Reader Poll: 
Alternatives to Traditional Practice

When polled about the attractions that could draw them from conventional practice, P/A readers revealed two complementary concerns — financial stability and personal fulfillment.

Architects have little difficulty envisioning themselves in nontraditional careers: Nearly half of the respondents to our poll have seriously considered leaving their profession for another. Only 23 percent said strongly that they were content with their work and had no desire to pursue alternative roles. The balance of those polled find the income and personal rewards of other fields attractive. With the assumption that our respondents are not exceptional in their job mobility or self-scrutiny, the poll shows that alternative occupations aren’t far from the minds of architects.

Are these signs of a swelling wave of disaffection in the profession? Perhaps not. One might expect to find a high level of curiosity about alternative roles in a generalist’s field like architecture. Moreover, practice induces architects to explore a variety of options — every design effort is a search for new solutions. In this light, it’s not surprising to find that 93 percent of this poll’s respondents cited a career stage at which they had considered alternatives to conventional practice.

The Respondents (Figs. 1-6)

Of the 1000 respondents included in this poll (conducted in June 1990), more than a third said their work extends beyond the architectural office. This generous representation of people outside of conventional practice, in an architecture magazine’s poll, is itself proof of the field’s broad relevance. Forty percent of the respondents were in their thirties, setting the median age at 37; each age group accounted for an average of 20 percent of the replies. Eighty-two percent of the women polled were under 40, reflecting their increased enrollment in architecture schools over the past two decades. But overall, the number of responses by men exceeded those by women at a rate of almost 6 to 1.

Although two thirds of the replies came from people working in conventional architectural practices, “other design firms” engaged 13 percent of the respondents, and 23 percent were in alternative careers. In the latter two categories, women outnumber men, but conventional practice remains the choice among proportionately more men (67 percent) than women (55 percent).

More than 90 percent of those polled have a professional architecture degree. In all but the B Arch. category, the percentage of women equals or exceeds that of men, and women were nearly twice as likely as men to have a bachelor’s degree in another discipline. Perhaps women’s more diversified education helps account for their quantitative lead in alternative careers.

Fifty percent of those who replied to the poll listed themselves as owners or principals, although women are more likely to be staff architects, draftpersons, or designers than managers or principals. In alternative careers, however, positions are distributed more evenly between the sexes; they offer broader avenues for independence and advancement — an attraction for those stymied by the structure of a conventional office.
Considering Alternative Careers (Figs. 7–12)

While about half of all architects under the age of 50 have considered leaving conventional practice for nontraditional employment, those in their 40s are most likely to have actually worked outside an architect's office since graduation. Among respondents in their 20s (whose lifestyles are presumably more flexible) only 36 percent said they have worked elsewhere. Apparently most people turn to other jobs after they've accrued some experience in the field or perhaps those in their 40s entered a profession more flexible than it is today. Only 35 percent of those over age 50 consider nontraditional work — by far the lowest level among the age levels in the poll. This response and others show that the older the practitioner, the happier he or she (more likely a male) is with the architectural profession. One might infer that our senior colleagues entered the field with different expectations from younger architects. It is also likely that those younger respondents with doubts about architecture leave the profession by their 40s, leaving a corps of committed and content architects.

The less responsibility people have in an architectural office, the more likely it is that they will have considered alternative occupations. When staff architects were asked if they'd considered leaving the profession, 63 percent said yes. However, they don't seem to be an exceptionally disgruntled lot. Their dissatisfaction was only 6 percent higher than that of project managers, whose position offers more pay and responsibility. When women architects replied to the statement "I am content with my current career and would not desire to pursue other alternative roles," they were more negative (53 percent agreed, 63 percent did not) than all staff architects (46 percent agreed; 54 percent disagreed with the same question).

Even though architecture is a generalist's profession, most respondents considered their education to be rather focused. Only 15 percent agreed strongly (and 32 percent disagreed strongly) that architectural school is a good introduction to nontraditional alternatives. While only 6 percent felt strongly that architectural practice exposes young professionals to alternatives, responses to this question were less negative — only 25 percent disagreed strongly.

Pursuing Alternative Careers (Fig. 13)

Our poll suggests that men are more likely to become interested in alternative careers after they've become acclimated to conventional practice. They report their lowest levels of interest in outside work during internship (13 percent) and preparation for registration exams (5 percent). However, women are significantly more interested than men in alternatives, as students and during their first five years in an architectural firm. This pattern is probably a consequence of the more diverse educational backgrounds typical of women.

Practically one quarter of the poll's female respondents and only 13 percent of the male respondents ranked internship as the stage when they were most interested in other careers. Conversely, 29 percent of the men replied that their interest in alternatives was strongest after they'd been in practice for a decade. Their level of interest in other careers increases steadily over the course of their careers.

Architecture's Disincentives (Figs. 14, 15)

About two thirds of all the respondents said that the hopes of a higher salary were the leading reason people with architectural degrees pursue alternative roles. Less quantifiable issues — the measure of control over one's work, opportunities for advancement, and personal satisfaction — were
Which alternative roles would you seriously consider?

- M1
- F1

Which aspects or architecture are the least appealing, and could induce an exit to another career?

- M2
- F2

Choosing Alternative Roles (Fig. 16)

While most respondents seemed discontent about the profession's remuneration, they ranked teaching (44 percent) and other design fields (40 percent) at the top of their list of desirable alternatives. Because neither area holds a sure promise of greater wealth, we can infer that the freedom to think and create independently remains an important goal long after architects finish school. However, real estate, which can offer more money (and, some would say, more impact) than architectural practice, also attracted 40 percent of the respondents. Nonarchitectural businesses (32 percent) and the construction industry (32 percent) were the next alternatives of choice. These latter statistics reflect architects' frequent complaints about their lack of clout relative to developers and contractors.

The more creative and independent alternative roles attracted a disproportionate number of women: 55 percent to design, 44 percent to studio arts, and 26 percent to journalism, which attracted only 11 percent of the male respondents. Historic preservation draws a slightly higher margin of women (28 percent) than men (22 percent), and energy conservation and environmental science appeal to more than twice as many women as men (26 percent vs. 7 percent). Architects' lofty visions of planning and rehabilitating our cities seem less vivid today: City and regional planning interested only 19 percent of our respondents, and only 14 percent were likely to investigate urban planning.

Today, we find two distinctly different alternative routes for architects: creative ventures, whose rewards are personal, and businesses that offer potentially greater profits, but fewer design opportunities than architectural practice. It would be inaccurate to surmise from this poll that architecture is losing its talent to other occupations. On the other hand, the results suggest that architecture's synthesis of creative freedom and professional stature is actually a fragile combination of two contrasting realms. Today, a sizable number of architects realize that there are alternative ways to achieve those goals.

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