Exploring Architecture: Role's and responsibilities - TAB U Podcast - S2 E13 - #TABUniversity

Podcasts

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TAB University host Katrina is joined by Eli Korman, chief investment officer and head of development finance at TAB, and Ben Mayfield, director at Norton Mayfield Architects.

This episode is on architecture, what it is, what you need to know about it, when you need an architect and all the wonderful things that surround architecture.

The top five questions we asked Ben were:

1. What is an architect?
2. What is the process to designing a building?
3. What is the difference between an architect and an engineer?
4. What sustainable solutions do you incorporate into your designs?
5. How did you get into architecture?

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1. What is an architect?

The architect is the guy who sorts a building out for you or with you. It might be the person that

comes around and helps you out with your extension or you might also do an office block. Architects span a wide range of projects, and we specialise in many different sectors. We can even help you with the locks on your doors.

The architect becomes a client confidant as well throughout the process. They're an interface between a client and a wider building team through the design process, and then into construction - how does a client translate what they want to see to someone who's putting it together? It's through a drawing, and when drawings don't cover everything, you need someone else to interpret, describe and enlighten someone.

To a contractor, I can be the person they don't like to see. The person turns up and goes, I'm not sure that's right, can you change that? Or delivering the news that a client wants to make a change. No one wants to see things changed when you're halfway through the work.

What do we do? We design architecture. We draw architecture, we produce architecture. We're a profession that offers a great deal of value to a project but we're not always needed. Ultimately the architect works as 'lead designer' with an overall responsibility to deliver the client's wishes.

The smallest project I've been asked to do, which doesn't really need an architect, would be sheds. Often people approach architects because they think they need planning approval. If you don't, an installer can put in what you need. But if you do need planning approval, that requires a drawing and that requires an architect.

2. What is the process to designing a building?

A lot of our work at the moment is finding new use for buildings or extending existing buildings. First, we've got to learn the building. For small projects, we'd survey it ourselves. Someone else would survey if it was a larger commercial project. We'd understand how the existing building is built, how it stands up, what elements of that building we might want to retain, what elements need to come out, whether it's for practical purposes or because there's something wrong with it.

We present to the client ‘this is what we think is feasible given your criteria, given the context.’ If that's still working for the client, we might then take that onto the next stage, which we would describe as a concept stage.

That's the first time we perhaps start showing a client something that starts to look like a building. We might show them a block arrangement, or something that starts to look like a building and how we arrange the elements that they want within the building in a space. Only loosely, because it's important that the client feeds back to us throughout the whole process.

We have to get a client happy and if we can get a client to sign off on the concept, then many more workstreams open up. This then becomes a developed design. This is where the first set of regulatory matters will start to surface. A good architect is always thinking about how the building will stand up, how it'll meet building regulations and how it will get approval from the local planning authority, for example. But once you get to a developed design, then it's time for us to start drawing. There might be other parties involved and other people investing. This could be neighbours that you need to show drawings to, or getting planning permission from landlords. These sets of drawings paint a picture.

We always try to meet the client’s brief and advise them where we can’t. If it’s regulatory then we explain that. If the planning authority has a policy that says they won’t agree to it, we might still ask, as the policy is guidance and not the law. Every site is different. But we tell a client if it isn’t going to work, and might be able to offer an alternative.

Homeowners in houses with gardens have certain rights to build in their garden without planning permission, but they still may want to get approval from the local authority, which architects can help with. More often than not, they'll need a developed set of drawings, especially to be able to interact with other professionals in the project, such as structural engineers, landscape consultants, or interior designers.

3. What is the difference between an architect and an engineer?

Both design with the whole building in mind, an architect might focus more on the look of the thing whereas an engineer will also be concerned with whether it stands up or falls down.

In the traditional procurement process for a commercial or domestic building, an architect would put together a design, and an engineer would assist the architect and the builder, making sure it stands up and meets regulatory approval for those elements.

There are many sorts of architects and engineers. There's the engineer that just slavishly follows the architect's plans and fits things in. There's the engineer that goes, I can do it this way, but I could do it this way.

There is an overlap, depending on the wants and needs of the project. For example, the Eiffel Tower is a beautiful engineering project. There's a beautiful viaduct in the south of France - that's an architectural design but it's a piece of pure engineering. It's a collaborative process delivering a building but there are clear divisions in responsibility.

