



# WHY ARCHITECTS MATTER

Evidencing and Communicating the Value of Architects

FLORA SAMUEL

ROUTLEDGE



'The architectural profession and society must collaborate on repairing the covenant between us so that we may deliver the outcomes that matter so much to both. Flora Samuel's excellent book throws light on the actual and potential contribution of architects to the prospect of social well-being and, more to the point, identifies ways in which we must go about realising this potential.'

*Benjamin Derbyshire, President, Royal Institute of  
British Architects and Chair of HTA Design*

'Architects are needed more than ever to address the challenges in the built environment. In this timely book Flora Samuel presents valuable insights for the profession's future development, which she argues depends on how it organises its knowledge. It is a must-read for architectural professionals in the 21st century.'

*Fredrik Nilsson, Professor of Architectural Theory,  
Chalmers University of Technology, and Head of  
Research in Practice, Älvstranden Utveckling, AB, Sweden*

'I have been teaching and preaching about the problems architecture as a profession and architects as practitioners face for the last five years. If only I had had this book to assign all along! It lays out so clearly the issues behind the ironic but tragic fact that the public and the architectural profession hate what architecture has become. The fact that no one in this binary is happy with a profession that is seen as effete and socially indifferent requires an analysis that goes beyond handwringing and cross accusations. This book is it, as it systematically analyzes both the history and structure of this dilemma.'

*Peggy Deamer, Professor of Architecture,  
Yale University and Architecture Lobby, USA*

# Why Architects Matter

*Why Architects Matter* examines the key role of research-led, ethical architects in promoting wellbeing, sustainability and innovation. It argues that the profession needs to be clear about what it knows and the value of what it knows if it is to work successfully with others. Without this clarity, the marginalization of architects from the production of the built environment will continue, preventing clients, businesses and society from getting the buildings that they need.

The book offers a strategy for the development of a twenty-first-century knowledge-led built environment, including tools to help evidence, develop and communicate that value to those outside the field. Knowing how to demonstrate the impact and value of their work will strengthen practitioners' ability to pitch for work and access new funding streams. This is particularly important at a time of global economic downturn, with ever greater competition for contracts and funds driving down fees and making it imperative to prove value at every level.


*Why Architects Matter* straddles the spheres of 'Practice Management and Law', 'History and Theory', 'Design', 'Housing', 'Sustainability', 'Health', 'Marketing' and 'Advice for Clients', bringing them into an accessible whole. The book will therefore be of interest to professional architects, architecture students and anyone with an interest in our built environment and the role of professionals within it.

**Flora Samuel** is Professor of Architecture in the Built Environment and the first RIBA Vice President for Research. She was also the first woman Head of the University of Sheffield School of Architecture in the UK. This book was written as a result of her concern about the amount of waste and suffering caused by the poor quality of much of our built environment. She has received extensive funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for her work on the value of architects and on the way in which they evidence that value. Being passionate about breaking down the barriers between academia and architectural practice, she has, since 2012, embroiled herself in the activities of the Royal Institute of British Architects as a twice-elected National Council member and Chair of its Research and Innovation Group. She also delivers research training in practice and is a supervisor of practitioner PhDs. Flora Samuel is known for her unorthodox writings on Le Corbusier, about whom she has published extensively. A mother of three daughters, she is based in Wales.

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# Contents

**What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ACTS 7:47**

## Introduction

### Part I

#### The methodology of archaeological research

##### 1. The methodology of archaeological research

##### 2. The methodology

##### 3. The methodology of archaeological research: the case study of knowledge

##### 4. The methodology of archaeological research

##### 5. The methodology

### Part II

#### The value of archaeology

##### 6. The value of archaeology

##### 7. The value of archaeological research

##### 8. The value of archaeological research

##### 9. The value of archaeological research

# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part I</b>	
<b>The undervaluing of architectural knowledge</b>	<b>11</b>
1 Public image, misinformation and the bogey of dispensability	13
2 The profession	29
3 Cracks in the professional foundations: the right body of knowledge	51
4 The research culture of architects	74
5 The value agenda	90
<b>Part II</b>	
<b>The value of architects</b>	<b>101</b>
6 So what is an architect?	103
7 The value of social architects	119
8 The value of cultural architects	142
9 The value of knowledge architects	154

