



### **Architecture as a Catalyst: Experience after Branding**

Multinational corporations are the primary agents for delivering both the benefits and problems of globalization to the myriad cultures of the world. The power of multinational corporations to reshape geographies both on the global and local scale has garnered a great deal of international attention from governments, the media, and concerned citizens from all walks of life. Much of this concern stems from the fact that many multinational corporations have developed resources to such an extent that they are no longer answerable to any national government. When unregulated by national and international laws, ecological understanding, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility, this potential can lead to enormously destructive acts. Conversely, corporations' agility, initiative, focused power and access to capital and resources allow them to innovate, create, produce goods and services, influencing the world on a scale and at a speed far beyond those of a nation-state and at a rate the world has never seen before. As global corporations increasingly present important economic and cultural potential in the world, the question is imminent how architects can make constructive use of the growing dominance of global corporations to reshape spaces and territories? Undoubtedly, corporations drive change at an unprecedented pace, which can be considered both negative and positive - particularly in their contested relationship to place and local communities.

On a positive scale, it has been demonstrated over the past decade that corporate capital can act as a powerful channel to reverse economic decline and promote urban revitalization. On the negative side, the global practices of corporations can also be the cause for the disintegration of cultural differences and local milieus. In this regard, the changes caused within local cultures by the products and practices of multinational corporations can range from cultural and economic *renewal* to cultural and economic *disintegration*. Renewal in communities, on a more general level, happens through the fusion of new forms of cultural expression that are brought about by a traditional culture's incorporating elements of what it encounters in the global marketplace while holding on to the essential ingredients that constitute its difference from the global norm. Conversely, disintegration or damage to a local culture can occur and has occurred when corporations simply override a place's difference and a culture's diversity resulting in what has become known as "McDis-



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neyfication". The impending challenge therefore becomes the utilization of corporate power to affect the establishment of positive meanings that can function as renewed sources of civic pride, a certain sense of community, the filling of a public domain, and a feeling of development and direction. However; while corporations are driven by the well-known paradigm "think globally; act locally" - places are confronted with the reverse paradigm. They have to *think locally* and *act globally* by using their local differences as equity. And yet it is precisely within this duality of the local and the global dimension of corporations and places that new guidelines for brand development have to be established and situated. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges for architects is to reinvent a brand identity that responds to the corporation's ambitions while simultaneously enhancing that of public, cultural, and political agencies.

Without a doubt, corporations have the resources and capacity necessary to enhance architecture's role as a catalyst for economic and cultural growth. Within this process, it needs to be examined, how architecture might be constructively used to implement sensitive connections and identities, which enhance the socio-economic potential of cities or regions beyond the strictly corporate marketing. The challenge lies in architecture's ability to become a building block for a *corporate identity*

**Global corporation and local community**

Foto: Anna Klingmann



as well as *place identity* by strategically combining aesthetic and experiential values that meet both corporate and civic needs. This touches on such points as organizational structures, programming, communal functions, and events that mediate corporate goals with the civic ambitions of a place and the people who operate there. In terms of marketing, this would mean that the expectations and the demands of the corporation have to be successfully amalgamated with the exploration and mobilization of a community's changing social, economic, and cultural potential in the global marketplace.

The use of architecture as a strategic facilitator to enhance economic values has enjoyed a long tradition within the corporate identity programs of multinational corporations. The World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, the Fabbrica Benetton Art School in Italy and the VW's Autostadt in Germany, are some examples among many that demonstrate the use of architecture as a visual symbol for the expression of a corporation's culture and personality. Contrary to conventional architecture, brand environments are not self-referential but develop their expressions within the context of a holistic corporate identity program designed to represent and support a firm's values and philosophy. A corporate identity program is a designed marketing concept that synthesizes corporate or institutional goals with a visual and spatial message, and presents a multidimensional communication process that not only engages investors and consumers, but also employees and the public.

