'Dipping Our Toes…': A Qualitative Interview-based View of UK Architecture Graduates in Practice

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This paper uses graphical diagramming to examine interviews with a number of Part II graduates in the UK. The intention of the project was to instigate a critical environment where experiences of graduates re-entering architectural practice, at this very particular stage in their career, could be shared and analysed. This process was undertaken in order to actively describe the position of graduates in the profession, in particular looking at the values and frustrations they experience or ascribe to mainstream architectural practice.

The paper details the processes of the research, in particular documenting the emergent analysis technique of mapping and coding that was developed for this project. Some key observations from the interviews are described, which inform a series of questions, aimed at introducing an informed critical reflexivity to graduate work, and at potential changes that might be introduced to mainstream architectural practice.

[1] Architecture education in UK is organised in 3 parts. The standard route is a three-year undergraduate degree, which is equivalent to RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Part I, followed by a year in practice, returning to university for a further two-year degree (diploma or masters) that is equivalent to RIBA Part II. Graduates then enter architectural employment as Architectural Assistants, and after a minimum of one-year further work experience can begin studying part-time for the Part III qualification, after which they are fully qualified as architects. An alternative route is to study part-time for each component, whilst working in practice.

Introduction

This case study uses a graphical technique to draw out information from interviews with a number of Part II graduates[1] presently working within the architectural profession. The aim of the paper is to refine a series of queries about the UK architecture profession, with particular focus on recent graduate experience of the transition from education to practice. A wider aim is to establish potential forms of praxis within mainstream architectural practice that we, as Part II graduates, might implement. We looked closely at aspects of architectural practice that Part II graduates found important and frustrating after one year in employment, and used diagramming techniques to identify areas of common concern. From these areas we drew out key observations, which then informed a series of critically reflective questions for graduates engaging in mainstream practice. Our aim was not to present conclusive findings in the manner of a comprehensive survey, but to identify areas for further in-depth study, and potentially to cultivate an awareness in the graduates of the choices made in their everyday work.

Background to the Study

The study was initiated in response to the call for papers for the *Alternative Architectural Praxis* symposium at University of Sheffield in November 2007. This was treated as a stimulus to investigate areas in which we, the authors, had pre-existing interests. Our area of study emerged from our personal questioning of what alternative architectural practice might be, and also a concern to account for the various positions of Part II graduates in the profession.

We do not consider ourselves to be experts in the field, but over the course of our education and periods working in practice, we had all taken part in various architectural activities that might not be considered 'mainstream'. These include work with voluntary organisations on projects that encompass the design and construction of community buildings in Slovakia and Romania and work on research projects. However, our more recent encounters of working in practice did not necessarily align with our preconceived notions, and we began to wonder if the traditional stereotype of practice, as seen from the vantage of the educational environment, really existed for post-Part II graduates. The processes of design in professional practice and in education are considered distinct but we wondered how far these differences were real, necessary or desirable, and what they revealed about our preconceptions of practice.

As authors of this paper, we tried consciously not to align ourselves with some 'fashionable' idea of the alternative as a binary opposition to the established and traditional. As we considered our approach to the subject of alternative practice it became clear to us that there was not a strict

2   *Alternative Architectural Praxis*,
     'Definition', (2007); www.altpraxis.
     wordpress.com, [accessed 28 April 2008].

duality between what might be considered alternative and in contrast what is termed traditional. Often it seemed that the qualities assigned to the alternative such as 'acknowledging that architectural practice has to deal with architecture's economic, political and social significance',[2] might actually be considered by many to be merely good practice. The significant issue seemed to be whether such characteristics were actively pursued or achieved in specific cases.

In devising our interview questions, it was our intention that the interviewees would speak about their architectural activities not in terms of this notional binary, but in order to assess which aspects of their work they valued, and which they found frustrating. We hoped for a wide-ranging discussion that hinted at proposals for a practice that did not stem from a desire to tick the mythical boxes of alternative praxis, but had emerged from the critical process itself.

Methodology of the Study

We conducted interviews with eight individuals who had worked in practice for one year since graduating in Architecture (RIBA Part II level), and who had not yet undertaken the Part III course to become fully qualified. The interviews were conversational and held in an informal setting. The research methodology follows a 'rejection of positivist notions of the social world, embracing interpretation, meaning in context, [and] interaction.'[3] Our methodology of 'one-to-one' basis interviews mirrored informal peer discussions, although we added an imposed 'structure' of open-ended questions with the interviewer taking a directing role.

3   Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of
     Practice*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
     1991), p. 6, cited in Linda Groat & David
     Wang, *Architectural Research Methods*,
     (New York: Wiley, 2002), p. 173.

The gathering, recording and analysing of data from the interviews followed this interpretive ethos: interviews were wide-ranging and discursive, and the process of 'mapping' and sifting the recorded information allowed observations to materialise through techniques of coding and analysis.

Structure and Content of Interviews

Due to our 'amateur' status and lack of resources, we were reliant on contacts within our peer group rather than selecting interviewees through random sampling of a large field. However, in order to get a spread of data representing a variety of perspectives, we used our contact network to interview graduates from different schools of architecture, working in a range of architectural practices. Graduates had studied across nine UK universities and worked in practices of two to over a hundred employees.

Whilst the interviews were discursive and open in nature, the following questions were used to prompt discussion and direct the conversation. They were also referred to when mapping and analysing the interviews.

