

Downclassing the Architect

A View from the Cliff

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Introduction

For no other occupation is the past so alive as for architecture. Ask a surgeon or an engineer or a lawyer about what their forbears were doing, say, a century ago, and you receive only the vaguest of answers. Ask an architect, and he or she will not only be able to produce any number of names, but also a couple of books about them as well. Point the telescope in the other direction and ask architects about the future of their occupation: they will have strong views about trends in practice, about where education is going, what they will be doing for clients, and about their role in the construction industry. With only a few moments thought, they could identify the ways in which architectural practice has changed over that century, and throw in a few ideas about how it will change over the next few decades

Now raise the analysis to a higher level, and ask the architects how their occupation's place in society has changed: what have been its movements, if any, in the social structure? At this point you will receive blank looks. I venture that there have been some subtle shifts in architecture's position in the class structures of the Anglophone world over the last hundred years, and that the occupation is now on the verge of a significant downclassing.¹

What Class Is

First, let's be clear what 'class' is about. All but the simplest and smallest societies are marked by an unequal distribution of material and non-material rewards: they are stratified. Moreover, this stratification is not some random effect. It is structural and persists through time. 'Class' refers to this enduring quality, to the fact that there are readily identifiable groups occupying different places in the stratification system.

One complication in talking about class is that the concept is so bundled up in the discourse about itself. As Michael Benedikt points out in this issue, your position in the class structure affects what you think about class. Your politics also affects how you think about class. Broadly speaking, a 'conservative' is someone who believes that inequality is natural, the result of differing abilities between individuals, and differing commitments to hard work. Many would also believe that capitalism is dynamic because it is unequal. Attempts to radically equalise a society only end up in grey-concrete communism. Someone labelled a 'liberal' views inequality as undesirable, and the result not of individual failings, but of wider social forces. So discourse about class often has a moral and normative content.

Class is usually thought of as deriving from an economic base. When we think of lower, middle and upper, we tend to think of poor, middling and rich. I think a better and more sophisticated way of thinking about is that of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. First, think not so much of classes as of social space. This space can be viewed as a plane. What we think of as classes are then just locations on this plane. One dimension of the plane represents the familiar economic continuum, the amount of economic capital you have, from poor to wealthy. The other represents the amount of symbolic or cultural capital. Symbolic capital comes in many forms: academic qualifications and educational attainments, knowing things, and being certified as knowing them; cultural objects or goods such as art-works or any of the many symbolic objects produced in society; durable networks of people on whom one can rely for support and help in life. And, most important, it includes embodied qualities; ways of acting and reacting; attitudes, tastes, and preferences.

In this system 'class' denotes groups of people with similar amounts of economic and cultural capital. The young architect and the young security officer may have similar amounts of economic capital, but because the former has greater symbolic capital, they occupy different positions in social space and hence different class positions.

Apart from absolute qualities, classes are defined by relational properties; how they stand with regards to other groups. The economist Paul Krugman has a striking way of picturing this. In 1950 one-third of American families did not have full indoor plumbing, and many still did not have telephones or cars. Few had televisions. The median income was about \$20,000 (year 2000 dollars). Now take such a family and offer to transport them to our present. They would be better off in absolute terms than in 1950: they would certainly have an indoor toilet and a shower, a phone, a car, and many other products that would be cheaper and of much better quality than the ones they were used to. Their material standard of living would be superior to their life in 1950. Would they accept the offer? Krugman answers:

“Almost certainly not—because in 1950 they were middle class, while in [2000] they would be poor, even if they lived better in material terms. People don’t just care about their absolute material level—they care about their level compared to others.”²

The Economic Cusp

The most striking change in the architecture profession through the last century is its expansion. In 1900 there were about 145 architects per million population of the United States and ten architecture schools. In 2000 there are over 500 per million produced from more than 100 schools. I have read any number of articles arguing that the more architects the better, the more design skills in the community the better. It does not seem to have occurred to any that the old laws of supply and demand are still in effect, for both economic and symbolic purposes. The economic effects are easy to determine: building construction has bubbled along at around three per cent of GDP for decades, so all those additional architects are chasing the same number of construction dollars that their rarer predecessors were.³ The situation would be more promising if architects had grabbed a larger share of this market. At little digging in the economic data shows no evidence for this, but at least it shows the architects holding their own. Each architectural employee brought in almost exactly the same income to his or her firm in the late 1990s as they did in the late 1960s (the earliest time for which we have this data). No one would argue that architects are drawing bigger salaries now than in the past, even in the current boom economy. The average income of the architect has declined by about ten per cent in real terms over those same thirty years.

