

Beyond the (archi)stardom: Subject positioning and power relationships in architecture studios

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Summary

The work processes in architectural firms involve partaking in creative and routine activities as well as dealing with contingencies. Architectural professionals are hence required to parley between the routine, the creative, and the unforeseen in the architectural processes regularly. These parleys are structured through power relations. Using qualitative interviews, we explore the subject positionings and roles of professionals in the work processes of architectural studios in Italy. Our preliminary findings show that the archistars (starchitects) are always solely reference figures. The regular (non-archistar) studio owners and project leaders instead operate in a horizontal organizational structure during regular creative-routine activities. This organizational structure becomes more vertical when confronted with contingencies. For ensuring the credibility and transferability of our findings, the next steps of the study will involve a) completing the analysis of the entire qualitative data set and b) conducting surveys based on identified themes from the qualitative analyses.

Keywords: Positionalities, power relations, creativity, architecture, contingencies, organizational structure, qualitative

Introduction

The work processes in creative industries, such as architectural firms, involve a combination of routine activities and creativity (Sonenshein, 2016). Yet, the architectural processes, while being creative, simultaneously involve some routines (Cohendet & Simon, 2016). For instance, constructing an auditorium requires aesthetic taste as well as the preparation of cost estimates and building permits. Furthermore, in the course of architectural processes, the professionals also encounter contingencies. The skilled professionals are thus required to parley between the routine, the creative, and the unforeseen in the architectural processes regularly. However, such negotiations are often structured through power relations (Brown et al., 2010). In this study, we examine these micro-level power relations underlying the work processes in architectural firms. Specifically, we examine the professionals' discourses about subject positioning (of the self and the others) in the work processes in architectural studios. Hence, our preliminary research questions is: "What are the subject positionings and roles of the professionals with respect to architectural processes?"

Through this study, we contribute to the literature on positionalities and power in creative industries. In the following sections, we discuss our literature review, preliminary research question, research methodology, and initial findings respectively. In the subsequent discussion and conclusion section, we deliberate on the initial findings and the next steps of this ongoing study.

Literature review

Contemporary architectural firms are knowledge-based, professional, creative organizations (Brown et al., 2010). Prior literature has pointed out how professionals in such creative organizations deploy

systems of persuasion (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) to get others to adopt their point of view. This persuasion potential of professionals depends on their subjective positions in the organization. Indeed, relations of power determine whether professionals receive opportunities for influencing the work processes in architectural firms. As Perrow (1972) highlights, “organizations are multipurpose tools for shaping the world as one wishes it to be shaped. They provide the means for imposing one’s definition of the proper affairs of men [sic] upon other men” (p. 14). Thus, grounding on the idea that power is an endemic part of organizational life (Fleming & Spicer, 2014), scholars have increasingly been interested in understanding how power manifests itself in organizational contexts. Further, power not only has an inherent relational nature; it also tends to emerge with regard to structural relations rather than to actor attributes (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). In this regard, researchers have found that individual departments are not powerful in themselves but become so only when they create relational dependencies (Hickson et al., 1971). That is, power’s manifestation occurs not just in explicit attempts to influence others’ behaviors, but also as “a network of relations constantly in tension” (Foucault 1979, p. 26).

However, as the literature highlights, power relations can limit the response repertoire available to individuals that try to accommodate divergent logics (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Examples come from individuals balancing between the need for exploration (i.e., coming up with a new idea, project, or process) and exploitation (i.e., relying on routines to maximize efficiency) as well as for competition (e.g., affirming one’s own status within an organization) and cooperation (e.g., working in team to combine different competencies and increase the likelihood to sign the deal with the customer). Moreover, despite the fact that mastery of a certain knowledge domain is considered central to strengthen professional power, the emergence of large architectural firms and the employment in increasingly large-scale projects have also been found to lead architects to focus more on becoming effective managers instead of excellent designers (Ahuja et al., 2017).