What other areas of architecture are there?

I don't think any architect or architectural practice would only ever do specific projects, like bridges or housing. They might specialise in those areas, but they wouldn't only ever do one thing. Some projects take 12 weeks, like domestic projects, but there's one I'm working on now that's in its 12th year! We have an overcurrent of the bigger projects, but we also keep an undercurrent of the smaller domestic projects because those are enjoyable too.

4. What sustainable solutions do you incorporate into your designs?

We would always ask a client what their sustainability goals are at the briefing and concept stage and encourage them to develop some sustainability goals, even if they haven't thought about it. We can tell them the bare minimums and then we encourage them to go a little bit further, and then add it to the brief. We'd reflect that in the concept and then add it to the developed design.

Building regulations have just changed, and there's been a greater emphasis now on better energy efficiency - building correctly with good insulation performance and air tightness. There's no point in having a highly insulated building and all gaps under the doors and all that heat disappearing out. There's regulatory approval, and planners may ask you to go beyond that regulatory approval. But they also ask you to meet certain other standards, and it very much depends on what you're building

as to what those standards are.

We did a house a couple of years ago, in South London, which is supposed to use no energy. Because it's in a conservation area, we weren't allowed to do the photovoltaics on the roof. So it's low carbon, not no carbon, but the intention is it never has to have the heating turned on. It benefits from solar thermal gain to heat the spaces and it's highly insulated. In the summer it's got techniques to manage that solar gain so it doesn't overheat. The idea is that the appliances in the space should do everything it needs.

Every building has an EPC rating, and they all need to be at C, minimum, by 2025. We're already assisting on projects, putting in measures to ensure a C band rating. We're doing a BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) 'excellent' on a project at the moment. BREEAM is wide ranging, dealing with the building and the materials and the build process. In my experience, the design is highly important in achieving those points. If it's part of the client's brief they'd probably have a sustainability advisor, or a BREEAM assessor, in early on, and probably a member of the design team who is wholly looking at that element of the work. It's less likely to happen on a domestic project though, although an architect will ask, 'could we do better?'. We start with passive measures that don't need to be maintained or re-fit.

5. How did you get into architecture?

I always liked building things. If you've got kids that like Lego, they're halfway to an architect.

I liked drawing. I liked things that moved and did things. And then I had a dad who's an architect, and I saw what he did. He didn't bring work home, but you got to see that there was a drawing board and there was a ruler that slid up and down and did something. It was the way that an architect uses images that say so much - that was interesting.

At 14, I got a week's work experience in an architect's office. I met people that were only maybe ten years older than me, doing crazy stuff, or at least looked crazy to me. And they let me do some of it! They probably balled it up and threw it in the bin later on, but I did some of it!

It's a vocation, not a profession - you have to be interested in it.

What qualifications do you need to have to be an architect?

There are many routes through it, the way I did it was through seven years at university.

To be called an architect you have to have a qualification and you can't offer a service unless you're registered through the ARB (Architectural Registration Board). It includes a degree, a diploma and a set of professional studies - not necessarily in that order. Ultimately you've got to have two years of professional experience and you've got to stand in front of a panel of peers to demonstrate your competencies before you can call yourself an architect. Architects deal with important things such as fire compartmentation - how someone would get out in the event of an evacuation, that needs to be demonstrated before you become an architect.

Can I become an architect if I cannot draw or can't do maths?

You don't necessarily need to be able to draw, a lot of information comes from computers these days. Computers also do a certain amount of the maths you'll need. But you will need to learn how to get that information. You wouldn't need to have maths A Level, but you need to have a good working knowledge.

What is the most exciting architectural project you've worked on?

The most exciting project I've ever worked on has to be each project I'm working on at the time! We as a practice don't live on our last project, we're looking to do the next one better. We're continually improving our professional knowledge, so every project should be better than the last one, which means it's got to be more exciting.

What's your favourite building?

I did a French exchange when I was 12, and they took me to the Centre Pompidou in Paris - that is just out of this world. I've taken my kids back to it, and my wife too, who is also an architect, and I'm still wowed.

You can find Ben and Norton Mayfield Architects at: http://www.nortonmayfield.co.uk/

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