Architect–client relationship and value addition in private residential projects

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contextualise the architect–client relationship and evaluate the factors responsible for its deterioration, and then define the impact of these factors on the future needs of architects and clients, including how such knowledge can help emerging architects to develop an understanding of the profession at an early stage. It will attempt to reveal new insights and build consensus around issues, such as functionality and aesthetics, per cent-based fee structure, conflict of interest amongst architects, contractors and clients.

Design/methodology/approach – A combination of qualitative online survey, semi-structured interviews and online focus group discussions under the comprehensive umbrella of the case study method has been used to construct a pragmatic framework. The data collection was focused on revealed preferences rather than stated preferences, in terms of likes and dislikes, in a standard survey.

Findings – Overall, this paper strengthens the idea that the predicament of the profession and the marginalisation of architects is due to their detachment from clients. The findings suggest that the fee structure might be a major source of discontent and there is an urgent need for alternative routes of procurement, particularly for private residential clients. While most clients prefer functionality over aesthetics and want architects to be affordable, they are more willing to invest their trust in architects who can deliver from concept to completion.

Research limitations/implications – The arguments contested in this paper attempt to demystify the dynamics that are at play during the construction stage. It looks at power sharing, responsibilities and silent hierarchies that transpire between architects, clients and contractors, particularly in private residential projects.

Originality/value – The main recommendation of this paper is that to secure the future of the architecture profession emerging architects need to be trained more in client-centric skills than design-centric aptitude.

Keywords Clients, Architect–client, Private residential, Value addition

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Architecture and the act of making a building for a client can be seen as a privilege enjoyed by architects, unlike the provision of any other product or service. Architects are endowed with comprehensive vision (Sariyildiz and Veer, 1998), they design and plan the whole building process; however, for many in the profession it is appalling to learn that the architect is no longer considered a key person by clients (Schoenmaekers, 2011; Stevens et al., 2015). Most consultants and contractors get paid in full for their products or services, yet often only the architect is held responsible for any shortcoming. Even when they remain subject to strict regulations and a professional code of conduct, their reputation, and that of the profession as a whole, has been adversely affected in recent decades (Celento, 2007; Buchanan, 2012).

The main argument contested in this paper attempts to demystify the dynamics that are at play during the construction stage. It looks at power sharing, responsibilities and silent hierarchies that transpire between architects, clients and contractors, particularly in private residential projects. The linking hypothesis is that architects cannot communicate the value that they bring and lack the understanding of client needs, which has led to their marginalisation. Through empirical research, the paper will attempt to build consensus around issues, such as functionality and aesthetics, per cent-based fee structure, conflict of interest amongst architects, contractors and clients, including misinterpretation of the client’s confidence and trust on them.
2. Literature review
Extensive research has shown that viewing architecture as art, a culture of allegiance and indoctrination, disassociation from clients and end users, neglecting moral and ethical responsibilities, and outdated models of education and practice have all led to the marginalisation of practising architects, increasing stress levels of academicians and heightening the concerns of emerging architects (Salama, 2007; Salingaros, 2008; Sirowy, 2013). Davies (1993) noted a consistent client response of “dismay” at architects’ “arrogance”, their “perceived unwillingness to accept and acknowledge criticism” and “as ‘being intellectually above the concerns of the client’s world’” (cited in Carmichael, 2002, p. 21). Hazel Bines (1992) opined that the involvement of clients and users in education could not only offset some of the criticisms of professional attitudes and power relationships in relation to clients and consumers but could also help to ensure that professional formation does address the changing nature of professions in society as a whole” (p. 135).

A study in Client & Architect: Developing the Essential Relationship by RIBA suggests that “clients certainly felt let down in a way by the architects” and that “clients think architects who listen and understand properly are rare. That must change” (Stevens et al., 2015, p. 18). One participant in RIBA study, Gregor Mitchell, who voiced contractor–clients’ concerns, said that there was no point in hiring an architect if they were unable to “significantly improve profitability by reducing costs or squeezing more space out of a building”. Many surveys and research projects commissioned by RIBA suggest that architects are not only “losing their ground” but also their professional status, which is becoming highly speculative as clients look desperately for alternatives. Baillieu (2015) questioned the purpose of such studies and research projects and asks, “what the point of all these hundreds of client interviews was unless it is to address the skewed procurement system and the reality of what’s really happening”. She alleged that such research projects are merely an attempt to reverse the old image of RIBA being anti-change and protectionist.

