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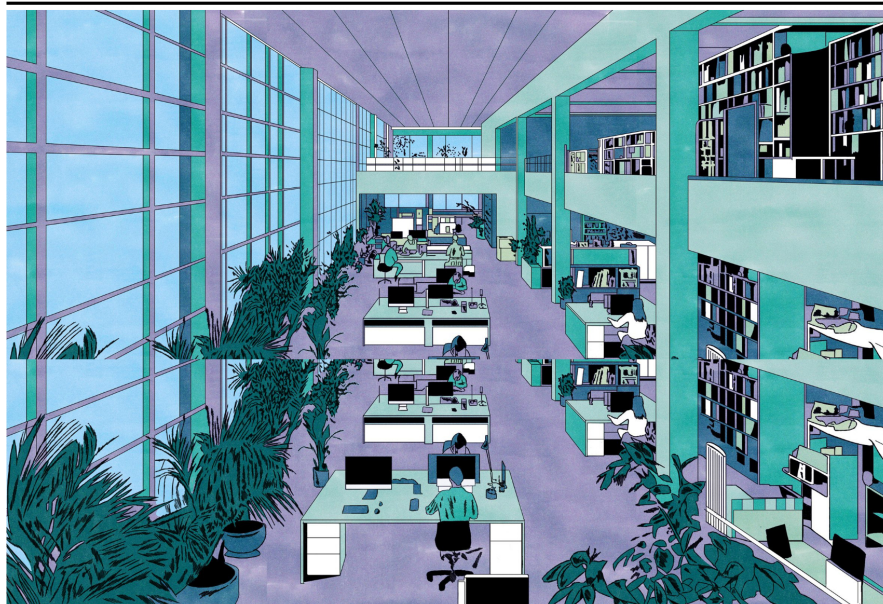
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Dezeen survey points to "broken" architecture and design industry



Nat Barker | 28 January 2025 | 18 comments

Dezeen's architecture and design [working-conditions](#) survey paints an alarming picture of an industry under strain. [Nat Barker](#) reports.

Josephine (not her real name) wanted to be an architect from a young age. But upon qualifying in 2010 and entering practice work in her native France, she quickly found things difficult.

"The conditions were really tough," she told Dezeen. "We had to work very long hours in a very stressful environment."

More than 450 responses across 64 countries

After one too many 3:00am finishes, she decided to switch to architectural lighting design, hoping it would be less intense.

Her next job, at a renowned studio in Germany, threw up a different set of issues, with a boss prone to sexually inappropriate behaviour and telling lewd stories.

Josephine emigrated again to work for another architectural lighting studio in the UK, where she says she has experienced yet more sexism, stress, pitiful pay, constant overtime and a lack of progression.

Now she is fed up, and is planning to move into user-experience design in search of a more fulfilling career.

"I'm very sad, because I like the field of architecture, and I have a lot of knowledge here, so I feel like I'm putting a cross on everything I did so far, and it's a shame," she said.



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"Maybe I'm very unlucky, but at the same time, I have seen maybe five different

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“I guess it’s very common, just as the saying is, I have been in a lot of offices, and so I have the feeling it’s the norm.”

Josephine was a respondent to Dezeen’s recent survey asking people to share their experiences of working in architecture and design.

We received more than 450 responses in total from people in 64 different countries, from interns just starting out in their careers to CEOs who began in the early 1960s.

Most worked for architecture studios, but we also heard from those at landscape architecture firms, engineering firms, design studios, interior design studios, property developers, public-sector bodies and brands.

