

## THE STRANGE CASE OF THE MISSING ASSISTANT: CHOICES MADE BY THE UNITED KINGDOM ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION AFFECTING EDUCATION, REGISTRATION AND PRACTICE SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS IN 1834

El extraño caso del ayudante desaparecido: decisiones tomadas por la profesión de arquitecto en el Reino Unido que afectan a la educación, el registro y la práctica desde la fundación del Real Instituto de Arquitectos Británicos en 1834

O estranho caso do assistente desaparecido: decisões tomadas pela profissão de arquitetura no reino unido que afetaram a educação, o registro e a prática desde a fundação do instituto real de arquitetos britânicos em 1834

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### ABSTRACT

This essay has its origin in issues related to the alleged failure in 2018 of the Royal Incorporation of Architect in Scotland (RIAS), a chapter of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), to comply with the requirements of its Royal Charter. This engendered a wider inquiry into the operations and legislation affecting architecture, enacted by and on the RIBA since its founding in 1834, in the promulgation and regulation of the interrelated processes of architectural education, registration and practice in the United Kingdom (UK). Pivotal moments in the late nineteenth-century debate on the “professional or artist-architect”, the enactment of the Registration Acts of the 1930s, the 1958 Oxford Conference on Architectural Education, the Monopolies legislation of the 1970s, the 1997 Registration Act, and the 2003 European Union Directive amended in 2015 are all put to the test by the contemporaneous structures and procedures of the office and the architect’s work. Texts on and by architects relating to education, registration and practice, as well as the various reports made by the RIBA, the UK Architects Registration Council (ARCUK) and subsequently the Architects Registration Board (ARB), are referenced and their impact on the architectural profession is assessed. The essay will seek to demonstrate that decisions made and directions chosen at those pivotal points and the lack of understanding of the links between them have left endemic structural flaws in education, registration and practice in the UK unresolved.

**Keywords:** education, registration, practice, UK, conflicts.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo tiene su origen en cuestiones relacionadas con el presunto incumplimiento en 2018 de la Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS), un capítulo del Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), de cumplir con los requisitos de su Royal Charter. Esto generó una investigación más amplia sobre las operaciones y la legislación que afectaba a la arquitectura, promulgada por y sobre el RIBA desde su fundación en 1834, en la promulgación y regulación de los procesos interrelacionados de educación, registro y práctica arquitectónica en el Reino Unido. Momentos cruciales en el debate de finales del siglo XIX sobre el “arquitecto profesional o artista”, la promulgación de las Leyes de Registro de la década de 1930, la Conferencia de Oxford sobre Educación Arquitectónica de 1958, la legislación de Monopolios de la década de 1970, la Ley de Registro de 1997 y la Directiva de la Unión Europea de 2003 modificada en 2015 son puestos a prueba por las estructuras y procedimientos contemporáneos de la oficina y el trabajo. Se hace referencia a los textos sobre y por arquitectos relacionados con la educación, el registro y la práctica, así como los diversos informes realizados por el RIBA, el Consejo de Registro de Arquitectos del Reino Unido (ARCUK) y, posteriormente, la Junta de Registro de Arquitectos (ARB), y se evalúa su impacto en la profesión arquitectónica. El ensayo tratará de demostrar que las decisiones tomadas y las direcciones elegidas en esos puntos cruciales y la falta de comprensión de los vínculos entre ellos han dejado sin resolver fallas estructurales endémicas en la educación, el registro y la práctica en el Reino Unido.

**Palabras clave:** educación, registro, práctica, Reino Unido, conflictos.

## RESUMO

Este ensaio tem origem em questões relacionadas com o alegado incumprimento, em 2018, da Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS), um capítulo do Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), em cumprir os requisitos da sua Carta Real. Isso gerou um inquérito mais amplo sobre as operações e a legislação que afetam a arquitetura, promulgada pelo e sobre o RIBA desde sua fundação em 1834, na promulgação e regulamentação dos processos inter-relacionados de educação, registro e prática arquitetônica no Reino Unido (Reino Unido). Momentos cruciais do debate do final do século XIX sobre o “arquiteto profissional ou artista”, a promulgação das Leis de Registro da década de 1930, a Conferência de Oxford sobre Educação Arquitetônica de 1958, a legislação sobre monopólios da década de 1970, a Lei de Registro de 1997 e a Diretiva da União Europeia de 2003 alterada em 2015 são todos postos à prova pelas estruturas e procedimentos contemporâneos do escritório e do trabalho. Os textos sobre e por arquitetos relacionados com a educação, o registro e a prática, bem como os vários relatórios elaborados pela RIBA, pelo UK Architects Registration Council (ARCUK) e, subsequentemente, pelo Architects Registration Board (ARB), são referenciados e o seu impacto na profissão de arquiteto é avaliado. O ensaio procurará demonstrar que as decisões tomadas e as direções escolhidas nesses pontos cruciais e a falta de compreensão das ligações entre elas deixaram por resolver falhas estruturais endêmicas na educação, no registro e na prática no Reino Unido.

**Palavras-chave:** educação, registro, prática, Reino Unido, conflitos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a rare study of the architect in society, Andrew Saint (1983, 6) writes:

In the two short centuries since architecture has become a well-defined profession of its own, its identity has afforded endless controversy. Is it an art practised by and for the sake of individuals, or a commercial enterprise geared to the needs of the market and the generation of profit, or a communal undertaking dedicated to the service of society?

Most enquirers rash enough to essay a serious answer to these questions have ended in admitting compromise... A compromise of ideals lies at the heart of the matter, to the chagrin of the pure in soul.

