

Globalization, neoliberalism and international homogeneity in architecture and urban development

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1 Introduction

In a globalizing economy, architecture and urban design have an increasing role in facilitating the circulation and accumulation of capital. While design schools continue to propagate Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum that "Form Follows Function", the reality in the world's great cities is that "Form Follows Finance".¹ Design and its cousin, branding, helps sell everything from buildings to cities. Cities themselves are now critically inter-linked by global flows of finance, mobilized by the interactions of a range of agents and 'fixed' in a variety of real estate infrastructures. In the globalized economy that has been evolving for the past 40 years, the world as a totality has become an arena of exchange and cooperation (as well as conflict), with increasingly dense and interconnected flows of ideas, values, images, and lifestyles. Certain cities have come to occupy key roles in this global economy. As Allen Scott notes, not every individual city everywhere in the world is flourishing, but "there is a distinctive group of metropolitan areas that are now forging ahead on the basis of their command of the new economy, their ability to exploit globalization to their own advantage, and the selective revitalization of their internal fabric of land use and built form."² The term "world cities" is often applied to these places because of the degree of their key roles in organizing influencing, and integrating space and society beyond their own national boundaries. Since the mid-1970s, the key roles of world cities have been concerned less with the orchestration of trade and the deployment of imperial power and more with transnational corporate organization, international banking and finance, fashion, design and the media, and supranational government and the work of international agencies. World cities have consequently become the sites of extraordinary concentrations of activi-

ties associated with organizing the finance and investment and creating and managing flows of information and cultural products that collectively underpin the economic and cultural globalization of the world.³

Meanwhile, global cultural shifts have come to place a premium on consumer experience, celebrity and spectacle, and "place" has become increasingly commodified.⁴ In this context, developers understand that design – especially by "star" designers – can add significantly to exchange value. Witold Rybczynski notes that "in the 1970s and 1980s, developers, led by Gerald Hines and George Klein, commissioned A-list architects such as Philip Johnson, I. M. Pei, and Kevin Roche to build office towers. These class-A buildings derived their prestige in great measure from their design quality. The difference today is that employing a famous architect is not only about adding design value, it is also about adding cachet, since individual architects have achieved a much greater measure of celebrity than in the past."⁵ In practical terms, the cachet of "starchitects" can make a decisive difference in three ways: in lubricating the planning-approval process in sensitive urban contexts; in adding value to the building through reconciling urban context and architectural form with commercial development rationalities; and in selling the interior space of the building to prospective commercial tenants.⁶ Meanwhile, cities have been broadly recast within a new political economy that is now dominated by neoliberalism. Urban governance has become concerned more with providing a "good business climate" than with the traditional concerns of civil society.⁷ A key part of providing a good business climate, for many of the globalizing cities in Europe, is the promotion of urban design, iconic architecture, and trendy cultural quarters.

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2 Toward homogeneity in the built environment

To what degree has all this resulted in homogeneity in the built environment? This article examines changes in the built environment of globalizing cities in Europe. Guggenheim and Söderström suggest that there is an increasing international homogenization of the appearance of the built environment of large cities as a result of the combination of several factors: “market liberalization (capital), international migrations (people), cultural globalization (ideas), urban entrepreneurialism (images), and changes within architecture and planning (the rise of global offices, “starchitecture”, intensified exchanges within the profession and new design technologies, journals, models, types).”⁸ We examine each of these factors in relation to the globalizing cities of Europe. The net result, we suggest, is a series of changes to the landscapes of these cities, changes that tend to result more in the convergence of metropolitan form than in differences or distinctiveness. Among the principal outcomes, we argue, are property-led regeneration through large-scale urban redevelopment schemes, new-economy hubs, ubiquitous office towers, cultural quarters, “semiotic districts” and “brand-scapes”, gentrified neighbourhoods and packaged suburban landscapes.

