

The Rooflight Company
Conservation
Report **2015**


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Introduction

The Rooflight Company put it to architects that there has been a more relaxed approach to planning in the UK, in recent years. Our research showed however, that the experiences of architects with planning is anything but relaxed. In fact **75%** of respondents disagreed that 'planners are less strict than they used to be'. There are some strong feelings out there and The Conservation Report revealed some fascinating insights into the world of conserving our built heritage.

Executive Summary

Some clear themes emerged from this research. It is evident from our findings that architects have a keen sense of responsibility about their part in protecting our heritage. At the same time however, they feel pulled in multiple directions by the balance required to appease the various stakeholders in the design process.

Planning and Conservation Officers are often at loggerheads with architects, but it's a shame that they are cited as the 'fly in the ointment' when all parties are working to the same ends. There is a need for a better understanding of everyone's objectives as well as a respect for their procedures, to ease the path.

That said, the option of 'Specified Equal or Approved' on products within a scheme can put designs in jeopardy. However passionate an architect is about authenticity and the right materials, only 'Specified' will prevent contractors or homeowners from changing their carefully crafted design. Of course it's a partnership and the client is king, but it's worth architects standing their ground to ensure the longevity of their designs and of the UK's built heritage.

Kester Harvey

Commercial Director



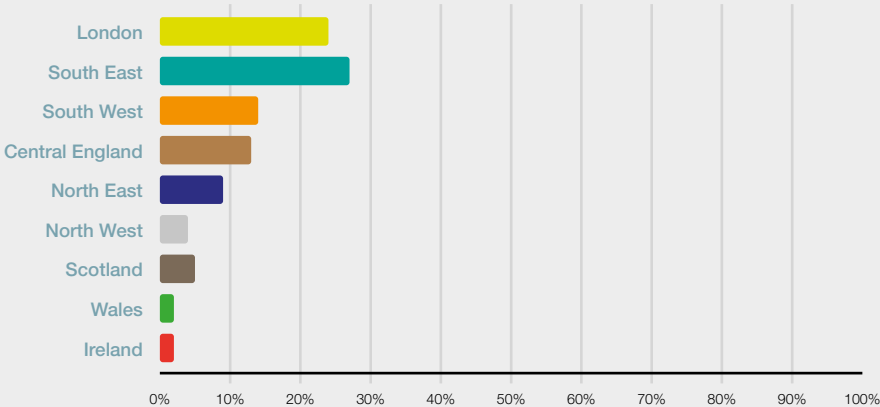
The research was conducted online during July 2015 and 177 architects responded.

The Findings

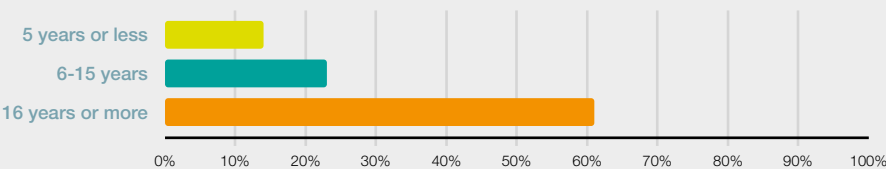
Key Statistics

Over half of respondents were from practices in London and the South of England
Over 60% of respondents have been in practice for at least 16 years

Location of respondents



Length of time respondents in practice



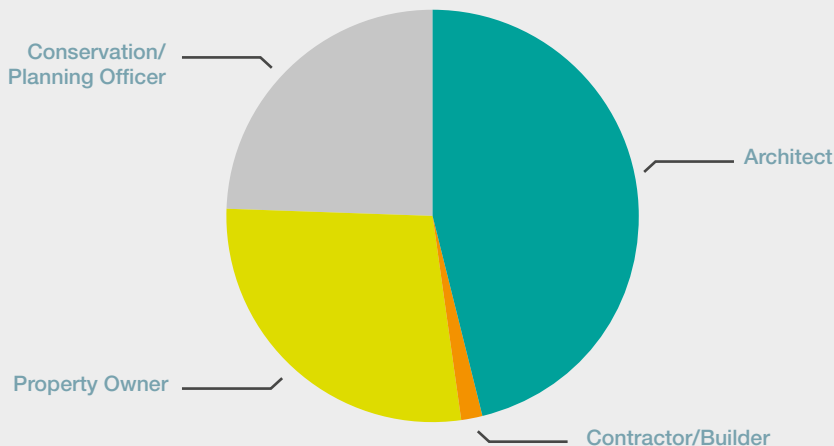
Custodians of the Nation's Heritage

We asked architects who they believed should have ultimate responsibility for period properties being restored in an appropriate way. Though legally it is the property owner's responsibility, nearly half (46%) the architects who responded believed that they themselves should be the main custodians. Surprisingly, less than a quarter (24%) suggested that Conservation Officers should shoulder the responsibility, though some architects commented that it is a joint effort between all parties; Architect, Contractor, Property Owner and Planning/Conservation Officer.