<b>Part III</b>	
<b>Making the most of architects</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>10 Education for uncertainty</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>11 Developing a shared language of research</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>12 Models of academic and practice research collaboration</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>13 Incentivizing research in practice</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>14 Risk and research strategy</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>15 Managing knowledge in practice</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>238</b>
<i>Index</i>	<b>242</b>



# Introduction

*Architects are not very good at explaining why what they do matters.*

*Alan Penn (Farrell, 2014, p. 65)*

This is a book about why architects matter, why the quality of the built environment makes a difference, why more people need to get involved in architecture and what we need from architects to help them do so. In the words of Michael Sorkin (2011, p. 1), 'Architecture is for everyone' – so why aren't they getting it?

Our skylines are dominated by what I call narchitecture – narcissistic architecture – self referential, confusing (purposely or through lack of care), excluding and damaging to wellbeing and the environment. I was inspired to write this book when I wrote to complain to my local council about the design of the library at the edge of my local park. The response I received from 'the architect' was that 'good design costs money', something which I fundamentally refute. In my experience architects are remarkably good at making something from almost nothing. However, affordability is a design problem which architects are ruled out of (Dulaney, 2012), often because of erroneous assumptions about expense and risk, the result being the unloved, short-lived and soulless buildings that act as the scenery for most of our lives. The resultant waste is unacceptable (Osmani et al., 2008).

We are dependent on the environment around us, animate and inanimate, to self-actuate (Huskinson, 2018). *Why Architects Matter* is built on the premise that the built environment can impact strongly on quality of life and that good – and I mean good with all its moral associations – clients and project teams can do a great deal to promote wellbeing through their activities. 'We need to articulate who the baddies are. What is right and what is wrong' (Imrie, 2017). One of my fundamental premises is that not all architects are the same. I want to make the case that architects who are professional, research-focused, innovative and ethical do exist but need much greater acknowledgement and support. While I hope this book will inspire architects to be more effective, it is really written for non-architects – policymakers, clients, potential clients and potential architects – to get insight into why this particular field of expertise is so important and what they can do to help.



Some academics have turned their attention to theorizing the problems of other countries, attracted perhaps by their alluring otherness as well the fees of overseas students and potential research funding. Although it is always worthwhile to highlight the problems of the developing world, the distinctly unglamorous look of British deprivation often remains ignored. There is much work to be done at the neo-liberal coal face of value to focus attention back where it should be, on the key role that the built environment plays in the lives of people and to remember that it is possible to do economics, and indeed design, 'as if people mattered' (Schumacher, 1993). There is a chance that we can produce a built environment for future generations that we can be proud of by encouraging an understanding of value in its fullest sense.

'Collaboration' is a word that is prominent at this time, but it is rarely associated with its partner 'trust' or the conditions to support that trust, as these are bound up with the messy touchy-feely world of human relations. *Why Architects Matter* is written as a polemic with the aim of fostering trust and the conditions needed for trust – evidence, clarity and rigour, as well as shared ways of working. The possibility of a construction industry in which contractual complexity is replaced by trust, a recognition of competence through ties of familiarity, clear evidence and/or the potential for internet-based forms of highly visible feedback – think Airbnb and Uber – all enable the client to manage the risk of trusting their team and to work together for infinitely better results. This book is born out of the perhaps idealistic hope that advances in knowledge sharing and data collection can support the development of a culture of trust and the development of shared vision to eradicate the waste and misery caused by litigation and poor quality design. While I am under no illusion that much can be done to change the damaging and unethical attitudes of the build-it-and-flog-it school of development – one that many of us lazily promote through our pension funds and investments – I do believe there is much to be done to help owner-occupier clients, buyers and tenants ask more of their architects and their landlords.