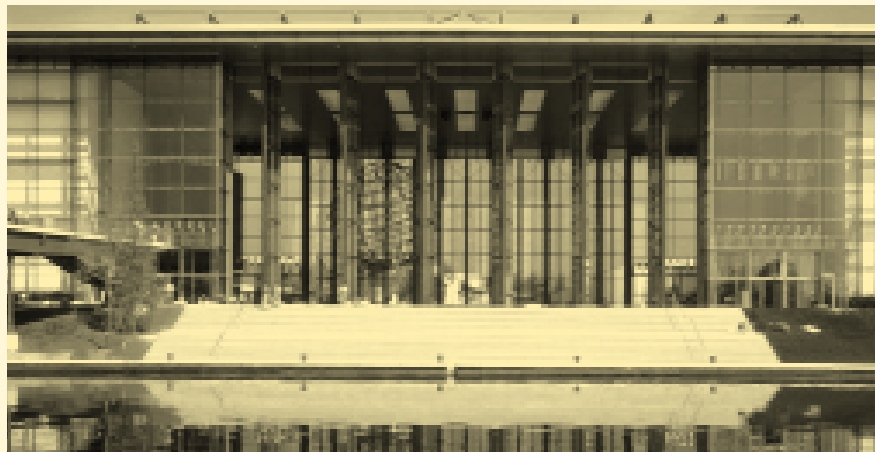
Within this context, corporate architecture transports a firm's values *externally* as an *image* to prospective target markets and *internally* among co-workers for all members of the corporation to identify with the principles and attitudes of the firm. Corporate architecture communicates values through environments, designed to get audience and content on to the same wavelength, and thus lets messages to be easily understood and remembered. Just like the agora turned democracy into something to be experienced and lastingly institutionalized, corporate architecture helps a company to gain a persistent presence by establishing a public interface beyond its products and services. This allows employees and customers to enter into a relationship with the company irrespective of their merchandize, and partake in its future development. Corporate architecture conveys a firm's ethics by providing a symbolic dimension, an emotional experience, and an organizational structure, that are combined to strengthen company values on a perceptual level. Consequently, corporate architecture articulates simultaneously an *intensive space*, which is developed from the corporate identity of the firm, as well as an *extensive space*, which at its most ideal relates to the particularities of cultures and places.

Corporate architecture has been around for a long time; yet it has changed dramatically as illustrated in the following analogy by Phil Patton: "In 1937 Ferdinand Porsche, father of the Volkswagen Beetle, travelled to Detroit to study Henry Ford's vast River Rouge factory, hire men, and buy machines to build an equivalent plant for Germany. In 1997 Otto Ferdinand Wachs, a top Volkswagen executive, visited Las Vegas and Disney World to analyze two current American specialties: theme parks and branding. The result of Porsche's trip was the mile-long factory in Wolfsburg that built the Beetle. The result of Wachs' trip opened on June 1: Autostadt ("Autocity")."

1927 marked the year that Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, moved his operations for the Model T to a new plant at the River Rouge in Michigan and fulfilled his vision of integrated operations, which not only encompassed component production, assembly, and transportation but also a comprehensive corporate identity program. Ford not only supplemented the principles of scientific management with a system of social rationalization and ethical standards, which included health insurance plans, educational facilities, and an eight-hour work day, but furthermore, extended his corporate reach into organized leisure activities. At around the same time, Wolfsburg, Volkswagen's company town, began life in 1938 as a

planned corporate city surrounding the production of VW with a representative factory, workers housing as well as recreational programs - referred from then on by the locals as the "VW city" or simply "car city." Almost six decades later, the Autostadt opened on June 1, 2000 in conjunction with Hannover's EXPO 2000, as a giant theme park and entertainment complex devoted to the history and corporate identity of Volkswagen. The development features an exposition-style corporate forum, an auto museum, showrooms, and pavilions for each of the company's many sub-brands (including Audi, Bentley, Lamborghini, Seat, and Skoda), an elaborate auto delivery center, several theaters, restaurants, shopping, a luxury hotel, and other anchor attractions. The high point of the trip to Autostadt for many visitors, however, is the pick-up of their new vehicles, ordered at local dealers but stored in one of two glass and steel towers, each 20 stories high and packed with 400 cars. "(Autostadt) is a way to show the soul and spirit of the company," says Wachs, Autostadt's director and former head of VW public relations. "We want it to serve as the company's platform for service and communication."

Meanwhile, also Ford's River Rouge Plant is in the spotlight of new developments, and again, a "Ford" is navigating the course. Named chair of the company just last year, William Clay Ford, Jr., 42-year old grandson of Henry Ford, has teamed up with William McDonough, an architect who specializes in sustainable design, to redesign the sprawling and aged yet still productive Rouge facility in Dearborn, Michigan to "transform the icon of 20th century manufacturing into the icon of 21st century sustainable manufacturing." Sue Skerker, the Ford Motor Company's Senior Director for Global Public Policy told the Detroit News: "Environmental leadership is critical to Ford both from a business and from a reputational perspective." Defunct



**Autostadt Wolfsburg, Henn Architekten**

Foto: Huthmacher, Quelle: Henn Architekten



buildings and polluted equipment on site will be removed and all other areas will be turned into an ecologically sound operation. The preservation and reinstatement of sensitive wild-life habitats for migratory birds and indigenous fish, riparian zones, as well as a restitution of high quality of open space are among the issues under consideration to change the corporate image of Ford from "reckless expansion" to one of ecological concern and environmentalism.

