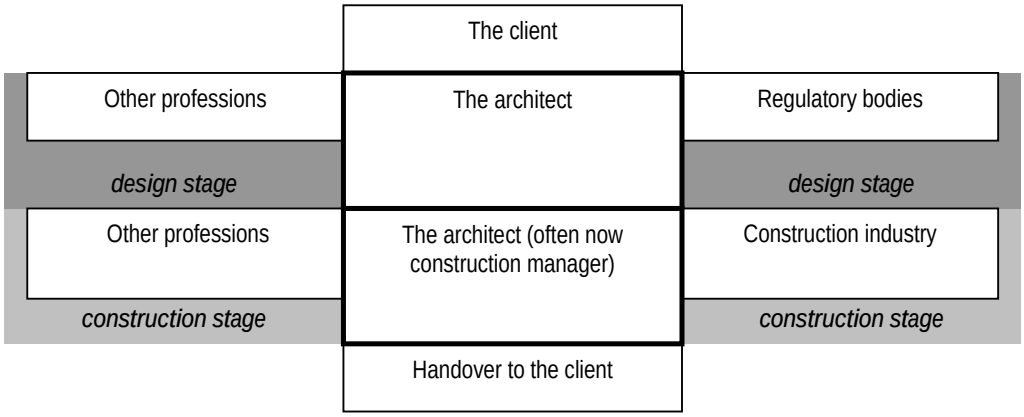
Architecture and participation: producing the built environment in social context

Introduction to core research projects for ScotMARK

In relation to architecture and design, the main actors in producing the built environment in modern societies are:

a) clients
b) architects
c) other professions involved (surveyors, engineers, planners, landscape and urban designers)
d) the construction industry (manufacturing, building and management)
e) regulatory bodies (planning and building control in particular)
f) building users
g) the general public

The traditional approach to producing the built environment (at least from the beginning of the 20th century) has brought these actors together as follows, although the central role of the architect in coordinating the process has changed somewhat in recent years in many more commercial contexts:



As can be seen there is a very limited role for building users and the general public – if any - in this process. It is increasingly recognised that this exclusion from the built environment production process alienates these social groups from the full use and appreciation of the built environment, which reflects on both the process and products, e.g. through increasing marginalisation of architects as a profession from substantial built environment production and also a predominance of public criticism of the built environment produced by, or with involvement of, architects.

This discussion paper attempts to conceptualise how building users and general public can become more involved in the process of producing the built environment - before and after construction - as a means to producing research projects, as it is believed this can produce better quality in individual buildings and the general built environment. This is seen as re-embedding the production of the built environment in social context. The key objective is thus to determine how best to bring users and the general public into the process in order improve the quality of built environment.

Buildings need to look good (aesthetics), function soundly (technology, environment and structure), and also provide appropriate spaces (internal and external). However, beyond this particular function, they are part of a larger whole – physically (impacting on the immediate built environment)

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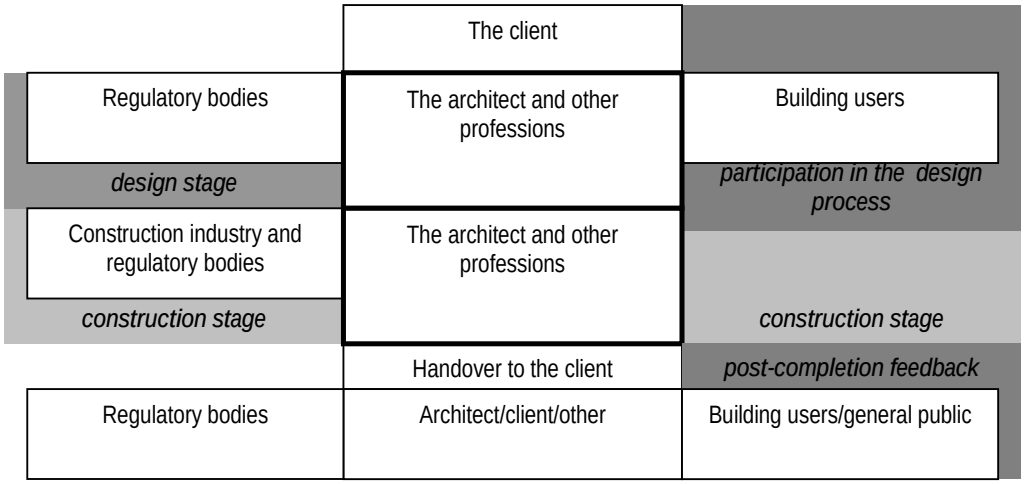
and culturally (impacting on the wider built environment). Architects and their clients traditionally expect to define what is appropriate in terms of space, function and aesthetics for the particular building, and architects as a profession have usually assumed they are the best to define this for the immediate and wider built environment. This exclusivity in the production of the built environment however has some serious socio-cultural failings, both for the "society" of users and broader society. This approach is also reflected of the training of architects, which focuses on aesthetics, space and function, and sometimes wider landscape or urban design issues, but not socio-cultural context.

How can social groups such as users and the general public contribute to the process of producing the built environment? Basically through participating in some form in the design process and then in some form of post-completion feedback. The first can be prior to the definition of the brief/programme, during the design process itself (and even adjusting this in the construction stage); whereas the second is normally after the construction process is complete for some time (although can also be before the end of this).

