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AJ roundtable

How is the vote to quit the European Union affecting your practice?

Words Ella Braidwood
Photographs Ben Blossom

The Architects' Journal and recruitment specialist Bespoke invited a panel of experts to share their thoughts on the challenges facing the profession in the light of the EU Referendum result.

In an atmosphere of economic uncertainty following the vote to leave the European Union in June, the long-term future of the architectural profession is hard to predict in the medium to long term.

The AJ/Bespoke panel discussed how the Brexit vote has affected business sentiment across the industry, the challenges facing architecture practices, studio staffing levels – and how to keep up morale.

Refreshingly, the overall response from the event was positive. Despite an initial blip following the vote in favour of Brexit, most projects are now back on track and client investments from outside the European Union are booming.

The concern, however, arises with respect to what deal emerges from the Brexit negotiations: how will leaving the EU affect the UK's architecture sector in the years to come?

Brexit vote: The immediate aftermath

Will Hurst Going forward it's obviously going to take a long time to negotiate with the EU on how Britain exits. But what is the general picture in architecture right now?

Richard Warwick We had a bit of a blip after the shock in June. The summer has been quiet, but things have started to come back. We're finding more confidence in our clients and generally in the outside world. It doesn't seem quite as scary as it did two months ago.

Doug Smith We've found that the immediate reaction was mostly from the big institutions, who had to be seen to react swiftly. Our more entrepreneurial clients saw it as an opportunity and still see it that way. Some things have dried up and stopped, [but] others have stepped in.

Nick Jackson We're seeing it varies very much by sector. There are people out there who are taking advantage. We've seen quite a few things stutter because somebody had to go back and talk to the bank or to private investors.



Nigel Bidwell We felt there was almost a 'double dip' because a lot of our projects are quite political and dependent on, for example, the [London] mayor. We found there had been a slowing prior to Sadiq Khan's appointment and that was then confounded by the Brexit decision. But, as Richard [Warwick] was saying, things are looking more positive. We are increasingly finding Hong Kong and Chinese clients are now looking to invest in both directions.

Camilla Neave That's the same for us – we opened the Sydney office earlier this year, which is going from strength to strength. We have the Hong Kong office and we've got a lot of interest from Chinese clients coming over here as well.

Andrew German Post-referendum, we didn't actually experience any immediate

'Over the summer we've had lots of pitches come in'

drop. Over the summer we've had lots of opportunities and pitches come in, whereas normally it's quite a quiet period.

Renato Benedetti There was a bit of uncertainty. Once there was a decision, admittedly a lot of people in London were shocked, but I think the rest of the country was quite keen on it. We even have a few clients – Lord Bamford [chairman of JCB], for instance, was a very keen leave campaigner – who were quite pleased.

Marion Cross: There wasn't any turmoil, we talked ourselves down before the Brexit vote and that caused uncertainty – the media had a big part to play in that. We've come through it and

nothing has changed for our business.

Staffing levels

Will Hurst That's quite a positive picture. What does this mean for staffing? Are you being more cautious because of the long-term uncertainty?

Doug Smith I don't think there is any point worrying, but something is going to change – we just don't know the timescale. We're still recruiting, we're not massively expanding, but we've not shrunk either. We haven't changed our numbers much. If anything we've gone up slightly.

Nick Jackson We have seen work stop and we are definitely not in the business of hiring at the moment. We're pretty flat. We have very few contract staff, we tend to hold staff and they sit with us for a long time.

Camilla Neave We're very much the same. We made a

few adjustments just before the Brexit vote, and we're being very cautious at the moment. Our numbers have gone down but they've gone up considerably over the previous year. We're still looking at the students [to hire], but we are being cautious.

Keeping up morale and keeping talent

Will Hurst The next two topics are related – staff retention and morale. How are you all doing with those two things?

Richard Warwick It's about finding time for people throughout the business and reassuring people. Taking somebody out for a coffee, lunch, or breakfast in your team shows great commitment to them if you're a busy person.

Doug Smith We have a six-monthly all-staff meeting. It's usually a couple of hours and everybody gets to know

each other. We also have drinks every Friday evening. If staff have concerns, they tend to approach you more in that slightly informal environment. We have a very open door policy.

Camilla Neave Following the Brexit announcement, Ken [Shuttleworth] gathered everyone and said: 'Right, we're very shocked, but we've got to crack on now.' Then he engaged everybody in thinking about what they could then do. For example, by thinking about what we're spending our money on and whether there are things we don't need to spend money on. And actually engaging other people to think about that.

Nick Jackson The biggest issue for us is that probably 35-50 per cent of our office are European or foreign nationals and they had no idea what it meant for them. They were all sitting there in shock.

Marion Cross The reality is that

'If it wasn't for the free flow of EU labour, we wouldn't have a viable practice'

if it wasn't for the free flow of EU labour, we wouldn't probably have a viable practice at the moment. There's a cultural heritage that tends to come with each nationality – London is cosmopolitan.

Andrew German We did do a note out to all staff on the Friday because of the percentage of Europeans we employ. It was to reassure them. Many of them have invested most of their lives [to work in the UK] and they've also converted to ARB in order to get UK-recognised qualifications.

Richard Warwick It's not the EU nationals who are here now that [face] the problem. The danger is in 10 years' time when, if we're

not careful, we won't have this open culture.

Lindsay Urquhart-Turton We did have an informal gathering and reassured everyone that we have been through difficult times before. I talked about the fact that we've got offices in Australia, which are doing really well, and the market there is strong – and in Hong Kong and the United States. If you're business is working overseas, you can point at that and reassure people.

Renato Benedetti We've got a very high percentage of Europeans working for us. We did have to reassure them. There is potential for a situation to arise in five years' time, when there won't be a crowd of interested and talented people coming here from Europe. But London is still London; it's a huge magnet. They will be coming from somewhere else, from other places.

- The panel**
- Will Hurst, managing editor, *The Architects' Journal* (chair)
 - Lindsay Urquhart-Turton, CEO, Bespoke
 - Marion Cross, director, Chapman Taylor
 - Camilla Neave, HR partner, Make Architects
 - Richard Warwick, director, Orms
 - Renato Benedetti, director, Benedetti Architects
 - Nigel Bidwell, partner, Farrells
 - Doug Smith, principal director, TP Bennett
 - Andrew German, partner, Sheppard Robson
 - Nick Jackson, director, Eric Parry Architects