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Habitus shock: a model for architect-client relationships on house projects based on sociological and psychological perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The widening gap between architects and clients and the associated problems in the management of their relationship have long been recognised by practitioners and researchers alike. An emerging trend in recent studies is to develop descriptive models to describe behavioural characteristics of relationships based on observations of ‘real world’ practice, indicating the significance of understanding the complexities of the social environment in which the architect-client relationship is within. This research built upon the work of past descriptive models by exploring the architect-client relationship on house projects with a focus on the client’s voice. It is an interdisciplinary study drawing theory from sociology to further understand this built environment industry problem. Sixty-nine percent of architects in Australia spend some of their work time on house projects and therefore improvements in this area can have significant impact on a considerably large portion of the profession. Habitus theory borrowed from sociology explains that the nature of architecture as a specialised activity places architects within an architectural habitus, distinguishing them from clients who are not trained in the field. An underlying premise of this study is that a mismatch between the architect and client’s habituses occurs as they enter into a relationship on the house project. This phenomenon is termed habitus shock, referring to the client’s experience of disorientation as they are confronted with an unfamiliar architectural habitus on the project. Culture shock theory is examined for its contribution to explain the process to which the client adjusts to the unfamiliar environment during habitus shock. The habitus shock model proposed in this paper suggests that the client may achieve learning during habitus shock and it is this client learning that can lead to successful relationships.

KEYWORDS

Architect-client relationships, architectural milieu, house projects, client behaviour

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1. INTRODUCTION

Architects achieve their objectives, whatever these may be, through client work (RIBA, 1993). Excellent design is meaningless unless understood, recognised and endorsed by clients who are ultimately in the power to fund projects. The nature and quality of the interface between architects and clients is therefore of central importance to the success of the architectural profession and is ‘one single, critically important, working relationship that rivets the attention day by day, week by week, of all practising architects’ (RIBA, 1995, p.1).

The extent to which the architect’s contribution is valued has, however, become increasingly questionable with a growing number of dissatisfied clients as past studies have shown (RIBA, 1992, 1993, 1995). Clients are becoming increasingly critical in seeking ways of procuring buildings and are no longer content to rely on architects as the primary adviser (RIBA, 1992; Nicol & Pilling, 2000). A radical change in the manner in which architects deal with clients is required if architects are to maintain their position within the industry. The profession’s habits of ‘exclusivism’ and ‘protectionism’ need to be eradicated in order to communicate more clearly the contribution they can make to the quality of the built environment (Cuff, 1991; RIBA, 1993). While design skills are not exclusive to the architectural profession, architects, by virtue of their training and specialisation are in a central position to apply appropriate knowledge and judgment to decisions on projects (RIBA, 1992). The marginalisation of the profession can therefore be detrimental to the quality of the environment.

This theoretical paper proposes a descriptive model for successful architect-client relationships on house projects focusing on the client’s voice. The applicability of sociological and psychological concepts is explored to further understand this built environment industry problem. It provides an account of how the architectural profession’s endeavour to maintain social distinction and autonomy by creating silent boundaries around itself has led to an increased distancing of the architectural community from clients who are not trained as professional architects. Several questions therefore arise: To what extent can the boundaries between architects and clients be blurred? What is about some relationships that is an enabler for success and how does this differ from other less successful relationships? Are there characteristics that underpin successful relationships and what are they?

Although the study is limited to architect-client relationships on house projects, it is nonetheless an important area of study as it represents a significant portion of the type of work architects are regularly involved with. Sixty-nine percent of architects in Australia indicate that they spend some of their work time on house projects including alterations, additions and new projects (RAIA, 1998). Furthermore, sole practitioners and small firms with five or less staff are a prominent feature in how architecture is practiced in Australia (RAIA, 2006). Additionally, the most frequent client type for sole practitioners and small firms are individuals who seek architectural services on residential properties (RAIA, 2006). Existing strategies, tools and techniques developed to manage relationships, which are typically aimed at larger projects and teams (for eg. Salisbury, 1991; Kamara et al, 1999) may not translate easily to the average architect and their relationship with the client. Therefore this study concerned with the architect practicing as a sole practitioner or in a small firm and their relationships with clients on house projects may provide insights into the processes and relationships which impact on a significantly large portion of the profession.
2. CHARTING THE CLIENT-DESIGNER RELATIONSHIP DISCOURSE

