

The Broken Promise of Architectural Practice in Belgium

Structural precarity, false self-employment, fausse liberte, and the sunk-cost trap in the Belgian architectural labour market

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ABSTRACT

This report looks at how the architecture profession actually works in Belgium: how it is organised, what the law requires, and why so many young architects struggle to make a living. It draws on Belgian and European survey data, internship rules, media investigations, and original work from the SBD Lab. I argue that traditional architectural practice in Belgium is fragile. It pays badly, it trains far more people than it can employ well, and it is held together by an idea about the profession that does not match the reality. I call this idea *fausse liberte*, a felt sense of freedom in independent practice that actually hides financial insecurity and a weak bargaining position. I trace this back to a career choice that many people make around age eighteen, on emotional grounds rather than a clear look at the numbers, and connect it to research on how young people form their identity. I also look at how architecture schools keep an idealised image of the profession alive, generation after generation. Graduates who instead use their technical training, in building simulation, digital coordination, energy performance, or public-sector work, tend to earn more, have steadier jobs, and build careers that last. Even within practice itself, the same split shows up: students who take real risk and start their own company usually do better than students who stay employed in a narrow technical role for years. This report names these patterns, explains them plainly, and suggests a different way to think about the choice.

1. The Myth of the Architect as Aesthetic Creator

Architecture is misunderstood, by the public and by students themselves. The image most people carry, the creative visionary, the master of form, the person behind beautiful buildings, is not false. But it only tells a small part of the story. It describes a small slice of what licensed architects in Belgium actually spend their time doing, and an even smaller slice of what the market is willing to pay for.

A more accurate way to describe an architect is as a coordinator. This is someone who brings together many technical fields, follows building regulations, keeps a structure safe and functional, and makes sure a client's ideas can actually be built within a legal budget and a real construction timeline. In Belgium, the architect is legally responsible for the structural soundness of what gets built. The Ordre des Architectes de Belgique, the professional body that regulates the title, defines the job this way. But the culture around the profession keeps sending a different message: that architecture is mainly about creativity and beauty, a craft closer to art than to engineering.

This gap between what an architect actually does and what people imagine an architect does is not just a branding problem. It shapes what students choose to study, what they expect to earn, and how they react later when the market does not match their expectations.

Architecture is a technical, coordinating job. The idea that it is mainly about beauty and art is not a harmless myth. It shapes who chooses the profession, what they are willing to put up with, and what they think they deserve to be paid.

Compare this to engineering. Civil engineering graduates who join large firms like Tractebel, BESIX, or Sweco Belgium know what the market pays, and they negotiate accordingly. They do not accept low wages out of a sense of duty to the craft. They work inside large companies with clear pay scales and standards. That culture makes low pay and fake self-employment unlikely. Architecture's culture makes both of these things normal.

2. Historical Origins: Two Roots, Now Merged

The confusion described above is not an accident. It comes from a real historical split, one that Belgian institutions merged on paper in 2010 without ever merging in spirit. Many people assume architecture only recently became a university subject. That is only half true, and the two halves point in different directions.

The engineering route, called *ingénieur-architecte* and later *ingénieur civil architecte*, was created inside universities from the start. It goes back to a decree in 1838 that created state engineering schools in Ghent and Liège. The engineer-architect qualification appeared soon after, by 1843, and took its modern shape at Ghent in 1862. From day one, this was a university degree grounded in science.

The pure *architecte* route, by contrast, stayed largely outside universities for more than a hundred years. The first architecture diploma was awarded by the Académie de Bruxelles in 1896. The title of *architecte* only became legally protected in 1939. Training mostly happened in art-school-style institutes, not universities.

The year 2010 did not lower any standards. It marks the year the non-university institutes were folded into universities, not the year a non-university degree first became possible. Seven of these institutes joined UCLouvain, ULB, ULiège, and UMons. Since then, every architecture diploma in Belgium has technically been a university degree. But the older split between a science-based engineering path and an art-school-based design path never really disappeared. It still shapes how the two kinds of programmes feel from the inside, even though the paperwork says they are the same.