This reeks of resignation; a fear that no stone unturned might lead to no turn un-stoned. It is echoed (Crinson & Lubbock 1994, 1) in that “few of us, after all, would have the courage and determination to cast aside all we have learned with such difficulty and at such cost over so long a period of time, to rethink the basic principles of our profession and learn new skills from scratch.”

Throughout fifty years in architecture —from being the sole working-class, Scottish state-school-educated student in a cohort of 34 drawn mostly from London and the south-east of England, to teaching, to director status— I have heard architects complain consistently about five things— loss of societal status, the unsuitability of recent graduates for practice, low starting salaries, slow professional progression and loss of function and deskilling —although never with quite the frequency and vehemence as of late. Outside agents are deemed to be at fault, never the profession itself. But then I am reminded (Burgin 1996, 22) that “it has nothing to do with...,” writes Plotinus, using a device similar to that which classical rhetoric named “preterition”, but which must wait another fifteen hundred years for Freud to conceptualise as “negation”.” Today we might prefer the term “denial”.

Denial, however, is no salve. Buchan (1995, 27) writing about the banking profession observes that: “a class that ceases to make itself understood eventually ceases to understand itself.” While Ravetz (1986, 11), on town planners, comments:

Their vision of history is conditioned by seeing it as that sequence of events leading up to the recognition of their own expertise without fully including themselves in the historical process.

The consequence of this is that the architectural profession, like banking or planning, is ill-equipped to reflect even-handedly on its processes or to speedily reflect significant cultural change. Response is retro-active, often belatedly so, and there is no consistent and continuous programme of incremental adaptation. Within the limited context of the essay format I have chosen to examine this societal interaction historically through the interrogation of publicly-available documents such as statistical reports, biographies, conference proceedings, pressure group reporting and pamphleteering, governmental legislation, news reports and architectural histories rather than *ex cathedra* pronouncements by the profession. I seek to reveal a profession triangulating uneasily between education, registration and practice —academia, government and business— while attempting to maintain as valid that other triad (Vitruvius 2009, 19) of “durability, utility and beauty.”

In liability disputes, most are familiar with the concept of the “originating cause”, the most likely being human error. Ascribing fault is complicated by widely-accepted but imperfect common practice or the *amour propre* of organisations and individuals. Here, fault incorporates the event in question and the very *raison d'être* of the offender, for defence is predicated, almost certainly, on the alleged integrity of the individual or organisation. Gerald Ratner's ill-advised comment destroyed his jewellery business; Sir Philip Green drained a pension fund and suffered a very public disgrace; Elon Musk's political affiliation impacts negatively on his business. And yet all infer an integrated ethical stance of business and self. The ethical context for architecture in the constitutional monarchy that is the UK is that societal sanction is granted by the Royal Charter, monitored by the Privy Council, which confirms the propriety and probity of an institute and the appropriateness of its byelaws and of the institute's members. The RIBA Charter was granted in 1837, that for the RIAS in 1922. Legal status is granted by the Registration Acts.

## 2. ART OR PROFESSIONALISM

The gap between what the Royal Charter confers and what might be the resolution of other pressures bearing on the architectural profession is that antinomial nexus of art and professionalism, education and practice, society and government when, in the second half of the nineteenth century (Muthesius 1972, 157-8):

A development of great consequence was the notion that there was a division between a ‘professional architect’ and an ‘art architect’, a term which Burges actually used in 1864. Already in 1857, Street had warned: ‘We architects are in great danger of endorsing the popular idea that we are “professional men” and not “artists”’.

Three initial attempts at establishing formal qualification and registration as a requirement to practice were made in 1857, 1886 and 1888 (Saint 1976, 327). The debate gained impetus in the competing legislative proposals of the government of the day and of the RIBA in 1890-92. Government claimed a public safety interest while the RIBA was less open about its own motives which were, perhaps, to advance its own position and secure a monopoly.

The RIBA case was promoted by its Secretary, William White (White 1891), of whom his essayist (Thomson 1968, 226) was obliged to write:

Of all the leading architects of the mid-Victorian Gothic school, William White came nearest to complete oblivion. He wrote no books, and although a frequent letter writer and speaker almost to the end of his life, by middle age he was regarded in some circles as an intellectual fossil of no contemporary relevance: ‘one of those amiable romanticists who command respect because of their guileless confidence in the irresistible force of obsolete systems of argument.’

While White's supporters (Crimson & Lubbock 1994, 38):

...were men like TL Donaldson. Robert Kerr, Richard Phené Spiers, Charles Reilly, AE Richardson and Reginald Blomfield. Few of them are outstanding as architects, but all

were good organisers and persuasive polemicists, most were well-travelled and internationally connected, and many were charismatic teachers.

The RIBA was impelled to contest the government proposal since it was supported by the Society of Architects (SA), a competing professional institute. However, both government *and* RIBA proposals were opposed by a third group led by Richard Norman Shaw and TG Jackson (Shaw 1892) which included the several essayists featured in Shaw and Jackson's book — JT Micklethwaite, , GF Bodley, Mervyn Macartney, Ernest Newton, Edward S Prior, John R Clayton, Basil Champneys, WR Lethaby, WB Richmond, Gerald C Horsley, largely the “art-architects”, and by Reginald Blomfield more inclined to the “professional” position— and the cream of British architects and artists of the late nineteenth century, responsible for its most significant works: among them architects John Oldrid Scott, George Gilbert Scott, Sidney Mitchell, William Butterfield, Halsey Ricardo, JD Sedding, Philip Webb, AH Mackmurdo and Robert Rowand Anderson, founder of the RIAS (McKinstry 1991, 174-9 and 191), and artists Edward Burne-Jones, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Walter Crane, Ford Maddox Brown, Hubert Herkomer, William Holman Hunt and William Morris. They believed of the RIBA (Saint 1976, 315) that since the 1860s “the standard had fallen off since then, not least because many of the leading architects had ceased to belong.” and that (Saint 1976, 317):

...the Institute [RIBA] had fallen into the hands of men like Robert Kerr, Macvicar Anderson, and Shaw's old foe, William Woodward. They, partly on practical grounds, partly out of self-interest, were bent on turning architecture into an ‘examinable profession’, like law or medicine.

