Architects generally agree that this profession faces profound problems. Do other professions provide models for solutions? by Thomas Fisher

There is one question that everyone seems to be asking right now: Where is the profession headed? The question is significant for a couple of reasons. Even to ask it assumes that the profession is changing and that the old ways of doing things no longer work – a momentous assumption given the amount we invest in training and licensing people to engage in traditional forms of practice. At the same time, the question implies that the profession is moving in a single direction and that, with enough effort, we will be able to define forms of practice in the future as clearly as we have in the past.

Having spent months talking to many people in this field, I think it is clear that the profession is undergoing tremendous change. But it is changing in a lot of different directions at once, suggesting that the profession in the future will be more diverse and more fragmented than in the past.

The Effect of the Recession
At issue here is how much the problems facing the profession – high rates of unemployment and underemployment, intense competition for work, stagnant or declining incomes – stem from the recent recession or from more fundamental, longer-term shifts in the demand for architectural services. The impact of the recession is indisputable. Since 1989, nonresidential construction has declined by 31 percent and architectural employment by 24 percent. But many in the profession are beginning to ask whether the recession only accelerated other forces that are permanently altering the profession’s position and power.

The Rise in Productivity
One such force is the computer and its telecommunications cousins, the modem and the fax, which have increased
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The productivity and profitability of firms fully utilizing the technology (P/A, September 1993, p. 66). But computerization has permanently eliminated certain types of jobs, particularly the entry-level drafting jobs that architecture schools have depended on to complete the technical training of their graduates.

It also has eliminated the barriers of time and distance that once protected firms from competition. More and more architects must now compete with colleagues who, with a CAD system in a spare bedroom, can produce drawings on time for lower fees. Architects must also vie for work with distant firms who can deliver services as effectively as the local offices. As Frank Stasiowski of Practice Management Associates points out, "By the year 2000, any two-person design firm can do work anywhere."

The Eroding Client Base

A second long-term factor affecting the profession has been a shift in the supply and demand of architectural services. Sharon Sutton of the University of Michigan argues (P/A, October 1993, p. 76) that some of the profession's problems stem from an oversupply of architects, "whose ranks swelled eight times in a population that only doubled" since 1920. Sutton also argues that there has been a decline in demand for architectural services as our economy has shifted from one dominated by many independent landowners, who often turned to architects, to one dominated by fewer large corporations and a lot of salaried employees, who rarely use architects.

Paralleling that economic shift has been an apparent decline in the public's perception of the architect's value. "As America moved from an industrial economy to a service economy," notes lawyer Carl Sapers, "architects who once commanded knowledge of both mechanics and aesthetics no longer were in command of mechanics." At the same time, knowledge of aesthetics was devalued. Architect Stanley Mathews, in an unpublished manuscript, has traced how "the profession has historically sought - and continues to seek - legitimacy in an aesthetic paradigm which has neither the credibility nor the authority it once possessed. A century ago aesthetics were a legitimate and respected concern within the public consciousness and indeed provided a secure foundation on which to base the architectural profession ... while [today] aesthetics are seen as marginal and even somewhat superfluous."

The Loss of Professional Turf

Another force affecting the long-term prospects of architects has been a shift in the architect's role in the building team. "Once," observes architect Elizabeth Padjen, "the practice of design was a subtractive process in which the architect was in charge of the whole ball of wax, peeling off pieces to give to consultants and contractors. Now it is additive, and the architect's role is only one of many... small bits assembled along the way by any number of construction coordinators." Padjen attributes that shift in role to the growing complexity of construction and the changing nature of client groups, but I think it also stems from architects' aversion to risk. Over the last several decades, we have been content to shrink our duties, sloughing off, through revisions to the standard contracts, responsibilities for which we might be held liable by the courts.

Meanwhile, a variety of disciplines from engineering to interior design to construction management are increasingly competing with architects as equals. Carl Sapers sees this stemming in part from the tendency of architects to favor "equality and peaceful resolution" of conflict, and in part from the AIA's entering "into agreements with collateral organizations representing engineers and interior designers to allow them to trespass on the architect's traditional turf."

