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Ethical Challenges in Start-Up Architectural Firms: Navigating Commercial Pressure and Professional Integrity in Bahrain

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Abstract

This study examines how start-up architectural firms in Bahrain navigate the tension between commercial survival and professional integrity, and whether the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) supports ethical practice at the procedural level. A qualitative reflexive triangulation design combined a five-year practitioner-researcher record from one start-up firm, sixteen semi-structured interviews across owners, staff, and clients, structured firm-record extraction, and a clause-level reading of the Bahraini framework against the Royal Institute of British Architects codes. Inductive coding produced nine patterns across three pressure sources, and the regulatory comparison documented a two-layer void at the individual-licensee and firm levels. Ethical fragility appears as a structural condition rather than a personal failing, and the study proposes four-layer structural change and introduces reflexive triangulation as a portable methodological design.

Keywords: Architectural ethics; Start-up firms; Regulatory voids; Moral agency; Bahrain.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The practice of architecture moves between ideals and survival. When a newly formed architectural start-up opens a small office in order to offer work to one client with the promise of future projects, the young team with high aspirations to establish a successful practice very quickly acquire an address, obtain a commercial registration and employees. The financial pressure of wanting to keep the office open starts to influence every professional decision. Ethics are tested and are sometimes even put aside while others are quietly redefined. The role of regulatory authorities, of professional codes as well as of institutional support structures becomes clear at the time when they are needed most – whether they are of any help or not.

Bahrain's architectural market is extremely competitive. Furthermore, there are an enormous amount of engineering and design school leavers entering the work force annually. A great deal of new practices emerge each year. Sadly few manage to sustain themselves over time. This paper looks at the role of the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP). The function of the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) is to regulate who can practice as an engineer. To ensure that no inexperienced architect delivers a project. For the purposes of this study what is sufficient to guarantee that inexperienced architects do not deliver projects. Decisions on fee transparency, work scope, contract issuance timing, handling of informal client requests, managing of pre-contract unpaid concept work and adequate documentation of all agreed variations. All of the above-mentioned points are currently left to individual discretion and are not part of the current framework for regulating architects. The investigation into the cumulative affect that the above-mentioned issues have on small founder-led architectural practices is the focus of this study.

1.2 Literature Gap

The main contribution of this paper lies in the application of three recent strands of literature to architectural ethics. Firstly, recent literature on architectural ethics moves from focusing on the ethical conduct of individual architects to an examination of ethics within institutions and systems. For example, Gillon, Ostwald and Easthope (2025) conducted a systematic review of architectural ethics research from the last two decades. The review revealed a significant shift from an individualist 'be the best architect you can be' approach to design, to a focus on social, environmental, and procedural ethics. However, the review also exposed a significant gap between the increased expectations of ethics placed upon the architectural profession and the current nature of professional architectural codes of conduct. Secondly, recent literature in the field of organizational ethics moves from treating ethics as the property of individuals, to treating ethics as an outcome that is structured by the organization. In other words, the values of individuals are supported or thwarted by the organizational structure in which they operate. For example, recent empirical research by Vriens, de Wit and Groß (2024) found that organizations scoring low on a number of key structural parameters, such as concentration, specialization and formalization, supported high levels of moral agency, whilst organizations scoring high on these parameters supported low levels of moral agency. Further, in a qualitative study that investigated the processes by which moral agency was supported in organizations, Espedal et al. (2024) found that moral agency was a community-supported process, rather than the capacity of individuals. Crucially, the absence of community support for ethical action was found to result in predictable failures of ethical action in pressure-laden situations. Thirdly, recent literature on institutional voids has moved from treating voids as simple absences, to an examination of the consequences of voids for firms, including severity and home-country effects. For example, recent research by Andrews and Luiz (2024) tested the severity of institutional voids for firms and found that the consequences of such voids for firms are mitigated by home-country factors. Further, recent research by Alaqrabawi, Muris and Abdallah (2023) examined how entrepreneurs in emerging markets 'fill' institutional voids with innovative workarounds, which harden into conventional practices over time.

There are two significant gaps in the current literature. First, while there has been some work on the ethics of start-up environments, none of this work has been systematically applied to the case of architectural practice in the Gulf region. Moreover, while there is a large body of work on institutional voids, this work has yet to be used to read the procedural shortfalls of existing architectural licensing frameworks against the procedural completeness of existing mature professional codes. Second, the majority of empirical studies on moral agency have focused on large organizations and in crisis situations. There is a lack of empirical work that investigates the small founder-led firm as a unique pressure-transmission site where individual, institutional, and field-level pressures intersect. This study aims to address these two significant gaps in the current literature.

1.3 Research Questions and Contribution

The aim of this paper is to answer two questions. First, the paper examines the architectural start-up companies in Bahrain and investigates how they manage to maintain their integrity and ethics while being under pressure from commerce. Secondly, the paper investigates whether the framework provided by CRPEP is sufficient to support ethical practice and ensure that ethical practice is implemented at the procedural level.

This study will contribute to the conceptual, methodological and contextual understanding of integrity in start-up architectural offices in Bahrain under commercial pressure. A structural understanding of ethical fragility is analyzed using three different theoretical lenses, including moral agency, regulatory voids, and market-driven professionalism. This analysis also led to the cross-cutting finding of asymmetric framing capacity among the parties involved in the project development. The study provides a combined frame of the three theoretical lenses of ethical fragility (Figure 1). It also develops a methodology for studying ethical fragility in professional services, namely reflexive triangulation. Lastly, it studies a sector of professional services, namely start-up architectural offices in Bahrain that has not yet been the focus of studies on professional services in the Gulf, including the analysis of the implementation of ethical practices of large international offices and of signature projects.