And while Josephine’s experience is not the standard, nor is it uncommon. [Dozens of people had similar stories.](#)

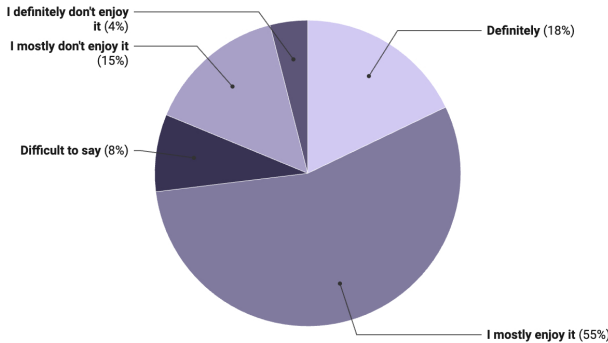
Architecture “operating on a culture of exploitation”

The good news is that most people seem reasonably content overall, with 73 per cent of respondents saying they either “definitely” or “mostly” enjoy their job.

Being able to work creatively overwhelmingly emerged as the main reason given, alongside the wide variety of tasks and the satisfaction of problem-solving or seeing projects complete.

But all that appears to come at a considerable cost. Even among those saying they liked their job overall, numerous problems were identified.

Overall, are you enjoying your job?



Source: Dezeen survey data • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

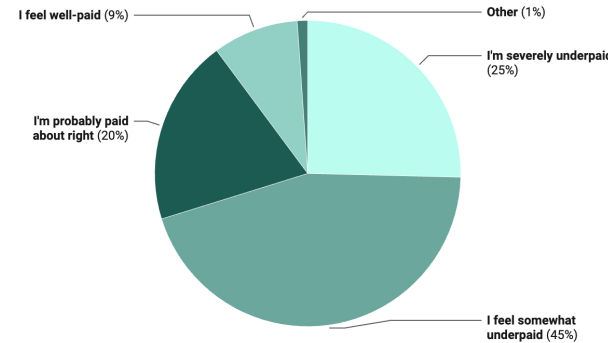
More than half (52 per cent) indicated their job does not match up with what they expected before they started.

In what many may find unsurprising, low pay and excessive workloads appear to be commonplace.

Only 29 per cent of respondents said they feel well paid or paid about right, while 45 per feel somewhat underpaid and another 25 per cent feel severely underpaid.

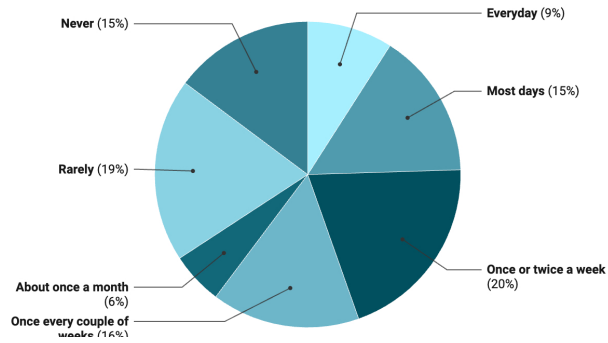
Meanwhile, two-thirds of respondents reported regularly having to do unpaid overtime. Nine per cent said they do so every day, while 15 per cent said they do so most days. Some said they have unpaid overtime written into their contracts.

Do you feel fairly paid?



Source: Dezeen survey data • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

How often are you required to do unpaid overtime?



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"The industry is operating on a culture of exploitation," said an architectural assistant at a large architecture firm in the UK.

"I have a genuine passion for architectural design and innovation, but this is difficult to hold onto when I can barely afford to live, despite this job taking over my life."

A huge 80 per cent said they have experienced unrealistic expectations of work in the past five years.

"Unrealistic expectations of work is almost a standard in an environment where the clients don't abide by contractual agreements, request unpaid design changes and managers just accept everything in order to preserve a good relationship with the clients," remarked an architect working in China.

"It was literally like life or death"

Troublingly, our survey results also indicated widespread issues with poor workplace culture within architecture and design.

For instance, 61 per cent of respondents said they have witnessed or experienced rude, belittling or demeaning behaviour in the last five years.

