

# YEP TALK

The Young Entrepreneurs & Professionals page

## 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 compliment. 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.

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 any 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-revised 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.**

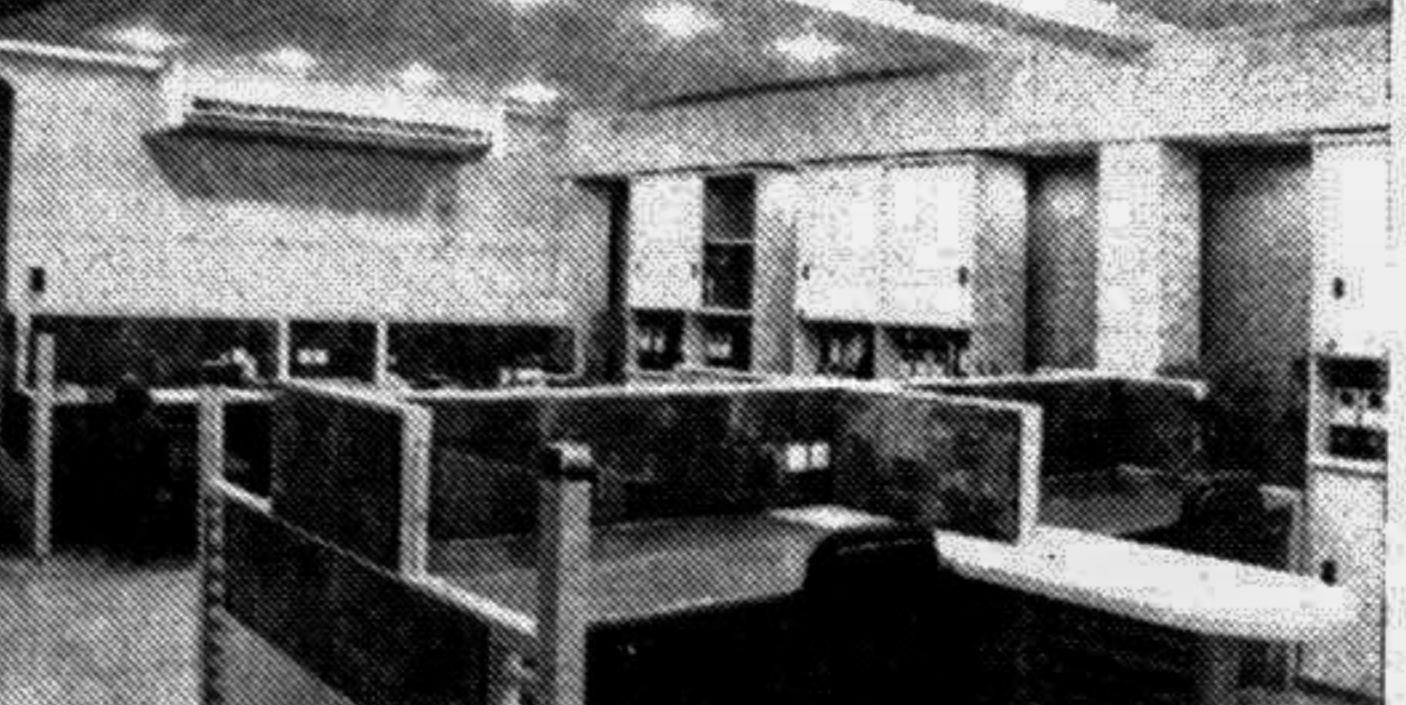
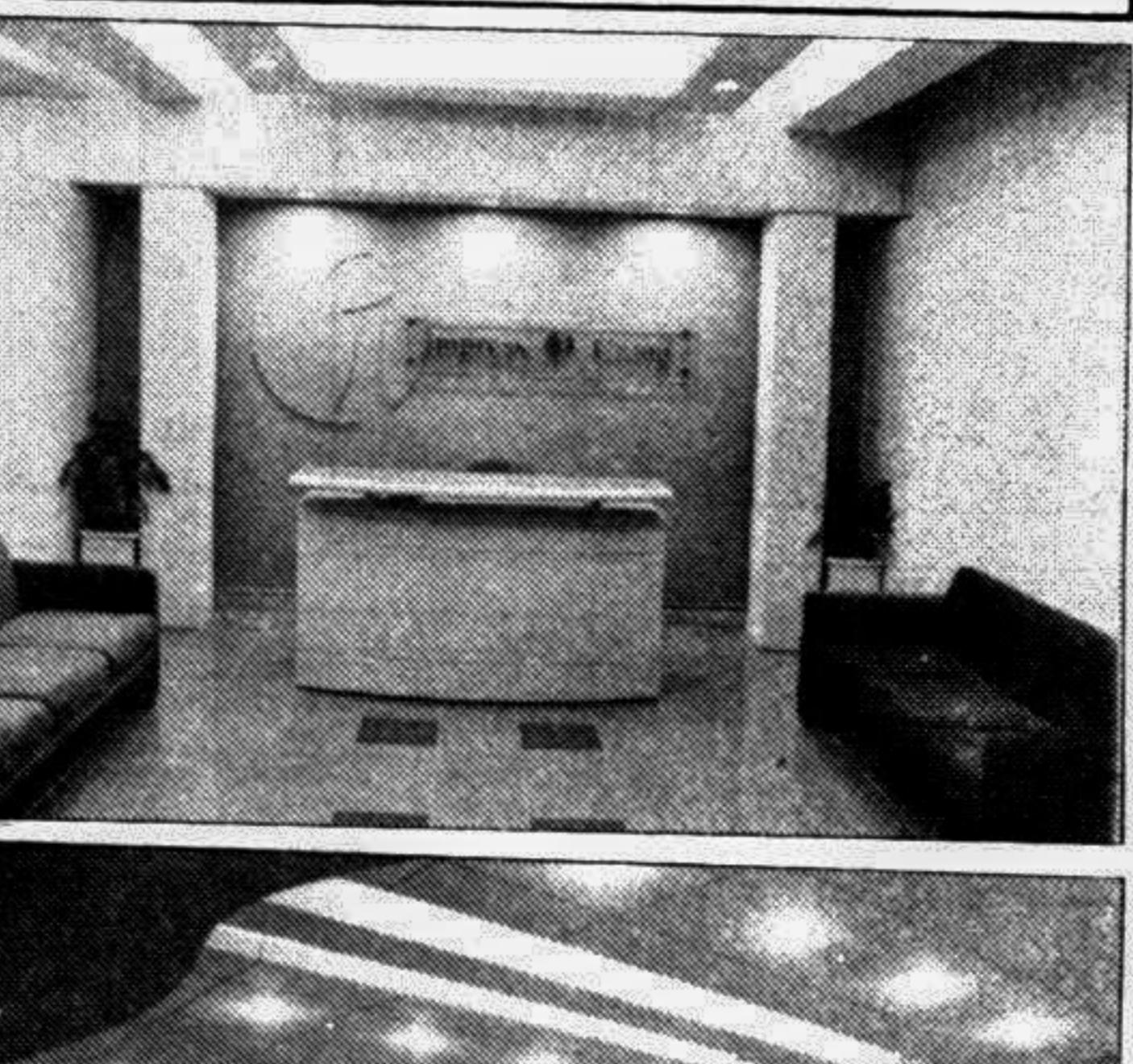
Another startling revelation comes from the client at a very late stage of design and makes the young architect wonder why wasn't he informed of this earlier, that is, at the time he proceeded with the design work. After a lot of effort and a great deal of time, the client informs that he had another 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 have given the client a 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 imposers. 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.