Drawing upon the four major approaches to western ethics, Thomas Fisher (2010) attributed the phases of architectural project and described the ethical dilemmas that architects are often confronted with. Phase 1: architects get commissioned for a project based on “virtue-ethics” (personal qualities such as honesty and integrity). Phase 2: “contract-ethics” come into play during negotiations of architectural fees, alongside the appointment of other consultants and contractors. In Phase 3, design and contract administration calls for “duty ethics” to display good intentions and fairness. Finally, in the last phase, “utilitarian ethics” demands evaluation of whether the clients’ aspirations and needs were met (Fisher, 2010, p. 11).

According to Bernard Williams (1995), many architects often struggle to reconcile societal values with professional norms, as argued in Professional Morality and Its Disposition. As a result, they often face “disquieting ambivalence” concerning ethical duties. Henry Cobb (1992) explained how uncertainty looms over – how an architect can best fulfil his duties and make difficult choices, as the recipients of his service are “fiercely committed to widely divergent and deeply conflicting principles of human duty […]. Hence, a disquieting ambivalence with respect to ethical issues – a pervasive uncertainty about how best to fulfil my duty as a professional – is a nearly perpetual state of mind for me, as surely it must also be for every architect in practice today whose work significantly touches or shapes the public realm” (pp. 47-48).

Burr and Jones (2010) conducted a study to examine the current position and explore the future possibilities and indications of the architect’s role. Using a series of Delphi rounds, they sought to evaluate and build consensus on “what it means to be an architect” in present times. Their results reported that the majority of panel members described an architect as “one who functions as the creator of the building’s design” (p. 126). They also reported that the influence and professional significance of an architect in the construction phase are
nowhere near that of a general contractor. The majority of the panel stated that poor communication between an architect and general contractor would most likely cause conflict between them. The overall concern of the panel members was that “the role of the architect is not clear and is not heading in a positive direction” (Burr and Jones, 2010, p. 130). According to Burr and Jones (2010), there exists a “discrepancy between the actual and the perceived-and-desired level of collaboration and communication […] If architects, general contractors, construction managers, engineers, and sub-consultants all agreed that there should be a higher level of collaboration, then why isn’t there?” (p. 134).

2.1 Meaning of value for clients
In *The System of Objects*, Philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1968/2006) contested that customers are won over by the perceived notion that advertisers take an interest in their well-being, the latter display and project warmth through their intentions and demeanour to personalise the product or services (p. 170). Through cultivated language, advertisers are not only able to convince consumers that specific products and services are essential parts of their lives, but also construct the idea of consumer choice, empowerment and simple solutions that inevitably appeal to the consumer (Leonard et al., 2004). Likewise, other professionals involved in building activity have also successfully captured large market shares, which were once an architect’s area of expertise. These professionals are giving tough competition to architects, which is good in a way for clients, given the flexibility they offer regarding alternative routes for procurement. They usually charge after completing the work or service, which has the added benefit for the clients leading architects to lose much of their business. Moreover, sometimes they imitate the role of architects in such a way that it is hard to tell the difference. However, the real paradox is that architects refuse to acknowledge this as a threat and still want to hang on to the outdated, traditional model of practice, for example, seen in their unwillingness to embrace the change of being client-centred. They still expect that a client will walk into their office with a project and ask them to design a beautiful building.

Advertisements are marketed to bolster symbolic, designed and functional solutions. Apart from focusing on the house as a product, home magazines highlight the lives of the “elite class” and publish stories that “romanticise” their lifestyle, which is not the readers’ lifestyle. Such media pressure not only bothers but also challenges readers’ sense of home and induces in them a misapprehension; by way of regaining social confidence, they are induced to catch up with the latest trends. However, pressure from the media can cause the consumer to question their perception of a home and can trigger pressure to maintain social confidence by succumbing to ever-changing trends, especially in upper-class societies. “What constitutes the ideal is of course always changing, if only incrementally, so the home is never finished” (Leonard et al., 2004, p. 99).

