

FAIR WORK IN ARCHITECTURE

AN OPEN MANIFESTO



unione
lavoratrici
e lavoratori
in architettura

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For architectural workers, for young architects, for our future

1. A complex professional landscape

The working conditions of architectural workers in Italy are particularly varied and complex. The range includes people working full time for firms but without employment contracts, self-employed professionals, owners of small to large scale firms, freelancers working on a project basis, architects employed by construction companies, and others employed in the public sector, in schools and in universities. Combinations of working arrangements are common: the registered architect who teaches at school, the freelancer verging on having a single commissioner, the owner of a small studio who has to take on work in another firm so as to make it through the month.

Taking a wider view, we find ourselves before a complex design and production process that includes a range of jobs, roles and expertise that extends far beyond the scope of a registered architect, just as the implications of living and building within society are vast and multifarious.

2. Architectural workers

That which has brought us together and led us to form this group is the recognition of a condition that many groups across the world are seeking to define: namely the 'architectural worker'.

What does being an architectural worker mean for us? To understand that, we need to focus less on the product of our work and more on the process; less on the results and more on the conditions that make them possible. If the reputation of an architectural firm is today based on its built works, and sometimes the narratives through which they are presented to the public (with signature words like beauty, sustainability, inclusion and diversity), we need to subject that reputation to a simple question: what are the working conditions of those who have designed, measured, surveyed, built and delivered that work? Pursuing this inquiry we encountered a reality often characterised by a loss of worker autonomy, exploitation, self-exploitation, fierce psychological pressure, the incursion of work into all aspects of life at all hours, arbitrary deadlines, discounted commissions, and no assurance of basic standards in work. We understood that it is these very circumstances that empty the act of building of its value, that transform it into a long-term social and environmental harm, having hurt those who work within it, and that is in total contradiction to any declaration of sustainability.

Architectural workers for us refer to everyone that becomes aware, through direct experience and observation, that freedom of opinion, personal wellbeing and that of others, and respect for the time required to deliver work must be the foundations of every new building and the first line of any design. Architectural workers work to defend and promote these basic values.

This belief, formed not from abstract theory but from having lived and seen specific toxic working conditions, is what unites us. For us, being architectural workers means taking active responsibility for asserting and demanding the recognition of our needs and our role. Our group brings together self-employed architects, fake independent workers ('finte partite IVA'), and freelancers: together we have decided to oppose this chain of exploitation. Our membership includes people who have been exploited as well as people determined not to exploit, and people subject to tremendous workloads who understand that it is not fair to either them or others.

The care of workers for their wellbeing and time, enables us to address our cause not only to fake independent workers or registered architects. We recognise their specific role as the patient and complex work related to space but we also situate them within a wider group of trades: architectural workers are also construction workers, render artists, surveyors, engineers, administrative personnel and university staff – anyone that belongs to the production cycle of space, in either its built form or its graphic and cultural design.

3. First steps towards a new awareness

In August 2022 Ilaria Moroni, a young architect from Perugia, in an interview for a local TV news channel, exposed the reality of precarious and underpaid jobs in architectural studios, part of the phenomenon of fake independent workers. After being contacted by numerous others who recognised themselves in her description, Ilaria opened a discussion group on Telegram called "Arch*rivoluzione", which grew rapidly to over 300 members. At the same time, she received scores of messages telling her about unpaid and under-paid work, and stressful, badly organised work commissions. In the wake of this initiative, we formed our group in October 2022, with the objective of harnessing ideas and intent to challenge this situation. Meeting online and in person, we are building a collective discussion on work in architecture.

We are people with different backgrounds and experience, reflecting the diverse reality of the architectural profession in Italy today. For this reason, we won't act as a class-based trade union or a trade association but instead as an open group, united more by principles and practices rather than professional identities.

We will go beyond the perimeter of a narrow set of professional problems to shed light on the social and environmental issues connected to them. We will seek to build a new awareness – starting from the protection of architectural workers – capable of forging new connections between seemingly distant professional circumstances and enabling active participation in a transformation that can no longer be delayed. We intend to put our technical and cultural knowledge at the service of a new debate on sustainability that focuses not just on the performance of the built environment but also on the conditions of the people that build it.

4. Things are starting to happen

The exploitation and hardship that architectural workers put up with daily has taken on greater public visibility since the 2008 economic crisis when a significant squeeze on the turnover of architectural studios placed further stress on the working conditions of an already highly deregulated sector. In the past fifteen years, articles, books, blogs and social media posts have discussed and denounced these conditions – often drawing attention to fake independent workers, underpaid internships, a lack of work-life balance and other instances of exploitation and work pressure.

The debate and the campaign today have an international dimension: the Sindicato de Arquitectos has been active in Spain since 2008 (immediately following the Spanish real estate crisis); in Portugal, Sinterq (Union of the workers in Architecture) has operated since 2019; in the UK, we find Future Architects Front and the Section of Architectural workers from the Union United Voices of the World; Holland is home to the group NAA! (Netherland Angry Architects); while in the US, Architectural Workers United is fighting for a fairer profession and the The Architecture Lobby has contributed theory to the debate. And these are just some examples.

