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Architectural Practice in Saudi Arabia: An Ethnographic Study of Professional Culture

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Abstract

This paper investigates architectural practice in Saudi Arabia as a professional and cultural system resulting from interaction among professionals in architectural offices. In the course of literature review and secondary analysis, five pillars of practice have been defined, including architectural design, technologies, management, legislation, and work environment. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in nine small, medium-sized, and large architectural offices (one of each size per region) located in Riyadh, the Eastern Province, and Makkah (375 hours over 45 days), while the results obtained through thematic coding in MAXQDA are compared across offices. The results show that there is more than one professional culture in the practice of architecture depending on the office size, structure, leadership, and communication. Formality and informality are two sides of the same coin, and the tacit knowledge, informal communication, and professional relationships determine the design choices. The effectiveness of technological, administrative, and legislative resources depends on the interpretation and application of these resources. The study proposes an integrated framework for understanding and evaluating the culture of architectural practice in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords

Architectural Practice, Ethnography, Professional Culture, Architectural Offices, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Architectural practice which was traditionally studied within the context of large projects has now become an important concern within architecture all over the world due to changes that have taken place in society, economics, culture and technology which have affected professional practice. However, in Saudi Arabia

and the wider Arab region, the term is still insufficiently defined as to what it entails.

Over the last forty years, research on practice by Schön [1] and Cuff [2], and more recent research on office ethnography [3], have redirected the focus away from individual architects and buildings, to consider social inter-relations involving people, materials, institutions, and broader social processes. These studies have utilized practice theory, a framework which emerged from anthropological scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, in order to analyze the interplay between individual agency and social structure [4].

Expanding upon this viewpoint, the research focuses on the social actorship of the architects in professional, organizational, and economic systems. Ethnographic research conducted at nine firms in Riyadh, Eastern Province, and Makkah has been used to investigate the cultural aspects of architecture in Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the five fundamental pillars of architecture, and the daily activities and everyday practices of architectural work.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Understanding Architectural Practice

No universally recognized definition of architectural practice currently exists, which could be attributed to differences in researchers' theoretical perspectives and interests. To derive an analytical framework for this study, a secondary analysis was conducted of twenty-seven definitions of architectural practice related to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) [5], supported by a review of relevant professional and academic literature. According to these definitions, architecture is a human practice combining consultation, design creativity, organization, ethics, and regulation. Characteristics that recurred across the definitions and the literature were recorded, which identified thirty characteristics associated with architectural practice, such as consultation, design, specifications, collaboration, professional culture, and contracts. Additionally, ethnographic studies supplement these definitions with insights into the way of practice implementation in the organization of architectural practice [6], coordination in building processes [7], design knowledge reuse in architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) firms [8], and architects' knowledge of users [9].

2.2. The Five Fundamental Pillars of Architectural Practice

The thirty characteristics were then compared and consolidated. Characteristics were grouped together when they shared a similar function, were conceptually related, or described overlapping professional responsibilities, so that each characteristic was assigned to the group with which it was most closely associated. Following the hierarchical decomposition method of Alexander [10], these groups were organized into five interconnected pillars, as shown in **Figure 1**, with main and subsidiary elements for each pillar: architectural design (design study and information on design), technology (information technology, construction technol-

ogy, and intelligent systems), management (planning and practice), legislation (regulatory bodies and support institutions), and the physical working environment (office environment and its economic, cultural, social, and health aspects). The framework connects international conceptions of practice to the local context and guided the fieldwork, coding, and comparative analysis process.

