



H
E
L
P
W
A
N
T
E
D

Are you an architect in crisis?
Do not despair. Relief is under
way in the form of countless
self-help books.

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)

There’s no shame in needing help, only in asking for it. No problem is so big it can’t be swallowed – no question so burning it can’t be left to raze the inner linings of our stomachs. What’s a little heartburn, compared with the sting of admitting confusion or doubt? But an architect can be stoic and noncommittal for only so long. Eventually a client gets irate or the sheriff delivers a subpoena. Sometimes an architect needs something more than a handful of Valium to deal with trouble and uncertainty. Sometimes an architect needs a self-help book. And, judging by the relatively large number of self-help books that target architects, that last ‘sometimes’ comes around a little more often than one might like to imagine. But what architect hasn’t asked herself: If I own a company, should I get a lawyer? Or: Is marriage stifling my creativity?’ (Yes, and yes.) In researching over a dozen self-help books, I read about hundreds of hypothetical problems and proposed solutions that keep hypothetical architects awake at night. The following are some of the more pertinent or otherwise startling examples I discovered along the way.

Problem: My clients and co-workers are needy and distracting.

SOLUTION: In *Time Management for Architects and Designers*, Thorbjoern Mann addresses the various distractions that befall architects and offers solutions for dealing with them. That said, Mann reserves a remarkably small amount of ink for the internet – what? No sound advice for the architect who juggles over 7,000 friends on Facebook? However, Mann does offer bitter medicine to those architects who still interact with ‘real’ friends. He writes: ‘Calling people distractions and time-wasters sounds very negative. “These are very nice people!” you say. They are competent, cooperative and friendly. But that is precisely the problem.’ In other words, nice people eat your productivity and come back for seconds; build a strong social web, and you’ll only find yourself entangled in it. You know, Mann should really be writing self-help books for dictators . . . For the distracted architect, however, Mann suggests some no-brainer techniques: scheduling no-play periods, letting all phone calls go to voice mail and putting on headphones – the international sign for ‘do not disturb’. Still, Mann acknowledges that people are dense and insensitive, so despite an architect’s best efforts, distraction is bound to come tittering along anyway. In such events, Mann suggests that the architect simply ‘smile’. A euphemism, as I see it, for: feign interest and pretend that your ulcer isn’t bleeding. In the age of ‘speak up’ and ‘voice your opinion’, I find Mann’s defence of the passive-aggressive smile brave and insightful.

‘Don’t let your irritation show,’ he writes. ‘This isn’t a matter of rewarding or encouraging the person who interrupted you, but rather a way of preventing the interruption from making you irritable and poisoning your own attitude. That irritability will last much longer than the interruption itself, even if you are thick-skinned enough to have no guilt or hesitation about being rude to interrupters.’ Thank

you, Thorbjoern Mann. You’ve just given a voice to the quiet architect who balks at the thought of confronting clients and co-workers. I assume it goes without saying that it’s still okay to tell your devoted spouse and children to leave you the hell alone: Can’t you see I’m working, damn it?

Source: Thorbjoern Mann, *Time Management for Architects and Designers: Challenges and Remedies*, 2003

Problem: I want to start my own design firm, but I keep having panic attacks.

SOLUTION: Dedicated to ‘all those designers willing to try’, *How to Start and Operate Your Own Design Firm* by Albert W. Rubeling, Jr. takes an architect from the anxieties of starting a firm to the loneliness of being at the top of one. A common thread running through this architect’s professional life cycle is incapacitating fear. ‘Every day you will be required to manage risk, fear, and guilt,’ writes Rubeling. ‘Every decision that you make, from the moment you choose to get up in the morning to that late-night moment when you decide to “call it quits for the day,” will have risk associated with it.’ Quite the pep talk, Dr Optimism. So what should the architect do, short of enrolling in inpatient anxiety treatment? According to Rubeling, the architect must ‘set goals and remain focused on them. Success is built on good work habits, routines, and goals.’ Rubeling then offers pages of model objectives, habits and affirmations for architects, such as: arrive at the office every morning at the same time, attempt to eat lunch at the same time every day, eat breakfast every morning and ‘plan the use of the prime time of your practice (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) with great care’. He goes on to tell architects that they should limit working days to 16 hours, ‘set appointments with yourself to study and deal with administrative issues’, and ‘market, market, market’. The one thing Rubeling maintains an architect should never do is to make publication an ultimate goal. ‘Big deal!’ writes Rubeling. ‘There is more to life than having your creation documented in a magazine.’ Mm, I don’t know about that one, Rubeling. Is there more to life than having your creation documented in a magazine?

Source: Albert W. Rubeling, Jr., *How to Start and Operate Your Own Design Firm: A Guide for Interior Designers and Architects*, 1994 (first edition)

Problem: I’m obsessed with my bad ideas, but who’s to say they’re bad, anyway?