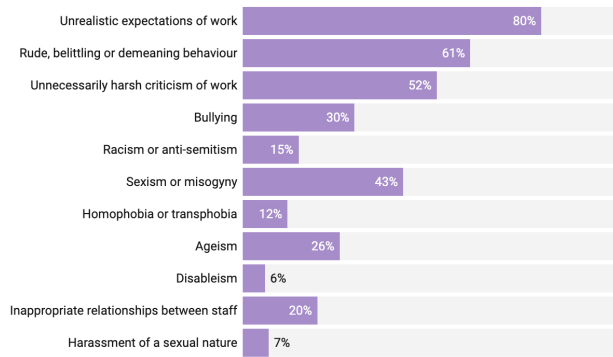
More than half (52 per cent) reported unnecessarily harsh criticism of work, and 30 per cent have witnessed or experienced bullying.

A recurring theme in respondents' answers was intense pressure and disrespectful behaviour from clients translating into highly strung senior members of staff acting poorly towards those below them.

In one particularly extreme case, a woman who had been a teacher at an inner-London high school and decided to make a career change into interior design lasted only a year at an architecture and interiors studio before she became seriously ill from stress and had to quit.

"I was used to pressure but this was pressure like nothing else, it was literally like life or death," she told Dezeen. "It would be like, 'the client doesn't like what we've done, this is a nightmare and it's all your fault'."

Have you witnessed or experienced any of the following during the last five years of working in architecture/design?



Employed as an assistant designer on a salary of £23,000, she worked until past midnight the night before her wedding on plans that were eventually unused.

On another occasion, she found herself hiding in a cupboard to eat cold rice with her hands after sneaking out of a five-hour meeting without breaks.

"I could say that my bosses were awful people," she reflected. "I don't think they were. I think they were under a lot of pressure and stress. They were really amazing architects, and it's just a shame that the outside pressures took away some of their humanity."

Other respondents told stories of public tellings-off, being shamed for doing less overtime than colleagues, being chastised for going out on the weekend, being asked to skip lunchbreaks and being loudly criticised over the phone within earshot.

There were also three claims of senior staff members sleeping with junior female workers who then received preferential treatment, and another three claims of redundancies in retaliation for pushing back on workloads.

A handful of people reported suffering lasting psychological damage from their experiences at work.

Half of women experience sexism or misogyny

Especially concerning was the reported experience of women who responded to our survey.

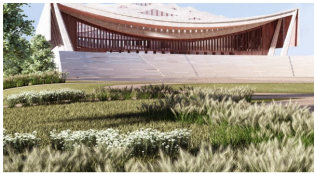
Out of 217 women, an alarming 107 (49 per cent) said they have witnessed or experienced sexism or misogyny at work in the past five years.

Seventeen said they had witnessed or experienced harassment of a sexual nature. Examples given included inappropriate touching by male co-workers.

Meanwhile, among 97 respondents who consider themselves to be part of an ethnic minority in the country they work in, 19 (20 per cent) reported witnessing or experiencing racism.

One architect, at a firm in the US, discovered that women of colour were consistently getting paid less than their peers.

The issue was denied by partners until they were threatened with legal action. At that point she was given a pay rise – though the wider issue was not rectified.



Forest memorial in India by 182 Design is a "spiritual threshold"



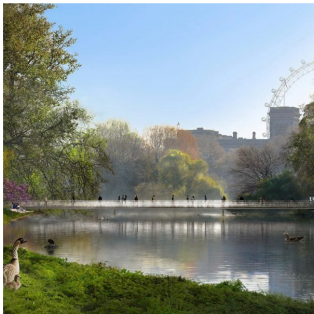
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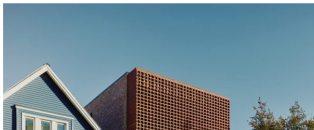


- 1 Architect/interior designer at COD Consultants
- 2 Technical mid-weight interior designer at Peter Mikic Interiors
- 3 Senior industrial designer at Monokoto
- 4 Material surveyor (auditor) at Material Index
- 5 Architect at Apt

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of exhaustion is no longer a
badge of honour"**

In another case, an interior designer at an architecture firm in the UAE said a director openly joked about not interviewing job candidates who were "too brown".

