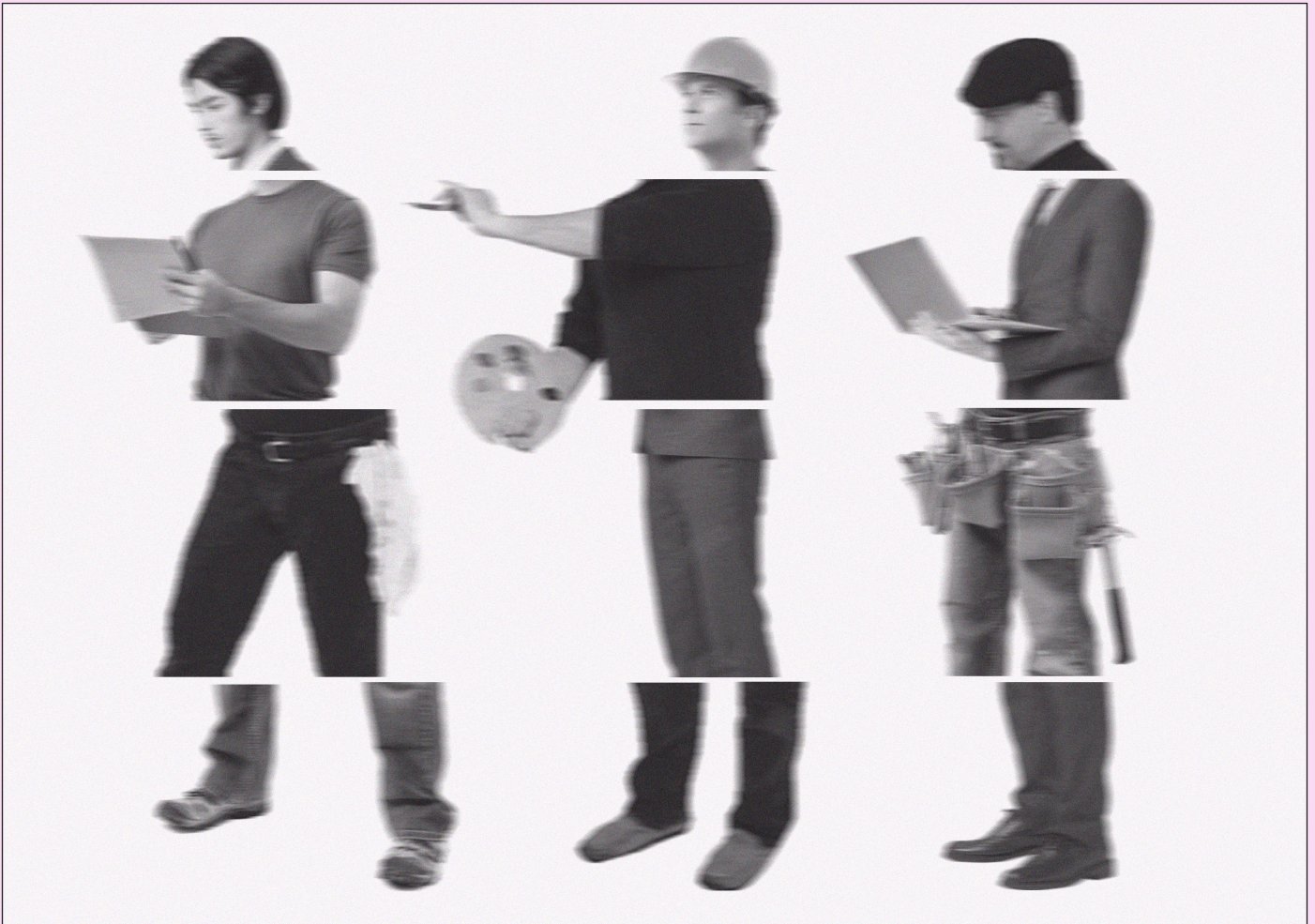


Architect, A Hybrid Profession

Ema Krakovská



More than 30 years ago, Reyner Banham compared the architectural profession to a black box, recognized by its output, though unknown in its content.¹ He pointed out the veil of mystery surrounding the discipline, rooted in a narrow value-system of architects and their desire to be recognized as noble, autonomous professionals. Banham's essay is still relevant today, as the perception of architects by the outside world and their own definition contained within the black box differ greatly. As a result, and to avoid disappointment on both sides, I suggest treating the architectural profession as a hybrid.

To imagine what a doctor, a lawyer or a professional football player looks like, is a rather simple task. Doctors dress in white, lawyers wear suits and footballers play in jerseys, the idea of them and the reality correspond. Their knowledge base is distinct and they proudly execute it in a defined territory. Now let's repeat the exercise with an architect. Considering we studied architecture, a black turtleneck enwrapping those four hours of sleep and Japanese stationery promptly cross our mind. More probable, however, is that we don't belong inside the black box and are doomed to google stock photos of architects, in hope of revealing their essence. Striking, at first sight, is that the architectural tribe, as anthropologists call them, seems to have a lot of paper at their disposal. Using almost exclusively analogue tools, these individuals sit at their big desks in air-conditioned offices, with a plastic ruler in hand and a smile on the face. Architects apparently avoid computers at any cost, there is nothing the good old pen-paper-ruler power trio couldn't do. Moreover, in case of imminent danger, their heads are carefully protected by a yellow helmet, ready to receive a hit (of inspiration) at any time of the day.

