

RIBA



Royal Institute
of British Architects

Best practice small practice

Using and developing the
creative strengths of smaller
architectural practices



“...one of the best anti-poverty pro-jobs programmes is to help more people start more small businesses, and ensure that access to capital, advice, skills – once restricted only to an elite – is opened up to men and women in every part of Britain”

Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP

30 September 2002

Introduction

The great majority of architects' practices are small. Only a very few extend beyond the general definition of a small or medium sized enterprise. Creative and highly motivated; they are also the essential general practitioners of the building design world.

It is well recognised that small team working provides the best conditions for maximum creativity and it is a model that larger companies imitate. However, small practices are under pressure to form larger companies and they are responding with innovative working arrangements to continue to provide the best service to their clients.

Government support is needed to ensure that the skills of small and medium sized practices are used to contribute to the public sector building programme and that there are opportunities for growth.

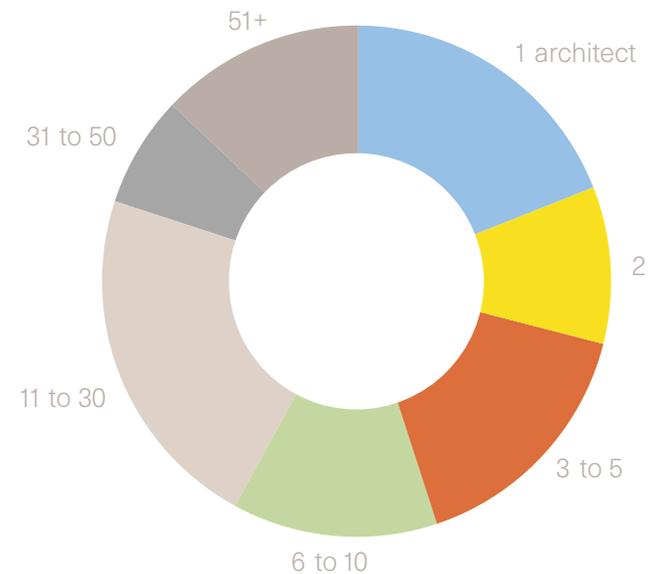


Fig 1. Architects by practice size
Architects' Employment and Earnings 2002
Mirza & Nacey Research for the RIBA

Small Practice

A small scale provides the best conditions for creativity – even large firms will carry out projects in small teams – and small practice attracts many of the best of Britain’s architects. The challenge to small practices and larger clients is how to use and nurture the skills available in small practices for the benefit of the wider economy.

Small architectural practices form an essential part of the construction industry, working and collaborating with other consultants, contractors and suppliers often in long-lasting relationships. Most have a mixed workload of commissions from different clients: private individuals, developers, small companies and parts of the public sector. Such a mix is essential to maintain a healthy practice and to weather economic cycles. Many carry out work of the highest quality and are a vital part of local and regional economies.

Probably all design firms started as small businesses, but only a few have had the opportunity to grow, frequently as the result of an overseas’ commission. Opportunities to grow locally are becoming ever more limited, as extensive related experience becomes a universal demand from clients and their backers.



above from top:
Saughton Visitors’ Centre, Edinburgh Prison
Gareth Hoskins Architects
photo David Churchill
Yokohama International Port Terminal
Foreign Office Architects
photo Sartoru Mishima
Sway Art Gallery, Sway, Hampshire
Tony Fretton Architects
photo Lorenzo Elbaz

Traditionally, buildings were designed and built by small firms. We now have technology that allows each individual to work, research, communicate and achieve far more. This is, in many ways, a golden age allowing small, creative teams to carry out large projects. Yet there is a simultaneous demand for design companies to be as big as possible to reduce the perceived risk of using them. Fortunately we do not yet require our novels or paintings to be created by large companies, but as with design we would be the poorer if we did.

Architects working in small practices are exploring ways they can form consortia to combine opportunities for creativity and quality with the necessary management to deliver even better value to clients. These efforts will make the talent available in small practices far more accessible for the delivery of the quality, innovation and excitement that is essential to allow Britain to lead the way in architecture at the start of the 21st Century.

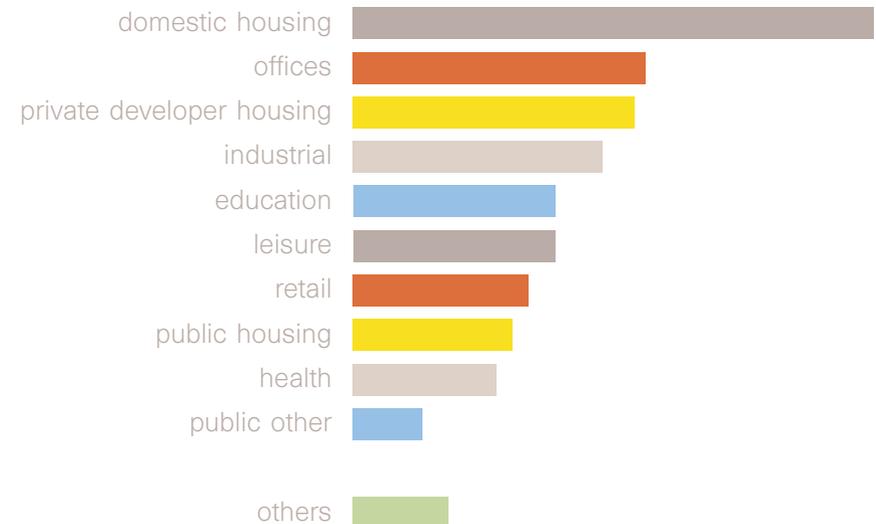


Fig 2. Building sectors worked in by small practices (approx 1–10 staff), 1995–2000
Small practice Survey 2000 for
RIBA Small Practice Committee



opposite:
New Art Gallery, Walsall
Caruso St John Architects
photo H el ene Binet
above:
Harmeny School, Edinburgh
Richard Murphy Architects
photo David Churchill