Interview Questions

Question 1: **Education**

Overall, during your (formal) architectural education:
What particular aspects of your studies in architecture did you consider of most value?
What particular aspects of your studies in architecture did you consider most frustrating?

Question 2: **Practice**

During your architectural work, post-education:
What particular aspects of your work do/did you consider of most value?
What particular aspects of your work do/did you consider most frustrating?

Question 3: **Course of Practice**

Since leaving university, what factors have been important in choosing your course of practice?

Question 4: **Architectural Interests Outside of Paid Employment**

What (if any) architectural interests/projects do you pursue outside of your main paid employment?
What factors motivate you to do this?

Question 5: **Architectural Agenda**

As a person involved in the practice of architecture what is your agenda, if any?
How does this sit with your role within your place of work?

Choice of Terminology

The terms 'value' and 'frustration' in questions 1 & 2 were informed by observations we made following our own experiences of architectural education and practice. We deliberately avoided using binary oppositions of 'important/not important' or 'frustrating/rewarding' as we were not attempting to judge experiences but to elicit conversation on a range of issues. In fact, we considered the terms 'value' and 'frustration' to be provocations. In our own discussions we began to view the idea of 'frustration' as a motivating factor and not necessarily as purely negative. Frustrations often prompted us to react or change things, and also to critically reflect on them. 'Value' as a term is again open to interpretation and was used to allow respondents a certain

freedom in discussing what they enjoyed personally and what they deemed important to the profession at large.

The use of 'agenda' in question 5 was also provocative, as we did not expect the participants to have an eloquently prepared response to this question. We used this term as a device to encourage interviewees to consider their concerns from another position, one that might be distanced from their day-to-day affairs. However, this term caused some unforeseen problems when we came to use it in interviews: the majority of respondents seemed confused or uncomfortable with the idea of 'having an agenda', and shied away from labelling the issues they thought important as such. The question usually required additional explanation in order to elicit a response.

Processing: Recording, Mapping, Filtering and Interpreting

The conversational manner of the interviews was a conscious attempt to gather qualitative information, however it also made direct comparisons between interviews difficult. Statistical analysis was deemed neither valid nor desirable due to the core objective of maintaining the specificity of the experiences recounted. We also recognised the degree of bias that could occur through interpreting the interviews at face value, or by mistaking our impressions of the discussion for what was actually said. A further processing of the interviews was therefore deemed necessary in order to gain some insight.

There were four stages of coding and analysis: Recording, Mapping, Filtering and Interpretation.

Recording

This was a form of transcription, distilling each conversation into separate written segments containing interview responses as statements, questionings, wonderings and interjections. The purpose was not to edit content, with direct quotation retained wherever possible, but rather to have a standardised format for all the interviews for comparison and digestion.

Mapping

The mapping followed the chronological sequence of the recordings but split the interview segments into two columns; one categorised as values, the other as frustrations. Between the segments the path or route of the conversation was drawn, crossing between the categorised columns as the interviewee's responses had, with interviewer questions or less categorical responses placed in the bridging space between the two. The result was a diagram that described the trajectory of the conversation [Fig. 1].

With each conversation in the same format we could view and directly compare them. The mapped interviews were placed next to each other to create a new combined map. Horizontal lines were drawn that connected instances where planned questions were asked, resulting in a flexible grid or matrix, which revealed the proportion of time devoted to each particular question in relation to the other interviews [Fig. 2].
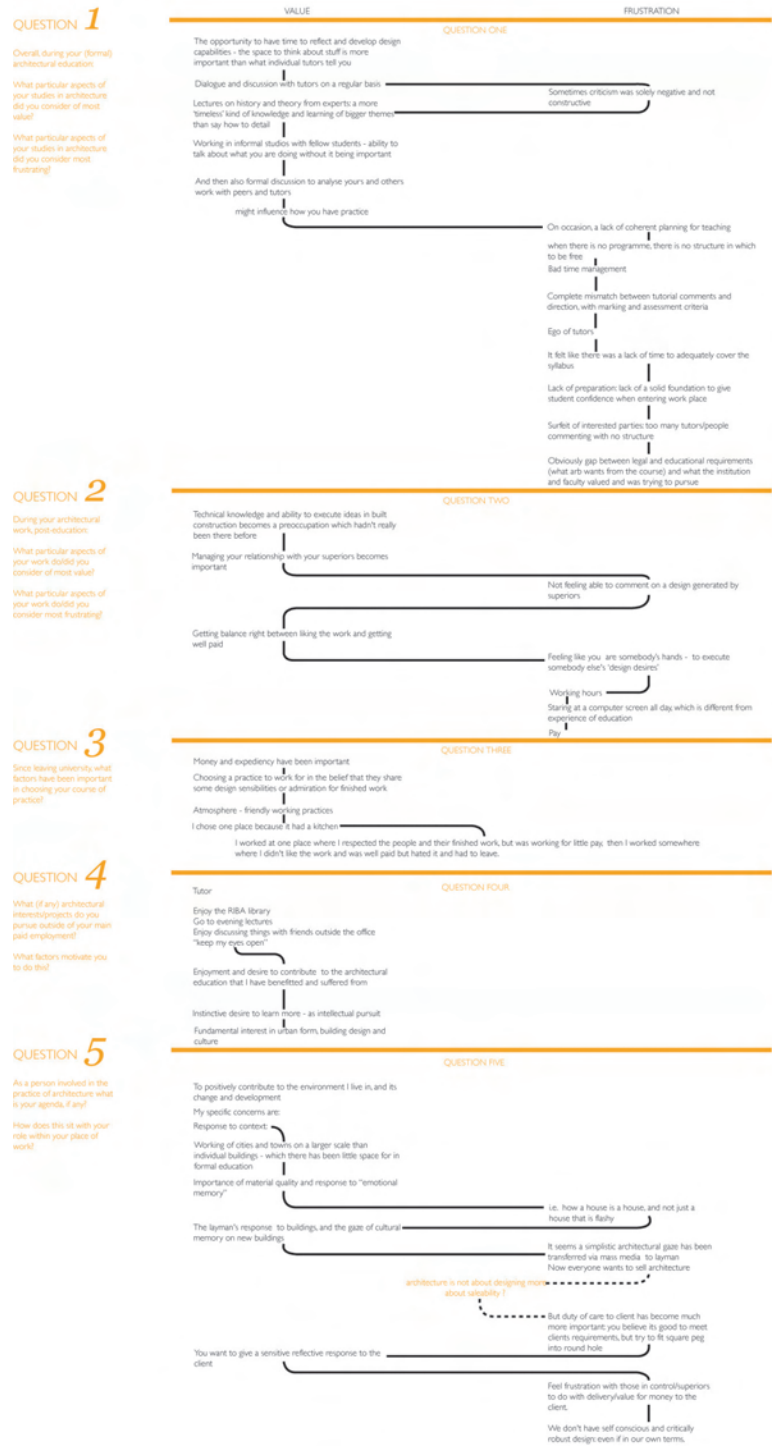

