

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Circuits of architecture and urban planning: Professional ethos and the internationalization of small architectural offices

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**Abstract**

Although the production of the built environment is increasingly globalized, and architecture and urban planning (AUP) professionals are known to be the key carriers of mobile ideas, the internationalization of small owner-centred architectural offices has gained little academic attention, compared to the large consultancies that dominate the global market. We bring together the literature on the circuits of urban planning ideas, the international movement of AUP firms and professional ethoses to explore the internationalization of small AUP offices. Using interview data from Finnish offices, we investigate the 'what, where, why and how' and find that they have entered specific geographically delimited AUP circuits demarcated by type of project. We contribute to the literature by identifying motives characteristic of small offices guided by professional ethoses suited to the circuits where they internationalize. Their ethoses may evolve in time and space, as they operate in new circuits. We propose that ethos-circuit coherence may contribute to the successful internationalization of small architectural offices. The findings open avenues for further research on professional ethos not only of architects but also other internationally operating professionals, as it may guide their decisions by other than a narrowly conceived profit motive.

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**KEYWORDS**

circuits of architecture and urban planning, Finnish architecture, motives of internationalization, professional ethos, small architectural offices

**INTRODUCTION**

The rapid urban growth around the world combined with the pervasive inter-urban competition is creating increasing demand for architecture and urban planning (AUP) solutions. In this process, urban planning, having once been the field of local public-sector practitioners, that is, planner architects employed by the cities is being taken over by private, often internationally operating consultant firms specialized in architecture, engineering and planning (Bok & Coe, 2017; Rapoport, 2014a). Cities are increasingly assigning AUP activities—consulting, district design, master plans and future visions—to these offices. We are interested in Finnish AUP in the global marketplace, practised by small architectural offices. Finland holds a legacy of internationally reputed architecture but present-day Finnish architecture is a markedly nationally oriented profession.

AUP offices are professional service firms (PSF) employing complex knowledge (cf. Reihlen & Apel, 2007, p. 141) to deliver services according to professional rules of conduct (cf. Løwendahl, 2005, p. 20). PSFs constitute a highly heterogeneous group because of different forms of knowledge, kinds of clients, modes of governance and patterns of internationalization (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2015, p. 75); therefore, types of PSF are often studied on their own. AUP as a commercial activity involves three elements. It is a *business*, denoting the ability to deliver professional services that sell on the market (cf. Sarfatti Larson, 1993, pp. 103–104). It is also a form of *art* with aesthetic values (Collier, 2006, p. 307; Winch & Schneider, 1993, p. 927), stemming from the profession's elite in particular (Sarfatti Larson, 1993, p. 9). Finally, it carries societal *responsibility* (Blau, 1987), with increasing concern for sustainable solutions (Collier, 2006, p. 311). Creative visual work in AUP services is joined with technical and functional competence in long-term place-based building and areal design. The design precedes implementation, and the work is not always done directly to the final customer. AUP offices are typically smaller and have internationalized later than other PSFs (e.g., accounting, advertising, banking) that followed their customers abroad and often created global office networks (Knox & Taylor, 2005, pp. 23–25). AUP firms may internationalize as part of project teams with other PSFs such as consulting engineers but often stay on-site for a limited time, and the home offices remain central in key decisions (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2015, pp. 78–79). As in all PSFs, reputation building is deemed important because a positive reputation indicates high service quality that can be hard to judge by the clients (Harvey & Mitchell, 2019, p. 280).

When these offices internationalize, they contribute to international circuits of professional knowledge where ideas are developed, combined and adapted to new places (cf., Faulconbridge, 2010; Healey, 2013; Hult, 2015, p. 540). What constitutes legitimate and relevant professional ideas, concepts and trends in such circuits is increasingly taken to be defined by the large dominant firms due to the expertise mounting in their organizations and efficiency in their transnational operations (cf. Olds, 2001; Rapoport, 2014a; Ward, 2005). They are also the most studied agents (cf. Grubbauer, 2014) although the overwhelming majority of AUP offices are small and domestically oriented (Knox & Taylor, 2005; McNeill, 2009). We know little about why smaller firms face the challenge of internationalization amongst the dominant players and why they choose to enter specific countries and places and not others. Against this backdrop, the contemporary internationalization of Finnish architectural offices offers an interesting case. The offices are mainly small, with less than 100 employees (Euro, 2019). International projects are few and far between.

As the internationalization of small AUP offices is limited and prior research on their internationalization motives is scarce, it is especially pertinent to investigate their internationalization against the odds of limited resources, difficulties in accessing market information and in gaining negotiating power within collaborative networks (Winch, 2008, p. 11). Internationalization may be influenced by the personal competences, interests and values of their owners, leading them to particular markets and projects. Therefore, we propose that it is not only interesting whether, why and

where they internationalize, but also what kind of *professional ethos*—understood as value-based codes of conduct—guides their practice at home and abroad. Professional ethos was not part of our original research problem but emerged during our interviews with Finnish architects. When asked about internationalization motives, many spontaneously articulated personal considerations regarding the manifestation of their professional ethos in international activities. Consideration of professional ethos offers a new perspective explaining the internationalization of small AUP offices.

