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THE CHANGING NATURE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE: THE SOUTH AFRICA EXPERIENCE

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While it is commonplace that things are changing in landscape architectural practice, the extent and nature have never been investigated in South Africa. This study, based on a 33% response to questionnaires sent to educators, private and public practitioners of 0-5 years, 5-15 years, and 15+ years experience, illustrates dichotomies in the ranking of the minds of practitioners and their perceptions of their clients' requirements. The responses of various practitioner categories do not vary significantly. They are in agreeance that they deliver less than what they perceive to be their clients' design needs or expectations. However, other service areas, such as performing the service promised, serving the client as a responsible agent, developing design proposals centered on the client's needs, and meeting client's time schedules, all rank higher than design performance. This represents a significant shift in priorities since peer evaluation (a central tenet of a profession) has diminished and client satisfaction is now the reigning priority. The values of the profession as represented in university curricula need to reflect awareness of those held by members of practice to assure that professional preparation is appropriate to the evolving demands of contemporary professional life.

INTRODUCTION

Profound changes have occurred in the design professions in recent years. These changes are the result of evolving land development and design delivery practices, growing demographic and environmental problems, emerging political and economic structures, and advances in information technology. Landscape architects find themselves at the confluence of these rapidly changing conditions with the result that their professional paradigms and the nature of their practice activity are also changing. Researchers in the United States and Great Britain who have investigated shifting conditions in the practice of architecture have identified some of these changes.

Evolving requirements in urban development have brought about systemic changes in contemporary design practice (Derrington, 1981:5-11; Crosbie, 1995, p. 50; Symes, *et al*., 1996:4). Over the last quarter century, the size and scope of building projects have been increasing with projects being commissioned by a new type of client, different from the traditional owner-occupier of the past. Contemporary clients for expanded scope projects include public clients, corporate clients, institutional boards, and development consortia. In the USA, three fourths of landscape architects surveyed indicate that their most likely type of client was a developer (ASLA, 1990:38; ASLA, 1999:8). Because these clients are rarely the end user of the facilities they develop, the relationship between the landscape architect and owner is becoming impersonal and distant, with the result that many of the traditional advantages of a close working relationship between the client and designer have diminished.

As clients have changed, so have their expectations (Derrington, 1981:5; Gutman, 1996:88). Increasingly, they seek a service centered on their specific needs rather than design-oriented advice of an aesthetically refined nature. These clients demand increasing attention to their unique requirements — often budget and time requirements or the functional and marketing concerns of projects. The specific character of clients' needs change with the type of organizations they represent and their different development goals or internal decision-making structures. Several areas of change have been identified.

Management Issues

Management concerns have been growing in importance as an integral component of design practice. The expanding size and scope of projects have necessitated the introduction of many specialists into the design delivery process to address an increased number of development requirements (Caudill, 1971,:71). The growing number of participants in the design process has required designers to devote an increasing amount of time to meeting their managerial responsibilities. The consequence of these changes has been an expanded and increasingly expensive administrative function that is seen to detract from traditional concerns for design quality, eroding long held professional roles and values (Derrington, 1981:6).

American landscape architects report that they are increasingly engaged in a variety of activities other than design in their routine work. These include practice management, contract management, project management, marketing, and public relations (ASLA, 1990:3). American architects indicate that recent graduates have little awareness of project management in particular and that their general preparation for practice is poor (Crosbie, 1995, p. 47). British architects also report an increasing requirement for management activities (including budget management), activities for which they feel inadequately prepared by their formal professional education (Symes, *et al*., 1997:44). About half of British architects surveyed report inadequate training in other areas they rate as important to practice as well, including urban design, planning, codes, and brief preparation.

Construction Practices

Changes in construction practice have had an important influence on the design professions. The nature of the construction contractor has changed; no longer a construction generalist, the contractor

has become a specialist broker of sub-contractors engaged to execute the different elements of the work. Because of its increased size and complexity, the building enterprise has diminished the role of the individual craftsman. Consequently, designers are no longer asked to supervise the work of craftsmen in the production of quality building, but to oversee work executed by unskilled or semi-skilled laborers who are unconcerned with the quality of the finished product. The responsibility for quality now rests with the general contractor, who is, in effect, removed from the building process (Derrington, 1981:7).

