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The Role of the Architect

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Challenges and Opportunities for Architects in the 21st Century

Architecture is an evolving and dynamic profession. The role of the architect has evolved over the centuries. Architects have been:

- powerful confidants to the pharaohs in ancient Egypt;
- philosophers/planners in ancient Greece and Rome;
- artisans and craftsmen in medieval times;
- “master builders” throughout the Renaissance.

Today, the architect is usually a professional service provider. Technological and sociological changes have altered both the way architecture is practised as well as the role of the architect in society. Architecture remains an exciting profession and architects continue to shape our built-environment and contribute to society and the planet.

There are several new frontiers in architectural practice which provide exciting opportunities for architects, including:

- sustainable design;
- new forms of project delivery;
- new technologies and tools for architectural practice; and,
- globalization.

Sustainable Design

The ever-increasing consumption of water, raw materials, fossil fuels together with the need to reduce demand for non-renewable resources will impact the future role of the architect and architectural practice.

Architects in Canada are currently leaders in both research and the design of sustainable buildings. In 2002, the Sustainable Buildings Canada Committee of the RAIC was transformed into the Canada Green Building Council and the RAIC provided administrative and financial support for this new organization whose goal is to transform the design and construction market. Today many architects continue to lead and contribute to the work of the Canada Green Building Council and to advancements in sustainable design.

New Forms of Project Delivery

Clients and governments are constantly seeking new ways of financing and more efficient methods to design and construct buildings and infrastructure projects. This has resulted in new and evolving methods of project delivery. Consequently, the architect’s professional relationship with clients, users and others in the construction industry is changing. Project delivery methods such as Design-Build and Public Private Partnerships (also known as P3) mean that the architect is often engaged by a builder or a financial entity and not by the owner or users of the building. This presents challenges for the practice of architecture but it also offers opportunities including new roles such as a compliance Architect, advocate Architect, and the possibility of various leadership roles within these new forms of project delivery.

Refer also to Chapter 2.3.2, Types of Construction Project Delivery.

New Technologies and Tools for Practice

Computer software and tools used in architectural practice continue to advance and improve. The historical role of the architect to gather information, process and synthesize this information, and use presentation techniques to communicate a solution can benefit significantly from new software and computer tools. There are
opportunities for the architect to expand and develop an architectural practice depending on his or her ability to embrace and integrate these new technologies. As these tools evolve, the potential for architects to prepare more accurate cost estimates and three-dimensional images increases. Furthermore, there are many modeling and simulation software programs available to assist architects in the analysis and evaluation of energy, lighting, daylighting and other factors influencing architectural design. Some architects specialize in the applications of such software. These tools can also facilitate the integrated design process and coordination with engineers, consultants, manufacturers and construction partners. Around the start of the 21st century architects led the way in adopting Building Information Modeling.

Globalization

Architectural practice now extends to all continents and there are many multinational architectural firms established in several countries. This globalization presents new challenges to architects to adapt to different cultures and new markets abroad, as well as coping with competition in the Canadian market from international firms.

The Architect as an Integrator and Generalist

Today, an architect is a professional with a general knowledge of the many disciplines involved in the design, construction, maintenance, and alteration of buildings. An architect must also have the skills necessary to synthesize, integrate and coordinate various parts of a project into a composite whole not only to satisfy functional requirements, but also to contribute to an orderly, visually-pleasing, and sustainable environment. The individual architect may become an expert in particular aspects of design, production or management, or become an expert in a specific building type or undertake non-traditional activities such as teaching, managing or building. There is a growing trend to specialize, such as architects as code consultants or programmers, and to become accredited or certified in specialties such as building envelope consultants (in British Columbia). However, the architect maintains a general expertise in all aspects of the profession.

The practice of architecture is interrelated with many other design disciplines, from various types of engineering to landscape design, to sociological and planning studies. In the complex task of coordinating the many specialists involved in a project, the architect develops a unique role and set of skills. Most architects have joined the profession because of a desire to improve the environment in which people live and work. This holistic view of the built environment has enabled architects to undertake a variety of strategic roles in society.

Professional Responsibility

The architect’s responsibility extends beyond the client to fellow professionals, the profession, and society in general. The amount of responsibility an architect is prepared to accept will determine how he or she practises architecture. The employed or salaried architect has reduced direct responsibility to his employer’s client, whereas the sole practitioner carries the entire responsibility. Architects in partnership share this responsibility. The architect’s responsibility varies depending on the architect’s role in society. Refer also to Chapter 1.1.3, Professional Conduct and Ethics, for more information on professional obligations and responsibilities.

Architects in Private Practice

The general public traditionally views the architect as a private practitioner.

Architectural Practice is the setting where ethos and circumstances lock horns, where individual and professional goals combine with budgets, deadlines, skills, organization, power, context and regulations.

(Cuff)

Architects in private practice may be:

- self-employed;
- employed (salaried) architects working for other professionals;
- independent contractors providing services to other architects;
- specialist consultants in various fields, such as project management, building codes, conservation, and specifications.
Self-employed architects may be:

- sole proprietors;
- in partnership with other architects or engineers;
- directors or shareholders of an architectural corporation.