It is thus our aim to explore *the influence of professional ethos on the internationalization motives of small AUP offices*. Based on interviews of Finnish architects who have operated abroad in the new millennium, we identify the *AUP circuits* the offices have entered (i.e., *what* has been designed and *where*). We portray their *motives* for entering those circuits (i.e., *why* they have internationalized) and explore the associated professional *ethoses* (i.e., *how* they approach international design projects).

Our study responds to the call for analyses of international circuits of AUP rooted in time and space and acknowledges the historical and institutional legacies that affect the international movement of AUP ideas (Harris & Moore, 2013, p. 1500). We bring together the literature on the international mobilities of architectural design (e.g., Faulconbridge, 2013; Knox & Taylor, 2005; McNeill, 2009) and urban planning (e.g., Harris & Moore, 2013; Healey, 2013), which have mainly developed separately. Prior research has only rarely focused on AUP jointly (Faulconbridge & Grubbauer, 2015; Rapoport & Hult, 2017). We contribute by suggesting that professional ethos has an impact on how architectural offices operate, and what kinds of ideas and practices they carry to international circuits of AUP in different parts of the world.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first review the literature on the internationalization of AUP and discuss the circuits of AUP knowledge where architects and their offices partake as they enter foreign markets. We explore the role of architects' professional ethos as a factor in internationalization processes. We then briefly trace the legacy of Finnish AUP in the international scene. We describe our data and analysis and present our results on the circuits that the studied architect planners have entered and their motivations for internationalization and find that a somewhat distinct professional ethos seems to correspond to each circuit. We discuss the significance of our findings vis-à-vis earlier research on AUP internationalization and conclude by recounting the main findings with suggestions for further research and a note on practical implications.

## AUP AS A GLOBAL BUSINESS

### Internationalization of AUP

While planning abroad begun as a colonial practice (Rapoport, 2015a, p. 111), the production of the built environment is becoming increasingly globalized (McNeill, 2015, p. 382). Economic growth and urbanization in the Global South have intensified AUP internationalization and opened the large Asian and Middle Eastern markets for internationally operating AUP offices (Healey, 2013; McNeill, 2009). Recent scholarship has focused on different aspects of this phenomenon. The literature on travelling planning concepts has traced the movements of planning ideas and practices (e.g., Harris & Moore, 2013; Healey, 2013). A closely related research has analysed the mobilities of the key agents that carry those ideas, namely, planners and architects (e.g., Cook et al., 2015; Rapoport, 2014b, 2015b).

The emergence of large globally operating planning consultancies has coincided with the opening of new markets (Knox & Taylor, 2005; McNeill, 2009; Ward, 2005). These 'global intelligence corps' (GICs) (Rimmer, 1991) have grown to dominate AUP in large-scale urban projects in emerging economies in particular. They have bought off local planning offices in all continents (e.g., McNeill, 2009; Rapoport, 2015a). The dominant firms are headquartered in North America and Western Europe, but new offices from Asia and the Middle East are increasingly achieving a global reach (McNeill, 2009, p. 7; Rapoport, 2015a, p. 111). Strategies to expand abroad include following a client or a network partner, winning competitions and marketing based on the reputation of the office (Winch, 2008, pp. 6–7).

The bulk of architectural offices, however, work on domestic or regional markets (McNeill, 2009, p. 9). They are typically small, and their revenues in the project-based business are not necessarily balanced over time, which sets

hurdles on internationalization. Compared to large full-house service firms or design-focused celebrity architects' offices, small domestically oriented AUP offices have internationalized later (Knox & Taylor, 2005, pp. 24–25). Risks are high and getting established in a new market easily burns limited resources disproportionately.

## International circuits of AUP

Internationally circulating knowledge, ideas, concepts, practices, artefacts and often the individual or organizational actors creating and/or putting them into effect are seen as moving in *circuits* (e.g., Healey, 2013; Peck & Theodore, 2010). In this study, we conceptualize the internationalization of AUP offices as an entry in specific AUP circuits. We consider these circuits as constituted by architectural and urban planning artefacts; the knowledge and competences that go into their design and implementation; the innovative ideas that change the principles, processes or styles of design; the AUP professionals that create the designs, those who order and invest in them; regulators; jury members in competitions and the mutual relations and networks of these professionals. The circuits are potentially globally extended but they are at the same time strongly situated through the sense of place, aesthetics and pride of those involved in or affected by AUP projects locally (Alaily-Mattar et al., 2018, p. 1875).

Despite globalization tendency, we do not merely assume a singular global AUP circuit generating isomorphism but concomitantly an array of interlocking circuits, each specific to given types and styles of AUP and traditions within institutional environments with regulatory distinctiveness (yet not necessarily confined solely to national boundaries). AUP offices can contribute to these circuits merely by working domestically, but through internationalization, they can strengthen their presence in them. To operate internationally, to enter any such circuit as an active participant, architectural offices need to succeed in competitions or gain merits elsewhere to be invited to design in the realm of a circuit.