This economic stasis is common to the great American middle-class: only the very rich have done well, and the very poor are worse-off now than in the 1970s. In what really counts in these matters, the *relative* status, the architect’s location along the economic axis has slipped down a little, but certainly not so much that the elders of the profession feel the need to remind their youngsters about how rich the good old days were. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that I suspect the occupation is at a cusp. What the architect does, and the sort of people he or she interacts with as part of the job, has changed. Quite a lot of new titles, if not occupations, have entered the construction industry in the immediate past decades: there weren’t any facilities managers or project managers back in 1950. Building has become more complex, but the architects do not seem to have taken on these complexities themselves. As one small example, consider security. In 1950 this was entirely the architect’s domain, and the task at hand consisted of selecting the right door furniture from catalogs. In 2000, ‘security’ means cameras, swipe cards, electronic keys, movement sensors and guards watching screens in secure rooms. All the details have been passed to consultants to worry about— and to be paid for.

That something significant and worrying has happened to the occupation’s work occurred to me one day as I perused bound volumes of the architecture magazines dating from the 1930s. Year after year the volumes fattened, splitting into half-year volumes as needed. But not after the late 1980s. I did some tedious page counting of one of my favorites, the UK *Architects’ Journal*. I was shocked

to discover that from 1990 to 2000 the *AJ*'s page count dropped almost fifty per cent. Less content, fewer advertisements.

I chose the *AJ* for its breadth. I don't think any other journal more closely matches the work of the occupation as a whole: quite a lot of technical and management material, a decent coverage of notable projects, professional matters, and a smattering of the high-culture stuff that is really only a small proportion of the occupation's work. The decline is not so obvious in the American literature, but then an entire journal of the first importance (*Progressive Architecture*) was lost some years ago. Perhaps its death let the others survive more or less intact. The magazines covering the work of the architectural elites, such as *AD: Architectural Design*, and *The Architectural Review*, haven't changed much over the decade. This is an important point that I shall return to.

We all know that other occupations have increasingly intruded on the architect's turf. The profession has done well if a twofold and more expansion has had so little effect on its economic standing to date. What I suspect the *AJ* is telling us is that this competition is now beginning to tell. Over the next twenty to thirty years I suggest that the architect's share of the design market will decline swiftly, and that fees and income will fall: in short, a slow economic downclassing.

A Symbolic Downclassing

Rather more subtle than this slight (so far) movement in economic space is the architect's travel in symbolic space. No doubt architects themselves, being essentially symbolists rather than economists, would consider this movement of more interest. Here the issue is not how much work the architect is doing, but how the title of 'architect' is working. The title, like others in the space of occupations, has long been a prize of the privileged classes. It must be protected *as* the rightful property of those classes. Or, to be more precise, its rarity must be preserved, for titles only have value in so far as they are rare.

What, really, does it mean for a title to change in symbolic value? Consider the 'clerk'. In 1900 it was quite something to be a young clerk. You were clearly distinguished from manual workers. You had a decent education: certainly a full secondary education, and even perhaps some college. You could handle numbers and accounts with proficiency, you could write well-constructed letters to clients. You had before you a decent career path, and could hope to reach high management levels before you retired in, say, 1940. A century later and the clerk is at the bottom of white-collar occupations, massively downclassed. No-one with a degree would dream of becoming one.

How is a title's rarity to be preserved in an age of mass education, when, we are told, only talent and industry are required to make it to the top? The first step, of course, is to ask your friendly local legislature to keep the riff-raff out by creating a legal moat around the title. There are two aspects to this. First, you must ensure that only some people can call themselves an architect, that there is a codified and bureaucratic way of deciding who these people are. All jurisdictions do this.

Second, you can also legislate that people with this title are entitled to a monopoly on certain sorts of work. So, for example, California lays out in great detail just what it is that architects (supposedly) do, and threatens imprisonment to any who may dare encroach. The difficulties with this sort of approach come in handling the fuzzy areas where the architect's work overlaps that of other occupations, and in handling change. The California code has to go through a number of contortions to prevent offending structural engineers and landscape architects. And, of course, this attempt to codify the inherently fuzzy can lead to some downright silly provisions. In California you don't have to be an architect to design a single-family residence. Provided it is woodframe. Specify a brick wall and you are headed for the county jail. Presumably, the same fate lies before you if two families move in to your building.

The alternative is to abandon protecting the work and concentrate on protecting the title, as is done in my home state of New South Wales. Anyone can design any sort of building, as long as they do not call themselves an architect, unless duly registered.