Market liberalization: The mobility of capital and the globalization of real estate and construction

Progressive liberalization of national financial markets since the 1980s and 1990s has constituted an insidious global driver in city real estate construction, interacting with more evident processes of structural economic transformation.⁹ Command of global finance was the defining feature of “world cities”, as noted by John Friedmann in 1986.¹⁰ However, the specific interdependencies between processes of financial and economic globalization in the operation of city property markets have, until recently, been understudied. Three decades on, Colin Lizieri’s 2009 analysis of major world cities indicates that international finance – “investment, wholesale and merchant banking, bond markets, equity markets, foreign exchange, derivatives markets, asset and wealth management”¹¹ – not only remains their key distinguishing attribute, but also

interacts with other globalized economic activities in the construction of real estate markets. Synergistic relations among financial and other “advanced producer services” – including the real estate and design professions, which are key drivers of the contemporary world economy and its “City”-scapes – have been identified in the City of London by Peter Taylor and co-authors,¹² and are present in other major European business cities.¹³

The significance of finance in shaping urban development in Europe was observed as early as the 1960s and 1970s, notably in “The Property Boom”, written by Oliver Marriott¹⁴ and “The Property Machine” by Ambrose and Colenutt.¹⁵ Such work pinpointed a decisive shift in the relationship between investment funds and property development before information and communication technology (ICT)-facilitated globalization became prominent. These publications drew attention to the power of finance capital in reshaping urban development, which had until then been seen as a mainstream role of public sector planners and architects. A turning point for cities had been established – the transformation of urban development into a financial investment business.

From the 1980s onwards globalization and liberalization¹⁶ have dramatically increased the exposure of European cityscapes to capital markets that are transnational and global in scope. The role of world or “global” cities¹⁷ as bases for advanced-services firms with worldwide office networks brings to the fore the complex interrelationships between global finance, economic globalization and urban design. Today, financial, real estate and design services are international suppliers, creating and shaping global cityscapes; and they are themselves global city “users”. Together they create both the demand for office buildings and supporting infrastructures¹⁸ (mixed-use retail, entertainment, restaurants, etc.) and organize their supply, thereby adding a global dimension to the web of actor interrelations in the local development process identified by Patsy Healey.¹⁹ The global consolidation of retailing, food and entertainment into international chains with transnational portfolios of real estate is also generating a new kind of commercial client for starchitecture. This increasing interlinkage between

finance, business and professional design services at a global scale is explicitly evident at the *Marche International des Professionnels de l'Immobilier (MIPIM)* property fair held annually in Cannes, where the top real estate and architecture firms with global aspirations come together on an international basis.

International migration and new cosmopolitanism

Globalization has rendered cities increasingly interdependent, introduced an increasing degree of cosmopolitanism to urban populations, disseminated the dominant sensibilities of corporate transnational capitalism, and fostered the emergence of highly mobile class fractions of professionals based on technology-intensive manufacturing, services (business, financial and personal), cultural-products industries (such as media, film, music and tourism) and design and fashion-oriented forms of production such as clothing, furniture, product design, interior design, and architecture. These affluent new class fractions have become a research and development lab for consumer preferences as well as the promoters of an intensified and voracious consumption ethic and the aestheticization of everyday life: an aesthetic that is predominantly transnational in character.

In the context of architecture and real estate, Leslie Sklair writes of the "transnational capitalist class," people who operate internationally as a normal part of their working lives and who more often than not have more than one place that they can call home.²⁰ There are four distinct fractions of this class, according to Sklair, each involving the principals and employees of different kinds of design, engineering, and real estate firms and institutional offices. First is the corporate fraction: the major transnational corporations URS Corporation, Nikken Sekkei, Ellerbe Becket, Gensler, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and their local affiliates. Second is the state fraction: globalizing politicians and bureaucrats at all levels of administrative power and responsibility who actually decide what gets built where, and how changes to the built environment are regulated. This fraction is increasingly important as cities compete for global status through promotion of iconic architecture. Third is the technical fraction:

globalizing professionals, employees of the likes of Arup (a global engineering, design, planning, and business consulting firm) and Cushman and Wakefield (a global real estate research, investment, and consulting firm). Finally there is the consumerist fraction: retailers and media responsible for the marketing and consumption of architecture and urban design. The point here is that the mobility, interaction and interdependence of these class fractions again makes for the diffusion, standardization and homogenization of ideas and practices.

