

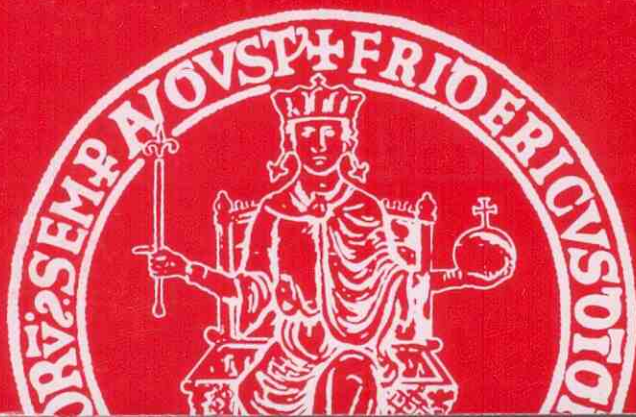
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CREATIVE BRANDSCAPES: ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM IN THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

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1. Introduction

While building booms on a global scale are rare, the world has seen its fair share over the years. But the boom that we are currently experiencing is unique, not merely because of its extraordinary longevity, but also because of its uniquely 21st century take on architecture's purpose as a brand. Increasingly, the skylines and urban landscapes throughout the "Global Village" have become "staged brandscapes" composed of towering symbols of corporate identity, where everything seems to be arranged for effect. This, of course, was not always the case. I started my research into branding at a time when architects were largely perceived as a nuisance to developers, as an obstacle to profit making – a time in the eighties and nineties when architects had virtually no input on the design of private developments – except of course on the design of the proverbial mirrored lobby, a time where good architecture was equated with luxury that only a privileged few could afford – a time when the general public eyed contemporary architecture with suspicion and apprehension. So I asked myself – why is it that people buy the latest coolest-looking VCR while resisting that very same innovation in architecture? What caused that tremendous rift between architects and the rest of us?

So what became apparent is that the enormous divide between architects and consumers, was in fact instigated by the modernists and their post war legacy and then merrily continued by elitist architects that were on the whole aloof to socio-economic needs in their incessant search of a grand vision. This divide between a creative vision and consumers' desires never existed in product design, which not only acknowledges people's expectations and desires in the design process, but in fact, surpasses them. I would argue that this perception of architecture as an elitist object has radically changed in the last decade or so where architecture is now increasingly perceived as a commodity, as part of a lifestyle – a brand, which I believe offers enormous opportunities for architects that have not been exploited yet.

2. Brandism

What exactly is Brandism? Brandism is a trend, where architecture and real estate are increasingly linked to the creation of a distinct identity to enhance the perceived value of an urban district, a residential development or in some cases, an entire city. This moment or perception of architecture as a commodity is largely keyed into the realities of global capitalism with cities or even nations trying to position themselves favorably in the global marketplace to attract capital. Branding as we all know has been around for a long time particularly in the fashion industry but also products in general and we know that a brand goes far beyond the actual product where the brand really becomes a symbol for a particular lifestyle, an attitude, and identity, and is essentially a symbol that conveys an aura of

meaning that elevates the status of the consumer as it is recognized by others. In many ways brands signify an identity, a lifestyle, and perhaps most importantly a sense of belonging. Whereas the idea of the machine permeated cultural and commercial production during the industrial age (often referred to as the Machine Age) and served as a metaphor for efficiency and standardization, the brand has become a symbol for contemporary consumer values associated with the Information Age: customization, differentiation, and communication. In this world of ephemeral values driven by a paradigm of perception, branding plays a central role.