The mobile elements in such circuits travel through social interaction in professional networks. Knowledge, ideas and so forth are put and kept in circulation by originators, adapters, carriers of others' ideas, or the various stakeholders in their translation in ever new contexts. Opinions of well-known architects and their critics carry AUP ideas, as well as stories attached to their origins or emergence. Which elements circulate and how, and where they move, is often influenced by power relations between the actors involved.

The circuits are transformational in that they also carry ideas that embody novelty. Architectural circuits frequent international biennales and competitions (cf. Sarfatti Larson, 1994) that showcase new thinking by those who manage to capture the *zeitgeist*. Hence, innovation development and diffusion are implicitly built in the conceptualizations of circuits of AUP, whether in the form of the thinking or styles of 'signature architects' (e.g., McNeill, 2007, 2009), in the conspicuous forms of 'iconic architecture' (Balke et al., 2018) or in sustainable concepts gaining ground, such as green buildings or eco-cities (Falconbridge, 2013; Rapoport, 2014b, p. 13). But all architects are not artistically innovative (Sarfatti Larson, 1993, p. 9), and only a small percentage participate in competitions (Sarfatti Larson, 1994). In circuits dominated by GICs, it is difficult for smaller offices to showcase competence and innovative ideas. Selected ideas tend to dominate professional thinking (Healey, 2013, p. 1511; Ward, 2002, p. 156) and those become frequently imitated, rendering them marketed commodities, 'tags' on big consultancies' plans (Marquis & Qian, 2014; Rapoport & Hult, 2017). This does not guarantee the best solutions, for instance, *de facto* sustainability in green solutions (Cugurullo, 2018; Hult, 2015, p. 551).

## Internationalization motives and professional ethos

Architects and their offices are among the key producers and carriers of internationally mobile ideas, but there is very little research on why they internationalize. Surveys conducted by professional magazines summarize the reasons for major globally operating AUP offices to internationalize: (a) the diversification of client base, (b) following clients

overseas, (c) offering expertise in a particular sector and (d) personal satisfaction in working in a foreign context (see McNeill, 2009, p. 9). Rapoport (2015a, p. 112) finds similar motives for the internationalization of large AUP consultancies and also push factors related to (a) home market recession and (b) the shrinking of Western urban markets and pull factors in the opening of markets in emerging economies where high-profile projects enhance their reputation and bring further commissions. These findings indicate that market access motivates internationalization, but they do not explain why AUP offices enter *particular circuits*. Further, apart from the personal satisfaction gained from working abroad, these are economic motives as if architectural offices were business firms like any other. They are, but they are also artistic endeavours (e.g., Blau, 1987; Sarfatti Larson, 1993) run by creative professionals who often have strong ideas regarding their roles in the changing societal realities (Blau, 1987; McNeill, 2006), which makes AUP a good case to explore professional ethos. AUP circuits are inhabited by individuals with a professional ethos that is enforced through education, professional associations and interaction as described by Yarrow (2019).

Ethical issues in architectural practice have been discussed (e.g., Collier, 2006; Fox, 2000; McNeill, 2006; Wasserman et al., 2000), but apart from Grabher (2018, p. 1788) who identified a deviation of mainstream national professional ethos as an aspect of a distinctive architectural style and practice at a fringe location, we do not find analyses of professional ethos in architecture, let alone in architects' internationalization.

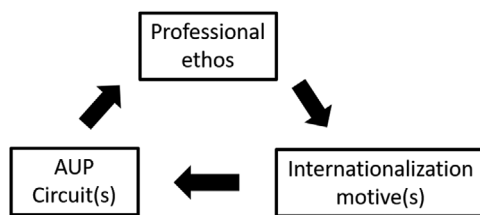
The rather limited literature on professional ethos analyses diverse professions. Bowman (2000, p. 676) finds specialized competency and an ethical standard to encourage competency central to a professional ethos and observes that 'a concern for the "bottom line" of technical skill must be complemented, if not superseded, by the "top line" of ethical responsibility—the essence of the professional ethos' (Bowman, 2000, p. 683). For Fayard et al. (2017, p. 281), professional ethos is 'composed of values enacted through material work practices'; Kantola (2012, p. 611) understands it as 'practice-related work ethics'.

Ethos is based both on a profession's collective and an individual's personal understanding of the codes of conduct within a profession (Bowman, 2000, p. 677; Stackman et al., 2006). By articulating professional ethos, a profession is made a moral enterprise different from other occupations (Newton, 1981, p. 50). While ethos is thus taken to distinguish one profession from another, and it may be seen as collectively shared within professions, it hardly unifies every profession quite like the Hippocratic Oath does for medicine (cf. Bowman, 2000, p. 674). Studies increasingly observe ethos as evolving over time as societal conditions change and witness variation of ethoses within professions (e.g., Bowman, 2000; Kallio et al., 2016; Kantola, 2012). However, professional ethos is mostly studied within a single country, not in the context of internationalization. We assume that there is variation in ethos due to differences in institutional environments. According to Kuipers (2012), however, professional ethos may become transnationally shared through cultural mediation. To us, this suggests that professional ethos may evolve through professional interactions within AUP circuits as professionals operate internationally.

