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In Italy, an Oversupply of Architects

By STEPHEN HEYMAN MARCH 11, 2015

From the Pantheon to Brunelleschi's dome to Giò Ponti's pathbreaking Pirelli Tower, Italy has one of the world's proudest architectural heritages. But has this rich tradition inspired too many architects for one country to support? According to a new report from the Architects' Council of Europe, there are 153,000 licensed architects in Italy — a huge sum representing 27 percent of all the architects on the Continent. That's 50,000 more architects than there are in the United States, and more than the number in Britain and Germany combined.

"There are just too many of us, which makes for a very difficult working environment," said Luciano Lazzari, an architect in Trieste who is also the president of the Architects' Council of Europe. "I was in Brussels recently and people asked me why we have so many architects. I honestly don't know why, apart from the tradition. It's a profession that's always been highly regarded in the past, and it still sounds good when you say it at parties, but in reality we are not well off."

According to the Architects' Council report, which surveyed about 18,000 architects in 26 countries, principals at Italian architecture firms charge on average \$39 an hour — about half the amount of their peers in Germany, France and Britain. Italian architects surveyed also reported some of the lowest job satisfaction rates on the Continent. "I think anybody here who's an architect tries to tell his children not to become an architect," Mr. Lazzari said. "That's something new. Traditionally, it used to run in the family."

Although there are efforts to globalize the perspective of Italian architects — including a plan to offer advanced degrees in English at Milan's Politecnico, which has trained famous architects like Ponti, Aldo Rossi and

Renzo Piano — only 4 percent of Italian architects say they have taken jobs outside of Italy in the past year, according to the survey.

Mr. Lazzari said that Italian architects faced fierce competition for jobs from their peers and from other professions — like engineers or surveyors, who can also work on residential jobs. One reliable source of income, however, comes from maintaining Italy's protected historical buildings, which by law only architects can work on.

“What you think an architect does and what an architect actually does is far, far different,” Mr. Lazzari said. “Our biggest problem in Italy is bureaucracy — this very, very complex system which all are a part of. It makes it very difficult to work. If you spend 100 hours working, 98 will just be paperwork and bureaucracy. The fun part is very, very limited.”

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