This would be illustrated diagrammatically as:



I. Participation in the design process

There have been various ways that building users have been involved in the design process in the past. Vernacular building provided a structured way for social groups to engage with the design and production process. This was both direct, in that users "commissioned" their own buildings and thus the client was often the user, and indirect in the sense that socio-cultural values – as well as available technology, climate adaptation techniques, nature of the economy etc. – largely defined building forms and what was acceptable and possible. Since the design process became separated from the construction process, and specialised functions in design (and for buildings) developed - largely from the 18th century, but more specifically in the 19th with the rise of professions - the user and general public's role has diminished, largely in proportion to the dominance of specialist professionals and clients. This specialisation perhaps peaked in the 1960s, with the strong post-war role of the state acting as both building client and incorporating professional functions, with the post 1960 growing economy increasingly substituting this by corporate private sector interests.

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However, the wider socio-cultural exclusion that the above has created in relation to the built environment has led to increasing alienation of building and other built environment users, and a growing sense of alienation of the general public from the specialist professions and clients, and thus from architecture and the wider built environment *per se*. The result has been various forms of protest: explicit in the initial struggle against comprehensive redevelopment and for conservation in the 1960s and 1970s for example; and implicit, in a widespread negative reaction to much new architecture and a preference for a narrow set of aesthetic values in the built environment, for example in the ubiquitous suburban house design. The former protests were in fact the basis for attempts to re-engage the users with the design process, as well as the general public at a broader scale, but have largely been surpassed as the wider social engagement function has also become professionalised (e.g. through conservation organisations as opposed to groups within civil society). Nevertheless "user participation in architecture" has been retained in a number of forms: through specific architecture traditions ("community architecture") as well as in an increase in "self-build" (normally housing). In parallel the possibilities of visualisation of designs in 3 dimensions through IT has led to an interest in engaging with wider social groups other than the client. However these approaches have to date been seen as specialist approaches and not widespread within the profession. Is this adequate?

This tradition of participation in design has raised a number of key issues, characterised as follows:

- WHY? - What are the various objectives of participation in the design process and the 'pros and cons' of these?
- WHO? - What is the user–architect role vis-à-vis the client–architect role – and within this the client-user relationship?
- WHAT? – What activities are participated in: to what extent does the architect see this role as guiding the user, e.g. on aesthetics, as opposed to solely investigating the user's existing interests/awareness?
- HOW? – What tools for participation can be used: social and technical - e.g. to what extent can non-specialised language and tools be used to communicate more openly in the process - and what resource (cost/time) implications do these entail?
- WHERE? – What sort of buildings might be more or less suited to participation of users in the design process?

These are issues that the following research project is created to investigate through: (AHRC application)

a) a literature review of participation in design of the built environment;
b) confirmation of key issues, identification of case studies and relevant techniques as well as appropriate civic organisations for the study, through a steering group;
c) investigations of case studies of buildings and architects where user participation has been engaged, through semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings;
d) a review of visualisation techniques currently used or in development and their actual / potential role in widening participation in building design; and
e) a series of interviews with civic organisations engaged in issues of built environment design and conservation.

II. Post-completion feedback

It is important to stress at the outset that post-completion feedback is seen as wider than post-occupancy evaluation, which assesses the "effectiveness" of building in human terms – mainly referring to the building users, but also the clients' position. Post-completion feedback can come

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from any of the involved groups mentioned in the introduction above, and thus is a wider process. That said, not all views are necessarily solicited in any post-completion feedback activity, as this can be targeted at one or some of these groups. To date the main form of feedback is from the architecture profession itself, and usually only for buildings considered 'significant' or 'notable', and to some extent from clients and other professionals, including regulatory bodies, although this is often informal. Some informal feedback can also come from users, although for architects this would seldom seem to be more than superficial observation. The general public is seldom consulted for feedback, except in 'landmark' situations, and much of this feedback is often more anecdotal than structured investigation.

As such it is important to establish similar queries to the above on participation in the design process concerning post-completion feedback:

- What are the objectives?
- Who should get involved in relation to these?
- What is the scope of the feedback that is appropriate in this?
- What processes or methods can be used? And
- Where can this be used best to advantage, especially concerning the costs and benefits of such feedback?

And also

- When is it appropriate to undertake the investigation (e.g. as soon after as possible, after some time, or over a period)?

There is an enormous range of possibilities here, ranging from – for example – having researchers interviewing a few users, through to multiple-level, longitudinal investigations of major building programmes. The focus of the proposed research programme for architecture in Scotland is thus:

a) To establish the probable likely range of post-completion feedback processes of use to the main actors in the built environment listed above through an analytical review and guidance from a steering group with representatives of these;
b) To identify relevant techniques for post-completion feedback and assess their resource implications in generic terms;
c) To undertake a specific number of post-completion feedback processes for a selection of different objectives in Scotland to assess more accurately the resource implications, as well as respond to priority feedback needs;
d) To recommend ways in which post-completion feedback can be established as a more continual process for major actors in producing the built environment and more generally for the architecture profession across Scotland.

This proposal is directed in the first instance to the Scottish Executive Architecture Policy Unit and the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, acknowledging that substantial additional funding from major clients and other professions/industry would be required to implement c). These could be focussed, for instance, on building types (e.g. hospitals, schools), contractual process (e.g. fixed, flexible), ways to engage different actors (e.g. significant public buildings), or different methods to embed post-completion feedback in the practice of producing the built environment (e.g. architectural education, specialised consultancy, partnerships with research institutions etc).

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