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# **The Values of Starchitecture: Commodification of Architectural Design in Contemporary Cities**

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## **Abstract**

In the last two decades international architects have been playing a significant role in city-branding and in marketing real estate products. Both public and private decision makers raised great expectations toward the increase in the value of the buildings and places that star architects designed and toward positive urban and economic effects that could derive from such projects (e.g. new and spectacular museum facilities, corporation headquarters). This paper criticizes the simplistic views representing the starchitect's alleged added-value in mere economic terms and it proposes to consider a broader set of cultural and political dimensions. Drawing on two case studies of different contemporary cities - Abu Dhabi and New York City - the paper shows that these views do not correspond to decision makers' actual motivations, but, nonetheless, they have been the means for spreading beliefs and for providing certain actors (such as star architects, cultural institutions, real estate developers) with favorable conditions.

**Keywords:** star architecture; archistars; architectural design; commodification; urban policy

## **The Values of Stararchitecture: Commodification of Architectural Design in Contemporary Cities**

### **Economic and symbolic competition in contemporary cities: the demand side**

In the beginning of January 2013 the Wall Street Journal reported that, in New York City, "Residences in buildings designed by big-name architects tend to sell for more than similar units in buildings designed by lesser-known architects" (Tanaka, 2013) and provided some figures related to given buildings in New York. This is only one example of a broader representation of the positive value attributed to star architects' work in the public debate. One can see some resemblance in the academic debate; for example the recent paper by Fuerst, McAllister and Murray (2011) analyzed the prices of commercial office buildings designed by Pritzker Prize winners and American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal winners in the United States and found a significant increase in the rental prices of these buildings.

However, the economic argument is not the only one in the academic and public debate. In fact, in the last two decades international architects have been seen as a crucial ingredient for urban regeneration, for marketing new projects and real estate products, for re-imagining declining cities and so on (Sorkin, 2005). This has legitimized a number of urban development and regeneration projects and, in many cases, pushed the architectural aesthetics to become more and more spectacular in order to strike the public's attention and have a stronger impact in the specialized and mass media as well (Tschumi, 1994).

Most debates tend to rely on assumptions that link the artistic work of the architects to the economic performances of given cities and the opportunity for production and redistribution of wealth among citizens. More specifically, the justification of this mode of promoting urban growth and regeneration is based on the redistribution of the wealth generated by real estate appreciation or more generally in the production of relevant public facilities (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Clark, 2004).

Urban regeneration and development projects have often been combined with spectacular artifacts, focusing performance of or even on the figure of the star architect hero himself (Jencks, 2005; Saunders, 2005; Sudjic, 2005). Since the quality of the architecture and places are often supposed to be crucial for attracting local and global investments and final users, for generating a new identity of place and for the success of the intervention over time, star architects tend to be highly considered (and paid).

According to the work of Leslie Sklair, iconic and spectacular architecture has been serving contemporary forms of globalized capitalism to proliferate and fuel the rhetoric of inter-urban economic competition (Sklair, 2010 and 2012). In other terms, one can interpret the spectacularization of contemporary architecture and of the urban environment as a means for global players to work more easily in given urban contexts. At the same time this condition seems functional to the commoditization and commercialization of architectural design on a global scale. In fact an architectural project is at the same time a product and a media representing a city, a client or even a place, or more interestingly a real estate product to market.

Critical literature focused on the characteristics, strategies and the role of international architectural studios in urban matters (see, among others, the interesting works of Donald McNeill, 2009; Leslie Sklair, 2005 and 2006; Robert Kloosterman, 2012), in many cases criticizing these assumptions in general terms, but rarely considering the reasons why star architects are selected for particular projects and - besides the economic one - what relevant values and dimensions are to be considered and discussed.