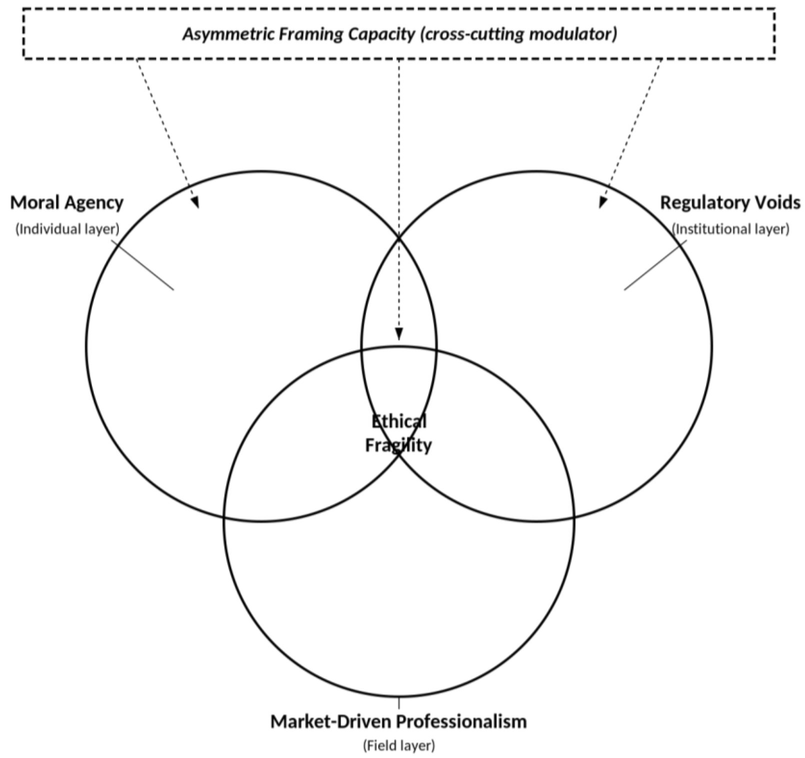

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: three theoretical lenses producing ethical fragility, modulated by asymmetric framing capacity (developed by the authors).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative multi-source approach within an interpretive practice orientation. The design of the research focuses upon the central proposition that ethical fragility in start-up architectural firms in Bahrain is produced by the interactions of moral agency, spaces of regulatory voids and spaces of market-driven professionalism. Given that the proposition is developed at three different layers (individual, institutional and field), the data must be derived from multiple sources that collectively address all three of the layers of the proposition. Each of the data sources has particular analytical weight. Importantly, the purpose of having multiple data sources is to enable triangulate the views of participants rather than to seek to present a comprehensive representation of the views of all participants.

The study used four main data sources. A five year practitioner-researcher reflective account from a single start-up architectural practice was analyzed alongside semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants from several different start-up architectural practices. A close reading of Bahrain's current engineering practice regulations alongside a mature international code was also analyzed, as well as a structured extraction from the reflective firm's document archive of information including project numbers, contractual terms and pre-contract concept work for individual projects.

2.2 Methodological Position: Reflexive Triangulation

This study does not see the dual role of the practitioner-researcher as a 'problem' or a 'contamination'. The first author is the founder of a start-up architectural firm in Bahrain that was operational for a period of five years. The researcher is therefore close to the subject of the study and the danger of the practitioner's memory of past events reshaping itself to form a more coherent and complete narrative than actually happened is a recognized risk. The research design seeks to counter this risk through a process of reflexive triangulation. The practice's records of past events form the practitioner-researcher's reflective record. The record is structured to form a contemporaneous log of events that were happening as the practice developed and grew. The log contains signed contracts, fee correspondence with clients and other organizations and companies, financial records and statements for the practice and its projects, the practice's files for completed projects and correspondence with previous and current clients. The findings from the analysis of the practitioner-researcher's reflective record are then compared and contrasted with the findings from the semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants. These participants are drawn from a range of different organizations and are at different levels of management and are in different positions within their organizations. The final component of the research design is a series of reflexive memos written by the first author immediately after each of the six client interviews. Each of the memo's compare the clients account of events with the practice's record of those same events and the first author's own memory of them. The memo's record where there are three accounts and differences between them.

The design of this study consists of three components that function as a structure to the research. The first component consists of the practitioner-researcher's reflective record of the practice, which includes a structured, contemporaneous note of events as they unfolded, signed contracts, fee correspondence, financial statements, project files, and client communications. The record of the practice functions as evidence in this study, rather than a narrative account of events. The second component consists of a sample of sixteen participants, including current employees, former employees, clients, and colleagues. Participants were selected on purpose to compare and contrast between firms, as well as between positions within a single firm. The third component consists of a set of reflexive memos that the practitioner-researcher wrote immediately after each of the six client interviews. These memos function as a means to compare the account of the client with the record of the practice and the practitioner-researcher's own recollection of events, and to note where the three accounts of events differ.

2.3 Data Sources

Reflective record. The practitioner-researcher's firm was in operation for some years from 2015 until its closure in 2019 in Bahrain. The firm's archival material – comprised of the practitioner-researcher's reflective notes written whilst the firm was operational – has been drawn upon for this research. In addition to the reflective notes of the practitioner-researcher a full archive of the firm's material has been reviewed including: 67 signed Consultancy Service Agreements (CSA); 622 client quotation folders; cash-flow workbooks for the years 2017-19 inclusive; project folders that include all deliverables and subfolders that detail the specific stages of a project's execution where appropriate.

Semi-structured interviews: The practitioner-researcher conducted 16 interviews between October 2025 and May 2026. The sample of practitioners consisted of 5 owners (O1 to O5) and 5 staff members (S1 to S5) from start-up architecture and interior design practices in Bahrain. In addition, the researcher interviewed 6 clients of the firm that is the subject of the practitioner-researcher's reflective record (C1 to C6), with 2 from each of the residential, retail and development project types. All participants gave informed written consent for the interviews, which were recorded and the participants subsequently assigned pseudonyms for the purposes of the ensuing paper.

Regulatory documents. In addition to analysis of the Bahraini (Law No. 51 of 2014 as amended by Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2021 plus the 2023 Executive Regulations) and British (RIBA Code of Professional Conduct plus the Code of Practice for Chartered Practices effective 1 May 2019) frameworks for construction practice, two bodies of text were analyzed as separate entities. The CRPEP framework for practice regulates the individual practitioner-licensee. The RIBA framework for practice, however, regulates not only the individual RIBA member but also the practice (or firm) in parallel. Thus the two sets of Code of Practice are analyzed as two separate bodies of text.

Firm-record extraction: Five quantitative data sets extracted from practitioner's records of his firm: (1) Project numbers and Margins' progress by Year; (2) Contract Policy Timeline; (3) Behavioral response documented for change-order clause; (4) Unpaid pre-contract concept work done by client's consent; (5) Client Referral Sources' distribution over the five years of the firm's life.

Table 6 summarizes the profile of owners, staff and clients, from different firms than the one from where the reflective firm's owners and staff were drawn from, and of former clients of the reflective firm.

Table 6: Participant profile across the three sample groups (anonymised).

Code	Role / position	Firm or sector context	Years in field	Project type focus
O1	Owner-founder	Architecture start-up	9	Residential and commercial
O2	Owner-founder	Architecture start-up	7	Residential renovation
O3	Owner-partner	Architecture start-up	8	Villas and commercial
O4	Owner-founder	Interior design start-up	6	Residential and retail
O5	Owner-founder	Interior design start-up	3	Residential
S1	Senior draftsman	Architecture firm	11	Site coordination
S2	Junior architect	Architecture firm	3	Production drawings
S3	Mid-level designer	Interior design firm	5	Concept and tender
S4	Senior architect	Architecture firm	9	Project management
S5	Junior interior designer	Interior design firm	1	Production
C1	Retail client	Reflective firm	n/a	Retail fit-out
C2	Residential client	Reflective firm	n/a	Residential
C3	Retail client	Reflective firm	n/a	Coffee shop fit-out
C4	Residential client	Reflective firm	n/a	Residential renovation
C5	Development client	Reflective firm	n/a	Cross-border residential
C6	Development client	Reflective firm	n/a	Hospitality investment

Years in field is years of post-qualification practice for practitioners; not applicable (n/a) for clients. Pseudonyms (O1–O5, S1–S5, C1–C6) are used throughout the paper.