The justification for all this, of course, is always held to be the public interest: “public health, safety and welfare”. I’ve never been quite sure just who this “public” is. Very few private individuals ever use an architect. The great consumers of architectural services have always been institutions and corporations with considerable financial clout whose lawyers are quite capable of protecting them, thank you. If the aim is to protect the public from bad design and ugly buildings—well, it hasn’t really worked, has it?

No: the aim of legislation is not to protect the public from architects, but to protect architects from the public.

Legislation only goes so far. More effective in reducing the demand for a title is lengthening the time it takes to acquire it. This is what the educational system is for. Few from less-well-off families will contemplate five or more years of education, and then a few more years of internship, before they see any sort of pay-off to their career choice.⁴ If the sheer length of an architectural education is not a sufficient disincentive, then people from the wrong classes can be put off just by confusing them. Should I be doing a B.Arch. or an M.Arch.? Why does your school offer an M.Arch. 1 and an M.Arch. 2? Occupations unthreatened by overpopulation always have simple credential progressions; and those most so have complex ones—think of the peculiar B.A. to J.D. to LL.M sequence in the bloated occupation of law in the USA.

Rather more tempting for the unprivileged is a few years at college to become a website designer. The economic benefits are greater and arrive sooner. For that matter, there are quite a few self-taught website designers out there. But, and this is the point, the symbolic rewards are rather less. Only the well-off can afford to value symbolic rewards over economic ones.

Neither restriction by licensing nor increasing the educational requirements has completely succeeded in keeping the architects’ numbers down. No doubt without either we would have rather more than we do now. Clearly, though, the privileged classes have had rather more success in maintaining the value of the title of ‘architect’ than with ‘clerk’. As it is, the threefold relative increase since 1900 has had perhaps the same marginal effect on the title’s symbolic worth as the increase has had on its economic worth. There is still considerable social cachet to be had by calling oneself an architect.

But, again, I think the occupation stands at a cusp. There are now enough students in the American architecture schools to replace the entire profession within five years. In the forty years from 1960 to 2000 the number of architects per million doubled. There is every likelihood it shall double again in the next forty or fifty years. There are going to be quite a lot people describing themselves as architects, regardless of whether they are working in architecture firms.

Internal Changes

All this bears on the movement of the occupation’s center of gravity in social space, as it were. I suspect that this conceals some significant changes in architecture’s internal class structure. One advantage of the Bourdieu model of class is that it can be applied to portions of society, such as architecture, as well as the whole. The sole proprietor turning out alterations for middle-class homeowners sits at one end of the economic continuum; the multinational firm designing hotels, hospitals and airports sits at another. The Pritzker Prize laureate occupies the highest reaches of architecture’s symbolic continuum, the young CAD jockey the lowest.

Adopting this model of the occupation lays bare one important fact: the title ‘architect’ is not homogeneous, neither in time nor in space. Architecture is just as stratified as society as a whole. No one could read this anecdote, by John Welsh, former editor of the *RIBA Journal* and *World Architecture*, and believe that the diners at the Century Club (Meier, Eisenman, Stern, Cobb, Graves, Pelli, Tschumi et al) have much in common with those detailing supermarkets at CAD stations:

“ The Century Club Dinner was certainly not some cosy supper, but one based on a strict agenda. ‘Tell us about the state of architectural magazines,’ said Meier, with some *ennui*, of a subject he and the rest of the room obviously found of little interest, unless it featured them. The celebrities munched away until I pointed out that magazines were businesses expected to make a profit. ‘ We’re not interested in fiscal complexities,’ said Tigerman in obvious intellectual discomfort.

“ Time Warner Inc had offered the group \$1 million to celebrate the millennium. How should they spend it? An exhibition of 40 architects under 40, perhaps? No. ‘There’s no talent coming up behind us,’ said one. A design workshop on a deprived urban area.... No. ‘You don’t think the men in this room work with *people*?’ said another. An hour and a half TV program on the members of the dining club? Oh yes, that went down well.

“...What horrified these men most was that television or magazines could be interested in anything other than a high culture of which they considered themselves the primary exponents. And the savagery of their conversation... made them come across as dismissive not only of all those architects who struggle hard with shopping malls and petrol stations to pay their mortgages, but also creative types who had not yet won the big one.”⁵

A catty anecdote but a telling one. So let us distinguish three broad groups in the social space: the mass of architects, endowed with only middling amounts of economic and cultural capital; those with high amounts of cultural capital; and those with high amounts of economic (the large firms).

Over the past thirty or so years the large firms⁶, the economically dominant class of the profession, have increased their share of the construction dollar considerably. However, they still employ about the same proportion of architects as they ever did. In consequence, although the profession as whole is only slightly worse off than it used to be, the large firms have become richer and the small ones quite a bit poorer.