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



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

1. BRAC Tower at Mohakhali by Index Architects

2. S.O.S Children's Village at Bogra by late Raziel Ahsan

As a young professional,

## 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....



Architects Sonia Khan, Naushad Hug, 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.

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 Rangs Bhabon, Bijoy Shoroni

Office of Alitalia Airlines and Cargo services at BCIC building, Motijheel

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-

a. Poor rate of recovery of consultancy fee

b. Weaknesses in project management

c. 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 everyday... you find yourself encountering new design challenges and you relish the efforts to find creative solutions to those.

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.

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.

Our next target is going for total computerisation as far as designing and drafting is concerned. We will also need to hire a full time architect shortly.

Do you use computers for designing and drafting?

We do work with computers now, but are restricted to partial use.

Who are your favourite architects at home and abroad?

At home, we admire works of

Muzharul Islam and late Raziel Ahsan.

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 ar-

chitects Saif-ul-Haque and Jalal Ahmed for the NGO Baachitey Shekha at Jessor, is a brilliant work. The spaces and detailing have been extra-ordinary and it is a delight to experience such

works of architecture.

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 ac-

tivist, 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 Paimir, 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 de-

mand from the Institute of

Architects, Bangladesh?

We want IAB to take steps

for immediate implementa-

tion 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 Min-

ister of Bangladesh, what imme-

diate things would you do for the cause of architec-

ture?

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 at-

tempting to totally restructure

RAJUK, transforming it from a

profit making authority to a

genuine planning authority. But

the resistance would be so