An important consequence of these changes in contracting has been to shift attention away from the pursuit of quality building to the legal interpretation of contractual obligations with the result that the relationships among the parties "collaborating" in the project delivery are often adversarial — at times resorting to the legal system for the resolution of disputes. Because land development has become a complex enterprise requiring specialized skills, the division of labor and cooperation to orchestrate a wide variety of resources to implement desired change in the environment, adversarial relationships become both destructive to the process and frustrating to the parties engaged. The result of these developments is that the delivery of excellence in both design and construction are becoming difficult in the extreme under conventional implementation approaches.

Economic Considerations

Economics has become the most significant factor in the changing character of design practice. The influence of inflation has created severe pressure for all decisions and services to be delivered within reduced time frames. The most compelling result of reduced time is noted in the quality of the design service being delivered (Derrington, 1981:9). As the client is becoming increasingly aware of the cost of services (and requires the delivery of designs in compressed time periods to reduce market uncertainty and potentially increased costs), quality appears to be impaired. This is often evidenced by inadequate or conflicting instructions in the (rushed to completion) contract documents with the inevitable cost escalation, delays, and deteriorated working relationships that result.

The development industry has responded with process technology, such as construction management systems (often supplied by outside experts) to ensure that projects are executed on time and within the budget. A major consequence of this is that the designer is becoming one of a number of service providers with diminished capacity to oversee overall excellence in the quality of the finished project. Under these conditions, design fees are negotiated to the lowest possible levels with the result that design quality is further threatened (Derrington, 1981:10).

Design Quality

Since the end user is so far removed from the design-development-construction chain, and life cycle costing and value engineering are seldom used, design quality has been redefined by contemporary circumstances. Attention to physical form as the principal measure of design excellence (as defined by the professions) has diminished in light of contemporary influences on design and construction processes. Quality has come to mean the delivery of the project, as defined by the client, on time and within budget (Derrington, 1981:10).

Design practice is being affected by the growth of the consumer movement. In an effort to ensure that they receive value for their money, clients demand detailed accounting of expenses, contractual performance specifications for services, and explicit rationale of design recommendations. Additionally, there has been a growth in the regulatory requirements to which designs must respond, and regarding which, the designer must submit to lengthy review to assure compliance (*Government Gazette of South Africa*, 1997, p. 5). Taken together, these influences create multiple layers of constraint to individual design behavior and significantly alter and, from the point of view of the designer and client alike, complicate the design process.

Service Issues

Service, to include management of the design process, has become the most important aspect of design practice. A survey in the USA (Derrington, 1981:80) found that both architects and their clients valued the creation of design form as the least important aspect of the designer's service. Client orientation of the service provided was considered the most important consideration by architects with management ranking second and technical knowledge third in priority. Clients also consider services oriented to their particular needs to be the most important aspect of the service they received from architects, although they believed that architects' performance is delivered in reverse priority. In their evaluation of architects' performance, clients perceived design to be their primary focus, technical competence as second, with management and service orientation receiving the lowest priority attention. As a consequence of this divergence in perceptions (or values), there have been changes in the way architects relate to their clients. Landscape architects are exposed to similar pressures. Not surprisingly, these changes have been responsible for a perceived deterioration in the value of the services being rendered by both designers and their clients. The following areas of weakness have been identified:

- Contemporary clients requiring more than mere design service demand strict control of costs, adherence to abbreviated time schedules, the provision of consistent and knowledgeable contact personnel, rapid and effective decision-making, and the demonstration of considerable flexibility in design approach to accommodate their specific needs and activities. Architects, on the other hand, are seen to place primary emphasis on the quality of design form, apparently unaware of, or unconcerned with, the changing needs of their clientele (Derrington, 1981:88).

- Clients feel their needs are not being met due to a lack of managerial skill and formal mechanisms within the design community for precisely determining and satisfying the needs of sophisticated contemporary clients (Derrington, 1981:89: Crosbie, 1995:48). Not only are architects often ill prepared by training to satisfy their clients' needs, but more importantly, some maintain that the profession as a whole is not oriented toward the identification and satisfaction of them (Rapoport, 1990:82). This may be a result of their focus on and confidence in well-established internal values and professional goals, in preference to the values and goals of clients or users, coupled with the fact that there is little feedback from users to designers.

The Characteristics of Professions

The characteristics of professions are changing in response to evolving social conditions. As professions respond to address changed circumstances, they begin to take on new characteristics. A comparison of old and emerging professional paradigms illustrates the impact of evolving conditions on contemporary design practice (Faniran, 1987).