Cultural globalization

Among the complex dynamics of contemporary cultural change and conflict are increasingly dense and interconnected flow of ideas, values, images and lifestyles based on the consumerism that flourished as a result of the success of the Fordist economies of North America and Europe in the late 20th century. But the mass production of Fordism led inevitably and dialectically to disenchantment as novelty, exclusivity, distinction, and the romantic appeal of goods were undermined by mass consumption. To counter this tendency, product design and niche marketing, along with branding, have become central to contemporary global culture. The result was that the design of the built environment has become intimately involved with many aspects of consumption, especially those involving an explicit design premium, such as fashion and luxury products.²¹

Consumer demand has come to be encouraged through a variety of specialized urban settings – "cathedrals of consumption"²² – geared to the propagation and facilitation of consumption: look-alike shopping malls, chain stores, franchises and fast food restaurants, casinos, and themed restaurants. In their review of contemporary changes to urban landscapes, MacLeod and Ward note that "along the increasingly labyrinthine necklace of globalizing cities, a more generalized post-Fordist attention to urban lifestyle has helped to precipitate a range of alluring consumption spaces - nouvelle cuisine restaurants, boutiques and art galleries - alongside instantly recognizable coffee bars (Starbucks being emblematic)."²³ These spaces provide a global service infrastructure for mobile international travellers and, in consequence, embody the transience

that trained architect and designer Deyan Sudjic attaches to airports, “in a real, as well as a metaphorical sense”.²⁴ Sudjic points to property developers as being more culpable than architects and urban planners in shaping post-modern cities, yet all are complicit in the creation of a contemporary urbanism that caters for lives “in transit”, we suggest.

The neoliberal impulse and urban entrepreneurialism

This consumerism is closely connected to the neoliberalism that has come to dominate the political economy of cities across Europe. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell have characterized the process in terms of a combination of “roll-back” neoliberalization and “roll-out” neoliberalization.²⁵ Roll-backs have meant the deregulation of finance and industry, the demise of public housing programs, the privatization of public space, cutbacks in redistributive welfare programs, the shedding of many of the traditional roles of central and local governments as mediators and regulators, curbs on the power and influence of labour unions and government agencies, and a reduction of investment in the physical infrastructure of roads, bridges, and public utilities. Roll-out neoliberalization has meant the establishment of public-private partnerships, the encouragement of inner-city gentrification, the creation of free-trade zones, enterprise zones and other deregulated spaces, the assertion of the principle of “highest and best use” for land-use planning decisions, and the privatization of government services. Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore suggest that the implicit goal of neoliberalization at the metropolitan scale has been “to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices.”²⁶ As a result, planning practice has become estranged from theory and divorced from any broad sense of the public interest. Planning and urban design have become pragmatically tuned to economic and political constraints rather than being committed to change through progressive visions. Public-private partnerships have become the standard vehicle for achieving change, replacing the strategic role of planning with piecemeal dealmaking. Planning has become increasingly geared to the needs of producers and the wants of consumers and less concerned with overarching notions of rationality or criteria of pub-

lic good. In this context, city governments, as well as developers, have come to place special emphasis on the symbolic value of “signature” buildings commissioned from “starchitects” and on the importance of architecture and design in city branding and inward investment.