Over the years, considerable work has examined relationships between clients and architects (Cuff, 1991; Cowdroy, 1992), clients and project managers (Zeisel, 1984; Kamara et al, 2002), clients and design managers (Sebastian, 2007; Emmitt, 2007) and project managers and design teams (Barrett & Stanley, 1999; Emmitt & Gorse, 2007). The boundaries between architects and clients have been blurred where an architect (acting as project manager, design manager, etc) may take on multiple roles on a project. For example, a project manager may represent both the ‘client’ and ‘designer’ groups on any one project. However, an underlying factor common to all projects is the need for these two major parties, that is, the design and client groups to work together to resolve conflicting project requirements. Therefore, rather than being limited to the study of architectural management, that is, the relationship between architects and clients, the review was widened to include material surrounding the broader discourse on design management. The review drew from key works in a range of fields and disciplines including architecture, management, psychology and sociology, which can be broadly categorised into four key themes including; design theory and methodology, environmental design and planning, communication and sociology of architectural practice (refer to Figure 1). Figure 1 charts some of the key trends and developments within the client-designer relationship discourse against the four themes between 1960 and 2008. The bolded texts represent key works and events specifically related to the study of architectural management whereas regular texts represent works and events related to the broader discourse on design management. The circled portion of the diagram represents the theoretical origins of the proposed approach to the management of the architect-client relationship. A detailed discussion of the review has been provided elsewhere (Chen, 2008), however, a brief overview is now presented.

Research relating to the first three themes has tended to focus on the development of prescriptive models suggesting a particular ideal methodology (for eg, Habermas, 1990; Yu et al, 2006). A variety of design process models (RIBA, 1973; Austin et al, 2000), briefing guides and tools (Kamara et al, 1999; Yu et al, 2006) and practice management guides and checklists (Sharp, 1981) have been developed over the past four decades within these three major themes. Although seemingly different in approach these three themes assume that the client-designer relationship can be systematically controlled and structured to achieve optimisation of briefing, design and construction activities to improve project performance. The emphasis has been on the “know-how”, thereby resulting in a lack of deep understanding of the nature and underlying characteristics of relationships. Although useful for providing some order and logic to the overall design process, these tools or guides based on the prescriptive approach do not adequately capture the complexity of the design process. The nature of the design process has been described as “a leap into the unknown” (Friedl et al, 2002), necessitating architects to operate within a highly unpredictable process with unexpected jumps in phases and levels. Coupled with this is the need for architects to work with clients who may not understand and experience the unexpected jumps in phases and levels the same way they do given the differences in backgrounds and experience (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006). There is limited evidence to support the assumption that the prescriptive design approach suggested accurately reflects actual practice (Lawson et al, 2003; Aken, 2005). More importantly, most of these prescriptive models neglect the softer social aspects concerned with the promotion of effective collaboration (Friedl et al, 2002; Macmillan et al, 2002) resulting in a lack of understanding of the social complexity of the design process. Therefore, it is contended that the answer may not be in the development of another prescriptive model of the client-designer relationship.
An increasing number of empirical studies within the third theme of communication have provided critical insights into specific behavioural attributes of participants and how this influences project success (for eg, Barrett & Stanley, 1999; Emmitt & Gorse, 2007). In particular, understanding client behaviour and its impact on project delivery is an emerging area of interest (Bertelsen & Emmitt, 2005; Tzortzoulos et al, 2006; Boyd & Chinyio, 2006). Past studies have demonstrated that clients are confronted with uncertainties and require adequate support to help them understand and perform their activities on projects (Barrett & Stanley, 1999; Tzortzoulos, 2006). The client's ability to carry out their role effectively on projects has been established as critical to project success yet little information is available on client behaviour in terms of how they experience and overcome uncertainty on projects. Therefore what is key to future research is to explore how clients behave in their experience of uncertainty and how they effectively deal with unknowns in practice.

Figure 1: Charting the client-designer relationship discourse
Studies within the fourth theme (for eg. Cuff, 1991; Stevens, 1998) have revealed other subtle processes operating within the architectural milieu which present interesting tensions between architects and clients. A common thread linking the sociological studies of architectural practice is an identification of a social milieu underpinning the inner workings of architectural practice, which shapes their relationship with clients. In charting the typical life career of an architect, Cuff (1991) identified that each architect undergoes the “metamorphosis from layperson to architect within a frame created by the surrounding social milieu of practice” (Cuff, 1991, p.155). There is thus a tacit agreement of acceptable behaviour, reliable expectations and values that architects are expected to share. It is the maintenance of this social milieu by claiming a particular knowledge territory as distinctly their own and by keeping a degree of mystery about the knowledge base which allows the profession to establish a degree of autonomy from those clients they serve (Freidson, 1986; Stevens, 1998).

