Architects and Power
Towards a New Architectural Practice

Comparing architectural practice in France and Spain, Weld Coxe and Mary Hayden argue that there is a close relationship between the degree of architects' responsibility and the profession's economic status.

We welcome readers' comments on the information given in this article, especially regarding its relevance to U.S. practice. Comments will be published in the June issue. —Editors

Architects in France, with some notable exceptions that may prove the point, speak of the weak position they hold in French society and of their constant struggle with French contractors over control of the quality of the work. In general, French architects see their profession as struggling uphill to protect itself from unappreciative clients, poor compensation, a hostile construction industry, and an uncaring society. In Spain, by contrast, architects believe they are held in very high regard by society, and speak of a "social contract" whereby architects are given full authority over their work in exchange for accepting the responsibility for seeing the work through to completion.

The relationship between the social status of architects and the degree of responsibility they accept for their work is not, of course, quite so simple. Nor is the result just a factor of different national customs and practices. But our research, involving interviews with 45 firms in 14 countries in Europe, Asia, and North America, shows that architects in private practice who provide more complete services to their clients seem without exception to be stronger, more influential, and more prosperous than their peers who take a less responsible role. Also the degree of responsibility accepted by architects for their work appears to have no adverse impact on the quality of design. In fact, a large majority of the architects recognized as best in design in the countries we have studied insist on taking the greatest responsibility for the complete execution of their work.

The fundamental point — that architects who take greater responsibility have more influence — can be demonstrated by reviewing practices in two illustrative countries, France and Spain.

France

In France, architects who complete a five-year education are automatically eligible for registration with the Order of Architects and are thereby qualified to undertake a private practice. In reality, the great majority of students enter established offices while attending school and take six to eight years before receiving their degree. Currently there are 20,000 registered architects in France — double the number a decade ago — of whom 21,000 work for their own account, which means they either have a private practice of their own or work as freelance staff (as distinct from employee status) in other firms. Many do both, earning their basic living by working in other offices while moonlighting small projects in hopes of building a clientele to break out on their own.

The result is that a large majority of private practices in France are small, and a firm with six to eight staff is considered large enough to tackle any project. "The cultural milieu (among architects) is that you have to be small to be good, but it is changing," says Paris architect Jean-Paul Viguier whose own staff has grown to 60 and is one of the largest practices in the country.

The way French architects obtain commissions has undergone considerable change over the last generation and may have something to do with this culture. In the initial post-World-War-II years the selection process was largely political, with public work going to architects who were supporters of the party in power. Whenever a local government changed, the architects serving it would change. Private clients generally followed the pattern, awarding their work more with regard to relationships than to qualifications.

In the late 1970s, however, a national law was passed requiring that all public work throughout France be awarded on the basis of design competitions. The competition process that resulted has become relatively efficient and is generally seen by French architects to be both fair and good for the profession. Especially in the opportunities it creates for younger architects to gain recognition. While some competitions are open to anyone who submits a scheme, the majority follow a more limited, two-stage process. In the first stage, the project is announced and architects can submit letters of interest and their qualifications.

From these submissions and from "general knowledge" the jury will then invite a short list of six or eight firms to prepare competitive designs. Competitors are paid a stipend and the scope of submissions is strictly defined to discourage excessively costly presentations. Submissions include functional plans, an "aesthetic solution," and a cost estimate prepared by a qualified estimator who is part of the architect's team. Generally the juries, two-thirds of which are architects and government officials and one-third architects, are expected to weigh the three factors — function, aesthetics, and cost — equally in determining the winner.

French architects who enter competitions can become highly sophisticated in dealing with the process. While the stipend is not large enough to be profitable, it is reported that some younger French architects can support a practice for several years entirely on competition stipends without ever winning. Many established firms will compete on major projects, but others avoid them. "The firms that are well known do not want to do competitions. It is too hard to win," says Bernard Tarrazi, founder of one of the best-known practices in Marseilles.

The private sector in France still awards the majority of its commissions on the basis of relationships and referrals, but important private projects are frequently subject to selective competitions, usually without compensation. Most architects are anxious to enter these on the theory that once an architect wins a private project competition, the relationship may continue on many future projects.