It's worth noting that there was a marked difference in attitudes of some architects. Of those who reported mostly choosing 'Specified Equal or Approved' for products in their schemes, only 37% felt architects are responsible for ensuring period properties are restored appropriately, 29% thought that the buck stops with the property owner and another 29% believed Conservation Officers have the main duty of care. Whilst legally the property owner is ultimately responsible, some of these architects could be missing out on their vital role in building conservation by not selecting 'Specified' more often.

The Findings

Prime responsibility for ensuring a period property is restored in an appropriate way



On balance however, when it comes to ensuring that the nation's heritage is being preserved or renovated in an appropriate way, architects are often the self-appointed custodians. As experts in their field, who understand building design this is encouraging. There are however, many 'links' in the conservation chain, so our research also explored where there is potential for this responsibility to be usurped.

Specified vs. Equal or Approved

Overall 72% of architects said that they 'mostly' chose 'Specified' in their designs, versus **24%** who 'mostly' chose 'Specified Equal or Approved'. So most architects are clearly keen to ensure that their specification stays in place and will not entrust it to the contractor or anyone else. The mix of 'Specified' and 'Equal or Approved' was more evenly spread amongst the recently qualified architects with only **57%** saying they mostly choose 'Specified' and **42%** mostly selecting 'Equal or Approved' in their designs.

Worryingly, of all the respondents **half** (50%) believed that their specifications were only held 'sometimes' and **12%** admitted to not knowing whether specification had been retained at all. The **38%** that felt their specification was held 'every time' demonstrates that selecting products for specification is far from a waste of time. It does however beg the question; if architects are the custodians of our built heritage what happens when their expertise is overridden?

Links in the Chain

As previously mentioned, many architects felt that protecting period properties is a team effort, so perhaps it doesn't matter if specification is ignored. We asked survey recipients who they believed was the main influencer of changes to specification and unsurprisingly **60%** said it was the contractor, with **29%** saying it was the property owner.

The Findings

There were some regional variations to this response. **More** (71%) architects based in Northern & Central England believed it was the contractors who moved away from specification compared with **55%** who believed this in London & the South. Conversely, **34%** of architects based in London & the South thought that the property owner was the main influencer of change whereas only **16%** based in the North & Central region thought this. Clearly there are some clients in the South and contractors in the North with strong opinions.

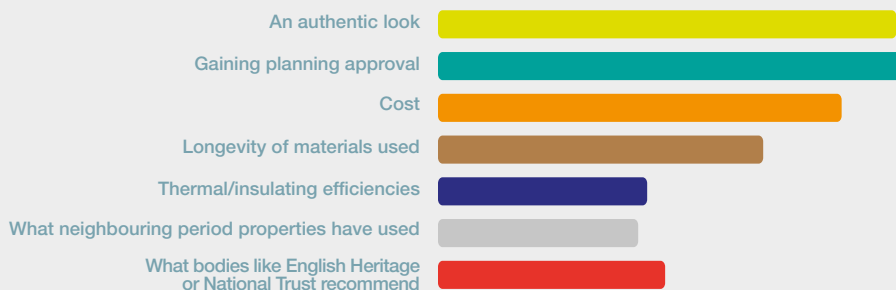
Contractors and builders are of course experts in their own fields, just as architects are but their heavy influence in the chain of period property conservation does start to erode a design's integrity put in place at the start of the process. Most property owners do not have experience in conservation of the built environment, so the fact that well over **a quarter** (29%) of all respondents believe the client instigates change, could threaten the preservation of some buildings for the future.

To shed light on the issue, we asked some contractors for example reasons of why they might go against specification. Predictably, cost was the main reason cited however the wishes of the Conservation Officer were also mentioned and one person simply said their boss told them to.

Customer is King

Digging a little deeper into the client's motivations – particularly going against the recommendations of architects for which they've paid good money - we asked respondents what they believed was important to clients with period properties. Architects believed that gaining planning approval was the number one priority for clients, with cost being the next most important client consideration and achieving an authentic look being close behind. Recommendations from bodies such as English Heritage or the National Trust and building features on neighbouring period properties, are of least interest to property owners.

What's important to clients



While these priorities are understandable, indeed predictable, if cost and planning are the main drivers for decision-making, this could mean that period properties aren't always given the respect they deserve – despite best intentions at the outset.

The Findings

Making Architects Tick

It's at the 'outset' where a heritage property begins its renovation journey and an architect makes their mark. So we asked architects where their own priorities lay. The results are telling and go some way to explain why the process of working with period properties can be fraught.

