

BRANDISM™

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Particularly over the past fifteen years, it has become resoundingly clear that products of the post-industrial age have morphed from proficient "technology equipment" into larger, consumer-focused concepts, gravitating from the sphere of rationality to the realm of desire, from the objective to the subjective, to the realm of psychology. In this world of ephemeral values driven by a paradigm of perception, branding plays a central role. Whereas the idea of the machine permeated cultural and commercial production during the period from World War I to World War II (often referred to as the Machine Age) and served as a metaphor for simplification, standardization, specialization, and precision, the brand has become a symbol for contemporary consumer values associated with the Information Age: differentiation, customization, communication, and perception. Brands are major contributors enforcing global culture and undoubtedly, the marketing world has become one of the central formulators of people's expectations and hopes about themselves. Brands give products, services, places, and events an added symbolic value, which, as it were, elevates them above themselves, and makes them more than they are in a material or functional sense. Brands synthesize images, identities, and life-styles into coherent entities, while simultaneously codifying cultural values at large. Brands act as catalysts to raise the value and/or status of a particular place, a person, or an event.

Architecture Brands

Branding and architecture have in recent decades developed an intimate relationship in which they feed off one another. For example, Prada, BMW, ING, and other leading brands have in recent years employed architecture as a central part of a larger marketing strategy. But architecture and urban planning also increasingly borrow from branding. Cities such as Bilbao, Shanghai, Dubai, and New York have extensively used architecture in order to enhance their image and elevate their position in the global village. If one counts all the buildings that are currently under construction in the Far East, the Middle East, the U.S., and Europe as part of an attempt to redefine urban, regional, and in some cases also national identities, one cannot help but notice how integral architecture is to branding and vice versa. Thinking about architecture as part of our economic environment brings us also to think about opinion-shaping, power, identity, and experiencing the world. When seen in a global context, architecture is no longer part of marketing our environment it has become the essence of it.

Notwithstanding its pervasive influence on architecture and urbanism, branding has a controversial reputation. The paradox of the architecture's intended application as a catalyst for generating a distinct message in the global marketplace lies in the simple fact that it has contributed to the growing homogenization of people and places. More often than not, rapid development strategies fail to establish sensitive connections to particular contexts by imposing standardized forms and formulas on the urban or suburban landscape. By favoring the creation of architectural objects over more comprehensive urban interventions and by severing their identity from the complexity of the social fabric, today's brandscapes—exemplified by corporate franchises, cultural signature buildings, emblematic shopping centers, alluring expositions, and luxurious residential developments—have, in many cases, resulted in a culture of the copy, imitating one another in their offerings and aesthetics.

Global Inc.: The Subversion of Place

It has been demonstrated over the past decade that architecture can act as a powerful channel to boost economic growth and international recognition. As more and more businesses are attuned to the advantages of international locations and accelerated employment mobility, cities need to confront a growing number of competitors in their efforts to attract scarce resources within an ever-expanding range of possibilities. Therefore, places have adopted a market perspective, striving to communicate their competitive advantages along with a distinguished image. As every community transforms itself into a seller of goods and services, places become more like corporations, developing products, markets, and customers.¹ Places are ranked and evaluated today on every conceivable dimension: where to start a business, where to raise a family, where to plan a vacation, hold a convention, or go for entertainment. Consequently, cities just like corporations launch branding campaigns in order to attract tourists and investment capital. Buildings—when strategically used—play a key role in the marketing of regions as special features that promise a pulsating environment for employment, income, trade, investment and growth. Strategies of city branding in the past have typically included architecture as a tool to spark a process of urban renewal either through the construction of singular cultural attractions such as museums, concert halls, or libraries, major improvements of infrastructure, or programmatic interventions such as the development of recreational facilities and entertainment. Generally, however, place marketing is driven by a combination of more than one factor. In Europe, for example, regional cities are emerging on the global map, powered by “world-class architecture” designed by brand-name architects. Rotterdam (most recently with the redevelopment of Kop van Zuid), Porto (with Rem Koolhaas' Casa da Musica), Wolfsburg (with the Autostadt and the Science Center by Zaha Hadid), Barcelona, and London (with the

Olympics) have led in the trend of using architecture and urban design to promote urban identity schemes.² In other instances, place marketing is spearheaded by an iconic piece of signature architecture. The Seattle Library designed by Rem Koolhaas is one example, which instigated a larger city branding initiative. For similar reasons, the city of Porto commissioned Koolhaas to design its Casa da Musica. Denver, Toronto, and Manchester gave post-Bilbao museum commissions to Daniel Libeskind, who delivered a trio of photogenic projects, while Qatar hired Santiago Calatrava to design a predictably flamboyant museum, and Guangzhou appointed Zaha Hadid to design a grand opera house scheme.