Being able to address issues within the workplace also emerged as a common concern.

Among respondents who have complained about working conditions in the past five years, only 12 per cent said it led to action that resolved the issue.

Many others decided not to complain for fear of repercussions or in the belief that it would make no difference, with several citing a lack of HR within their workplace or a sense that the problems were normalised.

"It feels like a lost cause"

Plenty of other trends emerged in written answers to the survey.

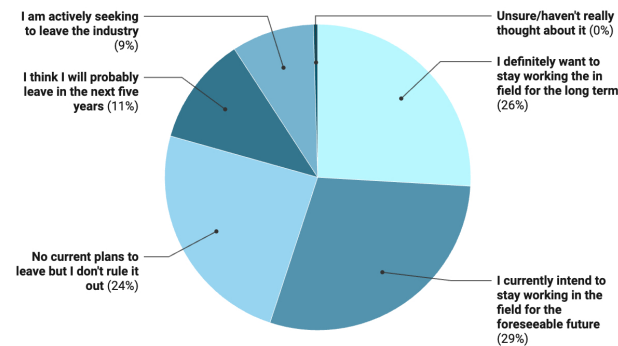
Younger staff often described feeling victimised, while older workers frequently said they are undervalued. There were also multiple claims of classism.

Architects were often angry about what they see as waning respect for the profession in the construction industry, with several reporting rudeness from clients juxtaposed with spiralling expectations.

Some respondents bemoaned poor running of their companies, with frustration over fruitless work done to enter competitions unsuccessfully and what one person termed "suicidal bids".

"The profession is broken on so many levels," summarised one UK architect. "Working in a small practice I felt exploited and undervalued, but running a small practice I found it was very difficult to get the work done and make any money!"

Do you see a future for yourself working in architecture and design?



Source: Dezeen survey data • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

"It feels like a bit of a lost cause, when at the same time, it feels like the world needs architects to be creatively thinking up solutions to our challenging societal problems," they added.

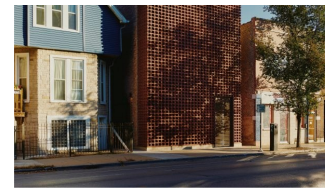
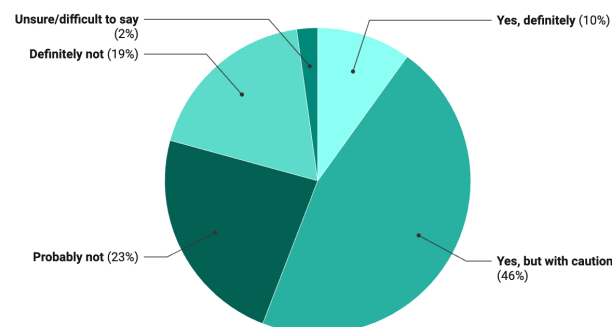
Architects, and those in western countries, are not the only people frequently struggling.

"This industry is terrible for mental health and personal life," said the owner of an interior-design studio in Singapore.

It is important to emphasise that these stories are not representative of everyone's experiences, and to acknowledge that our survey only captures a tiny snapshot of the millions of people who work in architecture and design worldwide.

But there are indications in the findings that discontentment about working conditions may lead the architecture and design fields to lose a significant amount of talent in the coming years.

Would you recommend a career in architecture or design to someone younger?



London Design Festival guide 2025



Dezeen Jobs



Only 26 per cent of respondents were positive that they want to stay working in the industry for a long term.

Another 11 per cent expect to leave within the next five years, and a further nine per cent are already actively seeking to change careers.

That equates to roughly one in five people working in architecture and design who are expecting to move elsewhere in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, only 10 per cent of respondents said they would “definitely” recommend a career in architecture or design to someone younger.