2.4 Inductive Two-Cycle Coding

Two coding cycles were used for analysis of the data. The first was an inductive open coding process where all of the transcripts (including owners and staff of the sample firms, as well as former clients of the reflective firm), the practitioner's reflective entries and relevant document extracts were read line by line and short descriptive codes created for sections where the owner/staff member described an ethical decision that he/she had made in addition to any description of commercial pressure, any description of a lack of institutional support and any description of structural support that they had encountered. In total 47 first cycle codes were developed.

The second coding cycle, axial coding, produced a set of 9 patterns, all of them arranged by the source of pressure that they describe, namely: (a) pressures that originate outside the firm, in the market; (b) pressures that originate in the institutional environment; and (c) pressures that originate within the firm. A total of 10 analytical observations emerged from the two coding cycles, including a tenth observation that was not addressed in the qualitative analysis, but that a close reading of the transcripts of the interviews with the clients as well as of the reflexive memos written by the firm-owners provided, namely, the observation of asymmetric framing capacity.

3. Results

This section outlines the findings of the research through outlining the nine patterns identified through inductive coding of the data from the case study of the reflective firm as well as outlining the documented structural-learning timeline of the firm, the firm-record economic arc, evidence of free conceptual labor and the evolution of the referral-channels. The section concludes with a comparative reading of the Bahraini and British regulatory environments for entrepreneurship. The findings of this section are interpreted in the following Discussion.

3.1 The Nine Patterns

From the inductive coding process, a pattern map was developed containing 9 different patterns of 3 sources of pressure. Details of all the patterns and their frequency counts within the 16 interviews from the 3 different role groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The nine patterns and their cross-corpus distribution.

Code	Pattern	Source	Owners I (n=5)	Staff I (n=5)	Clients I (n=6)	Total I
P1.1	Fee pressure	Market	19	6	8	33
P1.2	Free conceptual labour	Market	8	0	6	14
P1.3	Social-network entanglement	Market	9	0	10	19
P1.4	Contractor undermining	Market	5	3	0	8
P2.1	Regulatory gap	Institutional	22	10	18	50
P2.2	Informal practice	Institutional	9	13	11	33
P2.3	Scope creep	Institutional	15	6	15	36
P3.1	Owner-to-staff transmission	Firm-internal	6	47	0	53

Code	Pattern	Source	Owners I (n=5)	Staff I (n=5)	Clients I (n=6)	Total I
P3.2	Partnership and successor risk	Firm-internal	2	4	0	6

I = total instances of data in a given role group (i.e. all instances of new data within the role group of staff, developer, or owner); n = number of individuals within a given role group (i.e. number of staff, number of developers, number of owners).

These distributions are shown in Figure 2, where the cross-corpus distribution of the number of instances of each pattern is shown for each of the three role groups. The two most frequently occurring patterns (owner-to-staff transmission with 53 instances of substantively new observations from a total of 65 instances of this pattern from a total of 96 instances from all 16 interviews; and the regulatory gap with 50 instances of new observations from a total of 65 instances of this pattern from a total of 96 instances from all 16 interviews)) have very different distributions for the three role groups. Owner-to-staff transmission of the business occurs almost entirely in the staff sample, whereas the regulatory gap occurs with roughly equal frequency in all three samples.

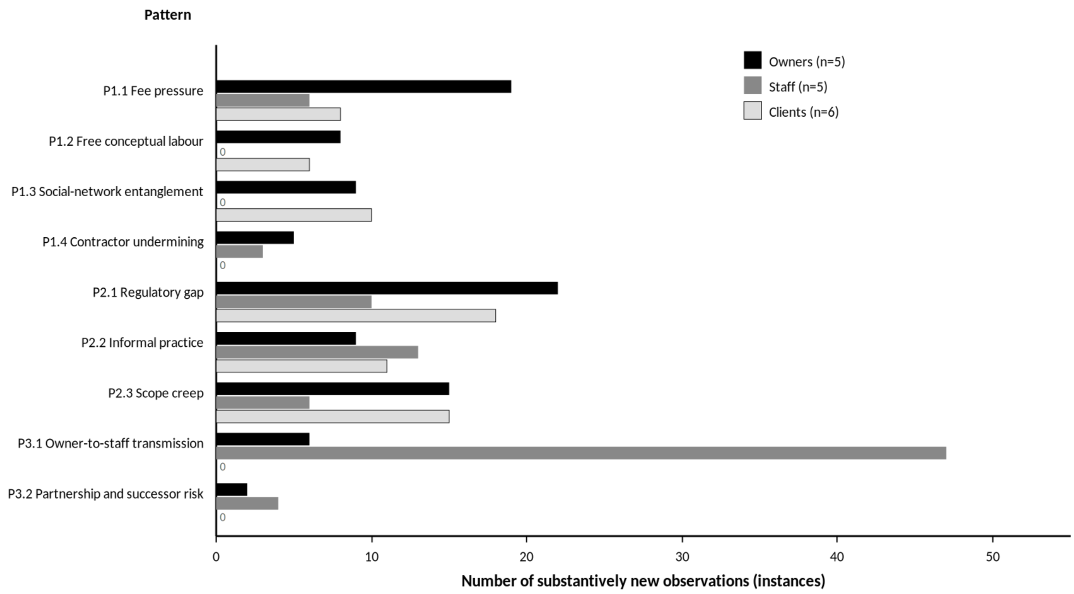

Figure 2. Distribution of pattern instances by participant role across the nine empirical patterns (developed by the authors from inductive coding of the 16-participant corpus).

3.1.1 Market Pressures (P1.1 to P1.4)

P1. Fee pressure is the most cross-cutting market pressure in the corpus. It is mentioned in 14 out of 16 owner transcripts and therefore saturates the owner sample. There are three different manifestations of this pressure: 1) owner's first price in a conversation with contractor is already a low fee to enter into conversation; 2) over time this fee even decreases during the entry phase and only later (even after years) owners hesitate before quoting the full rate; 3) lowest price in tender is offered by a low quality contractor that in the long run will not deliver what was promised, and in a documented case even tendered at 9,000 BD while the full rate was 14,000 BD, and in another case even undercut that price by tenders at 4,500 BD..