The architectural process through which a project passes in France is similar to the pattern followed in much of Europe, with some important differences. In France, there are four phases of an architect's basic services. The first is a set of conceptual drawings (avant-projet sommaire) which illustrate the proposed solution for the client's approval of function and general aesthetics. This phase is followed by "permis" drawings (avant-projet détaillé), which add code, utilities, and life-safety elements, typically at 1:100 scale, and are used to obtain pub-
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lic approvals and permits.
At this point the process can go in either of two directions – called missions – depending on how the client and architect propose to have it built. In the so-called M-I approach, the architect will prepare complete working documents and a quantity survey that the contractor(s) – typically selected by bidding – are expected to respect and follow to the letter. In the alternative M-2 process, the architect prepares only what amounts to performance specification documents, and after bids are received, the selected contractors are expected to make their own drawings to finish the project.

This dual-track process recognizes what Versailles architect Alain Cornet-Vernet calls "part of the game here in France. Working drawings are never built as drawn. The contractors are (always) putting their hands in design." This conflict between architect and contractors is seen by some in France to be a central threat to architects’ future. Cornet-Vernet responded to this threat some years ago by organizing, in collaboration with architects from various regions of France, a national design-build organization, Architectes, "as a revolt against the building process. We are entrepreneur architects, and we want to be respected." This group, consisting of 120 firms located throughout France, with its own central staff to handle such things as advertising, contracts, and insurance, has been successful. Design-build now currently represents about 1 percent of Cornet-Vernet’s practice, but provides, he says, 50 percent of the profit. The rest of the firm’s projects – mostly retail and housing – are carried out through the conventional architectural process. Cornet-Vernet says the greatest advantage of the design-build link is that "it works as a way to look qualified – a developer knows our firm is delay-and cost-conscious.”

Another tradition that limits the power of architects in France is the custom of asking the client to have separate contracts with each of the different engineers and consultants involved in the project. This may be changing, however. Many of the more successful architectural firms in France say they will encourage a client to give them a single contract and to let them, in turn, subcontract the consultants in order to have more control over the project.

On balance, the evidence in France is that architects who practice in ways similar to those of mid-size firms of the U.S., offering full service and continuity of experience, can be quite successful. The response of their clientele would indicate a substantial market for this approach. But the predominance of very small firms, the cultural milieu that endorses or excuses smallness, the rarity of full-service, single-responsibility contracts, and particularly the unresolved conflict with the construction industry, result in a social climate in France in which most architects believe they are undervalued and highly threatened.

France is certainly not the only country where most of the architects speak in paranoid terms and practice in a schizophrenic reality. What is startling to discover is that in Spain, France’s nearest neighbor to the south, conditions for architects are perceived to be almost diametrically reversed.

Spain
Since the demise of the Franco dictatorship in the mid-1970s, Spain has rejoined Western Europe politically and economically at an almost unbelievable pace. With a population of nearly 40 million, it is the fifth largest of the 12 Common Market nations, and its economy is a healthy mix of industry, agriculture, and tourism. Spain celebrated its return to normalcy last year with a triple play – the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, a World’s Fair at Seville (both in P/A, July 1992), and completion of a multibillion peseta upgrading of its highways and infrastructure required for full membership in the Common Market.

As a consequence of all this activity, Spain’s 19,000 architects are clearly busy and prosperous, but it is the perception of their social position that makes the nature of architectural practice in Spain so interesting. Architects in Spain say they are regarded very highly by the public – possibly equally with lawyers, but well above doctors, accountants, and engineers. This high self-perception exists in spite of the admitted presence in Spain of all the “normal” problems of architectural practice: young architects talk of the difficulties of getting established; established architects complain about too much competition in finding work; contractors are said to cut corners and change drawings; fee levels are considered less than desirable. But in Spain there is no paranoia about the respect in which architects are held by society.

Several key differences seem to be fundamental to this. First, education of architects in Spain includes training in civil engineering, so they are qualified to do structural and mechanical calculations. Ricardo Arroja, newly appointed dean of the architectural school at Madrid, describes the rationale this way: "Architectural training teaches how to draw it. Civil engineering teaches how to build it. I am unable to draw something if I don’t know how to build it.”

Except for the difference in curriculum, the education process for architects in Spain is similar to that of several other Western European countries. It takes six years of classes plus a final exam and design project to earn a degree. Once those requirements are fulfilled, architects become automatically licensed to practice. Most architects apprentice in established practices during their education, and take up to ten years to obtain their degrees.