Year	What happened	Source
1838	A decree creates state engineering schools in Ghent and Liège, placing civil-engineering training inside universities.	UPA-BUA, Historique de la profession
1843	The title of <i>ingénieur-architecte</i> first appears, inside the engineering faculties.	UPA-BUA, Historique de la profession
1862	A separate <i>ingénieur-architecte</i> programme is created at Ghent, the direct ancestor of today's <i>ingénieur civil architecte</i> .	Cairn.info, 2014

Year	What happened	Source
1896	The first <i>architecte</i> diploma (as opposed to engineer-architect) is awarded by the Académie de Bruxelles, outside the university system.	UPA-BUA, Historique de la profession
1936	The architecture diploma gains legal recognition.	Cairn.info, 2014
1939	A law protects the title and the practice of <i>architecte</i> .	Cairn.info; Moniteur belge
1949	Architecture training shortens from 7 to 5 years.	Cairn.info, 2014
1971	The Ordre des architectes itself proposes bringing architecture education fully into universities.	Cairn.info, 2014
2009-2010	All 7 non-university architecture institutes join UCLouvain, ULB, ULiège, and UMONS.	Cairn.info; Euroguidance France

Sources: UPA-BUA, Historique de la profession (upa-bua-arch.be); Cairn.info, 'Sous l'horizon de l'Université. Un chapitre de l'enseignement de l'architecture en Belgique (1980-1990)', revue Clara, 2014; Euroguidance France, Les études en architecture.

This history matters because it explains why two very different identities, the technical coordinator and the aesthetic creator, still sit inside the same profession. One lineage grew up around calculation, regulation, and liability. The other grew up around the art academy and the design studio. A decree merged them on paper, but the culture and teaching style of the studio-based track never really changed to reflect the economic reality of the engineering track. A student today, even in a fully university-based programme, absorbs the studio's artistic self-image far more thoroughly than they absorb the engineering track's discipline about money and market realities.

3. The Belgian Architecture Office: Fragmented, Small, and Structurally Constrained

Belgian architecture is made up mostly of small, scattered practices. A large European survey covering 28,000 architects across 29 countries found that 46% of architects own or lead their own small firm. Private housing makes up more than half of all architectural work. Across Europe, the whole architecture sector generates about EUR 26 billion a year, against a construction market worth EUR 2,600 billion. That is a market share of just 1%.

Source: Architects' Council of Europe (ACE), The Architectural Profession in Europe, Sector Study 2024. April 2025. Data from 28,000 respondents across 29 countries.

Belgium follows this pattern and makes it worse. Most Belgian architecture firms serve middle-class residential clients: single homes, small apartment buildings, renovations, and extensions. These clients care about price and shop around. Since the European Commission scrapped fixed fee scales in Belgium in 2003, architects have competed almost entirely on price, which tends to push fees down over time. As architecture writer Enver Peeters documented, fees have dropped over the past twenty years even as the amount of regulation architects must handle has grown.

Source: Peeters E., 'Je bent jong en wilt architect worden? Kan, voor een hongerloon', *Architectura.be*, 2023. Altomonte S. (ed.), *EDUCATE State of the Art of Environmental Sustainability in Professional Practice*, 2012.

This has real consequences. A small firm serving residential clients works on thin margins. Design fees for a single private home usually run 8 to 12% of the construction budget. For a EUR 300,000 renovation, that is EUR 24,000 to 36,000 in gross revenue, out of which the firm has to cover overhead, insurance, software, outside consultants, and, if it has any staff, salaries. Not much is left over for labour.

Some other countries have avoided this trap. In the Netherlands, large housing developers commission the same building types over and over, which lets architecture firms invest in better tools, deeper technical skill, and fair pay. Danish firms have built reputations for high-value public buildings that command premium fees. British firms have built internationally recognised brands. Belgium's tradition of custom-designed, one-off homes for individual clients has not found an equivalent way to scale up.

The outcome is a sector that trains more architects than it can absorb, while paying too little to support the ones it does absorb.

4. Statutory Status: Independent, Salaried, or Civil Servant

4.1 Three Ways to Practise

Belgian rules recognise exactly three ways an architect can be legally set up: independent (running your own practice), civil servant (working for government), or salaried employee. Each comes with its own rules, and the three do not mix easily. An architect cannot usually be both a civil servant and an independent practitioner at the same time, apart from narrow exceptions like teaching or working on one's own home.

In practice, working independently is still the most common route into the profession. Data collected across Europe shows that 35% of European architects work as sole independents, and the share is even higher in Belgium and France. Meanwhile, salaried private-sector jobs for architects have been shrinking across the EU, falling from 23% to 18% of the profession between 2020 and 2022.

Source: MAF Assurances, 'Être architecte en Europe', summarising the *Conseil des architectes d'Europe (CAE) sector study*, 2022 edition.