Thus, there is no uniform understanding of professional ethos; instead, existing views seem informed by the profession and institutional context being analysed. We define professional ethos here as *value-based codes of conduct that guide credible professional practice*. It comprises formal and informal codes and differences between individuals or groups within professions, and the classic idea of ethos conveying trustworthiness.

In the absence of analyses of professional ethos in AUP, we are inspired by the literature on architecture as well as our discussions with internationalized architects and posit that the professional ethos of individual architects or architect-entrepreneurs concerns determining a viable balance between the emphases on (a) AUP as artistic design (cf., Collier, 2006, p. 307; Winch & Schneider, 1993, p. 927); (b) AUP as a business (cf., Sarfatti Larson, 1993, p. 104) and (c) AUP as a contributor to societally responsible solutions (cf., Blau, 1987). We consider these as the three central dimensions of professional ethos in AUP and propose that emphases between them differ due to individual, professional and circuit-specific developments, and therefore in different contexts, architects may strike that balance differently.

We further suggest that professional ethos affects the motives of an office to enter a specific AUP circuit (Figure 1). Professional ethos is presumably formed in the institutional environment where professionals originally operate. In internationalization, changing institutional environments should be considered: When an AUP office enters a new



**FIGURE 1** Relation between professional ethos, internationalization motive(s), and architecture and urban planning (AUP) circuit(s)

circuit, it becomes part of its networks and circulation of knowledge and practices. We, therefore, posit that the circuit may also affect the pre-existing ethos of those professionals who adapt to the circumstances.

In sum, we propose that professional ethos influences small AUP offices' motives to internationalize into specific circuits, and the circuits, in turn, may influence the professional ethos of the AUP entrepreneur, strengthening or moulding it.

## FINNISH AUP ABROAD

### The legacy and the institutional context of a homebound profession

Finnish AUP serves the design needs of the Nordic country with a low population density and living environments that endure annual temperature alterations of up to 70 degrees. The country went through late industrialization and started catching up with the most advanced nations only after the Second World War. Without its own colonies but under past Swedish and Russian rule, it has gained experience in ruling countries' AUP influences. Finnish AUP is considered of high quality and largely respecting sustainable principles (e.g., ArchInfo, 2014a; Savolainen, 2010). It is recognized for attention to detail and use of materials, distinctive use of space, democratic urban planning tradition, social integration in urban planning and a harmonious relationship to nature (Vesikansa, 2017, p. 339, 343). Finnish architectural competitions are characteristically open and anonymous, creating a fairly equal playing field for experimentation. Competition-winning designs are usually implemented, which is also not a global norm.

Finnish architectural education is considered high standard in international comparison (apoli2020, 2021) and attracts foreign students. Until very recently, a specialized planning education in the Anglo-Saxon tradition has been missing (Kangasoja et al., 2010), and architectural education has covered spatial planning. The small student intake in just three universities partly consolidates the profession's domestic orientation. As the number of architects per capita remains small, they are practically fully employed by domestic projects, and their offices are on average very profitable (Honkanen, 2017). Participation in international competitions is rare. Domestically, architects typically consult projects coordinated by construction companies.

The international reputation of Finnish architecture is continuously linked to Alvar Aalto, the eminent architect and urban planner even if others have also gained international recognition. In the post-war era, the concept of Finnish architecture solidified through an original version of international modernism to which Aalto contributed (Gold, 2007, p. 33; Quantrill, 1995; Vesikansa, 2017, pp. 340–341). The international reputation, however, grew largely on domestic projects and export exhibitions around the world (Griffiths, 2004, p. 60; Vesikansa, 2017, pp. 340–341). Apart from Aalto, only a few architects (such as Eliel Saarinen and son Eero and Viljo Revell) designed abroad.

In the 1970s and 1980s, reduced domestic demand after the oil crisis pushed architects and engineering firms to implement building and urban planning projects in Canada, Africa, the Middle East and Asia (Laakso, 2017; Murole, 2012). Residential and office architecture and urban plans were designed for the Soviet Union/Russia. By the 1990s,

foreign markets dried up and a deep recession in Finland dragged the construction sector down (Laakso, 2017, p. 333). A few architects still got commissions abroad, including urban planning in Libya and Denmark and the Finnish embassy in Berlin (Vesikansa, 2017, p. 345), but the general attitude prevailed to the effect that architects worked in the Finnish scene.

Finland joined the European Union in 1995, which opened an enlarged market and a range of architectural competitions (cf. Savolainen, 2010, p. 19). Soon, a major breakthrough was made by a winning entry by a Finnish office in a 1996 European competition for a reconstruction of a cultural building in Germany. Signs of a renewed interest in internationalization were visible in the early 2000s. The winning of the competition for a new cultural building in Norway by young architects may have further inspired others to participate—and succeed—in international competitions. Projects were implemented in Europe and China. After gaining international experience around the globe (ArchInfo, 2014a) and winning a number of major Chinese competitions, one of the larger Finnish offices opened an office in the expanding Chinese market. Occasionally, Finnish offices internationalized with clients through designing office and manufacturing premises for Finnish multinationals. More recent projects included innovative designs for floating constructions in the Middle East (Bhatia, 2016). The internationally operating offices often specialize in a region and type of design.

