

## Drafting Culture

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A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor process we get a result that existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose...

Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1867, Vol. 1, Part 3, Section 5

Three years is not a long time in the life of a mature, capital intensive industry—possibly enough to produce a new model, but not enough to retool a whole production line or change market perceptions. The same, however, may not be true for those sectors of the economy exposed to socio-technical turbulence and characterized by product agility. A good example is provided by distant architectural services.

When I contributed some ink to the paper of this journal in 2003 (“Foreign Routines,” *arcCA* 03.2), I noted how convergence technologies had managed to uproot traditional modes of professional exchange and interaction. Yet I was cautious about the professional take-off potential of the market for three reasons. One was that I sensed its clear polarization towards geographic reorganizations of the same company on one side, and cottage industry operators and commercial drafting bureaus on the other. The second was that, within this environment, I felt that the social division of responsibilities that traditionally characterizes design activity was likely to give way to a detailed division of production, “where drawings are turned into (and turned out as) goods, and where workforce training needs and profiles shift from spatial and technical understanding to work station dexterity.” Finally, the third reason was that the profession itself seemed extremely coy about the entire arrangement, and unwilling to concede its undeniable lure openly.

Today, I am no longer sure this is the case, and I am prepared to admit defeat by evidence. Digital exposure has certainly reached new levels. Try a search of *OffshoreXperts*, a website of distant outsourcing, and armies of potential drawing-services subcontractors, divided by world region or type of specialty, will scroll before your eyes. Not that they all qualify for NASA consulting, but their cyberspatial presence still betrays a degree of organizational infrastructuring that was unthinkable only a few years ago.

More significant, however, is the fact that distant services have come out of the proverbial professional closet and situated themselves at the forefront of the architectural sector restructuring debate. Both professional and management journals now give digital outsourcing a modicum of coverage, and the many professional firms that have used such services are more prepared to talk about it, at least compared to the past. This may be partly connected to the recent evolution of building design markets in advanced economies, where firms’ specialization in construction documentation or project administration—services valued by sophisticated clients particularly on complex projects—is finally coming of age as a legitimate professional strategy to hedge knowledge-acquisition costs and reduce office exposure.

Be that as it may, the CEOs of some of the most successful design services subcontractors have entered the professional scene from the front door of AIA, RIBA, and CAA meetings, with addresses or workshop presentations aimed at debunking myths of makeshift competitiveness through the display of professional wares and office workforce preparation. As a matter of fact, many of these business structures have come to resemble (or literally to replace) commercial design or executive architectural offices in the U.S. or the U.K. They use the same language, publicly subscribe to an ideology of scrupulous productivity and value for money, and in some cases have graduates of prestigious universities or former associates of renowned firms at their helm.

Provided that one changed “Public” to “Private,” the set-up is not too dissimilar from the Departments of Public Works established across the British Empire during Queen Victoria’s and King Edward’s reigns, headed by highly qualified minds and staffed by well-trained, conscientious avatars. Had technological circumstances allowed for it earlier, digital collaborations may have been able to build some historical lineage. Albert Khan would have been happy to contract a sister firm for the design documentation and on-site administration of his Russian factories in the 1930s; Bruno Taut would have been a good design director for a Turkish export-oriented firm; Antonin

Raymond and Kunio Maekawa would have conscientiously dispatched flawless architectural details from Japan to international clients; and Fernand Pouillon could have made a killing servicing French companies from his office in Algeria.

My flippancy has the purpose of highlighting one element I consider important for the discussion: that, within the newly forming regime, notational correctness of the documents exchanged will cease to be the discriminating factor for digital outsourcing. In a widening market characterized by firms' long-term strategic decisions and high levels of public information, and where there is ample opportunity to preview skills and undergo preliminary pilot tests, the appropriate use of drafting routines, detail libraries, and quality assurance guidelines is the necessary condition to operate at a minimum competitive level. And by the time all the players allowed on the field know the basic rules of the discipline they are in, the pickets of the game will have to be relocated onto farther (or higher) grounds, in this case delimited by design skills and cultural perceptiveness of sorts.

For too long, professional handbooks have treated construction documents as neutral translations of design decisions taking place somewhere else, the format of which could then be standardized or reduced to norms. Instead, we all know that architectural practices tend to conform to and employ, either explicitly or implicitly, systems of design procurement, decision making, element costing, and technical linkages that have major consequences over the formatting/layout of contractual information and associated graphics. This generates markedly specific collaborative needs, which can easily become the basis for selective alliances and the arrangement of complementary services in a fee-shrinking environment. Several drafting outsourcing firms are now firmly onto this, and eager to prove their ability to move up the design or project development chain. It is not by accident that the name of one large company in the business comes from the compression of "satellite" and "atelier."

This evolution, in a sense, suggests that digital outsourcing has changed, or is changing, its geographic narrative: no longer a way to bring two distinct socio-economic and professional worlds together in order to benefit from their wage differentials, but rather one of transacting within a much larger territory of practice, where firms can locate themselves more freely according to production advantages. The reasons to pursue distant collaborations remain the same—competitiveness and professional sustenance—but the industrial repercussions are drastically different, because, in the second case, distant servicing may mean structural relocation of previously closer function and replacement of previously local employment. Coping with the challenges of the times, in the end, may require more than retaining construction documentation skills. It may imply drafting a new culture of professional services that recognizes the winds of change while acknowledging that there are still plenty of softer areas, such as urban, community, landscape, and interior design, which are less adaptable to non-local agendas but equally necessary to the public welfare.

#### **Average annual growth in GDP, 1990-2002:**

U.S.: 3.3%

China: 9.7%

India: 5.8%

#### **Average annual growth in Services, 1990-2002:**

U.S.: 3.7%

China: 8.8%

India: 7.9%

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