

Will there be such a thing as 'an Architect' in 2025?

RIBA's thoughts on the future for Architectural Professionals

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) isn't too sure. In 2011, its think tank, Building Futures, published a report ? The Future for Architects? It made for some disturbing reading for most British architects, and for anyone harbouring old-fashioned or romantic notions of what an architect might or should be.

The report hints darkly at the death of the medium-size British architectural practice (ones with around 25-150 staff), and suggests that most work in the future will be carried out in emerging countries a long way from home. The firms that will survive will either be specialist small scale practices, local studios or high-powered, business-minded international offices with multilingual staff based around the world.

The former, the report suggests, will nurture the craft side of architecture; designing new houses and restoring old buildings, while the latter will act increasingly as multi-disciplinary design teams working on the skyscrapers, ever-bigger shopping malls, and massive urban developments of the future.

Building Futures says that between 2010 and 2020, growth in construction will rise by 18% in the developed world, and a whopping 138% in the emerging world. On one level this is a simple reflection of economic growth in countries such as China; but it also reflects the general retrenchment of large-scale public projects, from school buildings to new hospitals, in Britain, a country scaling back on many fronts. Some of the 40 architects interviewed by Building Futures say that the very word "architect" itself will soon be as outmoded as "wheel tapper" or "lollipop lady."

They didn't use these exact terms, but they do expect to be called something like "creative consultant" rather than "architect" in the future. Weirdly, this comes at a time when more young people than ever *want* to become architects. The RIBA report notes that between 2004 and 2009, the number of students signing up to Part 1 architecture courses in Britain rose by 23 per cent. Significantly, more than half of which are women. In the United States, Mattel Toys clearly believes that women architects are the way to go. One of their latest innovations in their "Barbie - I Can Be" line is "Architect Barbie"!

Naturally the latest incarnation of a generation defining plastic cliché sports thick, black-rimmed glasses together with a skyline print dress and ? wait for it ? a pink plan holder!

Aside from the plastic fantastic - household name movie-stars feature in the profession's archive files; Brad

Pitt worked on the design for a shocking wave of towering new apartment blocks in Hove (Sussex). He, too, would have liked to be an architect, but he had to make a few films and these, presumably, got in the way of his dream career. Thinking of what have been referred to as 'starchitects', the report states that there will *still* be a demand for their input, but that the stars charged with building design might extend more frequently to fashion designers, product designers and artists, the faces of household name brands. Although it has become fashionable to think that other types of designers and even artists can usurp the role of the architect, this is rarely true. Take the Orbit ? the great winding red tower at the centre of the 2012 London Olympics site. Although the artist Anish Kapoor is almost always credited single-handedly with its design, in practice he is working hand-in-hand with the engineer Cecil Balmond and the architect Kathryn Findlay, who are fleshing out the practicalities. So, Architect Barbie and the daydream ambitions of Brad Pitt are not so easily dismissed. What *they* represent is the enduring dream of the architect as a kind of glamorous, intellectual, artistic star. A practical one, too.

While there is a certain glamour in architectural practice, the truth is that much of the work involved is the stuff of hard slog. Whether or not Barbie would be up for the challenge, the image of the architect as hero and artist is clearly both enduring and marketable. It's not all doom and gloom. Alex de Rijke, founder partner of dRMM, and one of the architects spoken to by Building Futures, says "we're a medium size team of 26 architects based in London, and we're thriving. What we can offer is adventure in design as well the ability to see through projects on any scale. We're small enough to be intimate, big enough to deal with major challenges and, by nature, we're collaborative; we work perfectly naturally with engineers, contractors, clients and artists in all media. I don't see us as the past." De Rijke speaks from a position of strength. His forward-looking practice is justly celebrated for its fresh approach to schools and housing. "Things are certainly changing", he says, "but what I'd question is the role not of architects as such, or whatever we call ourselves in future, but the profession. Our job is invention and design; I'm left wondering if it'll be bodies like the RIBA that'll go rather than us."

As the global nature of the construction industry changes, can a locally based institute keep pace and retain relevance? "The Future for Architects?" is best seen and read, perhaps, as a wake-up call for British architecture and construction. As RIBA's Building Futures director Dickon Robinson says, "This report seeks to stimulate a discussion about the challenges and opportunities which architects in the broadest sense face, in the hope that the ensuing debate will put them in the best position to succeed." But when you have the likes of Brad Pitt and Barbie knocking on your studio door, how can anyone say there's no future for architects?

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