

Seasonal Shout  
90  
Words by Veronica Simpson

# THE ARCHITECT'S CONUNDRUM



**Arguably, architecture is one of the coolest professions on the planet. But architectural education is expensive and lengthy. And in some parts of the world, newly qualified graduates could earn more working at McDonalds. So how and where and why do they do it?**

Brad Pitt wishes he'd been an architect. And global music phenomenon Kanye West (now known as Ye) increasingly behaves as if he is one – first, by proposing Star Wars-inspired 'Yeazy' homes for the homeless in 2019, and now with his aim to create 'Yecosystem' mini-communities across the United States. Social media abounds with images of the sleek, contemporary dwellings nestled in those communities, which are surely guaranteed to feel like the inside of a skip.

Certainly, architecture has never been cooler. And yet despite being one of the most expensive qualifications to obtain, demanding up to seven years of study (including two years in a professional practice), the starting salaries fall so far behind those of equally academically-intensive careers in law and medicine, never mind IT and accountancy – that it's almost laughable. In the UK, a law school graduate from a top university can expect to earn £50,000 a year or more, while for a newly-minted architect, it's more like £25,000. That's actually lower than a management trainee at McDonalds, as mentioned in a recent article in the UK architecture magazine Building Design.

So why would anyone want to be an architect? Some are undoubtedly lured-in by the perception of it being an elite and privileged profession, not to mention the appeal of the eye-watering price-tags attached to those incredible skyscrapers in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. But how much of that goes to the architect?

Generally speaking, the architect's fee is negotiated as a percentage of the project cost, but there are many variables within that system, as one UK architect – who wishes to remain anonymous – explained. "The percentage never reflects the scale. From a small building to a large building, the fee decreases from 7% to 3%. So you've gone from half-a-million to 100-million pounds in project costs; it's a lot easier to make money from smaller projects. At the larger scale, there's a lot of downwards negotiating done."

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So don't be fooled by the huge sums attached to major developments, such as the £9 billion cited for the newly reopened Battersea Power Station, one of London's beloved landmarks. That sum includes the purchase of the land, the restoration of the derelict building, the payment of the architects – Frank Gehry and Norman Foster (among others) – for the design of luxury apartments, and the creation of all the public spaces and infrastructure, including a brand new metro station. For Wilkinson Eyre, the architects who repaired and rein-

carinated Battersea Power Station, making it into a shopping, leisure, and residential destination, the architect's percentage of the construction costs didn't go very far, given that there were up to 30 architects at a time working on it over a period of nearly 10 years.

So where exactly is money to be made in architecture? For smaller firms, private homes – from extensions to newbuilds – can provide a steady turnover, the more luxurious the better. Says one anonymous informant: "You can design a decent-sized house and charge a client maybe 10%. That could potentially be a good fee, especially if the project costs a few million."

So most young practices establish themselves by taking-on stylish but economical home refurbishments, then go looking for interesting commercial projects to expand their client base and show they can offer ingenuity and flair on a tight commercial budget. This is how young London practice ROAR has pro-

*Previous spread:*  
Battersea Power Station in London may be part of a £9b development, but Wilkinson Eyre's refurbishment of this historic industrial landmark will have earned them only a tiny fraction of that sum.  
Photo © Peter Landers

*Opposite page:*  
The Community Classroom by O'Donnell Brown is being used for outdoor learning in schools and parks / Photo © Ross Campbell

Extensions allow young architects to make their mark, like this inventive project by ROAR Architects. Its curving, CNC-milled roof was both quick to assemble and cost-effective, lending height without compromising the neighbours' access to light.





ceeded. But what is the next step up – civic and cultural buildings, or bigger-budget corporate and commercial projects? Craig Rosenblatt, ROAR co-director says: “I doubt that cultural projects pay that well, so we will always require a solid base of private residential projects and commercial work.”

As a company’s profile rises (awards can be very helpful here), so should their fees, but “money is definitely not the main factor,” says Rosenblatt. So what, then, motivates them? “Creating bold and playful designs that elevate the everyday. Working closely with clients to create a scheme they love and enjoy. To build something physical that is used and that lasts.”

This is all well and good, but you still have to balance the books, and in the UK this has become harder than ever – especially with soaring material costs created by Brexit and the Ukraine war. Extra pressure has also been exerted, quite rightly, from within the profession, to create greater equity for interns (who for years could be expected to put up with unpaid apprenticeships) and women. After a 2016 campaign by Women in Architecture revealed that they were underpaid by as much as £55,000 compared with their male equivalents, that gap is closing, thankfully. But to avoid the London weighting on salaries and office rents, many practices are seeing the benefits of relocating outside of the UK capital. This is what O’Donnell Brown has done: after successfully competing in a tough London market, they decided to move to Glasgow in 2016.