## **Two strategies of distinction for the architectural design firms: the supply side**

In the academic literature one can find countless debates regarding the similarities between architecture and art. What seems more interesting is that architects tend to distinguish their image according to social and communicative processes that are similar to the ones of the art market. The methods of distinction of architects are based on the specific parallel between art and architecture (Sarfatti-Larson, 1993). This has at first sight a significant importance in the current architectural business, well beyond the abovementioned condominiums in New York. Saunders depicted the current situation:

In places where big money intersects with big new urbanization, high-rise, both mundane and spectacular, have become aggressive assertions of a city's or country's unignorability, rapid progress, and membership in modernization's big league. Dubai and now Abu Dhabi present the most mind-boggling instances of a sudden and extensive use of architecture to buy a way both into the 21st century and into the cultural traditions of (largely Western) civilization ("We'd like three Picassos, two Matisse..."). (Saunders, 2007, 6)

Despite the significant expansion of global demand for architectural design and planning services, these mechanisms of distinction are quite important with reference to internationally most visible projects since they limit competition and risks for design firms. The studios which are capable of entering the architecture star system are in fact less vulnerable to competition for certain types of works, such as outstanding public facilities, museums, concert halls, institutional and corporate headquarters, luxury housing and so on (Kloosterman, 2012). Architectural firms are appointed for these projects through invitation-only competitions or even directly by public and private clients. From this point of view, architectural studios benefit in the long term from their established reputation, in a way that is similar to artists.

One can say without hesitation that architects who rely on their distinction and aesthetic style are conscious of the similitude to contemporary artists. The star architect Frank Gehry in an interview said: "[...] since Bilbao, I get called to do 'Frank Gehry Buildings'. They actually say that to me. We want a 'Frank Gehry'. I run into trouble when I put a design on the table and they say, 'Well, that isn't a Gehry building'. It doesn't have enough of whatever these buildings are supposed to have - yet." (Gehry in Jenks 2005, 9)

Most innovative and renowned architectural firms are often related to the personality of particular designers or to the extraordinary ability of completing special tasks. Their services tended more and more to be branded and to become a commodity (Klingman, 2007). In literature, two strategies are recognized as relevant for architectural firms to organize their work and sell their services in the frame of contemporary global competition and international mobility.

Coxe (nd; Coxe et al, 1986) synthesized three organizational strategies for architectural studios: a strong idea, strong service and strong delivery. The first concentrates on supplying unique competences for innovative and creative projects, where the star or an exceptional expert can prove to be decisive. The second, strong service, targets experience and reliability in complex design, development and implementation processes. Thirdly, strong delivery tends to produce more routine projects and services, where economic efficiency and the repetition of established solutions to architectural problems are the core business. The latter is of little interest in the discussion of spectacular and global architecture, while the first two strategies are crucial in discussing the building of an architect's reputation and international visibility in terms of creativity and reliability.

The charisma and personality of an individual designer is often at the heart of strong idea studios. Typically they are groups of workers closely collaborating with this star-like figure or using their name as a brand: Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel

Libeskind and so on. They tend to specialize in building shells that are generally related to a buildings' aesthetic and symbolic recognizability. They typically work in different geographical contexts, since their high level of specialization is requested on few occasions in each city.

Similarly, the strong-service strategy targets a specific architectural market sector which is not accessible to many other professionals. More specifically, the strong-service strategy is highly reputed because it follows efficiency criteria in the organization of the design and implementation work cycle. Time and cost reliability is appreciated by investors and leads to higher profit. These studios are not centered on the figure of a star but they tend to have a corporate image. Their firm is often named after the initials of founders or principals, for example SOM (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill), HOK (Helmuth, Obata and Kassabaum), KPF (Kohn, Pedersen and Fox). These organizations are sometimes articulated into branches following the whole life cycle of an architectural product (including engineering, public relations, city and community planning) and they can specialize in given items: office towers, skyscrapers, stadiums and so on.

Sarfatti Larson reported an interesting dialogue between one real-estate developer and the multi-award-winning architect Rob Quigley: "Rob, this is not going to win an architectural award, is it? Each time a building of mine got an award, I lost money!" (Sarfatti Larson, 1993, 98). This sketch mocks the belief of artist architects being late and over-budget, as opposed to studios that are less oriented towards innovation but more reliable.