To be a profession is to profess custody of a particular body of knowledge. In making the case for architects I am making the case for what it is that they know and what they do with that knowledge. I argue that architects are socio-spatial problem-solvers, integrators of complex bodies of information and masters in space-craft. Despite the fact that architectural practices are well known from outside to be 'knowledge-based organisations' (Winch and Schneider, 1993, p. 1), "'knowledge" is not a word with which most architects instinctively feel very comfortable as a way of describing the essence of their professional discipline' (Duffy, 1998, p. xiii), but it is my thesis that the knowledge and skills of architects need to be reframed and developed strategically for a twenty-first-century context of accelerated change. Discussions of knowledge seem to imply that it is a static resource to be exploited like money in the bank, which of course it isn't – hence recent emphasis on processes of 'organizational learning' and the structures needed to help this happen (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011). However, both 'knowledge management' and 'organizational learning' are alien to most architects, so the subtle differences between them are slightly immaterial in this context. I want to highlight what it is that architects know in the hope of



improving organizational learning. While my focus is on architects, conclusions may be drawn from this book with applicability to a range of learning and 'knowledge-based' organizations.

My difficult ambition has been to write a book that sits on a table between the shelves marked 'Practice Management and Law', 'History and Theory', 'Design', 'Housing', 'Sustainability', 'Health', 'Marketing' and 'Advice for Clients' in a typical architectural bookshop, bringing these aspects of the profession into an accessible whole. It has been conceived, in particular, to cross the uneasy cultural divide between architects and other built environment professionals. This book veers purposely between the extremes of creative expression and nitty-gritty aspects of contract law, because they are in reality linked. This is, however, largely uncharted research terrain. I am particularly concerned with making the business side of professional training more engaging by setting it within its cultural context, in this way encouraging critical engagement with this neglected area of practice. I take inspiration from Howard Davis, who gives a 'cross-cultural' take on building as a 'unified social process', but my emphasis is on the contribution of the architect to that process within the UK (Davis, 2006). Another key book in this area is Robert Gutman's excellent *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (1988), which addresses a good deal of the territory covered here, albeit from a US angle and written some thirty years ago, but with minimal attention to the knowledge economy of the field and no attention to diversity. Steven Groak's unsurpassed *The Idea of Building* (1992), written from the perspective of a civil engineer, is a really important source. *Why Architects Matter* is also in some ways a response to Jeremy Till's *Architecture Depends* (Till, 2009). I will argue that architects are neither autonomous nor dependent (Imrie and Street, 2014). The book has been developed in conversation with Simon Foxell, whose *Professionalism for the Built Environment* is forthcoming. I should also mention the books *Architecture Matters* (Betsky, 2017) and *Why Architecture Matters* (Goldberger, 2011), which are both written from a US perspective. This book is about *architects*, not *architecture*, a subtle but important distinction to be discussed in Chapter 6, 'So what is an architect?'

My territory is what Ernest Boyer calls the 'scholarship of integration' and 'application', making connections across disciplines, 'placing specialities in larger context', often educating non-specialists too' (Boyer, 1997, p. 18). An additional aim is to offer researchers outside architecture a way into the field and to encourage them to help us investigate the links between the built environment and wellbeing. Such diversity is challenging at a methodological level, requiring what Abbott calls the 'usual disclaimer a synthetic writer makes to area specialists' (Abbott, 1988, p. xii). Further, it is hard to set the limits of a poorly defined entity, architects, in a constantly changing context with a paucity of evidence and hence 'to keep the coverage even', an academically desirable quality. One solution, adopted by Gutman (1988, p. 2), is to use a slightly different methodological framework for each chapter depending on the matter at hand, the whole stitched together with a consistent thread that winds through the narrative – architectural knowledge and its value.

Supporting the development of research in practice in order to generate the knowledge necessary to be more effective and more inclusive is a primary



concern. Publishers of books aimed at industry generally suggest that the authors use extremely simple language and few or no footnotes, filling their books with bullet points and pull quotes for hard-pressed people to digest at speed. With this publication I have tried to offer a difficult middle ground between such industry-oriented writing and more highly theorized academic forms of communication. Parts I and II are built on more solid research than Part III, which is more speculative, with the aim of galvanizing an industry readership into action. I have peppered the text with references to other work partly, of course, to give acknowledgment to others, but partly also to show the extent of further reading that is possible, particularly within refereed journals, the highest quality information source, now more freely available over the internet. The intention is that these footnotes help provide solid back-up for arguments to be used by architects, clients and others in report presentations, funding applications and debate. I acknowledge more than a passing interest in 'evidence-based marketing', the use of data to promote the cause of the field. The references form the backbone of the online platform *Valuing Architects* developed in parallel with this book to help professionals communicate their offer and, unlike this book, designed for consumption at speed. Thinking fast and slow are radically different procedures, as Daniel Kahneman has shown (Kahneman, 2012).