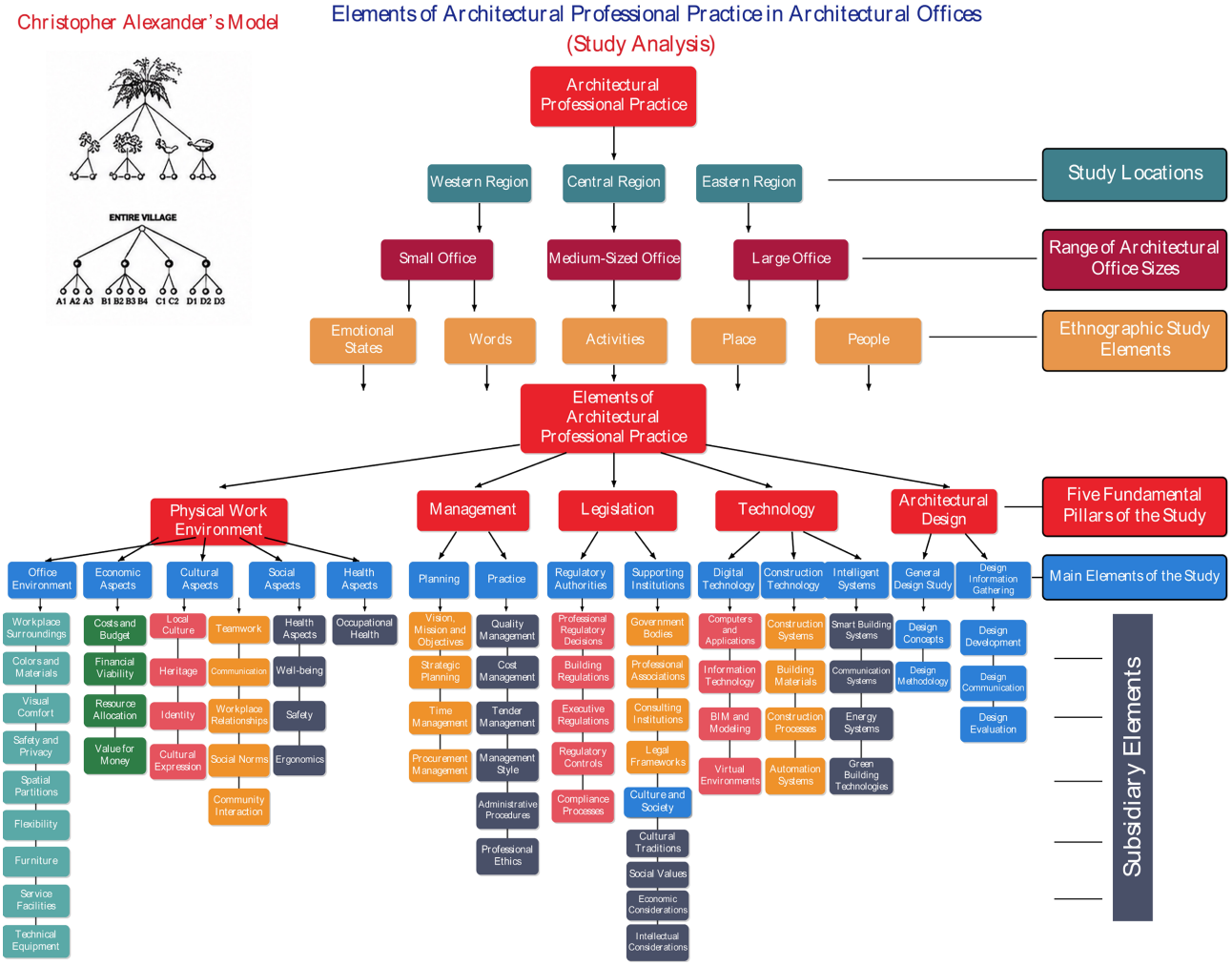


Figure 1. Analytical framework, showing study locations, office sizes, ethnographic study elements, and the five fundamental pillars of architectural practice with main and subsidiary elements.

2.3. Architectural Practice as a Professional Culture

The ethnographic approach understands social life via fieldwork, participation, and immersion [11] [12] based on an understanding of culture [13]. The architectural application of this approach has informed design and building assessment [14] [15] and been extended via visual and sensory techniques [16] [17]. When applied to the office, this approach enables the understanding of decisions that arise out of negotiations [2], the embodied knowledge of models [3] and tacit knowing enacted through actions [1], while its requirements for access, time, and reflexivity are documented [18].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Analytical Framework

The study used a qualitative ethnographic approach in two main stages. The first stage led to the development of a five-pillar framework (Figure 1). In the same stage, a structured preliminary questionnaire was distributed to architectural offices in the three regions and completed by 98 respondents. The responses helped identify and prioritize the professional elements to be examined during fieldwork and informed case selection (Section 3.2). The second stage involved ethnographic fieldwork. The five pillars were observed through five ethnographic study elements: people, place, activities, words, and emotional states.