A much greater proportion (19 per cent) said they definitely would not, while another 23 per cent said they probably would not. Most of the rest (46 per cent) said they would, but with caution.

Many of our respondents were clear: regarding client expectations, salaries and working hours, things need to change. Whether that will be possible is less certain.

Thanks to everyone who took the time to respond to our survey. The illustration is by Marie Mohanna.

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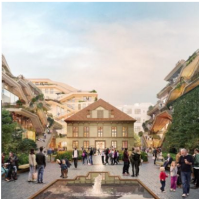
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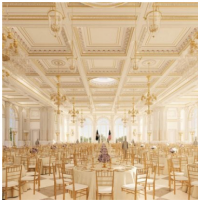
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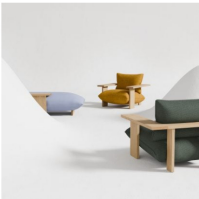


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Best Newest Oldest



vbha

7 months ago edited

It would be great if Dezeen could further format these questions and data by age group. I think that would be interesting to see how responses correspond to age and where people are in their career.

Architects in the US, from my perspective, appear up and down the spectrum stretched to their breaking point. Though one could have said that pre-pandemic and yet there is more room to stretch. I know of no one that has had their pay bumped up to match the rate of inflation, and that many firms are struggling with a depressed market due to the high interest rates.

It's not clear to me that there is a recovery in sight where the market is good enough for firms to feel that they can increase their fees and thus, balance peoples pay. Pay was not exactly great pre-pandemic and now things are worse. From the younger designers I have talked to it reminds me of the great recession times: "Just be happy you have a job or leave the profession".

The profession still pretends that they can operate in the same way that they did 100 years ago but with better technology. As long as that remains the attitude, with ridiculous micromanagement by senior partners, and an absurd number of unproductive staff at firms (full time meeting sitters, bad PMs), things will never improve. If it makes architects feel better. From what I can tell, other professions have an equal amount of BS in their daily lives, but they do get paid more.

If there are a couple bright points I have anecdotally witnessed, although they are more like rays through the clouds: 1) I feel that many architects, young and old, done with the rat race when they feel there is no way up, have taken work/life balance into their own hands and simply do not complete the work if they are overloaded with too much. Let the stamp holder deal with the consequences of running their business in that way.

2) I have not personally witnessed much 'bullying' in the profession or school in the US, compared to stories I hear of elsewhere. Perhaps I have been lucky in my employment?! I figured that there is a real liability concern in the US here in that sort of behavior. Pathetic that the profession cannot advance beyond these basic standards.

3) I feel that architecture remains a profession far away from automation, due to the many hats that an architect must wear every day and the frankly pitiful remuneration. Why would any tech firm focus on automating us?!

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ▸



Anon

7 months ago edited

This should not be news to anyone who has worked in architecture. I have worked at senior levels in multiple firms and witnessed extreme cases of bullying sexual harassment and even sexual assault. Nothing is ever done about it and the industry never changes.

Everyone knows which major firms have toxic environments it's time to stop celebrating their work and start scrutinising their work practices. The architectural press tip toe around the issue but if the profession is to survive and improve then some of this big beasts need to held to account.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ▸



Frank Lloyd Wrong

7 months ago

Mega-multinational are the future of the profession. Any office with less than 120 staff will not survive. I recommend intern architects secure a position in a large corporate firm and climb the corporate ladder for the sake of making enough income to pay rent and buy groceries. Also, marry someone who makes more money than you.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ▸



anon → Frank Lloyd Wrong

7 months ago

How is this remotely relevant to a serious discussion about working practices in architecture? If anything the current issues within the industry show that flexible and agile practices are far more resilient then the multinational architecture factories.

👍 2 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ▸



anon → Frank Lloyd Wrong



apscoradiales 7 months ago edited

"Marry someone who makes more money than you..." wise suggestion. Not that difficult, actually. Architects are paid less than many other professions. I suggest you get a government job. Boring as Hell, but at least you will have good medical insurance, decent salary, good pension when you retire, and nobody can fire you as easily as in an architectural firm.