As suggested by Brown et al. (2010), such power relations can be investigated by examining how professionals talk about their everyday work life. In this study, we explore how the professionals talk about themselves and others (i.e., archistars/starchitects, studio owners, architects, project managers, etc.) in terms of their positionalities in the architectural process. The small-d, micro-level focus we embrace in this study is suited to understand how these professionals discursively articulate their role identities with regard to the creative processes in their respective architectural studios (Caza et al., 2018).

Research methodology

At its current stage, our study is qualitative. Our initial sample constituted of 24 architectural professionals, from which we excluded 5 participants whose profiles did not match our study requirements. For instance, three of the excluded participants had junior-level jobs and were comparatively inexperienced in the profession. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the remaining 19 professionals (8 females, 11 males). Our sample includes freelancers, owners of architectural studios, and studio employees in Italy. We chose our geographical context as Italy, since the country has had a long tradition of creative industries and architecture, which is also reflected in the high quality firms and architectural education programs offered contemporarily. Since the interviews were in Italian, we translated them into English before conducting the preliminary analysis. Initially, we read through the translated transcripts to get a general sense of the discourses involved. Then we coded a portion of the data inductively, to identify the overarching themes. To do so, we followed the Grounded Theory approach suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). A list of the identified initial themes are included in Figure 1.

-----Insert Figure 1 here-----

Initial findings

Our initial findings show how architectural professionals position themselves and the others with respect to the architectural processes in the studio. As per our participants, the general architectural process involves a series of steps - discussion of the needs of the customer, development of a proposal and a

project feasibility study (if applicable), selection/creation of a project team (with internal and external members), acquisition of necessary authorizations, implementation of the project, and addressal of any contingencies. The contingencies can include any incompatibilities, problems, or customer-requested variations to the initial project plan. Subsequently, our preliminary analysis reveals the positionings and roles of different professionals with respect to the architectural process and the contingencies. We discuss the themes below, in detail.

Positioning and role of professionals in the architectural processes

Top management

While discussing top management, we referred to both archistars (i.e. the architects/studio owners with celebrity status) and regular owners of small architectural studios. The archistars were perceived to have the role of a reference figure. As per our participants, the archistars provide the studio with a signature name which the customers can immediately identify. They were mentioned to be political diplomats who bring big projects into the studios and subsequently have minimum presence in the projects. While the archistars were considered as just signature names, the regular studio owners instead were considered to operate in a horizontal organizational structure, in which everyone was able to interact directly with the client. The studio owners were thus identified as professionals who follow the architectural process directly and push others to create something new/better. They supposedly provide the other professionals feedback based on 'fresh eyes' and experience.

"However, [archistars'] presence in the studio is minimal, it's very commercial. If we are talking about archistars, the archistar is a politician and no longer an architect. If we're talking about architects then it's something else, he's present in all the projects, you always have 8/9/10 projects in mind at the same time so they're two different roles. I saw the archistar once a month when I collaborated with an archistar." (Participant 19, studio employee)

"So given that we have banned the word archistar... we try to work in a horizontal work system whereby, for example, even when there are meetings with customers there is never only my [owner's] presence, but there is also the presence of other key figures in the group because clearly everyone must also be able to interact directly with the client. So it is clear that the client addresses the signature of the studio but for us it addresses the whole project team in short." (Participant 16, studio owner)

Other professionals

Our preliminary results point to a very horizontal structure in studios. According to the participants, the project leaders (architects who lead the project teams) coordinate the process by "pulling everyone up by the jacket" to make professionals with different expertises work together. The leaders also notice and address incompatibilities in the architectural processes. The team members discuss every decision and evaluate all the options together with the leader, without indulging in blame games. This horizontal structure is for ensuring the professionals' freedom of expression and subsequent creativity.