2.2 Perception of value
“Nature creates and does not produce; it provides resources for a creative and productive activity on the part of social humanity; but it supplies only the use value and every use value […] either returns to nature or serves as a natural good” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 70). He contended that “work” has something irreplaceable and unique about it, whereas a “product” is something that can be reproduced with repetitive actions and gestures. As such, architectural products and buildings are labelled as “artefacts” and “original works” by their creators. For clients, however, these “artefacts” are just “products” that fulfil their physical and emotional needs, referring to the concept of fetishisation. If someone likes a “product” (artefact in its creator’s terms) in the window of a furniture store or the sophisticated interior of a hotel or a house, they develop a feeling of fetishisation, which impels them to own that “product”. People usually aspire to purchase a similar variant, but if they are unable to afford it, they are happy to find a suitable match that fits their budget.
This “commotion” can be seen in almost all middle-class homes, where people keep buying off-the-shelf products, such as furniture and furnishing items, to catch up with the popular style. One could argue that, in a way, this action of bringing in new furniture is also, eventually, the creation of a new piece of “work” or “artefact” and is comparable with what architects create. Perhaps, this is what users expect from architects regarding design. They are not necessarily interested in original works, great designs or artefacts (Furlan and Faggion, 2016). However, this does not imply that they necessarily know how to create a “work” by using the “products”, or, for that matter, how to differentiate between the two. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that middle-class clients, for whom architects do not prefer to work (Mackay et al., 2000), generally demand products and services which provide them with use value.

The effect of fetishisation and consumerism has engulfed middle-class society in such a manner that middle-class people are barely able to make ends meet and live their daily lives. Is it not ironic of architects to think that these clients will identify and appreciate the aesthetic value of something that is beyond their finances? Moreover, why should clients plan and think 5–10 years into the future, when most modern-day product-infatuated businesses are promoting a “use and throw” culture? An instrumental part of this problem are also other building professionals, furniture and furnishing companies, who offer zero-interest, use-now-pay-later schemes on their products. They only target the immediate needs of their clients and disregard long-term implications of these low-cost interventions. Their only motive is to sell and meet consumer demand (El-Nachar, 2011). By no means does the researcher want to take a position that a “use and throw” culture is good, nor that clients should endorse this path. The point of this argument is when most other businesses and companies are responding to consumer needs, why do architects resist that change?

Ilari Aho (2013) stressed the need for innovative and sustainable models for architectural practice and urged the research community to propose new business models. These new models must reflect value addition in the delivery and operations of buildings and consider “how value is actually validated in practices, how performance data can be shared amongst stakeholders (feedback and feedforward) and allow for ‘fine tuning’ or rectifying problems” (p. 114). “Target-value design”, lean construction and “evidence-based design” are some examples of such approaches. “Evidence-based design (EBD) is an innovation to the normative design process for practitioners who strive to base design solutions on measurable outcomes” (Martin, 2014). According to Macomber et al. (2007), “value is an assessment made relative to a set of concerns that someone wants addressed. There is nothing of value independent of a person [assessing] it is valued” (p. 1). In the architect–client context, they further add that, using design conversation, the architect must keep exploring the concerns of the client, which inevitably keep changing throughout the life of the project. The design and value delivered to clients suffer if the requirements are fixed early, and explorations are cut short (Macomber et al., 2007).

Logically seen, the value is added to a product or service through innovation and improvisation of the available resources while working within specific limitations. For example, take the case of stone flooring. Imagine that on the drawing, the architects have specified a size of stone slabs to be used in a room, but during the execution stage, due to the raw size of the stone slabs (natural marble), the specified size may not be the optimal size to minimise wastage. By adjusting the size of the cut slabs, the stone mason can substantially reduce wastage, thus bringing about added value. Hence, it can be argued that a substantial amount of value could also be added by contractors, masons, joiners, as well as the clients themselves, during the construction stage, particularly on private residential projects.