These new beginnings nurtured a new sense of membership in the global architectural profession. International assignments were acquired through competitions, contact networks and in collaboration with other Finnish offices. The received fees were higher than in Finland, but so were the risks. International success required a high level of competence, often long experience, credibility of the office and adaptation to foreign environments (Savolainen, 2010). The younger generation has internationalized via student exchange programs, and since 1993, students at the Helsinki University of Technology (now part of Aalto University) have been educated during annual field courses to work with local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global South, learning to avoid inappropriate 'First World' solutions (Kjisik & Vasko, 2018, pp. 50–51).

In sum, Finnish architects have internationalized via (a) competitions, (b) invitations following success in competitions or otherwise, (c) state assignments (embassies), (d) Finnish multinationals and (e) in situ education in humanitarian architecture. Additionally, a few Finnish offices have been bought by foreign multinationals. The Finnish scene also reaches international circuits of AUP through interactions in international professional meetings and events and by being the target of study trips by foreign professionals (cf. Cook et al., 2015; Faulconbridge, 2010).

## Data and methods

Our data on the internationalization of Finnish AUP stems from the new millennium. The two decades have witnessed a continuous international presence of Finnish offices (Savolainen, 2010), which is in contrast to the more sporadic foreign activities earlier, especially during recessions in the 1970s and 1990s.

Secondary data was sourced from academic and professional literature, reports and documents and the websites of the offices operating abroad. Primary data is derived from 33 interviews from 2017 through 2019 (Table 1). Background information was gained in interviews with five representatives of industry associations, eight urban development and planning professionals working as civil servants, two non-internationalized architects, four Finnish experts of a multinational planning consultancy having recently acquired a Finnish office and a pioneer in urban planning and construction exports. We interviewed 13 Finnish architects and urban planners who owned or partnered in an office that had operated abroad in the 2000s. They comprised the most prominent and most experienced but also representatives of the younger generation. They provided us with insights into their experiences in breaking off the national circuits. We reached a fair share of the limited number of internationally active Finnish architects as, in a recent estimation, only 10–15 offices were operating abroad (Euro, 2019). The figure is down from 2009, when around 30–40 of all 1600 Finnish offices were estimated to have experience in international operations mainly in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East (Savolainen, 2010, pp. 6–7).

**TABLE 1** Interviews

Types of interviewees	Number of interviewees (N = 33)	Interviews in offices with international projects		
		Elsewhere in Europe	In China	Elsewhere in the Global South
<b>Architect/urban planner</b>	20	7	4	2
Identifiers	#6–#23, #25, #26	#6–#9, #11, #15, #18	#10, #13, #14, #23	#16, #17
<b>Rep. of industry association</b>	5			
Identifiers	#1–#5			
<b>Civil servant</b>	8			
Identifiers	#24, #27–#33			

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for qualitative content analysis regarding the international activities of the architects, the international circuits they joined as well as their motives for and ethoses in internationalization (making four codes central for the analysis: legacy, circuits, motives, ethos). The themes that were linked to the key codes revealed coherence around circuits. The interviewees are referred to anonymously in the text.

## CIRCUITS, MOTIVES AND ETHOSES OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

Our interviews revealed, first, five AUP circuits, distinguished by region and type of project: (1) cultural buildings in Europe, (2) cultural buildings in China, (3) eco-cities in China, (4) commercial and residential AUP in China and (5) humanitarian architecture in the Global South. Each circuit includes either several Finnish AUP offices and/or a number of major projects including (a) architecture competition entries or commissioned building designs that have been implemented and/or (b) commissioned master plans and conceptual plans for urban development. Second, the interviews addressed their motives to internationalize in these circuits. Third, many of our interviewees autonomously considered their personal value-laden ideas with regard to their motives and logics of operation in the *specific* circuits. These considerations reflect, as suggested, distinct professional ethoses. Not all interviewees provided such considerations, however, which left room for our interpretations, drawing also on supplementary sources (interviews and articles in professional journals commenting on professional practice).

In what follows, we will characterize the five circuits in terms of the dominant type of project, typical competitors, networks of collaborators, clients and investors and the reasons that motivated the architect-entrepreneurs to enter them. We make interpretations of the kind of professional ethos that influences the motives of the interviewed architects to enter and work in each circuit, with different relative emphases on aesthetics, business and social and environmental responsibility.