What does that mean in practical terms? For O’Donnell and partner/co-director Sam Brown, it has meant they could sell their London flat and buy a house in Glasgow with enough space to insert the studio in the garden. O’Donnell points out: “Lower running costs

meant that we had a bit more financial flexibility to take risks, including committing time to self-initiated projects where we actively engage with societal issues.” For example, their simple, demountable and elegant ‘Community Classroom’ has been a hit for outdoor learning, both in schools and parks, attracting new clients to their business.

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Ah, supportive clients. A good client will provide the proverbial wind beneath the wings (along with the funds) to reveal an architect’s creative potential. That was certainly the case for Swiss/Austrian architect Christina Seilern, director of London-based practice Studio Seilern Architects. Egyptian developer Samih Sawiris invited her to convert a cramped conference centre into a concert venue in the basement of a hotel, as part of his mission to turn Andermatt, a former Swiss military crossroads, into a luxury resort. With determination and vision, she transformed this bunker-like space into one worthy of a visit from the Berlin Philharmonic – who actually opened it in 2019. Sawiris subsequently commissioned her for his project to develop El Gouna, a coastal region in Egypt, as a new cultural destina-

tion, asking her to design a striking cultural and civic centre. Seilern has gone on to complete the historically important restoration and conversion of a World Heritage site in Lithuania, and a minimalist but stunning luxury villa on the Greek island of Paros. These demonstrations of creativity and versatility won her the 2022 Female Frontier Award as WAN Architect of the Year. This is the kind of trajectory that most architecture students (and hard-working practice directors) dream of.

But such clients and commissions are hard to come by. So a growing number of practices are reinventing the model of how and when to make money, increasingly putting their own cash into schemes. Ten years ago, Stolon Studio spotted the potential in an awkwardly-shaped plot – not just to build their own family home, but to finance the project off the back of two similar plots surrounding it, in what became a multiple-award winning scheme called Forest Mews. They then chose to repeat the exercise, but this time they created a social-housing community, Kaolin Court, with rental apartments (and their own HQ) around a communal garden/courtyard space, of which they are now the landlord and custodian.

*Opposite page:* With the support of the ‘right’ client, Studio Seilern Architects were able to achieve the first world-class concert hall in the Alps, making Andermatt a cultural destination. Photo © R. Halbe

Forest Mews, by Stolon Studio / By acting as their own developer, the architects were able to build a dream home for their family, funded by two adjacent dream homes they built for others, all sharing an awkward site in south London. Photo © Barker

What about medium to large firms? High-end commercial and corporate tower blocks seem to be the dominant money earner – they certainly were during the boom years when city skylines in Russia, Asia, and the UAE were being transformed beyond recognition. Robert Winkel of Rotterdam-based Mei Architects and Planners agrees. “Yes, skyscrapers without any connection to the context are profitable. If [the architects] can create a building that lands like an alien on a plot somewhere, and can get good money for it, why wouldn't they do it? If you make it relate to the context, it's a better building, but that takes time. That's a challenge.”

But it's a challenge that Winkel feels passionate about. His practice made a name for itself in 2019 with an inspired retrofit of a Rotterdam dockside warehouse consisting of apartments above and cultural spaces at ground level. More recently, his ambition to tackle the appalling carbon footprint of construction has led him to become not just the designer of, but a 50% shareholder in the SA-WA project, a high-rise apartment building made predominantly of timber that uses circular technology while boosting biodiversity; 50 apartments [out of 109] are in the 'affordable rent' category. According to him, taking the reins in this way gives you more control over the output, but it also makes money. You just decide to put the money towards boosting the wellbeing of the residents and adding value to the community, rather than towards shareholder profits.

Are his methods and views popular in the Netherlands? “Not really,” he admits. “A lot of power is still concentrated in the companies that own land... and they don't want to receive less profit.” Still, he's just been appointed chairman of the Spatial Quality Committee

in Amsterdam, so we can hope to see more of his people-not-profit centric ideas emerging.

For him, the point of being an architect is “to show to the next generation that you can make a better world. It's not just about the design of a building. It is about building as a means to get happy, healthy people.” And in these tense and troubled times, perhaps social and environmental brownie-points are more precious than a fat pay cheque. <

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Fenix I, loft apartments designed and championed by Mei architects and planners / These airy waterfront apartments are built atop an old Rotterdam warehouse that is now a space for culture and creativity. Photo © Ossip

