



Focus on: Architecture

A demanding and intensely creative course, Architecture requires its students to hone a multitude of skills, but the rewards are great. Three Johnian architects explain why they're passionate about their vocation.



Andrew Tam (2003) – Architect, Gort Scott

It recently dawned on me that I have now spent more than a decade in architecture, although at 30 and only recently qualified, I am still a relative rookie. During my first experience of an architecture practice, in a week's work placement whilst still at school, I came across a jaded project architect, his face pallid and baggy-eyed from punishing hours clicking away in front of a computer, whose single piece of advice was to avoid architecture as a career altogether. It was clear that this was not a profession for the faint-hearted, but I quickly decided his was an unfortunate case. I am glad I never heeded his advice.

I am currently a member of Gort Scott, a growing, young studio founded in 2007 by my second-year tutors at Cambridge, Jay Gort and Fiona Scott. There are now fifteen of us, compared to just four when I joined three years ago, and being an active part of this rapid expansion is exciting. My experience so far has involved projects spanning from public space improvements and strategies with very little actual 'building' at all, to producing competition entries for an exceptional private residence in Whistler, Canada (now under construction). My colleagues share much of the design approach that shaped me as an undergraduate and continues to inform my work today. No matter what the project, it is about producing considered work through research and site analysis.

Often in this process, inspirational gems are unearthed through the social and historical make-up of a given context. During my postgraduate studies at the Architectural Association in London in 2008, I was part of a student group that designed and brought a portable cinema to the town of Lalibela, Northern Ethiopia, which was to be our site for that year's design projects. We discovered that Lalibela lacked public space and its residents had expressed a desire for public amenities, particularly a cinema. We were therefore inspired to design a travelling cinema that could provide a place for us to engage with locals and learn about life in Lalibela.

In many ways, the Cinema Lalibela project taught me that realising an architecture project involves much more than what one thinks of as 'designing'. We had just three weeks to conceive, fabricate, fund and organise the logistics and permissions for the cinema from scratch. These seemingly impossible tasks were successfully carried out only because our project team of eight collaborated so well – dividing tasks so that individual responsibilities were clear, and creating a defined programme of



Photo by Johnny Gao

milestones and deadlines. I am sure all architects would agree that teamwork and organisational nous are key parts of our daily work.

It is in my nature to be restless and interested in a multiplicity of things, so architecture's great variety suits me very well. Ultimately, I am drawn by the discipline's social design aspects, and I look forward to continuing to explore how I can create spaces that help communities, from London to Lalibela, to thrive.

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Kim Loddo (1993) – Architect and Director, Inglis Badrashi Loddo Architects (IBLA)

Architecture was not a career path I had even thought about, until I did a few weeks' work experience with a local architect in Gibraltar (where I am from) aged 16. I was excited by the promise of a job which was both creative and practical, and so I chose to study the subject at university.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Cambridge, and followed my BA with a Diploma, and then an MPhil in the Philosophy and History of Architecture. I spent a year in the US studying at Harvard and MIT on a scholarship, and after graduating I taught architectural design at Cambridge part-time. This role was challenging but fulfilling, and allowed me to develop an interest in architectural education, alongside practice. I now serve on the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) board responsible for validating architecture courses across the UK, and am also an external examiner at Birmingham City University.

I met my partner at Cambridge and, together with a friend, we started

IBLA in 2000. We are now an award-winning small practice of nine, based in central London, and have completed projects ranging from domestic extensions to housing schemes of 65 units. We take pride in delivering a quality finish, on time and on budget, and a lot of our work is repeat business. I am responsible for overseeing the detailed design, implementation and coordination of our projects, and run between five and ten at any one time.

At our scale of project, we are involved in every aspect, from the writing of the brief to the selection of furnishings. This is very different from working on multi-million-pound projects in a large practice, where one can spend a year or more working on a single element of a building, such as the window package, and never meet the end user or the builders.

I love my job, even on cold, wet days when I'm knee-deep in mud or halfway up a scaffold. For me, there is no greater satisfaction than standing in a space we have designed, and seeing it being used as intended. I enjoy the intimacy and intensity of the process of designing for an individual, and the struggle to create design innovation out of the everyday. Good architecture is a collaborative effort, and I believe that successful projects come from architects, engineers, builders and clients working together, under the



A house refurbishment in Shepherd's Hill, London, by IBLA

architect's lead. As such, one needs to be personable, persuasive and empathetic, and be able to talk to anyone – from the roofer to the most important client.

I have two children, and currently work four days a week. I will return to full-time in a few years, and feel very lucky to be able to do this. Architecture is hard but rewarding, and having your own practice is doubly so. No-one teaches you how to run a business at architecture school. But my partners and I like working for ourselves, and being ultimately in control of what we do, so it seemed like a natural step.

I love my job, even on cold, wet days when I'm knee-deep in mud or halfway up a scaffold.



Jonathan Austin (1977) – Principal, Austin Architects

I once bristled at the idea, expressed by a visiting lecturer in my final undergraduate year, that architects' careers often come together later in life. In the confident design studio atmosphere of the Department of Architecture, it was a discouraging forecast and I resolved to start with something different.

Rather than joining an architect's office on graduation, I worked with a surveyor in rural Norfolk designing the restoration and conversion of a large country house. The contrast with academic life was profound. Projects like a stair or a kitchen, even a drainage system, would be designed, then built, often at a fast clip. Working daily with a team of different tradesmen, I began to understand the time-honoured tussle between designer and builder. At twenty-one, the experience was invaluable.

Five years later, I was in a very different environment at a large design firm in Boston, Massachusetts. Founded by landscape architects, the firm's ethos of collaboration across design disciplines was a revelation. As a result of projects at Cornell, Harvard, and universities in New Hampshire and South Carolina, I gravitated towards work on academic

campuses, not just for their many design opportunities, but also for their social complexity. I drew constantly on my own collegiate experiences, such the subtle social aspects of living on a staircase (versus a corridor) or eating in Hall (versus a cafeteria), as well as the physical aspects; the walk from Merton Hall, where I lived as a graduate student, through Cripps and New Court, across the river to the front gate of St John's, then by bike to Scroope Terrace along King's Parade, is about as environmentally rich as it gets.

Eventually the constant travel, on top of designing projects in a large firm, became tiresome and I decided to form a small regional practice, where I could drive to projects, not fly, and, if possible, walk. The result, Austin Architects in Cambridge, Massachusetts, provides a varied professional life with a range of academic, non-profit and commercial clients. On one day recently I started early with carpenters and masons at a school construction site, progressed to a planning meeting with deans at Harvard Law School, and then went back to the office to work on a signage project, finish a business proposal and help get invoices out the door.

On the way home I dropped into our first restaurant, opened in 2015, for a drink, and afterwards reviewed photographs we commissioned of summer performances on a public plaza, part of a historic mill redevelopment completed in 2007.

Architecture requires a constant fluency in a broad and evolving range of skills: design, technical, managerial, legal, business and not least personal, especially learning from my younger colleagues. Now in my fifties, I realise some of that lecturer's wisdom. My thirty-odd years of accumulated experience, making places and spaces, has simply fuelled a desire to do more! ■

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The Community Plaza at Whitin Mill, Massachussetts, redeveloped by Austin Architects