P1.2 Free conceptual labour. Free conceptual labour refers to free work of a substantive nature i.e. designs, ideas, concepts etc. that are generated by architects within a selection process (e.g. competitions) or a developmental exploratory process (e.g. numerous concepts for a project that are explored at no cost to the client). The pattern appears in the transcript of four of the five owner participants and one of the six client participants. It is not a pattern that appears in any of the transcripts of the staff participants. One client participant described in detail the hotel concepts that he had generated with the architect for two different hotel projects. He described how for both of these projects the architect produced two iterations of concepts for the project and that after that the projects were placed on hold whilst the client's investment was reviewed for funding.

P1.3 Social-network entanglement (free scope) The kinship and referral economy is in Architecture practices a binding force on decisions concerning design scope, fee levels and contract enforcement. The pattern appeared in four out of five times in the owners' transcripts, four out of six times in the clients' transcripts and not at all in the staff members' transcripts. In the owners' transcripts there are cases of family-friend pricing, of being put under pressure by friend-of-the-father obligations, and of an 18-month long court case against a husband's friend client.

P1.4 Contractor undermining. This pattern describes the problem of third parties at site undermining the architect's site instructions by dealing directly with the client. It was observed in the sites of three of three of five owner transcripts, in the transcript of one staff member (senior site coordinator) but in none of the transcripts of the six clients. The pattern is a result of a structural mechanism: small design office with tight fees looses out against contractor who knows that the office cannot afford a fight.

3.1.2 Institutional Pressures (P2.1 to P2.3)

P2.1 Regulatory gap is the most frequent pattern and at the same time it is most evenly distributed among the number of owners, staff members and clients. It appears in all 16 transcripts. Every owner, every staff member and every client mentioned the lack of a procedural ethics infrastructure at some point during the interview. The convergent finding is that the formal regulations for competence and qualification to work do not cover the procedural aspect of work. This void is filled with private arrangements, personal networks and individual judgment.

P2.2 Informal practice: this is how people describe the operation of work without contracts, all verbal agreements, and paperwork not on time. It appears in 14 out of 16 transcripts. Informal practice is described by staff from below i.e. they were unaware of opaque contracts and only found out about problems after they had occurred.

P2.3 Scope creep: This pattern describes how work is included in a project (or bill) for which no provision was made. It is the most frequently appearing pattern within the corpus and appears in all of the sixteen transcripts. Owners report that the extras of absorbed work had become regular, with most having a structural-learning moment when the firm put in place a formal change order procedure for their projects. Staff reports of scope creep describe its daily operation as it brings fee pressure down to the individual staff member.

3.1.3 Firm-Internal Pressures (P3.1 to P3.2)

P3.1 Owner-to-staff transmission is the most heavily evidenced single pattern in the corpus, with 53 total instances. Owner-to-staff transmission describes the process whereby market pressure and institutional pressure are transmitted through the owner of the firm to staff of the firm. The pressure is initially financial or commercial in nature and is transmitted by the owner to the staff in a different form, typically as labor absorbed by the firm without compensation. An example of owner-to-staff transmission is a senior architect performing work at the level of a partner for senior staff salaries, while a junior interior designer works long hours, staying until 7 most nights of the year without overtime pay.

P3.2 Partnership and successor risk describes verbal partnerships, undocumented succession agreements, and the risk of firms being exposed to internal relational risks. The pattern is real but not saturated and appears to be more pronounced at senior levels within firms. One owner described a partnership that had ended when the partner had left for Dubai in mid-2024 and the owner was left to deal with three open verbal-agreement projects, two of which had gone on to pay and one that had refused payment on the basis that the agreement had been with the departing partner.

Figure 3 above illustrates how the patterns identified internally to firms, may map upon a broader framework of pressure transmission within the external environment and into the individual and internal environment of the firm. In the diagram here, three forms of external pressure are posited. These are; pressure from the market, from the institutional environment, and from the client’s capacity to frame out solutions for completion by others. The points at which these three lines of pressure converge with the individual/firm, is the point at which they first take a financial form. This financial pressure is then transmitted to staff members, in a form of work and in a way of distributing that pressure to them, which takes their labor in return for their salary. The owner transfers financial pressure in terms of partner-level work for senior staff and in terms of the amount of reputational risk that the work may place upon the owner, to other senior staff in the firm. Junior designers and administrators experience that same financial pressure as being under too much time pressure, to complete their work to the best of their ability.

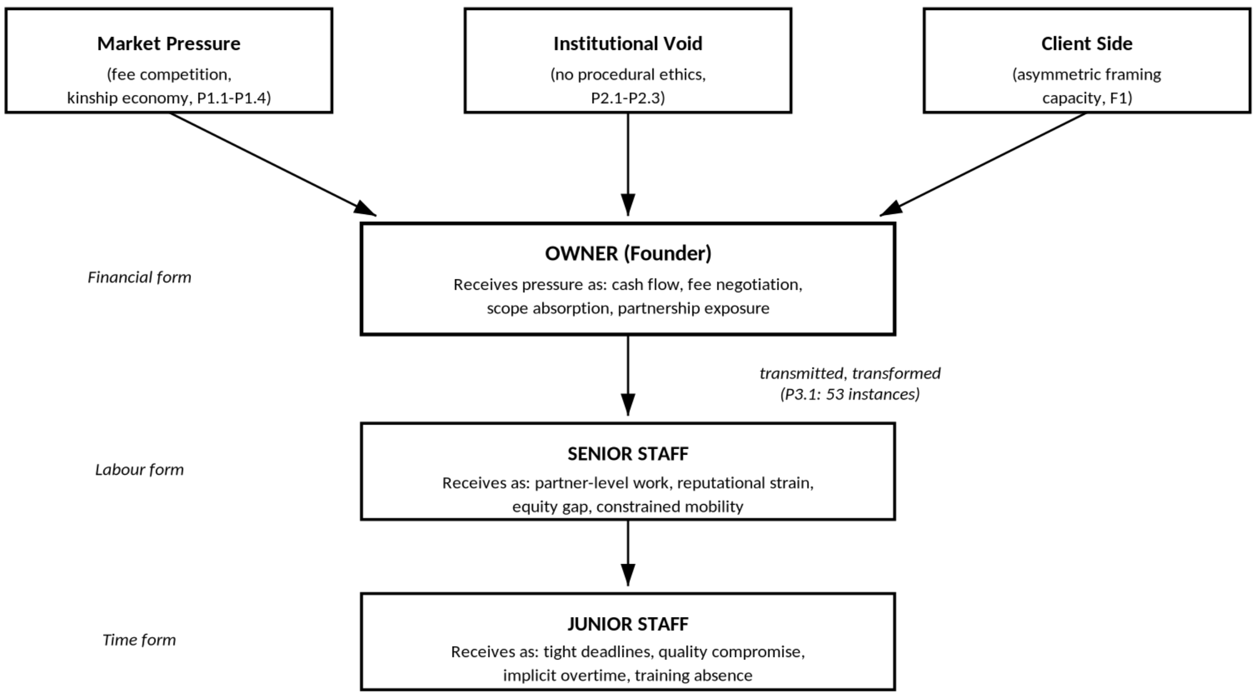

Figure 3. Pressure-transmission cascade across firm roles (developed by the authors).