2.3 Target-value design

Target-value design is a method by which design is optimised to fit as-built conditions or adjusted to benefit from the sizes and types of building materials. Working on design
in isolation or in a non-collaborative manner often results in projects that are overpriced, unconstructive, off-target and late. When architects do not adopt a target-value design approach, in which realistic targets and achievable budgets guide the design, client expectations are often frustrated (Macomber et al., 2007). The estimates of current design practices are based on designs whose constructability is yet to be evaluated. However, by radically transforming them to a target-value design approach, which is based on detailed estimates of constructible designs, architects can deliver target value from the design process.

2.4 Developing the argument
According to the above-cited literature, it can be seen that the qualified architects are being replaced by much less qualified and “financially-manageable builders”. This review has acknowledged the status of architects in the society, including their contributions, motivations and dilemmas. It has emphasised how other professionals, such as engineers and interior designers, have established a stronghold in the market segments, which the architects have ignored due to their preferences for design-oriented missions. The disparity between the language and terminology used by architects and clients offers insight into the reasons for the poor development of their relationship. It raises questions about the capability of architects, given that part of the architect’s job is to understand client (i.e. lay) perceptions and accentuates the need for additional training of architects to better understand the public’s tastes. Is it because architects ask for money for the design work in advance that many clients prefer to choose professionals who offer alternative methods of procurement?

Arguably, common sense leads us to ask: why should architects be paid a major portion of their fees before something has been built on site? Why can architects not be paid an agreed percentage calculated as per the amount of the running bills corresponding to completed works on the site? It is common to see architects justifying their advance payments by saying that a large amount of work has to be completed before they get to a site, where the major value is added. However, why should this be a large percentage of the whole project cost? Why should it not be a modest sum to cover the basic expenses of drawing a design and initial operational costs? The researcher by no means intends to imply that architects should not secure their deals and clients, but why should this necessarily take the form of advance money, rather than another type of binding agreement? As such, the paper will examine the following questions:

*RQ1.* Why are architects and clients not able to strike an optimum balance amid quality, cost and time?

*RQ2.* Why are architects unable to justify the value they add, and why cannot the client understand it?

*RQ3.* Will architects’ arrogance and clients’ emotions, expectations and lack of awareness put the future of this profession on thin ice?

3. Approach to investigation
A combination of approaches, such as a qualitative online survey, semi-structured interviews and online focus group discussions, under the comprehensive umbrella of the case study method, has been used to construct the framework for this study. Key themes from the literature review have been developed and written in a critical tone in the form of scenarios and statements, mainly from a client’s perspective, helping the respondents to reflect on past experiences while answering the questions. For the ease of reporting similarities and contrasts between clients’ and architects’ views, a Likert (1932) scale has
been used to gather respondents’ opinions and solicit their judgements on individual statements, based on their lived experience to build consensus around key issues, which are important to both architects and clients.

3.1 Online survey
Through qualitative survey using the Likert scale, this study collected 180 responses, affording meaningful insights into several propositions and assumptions. Many respondents also made critical observations and commented with examples that helped in the presentation and discussion of the responses. The survey that was shared widely in the UK and other parts of the world through a single shareable link helped to organise and reconcile the discoveries from the literature review in a logical manner. For five months, it collected responses from architects and non-architects and provided a premise for setting the tone and narrative, helping the researcher to contextualise the previous works in the light of recent technological advancements.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews
Through 26 interviews, events and focus group meetings, qualitative data were collected, reflecting the rich knowledge and personal experiences of the respondents. These interviews helped in exploring the issues in detail, contextualising and grounding the examples in real-world settings of Scotland. Potential respondents were informed about all the aspects of the study through an e-mail invite and were given sufficient time to respond, and the interviews were organised and conducted as per their suitability. Through these discussions, the researcher could acquire a more focused understanding, which eliminated approximations and improved the validity and reliability of the collected data.

