Starchitecture and Its Role in the Politics of City Representation, Symbolism, and Image

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**Introduction**

In its simplest element, starchitecture is defined as a “large, unusual building projects designed by celebrity architects.” Leslie and Gherardi more specifically define iconic architecture in terms of buildings and/or spaces that are famous, and that have distinctive symbolic and aesthetic significance. The famous/celebrity architects who design architecture projects are commonly referred to as “starchitects,” a term used to describe architects whose celebrity and critical acclaim have transformed them into idols of the architecture world and may even have given them some degree of fame amongst the general public. Developers across the world have proven eager to sign up “top talent” (starchitects) in hopes of convincing reluctant municipalities to approve large developments, of obtaining financing or of increasing the value of their buildings. Key attributes of starchitecture are that these buildings are almost always “iconic” and highly visible within the site or context. The status is enormously dependent on current visibility in the media, and a fading media status implies that architects lost their “starchitect” status. The key findings of this paper highlight the relation that starchitecture has with growth machine politics in major urban centres, how starchitecture is an important attribute in the branding of a city and in marketing real estate in cities, and an examination of New York City as a case study for examining the effects starchitecture has on an urban area.

Many modern Starchitects, such as Frank Gehry, are regarded as one-hit-wonder architects, where a majority of their buildings begin to be contrived from the same blueprint or design. Many innovative and renowned architects are often related to the personality of their respective designers, and their projects tend to be branded and become commodities. In the case of Gehry, with the

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popular and critical success of his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the building initiated huge financial growth led by tourism to the site and increased the prestige for the region. The building site was located in a formally rundown area of a city in economic decline, and the media has started to talk about the so-called “Bilbao Effect,” where a star architects designing iconic and prestigious buildings spurred the thought that unique architecture can make an enormous difference in producing landmarks for a city. Moreover, this “Bilbao Effect” refers to the trend of cities and developers employing landmark architecture to help attract tourism and the economic development that comes with it. In a similar manner, Olds describes how urban mega events, like high-profile starchitecture, can bring in substantial capital to stimulate the economy, bring cities national recognition, and bring people of diverse backgrounds on various grounds together. Olds mentions how these high profile events [or structures] can be viewed as aspects of growth machine politics, as there are always winners and losers in terms of who can have access to them, etc., which will be discussed ahead.

**Starchitectures Relation to Growth Machine Politics**

Many aspects of starchitecture have roots that are defined by growth machine politics including how high profile urban structures are proposed in order to generate increased profit for firms and industries in the area and to attract further development. The growth machine, according to Molotch, is the manner in which collective action and business alliances create conditions that intensify future land use in areas and a search for more and more growth; “an apparatus of interlocking pro-growth associations and governmental units.” Growth machines are meant to

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6 Ibid.
enhance exchange values of land with a focus on monetary value and profits. The idea seeks “aggregate growth [that] promotes the common good.”8 Additionally, residents in buildings designed by big name architects tend to sell for more than units in buildings designed by lesser known architects.9 Firms that are excellent examples of parties who work in urban politics who are large proponents and demand to see growth are land developers, who are continuously looking to earn profit in suburban land development and can benefit immensely from contracting starchitects to develop projects. As Harvey states, and expanded by Leitner’s work, urban centres have a desire to promote capital accumulation and move from collective consumption models of the past (managerialism) to an entrepreneurialism and in recent decades has seen immense success with architecture using urban centres like Abu Dhabi, New York, Hong Kong, London and even Calgary.10,11 Primarily, cities are politically driven to understand their position in the global economy as it affects its ability to attract firms and investment. For example, Leitner compares San Fransisco’s case in attracting investment as a result of technology and banking agglomerations, where as a city like St. Paul had to struggle to attract firms and investment.12 Dubai’s ability to attract extensive urban development, and starchitects, as a consequence to its destination branding and desire to be recognized as a world city seen through the lens of iconic architecture. Dubai is another excellent example where we can see a clear reflection in urban politics that there are those who benefit and those who do not; that the common good is not everybody as seen in Yasser Elsheshtawy’s comprehensive book *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle* (unfortunately, a topic that cannot be covered here).

