

REWORKING ARCHITECTURE

Peggy Deamer

Thank you, Tom, for asking me to be here; I really appreciate the invitation. I also want to say thank you to Jenna-Claire because she does so much work to make sure that these gatherings happen and that we have access to so many great cultural events; I know that that is a lot of work.

My talk, “Reworking Architecture,” reflects both my take on architecture and my research and activism on architecture. There are three parts to the talk: the first part will describe architecture as we architects experience it, which I think is different than public perception; the second part is what I call my “aha moments,” which led to a deeper analysis of the professional problems facing architects; and the last part will describe the resulting activist practice.

So, to start with part one, there are five things that I want you to know about architecture and architects. The first is that we’re paid really badly, particularly given the amount of time that our professional education takes – four years of undergraduate, three years of graduate, three years of internship, two more years of studying for and hopefully passing a notoriously difficult licensing test. We don’t see parity with lawyers and doctors. Architects make approximately \$45,000 the first three years out of school, while lawyers will make somewhere between \$75,000 and \$125,000 and doctors between \$125,000 and \$200,000 their first three years out.

The second is that we have a very limited market. Architects do not design everything that you see out there. You don’t have to have an architect or an engineer sign drawings for a single-family house, an agricultural building, a simple garage building, or an uncomplicated gathering place. There are no clear figures that identify the percentage of buildings in the United States designed by architects, but approximately 63 percent are signed by either architects or engineers, of which an estimated third are signed by engineers. One figure suggests that only 2 percent of single-family houses are designed by architects. Increasingly, in addition, other disciplines like interior design get jobs that architects counted on. The point is, architects do not have a huge array of job opportunities.

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A third limiting condition is the difference between what we're trained to do in school and what we're actually given as professional tasks. We're trained at school to think about the society in which our designs will work; we're trained to think responsibly about the environmental impact of our designs; we're trained to think about history and precedent. But the reality is that most of us will be given work that doesn't require much of that knowledge. Those going the route of working in large firms will, for a long time, work on door, window, and bathroom schedules—minor stuff. If you own or work in a smaller firm, you're probably designing high-end residences for the upper middle class. Again, a larger social concern and/or a deeper analysis of context or environment are not required. There's a big gap between our academic aspirations and our professional possibilities. This matters when, in the absence of financial reward, one looks for creative or social meaning, and that proves to be lacking as well. When I got out of school and had my first job, where I was basically asked to choose the furniture for an office building out of a catalog, it was a surprise. But I told myself that architects need to know interior design and get really knowledgeable about what comes from Knoll and what comes from other companies; which lights come from Artemide and which don't. But, you know, pretty quickly the difference between what I was being asked to do and what I was trained to do became apparent. Then I thought, okay, it's because I don't have my own firm, so I established my own firm with my partner, Scott Phillips. For five years I was excited about the fact that we had gone from a kitchen renovation to an apartment to a new, ground-up building. Surely we were on our way to larger, more socially significant institutional projects! But ten years later, we were just getting more of the same: rich people's second houses. Anyway, it took a while to realize I wasn't going to be invited to do the new terminal at JFK or the new library for Obama.

The fourth limitation is our professional labor practices, which, I would say, are prehistoric. We have unpaid interns. We have unpaid overtime. As employees, we have no control over our schedule, no conversation about the kinds of work partners are pursuing, and no access to unwritten management protocols. We work 24/7 for our supposed passion for (we are led to believe) the significance of our cultural contributions. We forgive our work-ignorance by saying "we're artists, we're creative, we don't have a discourse around labor, we shouldn't worry about money." If, for example, we're asked by firm partners/managers to come in on Saturday at nine and stay until nine Sunday to get a proposal out, most of us have been taught to think, "I am so lucky that I am needed!" This is an ideological problem that starts in school, where we are led to believe that the more all-nighters we pull, the more passionate we must be. Passion then, seemingly, equals talent; and talent equals, seemingly, "I will be a star!" There is a quick and false collapse of these ideas (passion/talent/success), which leads to marginal practices of which we are taught to be proud.