The studies indicate the importance of considering the architect-client relationship within the sociological context of the design environment where architects and clients customarily play out their engagements (Blau, 1984). A key criticism of much design management literature is the tendency to neglect these very complexities that characterise the everyday practice of an architect (Cuff, 1991). To disconnect the study of architectural practice from their social milieu and its associated complexities is to inappropriately ignore the important underlying systems that architects are embedded in their dealings with the client (Stevens, 1998).

In summary, the review identified many prescriptive models suggesting a particular rational methodology to those seeking guidance to address design management problems. The majority of past work has either proposed multidisciplinary models for the management of client-designer relationships or has sought out appropriate disciplinary knowledge (for eg, management, sociology or psychology) to understand this built environment problem. Significantly there have been limited studies on the architect-client relationship based on a sociological approach even though the practice of architecture and the management of client-architect relationships is generally accepted as a social process (Luck & Haenlein, 2002). The review also highlighted a lack of understanding of how clients effectively deal with uncertainty in practice to achieve successful project outcomes. To explore this problem further, the concept of habitus is considered, which is a sociological construct particularly useful for explaining the behaviour in situations where the prevailing set of values and rituals governing practice such as the architectural practice are not explicit (Bourdieu, 1977).

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The practice of architecture is one characterised by contradictory forces that present dilemmas to architects (Blau, 1984). In particular, the tension between design viewed as an art form and the implication that architecture is a business enterprise is a “dialectical duality” which architects have to contend with in their daily practice (Cuff, 1991). For many architects, the emphasis placed on pleasing clients to maintain a steady flow of jobs and to achieve profitability is seen as an act of compromise. For these architects, the business side of practice appears to take precedence, guiding the definition of the field, which goes against the underlying values and culture of the architectural social milieu (Gutman, 1988). Habitus theory contributes to a way of understanding the underlying values and culture of the architectural social milieu, which influences the relationships that architects have with clients.

3.1 Habitus theory

Bourdieu (1977, p.72) defines habitus as:
"systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor”

Group habitus is the assembly of collective individuals encompassing group adaptations and acclimatisation, “‘naturally' adjusted to the historical world they are up against” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.90). This enables an individual's involvement, familiarity or sense of being at 'home' within a social milieu, manifested through deep structural dispositions of acceptable perceptions, outlooks and ways or ntics of conduct. Individuals within a group habitus experience the world on a common sense level, justified through their exclusive understanding of the world.

Habitus, ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ entails that the nature of architecture as a specialised activity places architects within an architectural habitus comprised of unique dispositions, possessing specialist knowledge, skills and education, socially acquired through experience and practice and is continually reproduced over generations (Bourdieu, 1977; Stevens, 1998). The architectural habitus is comprised of cultivated individuals claiming a particular architectural knowledge territory as distinctly their own in order to establish a degree of autonomy from other members of the society. Cuff (1991) charted the metamorphic transformation of a layperson into an architect through a sequence of four distinct periods including as an architectural student, an entry-level architect, a project architect or associate and a principal. The four developmental phases tend not to be described explicitly to those undergoing the metamorphosis. Rather the layperson progressively 'learns the ropes' of the mysterious underpinnings of the profession over the course of becoming a full-fledged architect. Over time, architects become increasingly inculcated towards the mysteries of design practice and gradually "see the world in a new way", recognise the significance of peer review and develop segregation from the general public as they cross each invisible professional boundary. It is this process of socialisation that an architect commonly undergoes which distinctly sets members of the architectural habitus apart from other non-members (Chen, 2008). Group habitus is an important concept to consider because it helps to explain how the architect who is a member of the architectural habitus may differ from the client who is located within a different group habitus. The fact that the architectural field is not known to the client and vice versa is not without significance.

Specifically, the maintenance of the exclusive nature of the profession to continually reproduce “cultivated individuals” and “instruments of taste” requires a delicate balance since too much autonomy can eliminate the architect’s position within the market and foster resentment against the profession (Cuff, 1991). As the findings of the RIBA studies (1992, 1993, 1995) alongside several other academic publications (Stater, 2002, Grilo et al. 2007) have consistently identified, the profession's tendency to be peer-oriented rather than client-oriented has had the unintended consequence of alienating clients where architects have been described as "arrogant" and "inflexible". The manner in which architects successfully strike a balance of autonomy in their relationship with clients is a central skill required of architects but is one that has received limited attention within the design management literature.

