

# ARCHITECTS IN SPAIN: A PROFESSION UNDER RISK

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A review of the literature reveals that Architecture as a profession has been already studied in countries which belong to the Anglo-American model of professionalization: Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA. However, there is a paucity of work with respect to the situation in Spain, a geographical context with specific cultural, social and economic features, which belongs to the Continental model of professionalism. The study of state-specific professions, taking into account cultural contexts, shows international similarities and variations, besides it informs about constraints and opportunities existing in our national systems. In an attempt to address this research gap, we aim to depict Spanish architects' experiences and concerns regarding work, career and professional life. An interpretive approach is used, within the qualitative paradigm, to analyse 38 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Spanish architects of different age, gender and employment setting. Open questions explored reasons for choosing the architectural profession, career drivers and obstacles, and the realities of their working lives. Findings show that although most rewards and stressors derived from the profession are similar among countries, the Spanish context has particular features which result in interesting differences. Families influence students when choosing a career in architecture, social capital is among the factors helping their careers the most, while women also identify as barriers other aspects related to gender and work-family balance. Due to the economic recession currently afflicting Spain, participants describe a rather discouraging description of their situation and outline the lack of prestige and status associated with the profession.

Keywords: architecture, diversity, professionalism, qualitative research, Spain.

## INTRODUCTION

From early on, the sociology of the professions was prone to study the professions as a universal phenomenon unaffected by time and space heterogeneity. Hence, what were peculiar traits of specific professions in particular geographical and historical contexts (law and medicine in Britain and America in the 19th century) were considered as universal features of professionalization (Faulconbrige and Muzio 2012). The so called decentralized Anglo-American model, characterized by the freedom of self-employed practitioners operating in a market for services to clients, and self-regulated

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by a professional institution in charge of education, examination and licensing, became global (Evetts 2008).

Later on, the Continental model of professionalism, corresponding to European societies (including Spain) with a strong interventionist state and a large and powerful civil service apparatus, was considered. The state is directly involved in the institutionalization and regulation of professional expertise and is the main end-user of professional and technical services in a number of contexts (Faulconbrige and Muzio 2012). Although convergence between both models now renders this distinction partly obsolete (Evetts 2011), it is important for understanding current differences in the realities of professionals' work in different countries.

At present, the fact that professional occupations are different between nation-states and contexts are constantly changing is well accepted (Evetts 2011). Some authors have also pointed out that various actors have played historically different roles in the establishment and regulation of professional occupations while also influencing the realities of work and understanding of professional's duties and responsibilities (Burrage *et al.* 1990). In addition, they defend the study of state-specific projects in order to show international similarities and variations. Besides, acquaintance with different national systems and their cultural contexts "helps to inform us about the constraints and opportunities existing in our own" (Davenport 2000: 78). Research approaching the influence of cultural diversity on the realities of work in the architectural profession, is still at an incipient stage. This supports the case in favour of this paper, which sheds light on Spanish architects' work. It is also the foundation for a future direct international comparison with the UK and France.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore and depict Spanish architects' experiences and concerns regarding their work, career and professional life. Beginning with a review of the literature related to the architectural profession, we continue with a discussion of the particular sociological origins and the structure of the profession in this country, together with an overview of the economic context. Then we describe the qualitative research methods used and we discuss the findings. Finally, the contribution of this paper is highlighted showing that although most rewards and stressors derived from the profession are similar among countries, there are particular social, cultural, political and economic features related to the Spanish context which result in interesting differences.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION**

Existing research into the architectural profession has focused on individual countries, for example: the USA (Anthony 2001); France (Champy 2008, Chadoin 2007); Australia (Willis and Hanna 2001); Canada (Adams and Tancred 2000) and predominantly the UK (Imrie and Street 2009; Cohen *et al.* 2005; Sang *et al.* 2009a and 2009b; De Graft-Johnson *et al.* 2005; Fowler and Wilson 2004; Caven 2006). Caven and Diop (2012) have been the first researchers to conduct a comparative cross-national study regarding architects in France and the UK, while the case of global architects and architecture firms has also been studied (Faulconbridge 2009). Literature review suggests that Spain has not often been the setting for research studies about architects. In fact, only the recent works authored by Sánchez de Madariaga (2010) and Agudo and Sánchez de Madariaga (2011), focused on female architects, and Luque (2009 and 2007), analysing the state of the profession through surveys addressed to registered architects have been found.

