Specifying recycled: understanding UK architects’ and designers’ practices and experience

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This paper introduces findings from the Recycling by Design Research Project (Phase I) (see note 1). The importance of developing new markets for recyclate in the UK is first established. Selected research findings are then presented from a questionnaire survey response obtained from 539 architects and 142 designers, and follow-up interviews conducted with 20 of those respondents. These findings identified that UK architects and designers do not currently specify recycled products and materials, and that there are a range of obstacles to their doing so. A concluding discussion briefly examines the UK Government’s current position on addressing such obstacles.

Keywords: architectural design, design practice, ecodesign, environmental impact, materials specification

The Recycling by Design Research Project initially identified architects and designers as key ‘users’ of recycled products and materials: professionals whose role involves the constant selection of materials and products, and whose actions then influence the purchasing decisions of a broad group of other stakeholders, including their clients or suppliers (retailers, product manufacturers, printers and building contractors). The Recycling by Design Research Project has sought to identify the extent to which UK architects and designers currently use recycled products and materials, what inhibits them in doing so, and how they might be encouraged.

Phase I of the Recycling by Design Research Project sought to fulfil these aims through (i) delivery of a programme of primary research (see below), and (ii) dissemination of the best available information on recycled products and materials, their manufacturers and suppliers, and the issues surrounding their specification and use.
The completed Phase I research programme investigated architects’ and designers’ specification of recycled products and materials, the obstacles they encounter in seeking to do so, and the availability of useful information. The specification practices of designers have been neglected by previous research. The focus here, on recycled products and materials, excludes the use of products and materials recovered from the waste stream and simply reused without further reprocessing. Multiple methods were used in this sequential research programme:

Part 1—Questionnaire survey of designers and architects
Part 2—Interviews with key questionnaire respondents
Part 3—Focus group with ‘producers’.

This paper introduces selected findings obtained from architects and designers in Parts 1 and 2 of the research programme.

1 Research context: UK waste strategy

‘Waste policy is arguably the next biggest environmental challenge facing the UK after climate change’1

‘Waste’ is defined here as:

‘The wide ranging term encompassing most unwanted materials, defined by the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Waste includes any scrap material, effluent or unwanted surplus substance or article that requires to be disposed of because it is broken, worn out, contaminated or otherwise spoiled. Explosives and radioactive wastes are excluded.’2

Changes in the way the UK manages waste and resources are central to achieving ‘one of the pillars of sustainable development—reducing the flows of resources in industrialised countries’.3 A principal focus of environmental issues concerning waste by the media, activists and politicians has been the UK’s heavy reliance on disposing of waste into landfill when compared with other European Member States.4-8 This situation cannot continue; the UK Government has international legal obligations under the EU Landfill Directive (1999/31/EC) to cut all wastes to landfill.9 The UK landfill tax, introduced in 1996,10 and the new aggregates levy are also influencing waste management practices by encouraging greater diversion of waste from landfill and providing an incentive for more recycling.11

The most recent available figures indicate that annual waste arisings in the UK amount to 434 million tonnes.12 A selected breakdown of this total is given in Table 1.
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