Fig. 1. A typical mapped conversation. Image: Authors.
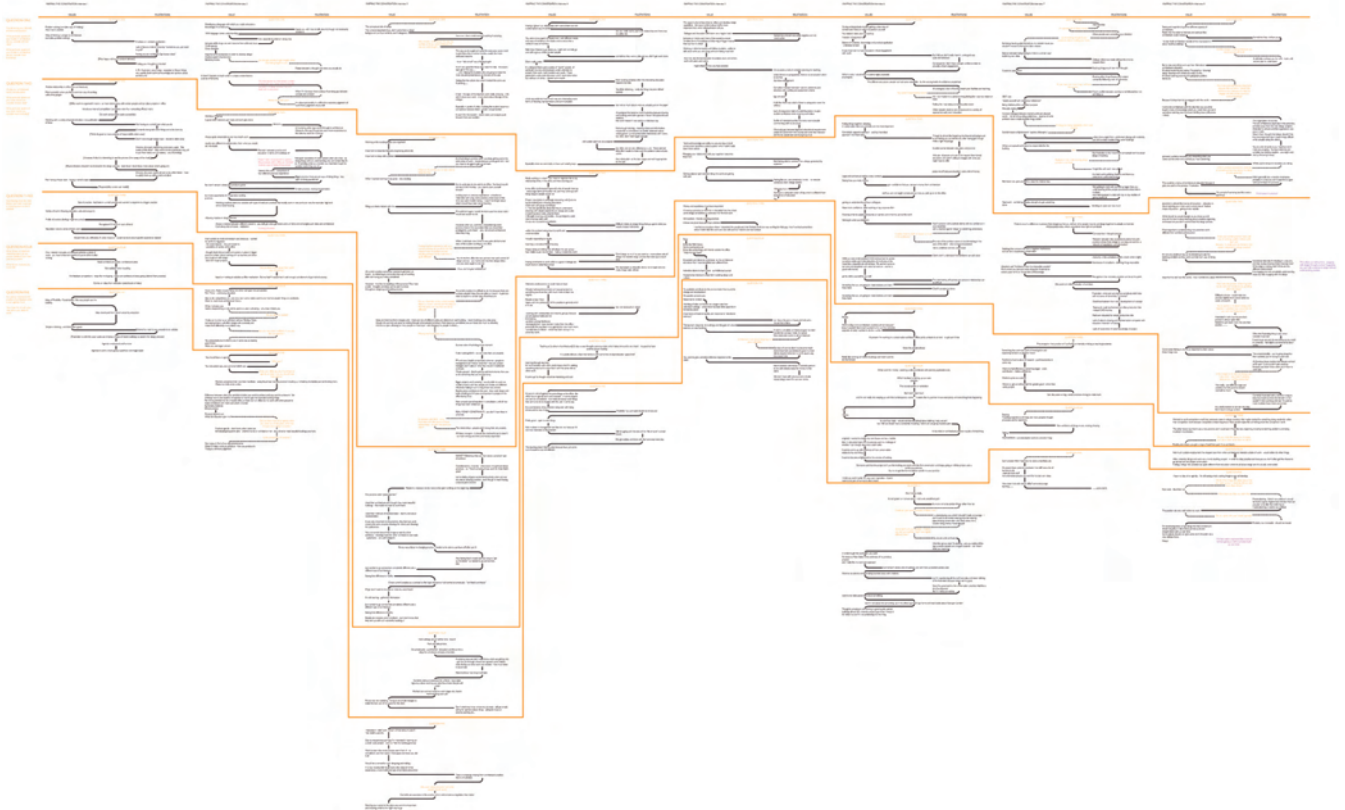
Fig. 2. The full mapped data. Image: Authors.