To say that *Why Architects Matter* focuses on Western culture alone would be to stereotype what is Western and what is not (Bonnett, 2004). I take inspiration here from the work of anthropologist Aihwa Ong's work at Biopolis, a genomic research centre in Singapore, in which she argues that scientific outcomes are the result of complex mediations between 'global technologies' and situated forces framed by what she calls a 'global assemblage', a viewpoint that avoids overly simplistic contrasts between East and West, North and South. I argue that there are global lessons to be derived from UK practice set within the melting pot of knowledge which is the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), an organization with members, chapters and schools across the world – some 17000 of its 40000 members are from outside the UK. At any point in time architects may be in demand on one side of the globe while floundering in recession on the other, with large global practices adjusting their services and presence accordingly. Its base, London, is arguably 'the world's global design hub' (Miller et al., 2013), being deemed a relatively stable world centre of finance and the epicentre of the former British Empire, in which a large proportion of the globe was oriented to UK ways of working and the English language system. In 2015 approximately 42.4% of the total gross value added of the UK architecture sector came from London, a figure that has been steadily rising over the last few years (GLA Economics, 2017, p. 8). Being an architect outside London is very different from being an architect in London, where architects' fees are but a small element of the overall real estate value of a project and the expectation of quality is much higher, but where the cost of living makes the lives of architects, young and old, almost untenable.

Ong is also inspirational in the way in which she draws on Donna Haraway's ideas of situated knowledge to make her own personal stake in her research very clear. 'No book about design is politically value free, whatever its apparent claim to objectivity' (Potter, 2002, p. 7). What then is the situated nature of my



authorship? Well, a born and bred Londoner, I was a practitioner for eight years and have been an educator outside London for over twenty more, Head of the University of Sheffield School of Architecture for four of them. My interest in business and leadership was spawned when, like most academic leaders, I was catapulted into this role for which I had remarkably little training. I am now based in the newly created, industry-focused School of Architecture within the School of Built Environment at the University of Reading, conceived to deliver a truly research-based industry education, discussed in detail in Chapter 10. This book is based on knowledge gained through thirty years of active engagement in industry and education in an increasingly cross-disciplinary and global context.

The positions I have held have not traditionally been held by women (Samuel, 2016). One of the things that makes this book on the construction industry unusual is that it includes a consideration of the way in which women and indeed other minorities have been excluded from the way the built environment is made. Drawing on feminist approaches to writing, I dust my account with moments from my own highly subjective experience as a counterbalance to the academic argument. I hope it gives the book a different flavour, making it more widely accessible than some others in this territory. As a mother of three daughters I am fully aware of the difficulties faced by the next generation and I want to write a book that they can read.

Being the daughter of two architects, trained at the Architectural Association in London after World War II, I admit freely that my love-hate relationship with architecture is part of my 'family romance'. Hence, I think, my particular long-term interest in the Franco Swiss Modernist Le Corbusier, who explored in an extremely self-conscious way what it meant to be an architect, perhaps because he never went to architecture school. He understood that a difficult balance between the needs of 'the individual and the binomial' was actually at the core of what it is to be an architect, the paradoxical synthesis of poet and engineer, the scientific and the ineffable. This, in essence, was what I was investigating in the course of writing five books on his practice – research which will emerge from time to time in this book.

While in some ways I have been preparing to write this book ever since my youth, most of the writing took place during the years 2012–2017, a period of enormous flux, not least in the construction industry and related institutions, beginning with deep recession following on from the global financial crisis of 2008. I have had to repeatedly revise the text in the light of new developments, the UK's 2016 vote to exit the European Union (EU) being one; the 2017 Grenfell Tower disaster, the entirely unnecessary and tragic loss of life caused by a fire in a housing block in West London, being another. This book is a snapshot at a certain moment in time. Many of the conversations that informed its development happened as a result of my temporary and active engagement in the RIBA, as an elected and re-elected National member of Council and as Chair of its Research and Innovation group. As a trustee of the RIBA and a chartered architect I am bound by rules of professional conduct in reporting my observations. I have, however, been fortunate to be part of the RIBA during its current process of realignment towards research, as evidenced by its most recent strategy document developed under



the auspices of the visionary RIBA President Jane Duncan (2015–2017), as well as her successor Ben Derbyshire (RIBA, 2016).