Most of these empirical studies have focused on women and the lack of equality in architecture (Anthony 2001; Adams and Tancred 2000; Willis and Hanna 2001; Fowler and Wilson 2004; Caven and Diop 2012), the ‘feminization’ of the profession and resulting ‘depreciation’ in status (Chadoin 2007), and why women leave (de Graft-Johnson *et al.* 2005). A dearth of research has also dealt with motivations for entering the profession and remaining (Caven 2006; Sang *et al.* 2009b; Caven and Diop 2012), with job satisfaction and work purpose (Sang *et al.* 2009a; Cohen *et al.* 2005) as well as with ways of managing the profession (Champy 2008).

## **THE ARCHITECTURE PROFESSION IN SPAIN: ORIGINS, STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

In Spain, the origins of the profession are craft-based rather than arising from the arts (Wilkinson 1984), architects’ predecessors did not belong to a guild and their training took place on the job. They usually began as stone cutters or masons, rising in the workmen’s hierarchy to the position of “aparejador” or supervisor, and becoming master-builders in the last stage of their training. Finally, as masters of works, they were responsible for the design and proper execution of the building. Appointments for important buildings such as cathedrals were the basis of a solid reputation, and they used to hold only one such position at a time. However, at the beginning of the 16th century, the master developed more varied works and was often absent controlling other projects, leaving the building in the hands of his supervisor. “By this time, the master of the works was beginning to estrange himself from the rest of his trade and to become an architect in the full sense of the word” (Wilkinson 1984: 132).

Spanish professional associations developed at the end of the 17th century. The “Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de Belén” was created in 1682 under the name of the architect’s patron saint (Belén), resulting in the “Sociedad Central de Arquitectos” in 1849, which is nowadays the “Consejo Superior de Colegios de Arquitectos de España” (CSCAE), an umbrella organization for the professional bodies (Roldan 2011). The first Royal Academy of Architects, initially called “Academia de las tres artes”, was founded in 1744 in Madrid, later becoming “Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando”, it represents one of the first references and education systems for the profession and remains the basis for the present schools of architecture.

According to Roldan (2011), other academies were created later on in different Spanish cities: Valencia (1765), Barcelona (school in 1775 and academy in 1850) and Valladolid (1783). In 1875, with the “Moyano” law, the teaching of architecture was passed from the Academies of Fine Arts to the Superior Technical Schools. Architectural education is nowadays offered at 31 schools of architecture with 30,149 students enrolled (Rubio and Gómez 2011).

According to Mirza and Nacey (2010: 12) Spain stands out as the third country with the largest number of architects in Europe, 50,000, following Italy (145,000) and Germany (100,500). Analyzed as a proportion of the population, the Spanish ‘density’ of architects is 1.1 - measured as number of architects per 1,000 population –which is above 0.9, the average European density. However, architects’ supply keeps growing at a speed of 3,000 per year (Rubio and Gómez 2011). Architectural practice to this day remains regionalised since around half of all Spanish architects are employed in Madrid and Barcelona (Rubio and Gómez 2011).

Recent data from the CSCAE reveals that in November 2011, there were 50,205 registered architects, 71 % male and 29% women. In terms of the gender divide, Spain

seems to reflect greater equality than other countries such as the UK or France with 14% and 22% of registered women respectively (Caven and Diop 2012). However, in Spain, women entered the profession later, and they concentrate, in a higher percentage than their male colleagues, in the professional categories of salaried, civil servants or teachers, clearly showing horizontal segregation (Agudo and Sanchez de Madariaga 2011).

