

Marketplace Research

Observations on Our Decade of Redefinition

by Richard W. Hobbs, FAIA

AIA Resident Fellow, Marketplace Research Trends



Many within and outside the profession over the past 10 years have been giving us portent of a future that is now upon us.

“Architects will be far less concerned with maintaining boundaries and much more willing to provide services as necessary to anticipate and meet our clients needs,” Francis Duffy, FRIBA, told us a decade ago.

“The architects’ scope of work will extend to the whole built environment, external and internal, and that developing architectural knowledge, freely and voluntarily shared, is what a profession is for. ... The test and validity of a profession is not how well we define our boundaries, but how fast we expand our knowledge base.”

“Has the last architect been born?” asked Stewart Brand at the 1997 AIA convention. Architects will become extinct as others meet clients’ needs, he warned, unless we change our fundamental understanding of who we are and rediscover the manifest value of our skills, education, and training.

In this world of overabundant information, people need knowledge navigators, said John Seely Brown and Paul Dugid in *The Social Life on Information*. These navigators know how to interpret and leverage physical and social forces much more effectively than those who would try to fight force with force alone. “Architects constantly figure out how to turn constraints inside out, transforming them into resources,” the authors observed.

One axiom of the current age is that change is coming so fast, we can’t see it happening. That was the problem Davis and Meyer confronted in *Blur*. To be creative in the new economy, they said, one must concentrate on connectivity, speed, and the growth of the intangible value.

Now, through the AIA Marketplace Research program, and in close cooperation with Robin Ellerthorpe, FAIA, we offer a matrix to give context to this theoretical string and illuminate the redefined profession that is unfolding before us.

Scenario planning is a relatively simple process involving creative thinking to solve complex problems through issue

identification and classification, matrix development, and scenario creation.

Scenarios are often used to form a basis for change—with scope ranging from organizational to societal. Scenarios can form the basis for long-term discussion and thought about architects and architecture; perhaps even to form the catalyst for change.

Redefinition scenario

The illustration of the redefinition scenario shift I offer here is based on a two-by-two matrix with the variables being skill sets and practice models. We align the two contextual issues at 90 degrees to form a simple matrix. Scenarios can then be crafted for various positions within the matrix. The skill-set variable ranges from specialization to generalist and the practice-model variable ranges from fragmented to integrated. To plot a preferred future using such a tool, you consider where along each scale your preferred future lies. Once you have set a target goal, you can consider the things you need to do to move from where you and your firm are to where you want to go.

- **Specialization/Integrated:** This vision has people with deep knowledge in specific areas working in a highly coordinated network. Complex client needs are met through the complete integration of these skill sets. The integration is likely to be facilitated through advanced information-sharing technology.
- **Integrated/Generalist:** Broader overlapping of individual skill sets means that seamless integration comes readily through collaboration. This vision is best for clients wanting a broad range of services for a fairly routine set of needs.
- **Generalist/Fragmented:** People with broad skill sets work separately from one another. In this situation, the client orchestrates the collaboration. This vision works best with fairly knowledgeable clients who have ready access to people with the various skill sets they need.
- **Fragmented/Specialization:** Knowledge is deep yet scattered in a niche market. This vision provides a wide range of complex problem-solving capabilities a la carte. Thus, it requires a client with deep integrative capabilities in-house or one who brings in a third-party service coordinator.

continued on next page

Marketplace Research

Observations on Our Decade of Redefinition

continued from previous page

In the first two scenarios described above, the client is getting an integrated set of services. In other words, the service providers are analyzing, coordinating, and prioritizing information—creating knowledge—which the client can readily convert into informed decision making—wisdom. In the latter two scenarios, clients are left to their own devices to differentiate between wise choices and those that are not so wise. The redefinition of the profession is moving architects away from the fragmented scenarios to those that are integrated. And it is the architect, according to the redefinition vision, who is best suited to serve as the client's integrator and facilitator.

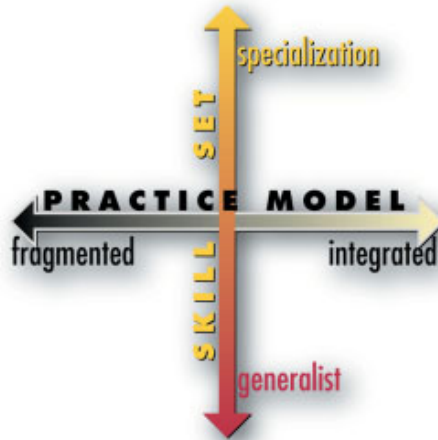
Architects have backed away from this opportunity before, leading to today's fragmentation. The need to bring people and knowledge together presents architects with the opportunity to find form for innovation in the creative design process.

Our preferred future

The mid 1800s to 1900s saw the invention of the profession of architecture. When generations to come look back to this period of 2002 to 2010, they will see its reinvention. The new Architecture is a process, not a product. It is a process of strategy, design, and implementation meeting the needs of the client, users, and community.

Gordon Chong, FAIA, in his AIA presidential inauguration speech in December 2001, referenced *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell as an example of the edge on which the profession stands today. The tipping point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold of getting a message across. In this explanation, when 20 percent of the mass has changed or is engaged in the effort, the change agent has been defined. Further, it is the focus on the message of change that makes it effective. It is the power of the context that generates change.

We are at the tipping point.



Trends for the coming decade

Here is a scattering of observations from various sources over recent years that illustrate the realization of the redefinition of the profession that President Chong foresaw as he has spearheaded that initiative since 1995.