The last thing that secures our marginality is our lack of diversity. We call the lack of women in the profession the missing 32 percent—which is to say, 50 percent

of the people who graduate from architecture school are women; five years out, only 18 percent are women. That missing 32 percent can be explained because of the things that I have described: bad pay, bad hours. I think women quickly figure out that they will have a very tough time raising a family and staying in the profession. One woman said to me, “Women are just smarter about the difficult practice that we’re entering into; men just deceive themselves about what it takes, or know their wives can pick up the problems at home. Being smart, the women leave.” It is my position that women are like the canaries in the tunnel: they feel the bad practices first and hardest. It’s important, but in some way they’re a marker of a more systemic problem. Gender diversity is an issue, but so is racial and economic diversity. Architecture’s bad numbers are the result of the same economic and work-life balance conditions that scare women, but made worse by the cost of entry. If somebody, for example, is the first in their family to think about going to a professional school, they’ll look at the statistics for architectural remuneration and think, for the cost and sacrifice of that education, there is little guarantee of reward at the other end.

I don’t want to indicate that I or my colleagues don’t love the issues and opportunities that come with architecture. We’re all passionate about our work. What attracted me initially, despite being a philosophy major at Oberlin, was that I just loved looking at buildings in my architectural history classes. I remember one assignment was to go out into the town of Oberlin and find a house and describe it. I was just so thrilled to consider the formal decisions that the architect must have made. So then I thought that maybe I could *be* an architect: I had math skills, I had some aesthetic sensibility – you know, the normal things that potential architects think are required. And I thought that whatever my trajectory as an architect was going to be, if I enjoyed the process of sitting down at a desk and drafting, that was enough. I really had no aspirations of being a star, whatsoever. And I never stopped liking that act of making design decisions and drafting. In that way my expectations were fulfilled. And yet, when architects get together, we do nothing but complain. So, to get to the second part of my talk: if what I have described is accurate, why aren’t we doing something about it? Or, for me personally, why did it take me so long to want to do something about it? I’m really describing a series of events that started in 2003. What woke me up? I’ll just go through five things that really brought clarity for me.

One was an A. Whitney Griswold Faculty Research Grant from Yale, which was very instrumental in researching new ways to practice. It allowed me to look at the various players in the architecture, engineering, and construction industry that are more and more, through technological advances, part of the design process. Instead of the normal hierarchical pyramid – the architect at the top making the visionary sketch on a napkin, handing it down to staff to figure out how to make it work and produce the working drawings; then their passing those drawings down to a contractor (who for the most part gets chosen for giving the lowest bid, not because s/he works well with the architect); and then the contractor handing the actual job to subs and

fabricators, whom the architect neither knows nor cares about – this was and is getting replaced with a system that brings people at the bottom of the pyramid closer to the top. Computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing (CAD-CAM) allow digitally inscribed designs to go directly to the fabricators: neither contractors nor working drawings are required. Working directly with fabricators means that architects must know the fabricator’s capacity and respect the fabricator’s knowledge about materials and the tools needed to manipulate them. The people at the back end of the design process are actually being asked to consult at the front end of the process, which I thought was really fabulous. With these insights motivating me, the grant offered the opportunity to interview glass and steel fabricators, engineers, industries such as DuPont, and architects at the cutting edge of CAD-CAM technology. In this research, I came across an even newer, more comprehensive production platform – building information modeling (BIM) – which allowed fabricators, engineers, contractors, owners, and architects to share input and collaborate on a single virtual design model. I was excited that collaboration and respect for all participants could replace the pyramidal chain of command. Part of the “aha” moment of this, though, was not just the possibility of a changing, more democratic workflow and procurement process, but my emerging disappointment about the resistance of architects to take advantage of this new possibility. The resistance to sharing and collaboration was eye-opening.