3.1.1 Habitus shock
Whilst the habitus is not explicitly tied to a theory of change, the dialectical confrontation of the habitus or what Bourdieu (2002) asserts, as a kind of ‘second birth’ is a condition that has received the attention of various researchers (Friedmann, 2002; Hillier, 2002). Second birth
refers to conditions where the habitus undergoes transformations as a result of fundamental environmental changes and/or educational learning. Within the contemporary social world context it is commonplace for individuals to encounter multiple second birth experiences as they transit from field to field over the course of their lives. Friedmann (2002) highlighted five ways in which the habitus theory can be extended beyond its primary task of explaining social reproduction to elucidate processes of change through second birth including escaping, forcing, challenging, accelerated change and breakdown of the habitus. These five changing conditions highlight the permeability of the habitus where both individual and group habitus can be fundamentally altered causing major transformations to social lives.

The concept of second birth is relevant to this research as it is concerned with the social space occupied by the architect and client during a project. It is proposed that a dialectical confrontation or mismatch between the architect and client’s habituses takes place as they embark on a project together. The client’s habitus may be inappropriate to cope with the unfamiliar architectural habitus, thereby resulting in potential discomfort. Generally when clients enter into relationships with architects they are uncertain about what is expected of them or what they can expect from the architect. A client’s habitus may be in a state of shock when confronted with the architect who is of a different corresponding habitus and may undergo some form of adjustment similar to individuals experiencing culture shock who are undergoing radical change from one culture to another culture. For the purposes of this research, the mismatch between the architect and client’s habituses, which presents a number of similarities with the culture shock phenomenon is termed habitus shock and is defined as the confusion or frustration experienced by clients who find themselves exposed to an unfamiliar architectural habitus and design process. To further explore the client’s habitus shock experience, culture shock theory is considered as it has received considerable attention within the academic literature in psychology, for its contribution into understanding how the client adjusts to the unfamiliar environment during habitus shock.

3.2 Culture shock theory

The culture shock concept was first introduced in 1960 by Oberg to describe sojourners’ intense disorientation, confusion and anxiety resulting from the loss of familiar cues in a new culture. More recently, the culture shock concept has been recognised to apply to any new situation requiring individuals to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies (Griffiths et al., 2005). Individuals undergoing any radical change in their lives including a client experiencing habitus shock may undergo some form of adaptation parallel to conditions described by culture shock (Pedersen, 1995). Culture shock theory suggests a common stage-developmental process that sojourners undergo during culture shock and it is the developmental process the client undergoes and the consequences of the client’s experience that need to be encapsulated within the context of this research.

3.2.1 Stage developmental process

From as early as 1955 (Lysgaard, 1955), there have been many attempts to describe the dynamic nature of the sojourner adjustment process. A common view is that the adjustment process is a stage-based developmental process (Pedersen, 1995), which is commonly referred to as the U-curve and is one of the best known process-centred models to describe the culture shock phenomenon (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). The U-curve views the adjustment process as one which moves from an initial optimism, elation and excitement through a subsequent dip as the sojourner struggles to fit in to the new culture toward a gradual recovery to a higher and more adequate level of coping and functioning in the new culture (Church, 1982; Shupe,
2007). Over the years the U-curve hypothesis has received varying degrees of support (Chen, 2008). Therefore it is important to describe the process in a balanced perspective when using the U-curve to explore the client’s habitus shock experience.

Adler’s (1975) five-stage developmental process identifies the potential for both positive and negative consequences that result from culture shock and is perhaps one of the few which views culture shock in a neutral rather than either negative or positive manner. For this reason, Adler’s model was adopted for this study of the client’s habitus shock experience. The five stages include (Adler, 1975; Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Pedersen, 1995):

- **Honeymoon**: a stage of discovery where curiosity, fascination and interest guide the sojourner’s behaviour to experience new culture as exciting, interesting or even dreamlike. Individuals are often encapsulated by their own identity and tend to ignore problems encountered.
- **Disintegration**: a stage where the differences between cultures become evident and lead to confusion, isolation and loneliness. This is when the sojourner must realistically cope with living in the new culture on a daily basis. It is the stage where new cultural cues can be misinterpreted and may lead to frustration, disillusionment, depression and loneliness.
- **Reintegration**: a stage where the new cues are re-integrated and the sojourner develops an increased ability to function in the new culture. This stage is characterised by the sojourner’s gradual adjustment to the new culture in learning appropriate host culture behaviour and norms. Although more capable to function in the new environment, one still holds feelings of resentment and hostility towards the host culture.
- **Autonomy**: the continued process of reintegration where one is able to view the differences between cultures in an objective and balanced manner. At this stage the sojourner develops a new sensitivity and understanding about the host culture and is able to function more competently within the new culture.
- **Interdependence**: the stage where one accepts and enjoys the differences between cultures and is able to function in both the “old” and “new” culture.