Both examples suggest the degree to which the concept of corporate identity is transforming from "the dictated visual identities of the past (corporate-centric identities that "tell" us the unconditional values they represent) to the "personal" visual identities (those designed around an emotion and whose interpretation is often different from one consumer to the next) of the present and the future." While in the past, corporate architecture was recognized as a tool to impart an unequivocal corporate voice through a cohesive visual identity that was easily recognized by many people; corporate architecture today has to convey an emotional content within the context of a visual message: Just as the emotional meaning of a brand evolves from dictated to personal (Gobe) the architectural expression of the brand needs to evolve from "impact" to "contact."<sup>1)</sup>

Yet, despite the transition from the imposed corporate splendour of the industrial age to more personable identities that rest on consumer relations, the architecture of most corporations is still very much based on visibility and impact. Arguably, Gunter Henn's generic corporate glass and steel architecture for the Autostadt epitomized by the monumental Konzernforum, belongs to the expression of a bygone era, one based on corporate expansion and unequivocal corporate power, distancing itself not only from the local environment but more importantly from the human scale of its visitors. With its air conditioned glassed-in piazza and massive open spaces the building establishes an image of corporate leadership but one that exudes an atmosphere of sterility, and distance to the public, where the visitor feels dwarfed and isolated. Similarly, also the theme park's pavilions are removed from their surrounding,



**Sony Building New York**  
**Philip Johnson, 1984**  
*Foto: Anna Klingmann*



connoting simplistic logos, which do not engage the visitor on an experiential level. The Volkswagen pavilion, for example, consists of a simple cube, with a sphere visible through a glass wall to evoke VW's timeless virtues: quality, safety, value. The Audi building is shaped in the form of interlocking circles, echoing the rings of its logo. The Bentley pavilion is built into a hillside - almost completely underground - and covered in the same granite as the nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel to suggest a shared quality of luxury. While the architecture reflects the symbolic value of each brand in a very mundane and prosaic manner it fails to engage the visitor through unique, evocative, and multidimensional messages that are prevalent in many of the VW advertising campaigns - most notably the "Drivers Wanted" campaign created by Arnold Communications in 1995. Overall, the Autostadt presents a conflict with Volkswagen's ambition to be a "people's brand" - one that exudes character rather than power and one that forges lasting connections with its consumers.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while corporate identity programs - at least in theory - have evolved over time from an approach based on the concepts of visibility and authority to one that is founded on interaction and dialogue, its architecture for the most part still reverts to simplistic expressions of power, wealth, and financial growth, irrespective of the firm's personal identity. The Sony tower by Philip Johnson in New York, formerly owned by AT&T, for instance, becomes a status symbol for Sony's technological innovation, conveying its image as a market leader:

It fails however in communicating the corporation's commitment to consumer orientation and lifestyle diversity. Johnson's post-modern tower scheme is a pale reflection of the human dynamics found in Sony's marketing campaigns, which are based on consumer interaction and the free flows of ideas between the corporation and people. Lloyds of London, designed by Richard Rogers presents a similar case of "old" corporate architecture. While its spectacular high-tech appeal conveys a distinguished icon by using the expressed structure and exposed services as ornamental orders, the hierarchical structure of the insurance is mirrored in the building's interior organiza-



**Lloyds of London**  
**Richard Rogers, 1984**  
 Foto: Anna Klingmann

tion. The atrium in the center of the building houses the trading floor on the ground floor around which the first eight levels of the traders' offices are grouped in an effort to connect the stockbrokers not only physically but also visually. The architectural image in this case is supplemented with an organizational principle that is coherent with the corporate identity of Lloyds as an insurance firm, which combines the values of old tradition with an ambition to innovate. However, where the building falls short is in its engagement of the customer. While the building visually dominates London's skyline with a dramatic icon, the structure is tightly controlled on the ground floor and supplies no public interface for the engagement of consumers or the community.

The austere corporate architecture of Nike's headquarters in Oregon reveals a similar conflict. The headquarters exude an image of an organization that is top-down and internally driven with no input from the surrounding community desired. Its conservative whitewashed glass and steel architecture neatly composed on a pristine beaux-arts inspired campus is ruthlessly fenced off to the public by rigid boundaries that discourage trespassing. Again, the architecture fails to match the customer orientation and dynamism of Nike's publicized corporate identity both in organization and image. The experiential quality of the brand is not realized consistently, and neither is the progressive image of the company in any way reflected by the classical rendition of the campus. Conclusively, all the previous examples insinuate a culture of rationality, but not one of interaction. In Marc Gobe's words: "they connote logo, but not soul."<sup>2)</sup>

