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Branding has many facets

Faces in conversation with Anna Klingmann
of Klingmann Architects & Brand Consultants

Faces: “Branding” originated from the brand marks of cattle herds or horses. But how can we imagine “branding” in architecture?

Anna Klingmann: Branding in architecture is a complex matter since it stands for uniqueness and individuality but at the same time, it also creates an effect of standardization as in the original purpose of branding cattle herds. The challenge then becomes how one might reconcile these two apparent contradictions.

Over the last years, this was primarily achieved by hiring star architects who, on the one hand, represent originality but, on the other hand, also guarantee instant recognition through a highly recognizable style. Ironically, through a process of repetition, the unique signature of the architect becomes standardized.

In addition, there are also other applications of branding in architecture. Through the implementation of brand values a consistent user experience is achieved, which does not however necessarily imply that the actual design has to be identical. This is a strategy which is frequently employed by good hotel chains: In the case of five-star luxury resorts, for example, great emphasis is attached to ensuring that each resort is given a unique flair based on the specific characteristics of the host country. This way, each hotel property is designed individually and might look completely different from another while the brand values and the service are kept at a consistently high standard.

So, you can see that today, there is more than one common understanding of how architecture might be successfully used in branding.

Faces: Brand architecture ensures a recognition value for consumers. Which additional advantages does brand architecture provide?

Anna Klingmann: Architecture has the potential of translating the image of the brand into a holistic customer experience, as we know it, for example, from “Louis Vuitton”, “Apple” or “Comme des Garçons”. This is no longer about the execution of a simplistic sales transaction but rather about translating the brand into an all-encompassing lifestyle. And just how important this is can be seen in the example of the Apple flagship stores, which have made a crucial contribution to the global success of Apple’s products. Moreover, the increase in pop-up stores is another response to the new definition of brand architecture. Pop-up stores are designed to surprise customers with impromptu interventions in unexpected locations for a limited period of time to keep the brand fresh and interesting.

Faces: How deep should branding infiltrate architecture?

Anna Klingmann: Over the last decades, branding has become far subtler than it used to be—take McDonalds, which, in the 1950s, offered customers for the first time the promise of a uniform product quality along with standardized service in a clean and bright environment. At the time, the motto was: “No surprise is the best surprise.” Today, this equation is reversed: The standard bores us to a certain extent

The Apple stores are more than just places where people shop. They have become centers of leisure where visitors can surf the Internet or listen to music with their iPads. They are meeting points and adventure playgrounds for adults (left side).



Photo: Michael Moran / OTTO

In 2011, the Uniqlo cubes were opened as successful pop-up stores in New York City. A part of the bright cubes is accessible and becomes an entrance to the shop (above).

The Café Balzac at the Main-Taunus-Center in Frankfurt has been given a memorable interior communicating Balzac's brand values (right side).

and we tend to look for surprises. This is why, in my opinion, it becomes increasingly important to achieve a sense of uniqueness in branded environments. This can be achieved by continuously re-interpreting the brand values and by adjusting the design from place to place, culture to culture and according to new emerging trends.

Faces: What is your approach to branding architecture? What needs to be given particular consideration and where do difficulties arise in your experience?

Anna Klingmann: Initially, we analyze the brand values along with the specific site conditions. Afterwards, we develop a strategy, which transforms both of these aspects into a holistic customer experience.

In order to achieve an optimal result, three components need to work together. I call them the hardware, software and humanware. The “hardware” comprises what we define as architecture in the traditional sense. It forms the stage as it were. The “software” relates to the use and programming of the space—the choreography: What, other than the sale, is going to take place within this space? In the case of an Applestore, this typically comprises the addition of seminar rooms and the Genius Bar, which offers a completely new definition of customer service—as a quasi-public experi-

ence. Finally, there is the “humanware”, which refers to the human element: the actual customer service and the dialogue between people. This aspect should not be underestimated because if the actors—in this case, the sales people—do not provide an informative and interesting service experience, the best stage becomes irrelevant and the customer will go home disappointed.

Therefore, in my opinion, the creation of successful brand architecture requires a delicate balance between all three components.

Faces: Is the choice of material important in branding or is the focus primarily on colors and shapes?

Anna Klingmann: Absolutely. In a certain way, materials are of the essence because they appeal to all the five senses, not only to the visual aspect. Water, for example, has a calming effect while music is reinvigorating. Wood provides a cozy atmosphere, glass has an urban appeal—all materials create a certain mood and atmosphere. Contrasting materials can also be exciting: rough stone juxtaposed with a smooth surface, decorative vintage elements mixed with contemporary materials. All these contrasts evoke different emotions that, ultimately, create the brand experience. Materials can achieve this in a much more subtle manner than



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shapes or graphics. Moreover, the use of ecological materials can express a certain attitude that appeals to the values of many customers.

Faces: What is more important in your opinion: Architecture or the architect who designs it?

Anna Klingmann: Successful brand architecture generates an added economic and social value. In the classical corporate identity system, architecture is used to communicate a company's profile to the outside world. Simultaneously, architecture and design transport a company's social value system internally— within the company, in order, for example, to generate a certain work atmosphere. The Google headquarters are a good example of how the free spirit of the company is reflected in the design of the architecture. Curiously enough, this is not achieved by a perfect styling but by allowing opportunities for change. The employees are given the freedom to decorate their own work places, while common areas allow for a mix of work, rest and play - through fun interventions like egg-chairs that can be used for an afternoon nap, ping pong tables and even a slide. This demonstrates how architecture can actively change the daily routine as well as the social interaction within a corporation and, at the same time, can

generate an image, which, in this case, is congruent with the Google identity.

However, much more frequently, a kind of “co-branding” is applied, which is often confused with brand architecture: A star architect is commissioned to create a form intended to strengthen a company's image with his or her own unique style, such as, for example, Zaha Hadid for BMW or UNStudio for Mercedes. But the consequence of the incessant repetition of this recipe is that it becomes increasingly homogeneous or sterile because the same signature style is applied to multiple companies. Essentially a pre-made image is applied externally and not really created from within the company's identity.

This, in turn, reduces architecture to a composition of recognizable shapes, which are not necessarily able to produce an experience that is unique to that particular company. As a consequence, this is a shortsighted model, which focuses primarily on impressing investors with an image that communicates status and prestige. This approach does not necessarily reflect the personality of a specific company or of a particular place. Yet this is exactly the potential of successful brand architecture: Achieving a unique result in which the user and not the architect takes center stage.



Portrait: Saemng World Productions / Valerie Parker

Anna Klingmann graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture (with distinction) at the Pratt Institute in New York and obtained a master's degree in Urban Development from the Architecture Association in London. Later, she attained a PhD in branding and architecture (summa cum laude) at the University of Arts in Berlin. Before opening her own office (Klingmann Architects & Brand Consultants) in New York in 2001, she worked for Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas. In addition, she has taught at various universities and gives numerous lectures worldwide.