Just before the start of the civil war in 1936, the first woman architect, Matilde Ucelay graduated in Madrid (Sánchez de Madariaga 2010). Together with many other republican architects, she was disqualified from practising and during the Franco regime women's presence in any professional field was reduced. Following the transition to democracy in 1977-78 the number of women in architecture rose dramatically, representing now a critical mass of students of 57% - a fourfold increase from 1977 to 2007 (Sánchez de Madariaga 2010). The late entry of women to the profession in Spain may account for the higher numbers as Mirza and Nacey (2010: 2) identify that in countries "where the architectural population is young, a higher proportion are women" which is indeed confirmed by Sánchez de Madariaga (2010) who found that the majority of Spanish women architects are aged 25-35. In general, it is a relatively young profession, with an average age below 43 (Luque 2009).

As regards the mode of practicing, in 2007, 68% of registered architects worked as "profesional liberal" with their own practice, 22% were associates or salaried, 8% civil servants in the public sector and around 2% were devoted to teaching (Luque 2007).

A different perspective can be obtained by analyzing surveys of the recently created "Sindicato de Arquitectos de España- SARq" (Architects' trade union) because it includes non registered architects among its 1,050 respondents (SARq 2011). The average gross annual salary of architects is 15,842 €, while for professionals working abroad is 24,564€ (SARq 2011: 5). Overall, salaries are poor with 18.2% earning between 6,600€ and 15,000€ per year; 17,6% between 15,000€ and 21,000€ and only 1.9% earn over 39,000€. Due to the present economic downturn, 63,1% confirm that their salaries have been reduced and 26.7% are unemployed. The SARq survey also acknowledges the existence of a widespread illegal practice among Spanish architectural practices: 24.4% of participants are currently working as "false self-employed" and 70.6% confirm having done so before (SARq 2011: 3). This is an illegal category of workers which conceals an employee-employer arrangement simulating a commercial exchange between business and customer. Under this category the architect is not hired but has to carry out all kind of tasks – including site control- with no social rights, unemployment benefits, and sick or maternity leaves, being also subject to employers in matters concerning paid holidays, working schedules, overtime, exclusivity and intellectual property rights (SARq 2011: 3).

Spain experienced a huge 'building boom' over the past decade (Naredo and Montiel 2011) and the rise of construction has been described as a "tumour" (Bielsa and Duarte 2010). This unprecedented growth had important positive consequences for architects' work, because since the passing of the Law 38/1999 of "Ordenación de la Edificación" (Town Planning and development Act), both the figure of the architect as Project Director and of the building engineer as Project Execution Director are needed for the correct execution of construction projects, making up a team called "Dirección Facultativa".

However, the economic environment in which architects work has changed a lot since 2008. European construction output fell back by an estimated 7% in 2009, and a further 8% in 2010 as a result of the continuing economic crisis right across Europe, Spain was one of the countries hit most severely (Mirza and Nacey 2010: 3).

## **METHOD**

This work is part of a larger comparative study focussing on international comparisons with the work of architects in the UK and France. Our aim is to examine architecture as a “lived experience”, and so we use the same qualitative methodology and tools as in previous publications (Caven and Diop 2012, Caven 2006). Using in-depth biographical interviews participants were allowed to discuss the issues most salient to them related to their professional careers. The interviews explored reasons for choosing the architectural profession, factors which have helped or hindered their careers as well as the realities of their working lives, analyzing pressures and satisfactions. The topics were designed to be flexible areas for discussion instead of question and answer type subjects. We tried to “inter-view” in order to construct knowledge in the “inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Kvale, 2007: 1). The interview guide did not include any specific questions related to gender equality.

In reference to the sampling strategy, 38 architects were selected via the membership list of the professional regulatory body (Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos) of two Spanish regions: la Comunidad Valenciana and Castilla la Mancha. Both regions show a mixture of contexts for architectural works from urban to rural and public and private sector projects. The principle of saturation was applied for determining the sample size.

