Between responsibility and starchitecture

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Abstract. The brand is an aggregate of elements that differentiate one product from another: name (used to identify a company, product, service or concept), logo (corporate identity), tagline (slogan) but also distinctive forms, colors, sounds, smells, tastes, movements. In architecture, we can talk about the building itself as a brand, an identity landmark (socio-cultural, historical, economic hub etc.) at community, regional, territorial or national level; building as a tool for brand promotion (commercial); the architect as brand (transmitter of valuable concepts / creator of recognizable forms). starchitects are renowned for a particular “signature” design linked to a representative public building becoming particularly famous. After the 2008 world economic crisis lesson, public opinion questions how our buildings perform socially, environmentally and economically in sustainability terms. On the other hand, the media commercialization process is rather biased and dismissive, recently depicting the image of a sole architect-creator, as social insensitive, unethical and destructive. Is this the time for a paradigm shift and the legitimate rise of the social responsible architect, the activist type focused on locatecture and thus regaining community sympathy?

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1. Starchitect/ure

1.1. Architects as brand

The short definition of starchitect (= star + architect) reflects its celebrity rank associated with avant-gardism and worldwide acknowledgement while reaching the idol status among its piers and general public.

First, let’s exemplify some of the concept’s features.

Adjoining a starchitect name with a building can add a value boost to the investment. There is no recipe for ensuring architect’s notoriety, celebrity status is relative and based on media popularization. In some cases, the celebrity of the architect / architectural firm lies in promoting innovative design ideas or methods and in other, the architectural forms are underlying the specific identity of the creator. Public recognition of particular architect style (Meier’s minimalism, Stern’s traditionalism) leads to the creation of architect’s identity, encouraging his/ hers professional development in that direction. Frank Gehry and his curved surfaces, Daniel Liebskind and his angular forms, the late Zaha Hadid and hers fluid volumes are examples of brands with a focus on creating easily identifiable shapes that appear recurrently in their architectural creation. Peter Zumthor or Norman Foster instead are emphasizing on idea conveying, formulating and communicating the message of the personal brand, being on the ideological stance of celebrity.

In the 70s and 80s, the British architect Norman Foster has designed a number of technically sophisticated buildings like IBM office building and factory, or Renault Center. The examples of hi-tech architecture and the message disseminated (brand statement): technical solutions for difficult problems brought him international recognition. But the personal signature of the architect is hard to discover due to

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not making use of the same architectural style repertoire but architectural solutions appropriate to context and function.

Starchitects are in the same time transmitters of valuable concepts and creators of recognizable forms with landmark potential. A media constructed concept, dependent on public exposure is being lately used with pejorative connotation associated with flashy and expensive buildings scattered pattern-like all over the globe, lacking social input. In a June 2014 article published in NY Times by Witold Rybczynski, the issue of franchising architecture is debated as the globalization of architecture is choking the local spirit and enriches the worldwide architects. It’s a reasonable argument that of architects belonging to a geographical and socio-cultural context being preferred to adopted ones. Architecture not being driven by a greatness factor (of the architect itself or the commissioner) rather by local necessity and resources. A romantic and reasonable point of view but at the same time disregarding the socio-economic mechanisms behind the brand new and glittery building. Nowadays it’s almost impossible to “blame” a single person for an act of creation that involves so many specialties and besides, there’s no building without a demand or several public institutions approval.

Architecture, Rybcynski writes, “is a social art, rather than a personal one, a reflection of a society and its values rather than a medium of individual expression. So it’s a problem when the prevailing trend is one of franchises, particularly those of the globe-trotters: Renzo, Rem, Zaha, and Frank.”

Architecture is the most eloquent reflection of an era and perhaps it should be as global as our society. Architects aren’t stuck between boundaries anymore and their “style” flows with them and is recognizable in unexpected places. The problem is that not always there is room for glamorous buildings as long as bare necessities aren’t firstly met. Also, constructing based only on specific demand not considering the social impact could be imputed to a large amount of representative buildings worldwide.

Beverly Willis anticipates the demise of the starchitect concept that does a great injustice to the profession as she states, and resembles “cultural imperialism”. The main argument refers to architecture as a collaborative process, thus common work recognition should be preferred if any. If the involvement of the lead architect often resembles with the leadership of an orchestra conductor, project’s merits or shortcomings should be divided between the many people involved in the development process including the client (design team members, real estate developers, engineers, construction crews, city officials etc.).

