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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marginalization and invasion of architects' role on house projects: Institutional intervention inadequacy and super wicked problems

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Abstract

The design and construction of houses normally require an architect's input. However, architects are increasingly being marginalized in these projects, and their roles are constantly being invaded by others. Despite repeated institutional interventions toward remedying this phenomenon, signs are not abating. This article examines the complexity of this phenomenon to explain the inadequacy of institutional interventions to address the problem. This article conceptualizes the phenomenon of marginalization and role invasion as a super wicked problem with six key features. First, the problem has a difficult definition. Second, the solution involves a large structural and economic burden. Third, time is of the essence. Fourth, multiple stakeholders attempting to solve the problem are part of the cause. Fifth, institutional interventions addressing the issue are weak or ill-equipped. Sixth, institutional interventions discount the future irrationally. The implications of this conceptualization for institutional intervention and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The successful design and construction of houses require complex interactions between clients and professional service providers, such as architects, engineers, planners, and contractors (Lapidus, 1967; Siva and London, 2012). Despite the importance of each of these project actors,

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the architect has, for decades, traditionally played the role of master builder and head of the design team and is responsible for managing the project and the activities of different actors (Cuff, 1991; London et al., 2005). Essentially, the architect has been perceived as the “spiritual leader” of the project (Royal Institute of British Architects [RIBA], 2015a).

In the modern construction industry, however, this role is no longer “the exclusive domain of architects. Other disciplines have gradually encroached on the architect’s core activities” (van Gulijk, 2009, p. 10). The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) (2011) reported that architects, especially “small general practices” and individual architects “working for private clients with local builders” are facing an invasion of their traditional role from “non-architect[s]” such as contractors and draftsmen. Evidence suggests that clients are unwilling to fully employ architects on projects where they may not be mandatory (Frimpong and Dansoh, 2016; The Guardian, 2017). In response to this trend, architects have repeatedly attempted to remedy this situation at the institutional level. However, research (e.g., Oluwatayo, 2013; Oluwatayo et al., 2014a, 2014b; RIBA, 2005, 2011, 2015a, 2016a) reports different conditions that suggest that architects’ institutional interventions have not been effective in dealing with the marginalization of architects and the invasion of their roles. The Architects’ Journal [AJ] (2017a), for instance, reports that although the profession’s authority has been in decline for a while, it “appears recently to have come to a head.”

Against this backdrop, the current work explores the complexity of the problem by asking whether such is a “super wicked problem” (Levin et al., 2012).

Studies exploring architectural management challenges from complexity perspectives, such as wicked and ill-structured problems, are relatively old, beginning with Simon (1973) and Darke (1979). Since then, the momentum of such studies has slowed down (for a summary of such works, see Siva and London, 2012). Thus, contemporary studies are needed to offer a fresh perspective and deepen our understanding of the nature of problems in architectural management, which would enhance the validity and effectiveness of approaches toward managing the phenomenon of marginalization and role invasion. This study therefore extends the frontiers of existing studies on wicked problems in architectural management and supplements the literature on this topic.

By addressing the issue of marginalization and role invasion, this article contributes to the debate on a key issue, that is, “the diminishing role of architects” (AJ, 2017a), which affects architectural practice. Focusing on house projects, this work explores an issue affecting a large sector of the industry (RIBA, 2011; Siva and London, 2012).

The conceptual framework proposed in this study can be used to investigate the interactions of other project actors (e.g., contractor, engineer, and product developer) with clients as they may introduce diverse situations and challenges into the management of project actor relationships (Siva and London, 2012).

In this theoretical study, we first present a brief review of the phenomenon of marginalization and invasion of the architect’s role in house projects with a historical perspective of the institutional interventions made toward

understanding and resolving marginalization and role invasion. Then, the theoretical framework underpinning this study is presented, after which we propose our conceptual framework. Next, we examine a priori whether the phenomenon of marginalization and invasion of architects’ role in house projects fits our definition of a super wicked problem. We do so by discussing examples from the broad literature and the literature specific to the client-architect relationship in house projects (predominantly those from the RIBA) to determine how they fit into each of the propositions of our conceptual framework. We end by presenting the implications of our conceptualization for research and practice.

2. Marginalization of architects and invasion of their role in house projects

Powell (1997) summarized the antecedents of the phenomenon of architects’ marginalization and role invasion as follows:

“During postwar reconstruction ... about 1973, architects gave enhanced prominence to the [end-user client], relative to the [developer-client], a move associated with greater professional social responsibility at a time of redistribution of national wealth. In the period which followed to the present day, architects faced demand from [developer clients] who were increasingly concerned with the management of time, value and risk and who were also becoming skeptical of professionalism. In addition to these changes affecting demand for architects’ services, competition from within and without the profession intensified.”

Even before 1973, the increasing trend in marginalization and invasion of architects’ role had become apparent (Allinson, 1993) because as far back as 1962, RIBA hinted of the potential for architects to lose their status in the construction market. Subsequent RIBA studies (1992 and 1993) revealed that the phenomenon of marginalization and role invasion was steadily gaining ground. Thus, while architects working in the housing sector formed the majority of the profession, “in terms of the value of construction they are in decline” (RIBA, 2011). The situation is not only limited to the UK but also prevalent in other European countries. In the Netherlands for instance, the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects argues that the professional relevance of architects is declining as they have now become one of the many professionals providing services to clients (van Gulijk, 2009, p. 10). A similar situation exists in France, prompting the Architects’ Order to remind French Architects to “seriously think about the future and strengthen their profession” (van Gulijk, 2009, p. 10). Studies conducted in countries such as the USA (Gutman, 1988), Sweden (Gustafsson, 2007), Australia (Siva and London, 2012), and Ghana (Dansoh and Frimpong, 2016) confirm that this situation is rather pervasive. Currently, the phenomenon has reached a point in which non-architects in one-stop-shop service providers are taking over the traditional architects’ market and their role (Dansoh and Frimpong, 2016; RIBA, 2011).

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