The Waning of Professionalism

Perhaps the most difficult long-term problem faced by architects is a growing skepticism of all professions within the general public. As Sapers observes, "In a less educated, more class-ridden society, the professions constituted a middle force between the working class and the capitalist class." But "that special role of the professional has all but disappeared.... The rising tide of education in society and the destruction of a class-based society empowered more people to challenge the professional's judgment." Aiding that challenge are electronic databases and expert systems, which make it increasingly difficult for professions to control infor-
Education

"How is it that we are allowing more and more people to come into architecture schools in the nominal pretense that they will become architects in the old style? ... Not everyone comes out of the other end of the machine. But those many who do emerge in a marketplace which isn't at all the kind of space they expected it to be ... their status is low, their chances at designing something satisfying are slim, and their earnings stand scant prospect of being commensurate with the length of this training.

Schools of architecture have always stood a little apart from the everyday demands of the profession and of the marketplace, and it is right that that should be so. But how far can that divergence go before the link between the school and the profession becomes dangerously tenuous, and the implicit guarantee that the school prepares the student for the world of work verges on dishonesty?"

Historian Andrew Saint, from a paper delivered at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, October 23, 1993.
Howard Roark is Dead

"The key to reading 'The Fountainhead' today is not to see Howard Roark as a role model, but as the ultimate bad boy of American architecture. Ms. Rand's philosophical views may always have a following, but her 50-year-old depiction of the architectural profession has grown more and more out of sync with reality. There is no room in the profession for Howard Roark today."

_Baltimore Sun_ architecture critic, Edward Gunts, from a piece entitled "The Fountainhead at 50, Expectations of Architects have Changed."
“One way to answer that question is to look to the professions of medicine, law and engineering, which have faced problems similar to our own.”

Testing the title ‘architect’ has ever done either the public or the profession any good."

**Three Models of Action**

How should the profession respond to its predicament?

One way to answer that question is to look to the professions of medicine, law, and engineering, which have faced problems similar to our own. None of these professions holds all of the answers, but I think we can learn something from each one.

**The Medical Model**

In the last century, the organization of the medical profession was not unlike that of the architectural profession today. It was composed largely of general practitioners who, with little technology and a scant knowledge base, attempted to handle patients’ every need, from dispensing cold medicine to delivering babies to removing tonsils. Earlier in this century, however, the medical community began to reorganize itself, turning the general practitioner into a kind of coordinator of highly paid specialists, to whom patients with particular needs are referred. What that reorganization accomplished, among other things, was to maintain close and frequent contact between doctor and patient, while promoting highly paid specialists who would make available to people the benefits of current research.

The architectural profession’s structure is now almost the opposite of medicine’s, with highly paid “generalist” partners and “specialist” employees who are paid less and are largely invisible to clients. But, if this profession were reorganized along the lines of the medical field, what would happen?

Some architects would serve as general practitioners, primarily diagnosing problems with existing facilities, analyzing clients’ physical space needs, and putting together teams of specialists who would offer expertise in areas such as design, technology, and management. There would probably be few, if any, large firms. Instead, the profession would consist, as in medicine, of many independent practitioners – whether GPs or specialists – who would team up in various configurations for different clients.

The architect as general practitioner would have to be more involved in building health, perhaps making periodic check-ups of structures to ensure that they are in good working order and to watch for problems. Building diagnostics would be a focus of architectural activity (and architectural education), not the marginal activity that it is now. At the same time, the market for architects would be, potentially, everyone who owns a building, not just those few who want a major rehabilitation or to build anew. Likewise, specialist architects would have strong ties to research and technical developments in their areas of expertise. They would be highly visible and well-paid members of the building team, bringing to projects in-depth knowledge about particular problems and procedures.