Another awakening moment was my reading, partly in relationship to the question of the computer’s role in design, about the nature of design and/or craft as they related to construction. Because architects don’t make or build buildings (contractors do), how can we claim sensitivity to craft given that our hand is absent from the construction? Indeed, with the computer, our hands were no longer even in the models or drawings. What was, I wondered, the state of design and craft in architectural production today? I read the introduction to a book by Ed Ford called *The Details of Modern Architecture*. He said – this is paraphrasing – that if architects in the nineteenth century had an interest in the social aspects of your design practice, they cared about the workers constructing the building. A twentieth-century architect interested in the social aspects of their work would, instead, care about the user of the building. That really resonated with me. So, the question for me became, Why in the twenty-first century can’t we care about both? Couldn’t we honor the construction workers and see them as contributors to the design, sharing with architects the responsibility for producing a better built environment?

A third revelation was a conference that was organized by a group called Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?). It is an organization consisting of two Columbia University architecture professors and people from Human Rights Watch who were monitoring the bad labor practices of the contractors building architect-designed projects in the Emirates. I’m sure you have read about the indentured construction workers who are brought over from India, Nepal, and China under false premises, have their passports taken away, and have no control over their work conditions or livelihood.

WBYA? had a series of conferences where they tried to get architects with projects in the Emirates to discuss their positions on the construction problems. Alas, they could not get one architect building in the Emirates to come and talk, not one. Everybody, we assume, was afraid of losing work if they spoke out against it. This to me was truly remarkable, and remarkable particularly in comparison to the artists whose work was going to be shown in one of those projects, the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi; they took the position that they were not going to contribute work to the museum. Why would artists, I wondered, be so much more conscious of the plight of construction workers than architects, a fact that seemed particularly ironic since one of the reasons architects say they don't identify with "normal" workers is that they are, instead, "artists." So, my job from then on was to convince architects that they are workers, and should identify with other and all workers.

A fourth "aha" moment was here at Yale. For some reason, there was an architecture talk in the Law School, and in the corridor on the way to the talk there was a sign on the bulletin board that said, "Top Ten Family-Friendly Law Firms." I was totally struck by that because we would *never* in an architecture school see that, not at Yale, not anywhere. Is it that we, as faculty or administration in a school, don't think it's important? Or that students who are about to graduate wouldn't think that it matters? Or that architecture firms wouldn't want to be known in this way? I found out later that law firms are crawling over each other to get on that list because they want to get the best and brightest. Is it the case that in architecture we don't know who are the best and brightest or we don't care about the best and brightest? Our graduates beg for work wherever they can get it, generally starting with those firms with a good design reputation. For me, the fact that design reputation is really the be-all and end-all of how students choose to pursue work comes with an over-aestheticized idea of what practice is, directing us workers to honor only "creativity."

The final revelatory moment was an architecture conference at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., the theme of which was women in architecture. The panel was made up of really bright women, many of them my friends. At the end of the talk someone in the audience raised her hand and asked, "I'm thinking of going to graduate school in architecture. What can I expect from my career in architecture?" In response, one of the women on the panel said, "Architecture is not a career; it's a calling!" I thought, "Wow, that indicates how much we've swallowed the ideology that says, 'The less you pay me the holier I'll feel.'" So that, along with the other moments, led to the need to address our professional ideologies.