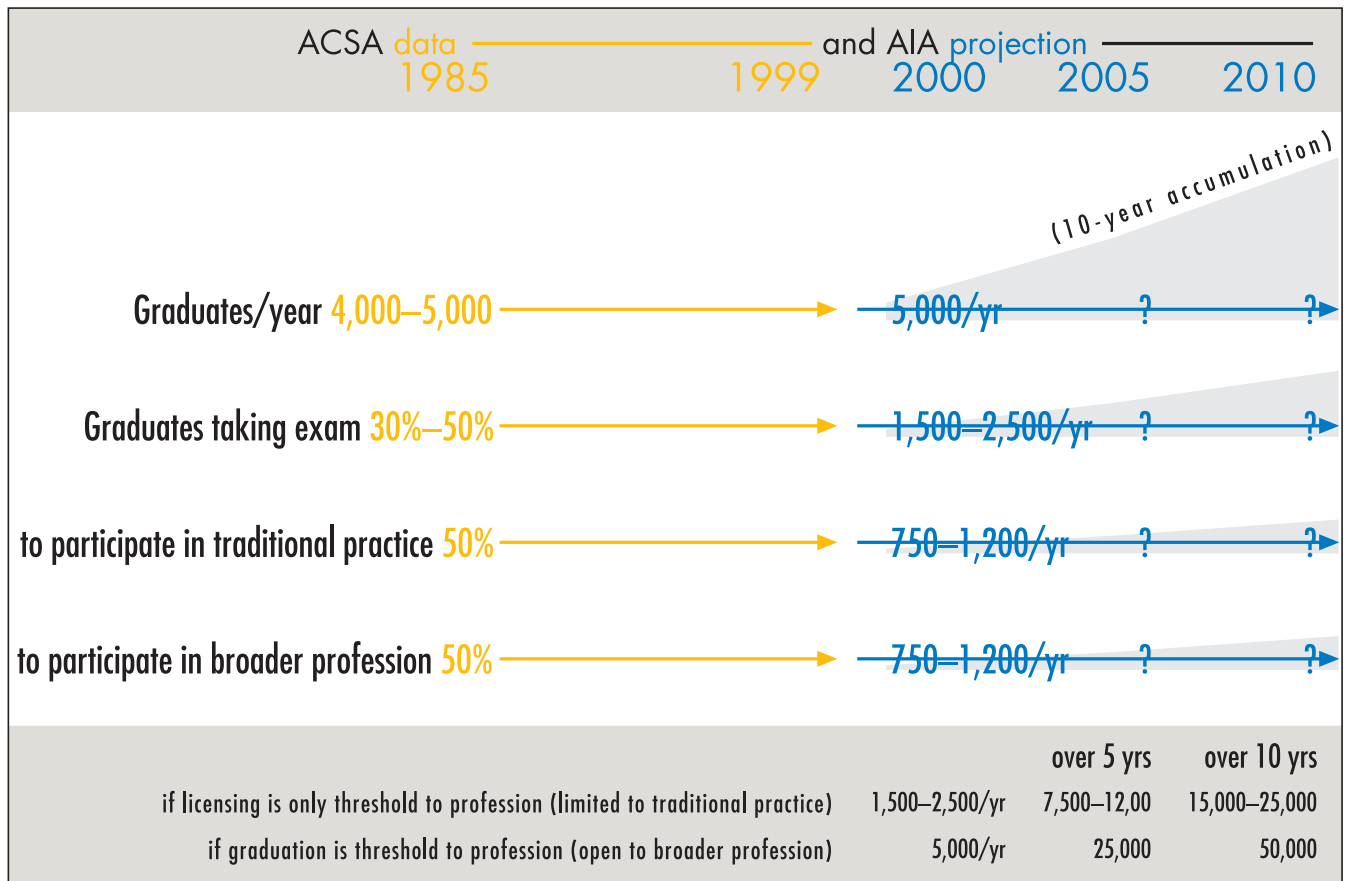
- Many architects are defining themselves not by their product (buildings) but by their design process. Architects as individuals are realizing that in a discipline of subdisciplines, one can specialize in just about anything.
- The demand for expanded services increased 313 percent from 1990 to 1999, according to the AIA Firm Survey 2000-2002, which further found that the demand for basic services expanded a respectable (but comparatively paltry) 86 percent during the same period.
- The number of firms with staff of 1 to 4 dramatically dropped between 1996 and 1999, and the number of firms with staff of 5 to 9 and 10 to 19 increased, with the greatest increase in firm size in those firms in the 20 to 49 and 50-plus.
- As firms are increasing in overall staff, they are becoming more interdisciplinary by adding greater professional diversity, which is decreasing the percentage of architects to total staff.
- The architectural firm profile is changing, the number of diverse professionals is increasing in firms, the number of nonlicensed architectural graduates is increasing. The revenue generated in firms by creating client value is increasing.
- As the architectural firm profile in firms providing expanded services is shifting to align with the client-centric strategy of providing a wider range of services, there seems to be a parallel shift in the careers architectural graduates pursue. From 1985 to 2000 there were 4,000 to 5,000 architecture graduates per year moving into the wide range of facilities-related professions. Of those, 1,500 to 2,500 may take the ARE, about

continued on next page

Marketplace Research

Observations on Our Decade of Redefinition

continued from previous page



750 to 1,200 will go into the building track, and the other 750 to 1,200 will move into the more broadly defined profession as licensee architects.

- The threshold to the profession will be considered graduation. Graduates recognize the career potential of looking beyond the buildings themselves and are getting involved in other ways to use their problem-solving skills that are not

benefited by or requiring licensure.

As we build the redefinition scenario, please weigh in with your own insight. Refine the scenario, adjust the matrix, add your scenario creation, and send your insights, revelations, and interpretations of your own design of the future to rhobbs@richardwhobbs.com, or visit www.richardwhobbs.com