There is 'a new role for academia to link up with practice in order to carry out an archaeology of the processes of architectural production, in a non-threatening but critical manner' (Till, 2007, p. 4). I thought that being an academic would impede discussions with practitioners, but the opposite has been the case – they have opened up to me with remarkable generosity. As a piece of Participatory Action Research (essentially researching by doing things with other people) it has been challenging to fit within the established boundaries of university ethics procedures, which correctly favour extreme transparency (Hart et al., 2013), as the book encompasses thinking and encounters right across my professional career (Jarzombek, 2016). The need to develop practical ethical guidelines for collaborative work such as that done by architects and other construction professionals is urgent.

Words such as 'practice', 'technology', 'theory' and even 'science' have radically different meanings in different contexts and at different times (Groak, 1992, p. 72). Practice can be interpreted very differently by different theorists (see for example Pantzar and Shove, 2010). *Why Architects Matter* is a plaintive call for the role that history plays in understanding where we are now (Cayer et al., 2016). The history of the architecture profession has been eloquently set out by Andrew Saint in his book *The Image of the Architect* (1983), in which he builds on the work of Howard Colvin, Barrington Kaye and Frank Jenkins. Most histories foreground issues of design and philosophy, one result being that we have a very poor understanding of how architects have operated as professionals over time and in relationship with others. Did they, for example, deliver on time and on budget? Such issues, of low import to academia, continue to be neglected in professional education. In this book I will not dwell on the normative readings of history that make up the canon of architecture; my account is unbalanced by what I perceive as a need to bring in other voices.

On a similar note it is necessary to distinguish between 'traditional art' – often an object in a gallery which 'demands the physically distanced, passive contemplation of the viewer, for whom meaning is anchored to the artist' (Hill, 1998, p. 3) – and some forms of contemporary art in which 'the subject is recognized as an active, engaged participant' (Joselit, 2013, p. 2), exemplified perhaps by the work of the art/architecture co-operative Assemble, winners of the 2016 Turner Prize for Art. Unless stated otherwise, references to art refer to the former, traditional, category.

Part I of *Why Architects Matter* sets out the problem that I am seeking to address – the nature of the profession and its increasing marginalization from the construction industry. I argue that the key attributes of a profession are knowledge, ethics and professional judgement. However, lack of clarity about what it is that architects know makes it very difficult for them to defend their territory. The discussion will lead to the knowledge base of architects, concluding with a reflection on architecture's poor fit with the prevailing culture of audit and value. Part II starts with a working definition of the term 'architect' and then sets out some of the very different ways in which the profession brings benefits both to clients and



