Probable, Preferred, Plausible and Possible Futures
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Despite initially qualifying as a joiner, I always envisioned becoming an architect. I believed the architect to be the person who was capable of influencing society through bringing their vision to bear on the built environment. We were told that architecture is the ‘mother’ of all arts and that the value of the architect is being able to envision preferred futures.

Many years later, it is evident to me that the way the architecture profession operates has changed considerably and continues to change. While there seems to be uncertainty surrounding the future of our profession, one might also ask if the profession has been slow to evolve within this changing context. To me, it is ironic that the profession that, in my mind, can envision the future, appears to have lost its own vision.

Having always held a wide range of interests, joinery, political science, business, urban planning and architecture, I realised that in each case it was the future context of these disciplines that was of the most interest to me. I then discovered the discipline of Strategic Foresight, or Future Studies as it is known in the United States of America. I have since developed my understanding of this discipline through my engagement with an MBA program at Swinburne University. It is appealing to me that Strategic Foresight is not led by a single profession, but rather integrates different expertise and viewpoints to provide a more complete picture. This approach allows us to consider futures we may not have previously thought possible and allows us to pre-empt events that may not have yet happened.

Strategic Foresight provides a systematic, generative approach to that complexity and provides a context within which we can make informed decisions. It recognises that uncertainty is not always in our own minds, but can also reside within the context in which we operate. It allows us to create scenarios using a combination of insightful tools to envision, implement, evaluate, revise and re-envision futures (Dator, 2002). This identification of evolving dynamics and emerging issues that could impact on our preferred future allows us to avoid unwelcome surprises. Depending on the field of interest, one can apply many different methodologies. For example, a brief to explore the possible futures for our universities would require a different approach to that of identifying emerging issues for a property developer, a company, or individual.

My personal involvement in the application of Strategic Foresight began with an opportunity to identify drivers of change in the Australian building industry. For this project I created advanced system maps that identified alternate future pathways to support insightful decision making by my client. My current work links me to Tasmania, Bendigo, Ballarat and Noosa, where Strategic Foresight is enabling both a school and the health sector to envision alternative futures. This work has led to the review of the school’s public policy, and the development of a consultancy brief for a comprehensive 30-year master plan for the health sector.

For the purpose of this article I have adopted the methodology of scenario writing to generate a cross section of possible scenarios for the future of the architecture profession. The supporting, although limited knowledge base, came from a brief survey I undertook with practitioners and entrepreneurs operating in the creative industries in Melbourne and Brisbane.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the survey revealed considerable uncertainty regarding the current economic circumstances and prospects for the profession in the future. Many practitioners spoke of low wages, low fees and a lack of work. There was also significant uncertainty as to the perceived value and relevance of the architect. On one hand, the architect was held in high esteem — as a leader of multidisciplinary project teams. The architect has a valuable role in facilitating and integrating the collective output of the team to make a valuable contribution to the built environment. On the other hand, the architect was subject to poor terms and conditions of engagement, with diminishing opportunity for creative input, and primarily occupied with the production of technical specifications and drawing packages.

‘Intelligent Infrastructure Futures: The Scenarios – Toward 2055’

A report entitled ‘Intelligent Infrastructure Futures: The Scenarios – Toward 2055’ was recently commissioned by the Foresight program of the United Kingdom Government Office of Science and Technology to support its Project on Intelligent Infrastructure Systems. The project explored how, over the next 50 years, science and technology can be applied to the design and implementation of intelligent infrastructure for robust, sustainable and safe transport, and its alternatives. This Strategic Foresight project identified 60 different ‘drivers for change’ and investigated many alternative futures. To illustrate the possibilities the project engaged a multidisciplinary team that included Foster + Partners to create four scenarios of how the future might look.

http://bis.ecgroup.net/Publications/Foresight/IntelligentInfrastructureSystems/06521.aspx
From here I established a scenario map that portrays four different futures for the architecture profession by arranging opposing values across two axis – the architect becoming more or less relevant, and the economy strengthening or weakening. Each scenario is no more likely than any other – the intent is that they stimulate discussion and debate.

**Scenario Map**

**SENSE & SENSIBILITY**
- A weaker economy brought stronger government intervention. Policies for sustainable development created niche markets and new industries. Often working in small, networked businesses, the architect became the facilitator of ‘value’ oriented outcomes that benefited local communities.

**2014.** The economy experienced a long expected downward slide. Deep budget cuts were followed by rising unemployment. Markets continued to globalise, and ethical and social concerns were overshadowed by commercial imperatives.

A further weakening of the economy was marked by a particularly low unemployment rate across the creative industries.

**2015.** Forced to compete, large architectural practices continued to cut fees and many of them closed down. An unseen wave of redundancy packages swept through the sector. Many leading practices lost their public profile and became subservient to a cost and time driven market.

**2018.** An economy in recession became the ‘new normal’ and ‘unemployed but active’ creatives were driven to establish new cross professional start-ups in order to survive. These businesses were more transparent, more ethical, and less hierarchical. Although fees were low and incomes modest, cash flow was more evenly spread. Open source and peer-to-peer networks strengthened.

**2020.** More frequent extreme weather events, uncontrolled urban sprawl and worsening traffic congestion prompted the government to release new policies with an even stronger focus on sustainability. Though the economy slowed even further, niche markets and new industries were created.

**2025.** The creative industries moved away from a dichotomy of large and small practices competing in the same market, to a new dichotomy of global and local markets, and many small, networked businesses operating across both. These businesses were more equitable and small-scale community oriented businesses across the world were connected by internet sites such as ‘wikihouse’ and ‘handmakers factory’. The construction industry had been transformed by new technologies. A new society of ‘green star thinking people’ replaced green star regulations.