The market pressures unleashed by neoliberalism have resulted – somewhat ironically in the context of free-market rhetoric – in a tendency for the homogenization of the built environment. Policies ensuring the free and unregulated flow of investments and unconstrained labour markets mean that “access to formerly protected labour markets in the building and planning sector has been opened to foreign firms and practitioners and planning, and building regulations in cities have been made more flexible.”²⁷ In the mid-1990s, the International Code Council (ICC) was established as a non-profit organization dedicated to the development of a single set of national and international model construction codes, including standardized zoning. Meanwhile, local regulations have increasingly been waived or not applied to large urban projects because local officials are trying to change their perceived urban image. Seeking to ensure that flagship projects have a symbolic aesthetic of up-to-dateness, officials allow and often demand a modern appearance “however inappropriate it may be to local climate, ways of life or aesthetic traditions”.²⁸ In addition, as Eran Ben-Joseph points out, the homogeneous character of large urban projects is driven not only by a desire for global aesthetic values, but also by the design process itself:

First, many of these projects are designed and planned by international architectural firms, which imbue each new development with their specific attitudes and styles. Secondly, local governments are ‘captured’ by the marketing and internationalisation of design that is readily disseminated through media and the Internet. Thirdly, the desire for consistency, and assurance for minimum performance, particularly in building construction, has pushed authorities to endorse or adopt universal codes and standards whenever available.²⁹

Under the pressure of increased economic competitiveness, political decision-makers increasingly look to flagship architecture to combine an imagery of economic re-

generation and civic pride. Aspa Gospodini writes that “in the era of globalization, the relationship between urban economy and urban design, as established throughout the history of urban forms, seems to be reversed. While for centuries the quality of the urban environment has been an outcome of economic growth of cities, nowadays the quality of urban space has become a prerequisite for the economic development of cities; and urban design has undertaken an enhanced new role as a means of economic development.”³⁰ Architectural critic Christopher Jencks argues that “... the self-important building characterizes our time, partly because the size of commissions becomes ever larger under late-capitalism and partly because architects and their commercial product must compete for attention.”³¹ The ability of a high-profile building of radical design to put a city on the global map was first demonstrated by Sydney Opera House, designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon in the late 1950s and completed in 1973. The subsequent success of the Centre Georges Pompidou, built between 1971 and 1977 in the run-down Beaubourg area of Paris, created what Baudrillard called a “Beaubourg effect”, part of a “hypermarket of culture” that “keeps people enthralled”.³² The current exemplar of this phenomenon is Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Its success prompted many other cities to seek to replicate the “Bilbao effect” of re-branding themselves and elevating their perceived status within the global economy. “At that point developers and mayors could see the economic logic of the sculptural gesture, with its many enigmatic signifiers, and the same method was applied to any and every building type.”³³ Now “every city”, observes Sharon Zukin, “wants a ‘McGuggenheim’”.³⁴ The result is that the more cities compete to be different, the more they end up looking the same, each with their sculptural flagship buildings and generic mixed-use regeneration schemes.

Mobilizing the “silent complicity” of architecture

Until relatively recently, most architecture practices have been organized around a local, regional, or national market framework. Globalization has changed all that. Enabled by digital and telecommunications technologies, by advanced international business services, and by the emergence of clients



World Cities in Global Times

Source: Financial Times, “World business. In one place. We live in Financial Times”

with transnational operations and a cosmopolitan sensibility, the portfolio of many firms has an international component and the scope of operations of many of the largest firms is now truly global, with multiple international offices covering several continents.³⁵ In Europe the profession still remains dominated by small firms and sole practitioners but for large-scale urban development projects, the big practices with an international reputation dominate. A European professional expert explains that they “can farm stuff out overnight to a Hong Kong office and they can detail it there overnight, so they’ve got 24 hour cover. And if you are working on a new Hong Kong airport or whatever, you can do some of the work here during the day and the rest of it in Shanghai.”³⁶