I'll go to the third part of my talk, which describes the activist organization, the Architecture Lobby, I started to address the above-described problems. In conversations with various colleagues, there seemed to be enough people who felt similarly about my reaction to one or the other of my professional revelations to call a gathering. The first meeting consisted of twelve people, meeting in my Brooklyn living room. Now we have chapters in seven different cities with 160 members and a following of around two thousand.¹

I will describe our work in terms of some of our campaigns. One is called Just Design, which is the closest thing to Yale Law School's Top Ten Family-Friendly Law Firms list. It gives exposure to and certification for firms that have good labor practices. Architects looking for work will know not only the design reputation of a firm but also its stance on supporting and empowering its staff. There are two stages to that certification. The first is a questionnaire that goes out to employees addressing six different categories of work environment: family-friendliness, legal labor practices, economic viability, diversity, transparency, and agency. The second stage after we get employee "nominations" is to go to the good employers, verify their policies, and get the history of their enlightened approach to practice. It is a campaign that, besides opening the eyes of employees searching for work, is also meant to convey to architecture employers that labor practices go beyond hiring up or firing down according to the work that comes and goes. The term that I always used for the profession was that it was an accordion profession. Companies would expand the number of employees when things were good. When things became meager, they had to contract those firms; and I was astonished by the interruptions that created for the employees and their families because incomes disappeared, their level of living came to an end. But I never heard anybody voice this in the architectural profession. They seem to accept it as their fate.

Another campaign is our Not Our Wall action. This started when the CEO of the American Institute of Architects, the day after Trump was elected, issued a statement saying its 87,000 members were there to work with the president. That was dismaying for a lot of architects, and the Architecture Lobby made a strong statement of protest against a professional organization that chased work regardless of ethics. But when the Trump administration sent out an RFP (request for proposals) to architects and engineers for proposals for the southern border wall, the Architecture Lobby demanded a two-hour walkout of architects from their firms to reflect on why they, as either employers or employees, went into the field of architecture. Yes, this was meant to discourage anyone from considering participating on such a proposal, but it was also meant to reconnect architects with their souls. This successful protest led to the publication of a book that followed the production of the chosen prototypes and documented the implications for cost and environmental endangerment.

Other campaigns consist of performances at places like the Venice Architecture Biennale, where you have an international audience of architects who surely have used unpaid workers to research the content of and build their installations; and the AIA national conventions, where you have the professional institutional elite. In both cases, believe me, they're not anxious to talk about labor practices. These performances are matched by Architecture Lobby insertions into architecture schools' "work fairs," where firms try to seduce students to work for them with no discussion of labor practices or worker empowerment. All of these are activities meant to educate architects to expect more from their profession and their work lives.

I'll conclude by describing research I have done on the profession. I got a grant from AIA New York (they are much more progressive than the national organization) to consider the implications of antitrust laws on architecture. The reason I got interested in antitrust laws was a visit I made with a colleague to the national AIA in Washington, D.C., to speak with their general counsel and the CEO to learn why the AIA doesn't worry more about the fact that architects, both owners and staff, are underpaid and perpetually unhappy. Basically, they said that the Department of Justice (DOJ) had issued two antitrust consent decrees when fees and fee schedules were discussed at AIA meetings. The first one was in 1972 when architects did have a fee schedule, which was determined by the DOJ to be collusional; the consent decree made fee schedules illegal. The second one, in 1990, when standard professional fees were merely discussed at a local meeting, had more major repercussions. AIA was fined \$100,000; and for ten years, every single AIA meeting, whether it was local, regional, or national, had to begin with a ten-minute video made by the DOJ describing what collusion looks like and what could or could not be discussed at an architectural meeting. The CEO of the AIA basically said that if an organization like the Architecture Lobby wanted to bring up fees or wages, they'd wave to us in jail because it's not just the AIA that is susceptible to antitrust indictments; any two architects having a conversation about agreeing on fees or wages will invite a \$10,000 fine and ten years in prison. I could see why the AIA is paranoid, but I still thought, "Gosh, lawyers for the most part all agree on what they're paying their first-year associates, and real estate agents all charge 6 percent of the cost of a sale. How does that happen? Are architects interpreting antitrust laws in a more paranoid fashion than other professions?" The outcome of that research showed that, no, architects do not approach these laws with more paranoia; but as a small industry, we do not have the strength to legislate around the negative effects of the enforced competition demanded by antitrust laws. Law and medical lobbyists have more capacity than architects to guide and regulate legislation that favors their professions. (I want to say that I had help from Al Klevorick from Yale Law School on researching this piece. He was enormously helpful even if he disagreed with many of my observations.)