3.3 Analysis
The researcher presented the results of the survey and then asked the participants to reflect on their views to build consensus around a specific issue. These discussions were recorded, transcribed and then coded in NVivo for qualitative analysis by the researcher. They helped in achieving confidence in the findings and correlating them with real-world examples through participants’ feedback and experiences. This was particularly helpful in reflecting and comparing survey result with people’s views and opinions. In semi-structured interview findings, the participants are addressed as, e.g. “Architect interviewee 1” (A1), “Client interviewee 1” (C1) and “Other-professional interviewee 1” (O1). However, respondents who commented while completing the online survey were identified as survey participant/response number/architect or client (SPXXX–AR or SPXXX–CL).

4. Interpretation of online survey results

| Statement 1. Most clients prefer functionality over aesthetics and want that architects should be more affordable and accessible |
|---|---|---|---|
| More than half respondents (57% combined) prefer functionality over aesthetics and want architects to be more affordable and accessible. One client contended that “I’m not one of those people that prefers functionality, but I would think more people prefer aesthetics over functionality” (C3). Architects were divided on this question. Exactly half (50%) agreed, whereas a quarter was neutral, and a quarter disagreed |

Pie 1. Overall response

![Pie chart showing the distribution of responses to Statement 1.](chart)
5. Interviewees’ response to the survey results during interviews

5.1 Functionality or aesthetics

The majority of residential clients look to architects for simple solutions, which need not necessarily be masterpieces of their creative imagination; therefore, they claim, architects should be affordable and accessible to everyone. When asked to choose between functionality and aesthetics, more than half (57 per cent combined and 50 per cent of architects) of respondents said that clients prefer functionality over aesthetics. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that current systems of architectural education produce graduates who only have aesthetic skills and do not know much about functionality and affordability.

On the aspect of functionality and aesthetics, A10 argued that functionality may be important for most of the clients in the world, but “people come to us because we do beautiful buildings; they’re not going to come to us to do a medical facility because it
doesn’t matter if the medical facility is beautiful or not”. Although he agreed that emerging architects do not know much about functionality and affordability, “absolutely right […] their skill will be in aesthetics […] they need to be trained that way [other than aesthetics]. A11 explained if “we’re talking about a residential type of project […] it’s a very emotional subject because you’re trying to find out how that person lives […] do they need a space for muddy boots or […] are they super tidy […] and to give over that amount of information could seem intrusive, but otherwise you are not designing to their needs […] some clients do want aesthetics, they want to buy it […] like you would buy a sofa […] they don’t want to go into the process, and other people want to know where the wood came from […] what the filling material is […] you know […] is the person being paid a fair rate for making it”.

5.2 Contractors or architects
Similarly, when asked if good contractors and skilled labourers are more important than architects for timely completion, quality and strict budgets, 36 per cent of respondents said yes. What was more surprising is that one-fifth (20 per cent) of architects also said that contractors were more important than architects. A10 believed that good contractors and skilled labourers are more important than architects, whereas A11 argued that since these projects are long, “some clients want the architect to get planning permission and then go away”. She was also of the opinion, “[…] well the architect is not the one who’s building the wall”. On the contrary, A1 was a firm believer that architects are definitely more important than contractors; he explained that:

[...] you can have a good contractor and a bad architect, and you still have a terrible project [...] and you can have a bad contractor and a good architect, the difference in both he argued was that, if the architect is competent and understands the contract [...] he can make the contractor perform, or he can get rid of them.

Referring to the context of the UK, A1 explained, “there is no record of contractors getting fired, whereas there is a definite record of architects getting into litigation. I’ve seen a lot of contractors bitten-off jobs and I’ve seen a lot of situations where the architect has actually made the contractor’s life very difficult and decide to change their contractor”. However, A8 expressed concern that:

[...] most people, when they’re looking for a new house or they’ve got the money to commission a new house, go straight to a builder [...] and the builder will give them the builder’s standard house [...] and that strikes me as just a lost opportunity for everyone concerned [...] because I sincerely don’t believe that a builder will truly be able to translate the aspirations of a client, which are very complex aspirations, into a built form [...] but actually bypassing the architect is like bypassing a huge opportunity to do something really good [...] and that’s a frustration.