Strengths

Small companies, involved with both design and construction of projects, have huge strengths and Britain has long had a small business ethos to support them and provide the opportunities to allow the best to flourish. They have:

- Real commitment to projects that can form a significant part of their workload
- The creativity and ingenuity to make difficult projects happen
- The hands-on involvement of senior staff throughout projects
- Local experience and background knowledge of communities
- The ability to assist and involve the local economy using local supply chains
- Closeness to the communities they serve enabling a sense of project ownership
- Flexibility and adaptability to circumstances
- Short communication chains enabling fast responses
- Extensive resources, information and support readily available through IT
- Low management costs

“We know that it’s small businesses who will create the new jobs of the future” Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP, Labour Party Conference, 30 September 2002

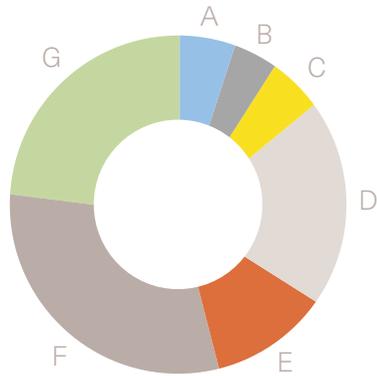


Fig 3. Architects by field of employment
Architects' Employment and Earnings 2002
Mirza & Nacey Research for the RIBA

- A local authorities
- B central government
- C private in-house
- D private practice salaried
- E private practice associates
- F principals in partnership
- G sole principals

Vulnerabilities

Smaller design and construction businesses may be more agile and able to survive a degree of economic hardship but they are also vulnerable to changing demands from clients, in both the private and public sectors:

- With a smaller turnover and output they have less experience of similar projects now required by clients
- Large bundles of projects are being assembled by clients seeking economies of scale and fewer points of contact
- Site specific designs may not be able to compete on cost with standard products offered by larger competitors
- Small businesses cannot offer so much 'cover' to those clients seeking to off-load project risk
- New procurement methods preclude smaller businesses from becoming directly involved, particularly in the public sector
- There are fewer experienced clients, particularly in Local Authorities, able to act as champions and facilitators for small businesses
- Small businesses can be overwhelmed by the paperwork required for bids for public sector work
- New procurement methods have very high bid costs and risk levels, preventing involvement from smaller businesses

Opportunities

The country needs creative design companies and high quality medium-sized construction companies if it is to prosper. The Government must ensure that small companies are supported and can grow into larger ones. As the major client of buildings and other works in Great Britain the public sector has the opportunity to invest in the future.

- The current major programme of public works will need to involve all the best and available designers and contractors if it is to deliver both quality and quantity
- It is essential for the economy of the country that SMEs have a continuing role in the public sector works programme
- The public sector has the unrivalled ability to promote the development of new and growing firms through competitions and targeted commissioning
- The export market for architects' services will be strengthened by support for design firms at home
- Far sighted client bodies and individuals are needed in the public sector to harness the creativity and commitment of small firms
- A better designed Britain will be better able to compete in the world for workers and companies, tourists and economic success



above from top:
GPs Surgery, Hammersmith, London
Guy Greenfield
photo Paul Tyagi/VIEW
Thames Barrier Park, Woolwich, London
Patel Taylor
photo Martin Jones

"We have to think small first" Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP, 30 September 2002

Celebration

Britain has architectural and design talent celebrated across the world. Our design schools produce students who are in demand internationally. Yet many decide to work for smaller, more creative, companies and teams where they have the opportunity to work with the greatest freedom.

The creative industries in Britain are a major and growing part of the economy and the country needs to ensure that the most innovative and talented are used to conceive, design and construct its buildings.

Those charged with the procurement of hundreds of new health centres and schools to be built across the country must ensure that they make bold choices that show faith in the future of architecture and design. They need to have real pride in the outcome. We must not make do with unimaginative and repetitive, bulk-purchased buildings.

As we embark on a major public works programme the opportunity exists to show that the best architects are celebrated in this country and we don't just leave it to others to recognise our most talented designers. The public sector can, should and must lead the way.



Action points

- Take a personal interest in the successful design and delivery of individual buildings and projects. Demand quality
- Champion the use of the best and most appropriate designers for each project in your constituency
- Question why a local project has been bundled with others elsewhere
- Encourage the use of a range of local and other emerging and talented architect firms
- Consider the use of architectural competitions to select the best design and designers
- Ensure your Local Authority has the in-house skills and resources to be an imaginative and intelligent client and that there is an appointed champion for good design
- Make sure that the Planning Authority encourages high quality and innovative buildings
- Encourage consultation and debate on building proposals
- Ensure an architecture centre or a built environment exploratory is serving your area
- Promote the construction of local landmarks to trigger community pride and regeneration

Design: DUFFY

opposite:
Landmark Theatre, Ilfracombe
Tim Ronalds
photo Martin Charles

RIBA
66 Portland Place
London W1B 1AD

T +44 (0)20 7580 5533

F +44 (0)20 7255 1541

E info@inst.riba.com

www.architecture.com

