

Perspectives: Young Architects' Forum

Statement presented on 23 November 2019 in Barcelona on the occasion of the Young Architects' Forum organised by the Architects' Council of Europe (ACE)

Architecture is still a very attractive profession for the younger generations. According to the latest ACE Sector Study, the number of architects in Europe has been steadily increasing over the past ten years due to growing numbers of young architects entering the profession¹. As a result, the profession is relatively young today: 30% of European architects are aged under 40 and 15% have 5 years or less experience.

Whether they are young graduates, employed or have set up their own office, young architects face numerous challenges: demanding labour markets, a burdensome regulatory framework, highly competitive and markets that are not very open, as well as business and professional environments where practices are changing rapidly.

On 23 November 2019, the Architects' Council of Europe organised a conference with the title *Perspectives*, inviting young architects from all over Europe to express their views on the profession and their visions and aspirations for the future. The present statement summarises the contributions received from the speakers of the conference.

L'architecture est par essence un acte politique.

Democracy, participation and bottom up approaches: putting people at the heart of the architectural approach

There is a clear need and demand for more bottom-up and participatory processes for the design of the built environment. There is growing interest in co-design approaches, aimed at actively involving all stakeholders and end users in the design process in order to ensure the project meets their needs.

- *One too often forgets for whom buildings are created. Our society needs more direct democracy - public and user involvement are crucial. Projects have to be developed in a bottom-up rather than a top-down manner.*
- *Private investors just see buildings as products, giving too much importance to real estate value, at the expense of the social, cultural and utility values. Such developments forget the need for beauty, sustainability and 'bonheur' and result in buildings which look more and more alike.*
- *The quality of the built environment is of common interest. This is not sufficiently reflected in national and EU legal frameworks.*

Sustainability: an integral part of architecture

While there is growing concern about the scarcity of resources and the fragility of our environment, urgent actions must be taken in the construction and building sectors, which have huge potential in terms of resource savings and waste reduction. Architecture has a crucial role to play here.

- *Sustainability must be seen as an integral part of architecture - the time when it was seen as something of its own has passed. It is an element like "firmitas, utilitas, venustas" - stability, functionality, beauty ... and sustainability.*

¹ According to the 2018 ACE Sector Study, between 2008 and 2018, the number of architects in Europe has risen by 24%, passing from 453.000 to 562.000 individuals. Study available on the ACE website https://www.ace-cae.eu/fileadmin/New_Upload/7_Publications/Sector_Study/2018/2018_ACE_Report_EN_FN.pdf

- *Meeting the challenges of our time requires new approaches, which are far removed from the greenwashing of façades in fancy 3Ds.*
- *It is important to look for alternatives to concrete - the construction material with the greatest carbon footprint. Earth, wood and innovative materials should be brought to the foreground.*
- *Thermal requirements and other regulations are too often non-holistic and look only at certain qualities of materials or technologies. The options of re-using or even undoing have no place in regulations. A more holistic approach is necessary.*
- *Designers should use technical innovations but not be driven by them. Technology is just a tool to be used in an adequate way. Likewise, BIM should be seen as a tool offering the opportunity to have greater control of the entire process.*
- *Circular economy principles have to be applied in the construction sector, so our built environment can be easily repaired, re-used or adapted to new needs, while optimising resource value and generating as little waste as possible.*

Transition from school to work: entering highly competitive markets

Many countries see a high number of young graduates entering the labour market every year. Competition for internships and initial work experience is extremely tight, sometimes leading young people to accept unpaid internships and to multiply the number of low-income temporary jobs, with little social protection and low probability of professional advancement². Yet, these internships and initial work experience are a must for starting a career as an architect, as certain indispensable skills and competences for the practice of architecture can only be acquired through professional practice experience.

- *Schools reach an historic maximum every semester. We receive 10 to 15 applications every day, all from very young and unprepared students requesting “any kind of internship, even if unpaid”.*

Facing complex regulatory frameworks and business environments

Architects operate today in a fast-paced business and economic environment, with only short-term visibility, requiring high flexibility and adaptability. They face the setting of complex standards and regulatory frameworks; administrative burden; difficulties and delays in receiving payments; insurance and liability issues, etc.

- *We perceive a lack of value in our profession, which sometimes translates into a lack of economic compensation. There is a trend to normalisation of irregular and unfair practices, such as non-paid or non-recognised work.*
- *The profession is still male dominated. As a result, 52% of the potential of our societies is lost. We advocate for equal treatment and for closing the pay-gap between men and women.*
- *Practice of and access to the profession are over-regulated. The plethora of norms, building standards, legislation and other rules make building expensive and limit innovation. Moreover, in many countries it takes far too long to become an architect.*
- *Cooperation with other professions is desirable but is often hindered by professional regulations.*

Public procurement and access to the market

With regard to public procurement, young and small architectural offices are severely impacted by certain requirements imposed by some contracting authorities. Being considered as non-eligible, they are prevented from working on large scales projects.

² The ACE Sector Study shows that architects aged under 30 earn significantly less than any other group - the average earnings of architects aged 35-39 are double those of architects aged under 30.

- *Access to public procurement is limited – it is almost impossible for young and small offices to enter the market. Requirements relating to turnover and references are highly obstructive to market access.*
- *Competition juries, too often dominated by the investors, frequently fear innovative approaches and tend to favour 'more of the same', resulting in standardisation of the built environment.*
- *As a result of the privatisation of resources and services, public authorities lose leadership with regards to achieving the common good.*

The recognition of architecture and the role of architects in society

The understanding of architecture in society, the recognition of its values and the perception of the role of the architect are evolving.

- *It is important to raise the general understanding of architecture in society - we do not only want to talk not fellow architects, but to everybody. Let Society feel the added value and atmosphere of contemporary architecture.*
- *Architects have to raise their political awareness and realise that architecture has the power to change our daily life, that it is a way to empower people for social transformation.*
- *Architects should play a role of chef d'orchestre, mediator and spokesperson for citizens interests.*
- *There is a growing public demand for quality-built environments, especially in the field of residential buildings, but also in all everyday situations: housing, working places, public spaces.*
- *Single architects signing projects with their own name are a dying species. The figure of the architect, practicing alone, is being replaced by collective and collaborative models.*
- *We want to be close to building activity, to be close to how things are actually built.*
- *Self-built small-scale projects, cooperation with artists, participatory urban design, empty or unused buildings, temporary use projects - offer great potential and opportunities for experimenting with new ways of occupying space and breaking down barriers between disciplines.*

Expectations from the European Union

The EU plays a growing role in many areas affecting the built environment and the daily practice of the architectural profession: recognition of professional qualifications, establishment and provision of services in other Member States, public procurement, energy performance of buildings, research, etc. Through a coherent and progressive regulatory framework and supporting initiatives especially in the cultural field, the EU can empower architects to achieve quality in the built environment and contribute to the achievement of EU ambitions.

- *Greater priority should be given to research focusing on the role of the creative arts and design in the social, economic and environmental transformation of the built environment, in particular on high-quality architecture as a means to improve people's quality of life. Innovative projects in the areas of urban innovative actions, building performance and (temporary) re-use should also be further supported.*
- *The EU should further support the mobility of architects in Europe, the networking of professionals as well as cross-border collaborations through dedicated funding scheme and online platforms.*
- *Better public procurement procedures are necessary: more democratic and transparent, open and accessible to SMEs, with fair compensations and limitations on the influence of the competition authorities.*
- *The EU has an important role to play in raising the awareness of citizens about the importance of quality in the built environment and developing an understanding of the profession.*

- *Do not look only at big scale projects – quality in small scale projects and everyday architecture is essential.*