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8 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 163.
The reasoning behind those who promote growth are simply tied to the notion that as a politician if you do not pursue growth and maximize revenue its is harder to garner support. Meaning at the end of the day “everyone has to support growth,” which is a very broad brush approach, according to Paul Peterson. The counter argument here is that there exist examples where growth is not necessarily beneficial, such as with urban sprawl where there exist increased difficulty in providing services (overcrowded institutions). Additionally, the argument that not all capitalists have the agenda that the economy requires growth, as a result of different interest groups not all organized solely around an economic focus. Stone also mentions how politics do matter and that economic growth is not the “only way to go,” but rather businesses can have different interests that can even conflict, such as the forestry industry and loggers versus the tourist industry. Politicians need rather change their perspective to look at internal political interests, as pluralism and structural Marxism are no longer viable, for structural constraints are ‘real’ and can be mediated via politics.

Several urban political theories have been postulated to explain the reasoning behind why specific tendencies have occurred in local economies to pursue further economic growth as the primary drivers, with two preliminary ideas based around elite theory and regime theory. In elite theory, elite networks have all the power in urban government; that is a small pod of the elite, or wealthy actors have considerable sway in political decision-making. Power is concentrated among the elite. The policies made here are often not representative of the collective, but rather the interests of the elite. Similarly in regime theory there exist ‘regimes’ in cities, or coalitions of actors/interest groups with power relationships that represent bonds, formed on a provisional basis.

14 Ibid., 6.
15 Ibid., 8.
Again, tying these notions into the ideas behind cities chasing starchitecture, when the desire to improve and develop a city’s skyline trumps the desire to improve the city itself, this phenomenon can prove very detrimental. This results in a city lavish in form, but lousy in function. Author Witold Rybczynski has been an outspoken critic of this phenomenon, noting “the charged atmosphere promotes flamboyance rather than careful thought and favours the glib and obvious over the subtle and nuanced.”\(^{18}\) Robert Moses looked at a city from the sky; Jane Jacobs looked at a city from the street; now it is almost as if current city planners are looking at cities from the side. Is this a happy medium, or a complete diversion from either form of urban planning? Modern cities limit their potential when they obsess over aesthetic structures and disregard the development of the public space surrounding them. By incorporating new urbanist practices into the design of these projects, we can help prevent a trend of aesthetically innovative buildings with serious connectivity problems.

Some of the main critics of these existing urban policies in North American cities is that they fail to recognize that in order to create effective economies we need to invest in our cities and not cut costs and connect the local and the global to stimulate the growth and productivity. It is all too often that we witness how late capitalist economies suffer from the cyclical booms and busts of the economic system and that the structure is inherently uneven in its resource disbursement, most notably of financial capital where workers sell labour for wages and part of their labour becomes profit, which is not being received by the workers and thus one could postulate that they are exploited. This struggle, as illustrated by Pickvance’s discussion on Marxism, this conflict between the workers and capitalist elite in capitalism, along with the radical income inequality, can lead to the structural collapse of the system.\(^{19}\)

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The creation of the symbolic city is what Paul Knox describes in his piece “Capital, Material Culture and Socio-Spatial Differentiation,” as a product of growth, where there exists a relationship between commodity aesthetics and the city of signs. Knox also makes note how prior to World War Two homes were built on a one-by-one basis, and the home regarded as a craft in comparison to corporate regularized uniformity homes took after the war. The regularization of urban landscapes began this transformation with the creation of the development industry, where an application of Fordism was applied to urban design. This eventually led to where we stand today with a move towards massive vertical landscapes (acting as an arm of corporate architecture), many taking the form of these highly unique and iconic structures, and the construction of 100s of “cookie cutter” homes at once. This “cookie cutter design” is elaborated on by Christopher Lineburger in “The Standard Real Estate Product Types: Why Every Place Looks Like Every Place Else,” where he notes how the role of global finance has been related to idea that financiers are more willing to finance projects that enable the positive effects of starchitecture, putting a limit on what they can built/desire to build. This results in the real estate industry, and the architecture that encapsulates these structures, becoming very specialized into very specific categories, as described by Leinberger. Building designs must conform to financiers desires and fit into one of these categories, and this commodification of real estate makes their products easier to sell; a conforming product type would be attractive to global buyers while the nonconforming types only attract the interests of local and regional buyers. Again, using Frank Gehry as an example, in an interview he explained that, “[... since Bilbao, I get called to do ‘Frank Gehry Buildings’. They actually say that to me. We want a ‘Frank Gehry’. I run into trouble when I put a design on the table, and they say, ‘Well,
that isn’t a Gehry building’. It doesn’t have enough of whatever these buildings are supposed to have - yet.”