### The circuit of cultural buildings in Europe

Cultural buildings are typically large iconic projects commissioned by cities, to assist in creating a distinction in interurban architectural and cultural competition (cf. Balke et al., 2018). Competition is high for these unique projects, and the circuit tends to be dominated by renowned signature architects. A number of Finnish offices have joined the circuit's networks, originally pushed by the domestic recession (interview#7). They have won competitions for opera and concert halls, theatres, cultural centres, museums and libraries in Germany, Norway, Poland and France, among others,

typically involving collaboration with local AUP offices, landscape designers and engineering companies. They have been motivated by the possibility to contribute to the international arena and develop their own competences by following the example of others in winning competitions (peer push); interesting projects; and the ambition to pursue international spearhead projects to build recognisability and reputation, opening new possibilities (interview#8). Similarities to the Finnish institutional context make it relatively easy to operate in the European market (interview#1) where high-quality AUP is deeply respected (interview#17); yet unlike in Finland, project management is typically led by the architect (interview#9). The personal consideration of professional ethos is often implicit but sometimes spelt out, such as by an interviewee's statement about their values, 'to use our capacity righteously' and to do 'sustainable and useful things' (interview#8). Since many focus on working in Europe only, we call this an ethos of designing *tightly regulated iconic architecture*. It matches the comparatively strictly enforced building and environmental regulations in many European countries (cf. McNeill, 2006). The ethos combines a strong aesthetic vision on a solid business base with a commitment to social engagement (ArchInfo, 2014b) and excellence in technically and environmentally sustainable solutions as assumed in the institutional environment.

### The circuit of cultural buildings in China

Similar to the above, this circuit represents iconic architecture with a distinctive aesthetic vision in the highly competed and commercialized market of Chinese mega-cities. Entering the circuit has taken place through competitions organized by Chinese cities and developers. Also, this circuit is dominated by signature architects that capitalize on the vast potential of the market. For the newcomers, operating in China has required considerable investment in time and resources to establish a name, to build local networks and the ability to persevere setbacks in a turbulent business environment that can be difficult for foreign firms (interview#1; interview#17). Teaming up with trusted local partners is a necessity due to different regulations and practices, including project implementation by local engineering companies. Finnish offices have won competitions for projects in first-tier and second-tier cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu. They were motivated to 'learn the rules of the game', and the office with the most experience in China was originally drawn there by coincidence. Its motive was to take further the office's know-how already established in Europe, and it has gradually built a strong presence through its Chinese subsidiary and trusted collaborators. It has succeeded in open and invitation-based competitions for cultural buildings or cultural districts. This circuit differs from the European counterpart because of the Chinese business environment that requires 'working 24/7 and instant replies to e-mails—otherwise, you're out', gruelling negotiation skills, difficulties in quality control and adapting to non-transparent regulations (interview#6; Joenniemi, 2014; McNeill, 2009, p. 10). Some architects refuse to work there for political reasons (interview#8), some question the construction of grand buildings that may end up half-empty (interview#17). Others accept that even if it is challenging to strive for quality and ecologically sustainable innovations in China, it is their professional ethos to do so (interview#6; interview#7; ArchInfo, 2014a). With the expectation that the central government's environmental efforts will increasingly influence local-scale action in the future, they anticipate increasing support for sustainable solutions in their designs in the future (interview#7). Specialized in operating in China, they work with an ethos of designing *context-sensitive iconic architecture*. China has endorsed grand architectural ideas in the past decade (ArchInfo, 2014a) and embraced Western architects but has recently become more critical (Stott, 2014; interview#5), which may slow down the building of conspicuous architecture in the country.

### The circuit of eco-cities in China

The planning of eco-cities in China has been a response to rapid urbanization and growing environmental challenges (cf., Rapoport, 2014a). The projects include large-scale urban planning for entire cities or districts. Competitions are

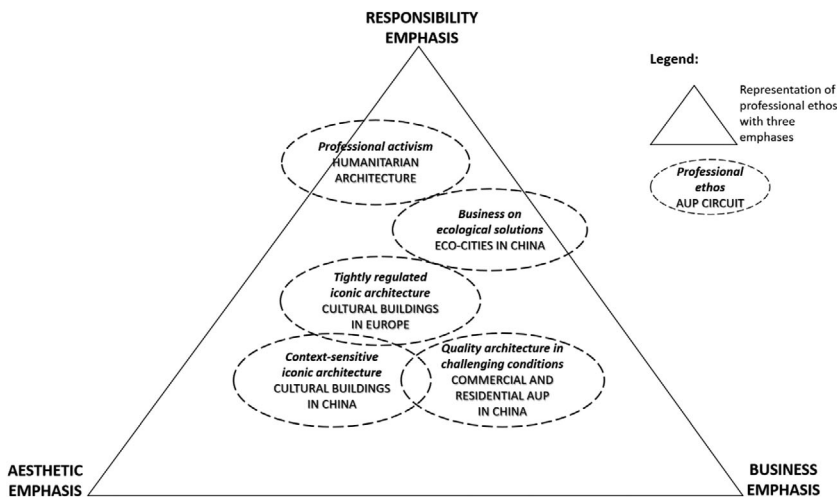
organized by Chinese public sector investment and development companies, sometimes with foreign developers. Large AUP offices and engineering firms tend to win competitions and implement projects. Overall, success has been varied. Some eco-cities are being built, some have ended up as half-finished ghost towns and some never materialized (interview#14; interview#21; Hult, 2015). Networking and collaborating both with Finnish and local partners, Finnish offices have participated in competitions and have been invited to plan eco-cities around China, including Tianjin, Mentougou, Gongqing and Danyang. While some construction firms decline to do business in China due to differences in business ethics and the lack of demand for sustainable construction (Salmela, 2011), offices specialized in the design of sustainable buildings, districts and cities have been precisely motivated by offering their expertise, combined with 'an idealistic desire to do something' (interview#13) and 'to save the world' because of 'the immense urbanization and need for solutions' (interview#10) in addition to tapping the business potential and the personal satisfaction in working in China. These signify an ethos of doing *business on ecological solutions*, which appears to be driven by genuine environmental consciousness calling for a fundamental change. Working in China is difficult, but the country and the projects it offers are fascinating (interview#14). Some offices have teamed up with Finnish high-tech firms to design master plans and to carry out joint projects. A consortium of urban planners, architects and engineering companies aimed to develop an ideal city concept (interview#13) including digital and profoundly ecological solutions; another has worked on a plan to experiment with a radically transformative idea of how cities should function (Paloheimo, 2019). Other offices had more incremental transitions in mind.