The result is a cosmopolitanization of architectural and urban design and planning firms and an intensification of what Kim Dovey has called the “silent complicity” that exists between architects and the agendas of the politically and economically powerful.³⁷ In today’s globalizing economy, this symbiotic relationship with capital is mobilized through (increasingly multi-disciplinary) intra-firm and inter-firm networks of architecture, engineering, planning, and urban design firms, along with marketing, branding, and real estate consultants. Like everyone else, they are influenced by cultural and professional trends – “travelling ideas”³⁸ about design that are translated, through practice, into homogenizing trends in built form. Thanks to digital communications, drawings, maps, photographs, magazine articles, videos, CAD renderings can be immediately shared across the globe, diffusing borrowings, inspirations, and “cut-and-paste” operations,

reinforcing the process of homogenization. Fuerst and colleagues observe that the term “signature” or “starchitect” illustrates the iconization “not just of buildings but of architects themselves”.³⁹ Cachet has monetary value so that, in a competitive global market, “practices want to be able to put their planning applications on their website which they do for inspection, so that people can see the copyright on that ... it’s a big issue, in connection to ICT and intellectual property ownership, how you can exchange files.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, inevitably, ideas flow between cities both through the websites of global design firms and their global design production networks.

3 Urban outcomes: toward homogenized metropolitan spaces

High-profile competitions such as the Pritzker Prize for Architecture are amongst the many vehicles through which design ideas are spread around the globe. The atrium design for the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, US, built by the Pritzker family in 1967, was so successful that it became the “signature piece” for Hyatt hotels in cities around the world.⁴¹ The pursuit of a ubiquitous brand design strategy by multiple services world-wide, has produced urban landscapes that have become almost independent of place.⁴² The financial value added to developments incorporating starchitect design is impossible to measure accurately. As Franz Fuerst and co-authors explain, quantification generally focuses on commercial added-value for individual buildings that can be measured with some accuracy, such as rental premiums and their transfer to the capital values. But this is a very incomplete picture, as they emphasise. The economic value of a leading architect’s reputation, referred to as “psychic income”, is acknowledged but hard to measure, as noted by Frank Lloyd Wright as long ago as 1936.⁴³ More recently, (reluctant) starchitect, Frank Gehry, has calculated that the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which cost \$100m to build 11 years ago, earned the city EUR320m in 2008 alone.⁴⁴

The real value of signature design for cities is thus difficult to quantify, but nevertheless recognition of its importance in neoliberal urban strategy, has produced “a market lubricated by state donations”, according to Neil Smith.⁴⁵ In addition to negotiated

planning gain, the longevity of signature buildings in the physical landscape directs diverse flows through cities. Such buildings constitute the physical and symbolic infrastructure for financial, knowledge and cultural flows into and beyond neighbouring districts. Signature design is therefore now commonly sought after by local development agencies and this is transforming the cityscapes of Europe wherever nation states in economic and political decline need to turn around unemployment and urban decay.⁴⁶ In post-Communist Eastern Europe too, Alastair Adair and co-authors describe increasing competition between cities for foreign inward investment,⁴⁷ extending the drivers behind homogenization. Urban redevelopment schemes are seen as more likely to be successful in a regional and national context also if they are associated with international “named” architects as opposed to local practices. MBM Arquitectes, Barcelona and AZ Urban Studio, London, were thus chosen to produce the ambitious Masterplan for Hastings and Bexhill urban strategy, published in 2002. The “Priory Quarter” is planned to accommodate 338,000 sq ft of offices, 58,000 sq ft of retail, a multi-screen cinema, “University Centre” and “Creative Media Centre”.⁴⁸

Property-led Regeneration

Most of the trends described above contribute to the property-led urban regeneration schemes that are arguably the principal reason for the homogenizing appearance of globalizing cities in Europe. Although different in the details of styling and finish, they are generically similar in concept and execution. The net result is the appearance of what Guy Julier calls “designscapes”: distinctive ensembles of office buildings, retail space, condominium towers, cultural amenities, renovated spaces, landscaping, and street furniture.⁴⁹ As Evans observes, this can result in “a form of Karaoke architecture where it is not important how well you can sing, but that you do it with verve and gusto.”⁵⁰ The success of property-led redevelopment in Bilbao, Barcelona, London’s Docklands and La Défense in Paris has rapidly become the most seductive of all “travelling ideas”, resulting in the serial reproduction of designscapes.