Thus, while corporate architecture has been around a long time, it rarely succeeded in the delivery of relevant experiences that reflect both the company's ambitions *and* the creation of stimulating interfaces to the public and the cultural environment in which it is situated. In recent years, however, multinational corporations not only define themselves through their products or services, but also progressively through their ethical position and societal commitment. The most innovative entrepreneurs injected into their businesses practices new ideas representing philosophies of justice, equality, and sensitivity to the environment.<sup>3)</sup> For the first time in history, corporate practices are intertwined with a concern regarding the impact their business exerts on the environment both culturally, financially, and ecologically. Benetton, The Body Shop, and Virgin are among a generation of corporations that combine their mission to build a successful business with a humanistic vision that is responsive to the environment as well as customer's needs. Overall, "corporate identities are changing to become consumers driven, flexible, multi-sensorial expressions of not only what the company thinks it is, but also reflections of how a company wants to be perceived by people and how they want people to interact with it."<sup>4)</sup>

As multinational corporations today, increasingly provide globally distributed networks between multiple overlapping scales and social orders, affecting drastic changes of geography both on the global and the local level, they also face increasing pressures to mediate their own ambitions with societal and political goals and the cultural and ecological context within which they choose to be situated. And as MNCs gain more and more political power in the restructuring of public spaces, they are increasingly faced with the social responsibility to create added values for the public in order to facilitate a reciprocal sense of connection and identification to localized communities and places. In an age of global divide over the real or perceived role of corporations as ruthless exploiters, brand architecture can no longer be reduced to a mere expression of commercial values but furthermore needs to capitalize on the mounting need of MNCs to instil social and political values. By mediating both commercial and civic ambitions, architecture must exceed its role as a manifestation of corporate power to become a multidimensional expression of ethical and social values brought to life in the most imaginative way. Corporate architecture needs to be redefined as a *glocal* space, in which multiple, overlapping interests converge to form multilateral connections to both local communities and places. As technology

and information comprise possibly the most influential force of our economy and are reworking the forms of countless industries, brand architecture needs to adapt to these changes while adopting its methods. In the information age, buildings should no longer serve as physical markers, but serve as cultural connections. In order to be relevant to our new economic order, corporate architecture must evolve to become more organic, flexible, and people-driven. It needs to support customer contact allowing for more humanistic organizational structures that endorse new interactions between employees as well as with the general public. Just as logos and brand personalities are now being consciously designed to bridge the gap between people and corporations, brand architecture must join the gap between the marketplace and geographic space.<sup>5)</sup>

By building an open-ended, relationship oriented culture that encourages sensitivity and understanding along with a creative questioning of the status quo, a relationship based architecture encompasses a larger social and cultural context through a dialogue-based approach - internally and externally - one that fosters sensitive connections to specific cultural environments and places, and one that encourages public activity in an age where communal spaces have turned into prime real-estate. Ultimately, it comes down to the contemporary redefinition of the fundamental role of architecture to fight for social values and accelerate positive potential in an economy, where the most radical cultural and economic changes are driven by the world's largest corporations.

The following points will be crucial for architecture to become a viable catalyst for corporations in today's global marketplace:

1. The creation of a specific personality to create a unique value for the firm, one, which gives the firm character.
2. The conscious creation of a public interface.
3. The facilitation of a flexible and open organizational structure that allows for multi-lateral connections - both internally and externally.
4. The mediation of the corporation's aims with the cultural, social, financial, and ecological aims of a specific region.

*Inspiration:* In the wider context, this relationship-based model of brand architecture can also serve as an inspiration for individuals, institutions, and cities. As not only corporations, but also people, organizations, and municipalities have to market themselves in the global economy, it falls to architecture to provide the representational as well as the organizational structures that can provide the necessary infrastructure for social patterns, work routines, and activities.

Evidently, for architecture to become a catalyst it has to exceed the architectural ritual. It must establish relational frameworks that are at once specific and open and that encourage new cultural, economic, and social realities to manifest while allowing others to simply evolve. Then, architecture becomes not only a strategic medium for the representation of individuality and social attitudes - of identification, recognition, continuity, and collectivity - but also a catalyst for cultural and economic change. This needs to be an integrative process that capitalizes on the dormant or explicit potential of particular places, services, and social relationships between people that distinguish one location from another. In conclusion, architecture as a catalyst is largely defined by four integrative dimensions, which hold true irrespective of scale:

1. Image: symbolic dimension
2. Organization: performative dimension
3. Place: ecological and experiential dimension
4. Community: social, economic, and political dimension

<sup>(1)-5)</sup> More about this subject will appear in Anna Klingmann's book "Branding Architecture" to be published by MIT Press 2006)