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NSW

The Commissioner
Productivity Commission

Review of the Legislation Regulating the Architectural Profession

The recommendations of the Draft Report of the Productivity Commission draws an extraordinary conclusion in the light of the recent debate about the quality of the built environment in this state.

It is ironic that the actual design of buildings is not required to be carried out by a suitably qualified person, while most other parts of the building process are controlled by legislation, even the design of the landscaping.

The report fails to consider the value of six years of tertiary education in a broad range of disciplines including design, environmental science, sociology and law as well as building construction in providing skills that serves the public interest. No other group in the building industry can offer this, in age of increasingly narrow specialisation, the ability to ace the 'big picture' must be of real value.

Architects offer a unique combination of skills that are ideally suited to dealing with the complex and often disparate issues such as environmentally sustainable design, energy efficiency and disability access are becoming increasingly important factors in building design. It is in the public interest that these skills are encouraged and utilised; the move to a deregulated environment is contrary to this interest as it will discourage formal education and study.

The Report dismisses the concept of a professional service as being capable of offering more than the market; that a professional, in return for a fee, provides a level of accountability that extends beyond that of the contract. Recent research by the CSIRO and Building Science Forum of Australia confirms the view that declines in the standard of design services, with an increase in disputes, costs and delays, are in direct correlation to the reduction in fee levels over the last decade. It is well understood the cost of professional fees represents a small proportion (less than 5-10%) of the construction cost of a building project; it is a far smaller proportion when whole of life costs are considered (for example, the cost of running a hospital exceeds the building cost after only one year ...). The proper consideration of design decisions can only occur with adequate expertise and resources; this is surely in the public interest.

The Report paints an image of the profession as elitist, ageing and relatively highly paid. in general, the architectural profession is far younger, more diverse in gender and background and certainly less well paid than the Report contends.

The Report appears ignorant of the way much of the profession works, as it excludes the employees of medium and larger practices from its estimates. The majority of these people are neither registered architects nor members of the RAIA; these affiliations do not provide additional salary or confer many other tangible benefits- they actually imply even greater responsibilities. By way of example, I work in a well established architect's office with a staff of 30 people working in a technical capacity. Of these, about half are registered architects. while even fewer are members of the RMA. These people are not 'building designers' but highly skilled professionals, the majority of whom have the necessary tertiary qualifications and relevant experience to meet the current registration requirements', indeed several have overseas qualifications at least comparable to local requirements.

Many graduates wait five or ten years before registration as there is no compelling need (or benefit) for them to do otherwise.

There is a strong overtone in the Report of the position of the Construction industry to take greater control of design in the interests of greater efficiency,- while maybe cost effective, there remain serious doubts about the ability of the construction industry to ensure that the public interest is met.

It is important to note that the practice of architecture is regulated in most countries; In an increasingly global economy, the implication for deregulation in Australia is to reduce our capacity to compete in overseas markets and risk being overwhelmed in our own. The need to establish a strong regulatory structure which allows for international recognition of these skills is surely in the national interest.

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9 June 2000