The designscapes of large-scale urban development projects are increasingly an im-

portant source of branded and perceived place identity. One of the earliest examples was Salford Quays on the Manchester Ship Canal, initially developed in 1982 through public-private partnerships on the site of Salford Docks, following the closure of the dockyards. The development now includes apartment blocks, offices, hotels, and retail space, together with the Imperial War Museum North (designed by Daniel Libeskind) and a landmark arts venue, the Lowry arts complex, designed by James Stirling and Michael Wilford. Other European examples include London's South Bank and Paddington Basin redevelopments, Espace Leopold and the EU District in Brussels, the new financial district in the Dublin docklands, Potsdamer Platz and the science-university complex Adlershof in Berlin, the Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam, the Euralille complex in Lille, Donau City in Vienna, Portsmouth's Gunwharf redevelopment, Hamburg's HafenCity, Birmingham's Brindleyplace, Copenhagen's Orestaden project, the CityLife project and Rho-Pero fieria complex in Milan, and the 1998 World Expo site in Lisbon.

Many of these are examples of what Leslie Sklair calls "scripted spaces", settings for the propagation and conduct of the culture-ideology of consumerism. As Swyngedouw et al. suggest, they are both cause and effect of the neoliberal regimes that now dominate European cities. "These projects are the material expression of a developmental logic that views megaprojects and place-marketing as means for generating future growth and for waging a competitive struggle to attract investment capital. Urban projects of this kind are, therefore, not the mere result, response, or consequence of political and economic change choreographed elsewhere. On the contrary we argue that such UDPs [urban development projects] are the very catalysts of urban and political change, fuelling processes that are felt not only locally, but regionally, nationally, and internationally as well."⁵¹

Office Towers

The most ubiquitous symbols of economic and cultural globalization in globalizing European cities are the medium/high-rise office towers that have appeared in both central and edge-city locations. As in the United States, the "vernaculars of capitalism" in the design of office towers have

been diminished in response to the forces of finance, market values of design, and prevailing theories of urbanism.⁵² Their increasing uniformity of appearance is in part a result of the adoption of international building standards in order to meet the demands and expectations of international clients and investors; and in part a result of the profit expectations and made risk-minimizing strategies associated with increased institutional investment.⁵³ It also reflects the dissemination and adoption of certain building technologies. The system of structural glazing developed by Paris-based RFR Engineering, for example, has been widely appropriated by architects and developer as a means of endowing commercial space with a fashionable technological flourish.⁵⁴

The increasing short-termism of real estate strategies on the part of developers (with as much gearing as possible), or more risk-averse Pension and Life funds seeking a secure repository in which "to dump their money for, say, five years", seems to have turned office space exclusively into a trading commodity.⁵⁵ In this context, superior rentals which will lead to all-important income streams, valuations and yields can be assured by prestige signature office design. Recently introduced innovative property investment vehicles (private real estate funds and Real Estate Investment Trusts), designed to spread risk exposure on large, premium mixed-use developments, reinforce the process of homogenization because their professional investor managers (who also pay a premium for starchitect-designed "magnet" offices which will attract blue-chip tenants) have international strategies.⁵⁶ In addition, an elite global class of super-rich individual private investors, apparently often based in the Middle East and Asia Pacific regions, is now recognizing prestige real estate as a secure longer-term asset. At the present time, a number of these (usually hard to trace) investors appears to want to own (as opposed to trade in) prestige office buildings in Europe. Similar to the original developers of Manhattan perhaps, they too are using big name, internationally respected architects whose designs stand out in the cityscape.⁵⁷ These global financial and cultural processes through which architectural homogenization is being produced, are increasingly impacting on European cities.

