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Architects Inquiry
Productivity Commission
LB2m, Collins Street East
Melbourne Vic 8003

Dear Sirs

Your Draft Report is accompanied by an invitation to make written submissions. This letter is in response to that invitation.

1. Profile of the architectural profession in Australia (Chapter 3)

My comments here are confined to the issue of "non-practising architects" in Western Australia. The Draft Report states that the W A Board keeps records of those architects. This is only partly true. The Architects Roll of W A in 1999 listed only those older non-practising architects who are retired but who wish to retain the title "architect". There are many other non-practising architects on the roll. They are eligible to practise but do not I personally know a couple of builders, a lawyer, a couple of arbitrators, a planner, a project manager and several academics, all of whom are non-practising and not retired but still appearing on the Roll as architects.

In other words the Architects Roll in W A is not a roll of practising architects. It is a roll of persons eligible to use the title "architect", who at some time in the past became legally eligible to do so and pay an annual fee to remain registered.

2. The degree to which the registration requirements for architects (university courses, practical experience and practice exam) ensure knowledge of structural aspects of construction. (Chapter 5).

(My qualifications for commenting on this issue are : (a) 20 years teaching "professional practice" subjects at W A Institute of Technology and Curtin University, (b) coordinating and monitoring the practical experience component of that course for the whole of my tenure there, (c) about 15 years conducting annual tutorials for candidates for the practice exam.)

(a) In university courses in Australia the most that is taught about structural aspects of construction are some principles of structural design. Unless the architect is also a structural

engineer, an architect in designing any but the smallest structure would either engage an engineer as a sub-consultant or

persuade the client to engage an engineer as a separate consultant. (So would a non-architect designer).

The teaching of structural design in universities is generally beyond the capacity of full-time staff. It is usually taught by part-time lecturers (engineers).

Chapter 5 of the Draft Report seems to lump "structural" issues with "health and safety" issues. Certainly "health and safety" includes structural matters but not exclusively. There are many non-structural aspects of health and safety, such as heating ventilation, cooling, security, drainage, weather proofing, access for disabled, etc., which are only marginally covered in university courses.

(b) The practical experience necessary for eligibility for registration .

In this stage of preparing for registration, the extent to which "knowledge of the structural aspects of construction" acquired at university is built upon is quite variable. An employee in a very small architectural office is likely to learn about a variety of matters (though not necessarily in depth) but an employee in a large office can be put into a specialist part of the office and learn quite a lot about only a small range of matters.

(c) The practice exam

The practice exam does not embrace "knowledge of the structural aspects of construction" at all.

3. Whether current standards for registration as an architect are appropriate and whether alternative mixes of qualifications and practical experience would also be appropriate for use of the title architect and its derivatives in meeting consumers' needs for buildings design and related services. (Chapter 6)

I confine my comments to the statement on page 89 of the Draft Report that "the periodic assessment of courses by the Boards should provide some check to course content becoming too far removed from the needs of architectural practice as seen by the Boards".

It is my observation from lengthy experience that this statement is dubious but even more so if it is reversed to read "..... some check to the needs of architectural practice becoming too far removed from course content, as seen by the Schools" because architectural education does not really recognise the breadth of practices in the modern construction industry.

4. Financial risks (Chapters 4 and 5)

On page 57 there is reference to underestimates of time and cost On page 69, in paragraph 2, there is the suggestion that the training of architects may increase their knowledge of costing and project management

It is my observation that the training of architects does not embrace, let alone increase, knowledge of costing.

As a senior member of the RAIA in W A I am frequently consulted by architects' clients who have been referred to me by the RAIA for advice. The most frequent query is about architects' inability to estimate costs or to design to clients' budgets.

5. Differences and similarities between registered persons and others.

In my role as a construction dispute consultant and resolver (as arbitrator and mediator) I have observed the practices of building design consultants of both kinds : architects and others. In my role as architectural services consultant I have similarly observed the practices of both kinds of architectural services providers. From those observations I can offer the following conclusions.

5.1 The claims of "many architects" (p. 81 of the Draft Report) that architects "offer a clearly superior service to non-architects" is true only in the sense of "offer,". The reverse may well be true also in the sense of "offer" but in any event my observation is that the quality of the service is not necessarily related to whether or not the service provider is registered.

5.2 After the normal completion of the building design and construction the resultant product is the building, the success of which (in terms of design) can be judged by the occupiers and other users on the one hand and by the public's appreciation of it on the other hand. As for the first of these judgements (by occupiers and users) I know of no evidence to show that there is a difference between architects and non-architects.

As for the second (public appreciation), I doubt if many architects themselves can tell the differences between architect-designed buildings and others, just by looking. Both categories of designers use the same tools, read the same books, specify the same materials, consult the same manufacturers. (Currently, curved roofs are fashionable with both categories.)

I am aware of controversy earlier this year in Sydney when the NSW premier, Mr Carr, publicly attacked the design of flats he described as “profit boxes”, which he said had not involved architects providing full services. (Sydney Morning Herald, 19.02.00). It seems to me that budget restrictions of client-developers may have had a similar effect, whoever the designers were, and would possibly have been too much of a challenge for many architects.

It is fairly easy for architects to recognise houses designed by "project home builders", i.e., those in the mass housing market. It is not so easy for architects to see the differences between one-off houses designed by architects and those designed by others. If architects have that difficulty, how much more so does the general public? The effect of Architects Acts in this context is obvious.

5.3 In my experience as an arbitrator and mediator in building disputes I have had to read contract documentation prepared by architects as well as by others such as builders, designers, draughtspersons, project managers, etc. I have found that it does not follow that if the author is an architect then the documentation will necessarily be superior.

5.4 I have learnt that exactly the same duty of care is expected, by law, of both architects and non-architects. What matters is not the title a person trades under but what the person undertakes to do and then actually does.

5.5 I have witnessed both architects and other designers performing architectural services - some professionally and some not so professionally, if at all, with some of each category in both types of architectural services providers.

On page 37 of the Draft Report there is a reference to "professional" and "non-professional" service providers. It is my view that there are so many vocations now claiming "professional" status that the expression no longer serves its original purpose and that there is no validity in describing architects as professionals and other designers as non-professionals.

5.6 Much of to-day's architectural services are computer based. Computer aided design, draughting, estimating, management and specifying are the modern tools of current building design practitioners. Many of the programs in use are common to both architects and non-architects. The quality of the services is as much related to the quality of the programs and their use as to the category of the designer who uses them.

6. Quality of the built environment

When Architects Acts were first introduced, many architects were also town planners and most town planners were probably also architects. The position now is that planning is a separate profession. Only a small proportion of architects are also qualified planners. The quality of the overall built environment is now more dependent on practising planners and planning legislation than on practising architects. You can drive for several kilometres through any recent urban or suburban area and hardly be affected by the work of architects, if at all, but will certainly be affected by what the planners have done. As for individual works in the built environment the major influence is more likely to be the work of engineers (bridges, highways, etc.) than the few buildings designed by architects.

Discussing the quality of the built environment as if it is dependent on Architects Acts is misguided and pointless.

7. Footnote

I enclose a copy of my book "If You Practise Architecture" published by the RAlA in 1996. I draw attention to the following chapters and invite you to regard them as part of this submission.

2.04 Professions?

20.6 Inventiveness in ways of bringing about new projects.

2.08 Where are you coming from to practise?

2.09 What a building designer designs.

2.16 The housing market.

(signature)

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