



ARCHITECT-CLIENT INTERACTIONS RESEARCH PROJECT

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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This study was funded by UCL Grand Challenge of Sustainable Cities (2014-2015)

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OVERVIEW

Architects working within the private residential domain learn to read their clients well: they gauge clients' openness to new ideas, their capability and willingness to pay, and they anticipate their clients' requirements. Although the architects expect to use their creative skills and tend to feel that they own the design, at the same time they are very sensitive to the clients' wants and put themselves in the clients' shoes. They seek to influence the client towards a better solution but ultimately, they view the client as the decision maker: they can challenge the client but there is a limit. Nonetheless, they are very influential in the interactions with clients. The options they propose and the ideas they introduce frame the clients' decisions, and they guide the client in many ways during their interactions. However, the architects' consideration for their client, combined with the assumptions they make, can constrain what they offer, discuss or encourage. There can be a somewhat curious imbalance between the emphasis placed on light within a design (almost always discussed in some detail) and thermal comfort (infrequently considered), despite the importance of both in the experience of the built outcome. Improving the energy efficiency of existing housing stock is of major importance in achieving national goals on carbon reduction. Inclusion of environmental impact, energy efficiency and thermal comfort in early discussions with clients as a matter of course would ensure that, at a minimum, the client has been presented with options and information and their response has been evaluated rather than assumed.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of academic research is to add to knowledge in society. Topics are typically identified through review of previous research and observation of societal problems. Outcomes from research are written up for publication in peer-reviewed journals and presentation at academic conferences. Through these and other means of dissemination, new findings are discussed and become part of understanding used in education, policy and the wider media.

The research project Architect-client Interactions came about through our interest in the ‘smaller end’ of construction, the work that small-to-medium businesses conduct that delivers almost three quarters of the turnover in the construction sector¹. We were particularly interested in projects carried out on existing housing stock. In the UK, 87% of the residential buildings that will be in use in 2050 are already built². The architects and other construction professionals who work on these buildings are today determining the local built environment of the next half-century and more.

We were also particularly interested in the role of existing householders as important gatekeepers who, through their decisions during minor construction works on their home, will determine domestic energy consumption of these building through the coming decades. To achieve the targets set by the Green Construction Board’s Low Carbon Routemap³ which identifies what the construction sector must deliver in support of the Climate Change Act 2008, by 2050 domestic energy consumption must fall to 14% of 1990 levels and 99% of this must be achieved on existing stock.

We contacted just under 200 architects involved in private domestic projects in the Greater London area, speaking to a number of these on several occasions. We examined 8 projects in detail, observing the meeting with the client at which conceptual designs were presented for the first time (RIBA Stage 2/Stage C) for four projects and analysing the email stream for the same stage for the other four, and following up with an in-depth interview with the architect of each project considered.

1 BIS. (2013). UK construction: An economic analysis of the sector. London: UK Government Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

2 Boardman, B. (2007). Examining the carbon agenda via the 40% house scenario. *Building Research and Information*, 35(4), 363-375.

3 <http://greenconstructionboard.org/index.php/resources/routemap>

FINDINGS

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IMPORTANCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The first finding of note was the importance of the client relationship to the architect. This contributed to the more limited number of projects examined in detail than originally planned. Many of the architects we spoke to were happy to take part in the research but felt that they could not grant access to a client meeting in order to protect the client’s privacy: *“you’re dealing with some very personal issues”*. In addition to a strong sense of protecting the client was the importance of managing the relationship with the client. What came across was how precious this relationship is for the architect and how much of the architect’s work is concerned with nurturing it. Although there is a commercial imperative in ensuring good relations with clients, the alignment with the client went beyond this. The emphasis on considering the clients’ needs seemed to form an essential part of a professional approach. There was a sense that, through their training, architects learn to protect the clients’ interests and, in this domain, readily take the clients’ perspectives:

“I guess the more you run a practice, the more you realise it’s not just the challenge of what you’d say a traditional architect does, which is the layout and solving that problem – it’s all of those things around it, it’s understanding how people work and how they think and how to get the best for them.”