These two strategy outlines are quite clear and, even if in a schematic and simplified way, they refer to the means of distinction of architectural studios. What requires to be questioned is if the motivation on the demand side is merely based on economic values. Saunders noted that, "Along with every other cultural production (including music, photography, book publishing, the fine arts, and even education), the design of the built environment has been increasingly engulfed in and made subservient to the goals of the capitalist economy, more specifically in the luring of consumers for the purpose of gaining their money. Design is more than ever a means to an extrinsic end rather than an end in itself" (Saunders, 2005, vii). This consideration helps one to question whether or not the clients of star architects expect to directly derive economic value from the design service or if they can derive some other forms of capital (broadly intended as by Bourdieu, 1984), that they are able to convert thanks to branded project.

### **Research questions and method**

One can see, on the supply side, the advantages for one design firm to distinguish itself by developing a specific *modus operandi* and a specific aesthetics and to spectacularize it to make it more evident and communicable through the mass media. However, on the demand side, it is clear that the mere economic terms cannot explain the reasons why public and private decision makers select star architects and make use of spectacular architecture in contemporary cities. In fact more complex explanations according to the context will help one to find more articulated answers to this question. Frampton supports the idea that the questions posed here are to be addressed by architecture and urbanism not by inquiring into the macropolitics of globalization, but at a small scale (Frampton, 2005).

For this reason the use of the case study method seems appropriate to explore, in different conditions, the reasons and the value attributed to star architects' work by decision makers. In the next paragraphs a set of spectacular projects in two extremely different urban contexts (Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and New York City, USA) are taken into consideration in order to show different dimensions related to these preferences. In this sense the descriptions of the selected projects will include cultural, relational, economic, reputational and symbolic dimensions.

### **Abu Dhabi: Architectural Spectacles for the Oligarchy**

The image and attractiveness of the capital of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi - a city with the highest per capita income in the world despite dramatic dual social conditions - have been leveraging important urban and architectural projects for specialized service functions, luxury tourism and high culture. The local planning system relies on a narrow organization of decision makers with a simple vision for promoting urban growth. In this oligarchic system the large-scale projects are selected by few actors on the basis of the financial and symbolic considerations with the overall goal of modifying the economic base of this small and rich country from oil and gas to tertiary and high added value activities (see among other plans: the 2030 Economic Vision and the structure framework plan). The oligarchic network of key actors mainly related to the royal families and the ruling institutions and agencies promoted a number of branded projects to represent the city internationally - Central Market by Foster, Landmark by Pelli, Yas Hotel by Asymptote, literally standing astride the new Formula 1 circuit, and Investment Authority Tower by KPF. The analysis of the Saadiyat Island mega-development project - which includes the Cultural District with its global cultural institutions, such as the New Louvre Museum by Nouvel, the Performing Arts Center by Hadid, the Maritime Museum by Ando, the Sheikh Zayed National Museum by Foster and, of course, the Guggenheim Museum by Gehry (Ponzini, 2011) - clearly shows the integration between strategic economic goals, financial goals and symbolic goals for which the government agency selected the star architects.

The use of star architects for office and retail space can be to some extent motivated by the expectation of immediate real estate appreciation, since developments hosting international owners or tenants tend to reach higher real estate values than other, perhaps geographically distant, office, hotel or leisure spaces. Similarly the credibility of the operation in the eyes of the international financial system is higher if it involves signature and reliable architects and experts.

The overall impact of such projects is problematic, first of all because of the unequal benefits that they generate for the population. Also, these spectacular buildings and compounds float in a generic urban landscape, granting little distinction to the capital city as a whole.

### **New York City: Multiple rationalities in a pluralistic city**

New York City has historically been the center of modern architectural innovations in international architectural aesthetics, although a large majority of recent housing and office stock is quite generic. Among the most significant changes in the last fifteen years, a new and consistent presence of international and renown architects can be mentioned. Star architects started to appear in almost every sector of urban development following partially different logic (Ponzini and Nastasi, 2011).