4.2 What Belgian Law Actually Requires of a Firm

A 1939 law, updated in 2006 and again in 2024, controls who can own and manage an architecture firm. It says nothing about how the firm's staff must be paid. The 2024 update relaxed the ownership rules.

Rule	Share owned by architects	Share of the board that must be architects	Source
2006 rule (until June 2024)	At least 60%	Every manager and director acting for the firm had to be a registered architect	jpvergauwe.be; Loi du 20 février 1939
2024 rule (from June 2024)	At least 51%	A simple majority of the board; non-architects can now also sit on the board	Monard Law; HV-A

Sources: Loi du 20 février 1939 sur la protection du titre et de la profession d'architecte (consolidated text, ejustice.just.fgov.be); jpvergauwe.be, 'La loi du 20 février 1939 a changé'; Monard Law and HV-A, commentaries on the Law of 3 May 2024.

So the accurate summary is this: most of the ownership and board seats in a Belgian architecture firm must belong to registered architects, 61% before 2024 and 51% since. That gives architects control over their own firms, and it is something the profession lobbied hard to loosen. But it says nothing about how well the firm pays the staff and trainees who do the day-to-day drafting and coordination work. Owning the firm has not translated into better pay for the people working inside it.

5. The Stage as a Labour Extraction Mechanism

5.1 How the Stage Works

To become a licensed architect in Belgium, graduates must complete a two-year supervised internship, called the *stage*. In theory, this is a period of guided professional training. In practice, for many graduates, it works as a cheap source of labour for small firms that could not otherwise afford to hire someone qualified.

A *stagiaire*, the trainee doing the internship, can work either as an employee or as an independent contractor. Most work as independents. That means the trainee pays for their own professional status out of pocket: business registration, quarterly social security contributions of around 20 to 22% of their income, VAT paperwork, professional insurance, and other overhead. None of this is paid by the *maître de stage*, the supervising architect. The trainee is effectively selling a fully qualified professional service, but negotiating from a much weaker position than the person hiring them.

The Ordre des Architectes sets minimum hourly rates by region. In Brussels and Brabant wallon, the minimum has been EUR 16.50 per hour before tax since 2017. In Luxembourg province, it is EUR 14.65. There is no single national minimum. Once social contributions, insurance, and overhead are subtracted, what a trainee actually takes home falls well below these already low hourly rates, and often below the minimum wage that a regular employee of the same age would earn.

Sources: Ordre des Architectes de Belgique, FAQ Rémunération des stagiaires (ordredesarchitectes.be). Meetern.be, 'Internship pay in Belgium 2025', March 2026.

Flemish newspapers have drawn a sharp conclusion from these numbers. De Standaard and De Morgen both reported on a 2024 wage survey of more than 600 freelance architectural workers in Flanders and Brussels, using headlines that have since become well known in the construction sector.

'Highly educated professionals earning less than the minimum wage of a bicycle courier.' — De Morgen, October 2024

BRUZZ, the Brussels public broadcaster, documented testimonies from architects who left the profession after years of unstable independent work, citing disguised self-employment, long hours, and no realistic path to financial stability.

Sources: De Morgen, 'Hooggeschoolden die minder verdienen dan het minimumloon van een fietskoerier: waarom zoveel jonge architecten er de brui

aan geven’, 5 October 2024. *De Standaard*, ‘Jonge architecten verdienen minder dan een fietskoerier’, October 2024. *BRUZZ*, ‘Jonge architecten steeds vaker sociaal uitgebuit: verdienen minder dan pakjeskoeriers’, 25 March 2024. *BAU vzw / Dear Architects*, *Loonbarometer 2024, Vlaanderen en Brussel* (deararchitects.be).

5.2 Fausse Indépendance: What the Data Actually Show

A large 2018 survey of professional satisfaction among architects and designers, with 1,843 respondents, found something striking: architects feel deep personal pride in their work, but score among the lowest of any profession studied when it comes to pay, security, and career progress. Among the findings, 7% of solo independent architects said they could not make ends meet financially at all. The survey’s authors gave this pattern a name: *fausse indépendance*, false independence. Architects are technically self-employed, but in practice they often work under the same kind of control a salaried employee would face, minus the social protections and benefits a real job provides.

Source: Architectura.be, ‘Le secteur de l’architecture a un sérieux problème de rémunération’, reporting on Mart Willekens (UGent) survey, NAV Architects’ Congress, Ghent, 2018.