3.2 Documented Structural Learning, 2015 to 2019

We can look at a reflective firm's document archive, to see how a start-up operating in a regulatory void develops private procedural rules. Seventeen signed Consultancy Service Agreements for this firm are analyzed here, dating from March 2015 until August 2019. It can be traced for each of the firm's rules, when they were first signed into the contract, and how it evolved from a one-page contract to a four-page contract of clauses over the five-year period.

Table 2: Documented timeline of self-imposed firm rules (selected).

Approximate date	Rule introduced	Anchored in
March 2015	Signed contract required before work begins (50% advance)	Project 1502 onward
July 2015	Change-order language as informal note	Project 1506
May 2016	Change-order clause promoted to numbered term	Project 1601
September 2016	Phase-based payment structure formalised	Project 1603
November 2016	Defensive-clause cluster (five new clauses)	Project 1608
Late 2016	Standard advance moves from 50% to 70% on signing	Multiple projects
December 2016	100% on signing for small projects	Project 1612
February 2019	Full-package clause: scope-shrinkage triggers requote	Project 1901

However, in November 2016 a complete new cluster of five clauses was added to the contract template in a single revision. These new terms are: a penalty of 1% per business day for late completion, a limit on site visits per project, disengagement of services 14 days after the date of invoice becomes unpaid, and a two-months' notice period for termination with payment of 20% of the anticipated profit (as was the case pre-AFS 2007). Notably, however, no changes were ever made to the contracts relating to presentation fees, pitch fees charged for pitches and concept-stage agreements that were paid prior to the contract being awarded. The area of pre-contract tender documentation (i.e., the pre-contract proposal) remained 'free' throughout the firm's operational life.
Figure 4 presents the contract evolution timeline of this firm, with the vertical position of each label indicating the degree of complexity added to the contract template at the time the rule was introduced. A dashed band at the base of the figure indicates the area or void of the pre-contract stage that was never covered by any of the clauses throughout the entire operating period of the firm.

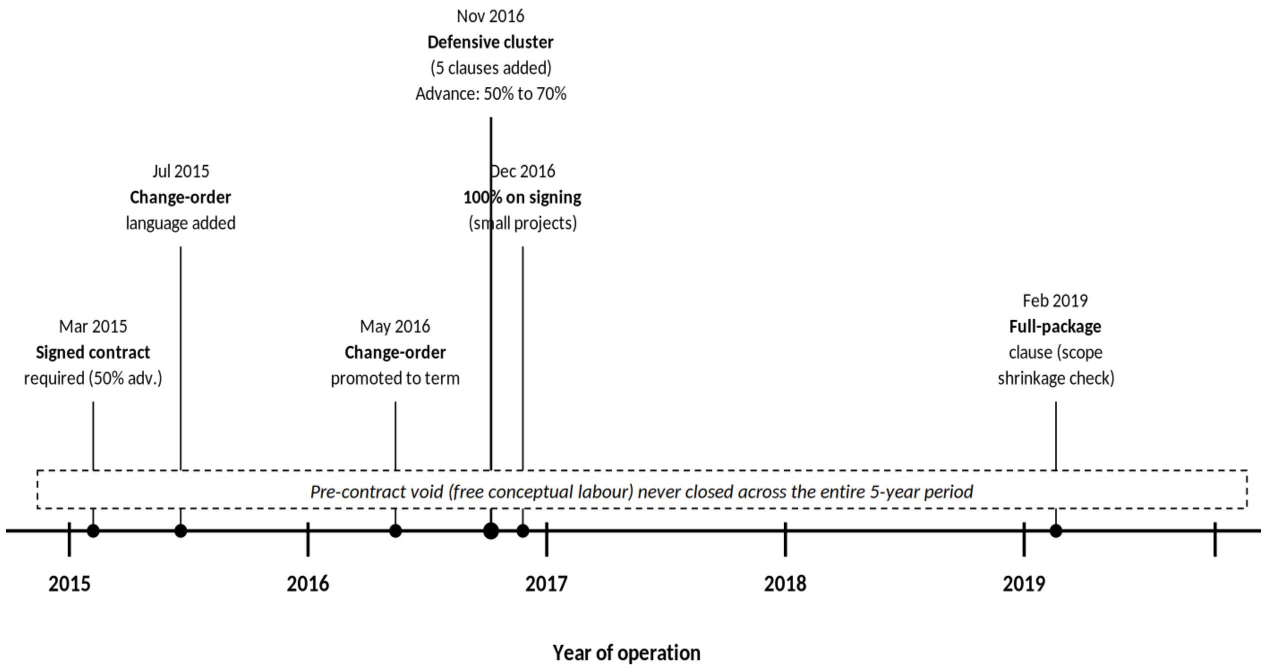

Figure 4. Contract evolution timeline of the reflective firm, 2015 to 2019 (developed by the authors).

Inserting a change-order clause into a contract does not automatically mean that change-orders will be issued against that clause. A behavioral analysis of the projects that the firm conducted under contract following the writing of the change-order clause by the firm (i.e. the post-clause period), by project archive (May 2016 to December 2019, revealed that the firm issued one formal variation order against the clause in the 44 months of the post-clause period. The primary method that the firm used to manage change on its projects during the post-clause period was to issue a wholly new contract with a new project ID for the follow-up work on the contract, in several cases follow-up work on multiple contracts with the same client. In several instances the firm was able to absorb change in the downward renegotiation of terms and conditions, including seven contracts written in mid to late 2019 that included 25% or 50% promotional type discount lines. Thus the clause was written and one formal variation issued in 44 months, the change-order clause was a deterrent to change at the contract stage but was not an in-engagement billing mechanism.

3.3 Firm-Record Economic Arc, Free Conceptual Labour, and Referral Channel

The fee decline from Year 1 to Year 2 for the same reflective firm is dramatic and, arguably, contrary to one's intuition. It shows that the average project fee for this firm decreased 30% from 967 BD in Year 1 to 673 BD in Year 2. Such numbers confirm that the structural fee pressure that reflects hardening-into-habits for the firm, that does not go away with time, or indeed self-correct as time passes. The Year 4 inversion on the other hand is quite unusual and is, in structural terms, quite separate from the trends reported above. On average the highest fees for the year were collected in Year 4, however they were also the fees with the worst margin (approximately -1,399 BD). Thus the firm reported as being in Year 4 was effectively charging out like a established practice, whilst at the same time having overheads that it had not yet reached a stage where it could support from its project fees. The Year 5 collapse on the other hand is a volume trend combined with a trend in project fee that has decreased by 65% over the previous year for signed contracts, with an average project fee of 1,463 BD. There were twenty-eight such signed contracts in the year. Thus the worst of the downward fee pressure reported above, a so-called 'discount cluster' in the analysts terminology.

