

Professional Practices in the Built Environment

27 - 28 April 2017

University of Reading, UK

Conference Proceedings

Rowena Hay and Flora Samuel



In association with:



VALUE OF
ARCHITECTS



A R E N A



April 2017

ISBN 9780704915725

Value of Architects, University of Reading, The Old Library Building
L046, London Road, Reading, RG1 5AQ www.ValueofArchitects.org

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This work was completed under AHRC contract AH/ M008274/1

The good client: How architect-client dynamics mediate attention to users

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Abstract

Due to the increasing complexity of architectural practice, gaining insight into future users' perspectives presents a particular challenge for architects. Architects' main reference point to obtain information about users is often the client. Moreover, architects indicate that a 'good' client is key to the project's success. Yet, architect-client relationships can be highly diverse, depending on the project type, procedure and phase. This paper sets out to study how different architect-client dynamics mediate attention to users in the design process. An ethnographic study provides insight into the daily professional practice of three diverse architecture firms in Belgium. Based on observations of project meetings and interviews with architects and clients, we identify four types of relationships: client absence, substitution by a developer, client consultation, and (long-term) engagement. Architect-client dynamics can result in conflicting or aligned ambitions. Extracts from the fieldwork illustrate how these can hamper or stimulate attention to future users in the design process. The insights presented in this paper contribute to untangling architect-client dynamics and can be useful to improve collaboration and knowledge transfer in design practice. A constructive relationship between architects and clients can provide an opportunity for enhancing their mutual ambitions to integrate use-related qualities in the design.

Keywords: architectural practice, client, ethnographic fieldwork, knowledge, user experience

Introduction

Due to the complexities in present-day architectural practice, attention to user experience is often crowded out by the varied and complex requirements architects need to consider. Moreover, in many projects there is no longer a one-on-one relationship between the designer and occupant of a building. This makes gaining access to future users' perspectives difficult for architects, which possibly endangers the appropriateness of the design. Especially when future users differ considerably from designers, the gap can be hard to bridge (Crilly, Maier, and Clarkson, 2008).

This paper starts from the observation that clients are often the number one reference point for architects to obtain information about future users, entrusted for their expertise and assumed ability to represent building occupants (Van der Linden, Dong, and Heylighen, 2016a). However, 'the client' can take different forms: an end user, a team of representatives, the head of an organisation, someone from the technical department, a developer ... just like 'the architect', 'the client' is often a construction of different individuals. Distributed tasks and knowledge along with differences in interests and ambitions pose another challenge to fruitful collaboration (Buse, Nettleton, Martin, and Twigg, 2016; Cuff, 1992; Green, 1996; Ivory, 2004; Thyssen, Emmitt, Bonke, and Kirk-Christoffersen, 2010).

Architects often mention the importance of having a 'good client', which seems to refer to knowledgeable parties, who have figured out what they want and are easy to collaborate with, or as Cuff (1992) explains:

After choosing the architect for a commission, excellent clients, while demanding and ready to stand their ground, remain open-minded and flexible. Unlike ordinary clients who may be more rigid or in some cases spineless, the clients who produce outstanding buildings have

a clear set of guiding values. Simultaneously, they are willing to take advice, add to the budget, and remove themselves from the architects' intimate area of expertise, the manipulation of form.

(p233)

Apart from the diversity resulting from the circumstances of and parties engaging in a professional relationship, differences can also result from changes induced by the project's course. Cuff (1992) observed architect-client relationships being built and taking different forms: 'courtship' (in the schematic design phase), 'building rapport' (during design development), 'unveiling boundaries' (related to construction documents), 'avoiding disputes' (during bidding or negotiating) and 'constructing progress' (related to administrating construction contracts) (p173-174).

In this respect, briefing and design are acknowledged as iterative activities, part of a social process (Collinge and Harty, 2014; Green, 1996; Yaneva, 2009), where architects' and clients' social worlds collide (Siva and London, 2011), knowledge is mediated through materials and individuals (Koch and Thuesen, 2013) and requirements unfold during design, even in competitions (Kreiner, Jacobsen, and Jensen, 2011; Van Wezemael, Silberberger, and Paisiou, 2011). Negotiating experiential aspects is not self-evident, it demands full immersion in actual use situations (McDonnell and Lloyd, 2014).