Interviews were conducted face to face by two native speakers between February and April 2011. They varied in length between 30 and 120 minutes, the majority of them were conducted at the participants’ architectural practice, some at the researchers’ offices, 3 at cafeterias and 1 at the interviewee’s home. All interviews were, with the permission of the participants, recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. Data was analysed following the conventions of content analysis (Kvale, 2007).

The sample consisted of 38 architects, of whom 20 were men and 18 women. Their ages ranged from 27 to 60: 4 respondents were under 30; 14 between 30 and 40; 9 between 41 and 50; and 11 were over 50. 34.2% were childless, while 23.7% had between 2 and 4 children, 34.2% had two children; and 7.9% had one child. In relation to their mode of practice, a wide range of occupations has been studied: full-time employees in local public sector authorities, full-time salaried professionals at construction companies, principals of partnerships, sole practitioners, “false self-employed” and university lecturers. One of the older men was retired, but he was included because of his wide experience in different professional fields. Reflecting the current Spanish economic situation, 4 women architects were unemployed when the interview took place.

In line with the profile of European architectural practices (Mirza and Nacey 2010: 44), the size of the 16 practices participating in this research is clearly skewed towards small firms: 4 are one person firms, 11 have between 2 and 5 architectural staff, which includes principals, partners and directors, associates, salaried architects and technical staff and one was a bigger practice with 14 staff. Other organizations represented in

this research are public and private Universities (Schools of Architecture), small and medium town Councils and construction companies.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Why to become an architect?**

The majority of participants did not rationally plan a career in architecture nor did they have much direct interaction with practising architects with whom they could have learnt details about the profession. Of the 38 respondents, four have architects as parents which can give some insight into what is involved. Typically, the response to being asked why they chose architecture as a career was along the lines of “I did not know what it was, what it involved, where it led, where I would arrive, I knew nothing. That was all, it is as simple as that”. (Male, age 50)

Only 6 of our participants report that architecture was all they had ever wanted to do from early childhood, whereas 35 cite being good at drawing and sciences (maths, physics) and 14 identify the mixture of technique and humanities offered by the study programme as the main reason for becoming architects. It was the expected contents of the university degree what attracted them to the profession, more than the architect’s work, which many of them ignored, not having family background or contacts in architecture.

In comparison with previous works, a new motive, showing the importance of the family institution in Spanish culture and society, is revealed in our research. Confirming that “Spaniards are collectivists when it comes to family, expressing pride and interdependence in their families” (Cabrera and Carretero 2005: 8), almost half of the participants argue that they have been influenced and pressured by their families in their career choice or that parents directed their interests. In fact, some would have preferred studying a different degree such as Fine Arts but it did not have enough prestige at the time and they were not allowed by their parents. On the contrary, another was forced to start Civil Engineering “due to my parents’ bad influence” and changed to Architecture the following year. Others point out that, with their choice, they tried to make their parents happy: “For my family, financing my studies meant a real effort. So I could not choose Fine Arts because they thought it had no future. I decided to study architecture as a form of respect towards them and I do not regret it”. (Female, age 42)

Unsurprisingly then, most Spanish architects had little prior understanding of the nature and culture of the construction industry which was not made evident during their architectural training. All participants noted that their studies had not prepare them well for the realities of work in general, and for actual site-based work in particular (Sang *et al.* 2009b).