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I've also done research into architectural contracts, which, it seems to me, perpetuate a noncollaborative set of relations between architects, owners, and contractors. As we all know, there is one set of contracts between the owner and the architect and another set of contracts between the owner and the contractor. There's no contractual relationship between the architects and the contractors themselves, something that is problematic for two reasons: it fails to manage the most important partnership in getting a good product; and it sets the architect and the contractor against each other for protection by the owner. It's all deeply uncollaborative and litigious and, given that we now have BIM technology to share information early on, unnecessary. We tend to blame lawyers for demanding that we assign risk in very, very specific ways, but in fact lawyers for the most part are more willing to think creatively about a shared set of risk

and reward than we know. There is a whole new set of contracts based on “relational contract” theory that supports collaboration and shares risk and reward among all those involved in the production of a building. Created by lawyers, these contracts aim at long-term positive relations and preclude the use of lawsuits if there are disagreements. The issue now, for me, is how to make these kinds of contracts, called integrated project delivery (IPD), the norm and not the exception.

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Statistics would be the essential thing to persuade the profession to change its practices, its organization, its educational processes. But I think it’s an indication of our backwardness that no one is looking at those statistics. (I will say that my colleague Phil Bernstein, who teaches professional practice here at Yale School of Architecture — he is now associate dean — and was also until very recently a vice president at Autodesk, which developed the BIM platform called Revit, very much believes that the profession is going to die if we don’t change things.) The schools themselves are not tracking graduates eight years out, nor is the AIA. But I’ll describe what I see because I taught here for a long time and watched graduates go into the profession for over twenty years. I would say that 10 percent have left the profession, another 20 percent have gone into a sideline of the profession (development, web design, owners’ reps), and of the rest, none has risen to a star position at any large firms. Generally, graduates eventually start their own firms. After they achieve what is considered “success” — having a project published; moving from an addition to a ground-up new house — they plateau, getting more of the same. The smarter ones, however, get out. One of my former students is a poignant example of what’s happening. When he graduated — very talented, very smart, very adept with the new technology — he worked for a year at a traditional firm, saw what was happening, left, and began to work for a consultancy company whose job was to help other architecture firms get introduced to the collaborative technologies I’ve been talking about. After working with them for two years and basically seeing how hard it was to persuade architecture firms to truly incorporate the changed hierarchies that come with collaborative platforms, he went to work for Skanska, the construction giant. For me, it’s a problem for society that people like him are leaving architecture to have an impact on the larger construction industry.

I’ve edited two books that I think address the problem. The first one is called *Architecture and Capitalism*, and it’s trying to go through architectural history with another narrative. In most architecture history books, you get a description of the change of styles and the heroes who participate in the creation of those styles. In *Architecture and Capitalism*, I was trying to show that changes in style are related to the economy more than they are to those heroes; that architectural history is part of a larger economic enterprise. The second book is *The Architect as Worker*, a collection of essays that examine what is gained politically when we architects admit to being workers, not just artists-with-a-calling. But I do have to say that both of those are edited books. They’re not books authored by me. I went off last year for three months to what I thought was going to be outlining my first self-authored book, and instead I was organizing for the Architecture Lobby the whole time.

I should end here, but I just want to say that much of my research now asks what it means to be a “profession.” What does a profession do that unions and guilds don’t do? Why do some European countries not require professional licensure? When does the state’s regulation of licensure help and when does it not? What is licensure versus certification? I’m interested in being able to prove that our current situation is not natural or God-given and can be changed.

Thank you!

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Notes

- 1 Now, at the time of the publication of this talk, we have twenty chapters, six hundred members, and five thousand followers.