In the quest for an image of distinction, local business and political leaders in many cities continue to build and rebuild as a sign of economic expansion, using architecture as a brand to demonstrate that they've arrived. However, as seen in many examples, their blueprint for growth is often limited to constructing a visual theme, an icon, or a signature that seems to have no specific social or material context. While seeking to project a seemingly unique identity, local interests simply hire "brand-name" architects whose reputations minimize financial risk by producing an architecture that is apparently less risky for investors, but also less and less evocative of a sense of place. As these architects stamp their signature on the urban landscape, they become more and more like franchises, creating standardized environments as they move from city to city, resulting in an imperative of uniformity.³ Just like a Starbucks in Boston resembles a Starbucks in Beijing or in Tokyo, star architects such as Gehry, Meier, Calatrava and Libeskind impose their themed abstractions everywhere: Gehry's Music Pavilion at Bard College, N.Y., his Disney Concert Hall in L.A., the Millennium Park Music Pavillion in Chicago, and his Experience Music Project in Seattle all resemble each other in their self-contained formal expression, while Calatrava's infrastructural hubs are yet another means to boost international recognition. Ultimately, by exporting their signature buildings to cities around the world, superstar architects actively participate in the leveling of local and regional distinctions by transnational economic investment, and, as a result, cities bear resemblance to one another as the same forms and formulas are repeated ad nauseam.⁴

As the discussion of urban form suggests, architects' designs become useful economic tools to speculative real-estate developers and city agencies alike to project what is now known as the "global city." Produced under the same social conditions as consumer products, these buildings have become cultural commodities that follow the same patterns of both standardization and market differentiation.⁵ Extensive publicity furthermore expands the cultural value of designers' ideas and in the process enhances the market value of both the architects and their buildings.

As signature buildings rise in place after place, gaining in recognition, the continuous reproduction of the architectural brand unifies economic and cultural circuits, and increases the economic value of investment capital.

Architecture as a Catalyst for Transformation

It is evident that market competition in a global economy with a highly differentiated social structure requires cultural products that strive to be distinctive. But how can architecture be idiosyncratic and respect the cultural differences of particular places if it is reproduced all over the world? In theory, signature-driven brandscapes suggest the possibility of reconciling market and culture; but the more visible they become, the more they take on the market-oriented look of franchise culture. In the current state of things, signature projects make places less distinctive. Ultimately, they become non-places in global markets.⁶

Accordingly, the challenge remains how architects might negotiate cultural values that respect the heterogeneity of places while promoting an architecture that aligns city marketing objectives with broader, inclusive objectives of urban development. Any location that wants to gain or retain visibility in today's Global Village will need to offer a unique character and a range of experiences that distinguish it from all other places. 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, using their local differences as equity.⁷ Therefore, while it is evident that urban development needs to take its cues from global economic and cultural developments, it is also abundantly clear that copying concepts and formulas from other parts of the world is no longer sufficient as a means of differentiation. The endless repetition of signature buildings, tower schemes, urban entertainment centers, stadiums, marketplaces, flagship stores, and cultural expositions have resulted in a conglomeration of Disneyfied ersatz locales, where meaning and form increasingly disconnect, and resembling one another in their offerings and aesthetics. In the end, the question remains how much global culture a city really needs in order to function as part of the corporate, market-oriented world, and how much it can bear before it loses its own identity and originality and becomes impersonal and undesirable.