Moreover Shaw (Saint 1976, 103):

...spent a lifetime alternately playing the artist and the practical man, a position which he justified in *Architecture, a Profession or an Art*. After all, the loudest ‘professional’ country house architect, Robert Kerr, turned out a blusterer who parted from his chief client on the worst of terms; maybe there was much to be said for the amateur approach.

Jackson's “Introduction” (Shaw 1892, vii, xi and xvi) and Shaw's opener are excoriating polemics, a fault-line running through architecture in the UK to the present day.

Legislation has at last reached the domain of Art, and it has been seriously proposed to charge Parliament with the duty of providing the public with good architecture and properly qualified architects. It is not likely that anyone, whether artist or amateur, who knows what Art really means, will be taken in by this chimerical project... [The artist] must go his own way; his art must be absolutely free, unfettered save by the canons of truth and nature, the limitations of human sense, and the possibilities of his instruments and materials.

The nineteenth and early twentieth-century architect's office known to Shaw and others consisted of a very broad-based pyramid. There was clear separation between the Firm, the architect partners, and the Staff which comprised of head draughtsman and the assistants: the improvers, draughtspersons, renderers, detailers, tracers and juniors in the complex structure of division of labour required to produce the physical information at drawing boards and see it through on site.

*Architectural* assistants were unknown. Staff were either in training or had reached their ultimate career progression as determined by the Firm, ratified by the head draughtsman. *None* of the staff were student architects, although some may have been studying architecture. Office practices and fee income were contingent upon those partially and unqualified support staff and their attendant costs and salaries. Those few studying architecture took articles with an architect or, later, were in paid employment attending evening or day classes at art and technical colleges and, much later, at polytechnics and some universities or qualified by external examinations conducted by the National Art Training School and the RIBA. Other routes into the profession in the early nineteenth century were through apprenticeship with a builder, private study and travel, or, more rarely, having gravitated to architecture from other professions. Within aristocratic families tradition was that the first-born son inherited the estate, the second son was purchased a commission in the army and the third son became a parson or an architect. These various strands of entry suited the structure of the profession and most offices whereby suitable assistants were guided in the acquisition of appropriate skills.

The objections to examination made by Shaw, Jackson et al. may have had as much to do with loss of control of the structure of the office and of the profession as with the appropriate training of assistants or for the preservation of architecture as an art. What Shaw (1892, xxxiv) recognised was an attempt by the RIBA to use government legislation to formally and proscriptively augment the Royal Charter.

We believe that, while it is possible to examine students in construction and matters of sanitation, their artistic qualifications, which really make the architect, cannot be brought to the test of examination, and that a diploma of Architecture obtained by such a means would be a fallacious distinction, equally useless as a guide to the public and misleading as an object for the efforts of the student.

Both registration proposals failed.

### 3. THE REGISTERED ARCHITECT AND THE OXFORD CONFERENCE

New opportunities in government and local authority work in the mid-twentieth century accompanied by the actions of an expansionist RIBA were radically to change the composition of the average architectural practice and increase the number of qualified architects in employment. First, the RIBA, having consolidated its educational requirements in 1905, provided access to chartered status through the offer in 1908 and again in 1925 of Licentiate membership (LRIBA) to members of the Faculty of Architects and Surveyors (FAS) which lost its architects and subsequently became a part of the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and to the SA which the RIBA absorbed thereby securing an institutional monopoly. Second, the RIBA got another chance at bringing the “artists” into line in 1931, 1934 and 1938 with the several Architects Registration Acts and the creation of the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom (ARCUK). In part, the RIBA hoped that protection, through registration, of title although not function would prevent Borough Surveyors and Engineers acting as quasi-architects to deliver the many council housing developments arising from the Housing Acts of 1919, 1926 and beyond which they had been doing in some measure (designing buildings 2022).

The subsequent boost to RIBA status gained post-WWII, legally through the Registration Acts and actively as part of a Welfare State delivery mechanism was crucial in initiating the Oxford Conference, convened in 1958 to review the training of architects, which created, in principle, the education system we know today. An early indication of how that was all to turn out, and not necessarily to the dismay of those involved, was that for Labour Cabinet Minister Peter Shore (Howarth 1985, 238) “the peaceful revolution of post-war Britain turns out to be no more than a managerial semirevolution.” While in architecture (Crinson & Lubbock 1994, 132):

By 1955 a new breed of younger, public authority modernists had come to dominate the Board of Architectural Education and the RIBA Council. By 1958 a rigged conference at Oxford set out the necessary framework and by the early 1960s the RIBA had been made into a kind of crypto-government department to carry it into effect.

This “new breed” included, (Sir) Leslie Martin and (Sir) Robert Matthew, hugely experienced in working with public authorities. Both were employed by London County Council, Matthew as County Architect, and, with Peter Moro, were the designers of the Royal Festival Hall at the 1951 Festival of Britain. Matthew became Professor of Architecture at Edinburgh University. Martin’s preamble (1958, np) to the Conference is instructive:

In order to concentrate the discussion which was bound to be extensive it was felt invitations to the Conference would have to be limited. Invitations were, therefore, sent to people inside and outside the profession who were known to have views to express. The Conference Committee was aware in taking this selective action valuable contributions might be excluded. It hoped, however, that it has achieved in its selection an effective cross-section of opinion and interest.

