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THE REPORT

10 U.K. Designers on How Brexit Will Affect Business

10 Slides

AD PRO calls on architects and designers to speculate on the future of their practices in the face of political upheaval

By George Kafka
January 23, 2019

Thirty-one months since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and just nine weeks until the decision is due to take effect, nothing is certain. Members of the British parliament overwhelmingly rejected Prime Minister Theresa May's deal with the European Union last week and the possible next steps range from a "No Deal" scenario—and likely social and economic chaos—to another referendum in attempt to undo the "Leave" decision of 2016.

Industries across the British economy are concerned and frustrated, with little sense of how post-Brexit Britain may look. Architects and designers, used to working fluidly and regularly with materials, individuals, and organizations from across the EU, are no exception.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) issued advice to firms for dealing with a No

Deal Brexit in November 2018, while an open letter authored by Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio, cosigned by Norman Foster, David Chipperfield, and Richard Rogers, among more than 1,000 other architects, designers, and educators, was sent to the Prime Minister in October expressing their belief that "there is no good Brexit." Last week, Chipperfield and Foster were among signees of a second open letter issued by the U.K.'s Creative Industries Federation, which called for a new vote with the option to remain in the EU.

AD PRO spoke to ten architects and designers to gauge the current mood across the U.K.

Photo: Courtesy of Amin Taha

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Amin Taha
Director, Groupwork + Amin Taha

"In the words of Sir Martin Donnelly, the trade department's most senior civil servant, we're 'swapping a three-course dinner for a packet of crisps.' There'll be medium-term turmoil similar to the financial crisis with projects shelved, while home and foreign investors look for cheap purchases. Few practices will have cash reserves to outlast that sort of period without redundancies, lowering wages and their investments, in effect another recession for some period. After that, London will carry on while the regions shrink. From my perspective, the country will be worse off with less cultural cross-fertilization as the Home Office makes it more difficult for international academics, architects, artists—indeed all walks of life—to come and stay."

Photo: Courtesy of Piers Taylor

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Piers Taylor
Founder, Invisible Studio

"Yes, Brexit is a disaster—the cultural loss as much as anything. The U.K. is a world leader in architecture, and much of this has been achieved because of freedom of movement. The best architects have been free to come and work in the U.K. and infuse our culture, and we have also been free to work in Europe. Our architecture schools are full of brilliant European minds. All of this will change and we will become more insular and isolated. Architecture depends on being outward-looking and open, with no artificial barriers between countries. The proposed immigration criteria will hasten great change for the worse, and will not allow British architecture to continue to be world-class."

Photo: Agnese Sanvito

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Maria Smith
Director, Interrobang; Chief Curator, Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019

"The thing I fear most about Brexit is how much it diverts attention away from the real pressing issues of our time, namely inequality and climate breakdown. What has become abundantly clear with Brexit is that change at this scale is extraordinarily difficult. The political energy required to better distribute wealth or tax fossil energy is enormous. Brexit not only distracts us from these issues, but moreover exhausts us, making future incisive change even more challenging. That political intransigence and social injustice were arguably huge factors that lead us to this point."

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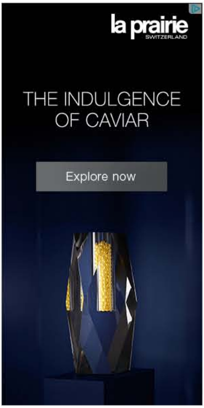
Adam Nathaniel Furman Architect, Artist, Designer, and Educator

"It's probably obvious, but I am devastated about Brexit.... In terms of work it's hard to say as nobody knows how it is going to play out, however—and this is terrifying—a No Deal exit is looking highly probable. In that case, I believe the [design] industry, most industries, will grind to a halt. I do not expect to be able to continue my current career if that were to happen. I might be forced to migrate.

If there were a deal, whether in the common market, customs union, or not, I expect that working on commissions in Europe will be more difficult, and there will be more paperwork, after the transition period.... The [design] industry as a whole is, I think, well prepared for a deal, as we are one of the most international of the creative industries that export services, and so it will be problematic, but not impossible, to extend some of the creative thinking that helped reach solutions developed for working in different parts of the world, to Europe. It also might force British architects to up their shameful levels of efficiency (and low pay) by reducing the heretofore plentiful supply of cheap, high-quality, easy-to-treat-and-pay-badly European staff.