“In my 55-plus years of practice and involvement in architecture, I have witnessed the birth and — what I hope will soon be — the demise of the star architect.” (Beverly Willis)

This comes in consent with Frank Gerry’s or Rem Koolhaas’s despise of the term. The longer the debate about the genius architect the harder will be to focus on the actual impact of the building in socio-economic or cultural terms. And further than the purpose of creating a tourist attraction, a business card for the design team, the client or the city hall, the social conscience should prevail.

1.2. Buildings as brand

The public reaction/ interest sustained by the media can invest a building with brand valence (Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House etc.). Buildings becoming socio-cultural/ historical/ economic landmarks at community/ regional/ territorial/ national level are usually designed by famous architects and thus wearing the personal mark of a few Pritzker prize winners, such as Rem Koolhaas, Philippe Starck, Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel or Renzo Piano.

The opening of the Guggenheim Museum in a post-industrialized city as Bilbao (1997) turned its faith around. According to The Economist: “visitors’ spending in Bilbao in the first three years after the museum
opened raised over €100m ($110m) in taxes for the regional government, enough to recoup the construction costs and leave something over.” It was long debated and acknowledged that the building became a symbol of urban regeneration and a landmark for the host city, in the same time reference to “Bilbao effect” or “wow factor”. The building in case reached the socio-cultural and economic landmark status at community level and was invested with brand value and due to public interest and media coverage became a magnet for tourists. As Art Media Agency, an international news agency focused on art market (AMA) reports, Gehry announced that other cities were claiming for their own Guggenheim: “Since Bilbao opened (…) I have been called with at least 100 opportunities —China, Brazil, other parts of Spain— to come in and do the Bilbao effect.” Other architects followed the pattern of the precedent architect + building duo. Daniel Liebskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin was completed in 1999 but remained empty since the year of its opening, 2001; during that time was visited as a work of art itself, by 350.000 people (as AMA reports) - a preview of its worth and of its creator’s value.

The 90s urban development phenomenon soon came to be processed as a recipe of success: starchitect+ famous art institution branch= international recognition, tourism and foreign investment. And for Bilbao, Gehry wasn’t the only choice, Foster+ Partners designed a metro and Santiago Calatrava a footbridge and an airport but no doubt, the titanium clad masterpiece was the real success attracting, as statistics are showing, over a million visitors annually in post-opening years. The building itself could be considered as a glamorous sculptural presence that soon after its erection became an architectural icon. One could argue that, even if Gehry refused to make replicas in other geographical contexts, a very similar construction with the same function and following its master’s cognoscible architectural style emerged on the man-made Saadiyat Island of Abu Dhabi. The imported architecture in this case, was placed on a leveled ground near the water so that the same reflective effect as in Bilbao could be obtained. The critique around Abu Dhabi’s Guggenheim reveals its purposes far from revitalization of surrounding (oil rich) areas. The attempt was to bring international culture on foreign land by importing successful models rather than experimenting with local architects, forms or materials. Decontextualization was not assimilated in this particular case and the “Bilbao effect” phenomenon reached a second phase that lost its core purpose of urban regeneration through public architectural program with international cultural value.

Fig. 1: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain

Fig. 2: Guggenheim Museum, Abu Dhabi, UAE
With some exceptions of large scale and big commissions buildings as shown above, architecture today tries to align with common concerns about environment and sustainability. It seems like the era of starchitecture fades gradually since 2008 world financial crisis, making place for socially responsible architecture. Large architectural gestures possible for oil rich countries like the UAE are scattered for the rest of the world while a new trend of promoting young professionals and architectural competitions promises to give a fresh makeover to urban skyline. Today’s design culture promotes collaboration and interdisciplinarity at the expense of individuality (single authorship). Also, even if the globalization of architecture is obvious and promoted by open cultural borders, the need for resistance from the local style is more and more present among young generation of architects in compliance with community voices.

Extravagant architecture isn’t going away entirely but is simplified and limited in geographical expansion while the discourse about locatecture seems more effervescent and focused on changing perceptions. It is common sense that the need for change or development should come from inside. The imported recipe doesn’t always work and could do more harm than good. Many voices turned against starchitects trend leveling architectural style internationally, having no concerns about local spirit or context and not solving real issues demanded by the society. As long as a large amount of world population lacks proper housing or sanity, the arrogant gesture of flamboyant architecture should come as a second choice.