Fifty-three delegates attended. Martin’s cryptic account does not elaborate on the basis for selection, who might have constituted the “exclusions” nor how catholic was the “cross-section of opinion and interest” because (Crinson & Lubbock 1985, 138):

The conference was indeed carefully organised; lists of speakers were vetted, preparatory papers circulated, and attendance restricted to fifty-three invited guests and speakers who would meet in April 1958 at Magdalen College, Oxford. Save for one or two traditionalists like Raymond Erith, almost all of the participants were modernist reformers, including the key figures: Leslie Martin, Richard Llewellyn-Davies, Percy Johnson-Marshall, William Allen, Richard Sheppard and Robert Matthew. In the absence of surviving minutes we are largely dependent on Leslie Martin’s official report for an account of what actually happened.

The Conference delegates did not misapprehend the changes they intended to effect on the composition of an architect’s office of the day for that office, as described above, had been codified as recently as 1933 in *The Information Book of Sir John Burnet, Tait and Lorne* (Burnet 1933). Such was the significance of *The Information Book* that it was subsequently published as Information Sheets in the *Architects Journal* which, in time, became *The AJ Metric Handbook*. An account of contemporaneous practice (Allan 1992, 110-111) confirms this structure of the private office:



Then, as now, the private sector of the profession typically relied on a supportive army of architectural assistants, salaried draftsmen and technicians to convert the seminal sketches of principals into the complex body of information from which projects must be realised.

The Conference concluded that “a uniform and higher standard of entry” would give real benefits which were: one, higher standards of training in all practical and theoretical subjects; two, the development of diversified interests in the student to meet the changing demands of technology (although none could begin to guess at how demanding those technological changes would be); three, the increased likelihood of progression to post-graduate study and research; and four, a nebulous note that “good minds absorb knowledge fast”, which might seem to suggest that particularly adept students could be advanced more rapidly through the course, as they had been under the execrated pupillage system, although that provision seems to have got lost.

Two prohibitions and one inconclusion are of interest. To be phased-out was qualification obtained through Testimonies of Study which coincided with a steady decline in pupillage and private tuition since the 1920s. Professor Budden (1924, xiv) at the 1924 International Congress on Architectural Education thought while “the pupillage system has practically passed in most of the large centres of population it still lingers in certain localities.” However, part-time courses in any HE institution were to be proscribed with immediate effect; although they were never quite abolished. Never put into practice was recommendation 5 (Martin 1958, np):

It may be that these raised standards of education for the architect will make desirable other forms of training not leading to an architectural qualification, but which will provide an opportunity for transfer if the necessary educational standard is obtained.

The university course as devised led to a more structured system than inferred by Martin, suggesting that the academic requirements of the degree-awarding institutions, as Shaw had recognised, did not provide the flexibility of access and conduct required of a creative and practical discipline. Access settled on demonstrable achievement in high school leading an ordinary degree after three years —Part 1— a subsequent year’s practical training, a Diploma or Honours degree after five years —Part 2— a further year’s practical training and eligibility to sit Part 3 and obtain registration and, if desired, RIBA or RIAS membership.

It is hardly surprising that an education system framed specifically for the creation of public authority architects or private practices with local authority clients, in a context when 70% of all architects were engaged in local authority or government-funded work, was lacking in any effective business input in either practice management or within the private sector business world. Whether in the recommendations of the 1958 Conference, in the practice of the gentleman architect, or in the creations of the architect as artist, the issue of business had found little traction as it contradicted the self-engendered and preferred identity of the architect. In the Oxford formulation the provisions of the Royal Charter and registration were elided as public service in that (Crimson & Lubbock 1985, 1-2): “RIBA has regarded [architectural education] as one of the three pillars of the profession, the other two being public sector housing and the post-war British planning system”.

As the first cohort of graduating architects of the new regime passed into practice in the mid-1960s and began to augment or replace those with other or no qualifications, the concerns



obliquely expressed by Martin and by Budden earlier became evident. The 1962 RIBA report *The Architect and His Office* found the profession at large —quite unlike the offices of Martin or Matthew who had exchanged public for private practice although their clients remained unchanged— was comprised predominantly of offices of less than five individuals, poorly managed and hopeless with finance. Whether this impelled the RIBA to action is not clear, but the Institute may have recognised that it had been premature in 1958 in dismantling the affiliated society, the Association of Architects, Surveyors and Technicians (AASTA), subsequently the Association of Building Technicians (ABT). What is clear, following a subsequent report by RIBA promoting a complementary organisation for technical staff, is that what is now the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists (CIAT) was founded on 12 February 1965. Such tardy formation could not redress the imbalance and replace the Missing Assistants for they had gone to university to get degrees. Even today, worldwide, CIAT has 8321 members (CIAT 2025) in contrast to 43,327 ARB-registered architects (ARB 2023b). One might expect that those figures, as percentages —16% to 84%— would have been reversed prior to 1958.

Either the office pyramid is now inverted and balanced on the tip of the lowliest Part 1 student's 0.18 Rotring—as we used to say— or sliding around on a Dell mouse; or it's the same way up it always was but that nineteenth-century army of poorly-paid, non-architect staff have been overwhelmingly replaced by Part 1 and Part 2 architectural students with university degrees and recently registered architects all with rather greater professional and remuneration expectations fostered by that education. Furthermore, there remain questions whether the Conference's four claims for the benefits arising from a “uniform and higher standard of entry” have materialised. There is doubt of any marked improvement in “practical and theoretical” attainment as demonstrated in built projects; the equilibrium of the architecture course is still weighted to the theoretical or, at least, towards architectural design. In an education system which seeks freedom of action in assessment and is loosely monitored by a professional institute constitutionally incapable of ranking the products of its members —other than safe awards for the “best” — improvement was unlikely.