The needs of clients are side-lined, as the needs are misinterpreted and looked upon unrealistically by the architects; and advice from friends and well-wishers disturbs and affects initial negotiations and the decision-making process. This makes the architect–client relationship (ACR), in its current model, operate more like a power struggle. This implies that it is often the case that first-time residential clients are not aware of how to ascertain what they want because the benefits of engaging an architect are neither explicit nor guaranteed for clients.

5.3 Per cent-based fees
Typically, architects charge their fees either as a lump sum or as a percentage of the project cost, excluding charges for site visits or time spent during contract administration. The next statement contended that the current fee structure that architects use is inadequate to
justifies the technical genius rooted in their concepts and professional ethos of their practice and fails to separate conceptual value from production-based money-oriented value. Around 45 per cent of all respondents and 47 per cent of architects acknowledged that the traditional fee structure is out-of-date. A10 firmly argued that clients like a percentage to base their projects on: “we will never look at a fee without checking it against a percentage, so even if we don’t tell our client about the percentage, we’re using […] we find most of our clients actually do like to know because they want to compare architects.” Moreover, “people like the percentage because it actually means partly that it is slightly under their control […] they can remember that the architect’s fee is five percent and the engineer’s fee two percent.” In other words, the agreement was that percentage-based fee structures encourage situations where clients first need to commit to the architect before the architect will discuss the design. However, A1 explained his way of articulating this kind of fee structure:

[…] why percentage-based fees are kind of yes […] you need to take us on, we’re telling you nothing until you signed on the dotted line to take the percentage fee and then we’ll go in come up with our best ideas […] So, it’s a kind of historical view and it is this historical but in the modern worldview […] where some people place a little value in the intellectual property […] they say, well as soon as you tell me, it is mine […] he built my design […] the guy that couldn’t draw was told how to do it […] built my design and I learned a lesson from that – never ever tell anybody any answers until you’ve got your contract in writing on your percentage fee […] because then they’re stuck.

5.4 Tactical benefit

Another hindrance to the ACR is the architect’s authoritarian image, which many clients feel, they use for the tactical benefit. When asked about this during the survey, 32 per cent of the overall respondents and 26 per cent of architects agreed that architects use their position for tactical benefits by promoting their affiliated teams. Although 60 per cent of architects strongly rejected these claims, it does not indemnify that this practice does not have any implications. Architects do use their position for the tactical benefit, said A10; he argued that:

[…] often it’s not so much about reducing headaches of coordination […] the architect’s the person who knows the least in the whole process […] the client knows what he wants and he’s going to know the building much better […] he’s going to know which plants go in […] change the curtain colour and all that […] the builder knows a lot about building […] the engineer knows a lot about engineering […] the architect needs to know a little bit about all of those things but never knows enough about any of those things together to actually do any good.

A9, on the other hand, said:

[…] most of the time the profession attracts egotistical personalities, plenty of promises to pay up in gold, someone has to pay for it. Yes, it is a competitive environment. As well, people go to establish links to position themselves tactically, and I used to quite a dismay, the same team over and over again but actually, If you have a good working relationship with consultant then, then why would you not try to promote them?

From personal experience, the researcher can argue that it is fairly common for product manufacturers to offer various promotional and incentive-oriented schemes that offer heavy discounts through architects for recommending their products. Hence, often it is a rivalry about, who can get a better deal for clients – contractors or architects – and moreover, it is worth noting that these special prices are never available to clients directly, even though they invest the money and perhaps pay interest too.