- The old paradigm was *solution-oriented*; professional practitioners were trained to define problems in terms of a pre-ordained solution.

  The new paradigm is *problem-oriented* to explore situations and define problems in an effort to identify possible solutions.

- The old paradigm was *question-answering*; professionals were trained to answer questions "professionally" (i.e., error-free and surprise-free).

  The new paradigm is *question-asking,* inquiring continually about problems in a more open, error-embracing, and surprise-anticipating manner (fast-fail, then rapid recovery).

- The old approach was *system-closing;* professionals were trained to operate within a comforting closed system environment that was elitist, technocratic, bureaucratic, conflict-masking, and product-oriented.

The new approach is *system-opening*, operating in an open, democratic, liberal, flexible, conflict-exposing, and process- or system-oriented environment.

- The old approach was *organization-captured*; professionals were trained to operate in a protected, institutionalized, client-oriented, and constrained situation.

  The new approach is *boundary-expanding*, operating in exposed, free-floating, humanistic, and issue opportunistic situations.

- The old approach was *politically explicit*; professionals were trained to operate late in the political process, choice-related, and with well-defined expectations.

  The new approach is *politically flexible*, operating early in the political process; is issue-formulating and uncertain of expectations.

- The old approach borrowed mentality, was impressed by foreign or *imported ideas*, technologies, and organizations.

  The new approach places emphasis on developing new local, *indigenous ideas*, methods, and technologies; or modifies foreign ones to suit local conditions.

- The old approach dealt with conditions as if they were essentially *static*.

  The new approach deals with *dynamic* conditions, evolving and adapting, integrated, interrelated, systemic solutions.

CONDITIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

South African society has undergone change in the last decade that is perhaps more profound and more pervasive than that found in any country not at war. Over the last twenty years, these changes have had a significant influence on landscape architecture as a design service profession. To determine whether changes in professional practice in South Africa reflect, or are different from, those found elsewhere, a survey of the profession was conducted in October of 1998.

A questionnaire was sent to all practicing landscape architects in South Africa with 33% responding. Responses were received from the following categories:

Nearly three-quarters of the responses (71%) were received from those whose primary professional activity was private practice. Just less than a quarter of responses (23%) came from practitioners in public agencies. The smallest group of respondents were four educators at the University of Pretoria which, with the exception of this researcher, included all lecturers in the program at the time the data were collected.

The total national population of 220 South African landscape architects includes 75% private practitioners, 15% public agency employees, 3% academics, and 7% who for a variety of reasons are no longer engaged in active practice. This distribution is similar to that found in the USA where 77% are private practitioners, 20% are public practitioners, and 4% are academics (ASLA, 1997:8).

Service Priorities

The questionnaire was organized to assess the priorities practitioners placed on the services they provide. They were asked to rank the priorities they assigned to a list of 28 areas of professional service. The rankings were requested in three categories: first, to characterize the level of service now being delivered by the respondents' design firm or agency (Descriptive of the design firm or agency);

TABLE 1. Categories of survey response.

	Private Practitioners	Public Practitioners	Educators	Total
Experience level 0-5 years	19	9	1	29
Experience level 5-15 years	17	7	0	24
Experience level 15 + years	16	1	3	20
	52	17	4	73

TABLE 2. Summary of priority ranking among service categories.

	Descriptive of the firm's performance	Rank	Important to the design firm	Rank	Perceived importance to the client	Rank
A. Design service	4,28	1	4,67	1	4,45	2
B. Technical service	4,16	3	4,26	3	4,27	3
C. Management service	4,01	4	4,54	2	4,27	3
D. Service orientation	4,19	2	4,54	2	4,52	1

second, to describe the level of service the firm or agency desired to deliver under ideal conditions (Important to the design firm or agency), and third, to describe the level of service that they believed their clients expected from them as professional service providers (Important to the client).

The rating scale employed was:

1. unimportant,
2. slightly important,
3. moderately important,
4. important, and
5. highly important priority of professional service.

The summary of responses from practitioners in the general categories of service is illustrated in Table 2.

Although practitioners placed their highest priority on design service as a "general category" (in both what they delivered and in what was important to them), they did not believe that this priority reflected the view of their clients. However, when investigated more thoroughly, it became clear that there were discrepancies between the priority assigned to design as a "general category" of service in comparison to the "individual design services" when broken down as discrete items. The summary of all responses is illustrated in Table 3.