In short, the relation with the client – as the main source of knowledge about future users – can be very different depending on the project type, procedure and phase. This paper aims to understand how these dynamics influence knowledge exchange, with an eye to promoting architectural qualities for the benefit of users. Based on an ethnographic study, we outline four different types of relationships between architects and clients that can dynamically take form during the design process. We analyse how the

socio-material setting (constituted by the interactions of individuals and design materials) of each of these relationships facilitates or hampers attention to future users' needs.

Methods

The results presented in this paper are based on insights from an ethnographic study carried out in three architecture firms in Belgium. The first author visited each firm over a six-week period, and studied four to five projects that architects were working on at the time. This resulted in almost 400 hours of observation and 16 interviews¹ with architects, project partners and clients. Table I displays the firms and empirical material collected. The firms and projects were

chosen to cover a broad range of project types and procedures. For a more elaborate motivation and illustration of the research methods, we refer to a methodological paper based on the study in the first firm (Van der Linden, Dong, and Heylighen, 2016b).

The overall analysis focused on architects' 'designerly ways of knowing' (Cross, 1982) about users, attending to the socio-material mediators in architectural practice. Below we report the particular aspect of architect-client dynamics, identifying four types of relationships we observed during the fieldwork. The results are illustrated with quotes from the interviews, translated from Dutch by the authors. For reasons of confidentiality, names have been replaced by pseudonyms.




	Canvas Architects	studio:ratio	ArchiSpectrum
firm details	6 architects Ghent	9 architects Brussels	100+ collaborators Brussels + 2 other locations
data collection	128h observation 6 interviews 4 projects fall 2015	129h observation 5 interviews 5 projects fall 2014	139h observation 5 interviews 5 projects spring 2016
impression (working models)			

Table I. Overview of the firms and data collected during the study

¹ One of the interviews at ArchiSpectrum was conducted in the context of an earlier exploratory study (see Van der Linden, Dong, & Heylighen, 2016a). Because of its relevant and complementary content (offering an additional perspective), it was included in the data set.

Results

Absence

A first type of architect-client relationship that was observed is client absence. During the competition stage, for example², participating architects are typically not allowed to engage with the client, due to the procedure aimed at guaranteeing equal chances for all participants. Information exchange is usually limited to a few briefing sessions. Answers to additional questions are distributed to all participating architects, which makes architects very careful in their phrasings, protecting their concept whilst it is in development. These information exchanges thus can hardly be classified as a dialogue.

Left to an often voluminous and technical project definition, architects indicated that they have difficulties in fully understanding the client's question. Being forced to interpret the brief without the possibility to check with clients is a major source of frustration. Based on the limited resources they receive, architects try to estimate which values they will target – a choice which holds great (financial) risks.

If you're doing a competition, you don't know. You're doing something, then you're submitting, and then... You never have direct communication with the user or client. And that's a major difficulty in competitions. So it can happen... First, it's very hard because it's difficult to interpret certain things in the project definition. But also, you can totally miss the mark, right. It can be a reason for them just to say 'yeah, we're not doing this', finished. And

then you've lost.

(Team head at ArchiSpectrum)

Trying to cope with uncertainties, architects often invest resources in finding out client preferences. A lack of information may prevent them from pursuing particular (innovative) concepts, leading them to play it safe by sticking to a conservative interpretation of the brief. When left in the dark about (aspired) user experiences, architects come to rely on knowledge gained from previous projects and their own imagination.

We also saw other situations where an emphasis on user experience in competition briefing documents offered architects guidance. In the open bid for a care facility for people with a severe mental impairment, Canvas Architects received a booklet with the portraits of three residents, documented through photos and stories (Figure 1). This unusual 'day in the life of'-style reportage offered a glimpse into an unknown world and was therefore much appreciated by the architects, who used it to their advantage. The client explained:

It turned out, with the four teams who were selected and then read the portraits, that it moved people. It worked...