### 3.2.2 Habitut shock & learning

Various researchers have used the growth model to describe the positive consequences of culture shock where it tends to be viewed as a specialised form of learning or educational growth experienced by the sojourner (Pedersen, 1995). There has not been any clear definition of what constitutes learning; however, three key themes can be identified to indicate that the sojourner’s experience of culture shock has resulted in learning:

- **acquisition** of skills and knowledge in relation to appropriate behaviour in the new setting to enable better adjustment (Kealey, 1988; Furnham & Bochner, 1986)
- **greater self-awareness** and broader and more complex worldview or perspective of host culture (Adler, 1975; Church, 1982; Brislin et al, 1986)
- **greater enjoyment** in the new environment (Brislin et al, 1986)

Perhaps an underlying theme across these indicators is their contributing role in leading to the sojourner’s increased competency to function in the new environment. Sojourner learning is therefore demonstrated in their increased ability to deal with an unfamiliar environment with less difficulty and stress. This is quite easily translatable to the habitus shock phenomenon and the client’s learning. When the client embarks on a house project a period of learning about the nature of the design process and its associated norms is necessary before the client is able to function competently in the new environment. Therefore the more adjusted the client is to the new environment the less difficulty is experienced.
It is suggested that there are two key factors which can facilitate the client’s learning during habitus shock, namely the development of coping strategies by clients and the compatibility between the architect and client’s habituses. Firstly the client can have an active role in developing strategies to help them cope with the unfamiliar environment. The client who is confronted with an unfamiliar design and construction process can become disoriented in the new environment. Everyday design issues which may seem simple to the architect can be perceived as confusing or even overwhelming by clients who are not typically exposed to such issues. It is at this uncertain stage that misunderstandings between the architect and client can occur and therefore a degree of learning about the other party’s habitus is essential to reduce uncertainties and avoid misunderstandings. Throughout the design and construction processes, the architect may utilise various methods to clarify issues with the client to reduce uncertainty in progressing the project. At the same time, the client may seek to acquire new skills and knowledge in relation to the design process to help them function with increased competency within the new environment. Therefore paying attention to how the client behaves and perhaps develops coping strategies may help to refine the understanding of the client’s behaviour in relation to the habitus shock phenomenon.

Secondly, consistent with the “cultural fit” concept within the culture shock phenomenon, the level of compatibility between the architect and client’s habituses may impact on the client’s learning. The “cultural fit” concept is based on the premise that the transfer of home culture learning relies on the similarities or differences between the home and host cultures (Bochner, 1972). The greater the difference between the home and host cultures, that is, “cultural distance”, the more difficulties the sojourner experiences in their adjustment process (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Triandis et al, 1994). During the client’s encounter with habitus shock, both the architect and client may continuously seek ways to achieve increased “fit” between the habituses to assist the client’s adjustment process for the project to progress. In most cases, clients ultimately hold the final control over major decisions to be made on house projects. Therefore project progress can be largely reliant on the client’s ability to make decisions within appropriate timeframes. Making decisions concerning issues relatively unfamiliar to the client can, however, be particularly challenging. This is when learning about the complexities of the design process and the architect’s language is crucial in assisting the client’s ability to contribute to decision-making throughout the design process. A lack of shared language between the architect and client can impact on the client’s learning process since the architect has a key role in explaining and familiarising the client with the complexities surrounding the design process. Therefore it is argued that an increased level of compatibility between the architect and client’s habituses can facilitate the client’s learning.

4. HABITU SHOCK MODEL FOR SUCCESSFUL ARCHITECT-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Figure 2 is an abstract representation of the social space occupied by the architect and client over the course of their relationship on the house project. An underlying assumption is that the architect and client’s habituses have a degree of influence over each other during habitus shock. It proposed that the effective management of the client’s habitus shock experience can improve or hinder the success of the architect-client relationship.
It is suggested that the client’s adjustment experience on the house project can result in learning which in turn leads to an increased fit between the architect and client’s habituses. The closer the fit between the habituses the less likely it is for conflicts to occur and hence the higher the likelihood for the quality of the architect-client relationship to be enhanced. Therefore it is proposed that client learning during habitus shock is a characteristic of successful architect-client relationships, which can be demonstrated in the client’s increased adjustment and ability to function competently in the new environment. There is currently little detailed knowledge of how the habitus undergoes transformations in such situations. Understanding the client’s habitus shock experience and the extent to which the habitus can change is significant since it influences the client’s experience of a project which shapes their perceptions of the overall success of the architect-client relationship. The client’s habitus shock experience, when managed appropriately offers the potential to enhance their experience and thereby ultimate satisfaction and this is worthy of further studies.

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