One of the most striking aspects of the service priority assessment was the level of importance practitioners attached to the range of service areas. In regard to the importance practitioners placed on the different services (Importance to design firm/agency), all but one item (the location of the their office convenient to the client) were ranked between important and highly important. The aggregate median for all services as indicated by all practitioners was 4.57 out of a possible rating of 5.0 (Table 3).

The picture is somewhat different when gauged by their actual performance as indicated in the "Descriptive of the design firm/agency" category. In this case, there were six service areas rated below "Important," one of which was below moderately important. The overall difference in priority between what landscape architects believe they deliver and the service they would like to deliver was a 9% differential. In both these general categories (Descriptive of the design firm/agency and Importance to the design firm/agency), design service was rated as having the highest priority.

Although landscape architects assigned their highest priority to design as a general category of service, this was not consistent with the earlier findings of Derrington (1981:57) in a similar investigation in the USA where architects gave their highest priority to "Service orientation." The investigation

TABLE 3. Summary of the service priorities in practice as indicated by respondents.

	Considered to be descriptive of the design firm/agency	Importance to the design firm/agency	Perceived importance to clients
	Mean	Mean	Mean
A. Design services (aggregate)	4.28	4.67	4.45
1. Designs function effectively	4.29	4.86	4.62
2. Designs have aesthetic appeal	4.21	4.55	4.05
3. Materials are cost appropriate	4.33	4.60	4.67
B. Technical services (aggregate)	4.16	4.26	4.27
4. Cost control of projects	4.33	4.79	4.76
5. Construction techniques	4.14	4.67	4.38
6. Satisfy code requirements	4.24	4.52	4.07
7. Construction documents	3.90	4.43	3.81
8. Coordinate consultants	4.14	4.52	4.21
9. Site inspection	4.21	4.64	4.40
C. Management services (aggregate)	4.01	4.54	4.27
10. High quality service delivery	4.19	4.67	4.69
11. Time scheduling	4.29	4.64	4.71
12. Communication	4.14	4.74	4.48
13. Provide a reliable contact person	4.38	4.67	4.64
14. Good client-principal contact	4.26	4.45	4.38
15. Make quick decisions	4.10	4.64	4.43
16. High office productivity	3.81	4.48	3.76
17. Efficient billing procedure	3.88	4.48	3.95
18. Sell projects for clients	3.90	4.21	4.10
19. Good personal relations with client	4.17	4.38	3.60
D. Service orientation (aggregate)	4.19	4.54	4.52
20. Meet client’s priorities	4.31	4.83	4.86
21. Speak client’s language	4.17	4.62	4.48
22. Act as a responsible agent	4.45	4.76	4.69
23. Flexible in design approach	4.40	4.69	4.83
24. Proposals centre on client needs	4.43	4.55	4.81
25. Good client-staff relationship	4.29	4.52	4.52
26. Convenient office location	3.26	3.67	3.21
27. Regular progress reports	3.93	4.43	4.43
28. Perform the service as promised	4.47	4.81	4.86
Aggregate means	4.13	4.57	4.37

of landscape architects reported here also revealed that the respondents believed that clients shared their view of design as one of the most important (if not the most important) service category priorities. In Derrington’s investigation, a selected group of clients, who were surveyed directly, gave their highest priority to "Service orientation," with "Technical service" and "Internal management service" rated essentially equal in second position, and "Design service" given the lowest priority among the four categories (Table 4).

Republic of South Africa (RSA) landscape architects perceive their clients’ priorities to be much closer to those actually expressed by clients in the USA than to their own, even though they consider that clients generally share their view of the relative importance of design service.

It is not considered particularly important whether practitioners in the USA and those in South Africa share one another’s views about service priorities. However, it is considered important whether design service providers in South Africa render services in priority consistent with their perception of clients’

TABLE 4. Comparison of priority ranking among service categories.

	RSA Descriptive of the firms' performance	RSA Important to the design firms	RSA Perceived importance to clients	USA Derrington's survey of client priorities
A. Design service	1	1	2	4
B. Technical service	3	3	3	3
C. Internal management	4	2	3	2
D. Service orientation	2	2	1	1

TABLE 5. The ten most important service priorities according to practitioners in all categories.