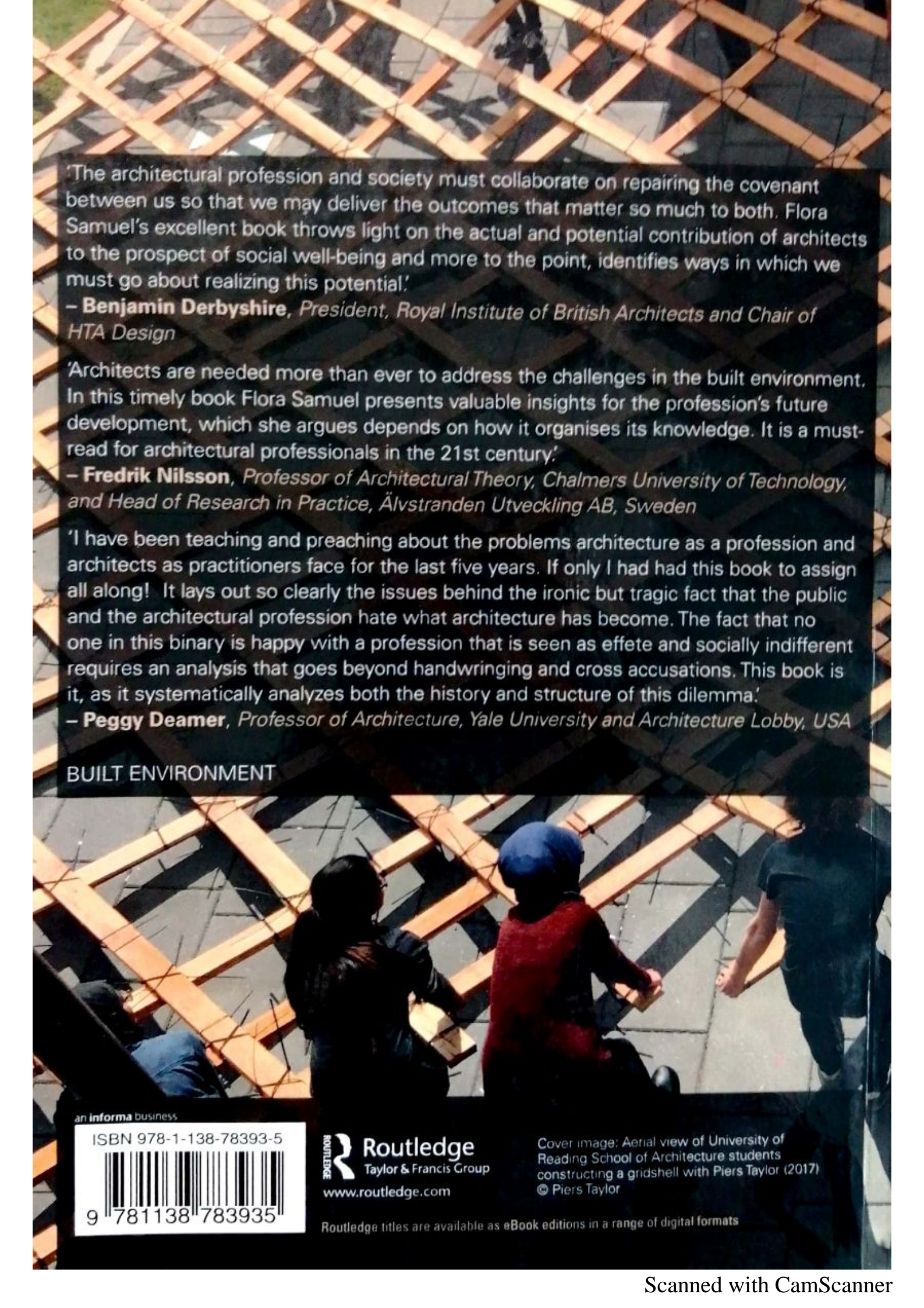
to society, through economies of social value, cultural value and knowledge. Part III offers a strategy for developing a resilient, rigorous, respected research-led profession. This book is built on the scenario of business roughly as usual – developments such as climate change might change everything.

The way in which architects use their knowledge is at the foundation of three Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded studies, the primary research for which underpins the discussion in this book: *Home Improvements* (Samuel et al., 2014b), *Cultural Value of Architects* (Samuel et al., 2014a) and *Evidencing and Communicating the Value of Architects*, which included a study of UK architect attitudes to post-occupancy evaluation (Hay et al., 2017) and the growth of the Research Practice Leads group – individuals leading on the research agenda in twenty-five highly innovative architectural practices. This group has provided an important means to gather information and test some of the ideas herein. It also builds on the *RIBA Student Destinations Survey*, a ten-year longitudinal study of architecture graduates involving seven schools which I instigated in 2011. While, as Gutman found in 1988, there is more data available on architectural practice than is generally acknowledged, its quality is 'very uneven' (Gutman, 1988, p. 2). I am therefore very grateful to those researchers, often from Organization and Management Studies (OMS) and Science and Technology Studies (STS), who have focused their attention on architecture and professional practice in the construction industry, for example Lu and Sexton's empirical studies of knowledge exchange in small professional practices and Imrie and Street's work on attitudes to regulation in design practice. Such projects have provided me with rocks of rigorous research in a swirling miasma of hearsay, focus groups and spin exemplified by 'corporate social science'. Disagreements between architecture and the social sciences over the nature of rigour and the need to be propositional will emerge as a recurring theme in this book. If I go too far in generating conclusions from a set of dislocated circumstances (Abbott, 1988, p. 10), or in suggesting new categorizations, it is in the pragmatic name of a call to action.

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