### The circuit of commercial and residential AUP in China

This circuit is founded on the massive construction of commercial and residential districts in rapidly growing Chinese cities. Some of the buildings in this circuit are aesthetically less striking than the cultural buildings, but the market is similarly highly competitive. The circuit is dominated by large global consultancies that are well-established in the market. Barriers to entry are high for smaller Finnish players that, like other Europeans, are more visible in the circuit of cultural buildings, whereas North American consultancies are specialized in high-rise commercial and residential buildings (interview#7). Yet Finnish offices have participated in projects in major cities around China, such as Guangzhou, Wuhan, Nanjing and Chengdu, motivated by 'upgrading their business to a new level' (interview#14). The most experienced office alone has accomplished almost 100 projects in the design of commercial and residential buildings and quarters. It has required patience and hard work, networking, convincing references, negotiation skills and presence in China. In this circuit, an ethos of *quality architecture in challenging conditions* prevails, combining a business emphasis with excellence in design. Finnish-like all Nordic-planning expertise is generally highly regarded (interview#19), but challenges in the Chinese business environment may be huge including continuous changes, hectic timetables, hoaxes and difficulties in implementing sustainable solutions despite an ambition to do so (ArchInfo, 2014a; interview#11).

### The circuit of humanitarian architecture in the Global South

This is an internationally evolving circuit of architecture that is involved in developing locally sensitive solutions to humanitarian problems in less developed countries and in areas hit by natural disasters. Key agents are architects, collectives and NGOs (Berlanda, 2018, p. 20; interview#16; interview#17) such as Architects Without Borders, sometimes in cooperation with international organizations. Their work supports resource-poor local communities with innovative design solutions. The work is carried out *pro bono*, and funding, for example, via donations can be raised internationally. They aim to respect local culture, knowledge and competences to use local building materials and to engage communities in design and construction (Hollmén, 2018b, pp. 31–32). The architecture programme at the Aalto University addresses questions of global development and includes annual field trips to Africa or Asia (Kjisik &



**FIGURE 2** Schematic presentation of the professional ethos of internationalized Finnish AUP offices in the five circuits vis-à-vis the three emphases in architects' professional ethos

Vasko, 2018, p. 51). This has spurred activism among the architects, who have established professional collectives to continue work on humanitarian projects besides their regular architectural practice. They have co-designed shelter, youth and village houses in Africa and Asia, motivated by the personally satisfying and rewarding work in developing countries context where local networking is essential, partly to overcome language barriers (interview#16; interview#17). One of their works has been broadly presented in the mainstream profession, including twice in the Venice Biennale (ArchInfo, 2016; Kjisik & Vasko, 2018, p. 51), which is rare in contemporary Finnish architecture. The humanitarian approach takes end-users as the owners of the projects, and architects participate in local networks to find fitting and empowering design solutions (interview#16; interview#17; Hollmén, 2018b, p. 32). An ethos of *professional activism* makes these professionals strive for responsible, ethical and meaningful work, to truly impact peoples' lives—seasoned by a sense of adventure (interview#17). Meaningful practice is a more important motivation for architecture than aesthetics (Hollmén, 2018b, p. 33).

Figure 2 sums up the results, portraying the five AUP circuits and the associated professional ethos that influence internationalization motives.

The figure discloses the different relative emphases in the professional ethos in the circuits by positioning them schematically vis-à-vis the three elements of architects' ethos, that is, the aesthetic, business and broader social and environmental responsibility.

## DISCUSSION

Exploring the internationalization of small architectural offices, our contribution is twofold. First, we proposed a conceptualization of the internationalization of architectural firms as an entry in distinct AUP circuits. We understood these circuits as internationally extended networks of actors and artefacts that implement, support, regulate or carry AUP knowledge, ideas, concepts and practices in specific regions and types of projects. This notion differs from the extant literature where circuits seem often implicitly to be taken as global. We specify them as nested and necessarily also mutually overlapping. Due to limited resources, most small offices specialize in just one such spatially delimited AUP circuit where they take major risks to pursue top assignments alongside GICs. Like other PSFs, they need to embed themselves in the institutional environment and networks in each circuit and build befitting competences

and reputations to win new projects (cf., Harvey & Mitchell, 2019; Reihlen & Apel, 2007, p. 147; Winch, 2008). When successful, our data indicates that the initial sunk costs provide a strong incentive to remain and strengthen their position in the chosen circuit.