A separate 2022 study collected testimonies describing trainee pay of roughly 1,000 to 1,600 euros a month, rising only slowly, a legal minimum around 17 euros an hour, and work weeks of up to 60 hours in some firms, with unpaid overnight sessions treated as a normal rite of passage rather than a red flag. The same study, drawing on comparative French data, found that between 10% and 20% of young graduates leave the profession within five years of starting agency work, and that the share of architects in serious financial difficulty grew sharply between 2013 and 2020.

Source: Leblatier E., ‘Architecte: du prestige de la profession à la réalité du terrain’, Analyse n. 08/2022, Smart/APMC, published with the support of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.

5.3 Fausse Liberté: The Emotional Choice and Its Psychological Roots

The pattern above, technical independence paired with real dependence, is not only a legal and financial condition. It is kept alive by a story people tell themselves, which I call *fausse liberté*, false freedom: the felt experience that independent, creative architectural work means freedom, freedom from a boss, freedom to design according to your own taste, freedom to build a body of work that is truly yours, even though the daily reality is depending on a client’s mood, competing on price, dealing with unpredictable cash flow, and never being able to say no to unpaid extra hours. The word people use for their situation is “independent.” What it actually describes is dependent and unstable, often no different from working for someone else, just without any of the protections that come with a real job.

Fausse liberté is the belief that you chose your own freedom, held onto precisely because admitting otherwise would mean admitting the original choice was not what it seemed to be.

This story does not begin when someone enters the job market. It begins earlier, in the decision to study architecture at all. The evidence in Section 5.2 is telling: pride in the work stays consistently high even where pay, security, and career progress are among the worst measured for any profession in Belgium. That gap between how architects feel about their work and how the market rewards it is hard to explain with economics alone. A better explanation is that the original decision to enter the profession was, for many people, an emotional one: made around age eighteen, based on love of design, family influence, or the appeal of the title, rather than a clear-eyed comparison of legal status, realistic income, and the shaky economics of small residential practice. An identity formed at eighteen can survive years of clear evidence that it does not pay, in the late twenties and thirties, which itself shows how much of what is being defended is an identity, not a career plan.

There is a further explanation worth mentioning carefully. Psychologists who study identity formation describe something called a moratorium: a socially accepted period where a young adult puts off resolving a hard identity question. Choosing a combined degree, like Belgium's *ingénieur civil architecte*, may work for some students as a way to delay, rather than actually make, the harder choice between engineering and architecture. No study has tested this idea specifically for this Belgian population, so it should be read as an interpretation rather than a proven fact. What can be said with more confidence is the pattern this idea predicts, and which the rest of this report's evidence already shows on its own: a habit of delay that repeats itself. The graduate who, at thirty-five, still cannot leave a struggling architectural practice, even when better-paid alternatives clearly exist, is in this reading repeating, with higher stakes, the same delay first made at eighteen.

None of this takes away from what graduates actually go through, or suggests it is their fault. The structural problems described in Sections 3, 5, and 7 are real, and no amount of personal maturity fixes a business model that cannot pay fair wages. But fixing the structure and helping people see clearly are not substitutes for each other. Growing up professionally, in this narrow sense, means becoming willing to look again at a decision made at eighteen using the information you have at thirty, instead of defending the original choice harder as the evidence against it piles up. Some architects say, informally, that they turn down salaried consultancy or management jobs that would clearly pay better and offer more security, because they value the independence and creative freedom of running their own practice. That pattern fits the *fausse liberté* idea closely: it is the feeling of freedom, not the actual financial benefit of the alternative, that people are protecting. This particular claim is based on informal reports and would benefit from real research.

6. Three Portraits: What the Stage Actually Produces

The three profiles below are composites, built from documented testimonies, media investigations, and a 2024 wage survey. They represent types of career path, not specific identifiable people, though each is grounded in real, repeated patterns.

Portrait 1: Ten years of passion, still at home

A graduate of a five-year Belgian architecture programme completes her two-year stage as a freelance collaborator in a small Brussels residential office. After social contributions and overhead, her real hourly pay works out to under EUR 12 net. She handles permit paperwork, produces construction drawings, and coordinates with engineers and contractors, working 45 to 50 hours a week. After two years she becomes a licensed architect and opens her own solo practice. Projects come slowly. Her middle-class clients negotiate hard

on fees: a kitchen renovation, a rear extension, a small apartment. Invoices get paid late. Her monthly take-home income averages EUR 1,400 to 1,800, depending on the year. She shares an apartment with a friend. She has no savings, no pension plan, no car. Ten years after graduating, she still moves back in with her parents during slow periods, returning to Liège or Antwerp when her income cannot cover Brussels rent. Her portfolio is real and often beautiful. Her financial future has no clear horizon. 'I already invested everything in this. I cannot stop now.'

