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## DEFINING ARCHITECTURE: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to establish an operational definition of architecture used by practising architects, architecture students and academics. From the feedback received through a questionnaire, practitioners, irrespective of gender, defined architecture as an art and an applied science complementary to the environment, a synergic expression of aesthetics and function. Phenomenology has a leading role in defining architecture for students, the other element being the historico-traditional dimension. Academics defined architecture as a functional space developed through dialogue between human activity/ies and the environment.

### 1. Introduction

Norman Foster and Rem Koolhaas are two contemporary ‘star’ architects, each a recipient of the highest award in architecture, the Pritzker Architecture Prize, in 1999 and 2000 respectively [1] and both are academicians of the International Academy of Architecture (IAA) [2]. In an interview published in The European [3], Foster states that “Architecture is an expression of values – the way we build is a reflection of the way we live” whilst Koolhaas, in an interview published in <http://www.fastcodesign.com> [4], states that “Architecture is a very complex effort everywhere. It’s very rare that all the forces that need to coincide to actually make a project proceed are happening at the same time”. These are two of the 121 definitions of architecture listed in a recent publication in the world's most visited architecture website,

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<http://www.archdaily.com/> [5]. This online article starts by stating that “There are at least as many definitions of architecture as there are architects or people who comment on the practice of it. While some embrace it as art, others defend architecture’s seminal social responsibility as its most definitive attribute. To begin a sentence with ‘Architecture is’ is a bold step into treacherous territory. And yet, many of us have uttered – or at least thought – ‘Architecture is ...’ while we’ve toiled away on an important project, or reflected on why we’ve chosen this professional path”.

The definition and the role of the architect have changed through history [6, 7, 8]. In a recent study on the job ability of architects, the operational definition of an architect was given as “a person who majored in architecture” [9]. The aim of this paper is to establish a contemporary working definition of the term ‘architecture’ as used by practising architects, architecture students and academics.

## 2. Research Methods

In this study, a qualitative research method was applied. Prior to the conference by the author at InterArch2015, the XIV World Triennial of Architecture held by the IAA in Sofia from 17 to 20 May 2015 [10], a questionnaire was distributed to the audience, 103 in total. Three open-ended questions were asked:

- what is architecture?
- what is architecture not? and
- who is one’s preferred architect?

The respondents were requested to state, in full, their name and occupation/official position. From the former, the gender of the respondent was inferred whilst the latter was classified as follows:

- i. practitioners,
- ii. academics in architecture,
- iii. students of architecture and
- iv. other, namely journalists/correspondents for architectural magazines.

A practitioner is a professional engaged in the field of architecture or allied to same, notable urban planning and interior design. An academic is either a practitioner in academia, part-time in either, or full-time in academia with no professional practice. The respondents who participated were those who handed in the questionnaire, duly filled (Table 1). They came from Bulgaria, Serbia, Italy, Russia, Georgia and Malta.

**Table 1. Respondents to the questionnaire**

Respondents		Practitioners	Students	Academics	Other	Total
Gender	Male (M)	10	3	8	0	21
	Female (F)	17	5	0	2	24
	M + F	27	8	8	2	45

### 3. Results

The responses of practising architects did not show gender-related differences. The overall response was that architecture is a way of life, it “surrounds us in our everyday life and brings value, meaning and quality to it”; it is an art and science, an expression which complements the environment, natural and/or cultural, a healthy shelter aimed to address the “sublime”. One quoted the German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “architecture is frozen music.”

“Architecture is a space of opportunities”. Harmony, beauty and function all need to be present in concord with the traditional and the surrounding environs. It integrates all in the built environment; it is a synergy of art, space and light. “It is the material image of the organization of the ambience in which we are developing spiritually and materially”. Architecture is read as the expression of an idea relating to the art of organization of space. Such organization has to meet the needs of the users, their activities and dimensions in an appealing and aesthetic matter.

In defining what architecture is not, one quoted the uncompromising, minimalist Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, “Architecture is not about form”. Architecture is neither form nor construction nor business. It is not just a building in some built environment. “Architecture is not something created by chance”; “Architecture is not just a matter of shapes, forms and values combined together to form beautiful and pleasant buildings”. It is not “building without spirit”, “a container of faked ‘globality’”. Bad architecture generates a depressive social environment, “it kills the spirit”.

Practising architects who are members of the IAA stated that architecture is “the art of construction with a soul”, “... the creation of man's environment”. Reference was specifically made to Marcus Vitruvius Pollio and the triad of commodity, firmness, delight. With respect to the query what architecture is not, two responses read “construction without a soul” and “it is certainly not the fashionable isms which keep appearing”.

The feedback from architectural students, tomorrow's architects, fell into two trails of thought: traditional and phenomenological, the former being predominant with female whilst the latter more popular with the male respondents. Emphasis was made on contextual design with respect to the genius loci of the site, both physical and metaphysical, mainly memory. Historical, architectural, scholarship inspired, definitions are manifested in statements like “Architecture is every single thing in the world combined in one, but with the right proportions” and “The mother art is architecture. Without architecture, our own civilization will have no soul”.