Self-employed architects in private practice must maintain expertise in two distinct areas:

- the performance of architectural services;
- the operation and management of a practice, including staff.

Refer also to Chapter 2.1.1, Organization of an Architectural Practice. The architect in private practice accepts liability for the architectural commissions which the architect undertakes.

Refer also to Chapter 2.1.7, Human Resources, for a discussion of employees and independent contractors in the design professions.

**Corporate Architects (Private Sector)**

Many corporations — that do not practise architecture — employ architects as members of their staff. For example, many large corporations employ architects in their real estate, design, construction, and facilities management divisions. The architect working for a corporation must nevertheless comply with the provincial requirements for practice and the use of the professional seal. Some of these architects may provide a full range of professional services for their employer, the corporation. Alternatively, they may simply manage the design and construction by selecting architects and consultants, and by coordinating the provision of architectural services as a representative of the corporation.

Frequently, corporate architects provide services in:

- site selection;
- project planning;
- programming;
- consultant selection;
- contract negotiations;
- construction contract administration;
- facilities management.

The special skills of the architect who is committed to an organization’s culture and goals can result in promotion to the executive levels of an organization.

**Architects in Government and Institutions (Public Sector)**

The architect can also serve society as a public service worker, that is, as an employee of the government, either at the federal, provincial/territorial or municipal level or for a public institution. Public Sector employees are not personally liable for their professional work to the same extent as their private-sector counterparts.

Often, universities and hospitals require in-house expertise for the management and expansion of their buildings and physical plant. Architects in government and institutions can exert influence and develop policies related to the built environment. Opportunities within the public sector may include positions at a technical, managerial or policy level. All levels of government construct and fund building projects as well as regulate the built environment.

Architects can play a variety of roles within government as noted below. Architects in these roles must be tactful and diplomatic in order to facilitate communication with the general public, officials, other architects, developers, and contractors.

Because many decisions regarding the built environment are made in the political arena, some architects choose to run for office for:

- various levels of government;
- school boards;
- professional or business associations.

Architects employed in government and institutions are not always required to maintain “professional” registration with a provincial or territorial association of architects. The lapse, or absence, of a professional licence can create a distance between the government “professional” and fellow architects, and can lead to a lack of currency and knowledge of the profession. Governments and the profession are working to redress this situation.
Federal

At the federal level, architects work as:

- employees of Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC), Department of National Defence (DND), Defence Construction Canada (DCC), and several other federal government departments;
- conservation architects within the Federal Building Heritage Review Office (FBHRO) and Parks Canada, the guardians of national historic sites;
- researchers within federal government agencies such as the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the Institute for Research in Construction (IRC) of the National Research Council (NRC);
- technical representatives and policy developers or other officials related to the built environment and building codes.

Provincial/Territorial

At the provincial/territorial level, architects work as:

- employees of various provincial/territorial government ministries, crown corporations, and agencies related to the built environment (for example, education, public works and government services, housing, planning, tourism, health, building codes and regulations, and heritage);
- researchers and technicians;
- policy developers for the provincial/territorial government.

Municipal

At the municipal level, architects work as:

- building inspectors and plans examiners;
- administrators and designers within municipal departments of Planning and Development, specializing in areas such as land-use planning and zoning, urban design, heritage conservation.

Architects in Education and Research

Architects may pursue a career in academia as faculty members at the university schools of architecture or as researchers in a variety of settings. The university schools of architecture in Canada have faculty on a fulltime, visiting or adjunct (part-time) basis. (Refer to “List: Canadian University Schools of Architecture with Accredited Programs,” in Chapter 1.1.4, Admission to the Profession.)

Some architects who teach also practise the profession or undertake research. Many architects also teach at the various community colleges, technical institutions, and cégeps (“collèges d’enseignement général et professionnelles” in Québec) which train architectural technicians, technologists, and other students who study design and the construction industry.

Architects in Construction and Development

Increasingly, architects are selecting careers directly in the construction industry or real estate development. As designers, planners, and managers, they can contribute significant skills to this sector of the economy. Typical careers include:

- developer;
- construction manager;
- contractor;
- Design-Builder;
- real estate agent.
Many developers have their own in-house staff to plan and coordinate the provision of design services for projects, and many building contractors are involved in “Design-Build” work, employing architects directly. The following skill sets can be especially marketable to builders and developers:

- marketing;
- economic feasibility studies;
- conceptual problem-solving;
- design;
- construction planning;
- estimating;
- construction administration.

Architects must confirm with the provincial associations of architects that their services and roles comply with provincial regulations. Architects occasionally lead the development and building process; in fact, the number of architect-led Design-Build firms, particularly in the United States, is growing.

**Other Roles for Architects**

An architectural education is often valuable for other fields of endeavour. Architects look beyond architecture for careers related to design, planning, and construction, and as specialist consultants. New career opportunities are also available to architects willing to pursue studies in related professions and become specialists with a multi-disciplined background. Some examples include:

- expert witness;
- architect/engineer;
- architect/planner/urban designer;
- architect/lawyer;
- architect/business administrator;
- architect/facilities planner;
- designer of virtual environments for computers;
- mediator/arbitrator;
- forensic investigator.

Refer to the RAIC website, *Becoming an Architect*, for a list of some of the non-traditional jobs for architects.

**References**