– Did they refer to it specifically?

Yes yes, to outdo each other, of course. (laughs out loud) [...] In most of the designs you felt that they'd given it some thought. Yeah, sure. Especially with the current designers we really had the feeling they got it.

(Client)

² We elaborate here on the situation of competitions, since the majority of the projects observed were granted through some kind of competition formula. However, architects in our study also had the feeling there was 'no client' in cases where they were commissioned by a central committee without knowledge about the daily operation (e.g. in the case of a new school). Architects indicated that this felt like "working around a paper", which lasted for the duration of the design process.

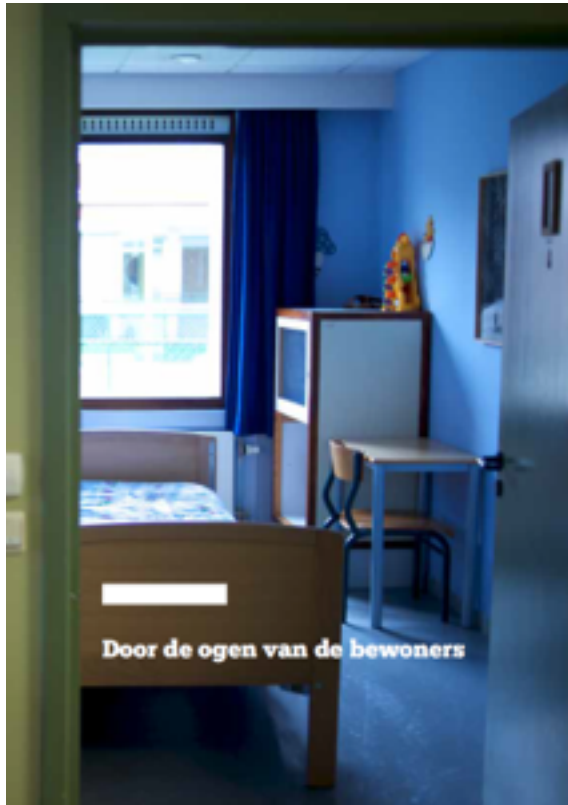


Figure 1. Extracts from the booklet “through the eyes of the residents”

Substitution

A second type of architect-client relationship we observed, occurred when a developer or contractor acted as a substitute client, for example in design and build contracts. In public-private partnerships, where the contractor is responsible for the financing, and sometimes also the maintenance and operation of a building, the public client was often 'absent' during the competition stage (as discussed above), and excluded from direct discussions with the architect. In these circumstances the developer's voice and opinion is heard louder than the client's. This can be problematic not least because each party brings their own programme that evolves in the course of the design process and can be difficult for architects to integrate. Further, in the competition stage, architects now have a partner in interpreting the (public client's) project definition. We witnessed developers joining forces with architects in order to figure out the public client's preferences through various channels.

However, the resulting assemblage of interpretations and impressions about the client's preferences can hamper architects in developing a coherent vision on user experience.

In projects where a contractor or developer acted as a substitute client, there seemed to be more attention to technical and commercial aspects in the design process, often suppressing architects' aspirations for user experience or what they perceive as architectural quality. This even seemed to impact on representation styles, as we observed more realistic renders compared to atmospheric collages architects produced in more architecture-oriented competitions. Coping with a dual client and vision can be difficult for architects. Open bids can force architects and contractors in rivaling roles, where architects try to realise what they perceive as quality and contractors try to cut costs, leading to the pursuit of different goals instead of a shared ambition. An architect testified how the developer constantly

pushed them to increase the density on the site, even when this action was against the wishes of the family who owned the land.

The original programme was this percentage of townhouses, this percentage of assisted living flats, this percentage of apartments [...] But they've been fiddling around and juggling with those percentages during the entire course. (upset) Yeah, it's been terrible [...] It's purely driven by profit. At a certain point they'd talked to a local real estate agency, who said 'well no, townhouses really sell poorly', so suddenly all of the townhouses had to be eliminated(!) Then the family heard the townhouses were out, while they definitely wanted an intergenerational housing project.

