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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Productivity Commission
Architects Inquiry
LB2, Collins Street East
Melbourne
VICTORIA 8003

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I, Stephen Brown, being a registered Architect, support the view of the Architects Board of Western Australia in that it is paramount that formal registration of Architects is retained and that the most appropriate model is a Uniform Act across Australia, administered by local State or Territory boards.

I enclose for the record a copy of an address I gave some years ago on the protection of the quality of the built environment, and although it refers specifically to Western Australia, it will no doubt be of relevance on a national scale, and is unfortunately just as true today as it was then.

Yours faithfully,

(signature)

Stephen Brown
Architect

AN OBSERVATION ON THE STATUS OF ARCHITECTURE

Of all the professions, Architecture is the least protected and the most vulnerable. The practice of Medicine and Law, for example, is prohibited to any person without the proper qualifications, and -yet anyone who picks up a pencil can submit a drawing of a building for consideration by the Authorities governing the approval of construction in Western Australian

The study of Architecture involves a five-year full time course at a recognised University, followed by a minimum two-year period of low-salaried practical experience in Architects' offices., and then a series of further examinations under the auspices of the Architects Board of W.A. before a person can practice as an Architect in this State.

This represents, at the very least, a seven year period of salary sacrifice, at the end of which time a young Architect should reasonably expect (as do young Doctors and Lawyers) to be able to reap the rewards of this considerable time investment by attracting well above average career remuneration.

Not so. Emerging Architects find that they have chosen a profession under siege. In an ideal world, there should be no question that all building design be undertaken by those best qualified to do so – the Architects. They are the only professionals trained to balance all the considerations involved in producing quality buildings. Factors such as climate, budget, construction techniques, site parameters, function and aesthetics, all impinge on the design process, and must all be resolved in the final form of each building before a satisfactory result can be achieved.

Unfortunately, much of our built environment suffers from a mediocrity that betrays its authorship. Far too much has been produced by the under-trained, and permitted by the unconcerned. This situation invariably stems from the approach of those Developers without vision who judge good buildings to be those enclosing the greatest amount of space, in the shortest amount of time, at the least cost to themselves. Whilst financial aspects are of course important, this mentality of judging everything purely in dollar terms is a strait-jacket that shackles the human spirit. It will not produce Art, it does not produce Architecture.

Associated with the “lowest possible building price” syndrome is the tendency to select a draftsman by the same criteria. Our suburbs are littered with the results of such an alliance. It is a sad truth that in general, the lay public are less than vocal about unsatisfactory building design, due primarily to a lack of training in this regard. They can judge a good Surgeon or Lawyer easily (... “Did I survive?” ... “Did I win my case?”), but how are they to deal with the aesthetics of the built form? It takes a major issue, of the likes of a Barracks Arch or Old Swan Brewery, to promote any level of emotional discussion, and even then it is usually confined to the category of historical building's under threat.

Herein lies the dilemma: If the public are unable to distinguish the good buildings from the bad, how can they be expected to condemn the latter?

This leaves Architects in the “Catch-22” situation of being the one group qualified to speak out against what they see as the 'Australian Ugliness', and then being accused of 'sour grapes' when they do!

Architectural Institutes, on a National level, are only now, beginning to emerge from a slumber that has seen their members' client-base being eroded on all sides. The Institutes' ethics of disallowing advertising because it would lead to unhealthy competition between Architects in the market place, was born of a time when only Architects were in that market place. Nowadays the competition is in the form of developers, designers, package-dealers, draftpersons, builders and so on, all offering a cut-price service.

Some speculative home builders even offer a “free design service”! In reality of course there is no such thing, the cost of producing the drawings is simply added onto the selling price of the house. No-one can seriously expect a firm's drafting staff to work for nothing. Yet whilst on the one hand this can be viewed as just a clever sales pitch, on a more subtle and disturbing level it is calculated to devalue the very, process of design itself and the role of more qualified competition. The Architectural Institutes are starting to instigate a public awareness campaign aimed at promoting the benefits of using professional services, but it will be a long and difficult process before the damage is reversed.

The public perception of Architects is that their fees are too expensive, but this should be relative to the greater benefits that can result. People may be tempted to use a draftsperson whose fees are cheaper, but can end up paying more in the long run if the resultant building is wasteful of materials, for example. Yet many clients fall to see that a designer's worth must be viewed as a 'Fees plus Construction Cost' equation. A very real bonus of Architect-designed buildings is that they invariably attract a greater resale value than the non-Architect-designed equivalent, a factor which does not go unnoticed by successful real-estate agents when it comes to the wording of their advertisements. Combine these benefits with the additional security of dealing with a fully, indemnified Architectural firm, and the broader overview makes it seem myopic to select a building designer solely on the basis of lower initial fees.