1 0 0 Reply Share



Frank Lloyd Wrong 7 months ago edited

Intriguing advice but I'd rather not design prisons the rest of my life just for job security and retirement...on second thought, where do I send my resume?!

1 0 0 Reply Share



apscoradiales 7 months ago edited

Hey, I designed prisons, three actually, when I worked in Toronto. And I got paid rather than being sent to one. Was a win-win situation.

0 0 0 Reply Share



Frank Lloyd Wrong 7 months ago edited

I hope you designed lovely resort-style prisons like the ones they have in Scandinavia in case any of us architects end up in one due to liability eg. Grenfell Towers intern architect. LOL

0 0 0 Reply Share



Aldus_ 7 months ago

I am 50 now. When I was 25 I told my boss at one of the largest commercial interior practices in London, the following.

"there are only 3 reasons for me to be working overtime :

1. I am not good enough at my job.
2. Management are not good enough at their job.
3. there are not enough staff to do the job.

So it is one of the 3, and I know I am good enough." They didnt like that :)

The design and architecture industry hasn't changed one bit.

However with some more experience, my belief is now this :

most staff are underpaid and overworked due to inability to deliver designs from thin air on time, based on usually insufficient briefs / fickle clients. All the other parties within the process of building or making, work from your idea and design. They all have a base to quantify from. You dont.

3 0 0 Reply Share



apscoradiales 7 months ago edited

How to run an office or how to deal with co-workers is not taught in schools. At least, not here in Canada. You learn on the job. Some people never learn, though.

1 0 0 Reply Share



Toilet Enthusiast 7 months ago edited

Academic institutions should stop glorifying and hyping up the profession so much and be brutally honest about the reality of the business with their younglings during their first year in school. The gap is way too big. We're taught the glory and honor of prominent architects throughout history. But we all know that it's all just a small portion of the business.

Architects born out of such an egotistic culture have no guts to form a union but to pay minimum wage to fresh graduates.

1 0 0 Reply Share



Frank Lloyd Wrong 7 months ago

Do your research before committing to 8 years of university, follower by 5-8 years in internship and grueling exams. At my school they communicated clearly on our first day class that if we are expecting a 6 digit salary after graduation then we should consider law school. Half my class of 42 dropped out before the end of first term. Only about 6-10 of us from that original class graduated.

0 0 0 Reply Share



apscoradiales 7 months ago

"Academic institutions should stop glorifying and hyping up the profession...", yep, I fell for it!!!

0 0 0 Reply Share



Eric Schneider 7 months ago edited

This is not the fault of universities. How can you blame them for sexism or for the fact that because of the highly competitive nature of the field, clients often expect changes for free and only in a minority of cases are willing to pay fees that are commensurate with the scale of work and responsibility that the designers are taking on? This is true, perhaps to a lesser degree, in graphic and industrial design firms as well, but from what I can tell is most acute in architecture practice. If our education system is at fault, it's because many educators think that their job is to berate and belittle their students to prepare them for what lies ahead.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Joe Public

7 months ago

Is the industry broken, or are universities now operating as businesses, churning out an excess of graduates and saturating the industry?

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Frank Lloyd Wrong Joe Public

7 months ago

Doesn't the accreditation board regulate how many students may be enrolled in North American universities?

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



apscoradiales

7 months ago edited

North America as in Canada? No, they don't. Practices want more graduates, and foreign trained architects. They are cheap, slave labour.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›



Fred Lewis Joe Public

7 months ago edited

Considering the vast majority of architecture students drop out and never become chartered – I highly doubt that's the case.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

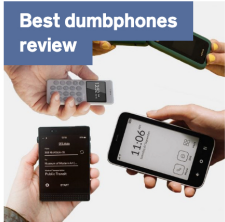
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