It's also interesting to see how brand values change ever more rapidly, especially now as we are experiencing a transitioning from what used to be highly standardized brands conveying the egalitarian values of the baby boomers to a more brand educated Generation X embracing a more cynical world view to Generation Y that essentially grew up entirely brand savvy and therefore embrace much subtler brands. To summarize the effects of brands it could be argued that brands no longer focus on the product but on building associations with particular lifestyles, contexts, and consumers. 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. Brands can act as catalysts to raise the value and/or status of a particular place, a person, or an event. The very same progression from materiality to ephemerality – from object to subject can be witnessed in architecture. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is no longer first and foremost assessed by its primary function (museum), but by its ability to instigate economic growth and urban renewal. The building compounds use value, sign exchange value, and transformational value, converting the building into a piece of brand equity. Thus, whereas modern architecture was primarily evaluated by its ability to increase production efficiency and early postmodern architecture by its potential to convey symbolic value, current architecture is largely assessed by its economic potential to change the perception and experience of its beneficiary – be it a single client, a corporation, or a city. Put differently, architecture in an experience economy has evolved from an emphasis on “what it has” (the object), and “what it does” (function + Program), to “what you feel” and to “who you are (experience + identity), which means that essentially the attention is removed from the object to the object's effect on the subject. As we have moved from a fordist (one-size-fits-all) economy to a postfordist mass-customization society, the attention of architecture has shifted from a paradigm characterized by the relationship of form, function, and program to a paradigm of experience and identification.

3. Branding and architecture

It is evident that particularly in the past two decades, branding and architecture have developed a relationship in which they feed off one another. For example, Prada and other leading brands progressively employ architecture as a central part of a larger branding strategy. At first brand architecture transformed the retail world with flagship stores such as NikeTown – which was really designed not so much in order to sell shoes but primarily for customers to experience and immerse themselves in the brand of Nike. Similarly the

Apple store created an entire Apple community space along with an aesthetic that mirrors that of their products. But it is not only the aesthetic but the activation of the program into a unique event space that turns a building or a space into a comprehensive brand experience – exemplified by the genius bar, which in essence is a complete reinvention of customer service, as well as the theatre for example, where people can attend free seminars which turn what used to be a simple store into a major third space – a public hub where people can get together and check their emails for free. In this sense, the holistic choreography of a brand experience essentially rests on three factors – hardware, which in essence is the architecture, the stage, software, which is the unique programming of the space, and the human ware, which pertains to service and human interaction. After all, if the service is not perfect or the human interaction, the aesthetic experience and the architecture also become irrelevant.

As brands today increasingly build emotional connections through a set of values and experiences, there is an increasing interest in architecture to create interactive settings where consumers can experience the brand with all their senses. From gallery-like shopping spaces with one-off exhibitions to mobile units, we see an increase in pop-up manifestations, which have a tendency to pop up unannounced in an unexpected setting, quickly draw in the crowds, and then disappear or morph into something else. The buzz they generate beats any public relations campaign and shakes up traditional methods of reaching customers. This notion to convey brand values in interactive settings also heavily infiltrated the automobile industry at a larger scale – for example with BMW World in Munich, a brand destination, where BMW customers can pick up their cars in an interactive experiential setting. The Mercedes Museum in Stuttgart is another example where visitors can engage the heritage of Mercedes, which has since become a tourist destination.

4. Brandism phase I

But architecture and urban planning now also borrow greatly from branding. Architecture for the past twenty years has played an enormous role in the branding of cities – primarily with cultural institutions to elevate the image of a city in the global market – as was in the case first with Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao in 1996 – a building, which put a formerly economically depressed town in Spain on the map and turned it into a major tourist destination. Other cities soon followed suit and have in recent years successfully used architecture as part of a larger city branding strategy. From the perspective of our current media and marketing driven environment, architecture is now in a central position. If you count all the buildings that are currently under construction in the Far East, in the US and elsewhere in the pursuit to construct new meaning structures and by redefining urban, regional, and in some cases also national identities you will 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 socio-economic context, architecture is now no longer part of marketing our environment it has become the essence of it.

5. Brandism phase II

Following this first phase of Brandism where architecture was strategically used to achieve

a distinct identity for a city, we have entered the second phase of Brandism where architecture is increasingly used to achieve a unique image for commercial developments around the world and where star architects who formerly designed cultural institutions are hired in increasing numbers to design corporate, hotel, and residential developments – particularly in the emerging markets the Far East, the Middle East, and in Europe. Branding has also drastically infiltrated the real estate market in New York where real estate developers collaborate with branders and star architects to create a unique identity for their developments. This whole trend in New York was started with Richard Meier's towers on the west side. Almost five years ago now, celebrities such as Martha Stewart, Nicole Kidman, and Calvin Klein were among the first to spend two-thousand dollars a square foot, which naturally helped convince some developers that architecture with a capital "A" could actually help them to sell real estate and make their projects unique. Newer examples include the Times building by Renzo Piano, which created a new icon for the NY Times, Norman Foster's geodesic extension for the Hearst Corporation, Cook + Fox's iconic Bank of America tower, Frank Gehry's Swiss mountain range for IAC, and the Urban Glasshouse, which essentially took the myth of Philip Johnson's legendary glasshouse in Connecticut and translated it into an urban brand.

