

Dossier — The wellbeing of architects

Guest editors

Naomi Stead,
Maryam Gusheh
and Byron Kinnaird

A major, nationwide survey of practitioners, *The Wellbeing of Architects* project reveals how we're tracking. Our guest editors provide a snapshot of the current situation and envision the promises of a better future, if we can pull together.

The situation: How and why are we here?

Words by Naomi Stead, Maryam Gusheh and Byron Kinnaird

It has long been suspected that we have a problem with mental wellbeing in the Australian architecture profession. But we have lacked conclusive evidence of whether there is a problem and, if yes, what form it takes and what's causing it. The conversation has been stuck: we thought but weren't sure, we suspected but didn't know, we worried but found no way forward.

Now, at last, that conversation can finally move on. Evidence collected from a large survey as part of *The Wellbeing of Architects* project¹ reveals that we do have a problem. The erosion of fees and the widening gap between the cost and price of services, alongside poor time and business management in particular socialized and cultured work practices, are having a direct, tangible and measurable human cost.

The question of *how* and *why* such conditions have come about is important. The survey gathered respondents' perceptions about the effect of infelicitous procurement processes, the presence of external agents in the construction sector, pressures from aligned disciplines, and various other forms of disruption and devaluation.

One of the key findings is that wellbeing issues are seen by many as systemic, not just a result of isolated practices or individual experiences – and certainly not something that can be fixed with better personal self-care. Poor wellbeing in the profession is not the “fault” of any particular group or role or practice type, but a structural factor to which the whole profession is subject. If we want to redress it, we will need to work together.

The survey of Australian practitioners, conducted online in 2021, had 2,066 respondents drawn from a wide range of practice sizes and types, levels of seniority and leadership, geographic locations and genders. It employed quantitative methods to collect data about work-related wellbeing, professional identity, perceptions of support, and the impact of work cultures on individual wellbeing. It also included open-ended questions where participants were invited to reflect on factors intrinsic and extrinsic to architecture that they perceived to be affecting their own wellbeing and that of the architectural workforce as a whole.

The scale and scope of this participation mean that the survey responses produce a strong and representative dataset, but also a treasure trove of personal stories and reflections – some of them poignant, some angry, many reflective, and all insightful. Some of these responses are presented in this dossier. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic,

which was raging at the time of the survey, are also taken into account.

The dataset represents one of the largest and most rigorously collected bodies of evidence ever assembled on this issue, with marked significance for the profession, both in Australia and internationally. We would argue that this is a clarion call for the profession and an opportunity for fundamental change toward greater wellbeing for all.

This dossier offers a snapshot of the survey's key findings and attempts to contextualize and interpret some of the data gathered. First, our collaborators from the Monash University Department of Management explain how the survey was designed and – as is evident from the responses – the ways in which the architectural community differs from the general working population in terms of wellbeing. This is followed by some revealing figures (graphs) from the survey responses.

Next, we present a series of qualitative responses – direct quotations from survey respondents under four themes that strongly emerged from the survey:

1. **Valuing architectural work** (page 58)
2. **Time management** (page 60)
3. **Fees and remuneration** (page 62)
4. **Leadership** (page 64)

For each set of responses, we have included our own short summary and also asked an industry representative, drawn from our larger team of research partners and collaborators, to comment.

Finally, we have invited a response from interdisciplinary researcher Natalie Galea, who has reflected on the findings, placing them in the wider context of the construction sector and the systemic reforms already in motion that aim to improve the wellbeing of workers.

– Naomi Stead is the leader of *The Wellbeing of Architects* research project, and director of the Design and Creative Practice Enabling Capability Platform at RMIT University.

– Maryam Gusheh is associate professor in the Department of Architecture at Monash University.

– Byron Kinnaird is a research fellow in the Department of Architecture at Monash University for *The Wellbeing of Architects* research project.

Footnote

1. *The Wellbeing of Architects: Culture, identity and practice* is an interdisciplinary collaboration between architecture researchers at RMIT University and Monash University, and research in the Monash University Department of Management. The ongoing three-year investigation is funded by the Australian Research Council (2020–2023) in collaboration with numerous industry partners. For more, see thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au.

Key survey findings

The survey indicated that people working in architecture have a lower-than-average quality of life compared with Australian norms.

Better personal wellbeing was most strongly associated with higher levels of career satisfaction, career support, relatedness to others, career optimism and career balance.

Some life or career stages were perceived as having a negative impact on wellbeing – in particular, job-seeking, the registration process and parenting/caring.

Lower levels of satisfaction with remuneration were associated with poorer wellbeing.

Fifty percent of respondents said that their work in architecture has had a generally positive effect on their wellbeing, while 42% reported that their work has had a generally negative impact on their wellbeing (Figure 6, page 56).

More than one-third of respondents said that their actual weekly work time exceeded 45 hours, and almost 10% said that their actual weekly work time exceeded 55 hours. Many respondents reported working, on a weekly or daily basis, more hours than they were contracted to work.

Many respondents were committed to their profession and took pride in their work but said they would not necessarily recommend a career in architecture to others (Figure 5, page 56).

The survey: Flourishing or languishing?

Words by Tracey Shea, Brian Cooper and Julie Wolfram Cox

Two key findings emerged from *The Wellbeing of Architects* project survey: that the wellbeing of Australian architectural workers is substantially lower than that of the general working population; and that, rather than flourishing, this community can best be described as languishing.

In designing the survey, we drew upon self-determination theory, which links a sense of wellbeing to individual motivation and the satisfaction of “basic psychological needs” – namely, the need for *autonomy* (a sense of willingness and volition), *relatedness* (a sense of being bonded, connected and significant to others), and *competence* (a feeling of being capable and able to effectively fulfil tasks).¹ This framework, which has a strong focus on both wellness and agency, along with the conditions that either facilitate or inhibit these experiences, is particularly salient for *The Wellbeing of Architects* project, given the high level of creativity and professional autonomy in architectural work.

“The wellbeing of Australian architectural workers is substantially lower than that of the general working population. Rather than flourishing, this community can best be described as languishing.”

The survey included established measures to help us understand the drivers of wellbeing in the architectural community. Wellbeing was captured using pre-existing sets of questions or “scales” that measured subjective quality of life, psychological distress and burnout. Other measures included the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, perfectionism, and contextual variables focused on career agency, adaptability and satisfaction.

A useful overall measure of subjective quality of life, or simply “wellbeing,” is offered by the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.² The index locates an individual’s wellbeing on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing. Wellbeing is measured across seven life domains: your *standard of living*, your *health*, what you are currently *achieving* in life, your personal *relationships*,

“Flourishing is intertwined with creativity, connectedness, coping and resilience – all factors that could be considered critical to a creative community and the wellbeing of its members.”

how *safe* you feel, feeling part of your *community*, and your future *security*.

The average Australian wellbeing score for samples of working people ranges from about 74 to 77, with the latest measurement – obtained in April/May 2020, in the early days of the pandemic – being 76 out of 100.³ The average score in our sample was 66.7, with survey respondents scoring lower than the Australian average on all seven life domains (Figure 1, page 54).

At the time of the survey, the COVID-19 pandemic had been ongoing for more than a year. To understand what impact the pandemic might have had on wellbeing, we asked respondents to compare their current situation to their quality of life just before its beginning. Thirty-five percent reported their quality of life to be “about the same,” but the subjective wellbeing for this subset of respondents was still below the average range for working adults (Figure 2, page 54). This suggests there may have been pre-existing systemic issues affecting wellbeing in the profession prior to the onset of the pandemic. The only group that reached scores in the average range of the Australian population was the 8 percent of respondents whose quality of life was “very much better” than before the pandemic.

The exact reasons for these relatively low wellbeing scores are unclear but, importantly, remuneration appears to be a key factor. Only those who were satisfied with their current level of remuneration reported wellbeing that was, on average, close to or above the average range for the Australian population (Figure 3, page 55).

An alternative approach to examining wellbeing is to measure mental health. We did so by asking respondents about their psychological distress or, more specifically, about anxiety and depression. The average score for our sample fell in the mid-range, where respondents were not

among the most severely distressed, but equally not as mentally healthy as we might have hoped (Figure 4, page 55). This finding is similar to many other studies, with community samples and professions showing mildly elevated levels of psychological distress during the pandemic.⁴ Nevertheless, one in four respondents in our sample was experiencing moderate to severe psychological distress.

Overall, our results suggest a population that, in the main, is best described as languishing rather than flourishing. US sociologist and psychologist Corey Keyes describes a mental health continuum on which languishing is the absence, and flourishing the presence, of mental health.⁵ This concept is particularly salient for our survey findings, because those who are languishing are not necessarily in severe psychological distress, but neither do they experience good mental health. Further, flourishing is intertwined with creativity, connectedness, coping and resilience – all factors that could be considered critical to a creative community and the wellbeing of its members.

While the context of the pandemic does warrant some caution in interpreting these findings, the outcomes of the survey show how important it is to understand and address the drivers of low levels of wellbeing and psychological distress in the architectural community. The research team will continue to analyze the survey data to more fully understand the complex relationships between the characteristics of individuals, the characteristics of their work, and their wellbeing, with further longitudinal data to be gathered in 2023.

— Tracey Shea is a researcher in the Department of Management, Monash Business School. Her research interests include occupational violence and aggression, and employee wellbeing.

— Brian Cooper is an associate professor in the Department of Management, Monash Business School. His research interests include work attitudes and employee wellbeing. Brian lectures in research methods and has extensive experience in quantitative business research methods.

— Julie Wolfram Cox is a professor of management in the Monash Business School. She has a background in organizational behaviour and psychology. Julie’s research interests include professional work, organizational change, leadership, and technology studies.

Footnotes

1. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2018).

2. The index (australianunity.com.au/about-us/wellbeing-index) is part of an annual survey that has been conducted by Deakin University and Australian Unity since 2001. See Robert A. Cummins and Rohan Mead, *The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index 20th Anniversary Commemorative Edition* (Melbourne: Australian Unity and Deakin University, 2021).

3. Sarah Khor et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index – Report 37: Subjective wellbeing during COVID-19* (Geelong, Victoria: Australian Centre on Quality of Life, School of Psychology, Deakin University, 2020).

4. Philip J. Batterham et al., “Trajectories of depression and anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in a representative Australian adult cohort,” *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 214, no. 10, 2021, pp. 462–68.

5. Corey Keyes, “The mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2002, pp. 207–22.

The evidence in numbers

Figure 1. How does the wellbeing of Australian architects compare with that of the overall working population?

Architecture practitioners scored lower than the Australian average on the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, which locates an individual's wellbeing on a scale of 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing.

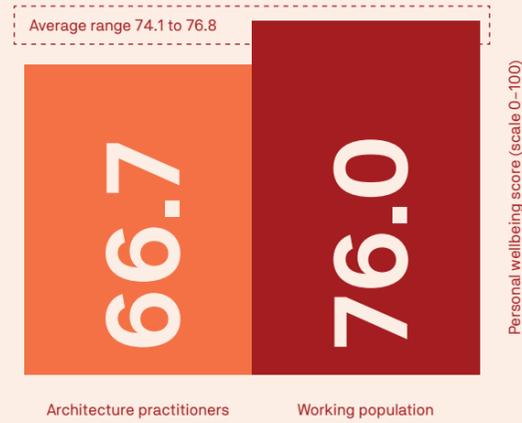


Figure 2. How do you rate your wellbeing now in comparison to your wellbeing prior to the pandemic?

What is the association between these responses and respondents' general wellbeing scores?

Respondents were asked to compare their wellbeing now to their wellbeing just prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also shown are the general wellbeing scores of respondents based on how they rated the change in their wellbeing since beginning of the pandemic. In all cases, the average wellbeing score for the respondents was lower than for the general Australian working population. This suggests that there may have been some pre-existing issues affecting wellbeing in the profession prior to the onset of the pandemic.

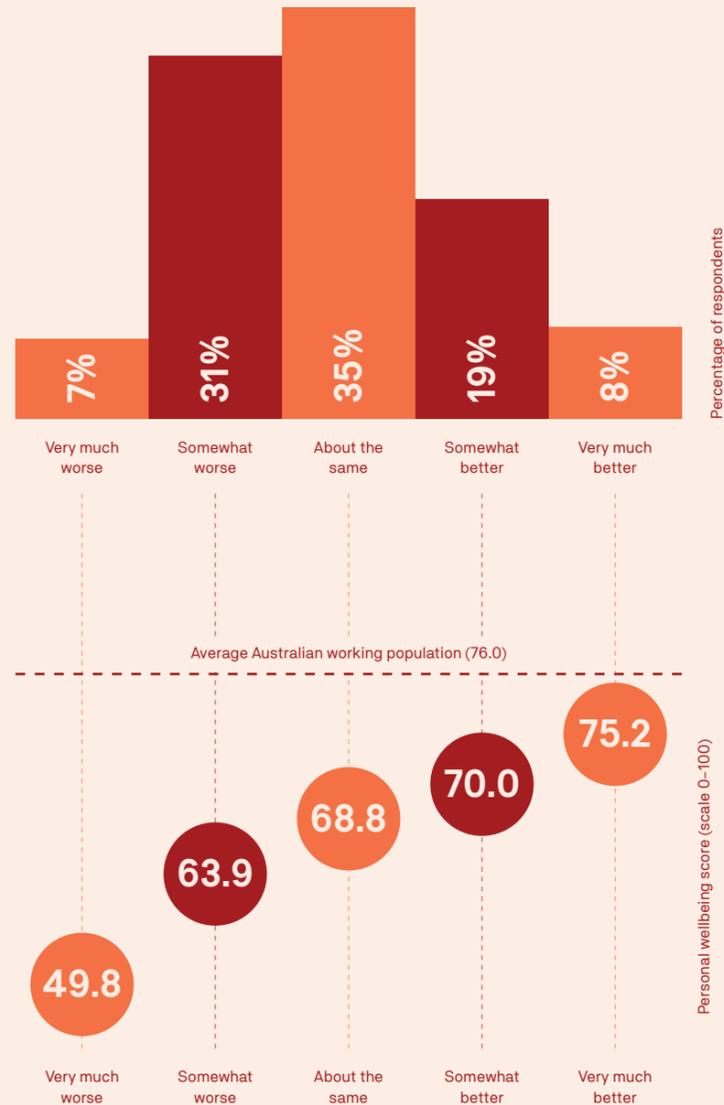


Figure 3. How satisfied are you with your level of remuneration?

Is there a relationship between levels of remuneration and general wellbeing in the profession?

Remuneration appears to be a key factor in the relatively low levels of wellbeing evident in the profession, with only those who were satisfied with their current level of remuneration reporting wellbeing close to or above the average range for the Australian population.

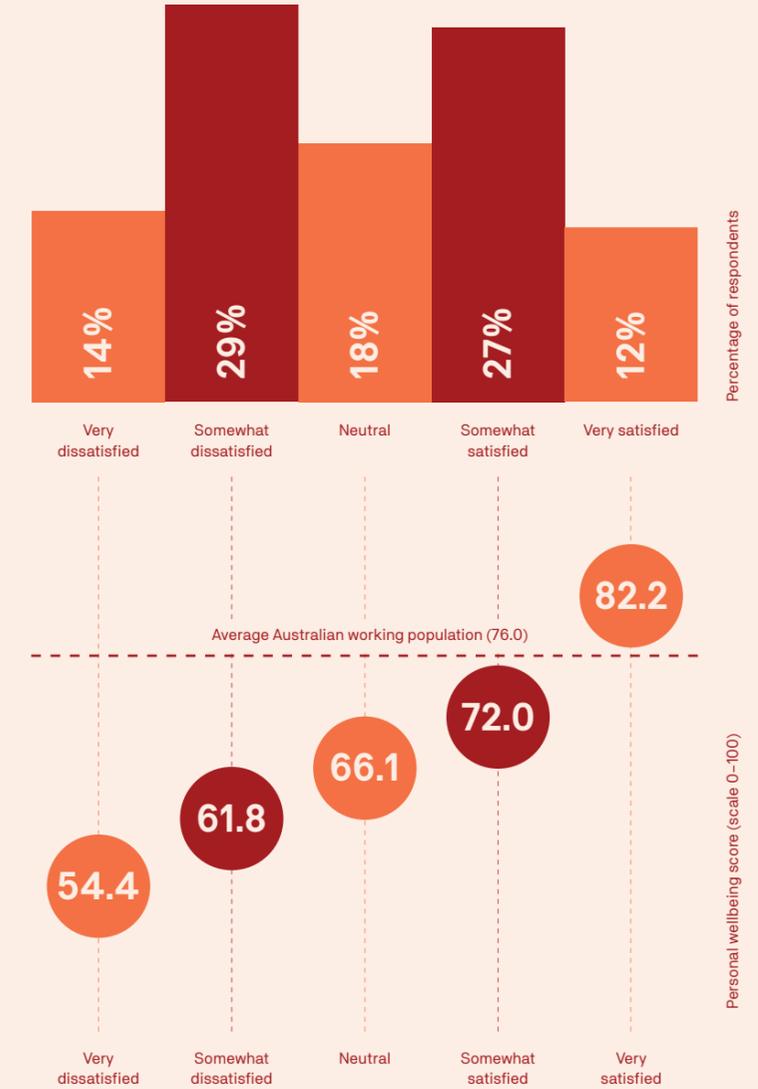


Figure 4. Are you experiencing any level of psychological distress?

Architects were not among the most severely distressed Australian workers but did display mildly elevated levels of psychological distress, with one in four practitioners reporting moderate to severe psychological distress. It is important to note again that the survey was conducted during the pandemic, which may account for part of this distress but is unlikely to account for all of it.

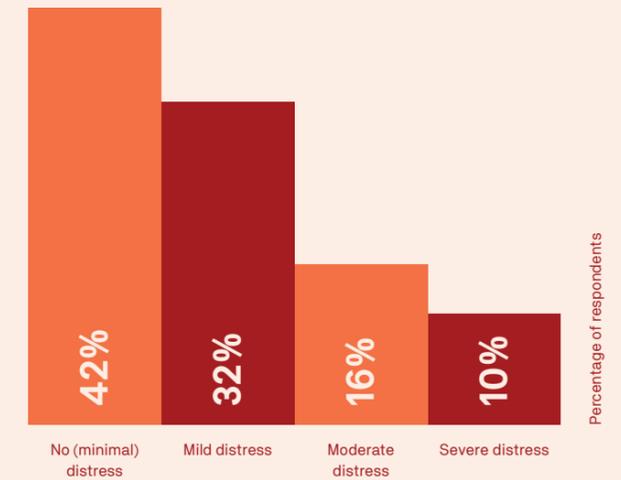


Figure 5. How satisfied are you with your working life?

A series of multiple-choice questions about architects' attitudes to their work and workplace practices suggested that respondents value their profession but may not view it as viable in the long term.

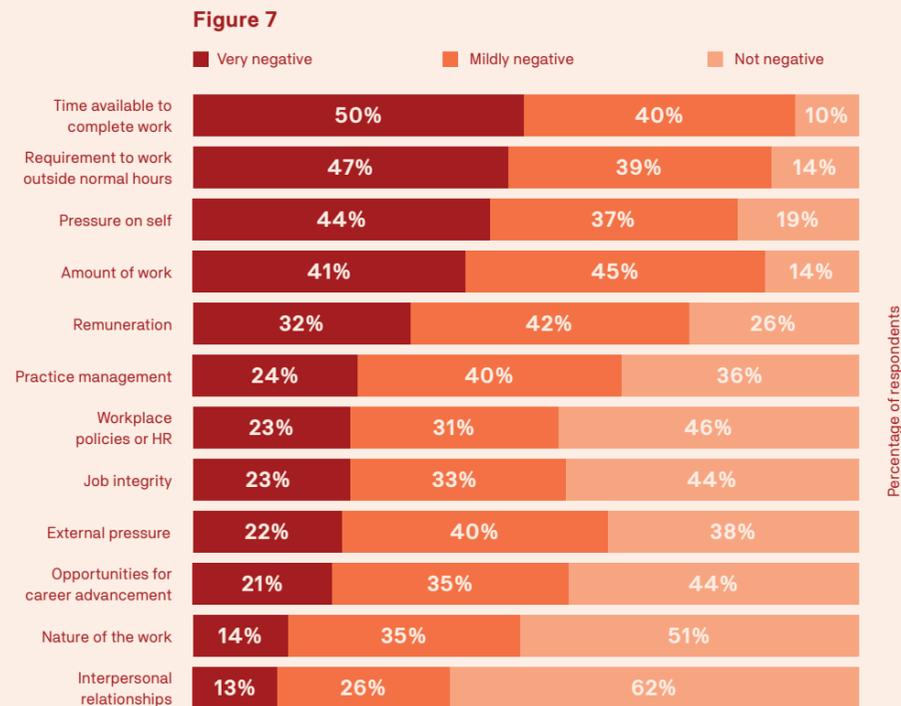
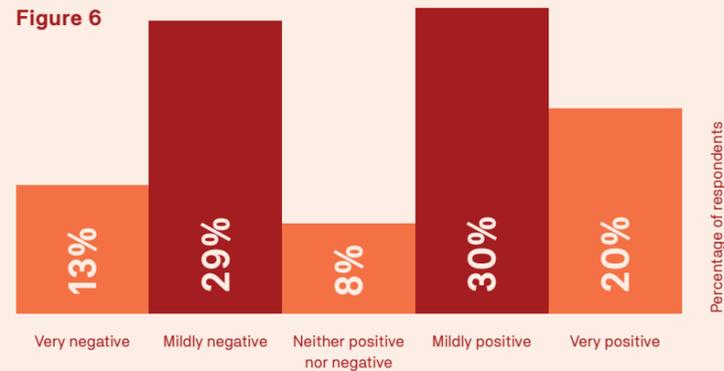


Figure 6. What is the overall impact of your work on your wellbeing?

Figure 7. Which work-related factors have the greatest negative impact on your wellbeing?

Reflecting on how their career in architecture has generally impacted their wellbeing, half of those sampled reported a generally positive impact, and just under half reported a generally negative impact (Figure 6). Not having enough time to complete work was identified as the most negative factor in terms of architects' wellbeing (Figure 7).

All figures are from *The Wellbeing of Architects 2021 Practitioner Survey, Primary Report*, March 2022 (see thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au/publications/the-wellbeing-of-architects-2021-practitioner-survey-primary-report).



1 Valuing architectural work: The human effects

What did the survey find?

Guest editors: The intersection between wellbeing and the ways in which architectural work is *valued* emerged very clearly in the survey qualitative responses. In particular, two types of value were underlined: first, the *holistic* value that architecture provides to society at large (and the implications of its being devalued, undervalued or poorly recognized); and second, the *pragmatic* value placed on architectural work, in terms of its professional status, the recognition of its real cost, and clients' willingness to pay.

“This profession is being undermined by its own political hierarchy ... and an uninformed public sector. The inability for architects to be recognized for the value they bring to a build, a project, a community, a place is such a devastating waste.”

– Female, self-employed, 56–65 years

Respondents described the value of architecture as commonly being under-recognized by stakeholders within and outside of the profession, and they lamented the lack of appreciation for what the design process can offer and lack of willingness to embrace its full scope and complexity. There was a suggestion that the status and reach of architects has diminished over time, not only within the construction industry but within society and culture more broadly.

Several respondents addressed the perceived need for architectural practitioners to be valued as people, rather than as fungible assets. These responses often acknowledged problematic working conditions within the industry. However, they also revealed the extent to which many professionals persevered with architecture, despite the structural issues, because of a deep emotional investment and a belief in the potential value it holds for individual and public good.

What can we do?

Emma Williamson and Kieran Wong: On the one hand, we throw our hands in the air and ask, “How did we get here?” And in the same breath, we wonder where else we thought we would end up through the potent combination of internal and external forces on our profession.

The comments and reflections in *The Wellbeing of Architects* survey summarize thousands of conversations that we have had with friends, colleagues and staff over decades. The findings are not for the faint-hearted and certainly bring into question the real future for the underpaid, overworked, stressed, distressed and exhausted architectural workers in Australian practices. These conditions are having tangible effects on the wellbeing of architects as a group.

“For me, it took years to get out of a mindset of just being grateful to have a job and to advocate for my value. We minimize ourselves professionally, which I believe reflects on our wellbeing personally. We interlink our professional and personal value.”

– Female, team member, 26–35 years

In our nearly 30 years in practice – and in the face of an unblinking neoliberal onslaught, the decimation of government capability and public service capacity, the shifting tides of risk, climate change adaptation, the internet, decentralization and commercialization of services, the gig

“With design being simultaneously celebrated and grossly undervalued by society at large – and the vast majority of architects’ clients – architects are kept in a limbo of emotional dissonance between being indispensable and being completely worthless.”

– Male, director, 36–45 years

“Basically, there is very little value in our industry. This leads to students who are treated terribly in offices and staff who are overworked and underpaid. How did we get here? How did project managers push their way into our industry and crumble the architecture profession from the foundation?”

– Female, associate, 26–35 years

economy, iPhones, reconciliation, the reduction in wage-bargaining, loss of mass unionization, the changes in student demographics as a result of HECS fees, and so on – the profession has doggedly stuck to the same set of practice notes, the same fee system and the same project methodology, and it simply seems unable to offer a viable (at scale) alternative. We have displayed a spectacular lack of agility where other professions have found opportunity. As a result, our perceived value has diminished year on year, and this shows no sign of abating. The confluence of these pressures affects the profession in terms of individuals’ mental health, and our inability to change or get ahead of the curve has created a new set of challenges as practices deal with varying forms and degrees of mental ill-health.

It is our view that the profession has struggled to find a support base, with an obvious example being our failure to celebrate and include architects and graduates who work adjacent to traditional practice. Surely these people have the capacity to be our greatest allies! The idea that you are either “with us or against us” fails to recognize the true agency of a project manager who understands design because they studied architecture.

It is also interesting to note the two types of value evident in the survey responses. It seems that those aged over 40 feel a loss of status – perhaps they quietly resent most project managers and feel generally lower down the chain than they used to. For those under 40, the diminishing value of architecture

has delivered the brutal blow of fewer prospects more broadly; unlike those over 40, the dream of owning a home will most likely stay in the realm of fantasy for this group. So why, they wonder, are they working so hard, for so little money – and, critically, at such great personal cost?

At the heart of this is, of course, a much discussed systemic and structural issue that is beyond the control of any one actor or practice. Even the largest of architecture practices in Australia is small fry compared with some of the development industry players, so pushing back against the tide

is unlikely to succeed. Instead, we need to use our creative problem-solving skills and get clever in finding ways of incremental change. We need to foster and support people who can advocate for the value of design and, by extension, create conditions for design professionals to thrive.

– Emma Williamson and Kieran Wong are co-founders of The Fulcrum Agency (an industry partner in *The Wellbeing of Architects* project).

All quotations are from *The Wellbeing of Architects 2021 Practitioner Survey* (see thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au).

42%
of respondents reported that their work in architecture has had a generally negative impact on their wellbeing

2 Time management: The impact on wellbeing

What did the survey find?

Guest editors: While only a relatively small number of survey respondents said that the actual *nature* of architectural work had affected their wellbeing, far more identified problems with how and when the work must be completed. Some noted a significant erosion of personal time available for commitments outside of work. It is well established that architecture has an entrenched long-hours culture and that practitioners work significant overtime, which is not always fully remunerated. What has not been previously established is the effect that this is having on wellbeing (Figure 7, page 56).

Many participants identified a lack of time-management skills – observing that they had not learned these during architectural education, and that they were largely absent from practice environments. Some participants called for the adequate resourcing of projects so that they could be completed to an appropriate standard, without unrealistic timelines and stressful time pressure. Others noted that pressurized working conditions are ultimately self-defeating and detrimental to the profession, given that people faced with relentless, unrealistic deadlines are apt to leave.

Some participants spoke about measures they had taken to gain control over their own time and workflow, including instilling various kinds of boundaries between work and personal life. There were also positive stories of practices that did have clear and deliberate strategies around management of time and people.

“I set boundaries between work and personal life [to support my wellbeing]. These boundaries were often looked upon as a lack of commitment to my job.”

– Female, senior team member, 46–55 years

“Most practices I have worked for have had little to no time management across projects.”

– Male, self-employed, 36–45 years

What can we do?

Darryl Suttie: As consultants, time is our commodity of exchange. Yet we don’t acknowledge or respect its value enough, either individually or collectively. To improve the wellbeing of architectural workers, we must develop a better framework within which to operate and deliver value. *The Wellbeing of Architects* survey voices are a powerful call to action, challenging us to humanize workplace practices and change mindsets.

“As an entire profession, we need to stop the ‘race to the bottom’ with fee-cutting. Instead, as an entire profession, we need to demand appropriate fees for the work that we do, so that we can properly pay staff to do good work, in reasonable time frames, without undue stress, pressure and cutting of corners. In other words, this profession as a whole needs to get its self-esteem sorted, stat!”

– Female, director, 46–55 years

First, we need to break the culture of long working hours. The industry needs to support team members to keep hours to a standard working week, and leaders need to encourage lunch breaks, shifting away from the misnomer that long hours are a badge of loyalty or productivity. Survey respondents have clearly had enough of poorly planned and resourced projects leading to personal sacrifice. There will always be occasional situations that call for extended hours or efforts, but these need to be kept to a minimum, balanced out and fairly paid. Tracking overtime as actual project costs gives an accurate measurement of the real input and effort invested by staff, enabling better time management and forecasting

on future projects. One way is to encourage staff to enter their hours on timesheets – honestly.

The impact of poor time management on professional wellbeing suggests that specific training is needed. Integrating these themes throughout the university curriculum would help us all to recognize the inherent value of time. Ongoing professional development, continuing industry dialogue and mentoring would consolidate workplace change.

In my experience, improved project planning and communication increases productivity and reduces stress. The core function of planning and resourcing, challenging scope and detailing timelines needs to happen earlier in the process for each project. The ongoing review, tracking and adjusting of workloads as a project progresses is empowered by teamwork and communication. When all team members participate in planning, clarifying and questioning assumptions, the process is normalized.

Practices need to challenge themselves and their clients to appreciate that producing more on a project doesn’t necessarily equal better results. Tight programs and requests for changes commonly derail time management, and when communication doesn’t acknowledge the effect on timelines, the design team carries the load.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to shift client expectations around travel, meeting frequency and reasonable deliverables and deadlines. Cloud-based project management software and BIM collaboration platforms are transforming how we share information with clients.

For example, on a recent project, our client was happy for the design development review to be conducted as a virtual walk

“I was blessed to have been brought up within a large practice that valued its people. While I did some long hours at times, this was always balanced with time off and encouragement of an active, healthy life outside of work.”

– Male, self-employed, 36–45 years

around the model, in lieu of huge reports and masses of drawings.

To avoid open-ended value assumptions by clients, we need to improve industry standards in detailing scope in fee proposals, quantifying deliverables, controlling the number of meetings and setting maximum times for specific tasks.

Creating a safe workplace is everyone’s responsibility. Cultural change and new work practices around timelines and time management can help to improve wellbeing across our industry – something we would all be proud of.

– Darryl Suttie is a director at Design Inc (an industry partner in *The Wellbeing of Architects* project).

All quotations are from *The Wellbeing of Architects 2021 Practitioner Survey* (see thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au).

55% of respondents identified timelines or deadlines as one of the top three factors having a negative impact on their wellbeing

3 Fees and remuneration: Is the juice worth the squeeze?

“Australian society places a low value on good design, so the fees we can command are never enough to cover the work needed to produce excellent design. As a result, design excellence only happens off the back of architects’ unpaid overtime.”

– Female, associate, 36–45 years

What did the survey find?

Guest editors: The survey revealed a resounding concern about the influence and impact of low fees on wellbeing in the profession, with a strong perception that societal under-valuing of architectural design related to equally undervalued financial investment.

Many participants spoke of structural impediments to fair remuneration, namely a “race to the bottom” in fee-undercutting and poor procurement practices that cyclically led to unrealistic deadlines, long hours and overtime, and low pay.

Respondents noted an incommensurability between the high levels of professional risk that architectural practitioners are obliged to carry and the low levels of remuneration. There was also concern over a perceived discrepancy between contracted working hours and hours actually worked.

Significantly, hundreds of participants spoke of a normalization of unpaid overtime. This sentiment was echoed in the quantitative data collected, in which more than a third of respondents reported that they were asked to work extra hours on a monthly, weekly or daily basis, and 86 percent of respondents reported a mild or strong negative effect on their wellbeing as a result of the amount of work required of them.

A significant proportion of respondents spoke about the direct impact of fees and remuneration on their wellbeing. Some spoke of personal financial struggles, identified as the result of poor remuneration, which, in turn, is seen to be linked with low fees charged.

What can we do?

Angelina Pillai: Fees, remuneration and their interconnectedness with the value of architecture have been significant issues in the profession for decades. At the Association of Consulting Architects (ACA), we have been aware of this through anecdotal evidence and observations, member feedback and intermittent pulse-check surveys. The evidence from *The Wellbeing of Architects* survey provides data that cannot be ignored, validating how serious these issues are in terms of wellbeing and the human cost of poor practices.

“Fee-cutting is the cause of a lot of issues. Not only does society value architecture less, but workers are expected to produce the same amount of work to the same standard for a lower price. The profession should consider standardizing fees to the extent that there is room for competition but remuneration is reasonable.”

– Female, graduate, 26–35 years

The ACA is promoting a shift in how we approach fee calculation and the running of a practice, to focus on business-oriented, sustainable and equitable models as enablers to improved cultural outcomes. But there are a number of challenges associated with this shift.

The first is not about what to charge, but how to charge, and as ACA national secretary Paul Viney advises, fee scales are not generally the solution.¹ Using the ACA’s time/cost calculator guide,² a practice can accurately work out the cost of all business activities through a detailed breakdown. The calculator is also a benchmarking tool, enabling a comparison of office overheads between similar-sized practices.

“If I am paid to work 40 hours, why is it written in my contract to ‘expect reasonable overtime 47.5 hours’?”

– Female, graduate, 26–35 years

ACA surveys indicate that more than 30 percent of firms do not have a resource management system;³ this can contribute to a culture of long hours and unpaid overtime, which leads to underpaid staff and, in the worst cases, interns being used for illegal commercial gain.

The second challenge relates to employment conditions and pay. The ACA encourages practices and employees to know their award.⁴ The 2020 ACA salary survey showed that 14 percent of practices are responsible for wage theft because they are paying beneath the award.⁵ While some practices are inadvertently doing this, it remains unacceptable. We strongly urge architectural practices to familiarize themselves with the relevant awards and to use them as minimums, not as maximums.

The third challenge is to shift the pendulum on the profession’s culture – especially, as one survey respondent noted, since design “is becoming more valuable in the community, but the reflection in architectural salaries is poor.” Don’t undervalue your own architectural worth. When you see a doctor, lawyer or accountant, you seldom barter with them on their fees. Don’t let others do the same with you. If architecture practices are committed to equitable conditions for all, then that should extend to what is expected of clients.

The fourth challenge is increased advocacy. The ACA, together with other industry bodies, needs to have a strong, firm voice to ensure that the value of architects and architecture is recognized, respected, and properly remunerated and resourced. We also need governments to be model “clients” who advocate for improved procurement processes and contract conditions, rather than being part of the problem.

Further, we need more research and benchmarking. As ACA national president John Held observes, “We don’t value design because we don’t price the cost of poorly designed buildings or cities. We don’t value good documentation because we don’t directly see the risks and costs associated with shoddy documents. We don’t value fair contracts because we don’t realize the cost of the risks involved. We don’t value independent contract administration because often the client isn’t even aware of the future costs of poor construction or substitutions of materials.” As he suggests, “A national approach to

practice research ... could lay the foundation of persuasive arguments for the value of our work.”⁶

Finally, the ACA has established an Architects Mental Wellbeing Forum⁷ to provide a space for conversations, ideas, resources and collaboration to collectively champion wellbeing initiatives across the profession and offer support. Being part of *The Wellbeing of Architects* project is part of our commitment.

For the ACA, the evidence that this survey has provided is poignant, and a clear signal that we need to strengthen our mission. More broadly, we all have a responsibility to step up and make a difference, using our shared agency and working as a collective.

— Angelina Pillai is CEO of the Association of Consulting Architects (an industry partner in *The Wellbeing of Architects* project) and head of diversity, culture and inclusion, Australian Council of Professions.

Footnotes

1. Madeleine Swain, “Calculating fees – part one: Working out your break-even point,” *Architectural Review*, republished with permission by ACA, 9 March 2022: aca.org.au/fee-calculation-part-one.
2. See aca.org.au/architects-time-cost-calculator.
3. Management for Design in partnership with the ACA, “Business and practice management systems survey results,” December 2020, m4d.com.au/wp-content/uploads/M4D_Business-Systems-Survey_Dec2020.pdf.
4. For a short overview of the Architects Award, the ACA’s role in negotiating it and the assistance it can provide members, see aca.org.au/the-architects-award.
5. For reports on previous survey findings, see aca.org.au/national-salary-survey.
6. John Held, “Fee redemption: A mutually assured future,” Association of Consulting Architects Australia, 19 June 2018, aca.org.au/fee-redemption-a-mutually-assured-future.
7. See aca.org.au/community/amwf.

All quotations are from *The Wellbeing of Architects 2021 Practitioner Survey* (see thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au).

43%
of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their current level of remuneration

4 Leadership: A call for collective action

What did the survey find?

Guest editors: In contemporary Australian society, wellbeing is often discussed in terms of the personal actions that *individuals* take to preserve their mental and physical health. But our survey respondents overwhelmingly saw the problem of poor wellbeing in architecture in *systematic* terms, with a general acknowledgement of the effects of structural pressures in the sector and the profession as a whole. Respondents also noted that solutions would need to come from collective action and reform at a profession-wide scale.

“We need people who are advocates of good, sustainable, resilient design and who understand that they need to support others within their teams to be their best selves.”

– Female, associate, 36–45 years

Many respondents called for collective action and vigorous leadership by individual practices and organizations, as well as the profession’s representative institutions. Some participants called for renewed professional agency, advocacy and activism. Some linked wellbeing questions to larger environmental and social challenges – and, in the face of these, the profession’s need for broader radical change. Others recommended more diverse leadership at every level of the profession, or called for government intervention or more effective unionization as necessary precursors to change.

It is clear that many practices are aware of the significance of work-related wellbeing and have instituted various kinds of activities and support programs to instil self-care as well as positive practice cultures. It is also clear that during the pandemic, many practices worked extraordinarily hard to care for staff, and that this in turn took a toll on the wellbeing of leaders. Survey respondents appreciated and valued all of these programs but felt that individual action was insufficient and that if change is to come, it must be at the systemic and structural levels.

What can we do?

Shannon Battisson: Architecture is an extremely rewarding yet challenging career. Any profession that is described more often as a vocation than as a job has the potential to take all that you have to give, and more. None of us is immune to the struggles that can perpetuate within an industry that demands both the height of creative expression and the rigours of legislated responsibility, all while juggling business and people management. Add to that the continued undermining of the architect’s standing within the construction industry, and society in general, and you have what some might regard as the perfect storm for a mental wellbeing crisis within the profession.

“The stress of navigating a very litigious environment with extremely high levels of expectation, and the constant undercutting of fees and competition for projects, creates a permanent state of fear and anxiety [that] becomes chronic and normalized. I love what I do, but if I knew what the ‘environment’ was really like, I don’t think I would have taken this path.”

– Female, associate, 36–45 years

So it is no surprise that *The Wellbeing of Architects* survey confirms the feelings of frustration among architects of all ages and professional standing.