Filtering

Through spatialising the recordings we were able to find relations that would have been impossible to determine in conventional text. Priorities and experiences were compared and contrasted. However, the main opportunity that the mapping offered was the possibility of 'filtering' the data that detached our personal agendas from the content. Rather than a simple reading of the interview text as the basis for determining significance, we could focus in an unprejudiced way on areas of the map that showed spatial significance. This formed the third stage in the processing of the information. We concentrated on the instances where a rapid or intense oscillation occurred between the two columns. These were identified visually, regardless of content, and placed as a series of highlights across the map. We gave significance to these oscillations between value and frustration as we thought that these were instances where the interviewee was (or could potentially be) expressing an unresolved issue or contradiction within their architectural experience. Something of value had been identified, and yet this couldn't be separated from an area of frustration or dissatisfaction. To us this seemed like a relevant place to investigate possibilities for alternative praxis.

Of these areas some simply contained disparate topics and staccato responses where the conversation had apparently not flowed. In most cases, however, the highlighted areas revealed an issue or a set of inter-

related issues pertinent to the discussion. These highlights provided qualitative instances of broader themes, which could be identified in a less succinct context throughout the other interviews.

Iterations of this process revealed a number of themes scattered across the map that could then be discussed. In no particular order the themes are:

> Group working practices
> Individual working practices
> Hierarchical relationships
> Design process
> Material processes
> Remuneration
> Learning
> Practice size
> Making a 'positive impact' in the world
> The role of the architect
> Balance / conflict
> Ego of the architect

These themes are shown as colour-coded, highlighted areas on the Interview Map.

Interpreting

Although the themes defined above and the mapped oscillations represent a potentially significant insight into the experience of architectural education and practice, the sample was never intended to be large enough to make claims across the subject area as a whole. Instead it has allowed us to make observations and pose questions informed by first-hand accounts.

The observations shown here are not exhaustive, but have been chosen because they struck a cord with our own experiences. The scenarios or phenomena they depict were not necessarily apparent to us before we began this under-taking. However, because we have found them to be pertinent we hope they can be easily recognised by others involved in the field and thereby encourage further debate.

Observation 1

A Change From Critical Learning to Passive Practice

An overriding *value* observed in the responses of nearly all the interviewees was the importance of learning. Learning was sought and valued, both in education and in practice, and for some respondents also in the architectural interests they pursued outside of their main employment. However, the nature of the interviewees' responses changed once they

began to discuss learning in practice, describing a method of learning derived from observation and absorption, which moved away from the more critical engagement they associated with education. In some instances it felt as if the learning desire became a thirst for its own sake, seemingly with little reflection on its method or the values implicit within it.

Examining more closely the situation of Part II graduates, this 'learning desire' can be seen as an understandable reaction. Once in practice graduates are confronted with a mass of information on a day-to-day basis: the realities of contracts, client relations, building techniques and how to best manage jobs within the office, to name but a few. In addition, the qualities often deemed of merit in education become less appreciated. In reaction graduates hold on to the desire to learn as their tool to negotiate the new experiences they are facing. This 'sponge-like' response is a logical

1 Overall, during your (formal) architectural education:
What particular aspects of your studies in architecture did you consider of most value?
What particular aspects of your studies in architecture did you consider most frustrating?

Seeing and experiencing all the different aspects of architecture. Really into the external interests and avenues that architecture could include.

1st year took architecture outside of the impression it's about 'building buildings'

Sometimes they confuse you

Did this change in what architecture was about put you off at all?

It definitely confuses you for a bit - took until second year to understand.

But to 'see everything' sums up how I feel about architectural education.
It's about exploring and seeing. The graphics / drawing/ design development all feel secondary to this.
It's about opening your mind to geography, politics, literature.

Are these external interests important because they can drive / morph the architecture or because of a need to engage with the world (inward or outward looking)?

Because it's important to be engaged with the world.

I came into architecture with the idea that you would be taught a body of knowledge which you could then use but it was about opening your mind and distilling down (influences / ideas).

2 During your architectural work, post-education:
What particular aspects of your work do/did you consider of most value?
What particular aspects of your work do/did you consider most frustrating?

(practice) is almost the inverse of education - education is about opening your mind, work is more about "tactical means of practice - getting it into real life.

What should be valued changes as you move up and around. For me it's about learning about practice, organising and issues, but you don't want to lose the design process.

Most important is understanding how practices work - different from architectural education

Does your current practice have a set way of working a path it follows with each job?
Because it's small can it be fresher in this aspect compared to a large practice?

It's not only small but new, so its interesting to see the teething problems as [the partners] work out their own way of doing things.

Sometimes feels like I'm floating in a sea; why are they issuing drawings these drawings now? What stage is coming next? What are the different relationships?
It is engaging but not completely understanding - stops you fully engaging with the design.

important to see how this works - how it all falls into place.

How does the process of learning, both by you and your bosses as you go along affect the design?