(Project architect at studio:ratio)

Consultation

The end of a (successful) competition stage³ usually marks the start of a dialogue between architects and clients. At the start of setting up their relationship, architects and clients often visit the client's current building (if available) and relevant reference projects. Visits prove valuable for knowledge exchange, as they allow for the building a shared frame of reference and specifying expectations through situated cases. Further, architects and clients usually organise regular meetings (e.g., every two weeks) when developing the design up to the point of the application for the building permit. During these meetings clients instruct architects about changes to be made, and architects have the opportunity to consult with their client on the interpretation of abstract notions (e.g., 'active education') and the relative importance of different requirements, in order to take the design a step further.

³ Of course, when there is no competition, clients can be consulted from the project's outset.

⁴ Collaboration improved when the contact person had more practical knowledge, allowing interaction on equal terms. Often this person then became the architects' ally, promoting the design with decision makers.

⁵ Client workgroups seemed to be an indicator of a human-centred tradition in the client organisation.

Everything on paper is open to interpretation for me. I really prefer just hearing 'so, how are you going to do that [storing ingredients for cooking classes]? do you need a fridge? and how big should this fridge be? or do you need a cold store? isn't that better' – 'oh, a cold store, yeah, then we can store the drinks for lunch in the refectory there as well'. These are all things that come up. Yeah, who's going to describe a cold store in a school? No-one. But if you ask the question, then they say 'oh well, that's right, that would be a real solution'.

(Interior design head at ArchiSpectrum)

Direct communication offers many opportunities for incorporating user values in the design. First, it allows for the tuning of ambitions. On a more practical level, architects are able to obtain detailed, contextual scenarios about users' daily activities from client committees, representatives⁴ or even client workgroups organised to consider particular aspects⁵. Architects and clients jointly exploring problems and solutions in a designerly way, where architects' proposals elicited new insights and made questions evolve. So client consultation went together with client learning, facilitated by the architects, who led the discussion as experts on aspects like materiality, and guided clients in reading design documents. Clients adopted architects' vocabulary just like the client's vision was adopted in the architects' narrative.

I think we're in a good dialogue [...] It's also true that, during the design process or coming about of a design, something happens with the client too of course, right, with us. You get thinking again yourself too, and that's a continuous interplay. Sometimes, well, you're putting things

differently than at the start. At the same time, it sharpens a bit the choices you make.

(Client)

Engagement

A final type of architect-client relationship identified is (long-term) engagement, where architects invest notably more effort in 'good' clients. 'Good clients' were seen as those who were knowledgeable, passionate and/or returning clients, resulting in the creation of a shared ambition. Often this started with the client's deliberate choice of an architect with an eye to collaboration – looking for a perfect match in terms of content and style. For example, in some care projects, clients had deliberately chosen architects without experience in care and expected them to co-develop their concept with them.

In frequent collaborations architects understood questions at a faster rate, but client expectations were also higher. As the relationship does not end with one building, architects stay involved after realisation. This results in collective learning throughout the process, as choices are evaluated and decisions are made. The fact that architects are confronted with the post-occupancy situation is quite exceptional.

Well, of course we're being pretty hard confronted with it. Because when you're building the third phase [of the project], they come and bother you about the first and second phase. And that's... awkward. Yeah, it's super awkward, because you're being confronted with operational stuff, or mistakes... or flaws. It's not always 'mistakes' but things that could've been better, and that's very inconvenient of course. Sure. Otherwise you're rid of that. It's operational and we're architects. (shrugging) Well we don't know.

(Team head at ArchiSpectrum)

A similar dynamic was witnessed with particularly passionate or visionary clients, infecting architects with enthusiasm. Canvas Architects, for example, developed a close relationship with a client with a revolutionary vision on dementia care. This relationship affected their way of working, e.g., meeting reports were seldom made, in favour of informal communication. The close relationship was however challenged at times when contractual issues came up.

