



Spaces of innovation in architecture firms

Project summary



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Research questions

This project explores the practices of innovation in architectural firms and the role of various technologies, social networks and media in shaping building design. Recognising the often collaborative nature of innovation, it aims to develop understanding of the way architects work in teams but also draw on a range of different stimuli in the innovation process. In doing this, the project also seeks to understand the way architectural knowledges move across space and the mechanisms for 'localising' building designs. A number of themes will be covered in interviews:

- The behaviours and characteristics of the successful, innovative architect.
- The social practices (teamwork, collaboration, inter-personal networks of communication) involved in innovation and the geographies of these practices. This part of the project aims to tease out exactly how architects go about developing innovative design ideas and the importance of intra- and extra-firm relationships.
- The importance of professional discourses in informing innovation



Methodology

The primary method of data collection for this project was in-depth interviews with practitioners. There were two main stages to the data collection process.

1. Thirty six in-depth interviews with architects in London (9 interviews), Paris (3), San Francisco (9), New York (9) and Tokyo (6).

- A rich dataset revealing the practices and relational spaces of innovation was collected with interviewees (see table 1) spanning the organizational hierarchy within firms, from director level down to associate architect.

Table 1. Interviewees in firms.

Cities: L= London; NY = New York City; P = Paris; SF= San Francisco; T = Tokyo.

Interviewee	City	Interviewee	City
Project Architect	L	Architect	P
Managing Partner	L	Architect	P
Associate Partner	L	Managing Partner	P
Managing Partner	L	Architect	SF
Project Architect	L	Managing Partner	SF
Associate Architect	L	Architect	SF
Architect	L	Principal	SF
Partner	L	Architect	SF
Associate Architect	L	Architect	SF
Principal	NY	Partner	SF
Architect	NY	Principal	SF
Principal	NY	Principal	SF
Partner	NY	Architect	T
Architect	NY	Architect	T
Architect	NY	Managing Partner	T
Director	NY	Architect	T
Director	NY	Principal	T
Partner	NY	Architect	T

2. Nine interviews with representatives of professional associations

- Key individuals (see table 2) in the professional associations representing architects in each of the cities studied were interviewed.

Table 2. Interviewees representing professional associations.

Cities: L= London; NY = New York City; P = Paris; SF= San Francisco; T = Tokyo.
RIBA = Royal Institute of British Architects; AIA = American Institute of Architects; JIA = Japanese Institute of Architects; AIJ = Architectural Institute of Japan.

Interviewee	City	Association
Director	L	RIBA
Researcher	L	RIBA
Director	NY	AIA
National Council Member	P	L'ordre des Architectes
Secretary General	P	International Union of Architects

Interviewee	City	Association
Director	SF	AIA
Publicity Officer	SF	AIA
Board Member	T	JIA
President	T	AIJ



Executive Summary

A number of insights were gained from the interviews with architects in firms that help advance knowledge and these are detailed more fully in the report below. In particular the following themes emerged from interviews:

- Architects work in a state of heteronomy (c.f. Larson, 1993) and clients, engineers and regulators all play an important role in the innovation process and in the localization of designs.
- Innovation is also the result of teamwork within firms and collaboration between experts (in the same but also spatially dispersed offices) with different skill sets.
- The media is a significant influence on innovation as it provides inspiration but also, because of the importance of good publicity to an architect's career, acts as a spur for architects to innovate.
- The cities in which firms operate have a significant influence on innovation, primarily because of the pools of talent they house.
- The role of the architecture profession varies between each city and whilst this often historically defined continues to have an impact on the work of global firms.

Interviews with representatives of professional associations were also particularly insightful. Of especial significance were the insights gained into:

- The way architecture is (has always been in some ways) a global profession.
- The way professional associations that have a national remit increasingly operate internationally.
- The challenges and debates about international work, its ethics but also its importance the business of architecture.



Detailed findings

The project primarily aimed to engage in a number of academic debates about the geographies of innovation in architecture firms but also cultural/creative industries more broadly. With this in mind the project had two main objectives:

To map and explore the multiple, scale transcending, networks and circuits of social practice informing innovation in global architecture firms.

Two main insights were gained in relation to this objective.