Other responses reflect contemporary trends in the existential phenomenology of architecture, namely reference to sensory experience. Architecture is about beauty and talent but also about emotions, human activity and type of lifestyle. “Architecture is the act of creating human habitat!”; “It is a way how to give shape to an open space; searching and building the best form for people”; “Architecture, in my opinion, is creating emotion/feelings impacting on nature to make people's lives more comfortable”.

Architecture is perceived as a contextual complex human activity which creates liveable spaces for humanity. It develops on the surrounding environs by conceptually solving existing problems and comes up with implementable solutions to render the environment more welcoming and fit for habitation without destroying nature. “Architecture is the art of finding functional and beautiful spaces. It's an endless way of finding our self and values”.

The emphasis of the students on the phenomenology of architecture is reflected in their inputs to the question relating to what architecture is not. Architecture is not artificial, soul less commercial buildings remote from the spirit of place. “Architecture is not a profession, it is not

a box, it is not just structure without feeling”; “Projects without participation of people with sense for art and sociology. Almost all projects are built just to earn money”.

Academics defined architecture as a functional space solely for human habitation; no reference was made to the complex architectural spaces in the animal world, spaces which function within an intricate settlement and are, in artistic terms, aesthetically pleasing. They addressed architecture as a specific human activity involving dialogue between people and the environs, cultural and natural, between artefact and nature. “Architecture is an art which is elaborate and creates new human values, new types/typologies and new perceptions. Its importance is to remind of something that humans tend to forget ... and accompany humans to the ‘place’ where these perceptions are born, thus ‘remember’ their roots”. How is architecture related to building engineering and construction? “Architecture is an aim of engineering art, which can be attained through the help of achievements in construction, technologies, artistic vision and poetic approach”. There is no architecture without poetry; architecture without poetry is mere construction.

“Non-functional dialogue between peoples and walls is not eourbanarchitecture and non-dialogue between artefact and nature”. Architecture is not just forms and colours with a purpose; it is neither scenography nor an “expression of the architect's narcissism”.

The response of the journalists/correspondents was probing: architecture is “a material culture of our society”. It is “deep thinking to organize and express the architectural space through the will of the epoch, knowing the complementarity of material/aesthetic. Everything is a consequence of that”. Architecture is neither 100% craft nor 100% vocation nor 100% technology. “Architecture is not business, but depends on money and the client”.

The response to who is one’s preferred architect is given in Table 2. Most respondents stated more than one architect. All, except some students, named an architect who inspired them. Frank Lloyd Wright tops the list. Other personalities include the Renaissance architect Michelangelo Buonarroti, the eclectic architect engineer Antonio Gaudi, and contemporary architects Norman Foster, Tadao Ando and Daniel Liebeskind. Other names mentioned by practitioners included Eero Saarinen, Le Corbusier, Santiago Calatrava, Renzo Piano, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Steven Holl, the Finnish architect Reima Pietilä and the Austrain architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Few architects, irrespective of gender, have “no idol”. An academic mentioned Moshe Safdie whilst architects who are members of the IAA identified Leonardo da Vinci and Luis Barragan. Ando and Liebeskind together with Alvar Aalto, Mies van der Rohe, Alvaro Siza, Jean Nouvel and the Neofuturistic Czech architect Jan Kaplický were mentioned by the students.

**Table 2. Who is one’s preferred architect?**

	Respondents	Practitioners	Academics	Students	Other	Total
Preferred architect	Frank Lloyd Wright	4	3	0	0	7
	M’angelo Buonarroti	1	1	0	0	2
	Antonio Gaudi	2	0	0	0	2
	Norman Foster	2	0	0	0	2
	Tadao Ando	0	1	1	0	2
	Daniel Liebeskind	1	0	1	0	2
	Other	9	3	5	2	19

Half of the responses given by architecture students follow this line of reasoning: “I don’t have a preferred architect. I like to collect different ideas and see how other people think,

to create my own ideas accordingly, and develop thoughts”; “I don't have one, because I think we should only get the best from everyone of the greatest architects and develop it instead of trying to replicate our preferred architect”. Other than those who indicated that they have more than one architect of their preference, most of the names mentioned are contemporary architects. A preferred architect is “The dreamer, the person who has a goal to improve the things”. Architecture is not a statement of the architect's ego. It is not a manifestation/exhibition of one's style; “It is not self presentation and building of one's own ego”.

#### 4. Discussion

In their study of Ayn Rand's theory of art, Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi dismissed architecture as art [11]. Peter Cresswell is critical of their work and argues that it is not based on 'fieldwork' but on 'office work'; “they avoid the 'fieldwork' of dealing with the works themselves and consequently misunderstand the essential nature of architecture. What they end up criticising is not architecture ..., but ... what architecture isn't” [12]. Quoting Alexandra York's statement that “art is a shortcut to philosophy” [13], Cresswell argued that architecture “is the pre-eminent shortcut; architecture certainly is art, it is the master art. In offering us our philosophy as a part of daily life and on a scale encompassing all the arts it recreates the potential for human experience based on the architect's selective re-creation of what experiences are of value” [12].