This can work alongside the state as well, as they go after specific building designs to chase after a specific image for cities.

Relph, discussion on the corporatization of architecture in our cities describes how the corporate skyscrapers, and the ‘fad’ (admiration of work similar to Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus) of modern architecture in the past, were used by financiers to “express the progressive dreams of corporate executives.” The irony with the construction of elaborate modernist buildings is that this style was originally intended for the masses with socialist intents. The corporate attitude toward architecture, driven by financiers, essentially is a perversion of the style and incorporates ideas like exotic facades, ornamentation, and other visual jamborees.

**Commodification of Starchitecture in Cities**

The commodification of starchitecture developments over the last couple decades has shown how various international architects have been serviced by cities to use iconic architecture as an important attribute for the branding of a city and in marketing real estate in cities, and these attributes can enable cities to be used as symbols to evoke specific feelings regarding their image. Ponzini’s brief piece discusses how decision-makers in both the public and private realms have made it known their increasing expectations and value of building projects by starchitects as they tend to have “positive urban and economic effects.” Additionally, an article by Sorkin mentions how these starchitects have been considered crucial ingredients for urban regeneration in cities, the marketing

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26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
of new projects and real estate products, and for the overall rebranding of cities in decline.\textsuperscript{29} This has resulted in the legitimization of many new urban development and regeneration projects across urban landscapes globally and has favoured a push for architectural aesthetics to become more and more spectacular with the desire to grasp the attention of the public and garner a more pronounced impact in the media.\textsuperscript{30} Logan and Molotch describe how the justification for promoting urban growth and regeneration in this manner is positioned on the “redistribution of the wealth generated by real estate appreciation or more generally in the production of relevant public facilities.”\textsuperscript{31, 32}

Urban regeneration and development projects of this nature are often combined with other spectacular artifacts, focusing performance of or even on the figure of the star architect.\textsuperscript{33} By stating that representing architectural aesthetics as a determinant factor in urban regeneration does not always necessarily respond to actual urban processes, but, it does still work as the means for “diffusing beliefs and behaviours among decision makers and provided architects, pro-growth politicians, real estate developers and other actors with favourable conditions for their business.”\textsuperscript{34}

Moreover, since the quality of the architecture and places are often supposed to be crucial for “attracting local and global investments and final users, for generating a new identity of place and for the success of the intervention over time, star architects tend to be highly considered (and paid).”\textsuperscript{35}

In her work, Leslie Sklair explains how iconic and spectacular architecture has been providing contemporary forms of globalized capitalism to proliferate and fuel the rhetoric of inter-

\textsuperscript{31} Logan and Molotch, “Urban Fortunes.”
\textsuperscript{32} T. N. Clark, \textit{The City as an Entertainment Machine} (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004)
\textsuperscript{35} Ponzini, “The Values of Starchitecture,” 11.
urban economic competition. In other terms, what she implies here is that one can interpret the spectacularization of contemporary architecture and the urban environment as a means for global players to work more easily in given urban contexts. At the same time, this condition seems functional to the commoditization and commercialization of architectural design internationally. As a matter of fact, one could argue from this logic that an architectural project is both a product and a media representing a city, a client or even a place, or a marketable real estate product. Another interesting note discovered from these readings is that architects tend to distinguish their image in accordance with social and communicative processes that are similar to the ones of the art market; contemporary starchitecture reflects what is popular in current art.