- 1.** For many architects the global nature of architecture as a profession renders the search for inspiration and ideas innately global, thus challenging the association of creative/cultural industries with exclusively local geographies of innovation (e.g. Simmie, 2003).
- 2.** Travel, conferences, magazines with global coverage and working in global cities that are the crossroads of flows of mobile architects are all strategies used by architects to incorporate themselves into relational spaces of innovation. This corresponds with emerging work in the mobilities paradigm (Urry, 2007) looking at the 'fluid' social spaces of many professionals.



To provide empirical exposition of these social practices; and examine the processes of embedding ideas in local contexts.

Three insights of particular significance were gained from the project:

- 1.** The global nature of architects' professional lives and work can be unpacked to reveal examples of travel, collaboration (with colleagues in the same firm and peers in other firms), worldwide scrutiny of other architects work and attendance at conferences. This mean it is impossible to 'locate' the place where innovation occurs. Hence all innovation is global to some extent, further challenging the idea that innovation and learning is a process with local and global components that have different qualities and can be disaggregated (e.g. Bathelt et al., 2004).
- 2.** On the 'design side', the embedding of innovative designs in the local context occurs through multiple actor-networks. In particular, the client (who is usually local to a project), local regulators, local sub-contractors and local architects involved in a project provide localizing influences on the design process. Applying these findings to work from relational economic geography (e.g. Bathelt and Glückler, 2003) and the global production networks paradigm (Dicken et al., 2001) brings in a cultural industries perspective to studies and develops more sophisticated understanding of the embeddedness of firms (Hess, 2004).
- 3.** Those inhabiting the building and residents of the city in which a building is built also localize designs through their consumptive and interpretative practices. The identity of buildings is, therefore, 'autonomous' to some extent with even the most 'placeless' work of a star-architect or apparently out of place skyscraper having a 'local' identity and meaning. This finding draws on and develops work that uses ideas from cultural geography (Lees, 2006; Jacobs, 2001) and



actor-network theory (Law, 2002) and applies it in the realm of global firms, economic geography and the work of the global architect.


These findings have been/will be used to advance academic understanding through the development of papers putting forward three major empirical and theoretical advances:

1. Mobile ecologies of innovation

Existing work on the geographies of knowledge and innovation (e.g. Amin and Cohendet, 1999; Bunnell and Coe, 2001; Malmberg et al., 2007; Bathelt et al. 2004; Coe et al., 2004) can be advanced by consideration of the need to move beyond discussions of local and global. Data collected as part of the project reveals the need for a theoretical conceptualization of the forms of mobility that influence innovation and learning, something that fundamentally repositions the focus of analysis away from the role of face-to-face contact and conversation and towards experience, engagement and practice.

2. Localising designs – actor-networks putting buildings in their place

The idea that global firms operate as embedded organizational forms (e.g. Coe and Wrigley, 2006; Dicken et al., 2001; Hess, 2004) is developed by this research because of the insights gained into how architects work in a state of heteronomy. Detailed examination of the 'design side' and 'consumption side' actor-networks influencing the work of global architects reveals previously ignored relationships that shape and localize the work of global firms. In addition, the findings of this project also show that studies of cultural/creative industries can better bring-in the consumer in discussions of the embedding of work of global firms.



3. Taking the professions seriously – geographical heterogeneity in work, expertise and status

The comparative work completed as part of this project, in five cities in four countries, reveals the need for greater recognition of the affect of professional status on the work of architects, as well as other professionals. There has been a burgeoning of work on professional service firms and their globalization (Beaverstock, 1996; Beaverstock et al., 1999; Jones, 2005) yet the affects of professional status, and the differences in professional status between countries, has so far been underplayed. Data collected as part of this project shows how in each country architects, their role in building projects, expectations about the 'value added' they deliver, and ultimately the success of global architectural firms, are all influenced by the professional identity of the architect. By comparing the different countries studied, with the contrast between Japan and the USA and UK being particularly stark, the project has shown how understanding the history and status of professions can better help us theorise the globalization of professional service firms.



Conclusions

This report details the main academic findings of the research project. Other findings relate to the challenge of organizing teams/studios to encourage innovation within architecture firms and the use of ICT to create integrated architectural firms and inter-office collaboration. Summaries of these findings are currently being developed.

What is clear from the analysis to date is that innovative architecture only emerges when practitioners are exposed to multiple influences, both within the firm but more broadly within the now global profession of architecture. This produces complex ecologies or milieus of innovation that are composed of interactions, collaborations and experiences that occur in 'spaces' well-beyond the office of a firm and even beyond the city a firm is based in. Architecture is, then, a truly global profession.



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