecture is not intended just to physically contain or define space; the aspiration of the craft is to minister to the senses. It is the three-dimensional 'art and method of erecting structures'. Vitruvius, a Roman Architect of the 1st century AD defined architecture as building that incorporated *utilitas*, *firmitas* and *venustas*. Translated into English by Sir Henry Wotton in the 17th century this means '*commoditae* (utilitarian qualities), *firmness* (structural stability and sound construction) and *delighte* (attractive appearance)'.³

You cannot reduce architecture to one or other of its components – it is a whole and a complex study of all the components of building, how to successfully and skillfully bring these elements into a design that is safe, aesthetically pleasing and challenging, and the administration and co-ordination to see the design realised to its full potential to service the individual, family, community or city. See Attachment B.

The curriculum in our Australian universities for the degree of Bachelor of Architecture reflects this complexity. The practice of the profession of Architecture is more than just the sum of its parts and cannot be neatly broken down and segmented into bite size pieces that would be able to be managed by a plethora of other practitioners. For this reason other courses are offered with a different bent, away from the emphasis on art and design towards say the management only of construction projects, or alternatively the finer nuts and bolts and building construction aspect. See Attachments C & D.

Architects have a developed eye for, and appreciation of good design, planning and detailing, stretching to well functioning urban concepts, and have a commitment to the infusion of such into the fabric of society through the built environment.

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Unfortunately our society is already largely complacent and happy with a utilitarian approach to the built environment. How often do we see ugly commercial, and retail tilt slab constructions erected with obviously little to no thought put to their physical appearance with a very low level of aesthetic consideration. Just walls, floors and a few penetrations for light and access – ‘as long as it meets the codes and is cost effective’ seems to be the dollar driven motto.

The recommendation of deregulation of architects should set off alarm bells in all sectors of society, the Productivity Commission is treading on unstable ground, they are the grim reaper sounding possibly the death-knell of architects who are in the business of making a contribution to society in creativity, offering specialised service to humankind, sensitivity to human ergonomics and the environment.

I, for one, would not want to be known as one who had brought about the demise of the architectural profession and sit back to see blots and eyesaws proliferate on the cityscapes of Australia all in the name of architecture.

The recommendation offers a short-term solution, without regard to the long-term affects, the ramifications and possible outcomes of the action of de-regulation on the quality of the built environment.

The value of good design is not always realised except in its absence...or perhaps rather in the presence of poor design. Remember that if fundamental mistakes are made in planning or building design they are not easily disguised and are not easily erased or rectified. Even though our built environment is becoming more temporary, buildings still stand for a long time. The legacy, or the liability can live on...

By compromising the current standards for admission to the profession of architecture, one risks compromising the built environment, allowing ill equipped practitioners to create visual and physical disasters under the guise of an architect.

The government if anything should be embracing architects and the promotion and use of their skills in urban planning, building and public spaces. For the time I have lived in Perth I have seen an incredible and positive transformation in the fabric of Melbourne, and architects for their input in design are largely to thank for that. I would argue that if appreciation is currently lacking for architects and the buildings they produce there is obviously not enough buildings being consigned to well reputed architects.

Architects should be having their skills and flair recognised and promoted, not demoted, as is the case. Had we the full support of federal, state and local governments we would see a surge in exciting and innovative architecture, the production of cutting edge designs, with Australia developing a very visible reputation as a centre for excellence in design.

OTHER ISSUES..

At one point in the review the Commission puts forward an option for adopting majority lay representation on the panel of the registration board (pg 145). I wholeheartedly support a proportion of lay presence on the Board as a positive influence with a balancing effect. However, the idea for majority representation has to be dismissed. How could a student in a particular field be assessed by anyone other than (or majority of) those directly experienced in that field? Even at senior school level maths teachers do not mark art history papers, nor do physics teachers grade biology projects. Similarly, how could it be possibly be conceived that accreditation could be granted to an architect by anyone other than an architect?

The Commission's proposal of the repeal of Architects Acts threatens to jeopardise many architects and their businesses. Suggesting the profession develop a voluntary national register of persons meeting certain criteria would require in turn a world-wide shift to recognise and accept this new recognition with no guarantee overseas markets will immediately accept and embrace such a change (pg xxxiii). (Not to mention the cost involved here which would no doubt end up being passed on to the consumer).

IN CLOSING...

By all means review the Acts themselves and revise the advertising and age limit requirements as they are redundant and outdated. To address the Commission's concerns regarding the ongoing standards of service from architects in relation to current knowledge and competency, I would be prepared to accept the extension of a requirement for a practicing architect to be part of the RAIA's ongoing professional development program. Membership of the RAIA would possibly then become more attractive to the non-member architect, because if it continues as it is currently, members receive attractive discounts on such programs. Even if full membership were to be made compulsory (which would be likely to double membership – refer pg 27), I could foresee advantages in this, as a wider member base could potentially reduce the quite costly membership fees, which currently deter many people from joining.

In the light of all the final responses and information provided I trust that you (the Productivity Commission) will be now well equipped to review and be flexible enough to revise your stance on the issue. I urge you to carefully consider all these presentations today and written submissions in favour of retaining the current Architects Acts, and to be extremely wary of the substantial risks and potential problems arising through completely abolishing them.

For the sake of architecture, and in the interests of the consumer and the whole of society, do not, I implore you, do not open it to a free-market approach where every person can freely lay claim to the title of 'Architect'.

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A

Extract sheets from Log Book of Experience in Architectural Practice – AACA

Attachment B

Newspaper clipping ‘Airport Wins Top Design Award’ written by Ruth Callaghan
The West Australian newspaper Saturday 3rd June 2000, page 16

Attachment C

RMIT Faculty of the Constructed Environment

Web pages for Courses and Programs and Bachelor of Architecture course outline

Attachment D

The University of Western Australia – School of Architecture and Fine Arts
2000 Architecture Course Book