Unlike Torres and Kamhi, this research is based on fieldwork. For practising architects, architecture is a conceptual idea applied. Their notion is theoretical rather than pragmatic, rational rather than empirical. This is more pronounced in members of the profession involved in academia and in authors engaged in the literature of architecture. For students, architectural design is an experience and so is architecture. This trend vindicates Botond Bogнар's claim of introducing architecture students to the phenomenological perspectives of architecture in his inquiry developed in [14]. Nowadays, the publications of Christian Norberg-Schulz and Kevin Lynch are, respectively, included in the main reading list of any course on architecture and urban design. Over the past two decades, the seminal work by Juhani J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, verbalized the significance of sensory experience in architecture. Pallasmaa, an academician of the IAA [2], argues that, “Experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture strengthens ... one's sense of being in the world, essentially giving rise to a strengthened experience of self” [15]. The responses to define architecture are illustrative of, to use Andrea Jelić's term, the “neurophenomenological 'twist' in architecture”. For Jelić, “the neurophenomenological investigations of architecture aim to identify and approximate the conditions of embodied experience of architecture, while revealing that a purely conceptual engagement with architectural spaces is only a misconception” [16]. For students, architecture is not an ego trip of an architect; nor a justification of an architect's existence. Unlike practitioners and academics, they have no preferred architect, they have no particular idol/star. They are interested in being exposed to the work of a number of architects in an effort to get to the essence of architecture. This recalls Wright's reference to Laozi, the ancient Chinese philosopher and author of the *Tao Te Ching*, who used to pose the question “What is the essence of the cup?” As the space within it gives meaning to the cup, which is its essence, “the essence of architecture is the three-dimensional space(s) created for human habitation” [17]. Students' interest lies in the message, namely architecture, and not in the messenger, the architect. Whilst inspirations from prominent architects are more frequent with academics and practitioners, most students aim to be exposed to the works of several

outstanding members of the profession in order to help them develop their own architectural philosophy and generate their own solution for a given setting. Their position departs from the classical definition of architecture by Vitruvius in [18], freely translated and paraphrased by Henry Wotton in [19], as “firmness, commodity and delight”, which they were certainly introduced to in the early years of their studies in the discipline. For them, architecture is neither theory nor just a well-proportioned form which stands and functions; architecture is about experience. They prefer to experience architecture rather than talk about it.

Indeed, does the rejoinder to the question ‘What is architecture?’ fall within the realm of architecture or within the domain of the philosophy of architecture? Is it the role of the architect or of the philosopher to define architecture? The question ‘what is x?’ is part of the Socratic legacy which western civilisation had inherited from the peripatetic master as documented in the early Platonic dialogues. It was the strategy which Socrates, by vocation a teacher of philosopher interested in the pursuit of truth, adopted when confronted by the sophists, paid teachers of philosophy and rhetoric. Most contemporary architects are more akin to the sophists; they are well-versed in rhetoric rather than philosophers of architecture. Their art of persuasion rationalises their expression, the grounding of their respective definition of architecture.

## **5. Conclusions**

Numerous definitions of architecture are available, some are historical whilst others are contemporary. This study aimed to establish a working definition used by individuals currently engaged in architecture. The following are the main conclusions:

- Practitioners, irrespective of gender, defined architecture as an art and an applied science which complements holistically the environment. It is the synergic expression of aesthetic and functional space addressing the well-being of the users;
- Architecture students came up with two operational definitions of architecture: historic-traditional, predominant with female respondents, and phenomenological. The former defines architecture in terms of proportions, the latter in terms of sensory experience. Architecture is the creation of optimal sensory sensitive space for habitation aimed at the fulfilment of the users’ self in tandem with one’s need(s); and
- For the academics, architecture is a functional space fit for human needs developed through dialogue between human activity/ies and the environment.

One can extend this study, based on fieldwork rather than a desk study, to non-architects thus acquiring an insight into the public’s perception and experience of architecture, whether private or public. It will help bridge the gap between architects, clients and society at large.

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## ДЕФИНИРАНЕ НА АРХИТЕКТУРАТА: КАЧЕСТВЕНО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ

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*Ключови думи:* архитектура, дефиниция, функционално пространство, феноменология, сензорно чувствително пространство

### РЕЗЮМЕ

Целта на това научно изследване е да установи оперативна дефиниция за архитектурата, която се използва от практикуващи архитекти, студенти по архитектура и учени. От получената чрез анкета обратна информация, практикуващите, независимо от пола, определят архитектурата като изкуство и приложна наука, допълваща околната среда, синергичен израз на естетика и функция. Феноменологията има водеща роля в дефинирането на архитектурата за студентите, а другият елемент е историко-традиционното измерение. Академиците определят архитектурата като функционално пространство, развито чрез диалог между човешката дейност и околната среда.

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