Difficult to know - could make the practice slightly more conservative (to avoid unknown?)
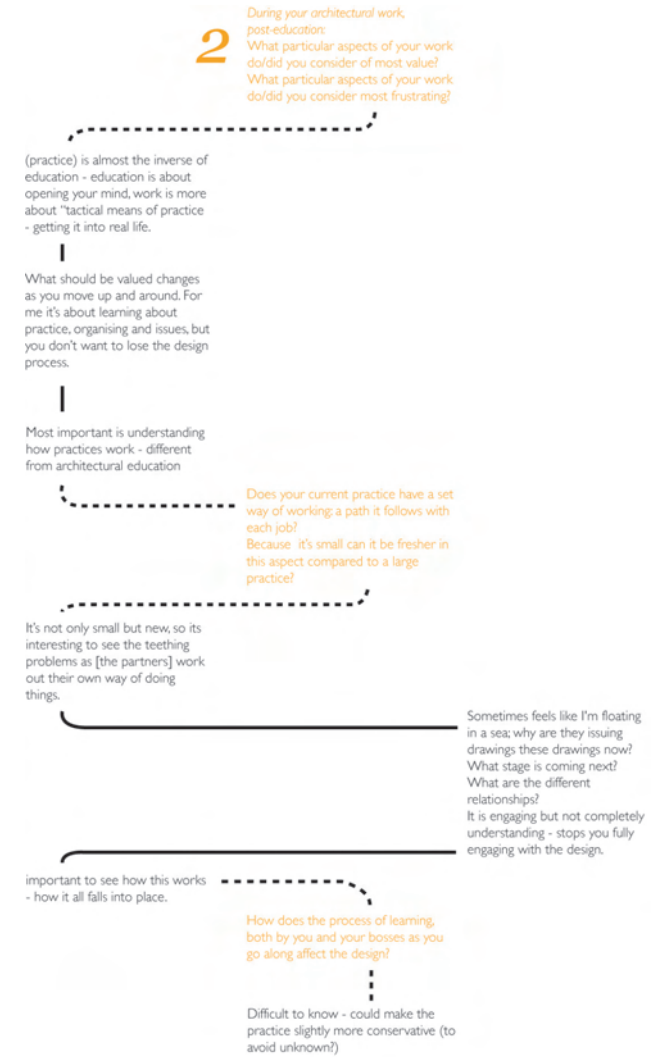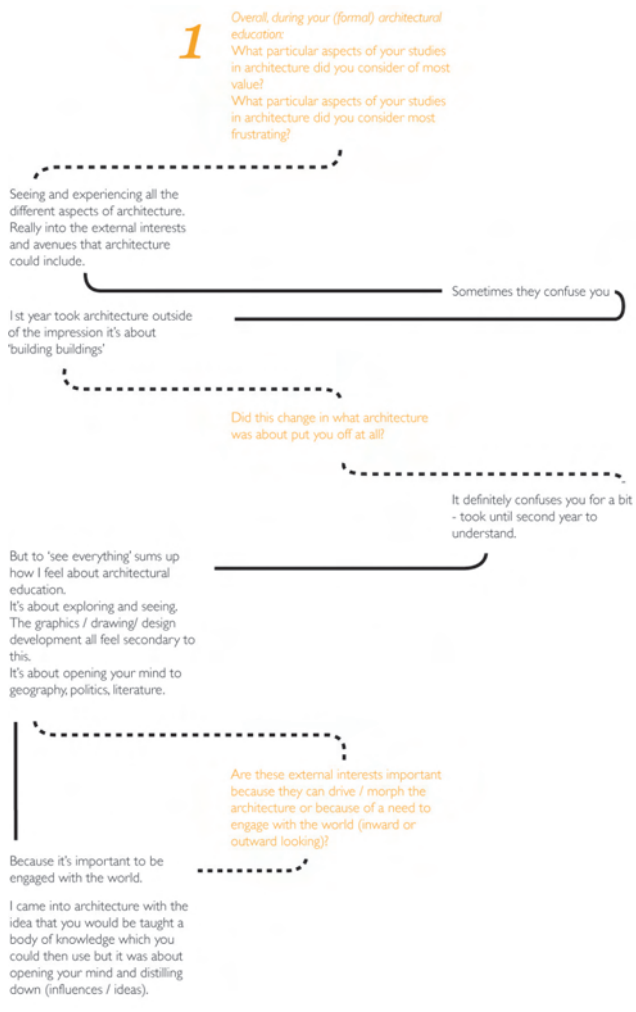
Fig. 3. Extract from Interview map—discussing learning in architectural education. Image: Authors.
Fig. 4. Extract from Interview map—discussing learning in architectural practice. Image: Authors.

extension of values learnt in education—exposing oneself to new ideas, learning through experience, trial-and-error—but without also carrying through the reflective criticality that is part of most schools' diploma or masters degree.

Several questions arise from this observation. Firstly, is an unquestioning 'desire to learn' really the best approach to understanding how to practice architecture? Secondly, will this approach empower the graduates to act on their perceptions and experiences in practice?

Observation 2

The Value of Office Type and the Acceptance of Compromise

The language used by interviewees to describe the architecture offices they encountered suggested that firms were regarded as being one of a 'type', with particular accompanying characteristics ascribed to each. This was especially apparent when interviewees were asked about what had influenced their 'course of practice' (question 3). Having worked in one 'type' of firm meant that interviewees wanted to 'try' something completely different next. This was mostly achieved by moving between offices of different sizes, or between practices considered more or less traditional/ progressive.

The overarching view seemed to be that working for these various 'types' of architectural firms was of definite, although possibly intangible benefit. In an extreme case this impetus became so strong that the individual positioned themselves within a firm they had no real desire to work for, just so they could experience this 'type' of practice for themselves.