The hands-off approach is characterised (ARB 2017, np) in our time thus:

In embracing new light-touch criteria and attributes the professional and statutory bodies will contribute to offering students access to an inclusive and diverse profession, meeting the consumer requirements of a modern multicultural UK society.

While unbiased assessment (Dyckhoff 2017, 204) has been left consistently to others such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe).

In 2007, Cabe, in its first audit of the new generation of affordable and social housing—a key pledge by the government found that 21 per cent was ‘poor’. A mere 18 per cent was rated good or above. The year before it found eight out of ten new secondary schools were ‘mediocre’ or ‘not good enough’...and a year before that it found that a third of new houses being built were of such poor quality they should have been denied planning permission.

What had been gained through the degree-status compact with universities was negated to an extent by the profession's tendency to give skills away. Architects in the mid-to-late twentieth

century might have been expected to undertake building condition reports; specification, description of works and schedule of rates writing; separate trades contracts administration; suspense accounts management; drainage detailing; fire safety and detailed building regulations negotiations among many others. Likewise in research, findings do exist, but they are not widely promulgated, tending to be shared between the promoter and the researcher sometimes through doubts as to wider application, more recently for *soi-disant* commercial confidentiality, or are lost in the vast wasteland of governmental briefing or scoping papers that serve no practical purpose.

However, the world of the 1958 Conference from which this educational structure was born was gone in less than fifteen years (Glendinning 2008, 5, 263).

But finally, from the mid and late 1960s onwards, all of these contextual frameworks were swept aside by the beginnings of a completely new set of relationships and mentalités – the start of a new phase of ‘disembedding’ that would tear apart and discard the painfully constructed structures of collective cohesion, including the dominance of the state, the pursuit of the new, and the insistence on planning.

Matthew played a central role in facilitating the final victory of the public-architecture-led revolt against gentlemanly private practice hegemony, which had been gathering force during the 1950s. 1950 had witnessed an AGM membership revolt against the RIBA’s learned-society status.

In this drive for a meritocratic professionalism, Matthew seems not to have known of Lubetkin’s more generous prescription (Allan 1982, 139):

To my mind, the biggest problem facing the profession is to teach the traditional architect to be, architecturally speaking, less of a gentleman and more of a craftsman. On the other hand, the modern architect might try to be a little more of the gentleman. He should abandon his theories of pure functionalism and approach architecture as an artist who, at the same time, has a fundamental mastery of the techniques of his art. It is essential that the modern architect be a master of the modern techniques of building and of materials if his buildings are to be more acceptable and more efficient. But it is also essential for him to remember that the tradition of his profession is intimately connected with a special imagination which should make his buildings reflect contemporary aesthetics.

#### 4. AFTER OXFORD

The salient point is that, although society, its culture, political consensus and economy changed dramatically in the late 1960s and continues to mutate to this day, architectural education remained largely untouched for over sixty years although scrutinised frequently, viz, *inter alia*: Bedford and Groák’s “Some Issues for the Future of UK Architectural Education of 1981” (Bedford and Groák 1983, 226-36); the 1997 Registration Act and the creation of the Architects’ Registration Board (ARB 1997); Colin Stansfield-Smith’s 1999 RIBA report *Architectural education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Stansfield-Smith 1999), the RIBA-promoted event, *Oxford Conference 2008: Re-evaluating*

*Architectural Education* of 2008 (Roaf & Bairstow 2008); the government-sponsored 2013 Farrell Review (DCMS 2013); the Architecture Students' Network (ASN) Conference, *Lines Drawn* of 2014 (Foster 2014); and finally, EU Directive 2005/36 amended 2013/55, *Equivalence of Professional Qualifications* and the profession's response from which the nation has subsequently resiled.

Bedford and Groák (1983, 226) comment on the 1958 Oxford Conference:

*However, that programme we suggest, failed in its immediate purpose on three counts. It failed to seek retention and integration of the very real merits of traditional methods of education and training. It failed to develop teaching methods for the new educational ideas. The proliferation of schools meant that none today are sufficiently large enough to make possible the variety envisaged in each school.*

Their observations still have force.

Having, in effect, contrived a government-approved monopoly, the architectural profession was exposed. The Monopolies Commission —subsequently the Competition and Markets Commission— had the RIBA in its sights from 1967 for its perceived restrictive practices and mandatory fees. Neither Matthew (Glendinning 2008, 313) nor his successors in 1970, now contrary to where they had been in 1958, could hold government interest in the profession to those areas preferred by the profession such as the reassuring though vague provisions of the Royal Charter.

*He wrote to the Times that the commission was 'clearly out of its depth' in its 'naïve and doctrinaire view (based on 19<sup>th</sup> century economic theory)'. 'To label "restrictive practices against the public interest" was an inversion of the truth'; if restraints were lifted, 'all aspects of national life would inevitably and permanently suffer', and in architecture 'the jungle would begin at Portland Place.'*

In any event, the profession was not always so "disciplined" as to reassure government of its probity, the contemporaneous bribery scandal surrounding architect John Poulson a case in point. A Western hemisphere trend throughout the 1980s for deregulation of business and financial practices on the one hand, and creation of consumer protection agencies on the other hand, proved inexorable. It was plain that the profession had failed to demonstrate adequately that it was not a closed shop, given the provisions of the Registration Acts and restrictions on entry route arising from the 1958 Oxford Conference, or its competence, laid bare in its 1962 survey.