3.2. Fieldwork and Data Collection

The offices were chosen by purposive sampling, with the following criteria: geographical distribution, size of the office, professional reputation, and level of architectural activity. Offices' accessibility and willingness to participate in direct ethnographic observation were also considered during recruitment. Guided by the questionnaire results, which identified the professional elements to be observed, nine offices were selected so that these elements could be observed across all three size categories in each region. The fieldwork was conducted in nine offices that varied in size (small, medium-sized, and large) in three regions: Central (Riyadh), Eastern (Eastern Province), and Western (Makkah region). The offices were distributed equally, with one small, one medium-sized, and one large office in each region, giving three offices in each size category (Table 1). Each office is identified by an anonymized code used throughout the paper. In total, 375 hours were spent during 45 days of fieldwork observing the operations, communication, decision making, interaction, and application of the five pillars by architects beyond documented procedures.

Table 1. Distribution of the nine architectural offices by region and size (anonymized office codes).

Region	Small	Medium-sized	Large	Total
Central (Riyadh)	R-S	R-M	R-L	3
Eastern (Eastern Province)	E-S	E-M	E-L	3
Western (Makkah region)	M-S	M-M	M-L	3
Total	3	3	3	9

The three size categories were adopted as a comparative methodological framework for ethnographic comparison rather than as statistical strata. They were told of the general size of practice differences that are mentioned in the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) benchmarking literature [19] and how this generally suggests that practices with ten or fewer employees can be taken as a broad defi-

nition of smaller practices, with mid-sized and larger practices being defined accordingly. This allowed for systematic qualitative comparative analysis of the nine offices in terms of their organizational structure, leadership, communication patterns, and professional cultures.

3.3. Ethnographic Data Analysis

Fieldnotes were analysed using open, axial and selective coding in MAXQDA. Field observations were documented by seven components: people, place, activities, communication (words), emotions (emotional states), objects, and the impact of the object(s) on the professional practice. Observations of activities and interactions were coded initially and then compared and grouped into more general coding categories. Observations of an individual manager's control of design decisions, for example, were coded as "centralized decision-making", "direct communication" and "limited delegation", and the combination of these codes led to the interpretation of patterns of leadership.

The coding was not constrained by the five pillars and their sub-elements, but the initial analysis was guided by them. Further themes that emerged during the fieldwork—including tacit knowledge, informal communication, professional relationships and leadership styles were kept as analytical categories. Interpretations were analysed by comparison across the nine offices, including comparisons of organisational practices. The nine offices were then compared according to size, management, professional relations, and work practices, and interpretations were developed concerning formal process and actual behavior, tacit knowledge and informal communication, and the interactions between the pillars.

The researcher's presence and professional interactions within the offices formed part of the field setting and may have influenced what participants did and said while being observed. The researcher's role and relationships with office members were therefore considered when interpreting workplace behaviors and relationships.

4. Ethnographic Findings

The findings below are illustrated with anonymized fieldnote excerpts and observed episodes from all nine offices, identified by the codes in Table 1.

4.1. Architectural Design Practices

Design in small offices was related to the experience and involvement of the office head, thus allowing for instant communication but also limiting the accumulation of knowledge and decision-making to very few people. Design in medium-sized offices involved more differentiation, but the process was dependent on communication between architects and office managers during the approval process or when changes needed to be made in the course of action. Large offices had further differentiation of roles, making intra-office communication im-

portant as well as the exchange of information during design development. Overall, design was influenced not only by the talent and ability of the architects but also by the managerial structure, clients, professional experience, and organizational factors.

These differences could be seen in the day-to-day scenarios. The field notes in the small office in Riyadh (R-S) showed that "the principal architect makes decisions independently or with a small team", which is a sign of the centralization of decision-making and informal communication. In a medium-sized Riyadh office (R-M), "design ideas are reviewed and developed through regular meetings, including discussions of alternative solutions", while the large Riyadh office (R-L) included "large teams comprising architects, planners, and external consultants". Design decisions were also made based on site and environmental conditions, as seen in one project where the team maintained existing trees and put in shading and pedestrian pathways.

