

# Job Shadowing in Architecture and Interior Architecture

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Paragon Architects and Eric Wright: an experience of large and small practices  
with acknowledgement to <http://teenzonemagazine.co.za/careerzone/get-the-job-architect/>

### Description of the practice

Paragon

Paragon Architects and Interior Architecture is a firm based in Johannesburg with work in Africa. Established in 1997, they created a name for themselves in commercial office architecture and have done much to define the current skyline of Sandton. However they have diversified into other genres that include retail, hotel & leisure, residential, industrial and a wide range of interior architecture. We have around 110 employees.

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*Eric Wright, a practicing architect and teaching academic. He runs a Unit in the GSA programme at the University of Johannesburg. Eric also owns a practice (established in late 2009) in partnership with Claudia Morgado, Boom Architects.*

### What are your working hours?

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Depending on the nature of your work that day, it may start early on site around 07:00 otherwise generally from 08:00 until the early evening. If you are working on an important submission, the infamous 'allnighter' may occur.

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*A normal day starts at 6:30am and ends usually around 6pm. Occasionally, when chasing deadlines, closing time stretches through to dawn.*

### What does your job entail?

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Architecture is a very wide field. Nobody can or would do everything, except perhaps on a very small project. Your training will include design, technical resolution, documentation, contract administration, client liaison; and may extend to arbitration and specialisation like sustainable design. Currently Virtual Reality has become very influential in the world of architecture.

The work at Paragon tends to be very large. Projects typically last for years. As a result the commissions are always done in teams. This may be a small team of 3 or 4 people up to teams of 15 people. Each person will be allocated various types of work in terms of documentation. Everybody works on Revit. But everyone will have been exposed to the entire field of architecture. Hopefully one concentrates on an area that is of particular interest to you in terms of field of work and genre of architecture.

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*A complex question phrased simply...? I hold the opinion that architects are problem solvers and expert learners. Our training equips us to engage a vast landscape of situations. Through intensive engagement and study of these, we are able to plug in to existing processes and provide platforms for change and growth. This allows us conversation with many user groups and types, from personal homes to community settlements.*

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**What are the mundane aspects?** This would depend on the personality of architect. As previously mentioned the job description is very wide. Some people may find regulations & legislative compliance fairly boring but it blows some peoples' hair back. Town planning regulations and details may not suit everyone.

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*Contract administration and dealing with councils and other administrative bodies can be tedious and exhausting.*

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### **What are some of the personality attributes required to be an architect?**

We need to remember that architects design buildings not in a vacuum, but for people, and occasionally animals. If you are a gregarious type of person you will enjoy the interaction surrounding the briefing. If you are more of a loner, you'll prefer resolving the design. Attention to detail is important, an ability to focus and clarity of communication are also of great benefit. Ultimately underpinning all of this is creativity. Not necessarily the 'arty' type, but a new or different way of looking at something.

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*The assumption might be that you need to be an outgoing people's person. I think this helps in terms of meeting people and developing relationships. However, I think a fundamental aspect is the ability to apply critical thinking.*

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### **What are the different fields an architect could get into?**

The era we have moved into has become increasingly specialised with technological developments and indeed how we live our lives. Architects specialise in a number of fields including: residential (single house, multi-storey, complex, social housing), workplace architecture, mixed use, industrial, medical, education, community, to name a few. Some architects continue into Urban Design as well. The training also provides an opportunity to explore media, marketing, graphics, film making and Visualisation. Some graduates go into Property Development as well.

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*Architects are equipped to deal with varying scales of the built environment, some options in the profession could include: urban design, settlement planning, landscape design, housing, private residential, commercial, civic, public, etc. The training that architects go through allows an individual to explore any other visual (or related) profession. Some of my students have gone on to explore media, advertising, industrial design, fashion or fine art.*

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### **Where and what did you study for this career?**

I studied at Wits and completed a Bachelor of Architecture in 1987. The course structure has changed slightly but generally comprises 3 years of academic study, one year of intern training, two more years of academic study, and after graduation, two more years of training under the supervision of SACAP (South African Council for the Architectural Profession) before registering as one of four levels of professional.