Other respondents followed a similar principle whilst also demanding more specific educational input or experiences from the firms they chose to work at.

Regardless of the reason for choosing a particular firm our impression was that the people thought they would either 'fit in' or not. Interviewees did want to have an input into the daily workings of the practice, but there was a sense that their presence would not be of much influence. This might be expected for the participants working in larger offices with corporate structures, however the same attitude across the board suggested a certain reluctance to engage with the form and structure of a practice beyond the design ethos.

It could be worth asking how this mentality of wanting to work for different 'types' of practices influences the nature of graduates' engagement with their current practice? It indicates a certain unfulfilled satisfaction and also a lack of agency in influencing the workings of
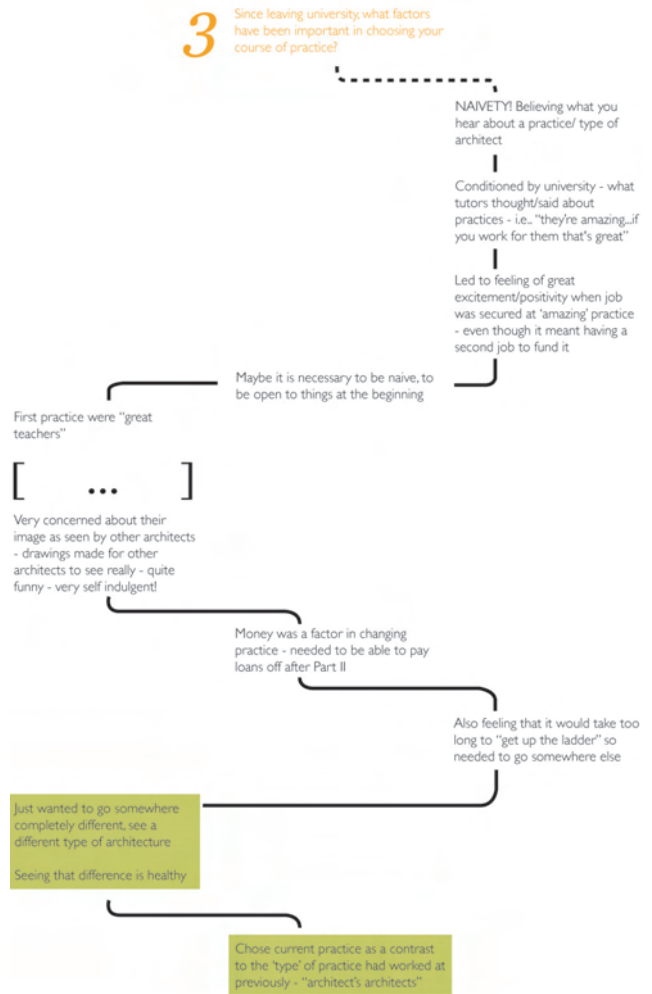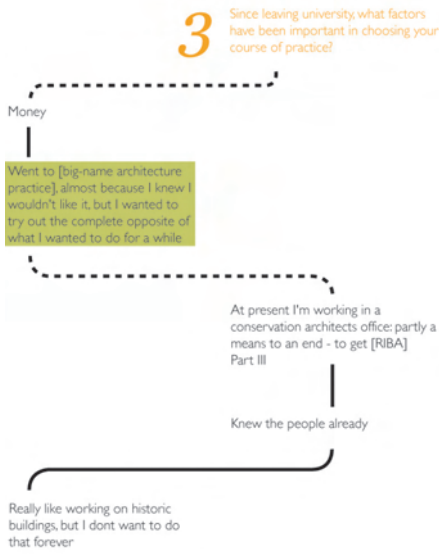
3 Since leaving university, what factors have been important in choosing your course of practice?

Money

Went to [big-name architecture practice], almost because I knew I wouldn't like it, but I wanted to try out the complete opposite of what I wanted to do for a while

At present I'm working in a conservation architects office: partly a means to an end - to get [RIBA] Part III

Knew the people already

Really like working on historic buildings, but I dont want to do that forever

3 Since leaving university, what factors have been important in choosing your course of practice?

NAIVETY! Believing what you hear about a practice/ type of architect

Conditioned by university - what tutors thought/said about practices - i.e... "they're amazing...if you work for them that's great"

Led to feeling of great excitement/positivity when job was secured at 'amazing' practice - even though it meant having a second job to fund it

Maybe it is necessary to be naive, to be open to things at the beginning

First practice were "great teachers"

[...]

Very concerned about their image as seen by other architects - drawings made for other architects to see really - quite funny - very self indulgent!

Money was a factor in changing practice - needed to be able to pay loans off after Part II

Also feeling that it would take too long to "get up the ladder" so needed to go somewhere else

Just wanted to go somewhere completely different, see a different type of architecture

Seeing that difference is healthy

Chose current practice as a contrast to the 'type' of practice had worked at previously - "architect's architects"

Fig. 5. Extract from Interview map—choice of practice based on experiencing different 'types' of practice. Image: Authors.

Fig. 6. Extract from Interview map—choice of practice based on experiencing different 'types' of practice. Image: Authors.

their current firm. The quote highlighted in Fig. 6 is an extension of this phenomenon, where the notion of 'types' is linked to finding a compromise between preferred architectural output, praxis, remuneration, working conditions and general quality of life. This seems no less idealistic than expecting to find a perfect 'fit', although it is somewhat accepting of the notion that to work for a practice that fulfils one requirement may well result in neglecting the others.