First, we should all focus on issues faced by our community and give room and time for solving programs like preschools or social housing (not addressed by starchitecture).

2. Socially responsible architecture

*Are architects and urban designers to blame for poverty, social tension and urban violence?*

*Does architecture have the power to change people’s behavior?*

*What are the responsibility parameters of architects and urban planners for the social developments within the neighborhoods they design?*

Not seldom, architects are accused of individualism, lack of collaborative spirit, blindness regarding the real needs of their community, wasteful of natural resources. Since clients define the brief and the authorities are validating the project, the blame is somehow shared. The moral obligations of each one of us should be the public interest and the environment, the two factors questioned when it comes to debate upon the starchitect(ure) theme.

Architecture can affect society making a place more or less livable and shouldn’t be a competition for fame and recognition. Also, it should fit in its surroundings whether geographical or cultural. The toughest choice is that of following the will of the client or that of the community, often contradictory.

“Alternative” architecture practices are searching beyond the limits of the construction profession, trying to educate communities about urban design, to draft public policy on housing, transportation and public spaces, to improve the quality of living by little improvement of surrounding environment and use of traditional techniques and materials. The novelty of approach is the attention to urgent needs of shelter (or urban common space), its adaptation to fit all needs (ex: Elemental, Alejandro Aravena) and to detail not the spectacle of form.
The socially responsible design is socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. The design process is participatory; architects are working closely with the public and users and intervene where natural calamities or improper governance deprived the people of basic facilities.

The act of resisting the status quo and change the preexisting order is considered activism and pointed out in our field as design activism. A building, an object or a drawing can serve the guerilla purpose and accompany a manifesto to raise public awareness. The interest in design for social impact and public service design grew in the last years and the themes preferred and commented throughout the media are: affordable social housing, emergency housing, climate change and sustainability issues, accessibility and inclusive design (serving all ages including disabilities).

Activism reveals an injustice or wrongdoing taking the side of a disadvantaged group, challenges a status quo perpetuated by authorities, offering alternatives of good practice.
3. Conclusions

In recent years, media perpetuated a common image of high-rated architects as individualistic, social insensitive, unethical and destructive. Santiago Calatrava was blamed for his overdue and over budget World Trade Center transportation hub, Zaha Hadid for her contemptuous comments about deaths among workers at Qatar soccer stadium (claimed as misleading press information?), SHoP Architects for Domino Sugar Factory- 55-story development arrogance in Brooklyn, just a few examples.

This biased and one sided categorization should be reconsidered because no architect can build a spectacular building without a client demand and a city authority approval with or without the public and media embracing it. Here it needs to be mentioned though that most buildings of today are commended by private interests, in many cases disregarding social ones.

After the 2008 world economic crisis lesson, pursuing sustainability issues, the public opinion questions how our buildings perform socially, environmentally and economically over the long term. Even so, a series of extravagant, international style buildings are constantly erected all over the world with the hope of becoming a catalyst of public interest. The legacy of “Bilbao effect”, a successful 90s urban development concept, lingers nowadays reinterpreted in other geographical contexts. The era of starchitect(ure) is being challenged though by the social responsible architecture representing the public interest and raising awareness about environmental issues.

Starchitecture has the global impact advantage but doesn’t resonate with local reality or homegrown design. Social housing blocks or preschools aren’t starchitect’s specialties rather museums or corporate headquarters. A new “breed” of architects referred to as activists are challenging the status quo of the profession, legislation or mentality.

Is it the time for architects to become socially responsible, address real social issues and offer living solutions to those communities that have no access to a well-designed environment?

The “activist architect” works in slums or disadvantaged communities, with minimal budget and local resources, responding to urgent community needs where the state has abdicated its responsibility. He designs schools, public spaces and residential buildings closely collaborating with local communities, incorporating traditional materials and technologies.

Without signaling the end of “starchitecture”, a very different kind of movement has been emerging within contemporary architecture, one that aims to tackle social issues within a global society.

As an exercise of imagination, a future scenario could be envisaged: starchitecture will dim, locatecture will arise, architects will search for interdisciplinary framework to address real community issues and will turn to ecological, economic and social sustainability toolbox, will embrace collaboration and civic participation.
4. References