The Blue building by Bernard Tschumi typifies the trend of how private developers increasingly choose to collaborate with formerly critical practitioners – pointing to a new movement in architecture where the schism of high and low architecture is increasingly disappearing in the light of global market forces.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a lot of controversy and even resistance in the architectural community on how one might deal with the radical shift and constraints of these new socio-economic conditions that are surfacing around the globe. In this sense, it is also interesting to note that many architects would not readily identify their work with branding – in fact they are doing everything to resist this term as much as they can and yet I would argue their work cannot escape the rules of commodification. Ironically, it is precisely because of the fact that architecture is increasingly perceived as a product that architects get more work from the private sector. So in a way there is a lot of potential for more good architecture to enter the world – yet we also face a shorter attention span perhaps leading to a superficial reading – a kind of "Paris Hilton phenomenon" that depends on instant recognition and -at worst- that is not tied to any notion of content. This phenomenon is evident in Frank Gehry's new project for a medical center in Las Vegas where he consciously emulates this thirst for instant recognition and contentlessness by simply providing waves of steel and glass that can be anchored into any generic developer project -making life very easy for the developer who can then very simply build an ordinary cost-efficient hassle-free building and yet gain all the merits from having an instant Gehry image.

6. Urban Brands

On the level of urban development, however, branding is a slightly different matter. As more and more businesses are attuned to the advantages of international locations, cities around the globe need to confront a growing number of competitors. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important for places to adopt a market perspective, and communicate their competitive advantages along with a distinguished image. In this sense, places beco-

me 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. Therefore, cities just like corporations act as brands in order to attract business firms, investment capital, and tourists. However, as opposed to corporate branding, where the architecture creates an experience that is unique to the brand, for architecture to create or strengthen an urban brand, it has to express the latent qualities of the city – its unique characteristics, which may relate to its unique surrounding, the landscape, the way people interact or other unique assets. Hence, 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.

In theory, therefore, brand architecture could suggest the possibility of reconciling market and place; of utilizing brand architecture to create a unique place based identity but the more visible it becomes, the more it takes on the de-contextualized, market-oriented look of franchise culture. Evidently, the continued use of star architects produces an architecture that is less risky for investors but also less and less evocative of a sense of place. As superstar architects stamp their own signature on the urban landscape, they become more and more akin to franchises creating standardized contexts as they move from place to place. To counter the generic nature of corporate towers, many cities now incorporate pre-established themes that are based on narratives imported from elsewhere – a strategy that originated in Las Vegas Casinos where specific narratives are translated into experiential commercial landscapes – and which is now successfully applied to shopping malls and urban entertainment districts. As for residential communities, a "Boca Raton style gated community", complete with golf courses and other leisure amenities, seems to be favoured from Shanghai to the Middle East, giving rise to an abstracted development formula that simply gets to be exported everywhere. While it seems to be a very sellable product at present, the question of course becomes one of authenticity and the division of new strategies that capitalize on the specific qualities of a certain place.

7. Heroes with flaws

All these efforts to create a unique identity eventually amounted to a grand formula, which at this stage has reached a level of Brand Urbanism most visible in Dubai, most notably with Burj Dubai, a destination project in downtown Dubai that will soon incorporate the world's tallest tower, the world's largest mall and an Armani branded hotel. In addition, Dubai succeeded to spur an entirely new place-making technique by launching a very profitable "Island Urbanism" that is built around the idea of maximizing beachfront properties. Themed districts such as "Sports City", "Arabian Ranches" and "Dubailand" are other interesting examples of branding real estate in an effort to create a unique destination.