Rank	Service area	Mean
1	Performing the service as initially promised to the client	4.47
2	Acting as a responsible agent to the client	4.45
3	Presenting proposals that center on the client's needs	4.43
3	Adhering to the client's time schedule	4.43
4	Flexible in design approach to meet client's needs	4.40
5	Providing clients with a consistent, knowledgeable contact	4.38
6	Controlling costs in order to finish project within the budget	4.33
6	Employing construction techniques appropriate to the budget	4.33
7	Identifying and understanding the client's priorities	4.31
8	Maintaining good client-office staff relationships	4.29
8	Providing designs that function effectively	4.29
9	Maintaining good principal-client contact	4.26
10	Adhering to safety and code requirements	4.24

expectations (which they apparently do not) and whether they understand (or are concerned about) their clients' values regarding the services they contract to provide.

In the ranking of professional services according to the respondent's current level of delivery ("Descriptive of the design firm/agency" based on respondents' rating of themselves), their ten most important service priorities were identified. There were actually 13 items listed in the ten priority positions, since three positions had more than one service with the same numerical ranking (Table 5).

Providing functionally effective design proposals, perhaps the most prevalent area of focus in design practice and certainly one of the profession's most important goals, ranked eighth out of the top ten service priority positions. Design function was ranked 10% lower than the highest priority item — "Performing the service as initially promised."

These findings regarding service priorities among landscape architects in South Africa are generally consistent with other findings among architects in the USA (Derrington, 1981:79), which revealed that for some time the contemporary definition of design quality has been broadened and redefined in terms of client-focused service and economics. This represents a dramatic shift from the traditional professional values of function, form, aesthetics, and quality construction — values that are among the most highly regarded within the profession as evidenced by the focus of much of the current literature in the discipline.

It is also important to note that aesthetic appeal in design, perhaps the highest single value among design practitioners in all disciplines (Symes, *et al.*, 1996:32), was ranked 11th out of the 20 priority positions (among the 28 service areas listed), reduced in status among practitioners to a second tier of service priorities.

The findings reinforce the conclusion that the profession is evolving and changing, and that the performance requirements and values being expressed in contemporary practice are not the same as those considered most important in the past.

CONCLUSION

The survey revealed that although practitioners are currently providing a level of service they perceive as being less than their clients desire, the ideal level of service to which they aspire is generally higher than that required to meet their clients' needs or expectations, suggesting that while professional practitioners are currently performing at a lower level than they desire, their personal and collective aspirations are higher than the demands of others (in this case their clients), reinforcing the traditional definition of a profession as a learned society whose actions are guided primarily by its own internal values. These values however appear to be in transition and, thus, may account for the respondents' inability to perform at the level of excellence they expect of themselves, and to which they aspire with increased performance opportunity. The nature of the profession does not seem to be changing, but the operational values and behavioral characteristics of its practitioners do seem to be.

While practitioners placed a higher priority on design than any other "general category" of service, the data do not support this position when comparing specific service areas. A number of specific services in categories other than "design services" were rated highest with *performing the services promised*, *serving the client as a responsible agent*, *developing proposals centered on clients' needs*, and *meeting clients' time schedules* clearly having the highest priority positions. That design was not considered the highest priority service landscape architects provide their clients suggests a significant shift from past priorities. Under prevailing conditions in South Africa, landscape architecture is increasingly becoming defined as a design service profession, with the primary emphasis on service rather than design. Providing designs that serve the needs of their clients has become more important than providing designs that satisfy the traditional functional and aesthetic values of the profession.

The dilemma this presents to the profession is whether the work of practitioners is to represent their own internal values or those of their clients. Further research is needed to reveal the actual rather than the perceived values and priorities of clients regarding the services they receive from landscape architects to clarify future directions for the profession. At present it seems that, in general, practitioners are trying to walk a fine line between satisfying their long-standing professional values, while at the same time responding to perceptions of their client's requirements. A significant advantage to practitioners is that some may choose a middle road while others may change in one direction or the other in response to the issues. The problem is that as long as these issues are seen to be in conflict, there can be no clear voice to define the services practitioners offer to clients. The lack of a clear voice from the profession provides great freedom for individual practitioners but at the cost of creating confusion among existing and potential clients, whose commissions are required for the realization of work. One clear indication from the survey is that the provision of design services is becoming an increasingly complex undertaking and that successful delivery will rely as heavily on a comprehensive, systems approach to holistic project definition and management as well as to any specific category of design resolution.

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