5.5 Conflict of interest

However, only 29 per cent of all respondents and 20 per cent of architects agreed that architects should play a strictly advisory role in average house construction, to avoid
conflict of interest. A11 and A10 also agreed that architects should strictly play an advisory role. A8 explained that the profession is recognising small clients; with specific reference to Scotland, he said:

I have absolutely no doubt that there are very many instances [...] and probably the majority of instances [...] where people, sometimes with small budgets, sometimes with big budgets, who can afford to pay for and build their own house [...] and let’s face it that is always going to be a minority in our society [...] because you know architecture at that level is not about the social model [...] architecture at that level is about enabling people [...] with varying budgets, but usually with a certain amount of money [...] a privileged amount of money to do something that is particular to them [...] and realise their vision with the assistance of being an architect that should be the ideal [...] now the irony is [...] if you actually look at this of years in Scotland there have been a very significant number of modest projects [...] and quite a lot of those houses are small houses on small budgets [...] often in remote locations by small practices [...] not earning big fees [...] who are, you know, they’re scraping together a living but they’re not living rich on too large fees [...] they’re charging very competitive fees for a very competitive high-quality service and they are on occasion [...] in fact more often than not I would say they are creating sublime buildings.

Clients, on the other hand, agreed that architects should only play an advisory role and not force things. C1 said, “my architect said, ‘you can have the wooden windows for a thousand pounds or the plastic windows for five hundred pounds, they will do the same’. The wooden ones will look much nicer; they might increase the value of the house more”. C5 suggested that to complete complex projects and execute intricate detailing, “you need to have good contractors”. On percentage-based fee structures, she held that “to me it doesn’t make sense [...] it has to be for me, the time [...] time is what you pay for, not size or budget. I’ve worked with both structures and time is the most sensible one [...] this kind of structure makes the best compensation for someone’s time”.

6. Reflective discussion: value addition in private residential projects
Since it is hard for first-time clients to determine the value at the outset, an architect’s name helps clients to distinguish between competing service providers (Roberts et al., 2000). Usually, the owners of small to medium types of residential projects with modest budgets are often overwhelmed with suggestions from friends and well-wishers. They are also influenced by advertising, where schemes and offers on building-related products motivate them into deliberations and encourage them to indulge in impulsive buying. However, it would not be wrong to assume that, generally their intentions behind these actions are to achieve the best possible results, within their budget.

Often in residential projects, instead of listening to their clients and discerning their needs and intentions, architects are often more concerned with the aesthetic aspects of creating a great design for their portfolio, whereas some architects merely consider the financial viewpoint and try to assess the fees, terms of engagements and profitability of undertaking such project. While there is nothing wrong on the part of the architects to evaluate the profitability of an assignment, they tend to overlook two important aspects during these initial stages of engagements. First, the clients are aware of the fact that they are availing the services of a professional, which costs them money; and second, they are under strong external influence from friends, which obscures their vision and lessens their rational decision-making capabilities. Although the professional conduct of architects, the initial contract paperwork, the fee structure, etc., inform the client as to how much it will cost them in terms of architectural fees, they do not communicate the look and feel of the end product. In other words, a contract of engagement is simply a promise in the shape of paperwork, which lacks the factor of “take-home feeling” or “value for money”.

Many people are worried about losing money or having their trust broken, and this makes them want to invest in something tangible which is physically verifiable and
contributes to overall “quality value” of the building, rather than architectural fees (Macomber et al., 2007). For example, according to clients, value addition is conspicuous, when they deal with other professionals and consultants in the building trade, such as carpenters, electricians and plumbing contractors. Who, although notoriously avoid such general obligations and prefer only to execute orders, are not only better-off being themselves and pledging limited responsibility but also able to communicate the “value for money” instantaneously. For example, when ordered, a carpenter will make a door as per specifications, but will not generally be responsible for making sure it fits the size of the opening, if there are other construction errors. Such situations sometimes do call for alterations, which is seen as an added cost for the clients and lack of coordination on the part of the architects or supervisor, which sometimes becomes the major cause of discontentment, at least for the clients.

Particularly for residential clients who come “in all sizes and shapes” with bespoke requirements, architects do not have much to offer in terms of prototype designs or a modular solution. Moreover, architects do not want to work for residential clients because they are far too demanding. Arguably, this is an important segment of clients and as a service-oriented profession, if architects will not serve them who else will? For example, doctors, dentists and lawyers do not make such distinction that they will serve only the rich and the ones who can afford them. Due to the issue of this affordability, more and more people are becoming unaware of what architects actually do. Consequently, they tend to look at architecture being unnecessary or something extra rather than an integral part of the building process that could provide better quality and save money down the line.