This might lead us to ask how graduates choose the criteria for assessing what makes up this balance? Should the notion of practice 'type' be consciously rejected in favour of more nuanced assessments of the balance between the practice's concerns and those of the graduate? Alternatively, should demands be made more explicit to act as drivers for improving praxis? Should graduates, as employees, be willing to submit to an unsatisfactory role, balancing this with 'quality of life' (and work) in other areas?

Dipping Our Toes Tessa Baird, Anna Holder, James Wakeford

Observation 3

Paid Employment Doesn't Seem Able to Satisfy Graduates' Architectural Ambition

While it is possible that our question on 'architectural interests/pursuits' could be considered 'leading'—implying a pressure to be seen to undertake architectural activities outside of paid employment—there is no doubt that respondents were involved in a wide range of architecture-related pursuits in addition to full-time paid architectural employment.

This may be unsurprising to the readership of this journal—it often seems taken for granted that architects feel the need to pursue architectural interests outside of practice and are motivated to do so. However, when surveying the range of work undertaken outside of practice as related by the interviewees—teaching and guest reviewing in architecture schools, self-building, running small jobs etc.—it is difficult not to wonder what the influence on mainstream practice might be if all this energy and architectural ambition was able to be utilised in practice in some way?

4 What (if any) architectural interests/projects do you pursue outside of your main paid employment?
What factors motivate you to do this?

Tutor

Enjoy the RIBA library
Go to evening lectures
Enjoy discussing things with friends outside the office
"keep my eyes open"

Enjoyment and desire to contribute to the architectural education that I have benefitted and suffered from

Instinctive desire to learn more - as intellectual pursuit

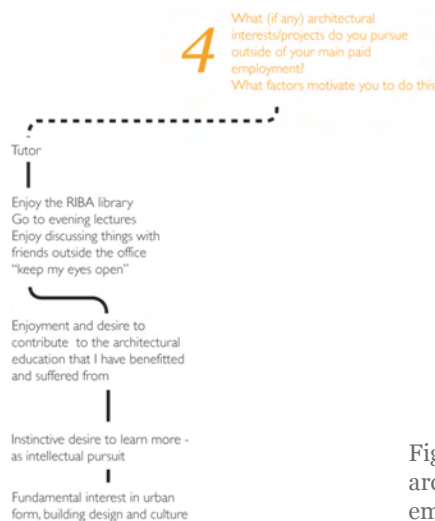Fundamental interest in urban form, building design and culture

Fig. 7. Extract from Interview map—architectural pursuits outside of paid employment. Image: Authors.

Does this state of affairs reflect badly on architectural practice, indicating that it is not sufficiently diverse to allow the professional desires and values of graduates to be encompassed in their work? Or rather do graduates expect too much of a commercial enterprise? Perhaps these questions reflect back onto architectural education in the way that it prepares students for practice. Does it to foster a greater confidence for self-action or conversely should it provide more realistic expectations?

Another suggestion was that keeping an element of architectural activity separate from employment allows for an individual architectural identity to be maintained. For instance one respondent stated; 'I don't want to be part of someone else's brand.'

Observation 4

Agendas Not Confined to a Certain Field and Yet to be Fully Developed

Respondents interpreted the question of architectural 'agenda' in a variety of different ways. These ranged from a set of values to guide design and practice, to stylistic and theoretical values, appraisals of certain stereotypes, comments on ambition and career plan, and reflections on the nature of 'work' for architects—or indeed for anyone.
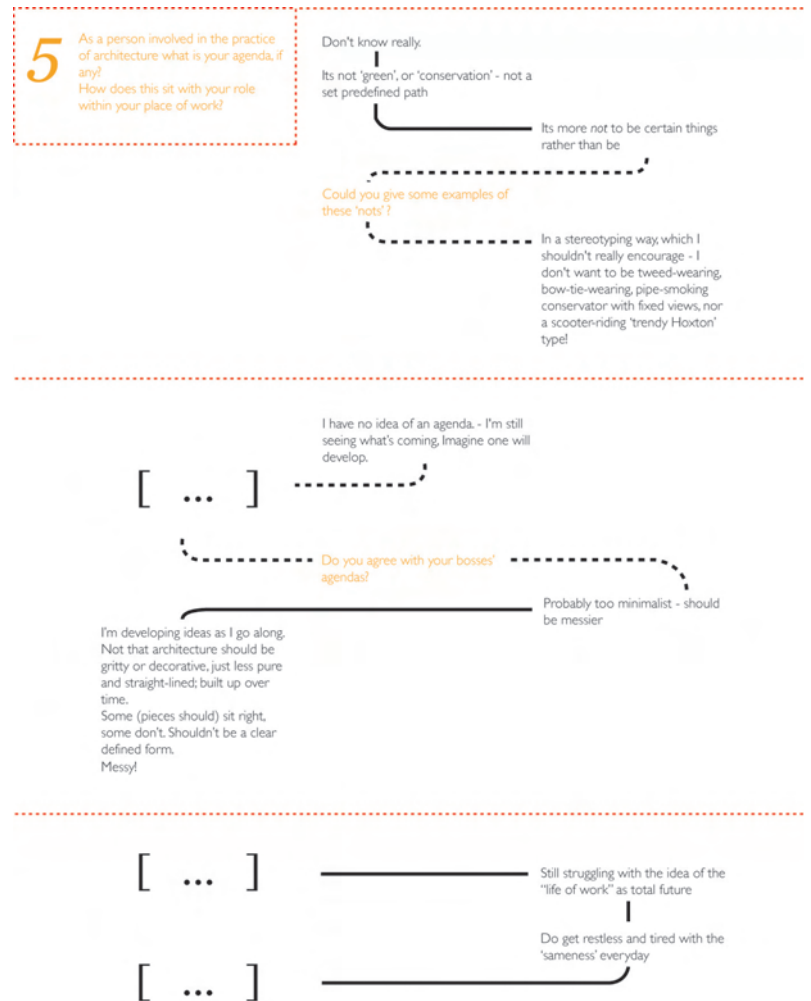