Second, we contribute by proposing that the motives to enter those circuits are founded upon professional ethos. Some of the motives corresponded to those found in the literature on GICs (McNeill, 2009; Rapoport, 2015a). Existing literature, however, tends to discuss internationalization motives in general. It does not distinguish between specific target regions (nor circuits) nor does it discuss underlying factors affecting the motives. The motives found here not only indicate the tendency to specialize but also the value-based choice of an operating environment abroad. This makes us propose that a sufficient ethos-circuit coherence contributes to the successful internationalization of AUP offices. In the case of a mismatch, architects may exit, or they may reduce potential incoherence in the ethos. This can happen by adapting to a circuit, or by setting their own professional practice as an example in the circuit. The odds of small offices creating change in a circuit are slim, but they may have an impact on established practices, for instance, if they have gained broader recognition for competences that are rising in importance globally. In this way, professional ethos is involved in idea generation and reputation buildup in AUP circuits. Foreign professionals generating original ideas and concepts, or introducing ones used in other circuits, need to adjust them to the context-specific interpretations and traditions so that it coheres with their ethos. The literature recognizes the power of influential ideas spread by large AUP offices (e.g., Cook et al, 2015; Healey, 2013; Rapoport, 2014a). Small offices can also succeed in socially significant idea generation but may have stronger personal controls arising from the ethos-circuit coherence constraint.

The implication for AUP practice is that by acting upon their ethos, architects face a trade-off: By avoiding certain circuits, they keep their integrity but will thereby not participate in promoting responsible practices first-hand in the locations that they disapprove. Alternatively, by entering circuits where their professional ethos clashes with prevailing practices, they may need to compromise elements in their ethos—and thus, in the short term, the kind of design they are used to providing—but, with time, possibly contribute to social or environmental change. The tentative suggestion arises that a provisionally flexible ethos may produce success in the long run; an unyielding ethos in a trying environment may lead to discrepancy and failure, better be avoided by non-entry or early exit.

From the academic point of view, professional ethos offers new avenues for analysing the international operation of small AUP offices. It may also inspire future research into professional ethos in other industries where decision-makers represent particular professions, as often is the case, for instance, in PSFs. Since the characteristics that distinguish the ethos of diverse professions vary, research first has to identify them. The analysis of professional ethos may help understand the choice of the markets PSFs enter and how they approach their service provision in them. If professional ethos has a role in stimulating decisions guided by other than a narrowly conceived profit motive, this has implications for explaining decision-making by globally operating professionals more generally.

## CONCLUSION

We explored how small Finnish architectural offices have met the growing demand for AUP services around the world. We adopted a novel approach by bringing together literature on the internationalization of architectural firms, circuits of AUP and professional ethos and found that in the new millennium, most of the internationalized small offices had operated in just one geographically delimited AUP circuit abroad, and altogether, Finnish offices had operated in five circuits. Three of them were in China, corresponding to the recent trend to supply for China's huge urbanization needs.

Besides previously known motives to internationalize, we found motives to enter the AUP circuits related to competence-building and responsibility. We also found professional ethos that guided the internationally operating architects' professional practice in the circuits, with a characteristic balance between aesthetics, business and responsibility. This suggests that each circuit develops and maintains a fairly distinguishable professional practice. These findings add to the literature, the aspect of professional ethos that helps explain the 'what, where, why and how' of small

AUP office internationalization. In doing so, our study gives a voice to the typical smaller architectural offices where the individual partners play a central role and the logics of action differs from those of large consultancies. The studied offices have entered the different circuits thanks to innovative designs and relevance in the context, initially tested in competitions, and paved their way to the networks and idea generation of the circuits despite their small share of the market.

A more systematic study is needed on professional ethos, whether it induces motives to drive change in AUP and whether it itself evolves in the context of internationalization. This links to the question of how the externally originating controls of an ethos in a new environment relate to the internally motivated ones (cf. Bowman, 2000, p. 675). Further studies could analyse how a potential discrepancy between an inbuilt professional ethos and actual professional practice influenced by the operational environment affects the performance of individual professionals.

A better understanding of professional ethos in AUP internationalization is also needed to inform AUP education and policy. If the internationalization of architect planners is deemed important for their competitiveness in the future, educational programmes can be supported in cultivating stronger insight into international operations. Governments need policy tools to assist AUP professionals with a growing concern for environmental and social issues in their international operations.

More generally, professional ethos is not relevant for the study of AUP alone. Including its role in analyses of different types of firms broadens the scope of explanatory factors in firm decision-making. This is pertinent as entrepreneurs and corporate decision-makers are increasingly becoming aware of their responsibility in solving wicked societal and environmental problems.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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