Portrait 2: The decade that ended in surrender

A graduate of a Flemish architecture school completes his stage in a mid-size Ghent practice, working as a freelancer. He specialises in sustainable renovation and becomes genuinely skilled at Belgium's energy performance rules and insulation detailing. For six years he works for a string of small offices, never getting a real employment contract, never receiving meal vouchers, never building up any pension. He applies for salaried jobs repeatedly. Firms want freelancers instead, because hiring a freelancer avoids the social security costs of a real employee. By year eight, in his mid-thirties, with a young family and an income that has barely moved since his stage, he makes the choice a growing number of Belgian architects make. He joins a technical consultancy in Ghent as a building physics engineer. His salary is EUR 3,400 a month before tax, plus a company car, meal vouchers, and full insurance. He never goes back to architectural practice. 'I gave it everything. The profession gave nothing back.'

Portrait 3: The one who made it, by leaving architecture

A graduate of ULiège's Ingénieur Civil Architecte programme completes her stage at a firm in Wallonia, then, on a former professor's advice, changes direction. She joins a large engineering consultancy in Brussels as a digital coordinator, working with Building Information Modelling (BIM), a system for planning construction digitally in detail before anything is built. Within three years she becomes a BIM manager, earns a professional certification, and leads the digital planning for a EUR 40 million hospital extension. Five years after graduating, she earns EUR 4,800 a month before tax, with standard benefits. She uses her architectural training every day, reading drawings, coordinating structure and space, working between architects and engineers, but she never signs a project as an architect and never registers with the Ordre. 'People ask me if I am sad I am not an architect. I ask them if they are sad they earn half what I earn for the same education.'

6.1 Four Documented Testimonies

A 2022 study collected first-person accounts that show the same patterns from a different angle. These are four individual stories, not a statistical sample, summarised here in plain language rather than quoted directly.

A young woman who left an architecture bachelor's programme after three years says the normal practice of unpaid all-night work sessions was the main reason she left, and remembers being exhausted enough that it affected a part-time childcare job she relied on to

pay for her studies. She retrained in site management and now works as a construction supervisor.

A trainee in Liège was paid 1,300 euros net a month for more than 40 hours of weekly work, never received the pay review he was owed every six months, and describes feeling unable to push back with his supervisor. He left after one year, citing a stressful work environment, and now works for a Brussels city government office, where he feels properly valued.

Another trainee in Liège describes independent-contractor status as the only realistic way into private practice, accepted pay below the legal minimum for her first six months, and says money and job status now weigh more heavily on her career decisions than the creative satisfaction that first drew her to the field.

A French graduate who could not find a paid position after graduating accepted an almost-unpaid internship at 525 euros a month, against a 530-euro rent, and describes the embarrassment of paying an informal go-between just to secure a training placement once she was no longer officially a student. Her situation reflects French rules rather than Belgian ones, but the underlying hardship matches the Belgian stories above.

Source: Leblatier E., 'Architecte: du prestige de la profession à la réalité du terrain', Analyse n. 08/2022, Smart/APMC.

7. The Business Model Is Not Sustainable

Small Belgian architecture firms serving residential clients are financially fragile. Fees have shrunk in real terms since fixed pricing was scrapped in 2003. Meanwhile the paperwork architects must handle, energy certificates, accessibility studies, fire safety files, digital submission requirements, has grown a lot over the same period, eating up billable hours without any matching rise in pay.

Many firms have responded by relying on trainees and freelancers instead of hiring real staff. This makes sense for any one firm trying to survive, but it damages the sector as a whole. It produces low wages, disguised self-employment, no real path for career growth, and a field where people leave before they build up the experience the sector actually needs.

Some Northern European markets have escaped this trap through scale and partnership with developers. In the Netherlands, large housing developers commission the same housing types repeatedly, which lets architecture firms invest in quality and better pay. Danish firms have built strong reputations in high-value public buildings that earn premium fees. British firms have built globally recognised brands. Belgium's tradition of one-off, custom-designed homes has not found an equivalent path to scale.