Table 3: Reflective firm, project counts and margin progression by year.

Year	Projects taken	Completed paid	Disputes / non-completion	Avg fee (BD)	Avg margin (BD)	Firm revenue (BD)
2015 (Y1)	13 (C)	8 (C)	5 (C)	967 (A)	not recoverable (G)	approx. 6,785 (A)
2016 (Y2)	11 (C)	8 (C)	3 (C)	673 (A)	not recoverable (G)	approx. 7,165 (A)
2017 (Y3)	11 (C)	9 (A)	2 (A)	2,545 (C)	approx. +882 (A)	27,997 (C)
2018 (Y4)	9 (C)	6 (A)	3 (A)	4,132 (C)	approx. -1,399 (A)	37,189 (C)
2019 (Y5)	28-30 (C)	approx. 14 (A)	approx. 14 (A)	1,463 (C)	approx. -150 to -300 (A)	approx. 38-40K (A)

C = confirmed in primary record; A = approximation; G = gap. The 2015 and 2016 cash-flow workbooks did not survive so margin for those years is not directly recoverable.

3.3.1 Documented Free Conceptual Labour

A directory-level audit of quotation files for the reflective firm identified approximately 53 unpaid concept packages were developed by the firm for potential work across the five year period. Each of these substantive concept packages were developed into a quotation folder complete with design work in excess of a price quote (e.g. DWG files, 3D images, mood boards, formal proposals etc.). The total estimated hours for all of these 53 concept packages is approximately 1,800 hours to 3,000 hours of work over five years of which 360 hours to 600 hours per year of this work would have been unpaid pre-contract design work. Two of the cases from the audit identified significant amounts of unpaid work for concept packages which included a 2019 hospitality concept package with an estimated 60 hours to 80 hours of work and a 2019 institutional interior fit-out concept for a university reception with an estimated 50 hours to 70 hours of work. Interestingly none of the seventeen agreements reviewed included any clauses relating to presentation fees, pitch fees or payment for work at the concept stage.

3.3.2 Referral Distribution and the Kinship-Economy Escape

Looking at the trends within these two years is even more telling than the two percentages put together. The 5 personal referrals that comprised 38% of the 13 engagements in the founder's Year 1 (2015) as independent practice – its first three projects were all personal referrals from his uncle an architect in his own right and the founder of the practice – had by the founder's fifth year (2019) reduced dramatically to only 1 out of thirty one (3%) direct contact projects. Meanwhile the number of these direct contact projects went from 6 out of 13 (46%) in 2015 to an astounding 26 out of thirty one (84%) in 2019. The kinship economy is clearly the default way in which start-up architectural practices in Bahrain obtain their first projects but it is not inevitable and that businesses that are able to build successful digital pipelines in order to reduce their exposure to the social-network-entanglement pattern that the kinship economy is embedded within.

Table 4: Reflective firm, referral source distribution.

Source	Count	Percentage
Direct contact (predominantly Instagram)	53	65.4%
Repeat client	14	17.3%
Personal referral	8	9.9%
Professional referral	6	7.4%

3.4 Comparative Regulatory Reading: CRPEP and RIBA

The above regulatory void was identified through sixteen interviews. In order to substantiate the comparison between the Bahraini and British frameworks for architectural practice, both will be compared on a clause by clause basis for four of the main institutional issues that were revealed through qualitative coding to form the procedural ethics of the practice of architecture.

On comparing both frameworks clause by clause for the four issues for the procedural ethics of architectural practice identified by qualitative coding, there are three major differences between the two frameworks. Firstly, the timing of the implementation of the two frameworks' duties; CRPEP duties are to be implemented at the contractual stage of a project whereas RIBA duties are to be implemented at the engagement stage. Secondly, the scope of the duties of both frameworks. The scope of the variation procedures to be outlined in the contract by CRPEP is to be implemented by the architectural firm but the operational execution of the variations against the stated procedure is not the responsibility of the architectural firm. Thirdly, the dual structure of the RIBA framework, which regulates the individual members as well as the firms of architects through parallel instruments, in contrast to the CRPEP that only regulates the individual licensees of architects with no firm-level procedural-ethics framework.

Table 5: CRPEP and RIBA, clause-level comparison.

Topic	CRPEP requirement	RIBA requirement
Fee transparency and disclosure	Executive Regulations Article 27 requires the contract to specify the value, fees, and payment schedule. No further structural duty is imposed at the marketing, proposal, or pre-contract stage.	Code Principle 2 paragraph 2.7 requires the architect to make the client aware, before contract, of the scope of service, how fees are calculated, when they are triggered, and circumstances triggering additional fees. The Code of Practice for Chartered Practices replicates this duty at firm level.
Scope variation and change orders	Executive Regulations Article 27 requires the variation mechanism to be specified in advance inside the contract. No positive duty obliges the office to obtain documented client agreement to each variation as it occurs.	Code paragraphs 2.3 to 2.5 require any variation to be agreed with the client and documented in writing, and prohibit material alteration of scope or fees without express written consent. Equivalent firm-level duties through the Code of Practice.
Contract timing and originating engagement	Article 18(b) of the Law requires a contract to exist; Article 27 requires it to record the start date. Neither expressly requires that the contract be signed before professional services begin.	Code paragraph 2.1 explicitly requires that all terms of appointment be agreed and recorded in writing before the commencement of any professional services. The Code of Practice replicates this at firm level.
Professional record-keeping	Article 24 of the Law requires retention of substantive technical outputs for at least ten years. The framework does not require contemporaneous records of agreed scope, fee basis, or communications altering scope or fees.	Code paragraph 5.1 requires members to maintain appropriate records throughout each engagement, including terms of appointment, the brief, agreed scope, agreed fees, communications altering scope or fees, deliverables, and fees rendered and paid.

4. Discussion

These results are presented in the Results section: three sources of ethical pressure on start-up architectural firms in Bahrain; nine patterns of institutional behavior within the corpus of cases; the behavior of one architectural firm in detail in order to show that there are indeed instances of partial private regulation under a regulatory void; and that for every major institutional feature within the nine patterns, the Bahraini regulatory framework and the British regulatory framework exhibit different structural characteristics. The remainder of this paper uses these results through the three theoretical lenses that were set out in the introduction.

4.1 Market-Driven Professionalism, the Kinship Economy, and Professional Dispossession

Next to the structural condition of entry into the market (Section 6.1), the fee pressure on architectural services also functions as a habit (Section 6.2). The market-driven professionalism is documented at the moment of entry into the market as well as after the entry phase. This is reflected in the way architects and their clients frame concessions on the fees of the architects. The findings from the two sets of reflective firm records confirm and extend the reading of the above structural condition of entry. The framing of concessions on the architectural fees by architects and by their clients first of all diverges, but it also has consequences for the way in which the concessions are interpreted (Section 6.2).