Generally, it is assumed that cheap fees often result in poor service, and architects often say that a client is firing his current architect because they have finally figured out that the cheap fees are costing them a fortune, in change orders from the contractor. However, changing an architect during a course of the project will also result in a messy situation both for exiting architects and the new architects, for which the client will pay the price. Moreover, when most established practices are always pressed for time and busy with bigger projects, how can one guarantee that their expensive fee will ensure that residential clients will not be ignored. After all, no one else is paid in advance; most tradespeople work by a paper contract, and even they run the risk of delay or non-payment by the client in some cases. Instead of proposing a fixed percentage of the whole project, which of course scares the domestic clients off, why not have some exit options for clients and architects, just in case they are not happy with the performance or commitment of either party.

The state of profession is not as glorious as it used to be in the past. Once established, small architectural practices tend to become very selective in the kind of work they undertake. Such practices believe that keeping existing clients is much easier and more profitable than constantly attracting new ones (Buckingham, 2001). Emerging architects are struggling to get employment in architects offices, leave alone independent commissions. Private residential clients could have been the perfect launch pad for emerging architects to learn the talk of trade. These could make them more competent, equipped with practical skills both for architectural offices and in case they want to set up their own studio. The culture and attitude of architect’s rejection of residential clients, just because they are demanding, is diminishing the role of architects within society, in this digital age. One can argue that emerging architects learn these skills when they work with established practice, but, realistically, they hardly get any chance to interact with clients during the initial years. Unlike doctors and many other professions, who establish connections and gain direct experience by interacting with their patients (read clients), emerging architects rarely get such chances within architectural offices, as they are there only as free labour, or “CAD monkeys”, and are exploited in the name of experience (Brown, 2012; Cooke, 2013).
7. Conclusion
This paper has looked at issues affecting the ACR when contractors and skilled workers bring up practical issues on site. These issues can range from operations and logistics to planning permission, etc., but concerning this study, they are the cost of design elements, material choice and finishing. Therefore, it seems that overall sample of respondents acknowledge the value of architects and their contributions, but the identified apprehensions need to be addressed. While most clients prefer functionality over aesthetics and want architects to be affordable, they are more willing to invest their trust in architects who can deliver from concept to completion.

The findings suggest that the fee structure might be a major source of discontent and there is an urgent need for alternative routes of procurement, particularly for private residential clients. A possible explanation for these responses is also that in non-residential projects, a percentage of an architect’s fees helps in budget planning and it is not something new for stakeholders, while in the case of residential clients, who are not even fully aware of the role and services offered by architects, they think paying architects is superfluous. Hence, task-based fee structures might encourage clients to approach architects with their projects, which may later have the potential to transform into larger commissions. This could be particularly beneficial to small practices and emerging architects.

The findings also indicate that there is an intrinsic relationship between an architect’s inability and a client’s failure to strike an optimum balance amongst quality, cost and time. Moreover, the role of emotions and other psychological factors also seem to accentuate clients’ anxieties. Taken together, these observations support the perceived notion of the clients that engaging an architect increases the project cost by 15–20 per cent, and also that architects are not interested in small projects. Given all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that architects stand isolated from the public, who are largely ignorant of the services they offer.

Arguably, architects truly bring spatial qualities to projects, which otherwise would have been just buildings, but where are such clients nowadays, who can patronise an architect’s dreams? If an architect wants to communicate their intentions to a user of the building, they must take user’s ideas about perceptions or desires seriously when it comes to developing a design brief. Therefore, the main recommendation of this paper is that emerging architects need to be trained more in client-centric skills rather than in design-centric aptitude to secure the future of the architecture profession.

Acknowledgement
The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to all the study participants for contributing their time to give such comprehensive and meaningful answers. One of the most exciting aspects of this research was the active and open participation of private residential clients. The author is also indebted for the support and mentorship received from peers in academia and practice, who agreed to face-to-face interviews and in-depth discussions, in some cases lasting up to 2 h. Finally, the author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback, contributing to the improvement of this paper.

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