4.2. Technology in Architectural Practice

Technology was assessed from three different perspectives, including digital technology (BIM and virtual environments), construction technology, and intelligent systems. However, the involvement of technology was not just about the presence of technological tools but also about the understanding of those tools by the office as well. With the increased use of artificial intelligence, digital simulations, and cloud technologies, there is a need to understand how they should be balanced with the creativity and identity of architects.

This is demonstrated by the contrast between offices. While in R-L, the work of large teams is supported by documented communication and building information modeling (BIM), in the small Makkah office (M-S), "work is carried out quickly through direct decisions by the owner using relatively simple tools". In both, how the tools were used was more dependent on the leadership and communication practices of the office than on the tools themselves.

4.3. Management and Organizational Practices

Management was analyzed in terms of planning and procedural aspects like strategic planning, cost management, and professional ethics. In small firms, management depended on supervision and instructions of the owner or lead architect and not on procedure documentation. In medium-sized firms, there was specialization in arrangements, but implementation varied in that decision-making concerning planning was concentrated on the managers while employees received instructions. In large firms, there was specialization, but formal arrangements were not an assurance of eliminating coordination problems between procedures and behaviors.

The big Eastern Province office (E-L) is also a case in point: although formally coordinated, the interaction between its staff in Khobar and Cairo was always

challenging. Discussions about coordination in the medium-sized Eastern Province office (E-M) were influenced by differences in the instructions provided by the managers. Responsibilities were also redistributed among team members following delays in one project, in response to the disruption. Professional ethics was also applied in the day-to-day practice, for example, when an architect refused to provide an external contractor with information about a project due to professional confidentiality.

4.4. Legislation and Regulatory Practices

The legislation was assessed in terms of regulatory bodies (such as building regulations and compliance), and associated institutions (government organizations and professional associations). Regulations affect design along with managerial and technological considerations, and their impact was not just determined by the frameworks themselves but also by their application in daily work. The analysis highlighted administrative procedures, professional transactions and compatibility of the regulation with cultural and social features of Saudi Arabia as areas for development.

4.5. Physical Work Environment

The work environment was assessed in terms of office environment (partitions, flexibility, comfort, and furniture) along with its economic, cultural, social, and health aspects. The workplace itself was not neutral, as it influenced the way people interacted and communicated at work. The study therefore considers the work environment's physical and psychological dimensions as interrelated with creativity, motivation, and engagement.

The small Eastern Province office (E-S), where "small open workspaces" allowed for direct contact and interaction with the founders and the employees, highlighted the value of personal relations, while E-M offered "a more organized working environment with dedicated meeting rooms". The large Makkah office (M-L) had multidisciplinary teams in "multiple spaces, including design laboratories and large meeting rooms" and faced pressures related to complex projects.

4.6. Comparative Ethnographic Findings

Comparison of the nine offices revealed multiple professional cultures instead of a single culture model (**Table 2**), depending on the size, structure, management style, communication, and integration of the five pillars of the office, and related to different degrees of organizational maturity, coordination, and stability. Size alone could not account for the differences, as each culture reflected a different balance between formal structures and everyday practice. Medium-sized offices reflect a transitional position between small offices with principal-centered culture and larger, internationally oriented offices.

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of architectural practice culture by office size.

Dimension	Small offices	Medium-sized offices	Large offices
Structure and decisions	Centered on the owner or principal architect, who holds decisions	Differentiated roles; decisions at times held at managerial level	Specialized roles; responsibilities distributed
Communication	Direct; close professional relationships	Direct instructions; approvals via management	Internal communication and design review
Design process	Tied to the leader's experience and involvement	Varying coordination; managerial approval	Coordination and consistent information exchange
Main tension	Knowledge held by few individuals	Uneven implementation of procedures	Coordination difficulties despite formal systems

These differences are not merely due to differences in size because contrasting cases of the same size reveal that it is not a size factor alone which accounts for these differences. In the medium-sized offices, however, R-M created designs through regular one-on-one meetings; M-M experienced more professional communication as they had "regular meetings where ideas are exchanged using technical terminology" and paid attention to their client's needs; but in E-M, it was coordinating with different instructions from management, even if the working environment was organized. In the same way, for the big offices, coordinated communication was documented via R-L's communication, while in E-L's formal structure, communication problems between geographically distributed teams were not avoided. The different situations illustrate how, in addition to office size, leadership, communication, organizational structure, workplace relations, and use of technology shape architectural culture. Table 3 provides observations from selected offices.

