



Australian Institute of Architects

Victorian Chapter Member Forum

11/09/2014

Overview

In early September the Victorian Chapter held a forum at Treasury Theatre for Victorian Institute members. Jointly chaired by Chapter Councillors Stuart Harrison and Amy Muir the purpose of the forum was to enable a broad open discussion around key issues facing the profession at the moment. The forum provided an opportunity for members to discuss openly how they would like to see the Institute respond to a number of current issues and challenges, and what role the individual members can play in that.

The evening itself was run in a “Q and A” format with questions from members (either submitted beforehand or raised on the night) put to a panel of members. The panel members came from a broad cross section of the community including small, medium, large and regional practices and SONA, VYAG, academic and government representatives. A full list of panel members is included at the end of this report.

A series of questions were fielded from the audience (with some submitted prior to the event) on the key issues facing the profession today. The list of questions asked is also included at the end of this report. Main topic areas addressed on the night were: wages; methods of practice; fees; education; internships; equity; public engagement; planning; and lobbying government.

Rather than attempt to reproduce the discussion on the night this overview identifies the issues/actions that came out of responses to the questions and also clarifies some of those responses to better reflect the current status quo of some of the discussed issues. The comments below are those of the panel members, and are not the view of the Institute – as the purpose of the Forum was for the Institute to hear the views of the members in order to inform Institute policy and programmes.

With an attendance of close to 90 members, Chapter Council was very pleased with the event and are now looking to hold another Forum early in 2015. This next Forum will focus more sharply on one or two issues to be determined post the upcoming State election.

This overview will be circulated to all Chapter committees and Chapter Council as a basis for focussing activities for 2015.

ON INCREASING ARCHITECT WAGES

- In order to pay better wages architects need to be able to charge fees that are commensurate with the value of their work. We need to establish a fee base and increase the value of the profession.
- We need to communicate widely about what architects do more widely for the community – the extensive scope of the architect’s role is largely misunderstood by the public.

- It's about 'respecting within our own profession' – the culture of long hours as a grad or as a director – architects/graduates have to draw the line; respect the young and be tough on not working extra unpaid hours. The young grads and architects should be valued in this profession.
- We need to look at what standard architecture practice is before expecting an increase in fees.
- We need to convince clients that architect services are of value and of need.
- A political climate is necessary where architects can be seen to contribute back to society.
- Institute would possibly support a rise in the Award rate but it's not up to the Institute. The ACA and Professionals Australia handle this. The Institute membership comprises both employers and employees from the profession.
- We need to make sure architects are more valued first to be able to afford a higher Award rate or we will all go out of business.

ON UNPAID INTERNSHIPS

- In most cases unpaid internships are illegal <http://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/policies-and-guides/fact-sheets/unpaid-work/unpaid-work>
- 2 weeks formal work experience facilitated through universities is seen to be beneficial to practices and students without costing too much to the practice.
- We have to be realistic that in the current climate there actually aren't enough practices to offer internships/ placements to all students – unis have to provide equitable education to all students.

ON OFFSHORING

- How are offshore architects able to work with the language and landscape effectively?
- Quality can suffer, difficult to control the outcome.
- Offshoring has its place, just as many things in today's culture that are made offshore – it's something that should be explored so that it doesn't undercut Oz economy and Oz architects/graduates. We have to be smart about it to do it well and it's about how you develop relationships offshore.
- Offshoring is an opportunity that with careful understanding could allow small/medium practice to remain design focused.
- Students believe that they aren't taught enough or know enough to practice after uni – and it is alarming that offshoring leaves students in a compromised position.

ON STUDENTS/GRADUATES and DOCUMENTATION

- There is a real need for students to get work experience as is difficult for practices to offer positions to graduates who don't have experience.
- Can we revisit the model where students get credit for working on projects through placements?
- Key to have students as they are incredibly talented and bring huge value and vitality to practice. Students and practice is currently disengaged - we need a matchmaking app to connect students and practice.

ON RETIRED ARCHITECTS AND MENTORING

- General focus in practice is on how to support students but a sustainable office should have people of all ages – a fantastic model is one where students who don't have the technical knowledge can be mentored by older architects.
- The older and the wiser are really good at imparting skills and knowledge about past models and arrangements that new architects aren't familiar with.
- Architecture is a lifelong profession – you never stop learning from the age/cultural differences.

- 'Older architects have a hell of a lot to offer to young grads and architects' – the Institute's Senior Counsellors have substantial knowledge and are a key example of this.

ON PARLOUR RESEARCH

- Architecture as a profession is fairly equitable compared to some industries but still work to do.
- The program made members aware that there is a problem and that we have responsibilities and a role to play in this generation to support the next generation coming through.
- It has done a lot to raise awareness.
- We have to make sure that regardless we are still looking at things on merit.

ON THE INSTITUTE

- Institute is developing a Cost guide that will assist members in estimating what it costs to deliver good service?
- Competition guidelines being reviewed by National Council working group.
- Institute is encouraging VBA to regulate project managers so that they are accredited.

ON THE INSTITUTE and LOBBYING/PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- Current relationship with the government not as strong as it has been in the past. Planning Minister has only agreed to meet with the Institute once in 4 years.
- Institute needs to engage in both back room lobbying and up front public engagement and advocacy. They are not mutually exclusive. In terms of the Institute we need to decide if we should be more proactive in the public realm and make a better case for ourselves. We should be more publically engaged. We are moving towards that direction, but there's a long way to go.
- We are the 'gentleman' profession – we are not pushy enough. We don't have public lobbyists at forums (i.e: Property Council and HIA) effectively we have volunteers attending forums. We need to look at how to improve our voice to be strong and confident.
- We need to be more vocal in every door – everyone in the profession has the ability to effect change and all architects should be doing it loudly and demand that we are treated as valuable in society.
- No support in current political environment for architects to be written into apartment design guidelines as sole designers.
- The individualisation that we pride ourselves on as architects makes it difficult to act collectively – we constantly distinguish ourselves from others' views. So if we are to change we have to own up to this and work out what we can do.

Forum panel members were:

- Mel Bright (Make) and Ben Edwards (Edwards Moore), from small practice.
- Karen Alcock (MA) Simon Knott (BKK) from medium practice.
- Ann Lau (Hayball) from large practice (*Chapter Council member*).
- Dennis Carter from regional practice.
- Jill Garner from the OVGA, (acting State Government Architect).
- Des Smith from Deakin University.
- Daniel Lawson as student representative, from SONA (*Chapter Council member*).
- Mercedes Mambort from VYAG, the young architects group. (*Chapter Council member*).