Overwhelmingly, when asked whether achieving an authentic look was their number one priority, **52%** stated that it was. A response that supports their position as the guardians of UK heritage. **Only 21%** said that gaining planning approval was their main priority with the next most important being quality and longevity of materials. Interestingly, the cost of products came much lower down the list with the highest number of respondents placing it as the fifth in a list where the lowest priority was seven. Could we be getting to the crux of the problem – if indeed this is a problem?

What's important to architects



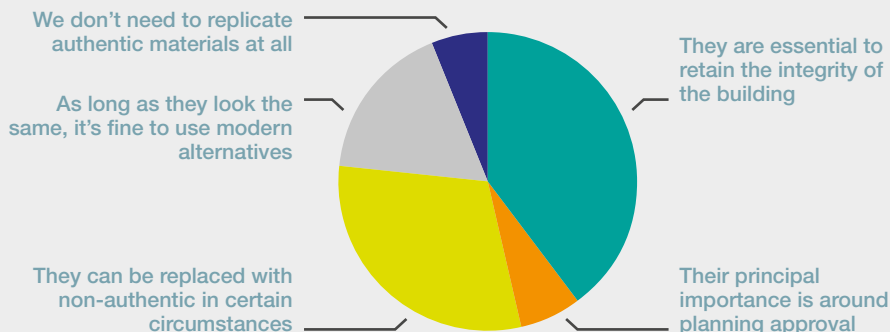
The Real Deal

Somebody once said that 'you get what you pay for' and it is often the case that quality and authenticity does result in increased cost. With this in mind, we quizzed architects about their views on the use of authentic materials. As you can see from the chart, over **a third (40%)** maintained that authentic materials are 'essential to retain the integrity of the building'. **Not far behind (30%)**, was the response that they can be 'replaced with non-authentic materials in certain circumstances'.

We can conclude from this that although architects are not averse to a practical solution where necessary, they prefer to be true to period buildings where they can. Thermal properties, cost and other modern-day considerations will factor but authenticity is the aspiration.

The Findings

Architects' views on the use of authentic materials



There were some interesting differences in attitudes depending on how long respondents had been in practice. Notably, only **14%** of recently qualified architects felt that authentic materials could be 'replaced with non-authentic in certain circumstances' compared with the **34%** of architects who'd been in practice 6-15 years and **32%** of those in practice for 16 years, who felt this. In contrast, the feeling that authentic materials' 'principal importance is around planning approval' decreased with length of time in practice.

Reassuringly, our mini-poll amongst contractors showed a strong leaning towards an authentic look, although once again budget and planning were mentioned as reasons they may look for modern or non-authentic alternatives.

It's Not What You Know...

So where do busy architects source their authentic – or otherwise – materials from? **43%** like to use a few suppliers that they know well and **40%** recommend solutions in consultation with their clients. These results suggest that many architects are fishing from a small but trusted pool of suppliers, perhaps specialists in conservation.

At the other extreme however, **15%** like to research specialised or new products for their designs. So while many architects stick with the familiar, there is clearly a thirst for innovative products amongst some designers. This appetite for the new was more prevalent amongst architects based in London and the South of England where **18%** said they liked to research specialised products, compared with just **11%** of architects in the rest of the UK who liked to work in this way. **More** (**47%**) architects in Central & Northern England preferred to 'consult with my clients and recommend suppliers/products that suit their needs' than the **36%** of other UK architects who approach specification in this way.

Planning Ahead

When we asked architects how new products sat with Planning in conservation buildings, there was a mixed response. **Over half** (**55%**) of respondents agreed that 'planners are more open to using modern alternatives', however **40%** disagreed with this statement. Could this mean that it's down to the discretion of the individual Planner/Conservation Officer or perhaps it's becoming an infamous 'postcode lottery'?

The Findings

The change in attitudes

People are less concerned with retaining historical detail



Planners are less strict than they used to be



Planners are more open to using modern alternatives



Breaking down the responses regionally, we did find that there were some significant differences in our respondents' experiences with Planning. Just **16%** of architects based in the South of England (including London) agreed that 'planners are less strict than they used to be', whereas **33%** of those based in Central and Northern England agreed with this statement. Even more revealing was a whopping **67%** of Central and Northern England practices agreed that 'planners are more open to using modern alternatives' compared with the national average of **55%** agreeing with this and just **49%** of South of England architects agreeing.

Though our Scottish respondents were lower in number than other regions, it is worth noting that although **71%** disagreed that 'planners are less strict', unlike other regions, **14%** of Scottish architects 'strongly agreed' with this claim. Similarly, **13%** 'strongly agreed' that 'people are less concerned with retaining historical detail'.

