

Constructing Building Integrity: Raising Standards Through Professionalism

Industry Factsheet: Architects

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Overview

In Australia, architects are among the most established and regulated professions. Architects have rigorous registration, accreditation and education requirements and standards nationally.

Architects Registration Boards (ARBs) are the statutory authorities responsible for legally registering architects and administering relevant State-based Acts. The ARBs collectively own the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (AACA), which administers and facilitates the National Standard of Competency for Architects (NSCA) and the Architectural Practice Examination, both core requirements of registering as an architect in Australia. The AACA also manages the national accreditation process for Australian architectural schools and qualifications. The Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) is the peak member-based association for the architecture profession in Australia, with 14,000 individual members and 1,800 practice members in 2023 (AIA 2023). The AIA operates at a national scale with Chapters in each state.

This fact sheet outlines the goals, values and professional standards of architects, before summarising the ethical challenges that the profession faces. It concludes by offering a range of recommendations and suggested actions to raise professional standards and enhance public trust, to be read in line with the [final industry report](#).

Goals and values of peak professional bodies

The vision statement and mission statements (goals) for ARBs focus primarily on professional obligations and protections for the client and consumers. Strategic priorities for the ARBs involve the advancement of the profession and advocating for the role of architects. The AIA describes a broader aspirational commitment for architects to a 'public good'. Its mission as an organisation recognises that 'good design adds value', with references to environmental and social aspirations and responsibilities.

Integrity system analysis - architects

The research identified 10 'integrity enablers' and 10 'ethical tensions' for construction sector professionals. **Table 1** highlights key integrity enablers that promote ethical values and raise professional standards in the architectural profession, and **Table 2** describes common ethical tensions that negatively affect the profession.





INTEGRITY ENABLERS	
	Architects' professional bodies have clear integrity standards, codes of conduct and processes for monitoring and reviewing these.
	Multiple sources of legislation from various levels of government (national codes, planning policies and contracts) are in place to support architects to achieve compliant and ethical outcomes. Planning and design codes provide architects with support for making decisions that consider the public good and environmental provisions.
	Architects have longstanding, rigorous accreditation, registration and continuing professional development (CPD) practices.
	Many processes in architecture are governed by contractual conditions, which require certain conduct and behaviours (of all signatories/parties). Contracts affect both the architect and the client.

Table 1: Integrity enablers identified for architects





ETHICAL TENSIONS	
	Extreme competition across the sector, 'the race to the bottom,' limits many architects' capacities to ensure high-quality outcomes. An excessively competitive environment is often linked to integrity breaches.
	The extreme fragmentation of professional roles and responsibilities in the sector, reflected in the growth of 'partial services contracts', undermines architects' capacities to design and produce high-quality outcomes.
	Constant regulation 'creep' – the growth in responsibilities and expectations without a commensurate increase in support or remuneration – is a contributor to work overload. The highly competitive environment and fragmentation of roles contributes to this tension.
	Architects have defined ethical obligations to principles (e.g. 'social good' and 'sustainability') that can exceed clients' commitments to these same principles. This source of tension is exacerbated by fragmentation and aggressive competition.

Table 2: Ethical tensions identified for architects

Key findings

The most significant source of integrity tensions for the architectural profession in Australia is a marketplace where **aggressive competition**, driven by free-market legislation, undermines architects' capacity to produce quality, compliant and ethical outcomes.

While pro-competition legislation may drive costs down for consumers and enhance efficiency across the sector, it also creates an environment where architects' (and other building professionals') fee proposals are barely sufficient to complete the scope of work required to the minimum standards expected. This results in increased risk, disputes, and rectification costs, often exceeding the 'savings' made through the competitive tendering process.

Both developer-driven demands for greater cost control and free-market pressures to reduce costs are behind the growth of 'partial services' and 'design and construct' models for architectural services. In these approaches, architects compete for specific stages in a procurement process without involvement outside these. This **fragmentation** of responsibilities and subsequent marginalisation of the architect's role is a source of substantial risk, potentially leading to disputes and increased rectification costs. Partial service models can leave architects with 'minimal agency and limited capacity', neither conducive to quality outcomes.

There is **inconsistent legislation** (at state/territory level) about who can design buildings. For example, in some states, only registered architects can design buildings of certain classes, financial value, or characteristics (types, heights, heritage conservation zones, etc.). In contrast, in other states, no qualifications are required. This inconsistency is problematic for the entire sector because of confusion around the qualifications and capabilities of 'building designers', who are often mistaken for architects and don't have the same education, accreditation and licencing levels. There is a **lack of clarity** around the identity, qualifications and capacities of building designers, which undermines architects' integrity systems.

Rigorous accreditation standards, registration, CPD expectations, professional recognition, and active support networks can ameliorate these ethical tensions in many circumstances. However, because the scope of professional competencies has been growing so quickly, the answer to every new challenge cannot be increased regulation of architects. Instead, there is a crucial need for architects to have the right **lifelong learning skills**. These skills are beneficial and essential, enabling architects to identify where they lack competence and seek appropriate support, ensuring their professional growth and the quality of their work.

Pathways to Action

It is recommended that the following actions are taken to address the ethical tensions and further strengthen the integrity system for architects:

RECOMMENDED PATHWAYS TO ACTION

R3 Raise standards in **education, training and accreditation** processes

- Architects are the most established and regulated of the building sector's professions, and architects' professional bodies must continue to maintain and strengthen standards while reiterating the importance of their member's skills, and their engagement throughout the entire building procurement process.

R4 Promote, protect and improve professional standards through **regulation**

- Expansion of state-based controls defining the minimum qualifications or licensing required to design various types or classes of buildings should benefit the sector and the community. Such controls must target non-qualified or not-registered designers and not undermine architects' acts, systems and standards.

R5 Enhance and support professional associations' **ethical standards frameworks**

- Increased consistency across ARB's ethical, behavioural, and CPD expectations would be beneficial for a profession that is increasingly national and international in its outlook.

FURTHER READING

Architects Registration Board Victoria [ARBV] & NSW Architects Registration Board [NSW ARB] (2022) *Systemic Risks in the Australian Architecture Sector*, October 2022.

<https://www.architects.nsw.gov.au/download/Report%20on%20Systemic%20Risks%20for%20the%20Architecture%20Sector%20in%20Australia.pdf>

Australian Institute of Architects [AIA] (2017) *Code of Professional Conduct* (current as at July 2017),

<https://www.architecture.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Institute-Code-of-Professional-Conduct.pdf> (accessed 21 June 2024).

Australian Institute of Architects [AIA] (2023) *Annual Report 2023*, https://www.architecture.com.au/wp-content/uploads/AIA_AR23-24_DPS.pdf (accessed 2 October 2024).

PROJECT RESEARCH

Additional research arising from the project (including the Final Industry Report) can be found at:

<https://www.griffith.edu.au/law-futures-centre/institute-ethics-law-governance/our-research/construction-building-integrity>

SUGGESTED CITATION

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