The parallels among different fields, however, go only so far, argues Princeton professor, Robert Gutman, who is engaged in a comparative study of professions. He notes, for example, that the architectural community has no institutional equivalent to the hospitals, which were key to the reorganization of medicine. Still, the architectural profession seems to have been pushed by the recession toward the medical model: witness the increase, in recent (continued on page 84)
(continued from page 49) years, in the number of small specialized “boutique” firms, of associations between offices with complementary specialities, and of architects offering clients diagnostic services, be they energy analyses or ADA compliance checks. What began as ways to survive the recession may end up being good preparation for the future.

Legal Model
A second model for practice is that of law. At the turn of the century, the legal profession faced problems of oversupply similar to our own. There were too many lawyers for the traditional jobs available. Compensation was depressed, and yet new law schools were opening up in universities all the time. But that profession did not reduce its numbers or start closing schools. Instead it began to reframe itself, viewing a legal education not as a preparation to try cases in court, but as a way of thinking about and analyzing problems. The result is almost a century later, has been a remarkable expansion of the legal turf, with lawyers as likely to head corporations or occupy political office as they are to try cases.

The architectural profession is in a position to make a similar transformation. Instead of seeing our education as a training in the design of buildings, some are beginning to see that what we really learn is how to assimilate large amounts of disparate information and find ways to order it and apply it to particular settings. Many of the submissions to our last Young Architects issue (July 1993), for example, were by architecturally trained people applying their education to a wide range of activities, from set design to software design.

Such pursuits, of course, are partly a result of the recession, which has resulted in too many graduates and too few traditional jobs. But I think something else is going on: a process of diversification within the profession, where traditional practice is increasingly seen as just one (and maybe not even the most desirable one) of many careers where an architectural education can make a contribution.

In that light, education aimed primarily at developing building designers may be too narrow an ambition, as one would say of a legal education that turned out only trial lawyers. Were we to embrace the legal model, we would have schools that offer a range of studies (of which building design would be just one), based on a definition of architecture as a unique form of synthetic analysis and the architect, according to Webster, as “one who plans and achieves a difficult objective.”

The Engineering Model
Engineering, of all the major professions, is closest to architecture and it faces some of the same dilemmas that beset architects, such as lack of public visibility and attacks on its traditional turf. Accordingly, there is relatively less to learn from the engineering profession — with one exception. Engineers offer architects a model of a design profession thoroughly grounded in research and committed to developing its knowledge base. Were we to do the same, we would attend more to the consequences than to the intentions of our work, would depend less on rhetoric and more on the quantification of what we do, and would share our failures as well as our successes.

Whatever the reasons for this — poor instruction in research methods, inadequate fees to conduct post-occupancy evaluations, unfounded suspicion that such efforts will destroy the art of architecture — the results seem clear: we have lost ground to other disciplines, including engineering, that are better able to predict the effects of what they do and prove that they add value to projects.

There are signs that this may be changing. A number of architecture schools, faced with survival in research-oriented universities, are now looking at ways of strengthening their curriculum in this area. Some firms have begun a policy of making periodic unpaid visits to old projects. And it seems as if architects are more willing than in the past to talk about what went wrong on jobs as well as what went right. Still, we have a long way to go.

Saving Us from Ourselves
What is difficult about this moment in the history of the profession is that the field is moving in so many different directions at once. Changes are occurring in the structure of architectural firms and the scope of their services, in the goals of architectural graduates and the careers they are pursuing, and in the nature of architectural education and the responsibilities of the schools. Observes Peter Rowe, the Dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Design and the spearhead of an excellent series of symposiums there on this subject: “The very idea of what constitutes architectural practice requires substantial expansion ... (and) the conceptual models and, indeed, the language or terminology by which we discuss these matters must also be revised.”

The real obstacle we face in the future may not be an unwillingness on the part of architects to change, but a resistance on the part of the profession’s institutions — the accrediting and licensing boards, the professional associations and the schools, even the magazines — which have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. If there is one lesson to learn from other fields is that the profession must not become its own worst enemy.