SOLUTION: Roger K. Lewis takes a tough-love approach in his candid (indeed) guide for architects, *Architect? A Candid Guide to the Profession*. In the book, he offers such stark truisms as: ‘If and when you marry, consider its impact on your career, and

your career’s impact on your marriage; there are many divorced architects!’ In a later section of the book, Lewis makes an effort to ‘describe what many architects are really like’ and breaks architects down into ‘types’, outlining the largely humiliating characteristics of each subgroup and offering advice on how not to fall prey to them. Among the types of architects Lewis cites are The Artiste, The Prima Donna, The Intellectual, The Critic, The Hustler and The Poet-Philosopher. But the type that made me do the longest double take was The Anal-compulsive. Lewis warns of the dangers inherent to this type: ‘Anal-compulsive architects sometimes perpetrate ghastly architecture when driven by personal obsession with their own bad ideas. They may be stylistically compulsive or compulsive about certain building materials or colors, despite their appropriateness. However, being obsessed should not be confused with thoughtfully taking and defending a position, the latter being crucial for the architect. Indeed, a very fine line separates vigorous advocacy from compulsive defensiveness, but it is an important distinction.’ Should Lewis care to write a sequel, I suggest he call it: Architects Who Have Low Self-Esteem After Reading *Architect? A Candid Guide to the Profession*.

Source: Roger K. Lewis, *Architect? A Candid Guide to the Profession*, 1985 (first edition)

Problem: For once, I’d like a client to come to me.

SOLUTION: I happened upon a heavily underlined copy of William B. Foxhall’s *Techniques of Successful Practice*, and nowhere in the book did the pencil markings grow thicker than in the paragraphs titled: ‘How to get the client to come to you’. Easy, guy. Don’t do anything erratic with that sharp pencil of yours. Granted, it’s a touchy subject, which Foxhall acknowledges. This may be one of the most desirable forms of client contact for architects, he says, but it’s also the hardest to achieve. ‘Most firms who enjoy a large number of unsolicited contacts received them as a result of satisfied clients and one or two well known projects. In fact, virtually every successful “design-oriented” practice can trace its reputation back to one or two early successful projects.’ Which begs the question: What separates the men from the boys – the early project from the *successful* early project? It’s not form, not function, not the impeccable good taste of the lead designer but, writes Foxhall, an ‘effective public relations program’. That is, ‘articles in the trade journals of the target client groups, newspaper features, places on client convention panels’ and so on. But there’s a catch: ‘Too often a firm’s public relations program is aimed at the design profession’s trade journals, which are useful in building a firm’s general reputation, but other architects are not clients. So if your building is published in an architectural journal, see that the prestige of that event is made known to the client group as well as to your peers.’ Which is to say that if you want to design an avant-garde cat shelter make sure your name gets print time in *Cat Fancy* and not just in *Architecture Digest*. Play the field.

Make yourself look available and interesting, without looking insular. This is the architect’s equivalent of the kind of dating advice published for teenage girls: Get him to dig you. Of course, a PR representative might be helpful in playing matchmaker, but Foxhall warns that ‘outside consultants are worth their fees if – and only if – they write well, understand design and construction, and know a target client group well’. And here the underlines grow denser still. Bad experience, I take it?

Source: William B. Foxhall, ed., *Techniques of Successful Practice for Architects and Engineers*, 1974 (first edition)

Problem: I’m so sophisticated and erudite that nobody understands what I’m saying.

SOLUTION: Written by architect and urban designer Matthew Frederick, *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School* is an easy read and a good present for your nephew or the kid next door who’s working towards a degree in architecture but, pressurized by pushy parents, is considering a switch to business school – and even though it’s none of your business, you don’t want him to become one of those ‘those guys’, so you give him a book that makes architecture seem hip and worthwhile. Between heartening Louis Kahn quotes (‘Architecture is the thoughtful making of space’) and sketches of Zaha Hadid (to drive home the point that ‘architects are late bloomers’ who often don’t ‘hit their professional stride until around age 50’), Frederick imparts the kind of architectural wisdom that one would hope to hear from a favourite professor, preferably one played by Robin Williams in a Hollywood film. Among the best advice Frederick delivers is: ‘If you can’t explain your ideas to your grandmother in terms that she understands, you don’t know your subject well enough.’ He goes on to write that ‘some architects, instructors, and students use overly complex (and often meaningless!) language in an attempt to gain recognition and respect. You might have to let some of them get away with it, but don’t imitate them. Professionals who know their subject area well know how to communicate their knowledge to others in everyday language.’ Elsewhere in the book, Frederick, apparently on a crusade to weed-whack hyper-intellectual pretension from architecture, also advises the architect to ‘manage your ego’. On a more practical level, however, Frederick has a suggestion that no other book I picked up offered: ‘Roll your drawings for transport or storage with the image side facing out. This will help them stay flat when you lay them on a table or pin them to a wall for display.’ Well. Somebody had to say it. ◀

Source: Matthew Frederick, *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School*, 2007

Corriette
Schoenaerts, Heart
and Mind (Part 2),
2011.

*'There is more to life
than having your
creation documented in
a magazine'*