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DESIGN PROCESS AND USE OF TECHNOLOGY

A number of different approaches to the design process were in evidence. For most, after appointment, an initial meeting with the client was the basis for writing the brief. A survey was then conducted, conceptual design options were produced and these were communicated back to the client for feedback and revision. Most architects offered a small set of options, and several said they tried to include an unexpected option in this set, taking a creative interpretation of the brief. Some offered a limited number of revisions as part of a fixed-price fee but others worked on a per hour basis, allowing as many revisions as the client cared for. Interestingly, a number of architects conducted almost all of their work over email. They had contact with the client for the initial briefing and the survey, but communications, including presentation and discussion of design options, were then almost entirely via email. This model suited these architects and their busy clients.

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The use of technology in interactions with clients varied quite considerably. In the client meeting, design options were presented in formats ranging from plans and elevations drawn by hand, to CAD-generated plans with tracing paper overlaid on which to sketch variants, to 3D fly-throughs on Google Sketchup, all offered to the client at the end of the meeting. Some architects encouraged the use of Pinterest to collect images of ‘look and feel’.

ARCHITECTS’ GENERAL APPROACH TO CLIENTS

The architects we spoke to were, to a greater or lesser extent, selective of the clients they accepted. They felt that most clients appoint them for their design skills and they expected to use these on the project. Most see the design process as collaborative, with the client as expert on their home and ways of living. The client is seen as the ultimate decision-maker “It’s their building, not mine, so who am I to say this is the best thing for them?” and this appears to form the underlying approach of most of the architects we spoke to. Only one had walked away from a project where the client had compromised the design too far in his opinion. The others would find a way to make it work for the client. Within the meeting, the architects built rapport through using lay language most of the time and taking care to explain technical terms, thus keeping the communication pitched towards that of equals rather than the expert speaking down to the layperson. They were open about their own views, often offering their personal opinion while not insisting on its primacy, and showing a human side, such as talking about their own home or family. These approaches helped to establish trust.

‘READING’ AND MANAGING THE CLIENT

The architects were confident in their ability to ‘read’ the client: “90% of clients’ wants, I could write most briefs for them”. They saw common patterns of requirements: big open plan kitchen/dining area at the back of the house, bi-fold doors opening onto the garden; more glazing including rooflights, lanterns, an orangery; more bedrooms and en-suites. It was necessary for them to be able to infer client needs on occasion as there can be limits to how well the client can articulate their requirements. The clients frequently talked about light, for example, but not about flow through spaces. In addition to making assumptions about requirements in some cases, the architects also judged how open the client was to novel approaches, how much they knew about the construction process and how much they could or were willing to spend. All of the architects required a written brief, not only as “a good discipline” but also to bring out differences of opinions between couples. The need to manage incompatible views between spouses was common and required careful

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handling. On occasion, the architect would agree with one or other where the particular point might warrant it but most dealt with the problem by pointing to the areas of contention and stepping back to allow the couples to resolve it between themselves. In the discussions, the architect often appeared to put him/herself in the clients’ shoes, considering their family stage and lifestyle requirements, for example. A particularly interesting style adopted by several of the participant architects was to move between “I” and “we” in the meetings. Although for some architects, the use of “we” referred to the team in their office, other uses appeared to put them on the same team as the client, with a common aim, for example, “having got the plan more or less sorted out...do we want to stop and get an idea of the [cost] from somebody, or are we just barrelling on with it?” This is likely to be particularly helpful in building rapport.

INFLUENCING THE CLIENT

Although the architects described the client as the final decision maker, the architect was highly influential in a number of ways. The architect frames the clients’ decisions, offering options which respond to the clients’ requests but are produced by the architect who ‘wields the pen’, affording the architect significant power. Drawing on their extensive expertise, the participant architects were able to guide the client towards particular solutions by providing multiple reasons to support a better design: better use of space, better proportion of space, position in the house and in relation to other spaces, light, more likely to get planning, less likely to have the neighbours object, costs less, less disruption, quicker to build and so on. Other influencing techniques observed included: referring to the clients’ (aspirational) lifestyle, talking about how other clients’ had acted, giving their personal opinion (“I like steps. They’re features”), talking through negative implications, benefits and technical options, raising leading questions such as: “If we spend a lot of money to create that space, what have you got?” (which implies rather than states a high or additional cost for little gain), giving their opinion on what the client would want: “you wouldn’t want to come in here”, expressing personal concern: “I worry about you spending 95% of your time in here” and, infrequently, providing strong recommendations: “I wouldn’t extend it in the first place and create the problem”.