From other pieces of critical academic literature that focused on the characteristics, strategies and the role that international architectural studios play in urban matters, many instances arose who the authors expressed criticism of these assumptions in general terms, but rarely did they consider the reasons why star architects are selected for particular projects and, aside from the previously discussed financial and economic factors, what relevant values and dimensions are to be considered and discussed. For example, in places with big financial players where ‘big money’ intersects with new urbanization, skyscrapers have become aggressive assertions of cities “unignorability, rapid progress, and membership in modernization's big league.” Ponzini uses the examples in South West Asia of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and describes how they present the most maddening instances of “a sudden and extensive use of architecture to buy a way both into the 21st century and into the cultural traditions” of largely Western civilization.

Renowned architects are not selected solely for their economic impact, but also for many symbolic and political reasons, which can be both be at the macro level; in the promotion of the

38 Ponzini, “The Values of Starchitecture,” 12.
39 Ibid.
national or city’s image; and the micro level; for legitimation, or negotiation of important project
details. There is dominant public rhetoric, again using the “Bilbao effect” as an example, or the
global competition among cities, as methods for justifying these in economic terms. Through the
case studies of New York below, it can be seen that the role and expectations for starchitects can
radically change according to the urban context and the individual project.

New York City as a Case Study

The City of New York has historically been a centre of countless modern architectural
innovations in international architectural aesthetics, although a large majority of recent housing and
office stock is quite generic (tall, analogous mirror glass office buildings for example). Among some
of the most profound changes that have occurred in the last fifteen years show a new and consistent
presence of international and renown architects and these starchitects started to appear in almost
every sector of urban development.

Corporations in particular, insist on using internationally renowned architectural firms to
successfully promote their image and, “to make a statement in the skyline of Manhattan, e.g. the
New York Times Building by Piano, Hearst Corporation by Foster.” Corporations’ increased focus
and attention to the architectural design of their office buildings appear to be a rational strategy that
enables them to better “attract and retain human capital and to enhance creative productivity.”
As part of his research on the topic Ponzini uses the Blue Tower by Tschumi, 40 Bond Street by
Herzog & de Meuron and the Perry Street Towers by Meier, as buildings which best represent the
effects starchitecture has on an urban fabric. Private developers often prefer more reliable

40 Ibid., 15.
41 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
architecture studios to avoid risk of over-budget or over-time processes, and over the last several
decades in New York, have begun hiring the stars of architecture at an increasing rate to design both
for office and residential buildings, with the assumption that their higher fees for design will
 correspond to higher returns for profit. The research done by Fein corresponds to this notion, and
he finds that the branding of such projects through an international architect makes the value
increase over 30%. In this sense, the perception and the
representations of star architecture work in this specific real estate sector responded to the
commodification of the architectural design service. This is evidently derived from cultural, status
and symbolic values attributed to these housing products.

In addition to corporate architecture, nonprofit cultural institutions often make use of
important architects to both stress their status and innovate their image and identity, but also
because fundraising is more likely to succeed if branded by a famous star, as in the case of the
Morgan Library and Museum by Piano or the New Museum by Sanaa. This can be seen as another
form of commodification of the architectural brand.

In New York the reasons for which different types of client hired star architects are diverse.
One can see how the architectural design service has been commodified and locally used and this
entire notion of commodification helps one to see issues with the figure of the contemporary
starchitect and allows one to discuss emergent urban problems with a deeper insight.

46 S. Fein, “Starchitect branding and the cost of “effortless living” or another episode in the continuing quest for social
Conclusion

To conclude, during periods of time when the real estate markets experience less favourable conditions, questioning the conception of architecture as commodified art to be collected by cities for economic benefit has gained traction in urban policymaking. The pursuit and formation of iconic and uniquely designed pieces of architecture, in the context of urban transformation (renewal), has enabled more attention to be made to the political and symbolic interests promoting this type of architecture. This desire of cities to accept and chase after starchitecture designs and architects also reflects their stated and vested goals; their modes of action by exploring the relation that starchitecture has in growth machine politics and boosterism; its tie to urban branding and in marketing real estate in cities; and how this is all exemplified powerfully in the case of New York City. All these notions relating to starchitecture and city image can enable and empower cities to use themselves as symbols to evoke specific feelings regarding their image to attract further economic capital.
**Bibliography**


Image Notes: