

## Profession at Peril?

by Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury  
Young architects complain about exploitation and non-payment of fee. The impact on their practice can be devastating for the profession as a whole.

WHEN YEP Talk met some young practitioners for interviews printed elsewhere in this page, there was one common complaint from everyone. It is an issue that is primary to any profession- the issue of making money, or to rephrase it to sound gentler, the issue of earning. Young architects complained that the practice of non-payment of consultant's fee is so rampant that the honour and dignity of the profession is often at stake. The growing impression among these professionals is that since it is a mean world, being nice and honest will hardly get anyone anywhere - so let us return the complement. It is about time we take note and about time, we do something about the problem.

Among architects, irrespective of the age group, the issue of non-payment of fee has been a known one. Possibly, there is not a single architect who has not had experience with a defaulting client at least once in his professional life. Yet, we hardly learn from the mistakes made earlier and continue to deal with the next client in a similar fashion.

It all starts from the very initial stages of a project. When a potential client comes to a young architect, it is usually through reference. Usually the first clients of your professional life are either your uncle's friend or a friend's uncle. So, it is taken as sheer impudence if you ask for an advance even before drawing a single line. To make matters worse, when the potential client asks for a list of completed projects, you are unable to produce any, because you have been only in this practice for about ten months, and it usually takes two years to complete even a low-rise building. This fact puts the young architect in a defensive position from the very onset. The only way he could make up for the 'inexperience' is through extra-ordinary efforts- efforts that any established architect or architectural firm will seldom put in without an advance payment. Hence, the service-sans-payment begins, and very quickly, the client gets used to this idea. So much so, that even after a month of working with different options for the project, when the architect asks for a partial payment, the client usually asks to wait until a decision on the final design is reached or if and when that stage is reached, 'until the RAJUK approval is obtained'. (Lesson 1: The client who does not volunteer to make a payment at the early stages of the project, is not likely to make any even if he is coerced in the later stages.)

To a young architect at the initial stages of his career, one built project is more vital than ten others that have remained in the drawing sheets. Hence, he is willing to give his client a benefit of doubt. 'Let this guy build the thing', he would say to himself, 'the advertisement value will compensate for the non-realised fee'. However, as it turns out in many cases, the client will put his construction ideas to halt because this year he has decided 'to go for Hajj' or 'the business is rather slow this time of the year'. (Lesson 2: Not everyone comes to the architect's office with the intention of actually building a design. It is more like a routine- 'I have a piece of land and here is an architect I know, so let's have a design from him'. You are not likely to get any result by pointing out that you have done your part of the job and can expect compensation for the completed work. At this point, you might call the friend or uncle who referred this client to you, but it hardly ever helps.)

**For an architect designing is almost a habit and the danger is that the more sensitive among the young architects are more likely to be affected by the undignified manner in which their designs are treated. A gradual decay in quality takes place and at a greater level, the profession loses out the most promising and enthusiastic designers.**

Another startling revelation comes from the client at a very late stage of design and makes the young architect wonder why wasn't he informed of this earlier. That is, at the time he proceeded with the design work. After a lot of effort and a great deal of time, the client informs that he had another design from some other architect (in most cases, a 'very experienced' one) and has found it to be more 'economical' than this one. However, only the most kind-hearted among all persons will go through the trouble of informing you this. In most cases, once you are done with the design and, most importantly, once the client's print, it becomes quiet on the client's front. He is either 'out of office' or 'abroad' from that moment onwards. One year hence, you might be surprised to find that construction work has begun on that particular piece of land and to add to your chagrin, the plan looks surprisingly 'similar' to the one you designed. (Lesson 3: Ask the name of the 'other' architect the client was referring to and call him to verify. In most cases, this 'experienced' guy does not exist. The experienced guy is actually the contractor, who can build a house based on your sketches.)

From our interviews, we have found that stories such as the one mentioned above, are repeated in young architects' offices. Eventually, the enthusiasm for design is lost to a great extent and even the well-meaning clients are taken for granted as imposters. Since, one assumes that his designs are less likely to be built, not a great deal of effort is given on them. For an architect designing is almost a habit and the danger is that the more sensitive among the young architects are more likely to be affected by the undignified manner in which their designs are treated. A gradual decay in quality takes place and at a greater level, the profession loses out the most promising and enthusiastic designers. Those who run their own firms have complained that they cannot forward plan of business because of the uncertainty that is associated with most of the projects.

At this point of time, the culture of non-payment has grown to such proportions that it calls for action from the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh (IAB). The Institute has a guideline for the fee of architects, but in practice that is not put into use. Also, no standard form of contract between architects and clients exist in Bangladesh, as in UK where Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) provides the outline for any form of contract. Here, firms and individual architects design their own contracts through a process of trial and error and often, the terms and conditions in contracts of different architects contradict.

For safeguarding its young members, IAB should make a move to draft a common format of contract. It should fix the minimum fee for architects and the make the system of advance payment mandatory. Until the much awaited Architects Act sees the light of the day, let us do the minimum we can do to take the profession out of its perils and convert it into a powerful one.

Archt. Chowdhury is a Core Group Member of the YEP Forum and a Partner at Metaphor Architects.

## Spotlight on Young Architects

How are the young architects doing? YEP Talk approached three architectural firms, all having an average age of two years, with a common set of questions related to practice and profession. Have a glimpse of the shape of things in the young architects' world as they talk about their work, office, dreams, frustrations and anger....

**Neoformation Architects**  
Partners : Ar. Khondkar Nazmul Hassan, Ar. Khalid A. Khan

Neoformation was formed in October 1997 shortly after Nazmul (a.k.a. Polash) and Khalid graduated from Department of Architecture, BUET. Working together since their sophomore years, both of them had the experience of working as associates in different architectural firms, in projects of varied nature and scale. The decision to get on with own practice rather than going for employment was influenced, to a great extent, by the success of relatively younger firms run by immediate seniors.

**Name a few on-going and completed projects of your firm...**

Interior design projects- Head office of Impress Ltd. at Shantinagar, Dhaka. Office of Coca-Cola Far East Ltd. at Hotel Sonargaon and at Rangas Bhobon, Bijoy Shoroni. Office of Alitalia Airlines and Cargo services at BCIC building, Mujibhel.

Head office of Esquire Group at Tejgaon, Dhaka. Office interior and movie theatre lobby of Modhumita Movies, Dhaka.

Building projects- Commercial and residential mixed use building at Sonargaon Road (beside Eastern Plaza).

Incepta Pharmaceutical Industry building at Gazipur.

Factory building of Marigold Sweaters Ltd. at Savar.

**Name your most satisfactory project till today....**

None of the projects that we have completed have attained satisfactory levels in our judgement. We are still learning and it's still a long way before one can have a sense of satisfaction.

**Do you have a dream project...a project that you really love to design?**

We would like to design institutional buildings or civic centres- complexes of large scale and volume...the ones we used to design as academic projects during the final years of our student lives.

**How would you evaluate your firm's performance in the past couple of years...**

We were fully occupied in the past two years and were not sitting idle for even a single day. Still, we couldn't achieve the growth that was expected. Primarily, the reasons behind this are-

- Poor rate of recovery of consultancy fee
- Weaknesses in project management
- Individuals or business houses who make with promises that are never kept. They know that we are young and that we are willing to work without advance payment in order to get a new project. Often, they escape with the concept of design and implement it with the help of draftsmen and contractors. The time invested in these projects can never be compensated in any way.

Nevertheless, if these two years are of any indication, we are hopeful about the future.

**What is the most positive aspect of your profession?**

That it's a new day everywhere...you find yourself encouraging new design challenges and you relish the efforts to find creative solutions to these.

**What is the most negative aspect of your profession?**

The creative efforts are hardly ever rewarded, in terms of recognition or monetary compensation.

**What are the future plans or aspirations of Neoformation?**

We will make efforts to strengthen our project management skills. So far as building projects are concerned, we really love to design the industrial ones. We will try to get more jobs of that particular type.

**What is the next major change you are contemplating in your office?**

In order to better our project management skills, we want to recruit site engineers and supervision staffs. We also plan to appoint a full time architect. At present, we have someone who works on a part-time basis.

**Do you use computers for designing and drafting?**

Yes, we do. Almost ninety five percent of our works are done with the help of computers. For the rest, we are forced to opt for manual drafting since we lack in-house facilities for large prints. Hopefully, we will be fully computerised within next one year or so.

**Who are your favourite architects at home and abroad?**

At home, we admire works of Muzharul Islam. Among the younger architects, Nahas Khalil, late Razul Ahsan, Saif-ul-Haque and Jalal Ahmed are our favourites.

Among the foreigners, Louis Kahn, B.V.Doshi and Raj Rewal.

**From the more recent works of architecture in Bangladesh, can you mention two of your favourites?**

- BRAC Tower at Mohakhali by Index Architects
- S.O.S Children's Village at Bogra by late Razul Ahsan

As a young professional,



Architects Sonia Khan, Naushad Huq, Khalid A. Khan, Nazmul Hassan, Mujtaba S. Islam, Ali Ahsan

what action would you demand from the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh?

We would want IAB to take immediate steps for the approval of the Architects Act and hence, stop the decline in professional standards.

We would also like the Institute to do something for the young practitioners...for guys like us...like training and short courses on management, professional practice and ethics etc. Our schools hardly prepare us for facing the world outside the design studio. The Institute should move in with its initiatives in this area.

We also want the IAB to take initiatives to establish a separate school for architecture, free from its present engineering dominated environment.

**If you were the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, what immediate things would you do for the cause of architecture?**

That's probably the last thing we would want to be...but then, since you are asking, let us put ourselves in that position momentarily.

The first thing for architecture would be the approval of the Architects Act.

We would make it mandatory for projects of national importance and of large scale, to be selected through competitions only. One can involve leading international architects in the process...by appointing them as jurors or consultants.

**A brief comment on the overall state of the profession....**

There can be moments of frustration in any creative line of work. We were fully aware of this when we decided to take up architecture as our profession. Still, at times when some of these moments remain not so momentary, a deep sense of hopelessness creeps in. The efforts, in terms of time, energy and money, are often not recognised by the clients we deal with.

The public, in general, remains unaware and indifferent to architecture in Bangladesh.

Just look at Dhaka city, and you will realise that we couldn't care less about our buildings and environment.

**YEP Talk would like to thank you for your time and cooperation. We wish you success and fulfillment in your work.**

**Indigenous Architects**  
Partners : Ar. Naim Ahmed Kibria, Ar. Sayeed Ahmed, Ar. Mujtaba Shafiqul Islam.

Indigenous was formed in October 1998. After their graduation from BUET in 1997, both Sayeed and Mujtaba (a.k.a. Shubho) worked in late Razul Ahsan's office. Naim (a.k.a. Ripon) worked in a real estate developer's office for some time. The three started off as full-time practitioners by setting up a small office at Sayeed's home in 1998. Two months ago, with a number of completed and ongoing projects to their credit, Indigenous has moved to new premises at Panthopth.

**Name a few on-going and completed projects of your firm...**

Interior design projects- Show room of Flora Ltd. at Banani.

Show room of Flora Ltd. at Computer City, IDB Bhobon.

Building projects- Commercial and residential mixed use building at Mirpur Road (beside Aarong).

Three storeyed unit residential building at Uttara.

**Name your most satisfactory project till today....**

None till now....designers are seldom satisfied.

**Do you have a dream project...a project that you really love to design?**

Large-scale building projects are what we dream of. For example, we would love to design Museums, where spaces can be manipulated to different moods and ambience.

Mujtaba has another dream project...he wants to design a recreational space within the city, specially, if not only, for the young. There are hardly any spaces of this kind in our country.

**How would you evaluate your firm's performance in the past couple of years...**

We feel that it has been so far, so good regarding some aspects of work. Our knowledge is increasing day by day. Now, we have developed a lot of technical and practical idea about how to transform design concepts into three-dimensional built structures. We feel we are more equipped than we were previously. And that is helping us tremendously in the design tables.

Another important experience is that with the clients. We find that each individual person has so little idea about architecture and the methodology of our work- that it is often an extremely painful process to

communicate.

Naim, however, feels that we are fulfilling a part of our obligation to the society by enlightening the clients about architecture.

**What is the most positive aspect of your profession?**

We love the creative work. To create something new at a conceptual level and nurturing that idea into a full-blown and technically sound state, is a wonderful experience. That is the most positive side of this profession.

**Just look at what has happened to the state of hospitals and patient care, once the doctors have moved to clinic business. The same thing is going to happen in our profession if a majority of architects have other interests in a project.**

**What is the most negative aspect of your profession?**

A great amount of designing time is lost in dealing with all sorts of people involved in a project. As we are a small firm, we have not got the required manpower to take care of different aspects of running a business. Hence, everything from office management to site supervision has to be taken care of by us.

Another negative aspect is the exploitation by the clients.

Among the foreigners, Charles Correa and B.V. Doshi, both Indians, are our favourites.

**From the more recent works of architecture in Bangladesh, can you mention two of your favourites?**

The project designed by architects Saif-ul-Haque and Jalal Ahmed for the NGO Baachey Shekha at Jessore, is a brilliant work. The spaces and detailing have been extra-ordinary and it is a delight to experience such

decisive Institute, with its own premises that will have facilities for architects like a large library and archive.

IAB should also work for setting up of a separate school for architecture, one that has more relation with art schools.

**If you were the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, what immediate things would you do for the cause of architecture?**

The first job would be to complete the legislative works for the Architects Act. Even India and Pakistan have their own acts since many years, so why can't we? It is all the more frustrating, because we have heard that Ar. Muzharul Islam, before the liberation, drafted the Architects Act, that is presently in force in Pakistan. They have turned it into a law, but as an independent country we have failed to do so.

**A brief comment on the overall state of the profession....**

Non-realisation of fee seems to be a common problem for all architects, regardless of age. For this reason, we are forced to opt for turnkey interior design projects, where the return is quick and more guaranteed. In fact, smaller firms survive because of the interior projects.

Consultancy fee for designing buildings, even if it is realised fully, is so poor that one cannot run an office depending solely on that. We seriously need to have a common system of fee, which must be adhered to by all architects.

**YEP Talk would like to thank you for your time and cooperation. We wish you success and fulfillment in your work.**

**Abora Architects**  
Partners : Ar. Sonia Khan, Ar. Mohammad Ali Ahsan, Ar. Naushad E. Huq.

All three partners of Abora worked for more than a year before deciding to form their own establishment in 1998. Naushad and Sonia worked at Tanya Karim, N.R. Khan Associates, while Ahsan was at Metaphor. Sonia still remains involved at TKNRK on a part time basis, while Naushad is working on a few projects for two other firms. The decision to remain engaged otherwise was a conscious one, as it helps Abora to lessen the burden of fixed overheads.

**Name a few on-going and completed projects of your firm...**

Interior design projects- Head office of Bangjin Bangladesh Ltd. at Iqbal Centre, Banani.

Display and sales centre of MEM at Panthopth.

Office of Noorani Group at Tejgaon.

Building projects- Redesign of Noorani Flower Industry.

Picnic and recreational centre at Dhamrai of Noorani Group.

**Name your most satisfactory project till today....**

None.

**Do you have a dream project...a project that you really love to design?**

A project like Louis Khan's Shongshod Bhobon is our dream. We wish to achieve what Kahn could in this project....the quality of indoor and outdoor spaces, the quality and manipulation of light, the juxtaposition of forms and materials, the monumentality and beauty, the concrete and the reflections in water. Shongshod Bhobon complex is a magnificent work of art....we wish we could create something like this.

**How would you evaluate your firm's performance in the past couple of years...**

Well, in terms of work performance, we are reasonably happy about what we have been able to do in the past couple of years. One serious deficiency remains regarding realisation of consultancy fee. We feel that we seriously lack the financial management and negotiating skills. It often happens that just for the sake of completing a project as per our design, we continue to give efforts at site, although the client has become a defaulter long ago.

Probably, it has a lot to do with the process in which we were trained at Department of Architecture, BUET. The emphasis on the secondary subjects such as management, accounting, client handling etc., is not adequate to prepare the architects for life in reality. As we are experiencing now, designing is just one aspect of the total profession. But, of course, we realise that if we could afford appropriate personnel for all the other secondary aspects, we could devote time to designing only. Let's hope for better times ahead.

**What is the most positive aspect of your profession?**

The creative part, no doubt, is the most delightful aspect. It is imagination at work here....always working with

ideas and solutions.

**What is the most negative aspect of your profession?**

That only a little of those imagination, ideas and solutions are implemented.

Client interference is the most negative part of work. We remain a pre-modern, pre-industrial society in the sense that we still cannot have faith and respect in professionalism and expert system.

**What are the future plans or aspirations of Abora?**

We plan to have more building projects in near future. Presently, we are involved in a number of interior design projects, which is extremely helpful for running the office and managing the overhead expenditures. Now, we need to design more buildings to develop our portfolio.

**What is the next major change you are contemplating in your office?**

All of us will become full-timers at office shortly. We plan to strengthen the project management sectors and will soon appoint personnel for supervising and coordinating sites.

**Do you use computers for designing and drafting?**

We are one hundred percent computerised from the day we started off.

There are certain advantages, you see. One is that we do not require additional drafting personnel at this point of time. Then, once the decision is reached and gets client's preliminary approval, development and changes take less amount of time. When you are working within a deadline, that means a lot.

**Who are your favourite architects at home and abroad?**

Muzharul Islam and Louis Kahn are our two favourites. Both of them share the credit for changing the face of architecture in this country. We must admit that the state of the profession would be very different today had there been no Mr. Islam.

As a designer and as an activist, Mr. Islam is still the man to take lessons from.

We also admire works of Italian architect Renzo Piano and Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron.

**From the more recent works of architecture, can you mention two of your favourites?**

BRAC Centre at Mohakhali, designed by Index Architects, is a superb work.

The Islamic Institute of Technology at Gazipur, designed by Turkish architect Duruk Pamir, is another of our favourite works.

Among the projects of smaller scale, Ar. Abu Haider Imamuddin's own residence at Dhanmondi is a fine piece of architecture.

**As a young professional, what action would you demand from the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh?**

We want IAB to take steps for immediate implementation of the Architects Act.

We also want the Institute to revise its existing guideline for consultancy fee to realistic levels and strongly enforce it. Any member, who violates the guideline, should face strong disciplinary action.

**If you were the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, what immediate things would you do for the cause of architecture?**

We would issue directives to demolish all illegal structures and encroachments. The name and details of the violators would be made public....a live television coverage during the demolition will also not be a very bad idea.

Another step would be attempting to totally restructure RAJUK, transforming it from a profit making authority to a genuine planning authority. But the resistance would be so strong....we are afraid that the office of the Prime Minister would also fail to implement any reform move.

**A brief comment on the overall state of the profession....**

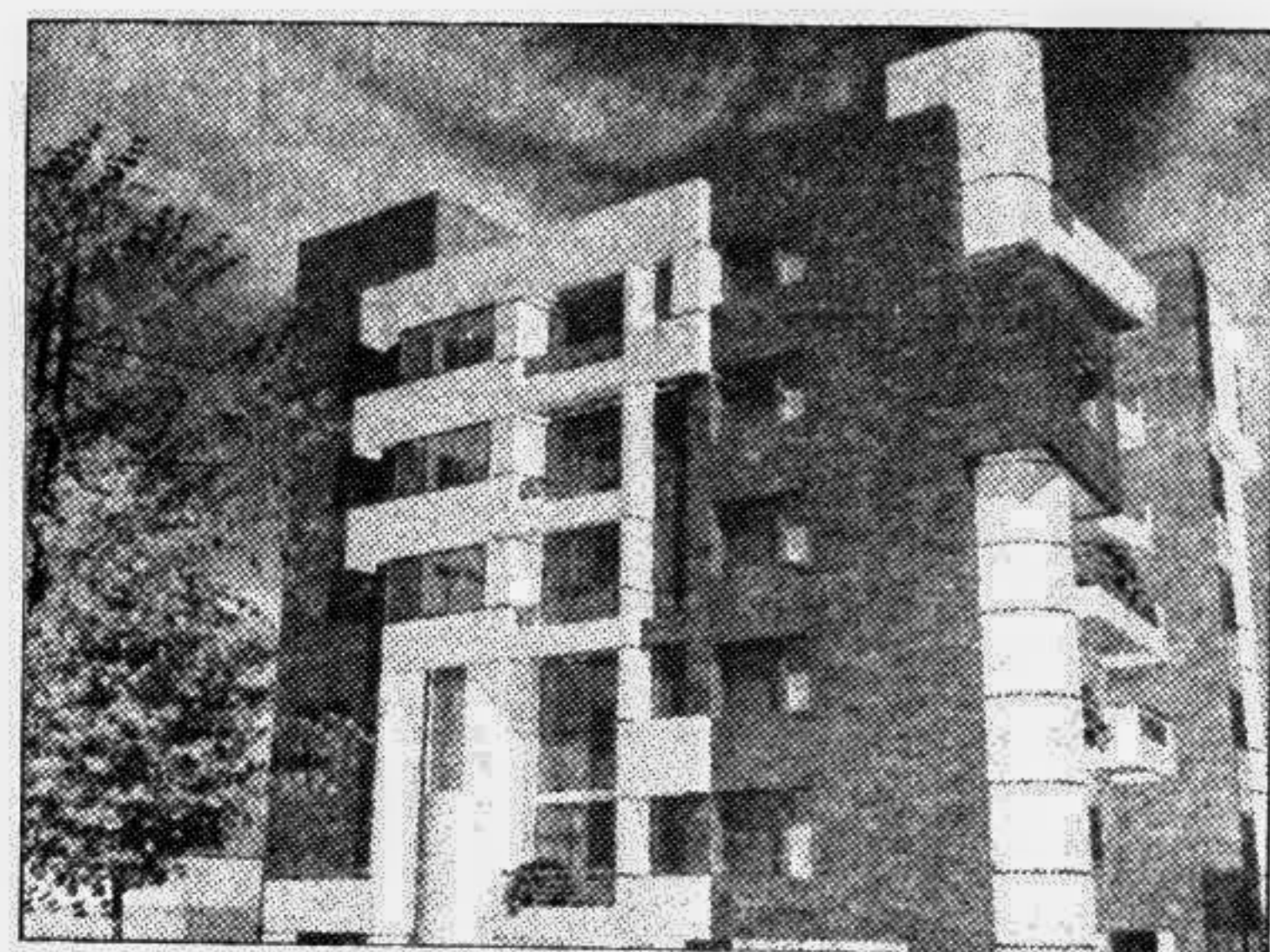
Due to financial insecurity, architects are gradually taking up contractors role in the form of turnkey interior projects or design-and-build contracts. Some architects have also become operators in the real estate development sector.

One is surely likely to make compromises in the qualitative aspects of design and with work ethics, if one tries to combine the roles of a designer and a contractor. Just look at what has happened to the state of hospitals and patient care, once the doctors have moved to clinic business. The same thing is going to happen in our profession if a majority of architects have other interests in a project.

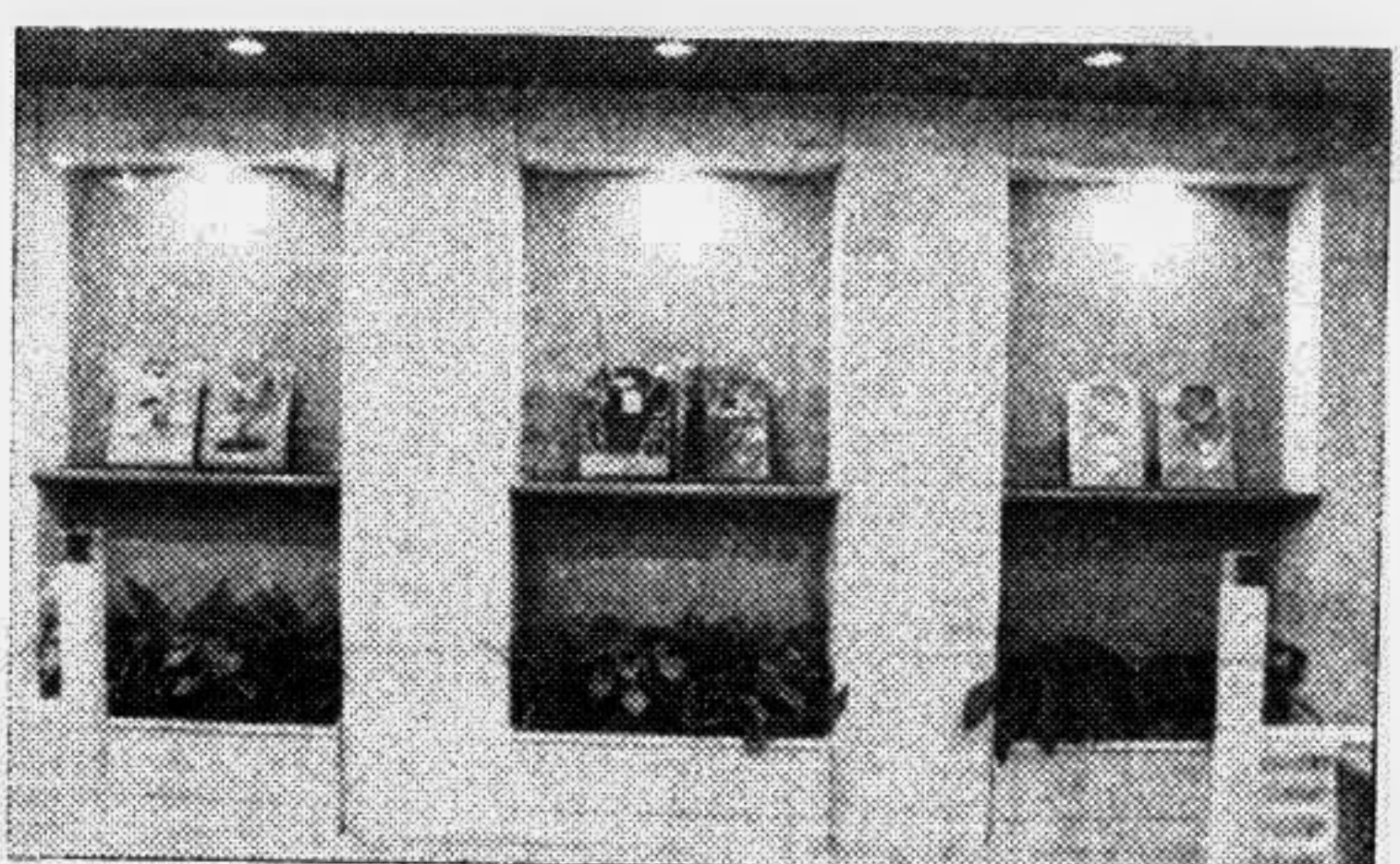
If we could guarantee consultant's fee, we would probably be able to avoid this situation.

The situation regarding non-payment of fee is really alarming for the state of the profession. Young architects like us, are likely to be quickly frustrated and soon will be making compromises in order to survive.

**YEP Talk would like to thank you for your time and cooperation. We wish you success and fulfillment in your work.**



**Client interference is the most negative part of work. We remain a pre-modern, pre-industrial society in the sense that we still cannot have faith and respect in professionalism and expert system.**



After putting in lots of efforts into a design, it is often found that the client has turned into a defaulter. This is a serious disincentive for creative work.

**What are the future plans or aspirations of Indigenous?**

We feel that we have to organise our office more in the coming years. The emphasis will be on management.

**What is the next major change you are contemplating in your office?**

We also want a strong and

works of architecture.

**As a young professional, what action would you demand from the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh?**

The architects' community, although very small, is a fragmented one. This is seriously affecting the profession and the practice. We feel that the Institute should work for building up unity and sense of bondage among its members.

**Calling Young Architects**

The Architects Chapter of the Young Entrepreneurs and Professional Forum is calling young architects to join in the efforts to improve the overall state of the profession.

Write to us about the problems you face in practice, along with your suggestion to solve them.

At YEP Forum, we are a team of doers and we believe it is always better to do things yourself, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for you.

Come up with suggestions what the YEP Forum can do for the cause of young architects in Bangladesh. We want your active participation in organising such programmes.

Come and join us. Let us try to bring about changes. We may not be successful always, but let us at least try to make our voices heard.

Write to YEP Talk, dstar@bangla.net or mail to yepf@email.com