Like so many others, I know intimately the weight of unrealistic commercial demands and work cultures that could at best be described as unhealthy, and at worst, something more sinister. And, like so many others,

“The challenges that the profession faces are of its own making and continue to happen. Architects have no solidarity as a profession.”

– Female, associate, 36–45 years

“There is a strange culture where everyone knows that what is happening is questionable, but no one wants to talk about it in case they are personally reprimanded.”

– Female, architectural assistant, under 25 years

I have persisted. I have taken time out, I have regrouped, and I have returned to a profession where the love of the creative endeavour was somehow greater than the personal cost. But that does not mean I, or others, accept that cost as fair or owing. My mentor, architect Laurie

Virr, taught me that architecture is the physical manifestation of a society’s aspirations. I wonder, however, if that is as true today as it has been for past generations. The constant undermining of the architect’s value to a project, including the unreasonable expectations of scope of services and the pressure to produce work without the time necessary to do it well, presents a real cost to our profession. So much more than financial, this is often a human cost.

This cost is being borne across all demographics. As both a practising company director and national president of the Australian Institute of Architects, I see the pain that is being felt across this profession. But I also see the possibilities for the future. As for so

many challenges that carry a human cost, the answers lie in us coming together as human beings first, and as practitioners second. The Institute offers many opportunities for learning, support and mentorship, but knowing how to do better is only half the solution. The Institute will continue to lead and represent architecture; however, we all need to work together to fight for our place within the wider construction industry and to put the human face back on the work we do. We are stronger together, always.

Following the incredible work done before us, we must continue to work to humanize architecture.

We must advocate for the benefits of good design across all levels of government and construction, and constantly speak to the true time and value of getting our built environment right on paper before starting to build. By being open about my own struggles with mental wellbeing, I hope to show others that the true face of architecture is as diverse as it is powerful. Only when we learn how to work together, and to have open,

brave and vulnerable conversations, will we find our way forward to a stronger profession.

— Shannon Battisson is a director of The Mill: Architecture and Design and national president of the Australian Institute of Architects (an industry partner in *The Wellbeing of Architects* project).

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65%
of respondents said that the management of the practice where they worked had a negative impact on their wellbeing

The way forward: Joining forces for change

Words by Natalie Galea

The Wellbeing of Architects project substantiates what many already thought: that existing business and work practices in architecture are harmful to the people working in the profession. The survey found that architects have a lower level of subjective quality of life than those working in other sectors and experience elevated levels of psychological distress and higher-than-average levels of burnout.

While this research fills an important knowledge gap, it also directs us to systemic and structural factors – business and management practices – that affect the wellbeing of people working in architecture. These factors are the result of the profession’s unique creative foundations and its position at the intersection of design and construction in the built environment life cycle.

“The systemic and structural factors affecting the wellbeing of people working in architecture are the result of the profession’s unique creative foundations and its position at the intersection of design and construction in the built environment life cycle.”

Of the four business and management practices recognized as having a direct and specific effect on wellbeing – value and valuation, fees commanded and remuneration paid, timelines and time management, and leadership and representation – not all are unique to the profession of architecture. Tight programs and tight margins produce long, irregular work hours that harm the health and wellbeing of other workers, including tradespeople and construction professionals, in the Australian construction sector. Construction companies have applied a variety of responses to address worker wellbeing. Most responses remain focused on individuals (for example, wellbeing leave, employee assistance programs and resilience programs), rather than attempting to make structural change to work patterns, including through the enterprise bargaining process with unions and large contractors and as a directive from clients.

But now, after decades of inaction by government and construction sector leaders, recognition and reform

is occurring. The health and wellbeing of workers – the social sustainability of the sector – is finally being addressed through a variety of forums.

Earlier this year, a federal government House of Representatives Standing Committee on procurement practices for government-funded infrastructure recognized that the government’s “expedient choices in seeking the lowest price ... as opposed to the ‘best value’” in procurement has diminished Australia’s “capacity to deliver fit-for-purpose infrastructure” and a sustainable industry.¹ In New South Wales and Victoria, state governments and the Australian

“Now, after decades of inaction by government and construction sector leaders, recognition and reform is occurring. The health and wellbeing of workers is finally being addressed through a variety of forums.”

Constructors Association have developed a construction industry culture taskforce, culture standard and research pipeline to address worker health, work hours and diversity in the sector.

In my own research, I recently studied the effects of the five-day work week on the health and wellbeing of construction workers and their families, thanks to a collaboration between the New South Wales government agency Health Infrastructure NSW (as client) and contractor Roberts Co. In their procurement model, Health Infrastructure NSW is now prioritizing the health and wellbeing of workers in the building supply chain.

Internationally, a coalition of human rights organizations has recently produced “Framework for Dignity in the Built Environment,”² which recognizes that problems faced in architecture, such as poor wellbeing and burnout, can and should be addressed earlier on in the built environment life cycle – by landlords, clients, investors, lawyers and those involved in the procurement process. The decisions these agents make have a significant impact on the lives of workers in the building supply chain.

All of these efforts take collaboration and strong leadership in the face of resistance. The case for change and call to action is growing

louder – and we are more effective when we work together. I encourage architects to add their voices to the chorus of initiatives working for change in the broader construction sector. Your unique perspectives will enrich the conversation and help us make a compelling case for system-wide reforms that recognize that people are our most valuable assets, and that their health and wellbeing must be prioritized.

— Natalie Galea is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne. She studies human rights and gender justice in the construction sector and human rights in elite sport. Natalie is a member of the advisory board for *The Wellbeing of Architects* project.

Footnotes

1. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities, *Government procurement: A sovereign security imperative* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport and Cities: Canberra, 2022), nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3056170142.
2. Institute for Human Rights and Business, “Framework for Dignity in the Built Environment,” 1 November 2020, ihrb.org/focus-areas/built-environment/framework-for-dignity-built-environment.