The first round of deregulation proscribed the mandatory fee scale, which was then described by the RIBA as "recommended" although the top end limit on percentages was left in place, suggesting to clients an upper limit from which they could always negotiate downwards which, of course, they did. The public impression remained that architects were well-rewarded for their work or were, since the days of the third son, recipients of generous private incomes, although such fortunate architects were largely those who would, at one time, have been considered the Firm rather than the Staff such that (Suskind & Suskind 2013, 94): "In the past, architecture was considered as a sort of pastime for a gentleman. Today it has not fully shaken that reputation."

Consumer protection regulation paved the way for the 1997 Architects Registration Act (ARB 1997). There was a perception in government (Warne 1993) that the relationship between ARCUK and the RIBA was too cosy. ARCUK was reformed as the Architects Registration Board (ARB) under

new legislation and with a preponderance of non-architects on the board. Rather than legislatively securing the function as many wished only the title “architect”, yet again, was protected although incompletely. ARB explained that the use of the term “architect” in the software industry, for example, would not be confusing and took what it described as the “common sense” approach. However, employment websites listing positions for architects are swamped with vacancies in tech companies. In conceding this more diffuse use of the title, it is weakened in its original use and meaning and becomes, subsequently, harder to define and defend. Degree courses are now being provided for qualifications in “Business Architects” and “Enterprise Architects”, neither of which, of course, have anything to do with architecture as architects understand it. Likewise, comparison sites such as [www.localarchitectsdirect.co.uk/](http://www.localarchitectsdirect.co.uk/) will find you a local “architect” who could as easily be an architectural technician or a building surveyor or log on to [www.gov.uk/government/publications/](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/) and search for “Architecture and standards” and encounter the same. The other construction industry professional institutes, chartered or otherwise, act as their own registrars with little evidence of the difficulties of title or function vis-à-vis society and government that architects appear to experience.

The RIBA conceded what government had wanted in 1891 under the guise then of public interest and permitted itself to be regulated by a quango widely regarded as having little empathy with architects, their work and concerns. In the same horse-trade, architects lost the Board of Architectural Education. Education now sits in that “antinomial nexus between art and professionalism, academia and practice, society and government.” These impositions might have happened irrespective of whether or not architects had pressed government for legislation to safeguard their status but historic pressure for legislated registration surely created the impression of institutional ethical weakness which the RIBA was rather too eager to shore up by becoming a “crypto-government” agency.”

In light of this, Colin Stanfield-Smith produced an education report for the RIBA, *Architectural education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 1999. From a background of innovative public office – the Hampshire Schools – then celebrated private practice working in the public sector and an avowed admiration of the architectural ethos of the 1950s and 60s, we may suppose him to reinforce the Martin / Matthew tradition (Telegraph 2013).

He chaired a major RIBA review of teaching practice and in 1999 made 26 recommendations calling for an end to “self-referential and self-indulgent” attitudes and outlining a broader, multi-disciplinary approach. The reforms, Smith felt, would affirm the central purpose of the profession. “Architects are the rightful custodians of the public estate,” he wrote, “because they have the capacity to introduce joy, imagination and wit into our environments.”

These recommendations, some or all, were incorporated into changes instructed by the RIBA in September 2002. However, despite its role in approving architecture courses in universities, the RIBA throughout has been reluctant to engage with the detail of those courses. If the following posting by a student (Architect 2010) in 2010 is even part-way representative, Stansfield-Smith had little long-term effect.

Architecture has transformed from a complex creative process of integrating diverse functions, structural systems, myriad services and utilities, inter-related spaces

and interior-exterior visual connections into a game of appliqué where one cuts and pastes decorations and ornament onto four sides of dull boxes.

The 2008 RIBA-promoted Oxford Conference, part fiftieth-anniversary celebration, part update, was hijacked by special interest groups whose papers, only loosely corralled into broad themes, are a set of isolates. There was little practical help for architectural education in the UK at this conference and its scale—it boasted of 500 delegates from 42 countries—militated against it. We might justifiably wonder why 50 years were allowed pass before concerted, collective attention was given to the education of those about to enter a culturally-determined profession, considering the substantial changes that had taken place in society over that period. We might also wonder why it was organised and chaired by the professor of the specialised architectural engineering department of Heriot-Watt University, which claims (2019):

There is a growing need to provide society with modern buildings that are sustainable, energy efficient and green. Architectural engineers focus on the interaction between engineering services, building design and human behaviour to design appropriate low-energy, indoor environments for buildings

Or we might wonder why so many of the papers presented and published in the proceedings had a greater or lesser engineer-focussed bias.

The 2008 conference raised issues which accord with the overarching concerns of our time—climate change, resource depletion, sustainability, renewable energy and diversity—where plainly technology and engineering have vital roles to play, although it seems the architectural educational consequences of this, other than advocacy for such topics to be incorporated in the traditional course, remained moot. But, as with other formerly-integrated competencies that the profession has given away or not up-dated, this is an area engineers (Addis 2007, 606) had been eyeing up for some time. “In the future, as architects, developers, politicians and society in general demand buildings with increasingly challenging performance requirements, the contributions of building engineers will become even more influential.”

Architectural contributors to the conference set out the challenges for aspiring architects. Christopher Alexander (2008), referring to his *Manifesto* of 1991, notes that:

...architect’s work and contractor’s work are too firmly separated, so students cannot learn the art of building, thus consigning the poor architectural student to a life as a kind of architectural dress designer. Another problem is the lack of a protocol which encourages day-to-day involvement of users in the ongoing design and construction process. (Alexander 2008)

Steven Parissien (2008) for The Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, revisiting some old battlefields, tasks tutors:

For those academics imbued with the technologically-driven certainties of the 1960s and 1970s, the need to restructure syllabuses round the goal of sustainability may be a hard pill to swallow. Employers in both public and private sectors are increasingly looking not for dogmatism but sensitivity and flexibility, for an appreciation of the value

of history and context rather than an intransigent devotion to outmoded forms and solutions, and for a multidisciplinary education which encourages young professionals to escape narrow subject silos and to think laterally.