In Italy, the Instagram page Riordine degli Architetti plays an important role as a site for anonymous reporting that has turned the spotlight on the phenomenon of fake independent workers, but in order to find organisations similar to those previously mentioned, we need to look at adjacent sectors such as the art sector with the example of Art Workers Italia.

5. Rethinking education

University is often the first environment in which future architectural workers encounter some of the big problems: the obfuscation of the productive process, the obsession with performance and the rhetoric of vocation. We are taught a work method that pays scant attention to personal wellbeing and is marked by deadlines that leave little room for students to cultivate interests outside of the course curriculum. The cult of the master designer and the finished product stifles inquiry into individual and collective production processes and instils in students the aspiration of become the brilliant, visionary architect – as if architecture were just a matter of talent and vocation.

Graduates are conditioned to accept a poor quality work-life in order to meet demands that are often and intentionally unrealistic, imposed by both private and public contractors and commissioners alike.

This kind of education, where it exists, becomes the basis for a devaluation of the individual and their capacities. Minimal or unpaid internships are accepted when instead, the specific contribution of graduates – their fresh ideas and independent thought – should be recognised by studios, in the same way as graduates recognise their opportunity to gain professional experience.

We shouldn't forget also that universities themselves are often places of precarious, fragmented and under-valued work for teaching staff and their assistants, compromising their ability to fulfil their educational function. They are also sites of semi-free labour packaged to recent graduates in the form of work experience placements lacking any adequate form of compensation.

6. Acting together for fair work

Through collective action, we aim to change working conditions that are fragile, undervalued and monopolising caused by unjust agreements with studios, public tenders that prioritise heavy price discounts and exclude young workers, big-player commissioners that use their weight to constantly lower fees and shorten deadlines (and who find limitless acceptance of this among many firm owners), fiscal challenges and social security issues related to the complex situation of many workers, and many other reasons that work together to diminish the value of our work and create a toxic working experience.

Through meeting each other and dialogue, we have overcome boundaries that appeared to divide us professionally and found an opportunity to converge around a common cause: fair work.

We assert fair work to be an essential principle of any assignment or contract, whether with clients or other architects. Fair work for us means fair pay and fair contracts, a healthy work-life balance, professional relationships free of bullying and discrimination, and equal access to tenders and commissions.

We intend to address this problem in a collective manner through dialogue and mutual help, because very often we are isolated, and therefore unable to change our working conditions beyond minor adjustments to individual contracts.

The way forward will be complex and uneven, and it will take time. This document is, we hope, the first step of many to come. We undertake to coordinate different working realities into a common perspective; as it is precisely through this conscious union of different points of view that we can build a broad vision. We will pay particular attention to young workers, to free them from the narrative of the incompetent and inexperienced underling ready for toil: often it is precisely these young people that have the energy and tools to drive progress and instigate change.

We will be a collective identity, a safe space for those forced to confront individual cases of exploitation: we will offer advice and help to get through it based on continuous observation, dialogue and study, and through various roundtables.

Those looking for help, recognition and a way to better their working conditions as architectural workers will know where to find us and how to make contact.

7. Our proposals

For students and recent graduates:

- an end to unpaid and underpaid internships at every level; including internships that substitute for the written test in the state exam;
- development of the awareness needed to recognise the value of your own work in order to combat all forms of self-devaluation and self-exploitation;
- university education that acknowledges the complexity of the profession, with a learning experience brings together theory, project design, visual design and construction as aspects of a unitary process;
- promotion of collaboration and mutual respect as the foundation for training and work against all forms of mutually harmful competition and the cut-throat pursuit of individual reputation.

For studio owners and freelance professionals:

- reestablishment of basic fees, fit for the requirements of today's market;
- normalisation of employment contracts through the development of clear regulation that makes it possible for studios owners to hire employees (balanced costs, a nationwide basic contract, pension funds);
- tax incentives for investment in a suitable working environment;
- workforce planning that doesn't underestimate the number of contractors or the skill-level required to deliver on commissions so as to avoid inadequate pay and cover costs;
- fair access to public and private tendering processes;
- fixed discount rates;
- welfare measures for workers.

For long term co-workers and contractors:

- short term goal: an immediate rise in wages to meet real living costs;
- long term goal: an end to the unjust, legalised, practice of fake independent workers in favour of fair and transparent hiring that permits access to pension funds and standard sector contracts that guarantee minimum wages, raises, welfare protections and working hours;
- accurate and official recognition of roles within the organisational structure of a studio;
- ergonomic working stations, with adequate hardware and software for the job;
- a health work-life balance (minimum and maximum working hours and overtime compensation)
- insurance for work related accidents and health coverage;
- equal parental leave for mothers and fathers.