"It is normally the architect [project leader] who notices the presence of incompatibilities: to say that the structural engineer doesn't care if his work is not compatible with the needs of the plant. It's the architect who sees it who sees that he has to integrate all these things here. So he's the one who says: "no, it won't come back here." (Participant 17, studio owner)

"...we say that good ideas come when we work together and in the end one almost doesn't even remember who had the idea anymore because it is such a thing, like a recipe in the kitchen, one puts a little salt in it, the other puts in another thing and then we don't even remember who had the idea of cooking that dish but in the end something important came out. So as I was saying, then the evaluation at the end is made by the person in charge of the project who knows all the variables but no idea is left unturned." (Participant 18, studio partner)

"I believe that in every situation in which there is a person, he must feel free to be able to say what he thinks and even if he shoots it big, pass me the term, creativity is still freed. On the contrary, if there are situations in which you know that you are not in charge of making that decision and therefore you, as the saying goes, tie the donkey where the master says, and then the thing is completely lost there." (Participant 18, studio partner)

At the same time, the structure of the architectural studios also involves a power hierarchy. The autonomy of the individual professional is expected during team discussions. However, once a final decision is made by the architects, the others need to abide by.

"Everyone has their own autonomy but clearly autonomy does not mean that then one can precisely take decisions that are somehow not agreed upon, because the elements are all clearly connected to each other. So the general line must be followed. So basically there is autonomy but once the decision has been made, everyone in the team still follows the decision made." (Participant 16, studio owner)

"[The project leaders should] make an effort to keep the goal and to maintain the project setting without dirtying it too much with so many compromise solutions which from my point of view demean the concept of architecture a bit." (Participant 17, studio owner, some parts of the quote are paraphrased to make the meaning clearer)

Role of professionals in the case of contingencies

In the case of contingencies or unpredictable situations, the professionals perceive the need for a well-knit team. While the regular architectural processes might involve a horizontal structure, in the case of contingencies this structure becomes more vertical. The project leaders lead the problem-solving process, with the help of team members. In this scenario, the professionals who are most competent on the situation is supposed to act first and then the others join in. In the case of contingencies, there is less autonomy amongst the members. Rather, the decision making depends on the profile and skills of the involved professionals. Once a decision is made, everyone has to follow it.

"...if the structural engineer starts making architectural assessments it's not good, [I am not saying] not listen to it but it's not good. He must place his own competence in the point of view for what his role is in that location. Otherwise confusion arises, the line must be clear, the structural engineer must have his own line, the architectural consultant his line. Mixing assessments leads to a compromising situation that greatly affects the impact of the structure." (Participant 17, studio owner, some parts of the quote are paraphrased to make the meaning clearer)

Discussion and conclusion

The preliminary findings show that the position of the archistars is figurative. The archistars give their name and fame to the studio, but they are not involved in the architectural processes in depth. Instead, the regular studio owners and the project leaders are the professionals involved in the architectural processes. While the studios have a horizontal structure, it is implicit knowledge that the final decisions regarding the architectural processes are always taken by the leading architects or the studio owners. This trend is more evident in the case of contingencies, in which the decision-making is more tightly tied to the role and experiences of the involved parties. All the professionals do not have an equal say in the process in such cases.

Since this is an ongoing study, there are some limitations at the current stage. Our findings currently are descriptive, and based on the analysis of only a portion of the collected data. Hence the next steps of the study will be a) completing the analysis of the entire qualitative data set and b) conducting surveys based on identified themes from the qualitative analyses. Through step a), we expect to find more themes pertaining to the power relations in architectural processes. The purpose of step b) is to achieve

credibility and transferability through data triangulation. Our data might also be further analyzed to capture which facets of power are identifiable in our sample. Consistently with Fleming and Spicer's (2014) paper, we acknowledge that power in organizations may take different forms (i.e., coercion, manipulation, domination and subjectification) and be acted in different sites (i.e. 'in', 'through', 'over' and 'against' organizations). Moreover, it could be insightful to explore the impact that certain power relationships, underlying architecture firms' work activities, might have on their creative performance. Hence, given how important it is for the firms to be able to come up with new ideas and to be able to tailor their project to their customers' needs and requests, one question to investigate would be whether power structures facilitate or hinder creativity. Finally, this study could also be developed to explore how power relations emerging in creative firms may be connected to professionals' identity threats (Ahuja, 2023) that follow, for instance, competing professional values or fragmentation of work.

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Figure 1. Overview of identified themes in the preliminary analysis – Roles and positionalities of professionals in the architectural process