However, the image of architects as paper obsessed helmet-heads, hardly distinguishable from civil engineers, is in a clash with the usual stereotype of a creative mastermind. The architectural culture, as presented to the outside world, is grounded mostly on a mystical quality we could describe as an artistic genius. The starchitects, to whom this quality is often assigned, are representatives of the architectural discipline, even if constituting just a small fraction of it. On one hand, there might be nothing wrong with picking the crème de la crème as mascots. On the other, however, this misconception could lead to false expectations among aspiring architecture students and the public. An archdaily article titled "21 Careers You Can Pursue With A Degree In Architecture" illustrates this confusion fairly well.² It seeks to address freshly graduated students of architecture, who found themselves unsure about their chosen path. The bitter realization of the gap between the current state of the profession and the black box ideals cultivated throughout the studies could be a trigger for such a response. Luckily, as the article states, a wide selection of careers opens to them despite, or thanks to, acquiring a degree in architecture. The list starts with various specializations such as Landscape Architect or Extreme Architect, which might not be the escape the graduates were hoping for. Nevertheless, as we scroll down through professions such as artist, politician, writer or entrepreneur, we are left with the impression of the architect as a multifunctional wonder. To be this adaptable in the era of constant change and uncertainty is undoubtedly a huge benefit, but what is it, that makes architects so flexible? Besides the contradictory identities and stereotypes, originating from the society and themselves, architects have always been ruptured into scientific and humanistic domains. Many would call the discipline a mix of art and science, exposed in the clash of an architect as both the helmet-wearing engineer and the creative mastermind. Architects are very well aware of this fact and often use it to their advantage, as Jeremy Till writes in his book *Architecture Depends*: "Architects have been good enough at exploiting these tensions: expediently swapping the hats of scientist and artist, they have two cards to play...With the left-brain, right-brain, double punch of objective reason and subjective genius, professional closure is effected. The most successful architects are those who deliver these punches in quick succession."³

I believe this hybrid character of architects, claiming responsibility in various domains, can be traced in history to the earliest notions of the profession. Vitruvius, loosely referred to as the first recognizable 'architect', wrote the only surviving major book on architecture from classical antiquity. The knowledge base of the discipline at the time spanned from drawing and geometry up to law, philosophy, theatre or medicine. The scope of roman architects with their diverse skillset could undoubtedly beat the archdaily list. Vitruvius rightly suggested that the architectural profession is far more than merely building, and necessarily requires a broad perspective.

Architects remained largely anonymous until as late as the middle ages and it was only during the renaissance period that the profession began to be recognized in today's terms. Architecture, at the time, was still seen as one of the arts and didn't require formal training. The shift towards a more academic and theoretical discourse was initiated in the late Baroque in France, culminating by the establishment of the first school of architecture. Ecole des Beaux-Arts defined the architect's role as a specialist in the elaboration of stylistic codes and provided rational design methods.⁴ The expertise of architects in this era was mostly in the control over the aesthetic dimension of architecture. However, with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, architects were suddenly faced with different challenges, as novel types of buildings were demanded. In addition, engineers started entering the field of building construction, sharing a territory previously dominated by architects. In fact, the Crystal Palace, often declared as a milestone of modern architecture, was also not designed by an architect at the time, but by Joseph Paxton, a gardener and a true hybrid. Not only did he design this revolutionary iron-glass structure, but he was also a Member of Parliament and, as a gardener, cultivated the most consumed banana in the Western world. Paxton's remarkable Curriculum Vitae portrays the fundamental problem of the architectural profession until the present day. Since the products of architects and non-architects are functionally indistinguishable, the discipline has always struggled to construct a controlled and protected market of architectural services. For this reason, we can never be certain that the building we are looking at was designed by an architect, it might as well be a product of an engineer, a developer, a builder or a banana cultivator. This is not an attempt to invalidate the importance of architects and their expertise in designing buildings, but an invitation to another perspective. In my opinion, seeing them rather as hybrids with competences stretching over multiple fields could help to form a more coherent and accurate identity.

From Vitruvius up to the present day, the architectural profession developed into a complex discipline, with education playing a crucial role in forming its diverse scope. In the following passage, Jeremy Till points out the way architectural curriculums have the potential to encourage flexible thinking in students: "Architectural intelligence, when freed from the shackles of attempting certainty and fixity, is far more febrile than the intelligence of other professions. Architectural education, when not obsessed with the production of visual imagery, exposes students to an extraordinarily broad range of intellectual activity, from poststructuralism to the structure of posts."³ Similarly, an argument for a wider outlook is expressed inside an article of the *OASE Jornal for Architecture* and its *School and Teachers* issue: "...in order to be able to develop into good architects, students need to be aware of the history of the discipline, of the theories and ideas that are hidden behind design decisions, and of the critical role an architect can – or cannot – have in society or in the development of a culture. A direct consequence is that students are not exclusively educated as architects who will build as much and as efficiently as possible, but also as intellectuals with a broad general knowledge, conscious of the complex forcefield in which architecture finds itself."⁵

As did Reyner Banham 30 years ago, I attempted to open the black box again, to see the evolution of the architectural profession and explore the cloud of disconnected images and assumptions that surrounds it today. I believe we need to start understanding and appreciating architects as hybrids, serving society with their broad range of competence. If nothing else, we could at least bring the architectural profession a step closer to revealing its mystery.

References:

1 Reyner Banham, *A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture, A Critic Writes: Essays* by Reyner Banham, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 1999)

2 Ariana Zilliacus, *21 Careers You Can Pursue With A Degree in Architecture*, online under: <https://www.archdaily.com/798632/21-careers-you-can-pursue-with-a-degree-in-architecture>

3 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, 1st ed. (MIT Press, 2013)

4 Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, 1st ed. (MIT Press, 1998)

5 Christophe Van Gerrewey, David Peleman and Bart Decroos, *Schools & Teachers: The Education of an Architect in Europe*, OASE 102, *Journal for Architecture* , 2019