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That's quantitative stuff. Qualitatively the loss of Europeans in the industry will be catastrophic for the cultural richness, energy, and critical development of our field, and our inability as Brits to freely move around Europe will impoverish us to an incalculable degree."

Photo: Andrew Meredith

5/10

Yinka Ilori
Furniture and Product Designer

"I think it will make the design industry even less inclusive if we leave the EU. Inclusivity and diversity in design are very important to me and are something I'm very passionate about, so in my opinion this will add to the existing problem. This will have an impact on the design industry and how we work collaboratively."

Photo: Courtesy of Fran Hickman

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Fran Hickman
Interior Designer

"Brexit is a sorry mess, but we are looking on the positive here. The fall in value of Sterling makes our fees as a U.K.–based interior design company better value internationally. We have projects in the U.S., Middle East, China, and Japan, and will continue to encourage work abroad."

Photo: Tim Soar

7/10

Paul Monaghan
Director, AHMM

"It's felt like this since the vote two years ago. We can't see any big change so far. We're always careful about looking ahead at finances, and we haven't had a big recession for ten years, so you're always careful about what's going on. Clearly I don't think it's a good thing. I think one of the issues is going to be construction prices, buying stuff from abroad. And that has a knock-on effect. About 40 percent of our practice is from abroad—about 30 percent from the EU. We do a lot to make sure they're reassured to help them get papers they need. It's something we constantly do to reassure people. Which obviously we didn't used to have to do. But we're still finding people applying from abroad, so I don't think there's any change in that. The funny thing is that at the moment we're not really finding any big difference. What I can't work out is if other firms are finding it harder, or we're just lucky."

Photo: Courtesy of Tino Seubert

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Tino Seubert
Product designer

"After the huge shock of the referendum three years ago, I was pretty good at ignoring the whole thing. I couldn't imagine a No Deal scenario or a scenario where I would have to deal with bureaucracy to be allowed to stay in the country. Even though I had the chance to apply for a British passport, I didn't take it, as I never thought I would need it. Now things are looking quite different and everything seems possible. A No Deal scenario or any deal without a proper trade agreement with the EU would be very harmful for my business. First of all, the economic growth will slow down even further, which will keep people from spending money on luxury goods, as I create them. But most importantly, about 40 percent of my business is with other EU countries (material, production, services, import, and export). I know how painful it can be to deal with non-EU countries in Asia or the U.S.

One forgets that sending items within a day without any delays and customs in between and working completely frictionlessly with partners from 27 other countries are not a naturally given, but they are vital to small design businesses like mine. If No Deal or a deal (which doesn't keep us close to the EU and the single market) actually happens, I am very likely to find myself another place to work and live, and I think there are many like-minded people in our industry. It would be devastating for London's creative scene."

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Oliver Goodhall
Cofounder, We Made That

"[This] big act of national self-harm now needs small acts of kindness. Leaving the EU—in any order of exiting—is clearly damaging for the U.K. economy. It is damaging for our global standing. It's going to cast a long shadow across the built environment professions, with so much talent choosing not to study, visit, collaborate with, or work in the U.K. We can't see any upsides to the whole thing! But as a small act of kindness and to prove that we're open, we've committed to pay the unfair settlement charge for all our EU staff...AND three of their family [members], friends, or lovers!" [The fee was scrapped before press time.]

Photo: Say Fromage Ltd.

10/10

Maria Cheung

Director and Head of Interior Design, Squire & Partners

"Squire and Partners is fortunate to have no shortage of project enquiries, however the majority of our clients are reluctant to commit to long-term projects, meaning we operate on a much more hand-to-mouth basis. Projects which do go ahead are subject to onerous contracts, which essentially establish get-out clauses should Brexit create an unviable market for their investment.

Since 2016, we have been more focussed on securing international work outside of Europe, whilst this isn't the primary focus of the firm. We do not believe that Britain's departure from the EU will damage the established gravitas of U.K. architects and designers working abroad, and are fortunate to be commissioned for projects in Russia, Egypt, Oman, Pakistan, and Qatar.

Squire and Partners employs 250 people from 29 different countries, including a large proportion of EU nationals. We and they are concerned about the long-term status of their employment, and whilst reassuring noises are being made, until there is a formal agreement, nervousness remains about their right to stay and work in the U.K. The situation has meant a number of talented EU designers have left the country since the referendum, and we have less applications from EU nationals.

We wish we could predict the implications of Brexit, because the sooner we know, the better equipped we and our clients can be to deal with the consequences."