Table 3. Selected anonymized fieldwork observations from the nine offices.

Office	Region and size	Observed episode or fieldnote excerpt
R-S	Riyadh, small	"The principal architect makes decisions independently or with a small team"; centralized leadership and informal communication.
R-M	Riyadh, medium-sized	"Design ideas are reviewed and developed through regular meetings, including discussions of alternative solutions."
R-L	Riyadh, large	"Large teams comprising architects, planners, and external consultants"; documented communication supported by BIM.

Continued

E-S	Eastern Province, small	"Small open workspaces"; direct communication between founders and employees based on personal relationships.
E-M	Eastern Province, medium-sized	"A more organized working environment with dedicated meeting rooms"; coordination influenced by differing managerial instructions.
E-L	Eastern Province, large	Coordination challenges between teams located in Khobar and Cairo despite a formal organizational structure.
M-S	Makkah, small	"Work is carried out quickly through direct decisions by the owner using relatively simple tools."
M-M	Makkah, medium-sized	"Regular meetings where ideas are exchanged using technical terminology", alongside attention to clients' needs.
M-L	Makkah, large	Multidisciplinary teams and "multiple spaces, including design laboratories and large meeting rooms"; pressures of complex projects.

5. Discussion

5.1. Formal Procedures and Everyday Practice

There is no indication that Saudi architectural practices always conform to a single organizational model, and discrepancies between formal structure and practice have been identified. This study observed differences in architectural practices within their daily contexts, as opposed to relying solely on the administrative structures. This conforms to the idea of practice as a negotiated process presented by Cuff [2] and the evidence that building coordination can be achieved through situated practices [7]. From the practice theory perspective [4], the formal structures were analyzed, adapted, and recreated through interaction, which could explain why size alone does not account for differences in office culture.

5.2. Tacit Knowledge, Leadership, and Professional Culture

Tacit knowledge, professional relations, informal communication, and leadership styles provide an explanation for the differences between what is formally set up and what actually happens because professional culture is created through day-to-day interactions and shared experience. The accumulation of design knowledge in small office leaders (e.g., R-S and M-S) is an example of knowing-in-action according to Schön [1], useful for immediate interaction but hard to formalize, in line with the importance of person-based knowledge found in AEC firms [8]. On the other hand, continued problems with coordination in large offices (e.g., E-L) indicate that formalization cannot substitute shared understanding resulting from tacit knowledge.

5.3. Integration of the Pillars and Practical Implications

The pillars did not function separately since design is affected by management

decisions, technology and regulations, whereas the working environment affects communication. While the model provides a hierarchical decomposition of practice [10], its components interrelate, which means that effective practices require integrating pillars instead of developing them separately. In terms of the offices, this means establishing the design identity of the institutions, improving the physical and psychological conditions of the working environment, making sure that artificial intelligence and cloud computing do not substitute creativity, and professional development. For regulators, flexible regulations must align with Saudi cultural and social specifics, digital regulatory platforms and support for mid-sized offices. For decision-makers, it implies acknowledging architectural practice as a contributor to Saudi urban identity.

6. Conclusion

The study was conducted on nine offices to gain insights into the architectural practice as both a cultural and professional system in Saudi Arabia. There is no way to analyze Practice alone without discussing technical, administrative, and/or legislative aspects. The dynamics between individuals, professional practices, organizational structure and work environment need to be examined. This research provides an ethnographic interpretation of the Saudi architectural practice and a five-pillar framework for analyzing the office culture. As this research focused mainly on ethnographic study, analytical generalization takes the primary place over statistical conclusions. Future studies need to investigate the wellbeing of architects with respect to job conditions and the impact of new technologies on the development of local architectural identity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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