AS an interesting comparison, the public may also feel that the fees of Medical and Legal Practitioners are too high, but the difference is that those professions have virtually no competition. Their ability, to earn their livelihood is protected by law, and the public pays the asking price or goes without. There will also, by common agreement, be a high degree of uniformity about their fee scales, designed to minimise, if not totally eliminate, competition between fellow professionals. Contrast this with the situation in a de-regulated Architectural world where any client can door-knock and haggle over the amount he is prepared to pay, armed with the knowledge that he can always go elsewhere because “so-and-so down the street will do it for less”.

Imaging a society in which John Citizen could do the rounds of Doctor's surgeries, asking for quotations on his forthcoming operation, and then making his selection purely on the basis of the lowest fee offered. A price-cutting war in the area of health services would have horrendous consequences, not to mention all the unproductive time that Doctors would have to put into 'fee-estimating' to try to win jobs competing against their colleagues.

Why then should it be any different for the construction industry? For most people, their proposed building will be the biggest monetary investment of their lives, and yet the ill-advised and indifferent attitude with which they go about procuring the building is a constant source of despair to the trained eye, which can only view the result and lament over how much better the same amount of materials could have been put together.

The building industry has always been the “barometer of the economy”. In tough financial times, buildings have the lowest priority on dwindling expenditure lists. Little wonder then that there is currently such severe undercutting of fees within the Architectural profession that many firms have been squeezed so severely as to be forced out of practice. The majority of firms that have managed to avoid closure have of necessity undertaken drastic wage-cutting and staff-cutting measures to survive.

For some time now, the various bodies representing Architectural practitioners in this country have lobbied for the legislation as follows: “*That it should be mandatory, for buildings above a certain threshold value to be designed, documented and supervised by registered, Architects*”. This situation exists in many enlightened countries around the world who enjoy an envied reputation in terms of the quality of their built environment. It is a situation that, far from making Architects an elitist group, would finally, give them parity with the other Professions.

Several years ago, a delegation of Perth Architects submitted the above motion to the liberal Premier of the time. His argument in rejecting the proposal, conveniently ignoring the ‘closed-shop’ analogies of Law and Medicine, was that it would be detrimental to ‘private enterprise’. Perhaps he visualised an army of angry voters comprising unemployed designers and draftspeople? Looking at the scenario logically however, as there would still be the same total pool of work available, the more likely outcome is that these same designers and draftspeople would become employed by the now-busier Architectural firms. The major advantage of directing important building design through professional offices would be the benefit total whole community: the standard of new buildings would increase dramatically in a very short space of time.

Smaller value buildings, probably including the majority of houses, would still be available to those drafting services who preferred to continue to work for themselves, but all other construction would receive the attention it deserved, by Architects who would at last be adequately and equitably reimbursed for their decision to pursue a career and accept the frugal years that a tertiary education imposes.

It should be stressed that Architects do not wish to prevent anyone from being self-employed or establishing their own firms, but simply request that if this is their desire, they finish their studies, qualify and register as fellow Architects, and compete on an equal basis.

A by-product of a protected and enforced uniform scale of fees for Architectural services is that the selection of Architectural firms would be based solely on the quality of their design. I do not suggest, in referring to some of the unimaginative buildings that exist, that all Architects are blameless or that they are all created equal.

But those who secure work on the basis of quoting dangerously low fees would be forced to produce improved building design in order to compete. The resultant raising of the standard of design would be a further bonus, and would, I believe, in the long term encourage a greater level of awareness and appreciation about building design in an increasingly discerning public, because this would become their sole basis of comparison in weighing up the advantage of using one Architect over another. The public would recognise good design, and begin to demand it!

I thank you for your patience and interest in reading this far. The preceding paragraphs have encompassed more issues than I originally intended, but they are all inexorably linked to the unhappy and unsatisfactory situation that is allowed to exist in this State and shape its form, not often enough for the better. It is my hope, and the hope of my colleagues, that there will soon come a time when the status of Architects in Western Australia can be elevated to a position alongside the other Professions. It would be unthinkable for Surgeons to have to compete on the streets and tout for work against anybody with a pocket-penknife, yet this seemingly far-fetched analogy parallels exactly the position Architects find themselves.

If we as a society do not adequately reward our professional people and protect their status from the destructive elements of unfair and unregulated competition, then we risk removing the very incentive that drives young adults to seek a higher education. If they do not see any advantage in taking the hard road of further study and self-denial as an investment in their future, then following generations will not aspire to excellence, and the world will be a far poorer place.