Corporations keep using important architectural firms to promote their image and, as they often say: "to make a statement in the skyline of Manhattan", e.g. the New York Times Building by Piano, Hearst Corporation by Foster. Attention to the architectural design of office spaces seems a rational strategy for corporations in order to attract and retain better human capital and to enhance creative productivity. Also, the prominence of the architectural designers they hire is sometimes interpreted as a catalyst for consensus building, as a potential positive impulse for the decision making process as well as a key for encountering lower institutional opposition (e.g. while managing the eminent domain procedure for the New York Times building or legitimizing the reuse of the historic building of the Hearst Corporation before the landmark commission). Here we start to see the

micro-political reasons for which, besides design qualities, star architects are selected for given projects.

The new trend of signature condominiums can be observed in the projects of the Blue Tower by Tschumi, 40 Bond Street by Herzog & de Meuron and the Perry Street Towers by Meier. Private developers, who typically preferred highly reliable firms to avoid risk of over-budget or over-time processes, started to hire the stars of architecture both for office and residential buildings, assuming that higher fees for design corresponded to higher returns. According to Fein (2007) the branding of such projects through an international architect makes the value increase over 30%. "With a weak dollar, real estate investments in the United States are relatively cheap for foreign buyers. Many of these investors are Russians, Koreans, and Saudis, who, in some cases, are buying entire buildings as investments" (Fein, 2007, 4). In this sense the perception and the representations of star architecture work in this specific real estate sector responded to commodification of the architectural design service. This is evidently derived from cultural, status and symbolic values attributed to these housing products.

Nonprofit cultural institutions make use of important architects both to stress their status and innovate their own image and identity, but also because fundraising is more likely to succeed if branded by a famous star, as in the case of the Morgan Library and Museum by Piano, or the New Museum by Sanaa. This can be seen as another form of commodification of the architectural brand.

### **Discussion and conclusions: the upsides and downsides of commodification of architectural design in contemporary cities**

Star architects' clients seem interested in the functional outcome of architectural design as well as in the returns in terms of reputation that the figure of a renowned architect can induce. As the two cases showed, famous architects are not hired for their economic impact only, but also for other symbolic and political reasons both at the macro (promotion of the national or urban image) and micro level (e.g. for legitimation, negotiation of project details). Of course there are dominant public rhetoric, such as the "Bilbao effect" or the global competition among cities, justifying these in economic terms (Ponzini, 2010 and 2012). By comparing the two case studies, one can see that the role of and expectations for the architstar can radically change according to the context and to the individual project. In this sense it is not possible to generalize this trend (Frampton, 2005).

In Abu Dhabi the architects were asked to position their masterpieces as the banner of a real estate product or on a predetermined megaproject scheme. This role seems to reconfirm the artistic and media contribution of the architect's work. In Manhattan the reasons for which different types of client hired star architects are diverse. In both cases we can see how the architectural design service has been commodified and locally used.

Representing architectural aesthetics as a determinant factor in regeneration does not respond to actual urban processes, but, nonetheless, it has been the means for diffusing beliefs and behaviors among decision makers and provided architects, pro-growth politicians, real estate developers and other actors with favorable conditions for their business (Sklair, 2006 and 2010). In particular, according to the belief that star architects are capable of branding real estate products, legitimizing the client's image, catalyzing political consensus and media attention regarding one project, higher fees are generally accepted (Klingman, 2007).

According to the observed cases, the actual role of the architect seemed marginal and having little influence over crucial political and urban development decisions (Easterling, 2005). In general terms the economic dimension cannot explain this trend, which depends on a set of other factors. Nonetheless, a richer idea of commodification helps one to see

evident issues with the figure of the cotemporary architect and allows one to discuss emergent urban problems with a deeper insight (Deamer, 2013).

It should be noted that many of the interventions considered in the two case studies depend on the particular conditions related to both the local economic and political stage. In a time of crisis, when real estate markets face less favorable conditions, questioning this conception of architecture as commodified art to be collected is crucial for urban policymaking. The discussion regarding the creation of exceptional pieces of architecture in the context of urban transformation should, at least, pay more attention to the political and symbolic interests promoting it, their stated and vested goals, and their modes of action.

### Note

This paper is based on previous researches and publications of mine, including Ponzini, 2010, 2011, 2012; Ponzini and Nastasi, 2011. I would like to thank the guest editors for their kind invitation and for pushing me to look at my research from a different angle.

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