As experiences become more and more commoditized, and the global landscape progressively more homogenized by the same dogmas and recipes, it falls to architects to create authentic and relevant transformations. Architects need to arrive at innovative and inspiring solutions that are unlike the models currently on the market, which rely to a large degree on the staging of

spectacle, and the repetition of signatures. It is doubtful if urban identity can be developed solely through the implementation of cutting-edge emblematic buildings, emanating from a climate of neo-liberalism, as these projects generally constitute self-referential, introverted entities, and—just like the festival marketplaces that preceded them—contain edges and boundaries that do not really take the larger urban fabric into consideration. In the end, it becomes an issue of object versus context, favoring the architectural brand over the more comprehensive urban brand as most of these projects do not take the urban framework as a viable resource of inspiration. In order to facilitate inspiring encounters with global culture without risking loss of identity and originality, the challenges of urban developments will increasingly depend on the design of surprising and distinct experiences, rooted in the distinguishing human resources and goals of a city and its communities. Identity, in this regard, might be viewed as a malleable entity under (perpetual) construction, rather than a fixed image, in order to avoid both the pitfalls of nostalgic obsession with a constructed authenticity and the celebration of its demise. Just as a brand identity has to be renewed by counteracting and destabilizing any received notion, true longevity and coherence in urban renewal can only be insured by vigilant destabilization. In terms of branding, this would mean that the expectations and the demands of the market must be successfully combined with the exploration and mobilization of a community's changing social, economic, and cultural potential. It is a process that capitalizes on the dormant or explicit potential of particular places, services, and social relationships between people that distinguish one location from another. Only then, architecture can designate the creation of an identity with its own experiential value, which is profoundly original and specific to one specific place. It is a line of thought that is characterized by a profound interest between people in a particular place focusing on the investigation of urban and architectural strategies that emphasize economic, social, cultural, and ecological independence.

The Conquest of Cool?

We are confronted with an economy that is dominated by a privileging of the image—giving rise to a climate in which publicity and perception play an ever more crucial role in the marketing of architecture. Yet architecture is more than an image. Architecture, contrary to products, is characterized by an enduring public presence that defines our environment more than any other brand as a lived, day-to-day experience. Therefore, the creation of a lasting brand in architecture must be more than a passing implementation of the zeitgeist. It is precisely within the context of an economy, which favors the short-lived standardized formulas of accepted marketing schemes, that the necessity of branding as a communication strategy—that counters fetishized abstractions with authentic solutions—becomes ever more pertinent. In order to be relevant to

our new economic order, architecture must evolve to become more organic, flexible, and people-driven. The architecture that results is relational, and consists of the interpersonal experiences that it generates. It is an architecture that is no longer obsessed with the object, with representation, or with newness, but is chiefly concerned with creating a meaningful and lasting identity that is responsive to the particularities of people and places. This is not so much an aspiration to abolish the emancipation from the institutional/representative structures, the articulation of autonomy, and the tradition of the critical margin. It is, however, a plea for a conscious departure from architecture's recent obsession with the ultimate cool. While "cool" may be the avant-garde's most precious resource, Irma Zandl, the founder of Zandl Group, a professional trend-spotting firm, argues that the center might be the new edge: "One of the things we've been seeing is that the edge has gotten incredibly predictable—I don't think it's very fresh anymore, because it's so focused on itself." In other words, maybe cool people aren't setting the trends anymore. Maybe what's going on is that the avant-garde is finally weaning itself off an addiction to cool. As a cultural commentator wrote, "If the center is the new edge, maybe mainstream will be the new radical, square will be the new hip, and—stay with me here—uncool will be the new cool. In other words, maybe there is hope for us all."⁸

¹ Kotler, Philip; Haider, Donald; Rein, Irving, *Marketing Places, Attracting Investment Industry and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*, New York: The Free Press, 1993: 346

² See also Charlene Rooke, "The Birth of Kool,"

<http://www.enroutemag.com/e/archives/may03/archives03.html>

³ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, 47.

⁴ Ibid. (Zukin, 1991,) 45.

⁵ Ibid.(Zukin, 1991,) 42.

⁶ Ibid. (Zukin, 1991,) 27.

⁷ Ibid (Kotler et al, 1993,) 316.

⁸ Lev Grossman, "The Quest for Cool", *Time Magazine*, September 8, 2003.