Meanwhile, large engineering firms in Belgium, names like Tractebel, BESIX, Sweco Belgium, InGensia, and SECO, are growing. They outsource routine drawing and modelling work, sometimes to firms abroad, while keeping the high-value project management and technical certification work in-house. These firms actively want to hire people trained as *ingénieur civil architecte*, because that training combines spatial and technical skill. They pay market salaries, offer real benefits, and support career growth. They are not held back by the low fees that limit small residential practices.

Sources: ACE Sector Study 2024. Architectura.be, Peeters E., 2023. ULiège Urban and Environmental Engineering FAQ (uee.uliege.be, 2025).

8. Those Who Make It: The Engineering and Consultancy Pathway

The record from ULiège's own Ingénieur Civil Architecte programme is instructive. Only 40% of graduates work at an architecture firm within their first ten years after

graduation. The other 60% work in engineering consultancy, project management, urban planning, government, or research. The programme reports that all graduates who are actively job-hunting find work within three months.

Graduates who use their technical training, in digital coordination, energy compliance, structural engineering, fire safety, acoustics, or life cycle carbon analysis, consistently earn more than those who stick to traditional architectural practice.

The pay gap is real and it grows. A newly graduated engineer-architect at a Belgian consultancy earns around EUR 2,800 to 3,500 a month before tax, plus a company car, meal vouchers, and full insurance. A trainee architect freelancing at the Brussels minimum wage of EUR 16.50 an hour for a 40-hour week earns roughly EUR 2,640 before tax, and considerably less after social contributions and overhead are subtracted.

After five years, the gap widens further. A senior digital coordination manager or building physics engineer in Flanders or Brussels earns EUR 3,500 to 5,500 a month before tax. An architect with five years of independent residential practice is unlikely to match that, unless they have built an unusually strong client base.

The consultancy path also builds up something a residential practice usually cannot: professional certifications, references on large public projects, and an international network. These assets carry forward and open new doors. The portfolio of a small residential practice tends to stay local, smaller in scale, and harder to leverage into the next opportunity.

9. Two Cohorts: The Entrepreneurial Path and the Employed Trap

The split between engineering and traditional practice is not the whole story. A second divide runs right through practice itself, and it deserves just as much attention.

Some graduates who stay in practice take a very different path from the ones in Section 6. They take real risk early. They start their own company, often doing renovation, retrofit, or small-scale design and construction, and they run it themselves. They set their own prices, build their own client relationships, and carry the financial exposure of a business owner instead of a freelancer working under someone else. Some of these ventures fail. But the ones that survive tend to grow fast, because their founders learn the market directly, adapt quickly, and keep the value they create instead of handing most of it to an employer.

Set against this is a second group: graduates who spend years employed in a narrow technical role, whether at a small architecture firm or, just as often, inside one of the engineering consultancies praised in Section 8. Steady employment can look safer on paper. But someone who spends years doing one type of task for one employer builds a narrow set of skills. If that employer's needs change, or the relationship goes sour, this person has less to fall back on than they might think. Pay in these roles often plateaus well below what the person's actual skill would be worth elsewhere, and without the negotiating power that comes from having built something independently, many of these graduates struggle for years to earn a comfortable living, even while technically employed and outwardly secure.

The gap between these two groups is not about talent, and it is not about the quality of anyone's degree. It comes down to risk appetite: a willingness to take risk, set your own terms, and build something, versus a preference for safety inside someone else's structure. The earlier sections of this report already show why employment often turns out to be less secure than it looks, both in traditional practice and in consultancy work. The graduates who take the entrepreneurial path are proof that the same starting point, the same degree, and the same market can lead to very different outcomes depending on whether a graduate takes ownership of their own path or hands that ownership over to someone else.

This split also creates real friction between the two groups, and it rarely gets discussed honestly. Entrepreneurial graduates tend to see their employed peers as risk-averse, people who chose safety and are now stuck with its limits. Employed graduates tend to see the entrepreneurial ones as reckless or simply lucky, and underestimate the skill and courage it actually takes to start and run a construction business. Both views miss the real explanation. The problem is not that one group is braver or smarter than the other. It is that early choices, often made without much thought, about whether to build something independent or plug into an existing structure, quietly steer graduates onto very different financial paths long before either group fully understands what they chose.

10. A Structural and Psychological Diagnosis, and a Proposed Reframing

The Belgian architectural labour market has five overlapping problems, and no single person or firm can fix them alone.

First, there are too many graduates for the traditional market to absorb. This got worse after a French university reform pushed more French students into Belgian architecture programmes, adding over 1,000 extra enrolments a year. The supply of newly licensed architects keeps rising, but the number of residential projects, and the fees they generate, does not rise to match.

Second, the business model itself does not work. Small residential firms simply do not make enough money to pay fair wages, invest in technology, or compete with engineering consultancies on salary. This is not a personal failing of any office owner. It is a structural fact about a market built on one-off, low-volume residential projects competing on price.

Third, there is an identity trap. Students choose architecture, and architecture schools recruit them, based on a creative, artistic image of the profession that the market does not actually reward, even though the profession keeps that image alive. Students who arrive expecting to become creative architects often leave with strong enough technical training to be excellent consultants, but programmes do not always make that clear early enough.

Fourth, there is a sunk-cost problem. Graduates who spend five to seven years building an architectural identity, often in programmes that emphasise design over technical skills, find it hard to change direction. What is at stake is not just the degree, but the identity built around it, which raises the emotional cost of switching paths. The result is a willingness to tolerate exploitation because it feels like devotion to a calling.

Fifth, and underneath the fourth: the original choice itself is often made too young and too emotionally. As Section 5.3 explains, many students enter the field on emotional grounds rather than a clear look at the numbers, at an age when a mature comparison of options is genuinely hard to make. *Fausse liberté* is the story that protects this early choice from being reconsidered later: it turns a genuinely difficult, precarious situation into something that feels like a chosen identity rather than a market outcome that could be fixed. The sunk-cost problem explains why graduates stay once they know the real numbers. The *fausse liberté* story explains why so many never fully absorb those numbers in the first place.

The point of this reframing is not that architecture is a bad choice. It is that traditional Belgian architectural practice is one possible outcome for someone with an Ingénieur Civil Architecte degree, not the only sensible one. Engineering consultancy and technical services are not a fallback. For most graduates, they are the strongest match for what the degree actually trains them to do, and the path most likely to give them the financial footing to return to architectural practice later, if they choose to, on their own terms.

Technical and engineering skill is not a consolation prize for people who could not make it as architects. It is the actual advantage the degree was built to give them.

11. The Institutional Reinforcement Problem: How Architecture Programmes Sustain the Myth

11.1 Studio Culture and the Aesthetic Myth

The identity trap and the *fausse liberté* story are not something students invent on their own. Architecture education across Belgium and much of Europe has long been criticised for reinforcing exactly the artistic, aesthetic self-image that Section 1 argues is misleading. This is a widely recognised problem in how design schools teach, not a flaw unique to any one school or teacher.

A few recurring habits are worth naming. Studio culture tends to celebrate a small number of striking, prize-winning, or media-friendly projects, which students naturally take as a preview of what their own career will look like, even though these outcomes are actually rare rather than typical. Talk that treats long hours, financial hardship, and instability as proof of real commitment to the craft, rather than as a documented market problem, circulates informally in many programmes, and faculty sometimes echo it rather than correct it. And because some architecture faculty have built their own careers mostly inside academia, research, or high-profile practice, rather than inside the price-competitive residential market most graduates actually enter, they may, without meaning to mislead anyone, generalise from their own less typical career when encouraging students toward traditional practice, underselling the harder economic realities described earlier in this report.

None of this means inspiring studio teaching is a bad thing. Ambition and design excellence have real value, and they are part of why the discipline is worth studying. The real problem is that the same faculty who cultivate the discipline's creative, aspirational side are also often the ones advising students on career and financial outcomes, and the aspirational message tends to win out, simply because it feels better and matches why most students chose the field in the first place. I recommend that Belgian architecture programmes formally separate these two roles: inspiring design teaching should continue, but it should be paired with mandatory briefings, run by someone other than studio faculty, that cover legal status, realistic income by career path, and outcome data broken down by career path, the kind ULiège already collects for its own programme. Where these two messages currently come from the same person, they should not.

11.2 The Same Trap, One Step Earlier: TFE and PFE Confusion and the Identity Commitment Crisis

The pattern above does not start at graduation. It starts earlier, at the point where a student picks a thesis type, and what happens there deserves to be named plainly, because it is not a small administrative detail. It is the same trap this report has spent many pages describing, just happening one step earlier and mostly out of sight.