For [our client]... the personal aspect is very important. In that sense [our client] didn't only look at the architectural proposal, but also at the team [...] 'will this person be able to understand me? will I be able to engage in a conversation? will we get along?' [...] Due to a change in the scale, we had to question our contract [...] we sent a proposal and then we got the reaction that they were actually a bit shocked (laughs) by our proposal. So very suddenly you're being torn out of this personal context, and it becomes business-like. Because you're still dealing with money of course.

(Partner at Canvas Architects)

In both examples clients had a stronger position and were more demanding in terms of content and dedication. Architects⁶ were more 'bound', not only in the sense of having to meet these expectations, but also in the positive sense of being more entrusted and particularly motivated to stay involved in the project.

Discussion & conclusion

In order to gain a better understanding of clients' role in the (lack of) attention to users in architectural practice, this study examined how architect-client dynamics work. Four types of relationships (client absence, substitution, consultation and engagement) were identified, with particular socio-material

⁶We observed that this higher level of engagement applied for the contractors involved as well.

characteristics that hamper or stimulate attention to users.

- When clients were absent little attention to user experience was observed, unless in the (rare) case it was presented as a main source and consideration in the brief. This highlights the importance of briefing documents as they can put a spotlight on user experience and provide a guiding principle during design.
- In situations where a developer acted as a client substitute, architects' attention seemed diverted towards more technical and commercial aspects. Conflicting ambitions can hamper realising use-related qualities in the design.
- When clients are available for consultation, important opportunities exist for aligning ambitions and exchanging knowledge, including rich information about user experience. Both architects and clients can take the lead in bringing experiential issues to the table. The format of the dialogue plays an important role in the extent to which this knowledge can be tapped (cf. Collinge and Harty, 2014).
- Engaged collaboration with the client can draw architects closer to users, as clients can involve architects in establishing an ambitious vision regarding users and confront them with users in person. This can possibly induce a more permanent change of mind, when architects take this experience on board in other projects.

These findings complement related research such as Cuff's (1992) analysis of phases in the evolving social relationship with a particular client (more or less situated during client consultation), by extending the scope, including design phases with different levels of client presence and taking into account the multifaceted construction referred to as 'the client'. The findings challenge prevailing

assumptions about how architects relate to users through the contact with clients, illustrating dynamically formed types of relationships beside regular architect-client consultation.

The study is limited in the sense that only Belgian architecture firms were studied, whereas practices can differ in regions with other regulations, procedures and attitudes. The diverse and fragmentary empirical material enabled insights into architects' daily experiences, but the findings cannot be generalised to draw conclusions about particular procedures. Architects were the point of departure - an additional study focusing on clients' experiences of briefing and collaborating with architects would be very valuable. Moreover, in this paper 'the architects' were considered as one party. At an individual level, a firm's organisational structure can increase the distance between individual architects and the client and users, due to the chain of contact persons, distributed tasks and dispersed information.⁷ If one aims to develop strategies to support attention to users in design, it is important to consider (the often problematic, as we observed) knowledge sharing in architecture firms. Finally, the notion of user experience was not deepened through the analysis, but will be elaborated elsewhere on the particular aspects architects refer to during design.

The study confirms the problematic situation of knowledge about users' actual interactions with buildings trickling back into the design process. Related research has identified strategies to capture user experience such as a user-centred theory of the built environment (Vischer, 2008), user participation in the design process (Blundell-Jones, Petrescu, and Till, 2005) or post-occupancy evaluations (Cooper, 2001) – yet all of them have a limited uptake in

⁷ As we observed, 'the architects' are often an ad-hoc team composed for the design project, featuring people with different expertise, tasks and tools, from within or even across firms.

architectural design practice. Paying attention to the client's role (as a sensitizer, instigator and key informant about use) in such user-centred strategies could be a direction for future research.

The insights presented in this paper contribute to untangling architect-client dynamics and can be useful to improve collaboration and knowledge transfer in design practice. A constructive relationship between architects and clients can offer opportunities for enhancing their mutual ambitions to integrate user values in the design.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants for granting access to their daily professional environment and for the time and effort devoted to explaining their work, motivations and concerns. This research received funding from the KU Leuven Research Fund, Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship, and through a PhD Fellowship of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO).

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