The architect licensed to practice in Spain is in quite a different position from architects in other countries. In Spain, an architect’s legal seal on drawings covers not only architectural but also structural, mechanical, and other engineering aspects of the building. In practice, architects typically employ engineering consultants to do calculations and to give them advice on conceptual design of systems, but most architects do the final architectural and engineering drawings in their own office. One result is that outside consulting engineering costs in Spain typically do not exceed 15 to 20 percent of the architect’s fee, whereas in countries where the engineers seal their own drawings, their costs may range from
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30 to 50 percent of the fee.

The law and custom in Spain also give the architects authority and responsibility to see that their drawings are followed in construction. “In Spain, the architect is always involved in the building process,” explains Aroca. The result, he adds, is “the architect in Spain is stronger than in other countries because we have economic control of the building.” “In other countries society has chosen to work with engineers,” notes Barcelona architect Jaime Auroca, a council member of the International Union of Architects. The situation in Spain is different, he believes, because “Spanish architects have both technical and humanistic strengths.”

Rafael de la Hoyes, one of the most respected architects in Madrid, says that “Because we are responsible, society understands they need an architect for every job ... not because of the artist, but because of the engineering. It is the only country in the world where 100 percent of construction responsibility is with the architect. A key reason for our success,” he explains, “is a social pact between the public and the architect. We have the lowest fees in Europe, but the client will always pay, and the work is in the hands of architects.”

The rule-of-thumb fee for full architectural services (including engineering) in Spain is said to be 5 percent of the cost of construction. This is the basic fee architects have agreed to accept for public work, and is analogous to the U.S. federal government fee limit of 6 percent. While this is considerably below the 7 to 10 percent “rule-of-thumb” in France and elsewhere in Europe, the efficiency of one seal and the more integrated design process appear to make up most of the difference. Architects in Spain, while not often rich, clearly maintain a standard of living in keeping with their social status.

The relatively strong economic standing of architects in Spain has been assisted by a unique arrangement whereby the architect’s professional association, the Collegio de Arquitectos, has legal responsibility to collect the architect’s fee from the client. The system was developed in 1931 at a time when, architects in Spain say, many clients would take delivery of plans, get a building permit, proceed with the building, and then just refuse to pay the architect’s bills. A law was enacted that requires the Collegio to certify that the plans are “complete” before a building permit can be issued. The Collegio, in turn, will grant its visado certificate to the client only upon full payment of the architect’s fee due at that phase. No building can get built in Spain without the client’s paying the fee and receiving the visado approval.

There are Collegio offices all over Spain staffed by architects who inspect plans, and the Collegio retains 1 to 2 percent of the fee for this service, passing on 98 to 99 percent to the architect. The Collegio’s certification is carefully limited to an inventory of what is drawn, and does not include liability for the accuracy or code compliance of the work. Legal liability remains with the architect and is covered by professional liability insurance that is available through the Collegio. Despite the greater responsibilities of Spanish architects, professional liability premiums are considered reasonable because Spain does not have a particularly litigious climate.

The visado process has clearly accomplished the goal of providing more business security for architects, but many architects now consider it obsolete. Says Seville architect Antonio Cruz: “It is archaic — it has no sense at present. Nevertheless, the Collegio has a considerable bureaucracy involved in the visado system; it may be redundant, but will probably be difficult to dismantle.

Another difference in practice in Spain that seems to contribute to the strong position of architects is the role of arquitecto tecnico. The profession of tecnico, also is 400 years old, and is defined as “one who puts everything in right order.” Today’s tecnico are trained in special colleges, separate from architectural schools. Hired as independent agents of the owner near the end of the working drawing phase, they assist with specifications, make quantity take-offs, issue a materials list as part of the construction bidding process, and then stay involved throughout construction to certify to the owner that the required materials have actually been put into the work. They also relieve the architect of the need to certify degrees of completion during construction.