Fig. 8. Extracts from Interview map—various responses to the idea of architectural agenda. Image: Authors.

The idea of 'an agenda' driving individual choices in architectural practice was something we wanted to explore. This was partly in response to the theme of the *Alternative Architectural Praxis* symposium; there was a feeling that 'alternative' praxis was a response to something or embodied some kind of agenda, and we were keen to see whether this was something that was an issue for graduates entering mainstream practice. We also wanted to gain some understanding of underlying motivations that might influence the career choices and actions of graduates.

As discussed above, not all the graduates we spoke to had a strong underlying set of principles, acquired through education, that were informing their career decisions. Again the idea of ongoing learning and exposure to many types of experience was cited—in some cases as a reason for not having an agenda, in some cases as an agenda in itself. In a few instances, conflicts between office and individual agendas were uncovered but this did not seem to be a universal experience in the confines of the small group of people we spoke to. What might the value be of developing and learning to articulate a clear agenda for architectural practice at this early stage?

Although most interviewees expressed something that could be construed as an agenda, responses were often fragmented and lacking clarity. Does this suggest a hesitancy to commit and therefore contribute towards a passive learning? Alternatively, does delaying a defined agenda imply a mature response, with the patient assimilation of ideas until they become sufficiently developed alongside a confidence to act upon them?

Observation 5

The Reality of Teamwork Does Not Lead to Equality of Decision-making

Most respondents noted the value of teamwork in both the educational and practice context. Interviewees recognised that there were significant differences in teamwork in practice and education. They valued such aspects in practice as the pace of production and the sharing of pressure and responsibilities, which in education is often placed on individuals. They also appreciated being part of a team that really seemed to achieve things.

However, there was a certain degree of frustration regarding the way in which office hierarchies intersected with notions of team structure, where the work of the team was undermined by the overriding opinion of senior practice members. One interviewee described this as 'the sweep of the cloak'—a 'Zoro-like' character appearing from nowhere, making his mark on the project before disappearing again, and leaving you to deal with the consequences. Because of this it seemed interviewees felt a degree of scepticism towards teamwork in practice as it became undermined by the reality of office hierarchy. Whilst the positives of teamwork were generally lauded, occasionally a conflict appeared between this working ethos and the desire to be recognised or to have your own way.

Conclusion

We set out at the beginning of this paper to explore the position we had personally found ourselves in, between an extended higher education and full integration into a professional institution. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that at the end of our investigation we find this position of limbo

to be so important in determining the reflections of our contemporaries. Contradictions of opinion and conflicted responses to questions on such broad themes as 'values', 'frustrations', 'agendas' and 'factors determining choice' are probably natural to this type of enquiry. However, the themes running through the interviewees' responses build a picture of graduates grappling to understand their position in practice. The desire to learn about the conditions they find themselves in, to experience a range of practice types, and to pursue other outlets for their architectural interests could be read as an attempt to situate and define themselves within a confusing field. The reticence to commit to an agenda (although some people then described one without the label) and the notion of finding the perfect 'fit' in the future add hesitancy to this reading, whilst general graduate frustrations and difficulties in resolving the reality of practice to imagined ideals cloud the situation further.

To us it would be unfortunate if this time between education and practice lost its independence and became burdened by yet another structure attempting to govern it. However, it seems that the current 'suck it and see' approach is not providing the best environment for a breadth of architectural experience or critical reflection. Obvious reactions might be to blur the line between education and practice, or to reappraise the value of professional qualification, questioning which aspects within it truly merit protection.

Clearly this paper does not demonstrate a wholesale rejection of the current state of practice, as many aspects were found valuable, interesting, and exciting by the participants. The paper also does not intend to advocate an aggrandised sense of the significance of the post-Part II period and the self-importance of individuals at this stage. But it seems apparent from our sample that the there seems to be a lack of criticality at this point partially due to the transition from education to practice. It seems that the application of this criticality could be of benefit to both Part IIs seeking to understand the running of their practice and to the industry in general. It should also be noted that the sampling was undertaken at a specific period of economic strength in the UK, before the current credit crisis that is likely to affect the construction industry. Participants were viewing their positions within a context of plentiful work options, from which to pick and choose, which may have allowed them to be more confident in expressing dissatisfactions as these could be realistically addressed by changing jobs. However, the participants responded to questions as if they had not been asked before and seemed to relish the occasion to talk in a context that invited considered criticism rather than a general gripe. Whether these opinions can be accommodated within practice remains to be seen.

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