Extension 1: The Kinship Economy Escape. The referral data from the reflective firm's record show a temporal pattern in the way in which the firm acquired clients. In the firm's first year of operation, 38% of engagements were acquired through the firm's personal network. By the end of year 5, this figure had dropped to 3% while referrals from the firm's Instagram followers rose to 84%. In other words, the firm did not eliminate market pressure; it simply changed the channel through which the market pressurized the firm. The kinship economy of referrals through personal connections (social cost) was replaced by the digital economy of followers (volume/price compression). The firm exposed itself to a new set of market pressures rather than escaping them.

This understanding of professional change extends to the second aspect of free conceptual labor which the framework had identified in the architecture project on governmental building design that had engaged the originating firm on substantial conceptual work, that had been framed as a mediator role by the firm's architects, and after which the project had been tendered as a public works contract. When the project was finally awarded, the originating firm found that another firm was paid 100% of the contract to complete 20% to 30% of the work for which the architects of the originating firm had done the conceptual design. The originating firm's free conceptual labour was not only unpaid; it had defined the terms of engagement for the contract that had paid another firm for the work instead.

4.2 The Regulatory Void as a Two-Layer Structure

The institutional-pressure cluster forms the analytical core of this paper. The regulatory gap in practices of procreative reproductive medicine is a phenomenon reported by all 16 informants and thus it is the most analyzed pattern in the corpus of texts studied here. A qualitative coding was applied to define the nature of this void: CRPEP is an institution that licenses and also accredits entities and individuals who wish to practice in the field of medical assistance to reproduction, and thus it delimits the boundaries of who is qualified to practice in the field. Yet, CRPEP's remit does not extend to matters of procedural ethics. As shown in the documentary evidence from the account of the reflective firm studied here, within this void practitioners resort to and create substitutes for the non-existent rules of the game of medical practice of this kind of reproduction, which in time may become routine practice or even a convention. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that this void is filled in all circumstances.

As mentioned above, private regulation can fill some of the voids, however others would remain open. In the case of the contract above, the contract was getting more detailed over the time of the firm's operation. This would mean that the voids that are at the stage of contract execution would be closed. However, the pre-contract stage where free conceptual labour and an unequal balance of framing capacity between client and consultant would lead to a significant number of hours of unpaid work (approx. 1,800 to 3,000 hours) would not be addressed. The main reason for this is that in order to close this void, the firm would have to cease participating in tenders and exploratory engagements for contracts.

Looking within the frameworks at the clause-level of the regulatory architecture, a further structural difference is revealed. All frameworks condition the practice of professionals in some way. The British framework conditions the practice of both individual members and firms, through a set of equivalent procedural duties in parallel instruments. The Bahraini framework on the other hand only conditions the practice of individual licensees, through a set of individual licensing. There is no firm-level procedural-ethics instrument within the Bahraini framework. This is the deepest of the discovered voids and cannot be addressed by further training of individual licensees. It requires the introduction of a new firm-level instrument with procedural-ethics duties that are parallel to those of individual licensees currently covered by the existing licensing framework.

4.3 Moral Agency and the Firm as a Pressure-Transmission Site

Read through the third lens of Practice, and we see what happens to professionals working within these conditions. The results of our data indicate that professionals know what ethical practice requires of them; they can articulate and express full awareness that the compromises they have made are compromises in and of themselves; and that they can describe, and experience, a loss of ability to practice consistently over time. Of all the patterns of practice which we identified, the pattern of Owner-to-staff transmission of pressure to do work well is the most heavily evidenced pattern in the corpus, with 53 instances of this form of transmission of pressure to do work well reported by five different staff members.

In each of the transcripts of practicing staff there is evidence that they retain moral ownership of their actions and therefore claim to act with moral courage. What is under strain is their moral efficacy or belief that their conduct will achieve the ends for which they are conducting themselves under pressure. That is to say that the practitioners in this study are working without procedural backing from a regulatory void. Their commercial conduct is exposed to a commercial logic that demands compromise, and the pressure that enters the firm at the financial/commercial level is transmitted through the roles of other staff. Practitioners in this study have no way of resisting such pressure without leaving the firm, and so are unable to hold the line as architects of a successful firm carrying out a successful project, and thereby sustain their belief that if they hold the line their conduct will be successful. This is the fatigue that results from placing excessive reliance on moral agency to do the work of ethics that is institutional in nature.

4.4 Asymmetric Framing Capacity

Another important finding of this study is that of asymmetric framing capacity. This coded pressure pattern does not function in the same way that fee pressure or scope creep pressure functions as a pressure on the firm. Rather it is a structural property of the architect-client relationship. It structures how every other coded pressure pattern is 'read' by clients and how they are 'solved' by architects. In other words, a key factor that influences how clients experience architectural services and how architects manage to deliver these services is the difference in the equipment that clients bring with them to the architectural engagement.

At the low end of the graduation curve are two clients who entered into architectural services contracts with the firm with no equipment to assess what was being offered to them. The first client was a first-time retail client who was referred to the firm by a friend. The second client was a residential renovation client who was also referred to the firm by a friend. Both of these clients were exposed by the regulatory void and did not know they were exposed until distance and comparison made the asymmetry visible. At the high end of the graduation curve are three clients who read the contract carefully before entering into the contract. The first client was a lawyer-trained client who refused to begin work with the architect until he had seen the contract paperwork. The second client was a sophisticated cross-border buyer who routed the engagement with the architect through his legal advisor in Riyadh. The third client was a hospitality investor who used the services of a legal advisor in Abha in order to negotiate the contract with the architect. All three of these clients entered into architectural services contracts with the firm and described their engagements with the firm in similar terms. However, their accounts of their experiences with the firm differed in a structurally specific way from those of the other three clients. The high-capacity clients described their contracts with the architect as a contract relationship with the firm, while the low-capacity clients described their contracts with the architect as a trust relationship with the friend who had referred them to the firm.

Table 7 displays the clients' framing capacity in the respective architectural cases. The capacity tier for each client was inductively derived from four indicators: 1) the clients' legal and/or commercial background; 2) how they found the architect (via a personal referral or by direct contact with the architect or through formal procurement by client's employer); 3) the contract (or terms and conditions) were read by the client prior to signing (or not read by client and only reviewed by the client's legal advisor after the fact); and 4) the manner in which any disputes that arose were resolved (relational or contractual).

Table 7: Client framing-capacity profile across the six client cases.