Co-creative startup businesses and greater engagement with local communities invited fresh thinking into the building industry. Taking advantage of the prevailing circumstances architects created a stronger, more highly valued profession, which positioned the architect as the facilitators of ‘value’ oriented outcomes that enrich society.
GREAT EXPECTATIONS
A stronger economy provided impetus for big business to grow. The focus shifted to long-term prosperity and ethical business models. In time, the architect engaged in seeking long-term, large-scale visionary outcomes, rather than short-term fixes.

2014. The economy experienced a long expected downward slide. Deep budget cuts were followed by rising unemployment. Markets continued to globalise, and ethical and social concerns were overshadowed by commercial imperatives.

Slow markets and the impact of natural disasters and extreme weather events caused citizens to demand greater reform. The newly elected federal government was pressured to provide a stronger focus on sustainable long-term growth and productivity.

2015. A period of struggle and change followed. Leaked documents exposed the interests of big business and eroded the credibility of government. Protests such as the Occupy movement intensified. Unemployment increased dramatically.

Social network sites like Google and Facebook provided platforms for new enterprises to emerge. A more informed and network oriented civil society pressured government to commit to more sustainable policies. Niche markets and new industries emerged.

2018. The Australian economy stabilised on the back of innovative manufacturing industries. Business became more equitable and inclusive, and the influence of more women in leadership roles was felt.

2020. Australia became a more ethical and balanced society that attracted substantial foreign investment. As the global economy stabilised the Australian economy became the strongest it had been since the Global Financial Crisis.

Prime Minister Abbott implemented his vision for an Austral-Asian union and established stronger bonds with emerging BRIC nations. Small opposition political parties disappeared and minority groups were banned.

Many businesses previously lost in the gridlock of short-term answers to long-term problems, engaged proactively in large participatory structures and embraced ethical models. With a view to achieving long-term economic growth.

Dissatisfaction expressed by end users in response to recent public and private projects saw the architect regain their role as lead consultant and visionary. Architects embraced ambiguity and grappled with complexity to design and deliver an enriched public realm.

BLEAK HOUSE
A weak economy caused government to align policy with big business. The gap between rich and poor widened. Few architectural practices survive, while many architects work under the direction of engineering firms as REVIT super stars.

2014. The economy experienced a long expected downward slide. Deep budget cuts were followed by rising unemployment. Markets continued to globalise and ethical and social concerns were overshadowed by commercial imperatives.

The Abbott government failed to stimulate the economy. Housing prices boomed in the short-term, however most vendors were either investors or over committed owner-occupiers. First homebuyers were unable to enter the market.

2018. The East West Link project represented a turning point in the relationship between government and citizens. The project was significantly delayed and doubled in budget. Poor citizens were angered by the massive influence of corporate money and the government’s determination to return favours Occupy movements sprung up across the city, but were quickly shut down; the Eastlink tunnel site became the location for violent demonstrations.

Small businesses struggled and many ceased to exist. Ethics and equality became concerns of the past. The reversion of the carbon tax attracted questionable foreign investment by businesses offloading their carbon industries in Australia. The Reserve Bank of Australia dropped the interest rate to the lowest in history. Markets did not even blink. Many architects left to try their luck in Asia or northern Europe.

2020. Architecture became ridiculed and existed only in flashy magazines and behind secure fences. Architectural practices struggled – some undertook commissions for small extensions, while others were bought out or ceased to exist altogether.

2025. Many young architects found work as REVIT professionals for engineering firms who had by this stage incorporated architectural services as part of their portfolio.

The expertise held by architects in their late 40s and 50s was no longer relevant. Some found employment in universities running free internet classes. The majority of those enrolled were international students, many of whom did not complete the course. Other architects worked for small not-for-profit organisations in an attempt to raise awareness about climate change. Their efforts promoting sustainable construction technologies or renewable energy sources mostly ended in benefit festivals and CD compilations.

TALE OF TWO CITIES
Government intervention aligned the local economy with rising global economies. Economic growth was the highest priority. Architects became more specialised and operated in a highly competitive environment.

2014. The economy experienced a long expected downward slide. Deep budget cuts were followed by rising unemployment. Markets continued to globalize and ethical and social concerns were overshadowed by commercial imperatives.

The artificial weakening of the dollar attracted greater foreign investment. Competition among architects was fierce, as highly skilled European and Asian practices flooded the Australian market with competitive fees. The majority of local architectural practices failed. Many architects found employment teaching in universities or providing specialised services – software management, 3D printing, or specification writing. Project managers continued to provide the lead role.

2018. High unemployment promised a steady supply of low wages, allowing architectural practices to reconfigure to meet the new reality. The handful of practices that secured wealthy patrons designed bespoke high-end luxury projects. Subservient to those clients, these practitioners were often referred to as ‘architectural pets’.

The weakening of the Australian dollar attracted greater foreign investment. The global economy stabilised and positive growth returned. BRIC nations continued their economic rise.

The ‘1%’ placed pressure on governments to align policy with their interests. Dissenting citizens experienced harsh crackdowns. The highest youth unemployment was experienced in the City of Wyndham, Victoria. This part of the city became a punching ball for police crackdowns; a London-like surveillance scheme was implemented.

2020. The gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen. Significant improvements were made in healthcare, education, transportation and ‘security’, for those who could afford to pay for services. Women continued to struggle for equality. The construction industry reconfigured to become an efficient web of internet based specialist consultants. This enabled industry to deliver on time and on budget and in response to high demand. Buildings were designed with shorter life spans and delivered at lower cost.

2025. The Green Star rating system was replaced with a two-category system to enable projects to be fast tracked. Large commercial construction companies priced out architectural practices that specialised in sustainable construction.