Overall, while **66%** of all architects disagreed that 'people are less concerned with retaining historical detail', nearly **a third** (31%) agreed with this assertion. It would appear that architects are experiencing apathy from some clients and other stakeholders when working on period properties. Although Conservation Officers and the Planning Department should be the arbitrators, it would seem that inconsistencies in applying policy in some instances, are a concern for architects.

The sticky issue of planning also garnered the most coverage when we asked respondents 'What's your biggest challenge when designing for properties with conservation constraints?' Unfortunately, phrases like "prescriptive approach", "unpragmatic & inexperienced officers", "narrow views", "inconsistent" and "lack of flexibility" were not uncommon. It wasn't just the planners causing headaches for architects, however.

A Challenging Environment

As discussed earlier in this report, budget is another 'bugbear' for designers and this was clearly evident being the next biggest challenge for architects – after planning. There was a feeling of frustration coming through with one respondent commenting that "often the funding isn't there for what really needs to be done", a sentiment echoed by many who struggled with "balancing cost with authenticity".

The Findings

Understandably, these budgetary frustrations were often directed at the client with a need to “justify costs to clients”, “balancing clients’ budgets with historical accuracy” and “convincing clients to pay for authenticity”. There was a sense that architects sometimes feel caught in the middle, “trying to please both client and Conservation Officer”, “educating the client and contractor”, or “explaining the conservation viewpoint to property owning clients”.

This delicate balance also seeped into other areas. For some architects their biggest challenge in conservation was “meeting modern performance requirements with a traditional appearance” and some honed in specifically on “achieving good thermal efficiency with an authentic look”.

For some, contractors were their biggest challenge with one architect commenting on the difficulty in “getting the client and/or contractor to understand that our specification is correct, even though they may disagree, especially if it’s expensive”.

The Future of our Built Heritage

Not surprisingly, budget came out on top when we asked architects what they believed was the ‘principal threat to preserving our historic buildings for the future’. As we’ve explored previously, cost is a key driver for many decisions around period properties and many architects felt it would prove to be a threat to such properties in the future. Many commented that skilled labour and materials may only be available at a premium, creating “an ever decreasing list of specialist contractors....resulting in specification of cheaper substandard materials due to client budget”.

Sadly, many felt that the property owners themselves could threaten period buildings, not only due to lack of budget but also “lack of maintenance”, “indifference”, “ignorance” or simply not “realising or caring about authenticity”. Contractors and developers were also highlighted by some for their uncaring attitude, “not wanting to follow specification” or being “Design & Build contractors who win jobs on very low prices, not quality of construction”.

The regulating bodies and planners didn’t get off unscathed either. After cost, they were the next most mentioned theme to be considered a threat to our built heritage. “Over-regulation”, “red tape”, “lack of imagination” were frequent comments with a few people expanding on this view, for example “Conservation Officers who are too concerned with preserving the building to allow considerations of usability and thermal efficiency to be integrated in the buildings in order to give them a new lease of life. If buildings cannot be used practically they fall into disuse more quickly and are eventually lost.”

One respondent was having a good day though, their remark that “I don’t see any relevant threat. On the contrary I believe there are only benefits”, shows that some architects believe in the system and are working successfully within it.

In Conclusion

Comment from The Institute of Historic Building Conservation

“With regard to the findings, naturally they lean towards an architect’s point of view, which is quite specific. Architects do provide an important element of historic building conservation but conservation of the historic environment is a collective effort.



We welcome that many respondents thought that preserving the historic environment was important and a team effort. We also recognise that the main threats to the historic environment among other things are lack of skills, uninformed owners, followed by capacity in the planning system and in many circumstances costs.

In our experience, owners of historic and traditional buildings are usually happy to do the right thing, once they are given the right advice and the reasons for it. To help in that, we would very much like to see the introduction of more heritage-specific content within the mainstream of construction-related training, for all relevant disciplines and trades, as that would help tackle the lack of skills at the root of the problem. The British Standard on conservation, BS 7913, should be a foundation document for any such training.

In addition, our own research makes it clear that the planning system would benefit hugely - in speed and quality - from increased conservation capacity in local authorities, as that would help dramatically in improving local knowledge and awareness of the key issues of care and maintenance.

And though cost can be a factor in the short term, the long term effects of a lack of investment in care, maintenance and improvement always means that the bills only increase, as we see in the huge charges attached to refurbishing many private and public buildings.”

Dr Sean O'Reilly, Director, IHBC

About The Institute of Historic Building Conservation

The IHBC are a membership body representing a range of conservation professionals across the sector. Although the conservation field is relatively niche, the sector in terms of its expertise is broad ranging, including architects among a variety of other professions such as conservation officers, surveyors, engineers, architectural historians, consultants to name a few.

The IHBC is providing an independent overview of the information put to us with no expert comments, ratification or endorsement of the research.



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As a company founded by an architect, we are unique in truly understanding the needs of architects.

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