Case	Background	Route to firm	Contract engagement	Dispute path	Tier
C1	First-time client, retail	Personal referral (friend)	Signed without close reading	Relational / no recourse	Low
C2	Lawyer by training	Direct contact	Reviewed carefully, refused to start without paperwork	Contractual	High
C3	Retail owner, lawyer brother	Direct contact, three quotes compared	Read carefully, email-only for decisions	Contractual, brother as advisor	High
C4	Residential, no legal background	Personal referral (friend)	Signed without close reading, WhatsApp primary	Relational, paid disputed variation under duress	Low
C5	Cross-border buyer, sophisticated	Direct, via Riyadh legal team	Reviewed by external legal advisors	Contractual, opted out of regulator	High
C6	Hospitality investor	Formal procurement framing	Reviewed by Abha legal advisor	Contractual, structured dispute resolution	High

Tier (Low / High): This inductive aggregate pertains to the four indicator columns. Low-tier clients (C1, C4) frame their relationship with the firm in terms of a trust relationship to the referrer, while high-tier clients (C2, C3, C5, C6) frame the relationship as a contract relationship with the firm.

Implications for the structure of professional services: the regulatory void (lack of effective regulation) documented in Section 3.4 of the report does not affect all clients in the same way. Clients with high capacity are able to privately substitute a contract for services with the protection that would otherwise be afforded by the regulatory void, whereas those with low capacity are exposed by the regulatory void precisely because they have not recognized their exposure and accordingly did not seek to substitute a contract in its place. Thus, the finding regarding asymmetric framing capacity functions to describe the client population as well as to assign cost of the regulatory void to them.

5. Conclusions

This study seeks to answer two questions. First, do start-up architectural practices in Bahrain maintain their integrity in the face of commercial pressures? Secondly, does the framework provided by the Council for Regulating the Practice of Engineering Professions (CRPEP) support them in doing so. The practices of sixteen architectural practitioners in Bahrain were studied through interviews, supplemented by the reflective practice of one of the firms studied, and by two sets of documents: the engineers' statutory regulations and the practices of two architectural firms. All the practitioners studied knew what constituted ethical practice and most of them wanted to practice in that way. However, the structure of the market within which they worked exposed their moral agency to commercial pressures without providing them with any procedural protection. Two key channels of the market placed pressure upon the practices studied: the kinship economy and digital acquisition. These pressures were not structured by the institutional framework of engineers' practice in Bahrain, which is designed to regulate the competence to practice rather than conduct. The framework operates at the individual-licensee level with no equivalent at the firm level. The study therefore concludes that the current form of CRPEP does not support architects in maintaining their integrity in the face of commercial pressure.

Structural aspects of these phenomena of fragility of architecture in Bahrain have been studied by employing three theoretical models (moral agency, regulatory voids, and market-driven professionalism). The main finding of the study (asymmetric framing capacity) can lead to a reframing of the current ethical interventions for architectural practice, by shifting the site of intervention from individual personal integrity (and stronger codes and better training) to two layers of the structural framework for ethical conduct and practice, i.e. the individual-licensee layer, and the firm level. Moreover, the study introduces the concept of reflexive triangulation as a novel methodological approach to the study of ethical practices in professional services. The study thus moves the site of ethical intervention for architecture in Bahrain from signature buildings and large international practices to start-up architectural offices in the country. Finally, the findings of the study are elaborated upon and recommendations are made for intervention at four different layers (individual-licensee, firm, field and internal-firm practices).

Our analysis of the findings can be summed up in four layers of recommendations to address the fragility of ethics in start-up architectural firms. At the individual-licensee regulatory layer, we suggest that the mandate of CRPEP should be expanded to include procedural ethics duties such as: 1) pre-contractual fee disclosure as a professional duty before entering into a contract with a client; 2) written agreement to changes in scope at the point of change; 3) written agreement at the concept stage before the commencement of professional services as the originating ethical act of the engagement; and 4) record-keeping of all activities contemporaneous with the engagement. At the firm-level regulatory layer, we recommend the introduction of a firm-level procedural-ethics instrument, applicable to all engineering offices as entities, that would parallel the individual-licensee framework. At the field layer, financial and entrepreneurial support institutions should require procedural ethics as a condition of their support, including provision of a concept-stage agreement template for early-firm support. At the firm-internal layer, practitioners should set up peer networks and mentorship programs to reduce the isolation of the start-up founder.

Given that an asymmetry in framing capacity to respond to start-up architects was found among the high-capacity clients studied, a client-side intervention to decrease the architects' ethical fragility could be the implementation and publicity of a standard list of deliverables as well as a published fee guideline, and a publicized explanation of the professional engagement with an architectural start-up firm entails.

The study has limitations. The study's findings are presented as a structural reading of a given corpus of practices and therefore should not be read as a statistical generalization of the start-up architectural market in Bahrain. The study relies on a sample size of sixteen practitioner interviews supplemented by one architectural practice's internal reflective documents and two sets of official regulatory documentation. The latter practice under study communicated via an Instagram-driven direct contact pipeline and thus the findings may not be representative of all start-up architectural practices in the Bahraini market. The cash-flow workbooks of the practice under study for the two years in question (2015 and 2016) did not survive. Estimated labour hours of free conceptual work as calculated in the study are magnitude estimates and thus are not based upon completed timesheets for individual practitioners. Three possible avenues for future research are identified: a comparative study of commercial pressures on the practice of the architect in other Gulf jurisdictions; a longitudinal study tracing the start-up over a number of years, commencing from the moment of founding through to maturity; and a quantitative study of the incidence of the matters raised in this study amongst the global community of architects.

The architects in this study began with ideals. They were tested by the reality of survival. They did not lack integrity; they operated in a structure that asked individual integrity to do the work of institutional ethics. The study is re-framed here from individual responsibility to structural exposure through structural means, from personal failing to required professional infrastructure. The result of this study is not that we should train stronger architects, but that we must build the conditions whereby those who are already so trained can sustain their practice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The start-up architectural practice founded and managed by Author 1 forms one of the four data streams analyzed in this research. The documentary archive of all projects and corresponding correspondence with clients, forms a rich data source to cross reference with findings from the other three data streams. The six clients that participated in this research are former clients of Author 1's architectural practice. The dual position of Author 1, as architect and researcher, needs to be disclosed. These asymmetries are being monitored and documented in reflexive memos immediately after each interview. Besides these already disclosed asymmetries, the authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Anonymized interviews and the inductive coding workbook used to develop the findings in this paper are available from the corresponding author upon request. The materials for the individual firms that were used for the firm-record extraction are however confidential and not to be shared; a list of the source manifest for each of the firm-record extraction (i.e. the list of items that were actually extracted from each firm's record) is, however, kept in the project's research file and may be made available to the reviewers upon request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

All 16 participants were provided with information about the study and have given their consent prior to the interview. All participants were anonymized and pseudonyms have been provided for all participants in this paper (O1-O5, S1-S5 and C1-C6). No information from firms or participants has been included in the study.

CRediT Author Statement

Batool Jamali: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing (original draft), Writing (review and editing), Visualisation. Islam Hamdi Elghonaimy: Supervision, Methodology, Writing (review and editing), Validation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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