

## Identifying the Designer as Worker

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As professionalized Architecture eradicates discourse of design as labor it does so in capitalism's favor, not to the advantage of the profession. The discourse of the lone genius with single authorship, creativity and talent leads to the rationalization of our long, unpaid hours as the sacrifice we make for society. The resulting system prevents us from identifying as workers and, as a consequence, remain ignorant of our exploitation by others who aren't so uninformed and can profit off of the value of our work.

The Architecture Lobby is an organization that argues for the value of architecture, beginning by identifying ourselves as workers and our contributions as "work" – work that is aesthetic, technical, social, organizational, environmental, administrative, fiduciary, but in all cases, work. The goal is to build on this fundamental awareness and understanding of value to become perceptive operators in our contemporary political economy.

It was not always the case that architecture ignored labor. 19<sup>th</sup> century architects developed their designs with particular regard to the skills, knowledge and creativity that the various trades – skilled and unskilled – would bring to their projects; they saw their immaterial work as part and parcel to the subsequent material labor. <sup>1</sup> In the US, members of the AIA in the 1930's called for the organization to become a union. When this did not come to pass, the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians (FAECT) - formed in 1933, merged with the Union of Office and Professional Workers in 1946, and terminated in 1948 when the latter was purged from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) with which it had joined – took up the need for architectural labor advocacy. In other words, it is neither God-given nor "natural" to think that architecture isn't part of a labor discourse.

Still, it has taken a number of convergent events to make it clear to the members of the Architecture Lobby how illogical this work aphasia is, particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One is the advances in technology that make the design ingenuity of fabricators, environmentalists and engineers and contractors able to be shared up front, early on, and in an integrated fashion. It is not just that CAD-CAM and BIM allow the transfer of knowledge to be seamless and coordinated, but it has made us architects aware that these players don't just execute design, they initiate it as well. The vertical structure with the architect visionary at the top and contractors and subs below is rapidly disappearing, as is the idea that they do "work" and we do "design".

Another is the realization that other professions approach their work habits, fees and their hiring practices in a more enlightened manner. In the hall of the Yale Law School one can find a sign that lists "The Top 10 Family-Friendly Law Firms." What? There are so many messages in the collection of this list that currently escape architectural professional thought. One clearly is that this matters; that graduating students will choose the firms they work for with this knowledge. The second is that it was collected by the Yale Law School students – that is, that the school endorsed this data collection as a matter of institutional concern. The third is that law firms are scrambling, lobbying, and striving to be on this list because they are anxious to attract the best and brightest graduates, itself interesting but indicative as well that the students must think of

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<sup>1</sup> See Edward R. Ford, *The Details of Modern Architecture, vol 1* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 9.

themselves as the best and the brightest; they are being wooed, not the other way around. All of these seem oddly anathema to our schools of architecture, our graduates, and our firms.

A third is the outcry over construction labor conditions in the emirates, particularly the protest by Gulf Labor over the construction of the new Guggenheim and NYU campus in Abu Dhabi. The protests struck a cord on two levels. First, architects were asked directly by Gulf Labor, the Human Rights Watch, and the architecture activist group, Who Builds Your Architecture, to take a stand on the illegal practices of indentured servitude for construction workers. The inability to get any architect building in the emirates to show up, make a comment, or change their project choices was (and still is) shocking. Yes, it is the case that architects don't have contracts with, power over, or responsibilities for contractors – the owners do. But where are our politics? What about our ethics? And isn't one advantage of architects that they have significant power to persuade, either via cultural or, as with the "Bilbao effect", economic cachè?<sup>2</sup> Do we have so little faith in our ability to set visions larger than designs themselves that we can't take a stand on a clear problem with the industry? The dismay at our architectural response was made more palpable for its contrast with the art community's, which agreed to a boycott by not displaying of their work at the Guggenheim and held protests in their New York museum. If architects failed to identify with the construction workers, presumably because we are "artists" and they laborers, how come the artists themselves didn't see it that way and saw the construction workers as brothers?

This observation made many of us think about the cause for our lack of a broad worker identity, and it became clear that our inability to identify as and with workers came from ignorance of or shame about our own labor conditions. Our graduates suffer many unacceptable conditions – cramped group living, enormous debts that bind us to jobs we would otherwise not take, itinerant work ungoverned by any laws of hiring, firing, or health standards; virtually no say about the amount or distribution of hours one is expected to work. When we don't recognize this as shameful in our own house, why would we be able to diagnose it elsewhere?

The Lobby recognizes that the organization of work has moved on from the time when the economy was driven by manufacturing and labor unions were the preferred method to assure job security and proper compensation. We have vigorous internal debates about whether the decline of unions is a result of the economy's move from manufacturing to service to knowledge production or whether it is merely ideology's good work to make unions seem, well, unseemly and old-fashioned. Likewise, we have lively discussion about whether the move towards a gig economy fueled by technological platforms is good or bad for society, good or bad for architecture. On the one hand, "production" is back in the picture and with it, the emphasis on those who produce it – knowledge workers, which architects surely are. Innovation and innovators, designers in studios and labs – these are the models of contemporary knowledge production and we architects surely are included.

Non-hierarchical work, collaboration, open-sourcing, ad hoc alliances, just-in-time delivery – these are things that architects are edging toward and that society deeply embraces. A convergence of a changing economy and a changing profession has the potential to be almost utopian. On the other hand, entrepreneurialism and freelance labor, equally central to this new economy, might be another word for precarity, individualism, competition, and the inability to

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Gehry has, since the first push of these organizations, indicated his stance against these practices.

identify as a class in need of common security. In short, Entrepreneurialism might just be neo-liberalism's dream child.

What we do know is that architects need to regroup and reorganize in order to have open conversations about these issues and realize their true worth. If we could persuade the AIA to be our proper advocates instead of selling contracts that prevent new practices and giving out self-congratulating prizes, that would be great. But it isn't happening. What a contemporary union looks like - that understands that the work force is no longer made up of the manager/labor dichotomy; that doesn't see a singular "other" to be attacked but rather adjustments in the network of power; that doesn't distinguish between blue and white collar but between the 1% and the rest of us – we are not sure. But it needs to be supportive of the struggling firm owners who have not figured out how to argue their value to their clients, of their employees who have spent as many years getting a professional degree as lawyers but make 2/3 the money and are laden with debt; of the public that deserves more than our ample but insufficient aesthetic intelligence.

We want architects to be better paid – yes. But we want the better pay to come with a realization of our status and value as workers so that we respect ourselves better and in turn are better respected by society. And this because we want to be at the seat of power when a developer considers the pros and cons of building a 50 or an 80 story building in a transitional neighbourhood; when a mayor makes judgments about public housing; when a governor makes a decision about public access to waterfronts; when a president allocates money for sea-level rise. We deserve to be at these tables.

To get there, we begin with this manifesto:

**We are precarious workers; these are our demands!**

1. Enforce labor laws that prohibit unpaid internships, unpaid overtime; refuse unpaid competitions.
2. Reject fees based on percentage of construction or hourly fees and instead calculate value based on the money we save our clients or gain them.
3. Stop peddling a product – buildings – and focus on the unique value architects help realize through spatial services.
4. Enforce wage transparency across the discipline.
5. Establish a union for architects, designers, academics and interns in architecture and design.
6. Demystify the architect as solo creative genius; no honors for architects who don't acknowledge their staff.
7. Licensure upon completion of degree.
8. Change professional architecture organizations to advocate for the living conditions of architects.
9. Support research about labor rights in architecture.
10. Implement democratic alternatives to the free market system of development.