As star architecture has been elevated to an absolute perfect image that is publicized and replicated everywhere, the question becomes: What's next? As we have now achieved picture perfect heroes, picture perfect developments with the best of architects, and the best of amenities, of luxuries waiting on every door step, golf courses being transported everywhere, amenities of every kind possible waiting for potential customers in residential

developments and malls alike – anything from ski slopes and the most outrageously advanced amusement parks; the question becomes ever more pertinent – how can developments and cities differentiate themselves and be unique and interesting in a world where uniqueness and perfection has become the benchmark? What is the next big move? What will people be looking for in five years from now? My answer to this question is that people in five to ten years from now will be looking for heroes with flaws. Heroes with flaws resist picture perfect surfaces. They have a personality and that means quirks. They exude an aura. They are human. They are authentic. They are transformational. They endure over time. They shine from the inside out.

We see this thirst for authenticity already in the retail industry. WholeFoods, aside from a new shopping experience, offers a distinct message and has been one of hottest stocks of the decade by translating socially conscious, environmental and nutritional values into a store environment, which in the end provides a sense of community to consumers. As people are saturated with the same offerings, we also witness a growing hunger for surprise, for provocation, for difference, for content – as illustrated by Comme de Garçon's provocative marketing technique, which extends to the concept of their flagship stores as exemplified by Dover Street market in London, a cooperative of independent designers hosted by Comme de Garçon, which keeps the brand fresh and original and furthermore instills a highly visible brand with a sense of inspiration and content.

All of these emerging consumer trends signify a shift from basic convenience, diversion, and experience to enrichment, inspiration, and content, that will also gradually affect the real estate world. Therefore, I would argue that in an increasingly fierce competition for the biggest, tallest and most spectacular, the challenge for developments in the future will be to establish a blue ocean – an uncontested market space, which is not possible by relying on established formulas – but can only be accomplished by an intentional breaking from the benchmark to create a truly unique product that will then make the competition to some degree irrelevant.

This inside-out strategy may demand a sense of original invention, of the rough, of the incomplete, of the aspirational, which obviously cannot be achieved by a perfect copy. What we are basically talking about here is an emerging need for authenticity. In a world where the staged resort has become the ultimate building typology, the question becomes ever more pertinent: How can we treat the authentic as a new amenity? In an age of over-consumption, over-information, and commercial noise in general, the No Brand may soon be the ultimate brand, as it only a matter of time when the maturing generation will seek the same qualities they now seek out on their brands in their future environment, which I believe will be less about a standardized formula of prestige – as was the case with the baby boomers – but about a customized environment that is an extension of their personality – relating to the context within which it is situated. In summation, my prediction is that people in an age of super convenience will be looking for that edge – relevant content that endures over time. They will be looking for real experiences versus trademarked experiences. They will be looking for authenticity that enriches local identity and difference rather than generic recipes. That guides them toward realizing a genuine aspiration through original, and innovative expression.

8. Living Brands

As we are faced with an increasingly homogenized brand world inhabited by exchangeable offerings – be it golf communities, retail brands, or leisure resorts – we are developing a growing hunger for the real. Fact is that consumers in a world filled with deliberately and sensationally staged experiences – an unreal world – increasingly choose to buy or not to buy based on how real they perceive an offering to be. Yet, too many real estate developers and companies advertise “authentic” experiences when in reality they offer standardized “me-too” experiences that span the globe from New York to Dubai. This drives the demand for genuine place-based experiences that draw their inspiration from the local cultures and offerings. The point is that as brands increasingly compete on a global basis in different markets, it becomes ever more important to create living brands that provide not only standardized convenience, diversion, and entertainment but furthermore allow for a sense of spontaneous enrichment, inspiration, and content. Our mission at Klingmann Architects & Brand Consultants is therefore to develop a brand from “the inside-out” and not – as current development practice seems to dictate – from the “outside in. It is important to realize that living brands are not a perfected stylistic veneer but an imperfect expression that grows out of character. Brands can afford to be inconsistent – as long as they don't abandon their defining attributes. They are like people. I'll venture one step further, and say that developments that are based on a fixed image eventually result in cardboard characters.

In order to provide our clients with a competitive edge in today's competitive market, we therefore take great care in bridging a company's inherent values with the indigenous cultures of a specific place. This not only helps to reenergize the brand on a consistent basis but also makes for truly authentic brand environments that connect commerce with culture, and community in more meaningful ways. When cities and buildings project a three-dimensional personality, inconsistencies and all, we know that the brand resonates with authenticity.

Notes

- ¹ Kotler P., Haider D., Rein I. (1993), *Marketing Places, Attracting Investment Industry and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*, New York, The Free Press.