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*I studied at Wits University and completed a BAS (Bachelor of architectural studies), BAS Hons, and MArch (prof) (Professional Masters of Architecture).*

### **What entry-level requirements should I have to qualify to study?**

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There are ten places to study architecture in South Africa, either as an architect or technologist. They include: Wits, Pretoria, UJ, TUT, UKZN, DUT, UFS, NMMU, CPUT and UCT. You will require a matric with University Exemption. Each of the universities sets different criteria, but Maths, some Physics and/or English would help.

Graphic representation would also be good. Most require applicants to submit a portfolio and sit an oral interview. Interior Architecture is offered at UP and UJ in Gauteng. There are also a number of private colleges that offer Interior Design/Architecture and include Greenside Design Center and Inscape.

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*This varies from one institution to the next. It would be best to enquire from your school of interest.*

### **Break-down of the subjects I can expect to learn/study:**

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Generally the curriculum is standardised across the country in terms of subject matter but it will vary slightly from institution to institution. Also because much of the teaching matter is project based, there will be a variation from city to city. Eric clarifies below in more detail.

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*Again, each school of architecture will phrase these differently. The content covers: Process thinking, Conceptual thinking, Design, Technology, History and Theory, Building performance, Force calculations, Presentation and graphics, Computer software, Office management, Drawing and Model-making.*

### **What would be the best way to get started in your field? (for example internship)**

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*Many firms/offices offer job shadow opportunities, this is a great way to get an idea of how offices run. It's always good to visit your local university and talk to some students and willing staff. Typically, internships only become an option once you have commenced your studies.*

### **What has been the highlight of your career so far?**

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Architecture has the [dis]advantage of being very very slow maturing. Oscar Niemeyer died in 2015 at the age of 105 and was still practicing. I am probably mid-career. Some highlights have been designing my own house and travelling to 85 countries around the world to document architecture to share with students and fellow professionals. My experience has broadened to include media in architecture.

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*I consider myself to still be very young in this profession. The first highlight was leaving employment and starting my own practice with my partner, Claudia Morgado. I also partner with Claudia and Adrian Ferreira as owners of POST Breakfast Lunch in Braamfontein. Career highlights at this stage include the projects we have completed and more importantly, all the possibilities in the pipeline.*

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### **What can I expect to earn in this career?**

Touchy subject. Frankly Architecture is not as well paid as the other traditional professions. This is the case around the world. Larger practices tend to pay more but smaller practices may offer a broader range of experiences. Ultimately if you are good at your job, you will be happy and remunerated.

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*This depends on many factors: what kind of office, what kind of work, where in the world... A starting salary for an M Arch graduate ranges from R12,000 to R18,000, depending.*

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### **What are the benefits in this career?**

A wide variety of activities. The satisfaction in participating in the construction and making of habitable objects. Contributing to the improvement of the built environment whilst respecting the Earth.

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*Every day provokes new opportunities and challenges. As Johannesburg shifts and changes, we have the opportunity to participate and through participation, we gain capacity to think, understand, propose and empower.*

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### **What is the market like in terms of jobs and competition?**

We need to remember the Architecture is intricately tied to the Construction Industry. Although there is a lag, when the economy slows, large projects are often delayed. As a large firm we are always looking for motivated competent staff. Different genres of architecture experience different levels of employment and competition.

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*Depending on the type of projects you are taking on, competition can be fierce. Ultimately our city is a prospector's town and everybody is looking for an opportunity to step up. A philosophy about the 'market' for architecture says that architects should be finding clients and writing their own briefs if they are interested in change and progress – this is a philosophy I currently subscribe to.*

### **Any other information you feel teens should know about this career?**

*It is hard work and requires every fraction of commitment you have to give. If the practice is approached as a way to see and live in the world, the work becomes less draining.*

### **Any tips for teens who would like to pursue a career as an architect?**

*Start reading about contemporary architecture now. Start developing an understanding of this city and its people and other cities around the world that are different to Johannesburg. Start changing spaces and places. Make things. Draw. Drink coffee. Live your city.*