Although the architects had many means by which they attempted to influence or persuade clients, they noted that there were limits to which they would pursue the attempt: “It’s not my job to push you in one direction, it’s just to make you really aware of the consequences of what you are doing at this stage”.

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ENERGY EFFICIENCY

In the meetings observed, there was occasional, though typically brief, mention of heating, insulation and warmth. At this stage, other aspects of design which have a bearing on environmental impact, such as materials, green roofs, sustainable urban drainage systems or solar panels, were not discussed although some of these topics are more suited to later in the design process.

There was an interesting contrast between consideration of light and heat. Most of the meetings discussed light at length, usually raised by the client but also referred to by the architect. In contrast, even where heating was discussed, its mention was cursory. There was no extended talk of feelings of cosiness and warmth in winter, and cool shade in summer. We wondered why this absence. The study observed meetings at only one point which was relatively early in the design process and it is possible that discussions on warmth could take place later in the process. We also speculated that the absence may be related to the traditional positioning of architecture as a fine art, with a focus on the visual but a lack of consideration of other senses. Does architectural training encompass psycho-physiological reactions to places or does it still consider only the visual impact? Even though the systems for heating will usually be detailed by another professional (builder/boiler installation engineer), thermal comfort is an essential element of enjoying a built space. Given the architects’ clear concern for their clients, if discussions around warmth and cooling do not occur in the design process, it is a curious omission.

There were a number of reasons why energy efficient solutions were discussed in these design sessions but equally a number of reasons why they were not. Reasons why energy efficient solutions were discussed included: to comply with or exceed building regulations, an opportunity to help achieve planning permission, to solve problems with the house, to cut heating bills, to benefit the client without significant cost penalty, (for underfloor heating) because it is in vogue, or because the client is interested. Reasons for absence of discussions including the view that the regulations already demand a high standard of insulation, that discussions around heating can be taken up with the builder, that there are too few benefits to the client, that there will be additional cost, that the client is not particularly interested, is focused on space requirements, cannot afford it or is not willing to pay for what they cannot see. Assumptions about the client were in evidence here and one architect candidly said. “I suspect they’re not hugely interested but I honestly don’t know that”. The implication is that although improvements to energy efficiency or environmental sustainability more broadly are seen as depending on clients’ interest, the level and depth of that interest may be assumed rather than evaluated.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCLUSION OF ENERGY EFFICIENCY IN INTERACTIONS WITH CLIENTS

Suggestions from the participant architects on how energy efficiency could become embedded within interactions with the client included considering each project as an opportunity to at least mention some ideas, such as cavity-wall insulation if it has not been done (which is rare) or a new boiler when expanding a house. The site might present possibilities, for example, for a ground-source heat pump. Elements could be included in the design without discussion where there is little or no cost implication. The issues of environmental impact and of energy efficiency could be included as a matter of routine in the initial contact with the client so that at a minimum, the client has been given the option and client reaction is observed rather than assumed. If the client shows interest, discussion could be taken into further detail. In any event, information has been provided, the client will listen to the expert and even if they decide not to pursue it at that time, they may return to the issue in the future. The benefits to the client could be explained, especially around thermal comfort and lower energy bills. Finally, throughout the design, the architect frames the clients' decisions by offering options. Continuing to develop knowledge of less environmentally negative materials and approaches, as these develop and costs drop, will allow the architect to guide client decisions toward more environmentally benign and less energy intensive solutions. The enormous challenge facing the construction industry in playing its part in achieving 2050 energy targets demands no less of construction professionals.

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