Rab Bennetts (2008a) of Bennetts Associates expresses a typical architect's complaint of loss of professional status and reflects on the imbalance of the aesthetic and practical components of the architectural curriculum "The emphasis of academic standards at the 1958 Conference may be partly responsible for the subsequent marginalisation of the architect's position in the industry.") and proposes (2008b, 303):

The deskilling process that is both the cause and effect of architectural marginalisation will have to be reversed if architects are to have the primary role in shaping sustainable buildings. Architectural students need to emerge from higher education with their idealism intact, but they also need to have sufficient knowledge of technique if sustainability is going to have any resonance with the future form of architecture. This is not something that can be picked up during practical training; in particular, the notion that it is a team-based activity is something that needs to be instilled from the earliest encounters with design education.

The conference organisers intended to produce a "New Agenda" for architectural education though little concrete seems to have emerged and, seven years later, @RIBAEducation tweeted on 24 March 2015, "Today @RIBA Council approved the structures to modernise architectural education." The RIBA Council meeting had been preceded a year earlier by the "Lines Drawn" Conference of the ASN (Foster archdaily, 2014), which was, itself, something of a follow-up to the 2013 report by Sir Terry Farrell, assisted by Thomas Heatherwick, Alison Brooks and Alain de Botton, for the then Minister of Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, Ed Vaizey. The Farrell report was dynamite. It made the first tentative steps in understanding that the long-standing problems in the profession of architecture in the UK are not to be resolved by piece-meal alterations to professional status or to architectural education or to professional practice or to registration procedure, but through an integrated approach to all four with the removal of the inconsistencies, illogicalities and anomalies that exist between them. The report seems to have been kicked into the long grass.

The ASN conference, held at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) and attended by 70 students from 22 schools, focussed on both the costs and length of the course. Student comments as reported (Foster 2014) were interesting in that they touched on matters which never found their way into the subsequent RIBA and ARB responses to EU Directive 2013/55: Ruth Jennings from Sheffield School of Architecture noted "...a constant assumption of being an architect as the end goal —a gateway into the profession and not a celebration." Martin Murnin of Queen's University, Dublin "...valued the depth of practical experience part-time tutors brought to his education." Emily Partridge from Cambridge University commented that "Projects that allow creativity and imagination, while being based in the reality of building and within a context, is a key strength of architectural education. It allows people to develop a moral, ethical and social approach to the built environment— an ideal that is unfortunately often not [found] in practice. "While Eleanor Grair from Newcastle University felt there was '...a real lack of design methodology in architecture schools.'" Oliver Wainwright (2014), *The Observer's* architecture critic and invited speaker, summed up:

*[I]t was interesting to hear how many students felt that the design process itself is so absent from the courses —not that there is a single approach that can be taught, but that discussion of different design methodologies goes strangely unspoken, with such an emphasis on superficial presentation rather than how to make good buildings and spaces.*

The RIBA proposed to drop the familiar structure of Parts 1, 2 and 3 and the minimum two years of practical training and replace it with four years academic study and three years monitored practical training or four years academic study, one year work-based learning and two years monitored practical training at which time, the candidate, having successfully completed the minimum seven-year course, was entitled to Registration with ARB. In truth, the content of architectural education was quite untouched by these recommendations; the change was solely to its delivery. In the words of Standing Conference of Schools of Architecture (SCOSA 2017) “architectural education has been in a moribund state for three years” in their response of 24 April 2017 to the Department of Communities and Local Government’s *Periodic Review Report: Architects Regulation and the Architects Regulation Board* of March (DCLG 2017). The Association of Professional Studies in Architecture (APSA 2017) were uncertain how to reframe professional practice requirements in the light of the 2015 decision and, still wedded to the supposed virtues of the Part 3 examination, seemed almost relieved at the delay. The RIBA (2017) response of 27 April 2017 was equally disappointed in the parking of the review. It was left to *BD* editor Ben Flatman (2017) to wonder why “reforming architectural education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is taking an awfully long time.”

## 5. A NEVER-ENDING STORY

This essay is not the place for a discussion of the impact of the computer on architecture *qua* architecture rather on how it impacts on the five complaints with which we began. Sharples (2018) observes of technology that “it is beginning to blur the line between architecture and manufacturing”, as do the Susskinds (2002, 98): “certainly, any distinction between designing and building seems to be blurred by emerging technologies.” The extent to which such practices, poorly understood, detailed and implemented, have led to the Grenfell catastrophe and the subsequent discovery of faulty lightweight or rainscreen-cladding systems throughout the UK is open to argument. It is significant that in central Edinburgh, a small city of five hundred thousand inhabitants, five buildings with such cladding systems have been stripped and reclad in the past five years.

In pressing the government’s case for Building Information Management (BIM) adoption chief construction advisor Paul Morrell (2011), was reported as saying, in a forced and anachronistic pun: “Architects who fail to adopt BIM risk being Betamaxed out.” Morrell need not have worried. The National BIM Report 2018 (NBS 2018) claims that 74% are using BIM on some projects, spread between 66% on small projects, 80% on medium projects and 78% on large projects.