While clients may understand the role of the tecnico, in practice they very frequently ask the architect to select the tecnico for the job. This has led many of the established architectural practices to have one or more relatively full-time tecnico. Xavier Cots, an arquitecto tecnico Xavier Cots, an arquitecto tecnico Madrid architect Elias Torres, the broader education in Spain prepares designers to be “an architect for everything. As much as you specialize people, it has to be a generalist who is ultimately responsible for the project.” While the architectural curriculum includes civil engineering, Spain’s architectural schools are consciously sep-
Summary
A comparison of architectural practice in France and in Spain suggests that wherever architects take greater responsibility for all the myriad inputs that are required to carry their work to completion, their position in society is enhanced. Further, there is more than sufficient evidence that accepting this broader responsibility need not and does not in any way diminish the architectural quality of the work. Finally, it is clear that this fuller responsibility can be assumed equally well in small offices and in large ones.

Does this suggest that it is time for a new manifesto on architectural practice? Should architects in Western Europe and elsewhere consider these findings in the organization and management of their own practices? More research will be necessary to confirm the premise, but precedents observed in other parts of this study suggest that these matters merit attention. For example, in Sweden a few years ago a group of architectural firms commissioned a study of contractors to find out why the builders were so frequently critical of and in conflict with architects. The surprising findings: the contractors wanted the architects to be stronger — to take the lead in the process. Their criticism was of the weakness of most architects, and they welcomed a more collaborative process in which the architect would be more responsible. Result: the Swedish architects who took the study to heart report that in the past five years their standing has improved 100 percent.

In Italy, there are two entirely different architectural climates: the north (Milan) and the center (Rome). In Rome, architects are heavily dependent on public work, which is dominated by political selection procedures, weak clients, and low, fixed fees. The result is that the great majority of architectural firms are small, and architects feel insecure, undervalued, and dominated by contractors. By contrast, it is reported that architects in Northern Italy have primarily a private clientele, not bound by politics, and willing to pay for what they want. The result is that Milan has a full range of architectural practices, large and small, strong and weak, but led by some with world-class reputations. Architects in Northern Italy would seem to be much more self-confident about their future.

Is it time to move toward a new order of architectural practice in the United States — one in which responsibility is recognized as on a par with professionalism and creativity? That question seems very much worth considering.

Weld Cox, Mary Hayden

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The following letters are a sample of those received in response to the essays in the Architects and Power series written by Robert Gutman (December, 1992, p. 39). The next essay in the series is scheduled for the June 1993 issue. —Editors

Look to Politics and Technology
We read with interest Thomas Fisher's editorial "A Modest Proposal for the Profession," (p. 7) and Robert Gutman's article "The Natural Market for Architecture" in the December issue. While it is heartening that some attention is being given to the crisis of contemporary architectural practice, there are several issues neglected by both articles and some implicit judgments that we feel must be challenged. Fisher rightly calls for a redefinition of the profession, toward a greater emphasis on solving social problems; Gutman feels that architects should concentrate on design, while striving to "discover the new expression and forms appropriate to our changing civilization." Although both these goals are admirable, several other points need to be raised:

Architecture must exploit its unique strength — the generation and execution of ideas: Fisher seems to suggest that lawyers should be emulated because they succeeded in assuming roles outside the strict definition of the law. Granted, but architects must first exploit what makes them different from all other professionals — their ability to generate, and find ways to express and execute, ideas. Architects must promote these skills, which are particularly useful in times of change.

Architects should both lead and work with others in the political realm: the decrease in demand for architectural services is in part related to the absence of architects in arenas of political debate and social service. Both the schools of architecture and the professional community have contributed to an attitude of benign indifference to an array of contemporary political and social problems being actively studied by other professionals including lawyers, economists, medical professionals, and scientists.

Architects need to become advocates of technologically progressive design: a great variety of technologies are available to engineers and builders that, without the input of enlightened design professionals, will not be put to best use. The future appearance of our infrastructure such as bridges and transportation hubs depends upon greater involvement and leadership by architects in the development of design work exploiting new technologies.

The "star" system of architectural practice endashes the status of the profession: In recent years many architectural journals and schools of architecture have focused on the promotion of successful and powerful architects whose "signature" work has afforded them and the profession an easy-to-digest, uncritical status. Under this system, collaboration and research are discouraged, and only a handful of architects and clients benefit. If the profession was modeled less like the fashion industry and more like the fields of science, engineering, and medicine, architects would be more competitive in the broader and potentially lucrative markets of building, materials development, and infrastructure design.

The idea of a "natural market"