Psychologists who study how young people form an identity draw a useful distinction. A person can explore their options before committing to a path, which is healthy. Or a person can commit to a path without really exploring it at all, usually because someone else made the choice easy, a parent, a teacher, or simply whoever happened to be available. This second pattern has a name: foreclosure. It means locking in an identity before testing whether it actually fits. Foreclosure is not a smaller version of a real decision. It is a well-studied risk, and it is exactly what this report has already described happening to architecture students at eighteen, when they choose the profession itself on feeling rather than information.

What happens with the choice between a *TFE recherche* (a research-based thesis) and a *TFE projet*, often called a *PFE* (a design-based thesis), is, in some ways, worse than ordinary foreclosure. At least a student who forecloses on a career at eighteen knows a choice happened, even if it was made badly. A student choosing between these two thesis types

often does not even realise a real choice is taking place. They end up doing a research thesis simply because a research supervisor answered their email first, not because they thought carefully about whether research or practice actually suited them. There is no moment where the student pauses to weigh the options, because nothing tells them the options are worth weighing. The commitment happens quietly, almost by accident, and the student only discovers years later that this small, unnoticed choice pushed them toward one kind of career and away from another.

This matters because of how hard these choices are to undo once made, a pattern this report has already shown elsewhere. A graduate who spends five to seven years building an architectural identity finds it painful to walk away later, even when the market makes clear it does not pay. The choice between thesis types creates a smaller version of the same trap, cheaper and easier to fix if anyone tried, but just as sticky once it takes hold. A few weeks into a research thesis, with a supervisor assigned and a topic chosen, switching to a design thesis means starting over: a new supervisor, lost time, and a project that no longer matches the story the student has already begun telling themselves. So most students do not switch. They finish whichever thesis type they drifted into, and years later describe it as their choice, when it was really the easiest option at the time, relabelled afterward as a decision.

The deeper cost is timing. This report has already shown that many architecture graduates only reconsider their original career choice around age thirty-five, long after the emotional and financial cost of staying has become very high. The thesis-type default teaches students the same bad habit even earlier, and teaches it more quietly, since nobody frames it as a decision worth noticing in the first place. If a school wants graduates who make clear-eyed career choices at thirty, it has to start by not letting them drift into unexamined choices at twenty-two. Right now, nothing in the process stops that drift. A short conversation, a simple form, or a page explaining that both thesis types lead to the same accredited degree and the same range of careers would be enough to turn an invisible default into a real, informed decision. The fact that this has not been done, in a section small enough that fixing it would cost very little, says something about how low a priority student self-knowledge currently is, compared with how quickly a supervisor's schedule fills up.

12. Conclusion

Architecture in Belgium is not a profession in crisis. It is a profession made of two very different markets: one fragmented, underpaid, and structurally unable to support itself, the other technically demanding, financially solid, and growing. A third split, described in Section 9, cuts across both: graduates who take ownership of their own path, whether in practice or consultancy, tend to do much better than graduates who stay employed inside someone else's narrow structure. Students and graduates who understand these differences early make better decisions. Schools that explain them clearly serve their graduates better.

The myth that keeps this system running, that architecture is mainly a creative calling, that instability is an honourable part of the job, that technical work is somehow a lesser path, causes real, measurable harm. It keeps graduates in exploitative internships longer than necessary. It sustains a business model that runs on cheap labour from idealistic young professionals and gives them no real path to financial stability in return. It dresses up that extraction as professional training. And on a personal level, it is protected by *fausse liberté*: the belief that one's unstable independence was freely chosen, rather than a structurally difficult situation that a fully informed eighteen-year-old, or a fully honest school, faculty, and profession, would have described more accurately from the start.

The BAU workers' collective in Flanders has named the problem correctly: it is structural, not personal. Architects do not earn less because they are individually less capable. They earn less because a profession built on custom residential projects, competing on price,

inside a fragmented market of small offices, simply does not generate enough margin to pay fairly. The fix is not telling small firm owners to pay more. It is telling graduates, and having educators tell students, before the emotional investment is already made rather than after, that engineering consultancy, government work, digital coordination, building physics, and carbon assessment are not compromises. They are the profession this degree actually prepares people for. And within practice itself, the fix is telling students plainly that ownership and risk, not just talent, are what separate the graduates who thrive from the ones who struggle.

Self-respect is a professional skill. So is a realistic, clear-eyed read of the sector someone is entering. So is the willingness to look again at an identity formed by emotion, once real evidence is in front of you, a kind of maturity that can be taught, and that schools, not only individuals, are responsible for teaching. All three are currently missing from how Belgian architectural education handles the move from university to practice.

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