A work in progress

Newcastle-based Paul Milner and Scott Savin, co-founders of
ALT STUDIOS, discuss how they use AI in their work and
whether it is friend or foe for the industry at large

A rtificial intelligence is here to stay, but what impact is it having on the design and architecture industries? *OnOffice* sits down with two professionals to get their thoughts on what the future holds for the industry.

OnOffice: Can you tell us a bit about where we are with AI at the moment?
Paul Milner: The idea of architecture as a slow vocation is under threat from artificial intelligence, for sure. Not because the technology lacks potential, but because it's useful, accessible and easy. Convenience, not capability, is the risk. Architecture is as much about thinking as it is doing. Good ideas emerge from time spent in uncertainty, testing and reworking. In contrast, AI offers results quickly. Yet often, those results mirror what the user wants to hear. And without friction, critical thinking atrophies. That slow wrestling with a problem – the uncomfortable but valuable strain of deep focus – is what psychologist Daniel Kahneman called 'System 2' thinking. It's the state we risk bypassing when convenience becomes the default.

OO: How do you use AI in your work and how has it has changed or affected your practice?
Scott Savin: We use it occasionally for logistics, not design. It works well in the margins of a project – but not at the centre. We don't use AI to generate concepts or amass studies. Not because it can't, but because that's not where good ideas come from, nor does it instil any sense of personal or collective fulfilment. That space belongs to uncertainty, instinct and a rich understanding of context.

OO: How can practices use AI in the best and most responsible way?
Scott Savin: Used critically, AI can raise the bar. A shallow site analysis won't cut it when clients can obtain a level of site data, planning policy and precedent in seconds. The onus is on us to offer insight, not just information. Used well, AI is a prompt, a critic, a companion. But that only works if we stay engaged and resist the urge to let it think for us.

Paul Milner: I recently asked AI to plan a complex day of showroom visits and consultant meetings. It factored in geography, timing and pacing – something a regular search engine couldn't do. That gave me back time to focus on design before and on the day. In that context, the tool didn't replace me. It supported me. And that support role – surfacing constraints, mapping routes, clarifying parameters – has clear value.

OO: What will happen when architecture becomes increasingly shaped by AI?
Scott Savin: We're already seeing it – quick renders, symmetry by default, algorithmic façades. Tools trained on precedent tend to generate repetition, not reinvention. AI doesn't invent new typologies. It reconfigures old ones. Unless we're deliberate, we'll end up with projects that differ in surface texture but say the same thing. Until we're clear about what we're optimising for, the results will reflect the algorithm's logic, not ours. The challenge ahead is to ensure what we build isn't just reactive, but intentional.

OO: What new skills will architects need?
Paul Milner: There's a gap between inputting a prompt and owning a decision – and it's in that gap that judgement, skill and confidence are built. Tools like this can breed passivity. The results look complete, even when they're not. Over time, we risk losing the habit of questioning, and how clients perceive our value. We've already given up a lot – scope, fees, time. If we now hand over the thinking, we make ourselves optional. So we need to reassert our value not through speed, but through depth – by showing that our insight, intuition and ability to hold uncertainty still matter. That means cultivating skills that AI can't replicate: spatial empathy, moral judgement, authorship and the ability to communicate the why behind a move – not just the what. Our value lies in our perspective, not just our productivity.

OO: Will AI stymie or expand human creativity?
Scott Savin: Both. Used well – intelligently and with critical awareness – it can sharpen a line of thought. Used lazily, it dulls instincts. When we avoid the discomfort of design – reworking a section, questioning a move – we miss the chance to grow. That discomfort is where progress happens. It's how creative judgement is formed.
Paul Milner: There's also a social cost. Will AI replace mentoring? Peer review? Those moments of shared thinking are where culture lives. Strip them out and we lose more than creativity – we lose connection. Architecture isn't a task to be completed. It's a way of seeing the world – and seeing oneself differently through the work. If AI helps us move faster, but not deeper, then are we really moving forward?

OO: Are there things that AI cannot possibly bring to the creative process?
Scott Savin: Yes – and it's not nostalgia, but a sense of function. Geoffrey Hinton, one of AI's founding voices, recently said he'd tell young people to become plumbers – not coders. Not because plumbing is immune to automation, but because it's one of the last to go. You can't outsource hands-on awareness.
Paul Milner: That applies here too. AI can simulate expertise, but it doesn't carry the moral weight of a decision. It can't read a room, sense hesitation or shoulder responsibility. And while it won't replace us overnight, the bigger risk is erosion – not disappearance, but a slow retreat from authorship, presence and peer-to-peer learning. That's why *shōgai no shumi* – a lifelong pursuit – still matters. Architecture isn't just output. It's observation, conversation, instinct. Optimisation has its place. But the discipline demands depth, not just delivery. It asks us to preserve the space for dialogue, judgement and work that takes time – not just tools that save it. Because that's what's ultimately at stake: not just relevance, but worth. The danger isn't AI itself – it's that we begin to flatten a complex, human craft into something faster, simpler, easier to replicate. And in doing so, we don't just risk the work. We risk the trust that gives it meaning. **alt-studios.com**