A more troubling development for architecture is a study promoted by the Ministry of Justice and the Education and Skills Funding Agency carried out by multi-disciplinary consultants Bryden Wood on evidence based design (Hamilton and Watkins 2009); a “platform” programme, which their Jaime Johnston, Director, Head of Global Systems (NBS 2018) explains:



*In construction, pretty much all buildings relate to the human form. This means that dimensions such as ceiling heights or distance from a window fall within predictable ranges, which can be used to define a small number of platforms that can accommodate a huge range of needs, from a bedroom to a sports hall. Within these platforms, connections and interfaces can be standardised so that just a few designs meet a huge range of needs and many components are repeatable.*

People like Johnstone have the ear of government and are aware of the impact of technology on the professions in general and architecture in particular. The “platform” programme is an example of the “externalisation” of a profession’s knowledge base whereby such knowledge acquires one of three characteristics; a charge online, no charge online or commons in the sense that Wikipedia is commons (Susskind & Susskind 2002, 197). Monetising only one of these three options, unlike conventional percentage or hourly-rate feeing and the securing intellectual property rights is problematic. Consider what has happened to the music industry in the past fifteen years. AI, for the moment, crudely, and unknowledgeably dredging the internet copyright-free supplants the initial sketch design and confers an air of misleading verisimilitude on preliminary proposals.

Despite this, the tussle over education, registration and practice continues. In 2023 ARB (2003a) announced a new system of “competencies” —Professionalism and Ethics, Design, Research and Evaluation, Contextual and Architectural Knowledge, Management Practice and Leadership— required of the practicing architect. These are accompanied by a looser framework of access and qualification (ARB 2022) which goes some way to meeting Bedford and Groák’s criticisms of the Oxford Conference’s recommendations and missed opportunities.

The Board’s proposals aimed to modernise the competencies required of architects to face emerging and future challenges... and improve the flexibility and innovation for universities and other types of learning providers. ARB also wanted the reforms to remove regulatory barriers, making its approach to quality assurance more proportionate and creating flexibility for new routes to regulation as an architect in the UK.

The RIBA remains fixed on its traditional Parts 1, 2 and 3 —and now, part 4, a post-graduate diploma in practice— system. Both ARB and RIBA current positions are concerned with outcomes whereas inputs are left to the universities and other providers such as the eight-year RIBA part-time course. Whether courses are reshaped to accord with ARB competencies is up the educators.

But the discrete issues raised above continue to arise. RIBA President Muiywa Oki (Flatman 2025a) has initiated a taskforce to investigate workplace culture and make recommendations on work-life balance, pay equity, inclusive workplace culture and sustainable business practice.

Oki says “it’s about the future competitiveness of the architecture profession. Architects across the UK are telling us the same thing, the current culture is not working. It’s time to take action and build a profession that values people as much as projects.”

Entirely laudable, yet still top-down and only vestigially connected to those issues of loss of societal status, unsuitability of recent graduates for practice, low starting salaries, slow professional progression and loss of function and deskilling that press most heavily on architects. Oki’s proposal seems predicated on the basis that it’s better to be seen doing something, however tangential, than to be doing nothing.

At the same the vagaries of changeable government policy-making reveal how dependent on government the professions have become, whether the subject is the drive for a £39bn affordable housing programme (Gayne 2025a) or the age restriction to be imposed on the level 7 apprenticeship levy from January 2026 which has roused widespread professional reaction from the RIBA (Flatman 2025b), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) (Gayne 2025b), the Law Society (Hughes et al 2025) and Human resources (HR News 2025) among others. Indeed, it is the last of these that reports the most concerning statistics in that this decision:

will cost UK employers around £214m in additional training costs. With 89 percent of level 7 apprentices aged over 21, research from the University Vocational Awards Council (UVOC), the higher and degree apprenticeship voice for over 80 universities, also reveals the extent to which the cut will widen the skills gap, hinder social inclusion and stifle economic growth.

## 6. A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

The tripartite administration and monitoring of architectural education, registration and practice in the United Kingdom and its several overlapping responsibilities and competencies has led to a series of counter-productive turf wars: on education, between the RIBA and ARB and between the government and RIBA and where academia is left largely to its own devices; on registration, between, first, the RIBA and government and later, between the RIBA and ARB acting as arms-length agency of government and between practice and academia over poorly-trained graduates; and on practice, between the demands of the Royal Charter administered by the Privy Council and the separate, although generally concordant, Codes of Conduct/Practice of the RIBA and ARB. The time is long overdue to agree the qualifications and several means of attainment, role and status of the architect in a 21<sup>st</sup> century UK. This cannot be determined, as it has in past, by the RIBA talking to the RIBA, ARB to ARB (and to the government) and government promulgating random policy-making. It is time for all parties to get around a table and agree exactly what is meant by the title “architect” enshrined in the Registration Acts, clearly demarcate duties and responsibilities, establish leadership and to welcome the Missing Assistant back into the fold.

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## SHORT CV

Roger Emmerson was born in Edinburgh and attended Leith Academy. He studied architecture under Sir Robert Matthew at the University of Edinburgh and under Professor Isi Metzstein at the Glasgow School of Art, graduating from there in 1982. He has worked throughout the United Kingdom from offices in London, Newcastle upon Tyne and, mostly, Edinburgh, running his own practice, ARCHImedia, from 1987-99 while concurrently teaching architectural design at Edinburgh College of Art. He was also visiting lecturer at universities in Venice, Lisbon, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Berkeley and has delivered papers on Scottish architecture at international conferences in Edinburgh, London, Venice, Berkeley, Jerusalem and Piešťany (Slovakia). Since 2000 he worked extensively in the fields of architectural conservation, housing, education and the hospitality industry, retiring from architectural practice, although not architecture, in 2016. He is the published author of four books and numerous articles, essays and reviews on Scottish architecture and architects.