I also suspect that this sort of stretching is happening along the symbolic dimension. There will always be elite or avant-garde architects, just as there will always be an elite for whom they design (hence the resilience of the magazines addressed to that audience). They are more closely tied to the class position of their clients than to the class position of other architects, and as their clients move in social space so will they. There is also some evidence, which I present elsewhere, that their numbers are surprisingly constant.⁷ No matter how large the rest of the occupation grows, those who are considered truly great, those who come to be admired, those about whom books are written, will never number more than a few hundred. Few of the mass of architects can ever hope to enter their ranks, and as the size of the mass continues to grow relative to the size of the elites, their chances grow ever smaller.

The Next Five Decades

I believe that we have seen a very slight downclassing of the architect over the past few decades, and that this process will accelerate over the first half of this century. While I don’t believe that the title ‘architect’ will go the way of ‘clerk’, it seems to me clear that the proliferation in numbers will necessarily change what it is to be an architect.

One unintended effect will be the creation of a new market of clients, albeit not a huge one. Architects tend to work for clients of the same class. As the mass of architects drifts down the social scale they will become more aligned to the lower-middle class. This is the class that today never calls in the services of an architect. Not necessarily because they have no use for these services, but because they simply never think to use them: it would be pretentious. Move the architect closer to their own class position, and they become as acceptable as, say, the local builder.

Of course, attempts will be made to lengthen the educational process. In 1900 almost no architects had a professional degree; in 1950 about half did; and in 2000 about four in five are so qualified. No doubt we will see the old idea of a D.Arch. trotted again out to replace the devalued B.Arch. and M.Arch. degrees.

Watch, next, for increasing labelling and new job titles, together with further legal hedges around the title of 'architect'. Unlicensed individuals with architecture degrees who today happily describe themselves as architects will come under increasing social pressures—formal and informal—to use other descriptions. Job titles like 'job captain' or 'project manager', which today are fluid and require indeterminate qualifications, will become more formalised, and their titleholders will be discouraged from calling themselves architects.

More subtle means will be used in offices to distinguish the real architects from the rising tide of entrants. Over the past decade, and for at least a few decades to come, computing and CAD will serve to demarcate the juniors from those on the fast track.⁸ Many have speculated on the pernicious effects of CAD on architecture, wondering if the computer's productivity threatened the architectural labor market. So far the only impact of computing has been to marginally *lower* the occupation's productivity. Others have professed to see insidious effects on building design, but I think that architects are capable of designing bad buildings without any help from computers. No, if evil you must seek from the IT industry's intrusion into architecture, then find it in the reincarnation of the recently deceased role of draftsman as the CAD operator.

Movements in social space are never swift. Decades pass before change is apparent. Moreover, social movements never appear as such, since they are disguised to an extent by one's own personal movement upwards through life. So all these developments will appear in disguise. The old will complain about the lack of skills in the young, but their complaints will really be about the increasing numbers of entrants to what used to be a selective occupation. And when the young complain about the intransigence and inflexibility of their elders, understand that they are frustrated by the failure of their profession to deliver the rewards promised to them—frustrated by the downclassing of the architect.

¹ I have to restrict this discussion to the English-speaking nations. The term 'architect' is used cavalierly to describe people with roughly (and only roughly, mind you) the same job content in any nation, but the position of the occupation in the different class structures varies so much that a description such as presented here has to restrict itself to broadly comparable nations. As an analogy, the term 'soldier' describes the same job content in Burma and Algeria as it does in the United States and Australia, but the social positions are incomparable.

² P. Krugman, *The Accidental Theorist* (W. W. Norton, New York: 1998), p 193

³ All analyses here are from data supplied by the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in particular the five-yearly *Census of Service Industries*; and the *Value of Construction Put in Place* series

⁴ I have never been convinced that so long an education was required to produce competent architects. Twenty-five years ago, fully one-quarter of American architects lacked a degree of any sort. Has the increase in formal education since then really improved the built environment?

⁵ J. Welsh, ‘Celebrity squares’, *RIBA Journal* June 1999, 122.

⁶ I’m regarding those firms with 20 or more employees as large. The way that the architecture magazines talk, one would think that these are the norm. In fact these firms account for only seven per cent of all American architecture firms. They employ about half of all architects, a proportion constant for forty years.

⁷ G. Stevens, *The Favored Circle* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA: 1998). I can’t go into the reasoning behind this here, but the basic idea is that the field only has so much attention space to devote to the great. Put colloquially, not everyone can be great (or famous) because if they are—no one is.

⁸ Even today, only about half of all architects actually sit in front of CAD machines, if a survey in a *Trends in Practice Report* (California Board of Architectural Examiners, 1999) is anything to go by.