### **Career facilitators and barriers**

When asked about factors helping their careers all architects point out the importance of their social capital, that is, their professional connections, people they knew that had helped them in getting clients. This is true not just for self-employed architects, but also for architects working in the civil service and even for those working at the University. This support the fact that recruitment methods in Spain are relatively informal, favouring personal contacts, unsolicited applications and internal advertising (Cabrera and Carretero 2005). In the light of our interviews, the strategy of “pulling strings” seems to be pervasive in the Spanish architectural labour market. Family members, friends, former clients, colleagues at work or even ex-teachers have been

facilitators for our participants: “My dad was a developer and I knew people from the construction sector. He introduced me to a quantity surveyor who was a family friend and he allowed me to meet people. That was my beginning and my facilitator. For some of my University colleagues who didn’t have connections, the process was much longer. At the time I had 400 houses being built, they had only done the refurbishment of just one house”. (Male, age 58)

The economic situation was highlighted either as driver or obstacle, depending on the direction of the economic cycle. Older participants clearly remember the various economic downturns they lived through and their negative influence in their studios. One reflects:

“I have experienced the economic downturn of the 70’s, the one of the 90’s was also tough. In the 80’s there were also some difficult years but we survived. During the economic crisis of the 90’s there wasn’t too much work, we had difficulties, but this is the worst, this is a financial one with structural consequences in construction and real estate markets. Nobody has escaped. We had lots of work every year and now there is no urban planning, no industries, no housing, nothing. We even have projects with building permissions that we have not been able to develop”. (Male, age 59)

The most striking result among the evoked constraining career factors is related to the lack of gender equality in Spain. Although the interview guide did not include any specific question aiming at surveying opinions about gender diversity, expressions such as “being a woman” and “work-family balance” appear as negative aspects among women. Gender barriers existed both within the firms and in the wider working environment involving clients and construction site workers.

In the first place, at a micro level, we found examples of women complaining about male employers being discriminatory and paternalistic when supporting traditional gender roles at the studio. As a 35 year old interviewee explains: “Had I been a man, I’d have had access to certain parts of the job, it would have been easier for me to go on site, or to carry out projects with more autonomy. My bosses were the ones controlling the building site, my work had to do with the plans, and I stayed at the practice... because we (women) are supposed to be tidier and calmer”. (Female, age 35)

Another woman also mentioned how male architects she had worked for preferred to hire women, since they thought “we are not as competitive, we complain less, are less ambitious, work harder and are more faithful”. Workloads were always divided and while women ended up drawing the plans and projects, men were in charge of the social relationships with clients and of the site control. In agreement with Agudo and Sánchez de Madariaga (2011: 167), women architects “are pushed into the background, becoming invisible for the client, taking on the work inside the practice with little attention” and maintaining occupational segregation.

Secondly, at a broader level, several women reported not enjoying work on building sites. A 58 year old interviewee, recalls with bitterness her first experiences on site in the 80’s: “Women do have a handicap there, you would go on site and they would start whistling at you, and you are supposed to be the site director. I suddenly started disliking the site”. Still, according to the words of a 27 year old participant, things on Spanish sites seem to remain unchanged nowadays, since construction workers do not take a woman seriously: “you are just a beautiful face for them and that is all”. This Spanish result differs from the situation in the UK, where workmen are (in the main) prevented from whistling or calling out (Caven and Diop, 2011: 223).

Client organisations were also seen as problematic in perpetuating gender stereotypes. A 43 year old Spanish respondent was restricted to designing small projects because a developer “would not place his investment in the hands of a woman, especially if she is young, that was an obstacle I felt I could not overcome, I always had to resort to my male colleagues at the practice”. Our interviewee here felt her career opportunities were being restricted as she was not being given an opportunity to prove herself.

### **Rewards and stress factors**

Both Spanish men and women architects obtain intrinsic rewards as a result of creativity and by seeing something they had projected being built; from positive feedback coming from clients, colleagues or bosses, and from good relationships and the joy of working with others. These accord with English and French architects (Caven and Diop 2012) and there are no differences between men and women.

Sources of stress in the Spanish profession are the combination of heavy workloads, tight deadlines and long working hours (10 to 11 hours a day) which, in Spain, due to the long lunch break imply finishing work at 9 or 10 at night. The result is the impossibility of balancing work and family life, with negative consequences for career development: “my professional life was completely cut short, there were projects I could not carry out because I was not there the whole day”. (Female, age 42)

Difficult working conditions are also evoked when participants recall having to frequently work over night and during the weekend and when referring to economic instability. This is specially the case for the self-employed and practice owners who, due to the present economic downturn, complain about not having a fixed salary every month and having to wonder “what is going to happen the following month”: “When you count on stability you can evolve continuously in your life. You might buy a bigger apartment or you can plan your future. We can’t, we are always scared, how are we going to educate our children?”. (Male, age 38)

The fact that Spain fits with the Continental model of professionalism mentioned earlier is confirmed by the pervasiveness and involvement of the State, influencing architects’ work. Thus, political pressures appear as a negative aspect for those architects working in public authorities such as town councils. They acknowledge difficulties in relationships with politicians in the Civil Service: “The political colours of the Civil service make your career really difficult”; they mention having been pushed to change the direction of reports, and that it is just their signature what is needed. More clearly: “The majority of politicians’ interests are spurious, and so they manipulate you, they try to use you, you are a qualified pen to do what they want, as long as it is legal”. (Female, age 43).

Additional grievances are directed towards the plethora of rules and regulations relating to building form and performance, nationally materialized in the Spanish Technical Building Code (approved with Real Decree 314/2006, of March 17th) and different regional and local legislation. Likewise, their practices are increasingly legalized and under threat of litigation due to risk and responsibility matters. This is all seen as a bureaucratic burden generating additional work and many times, the scope for creative endeavour is very narrow.

Besides, they are demotivated because their aesthetic decisions are too influenced by the client and by the constructor, leaving them with little autonomy. It emerges then that “architects work in a state of heteronomy, having to defer to the client and their demands rather than working as autonomous artisans” (Faulconbridge 2009: 2543).



A loss of respect towards the profession and downgrading are also highlighted and with them, certain confusion with their professional identity is developed: “Socially I believe architects are losing a huge position in society and we are not aware of it as a group. Nowadays we are the least respected people, everybody seems to know about architecture, everybody has the right to give an opinion and even question you, the Civil Service is not helping, we are the silliest of the world”. (Male, age 50)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Spanish architects, like architects everywhere, obtain intrinsic rewards from the creative aspects of their work. Stress factors are also common and relate to time pressures, long work hours and work-life balance. However, due to Spanish idiosyncratic working hours and a familialistic welfare regime, the incidence of work-family conflict might be greater than in other countries.

Taking into account that the Continental model of professionalism, which influenced Spain, was closely connected to the growth of the state and to state bureaucracies (Evetts 2008), government presence and strong influence can still be felt in many aspects. For example, pervasiveness of the Spanish State in architects’ work routines emerges through political pressures. A further exploration of this particular issue might be of interest for the research community.

The importance of the family institution in Spanish society is revealed when participants point out having been influenced and pressured by their families in their career choice. Social capital and networks of influence, rather than personal merit, emerges as one of the main career drivers for Spanish architects, something which has not been acknowledged in previous research on the profession.

In relation to gender, despite there being more women registered in the professional body and studying architecture than in other countries, this ‘critical mass’ has not served to improve their situation, as they report high levels of discrimination and find it difficult to progress in their careers. The gap identified in the literature review, together with the results of this exploratory paper and comparison with works in the UK, clearly show the need for further specific analysis of the situation of Spanish women architects.

Due to the economic recession currently afflicting Spain, with strong impact on construction activity, the findings show a rather discouraging description of the situation for most architects: unemployment, widespread job insecurity and exploitation under the form of “false self-employed”. They appear as relatively powerless victims against demands for regulation, increased bureaucracy, transparency and accountability. In addition, we reveal the lack of prestige and status associated with a profession which once had autonomy in the design process and nowadays has become a “heteronomous profession”.

Spanish architects clearly face an uncertain future with an oversupply of professionals, the situation is not helped by the professional bodies’ refusal to collate transparent statistics nor participate in European sector studies such as those commissioned by the Architects’ Council of Europe. Without such support their situation is unlikely to improve.

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