Semiotic districts and brandscapes

The spread of consumerism through globalization has changed and homogenized the retail environment of large cities in Europe. The term 'brandscape' has been popularized by Anna Klingmann, whose book begins by noting that we have arrived at a stage of hypercapitalism "where counterculture has been demystified, culture hijacked to transport commercial messages, (and commerce hijacked to transport culture), and all boundaries between high and low design, concept, content, and form have been blurred." Brandscapes, she argues, are very much a product of corporate interests, the conjunction of economic globalization and the increasing exteriorization of corporate identities. They "constitute the physical manifestations of synthetically conceived identities transposed onto synthetically conceived places, demarcating culturally independent sites where corporate value systems materialize into physical territories... Today, more than ever, brandscapes as physical sites have become key elements in linking identity, culture, and place".⁵⁸

A more common form of brandscape is the high-end shopping district, typically colonized in larger cities by the flagship stores of the leading global brands of high-end ready-to-wear clothing, accessories, jewellery, shoes, and so on, supported by expensive restaurants, cafés, art galleries, antique shops, and specialized luxury retail stores like Cerruti, Coach, Fendi, Ferragamo, Furla, Marc Jacobs, Missoni, Moschino, Prada, and Valentino. Ilpo Koskinen calls these districts "semiotic neighbourhoods" because they specialize in selling semiotic goods and experiences: the signifiers of distinction and cultural capital that have become so important to the new class fractions of the new economy.⁵⁹ Sharon Zukin calls them "destination districts".⁶⁰ Another form of brandscape, increasingly ubiquitous, is to be found in major airports, where concourses have been extended and remodelled to accommodate the duty-free outlets of the same global brands that show up in semiotic neighbourhoods. Lower down the retail hierarchy are the brandscapes of shopping malls, where both global- and national-brand stores are ensconced in a retail ecology that is supported by ample parking, multiscreen cinemas, outdoor plazas, food

courts, public art works, night-time bars and maybe a rock-climbing wall.

Cultural quarters and design districts

The growth of what Joseph Pine and James Gilmore have called the "experience economy"⁶¹ has meant that there has been a boom in museum building in the past several decades. The boom was set off in the mid-1970s by the completion of Centre Pompidou in Paris, as much a cultural amusement park and culture café as a museum. The boom was consolidated by the success of the redeveloped Louvre, with its completely rethought entrance halls and shopping corridors beneath I.M. Pei's distinctive and immediately recognizable glass pyramid in the central court of the ancient building. As Elizabeth Wilson observes, the new Louvre "looks more like an airport, or possibly a bank than an art gallery. The pyramid itself is exciting, but the open escalators, the shiny marble and the long row of shops, all dedicated to marketing various kinds of Louvre artefacts, speak corporate culture rather than aesthetic pleasure".⁶² Here is the clue to the museumization of urban landscapes: the capacity of the contemporary museum to combine spectacle with consumption. In a relatively short period of time, observe van Aalst and Boogaarts, "the museum cluster has become a key element of the tourism sector and an important contributor to the urban economy. In their competition to attract visitors, residents, and businesses, more and more cities are profiling themselves as a Cultural City, an Entertainment City, or a Fantasy City. Meanwhile, museums have evolved from buildings devoted primarily to educational and cultural presentations into public spaces where the visitor reigns."⁶³

The location of museums within cities is critical to their success, and they are often clustered together in branded "museum districts", "cultural quarters", or "design districts" — and often close to parks located in upscale residential, office and shopping districts.⁶⁴ In this way city "habitus" is commoditized in redeveloped "historic quarters" in several ways: "Objectified" physical cultural capital is produced by, and feeds, "embodied" elite cultural capital and is also transmuted to "institutionalised", knowledge-based economic capital. The synergistic interdependencies between

Leslie Sklair's "corporate", "technical" and "consumerist" fractions⁶⁵ can therefore be recognised in the process of spatial (re)production across the cities of Europe. Vienna's Museumsquartier claims to be Europe's largest cultural construction zone and one of the ten biggest cultural complexes in the world. Other examples include Amsterdam's Museumplein, the Museuminsel in Berlin-Mitte, Frankfurt's Museum Bank, Rotterdam's Museum Park, Barcelona's Montjuic Park, the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Parc de La Villette, Paris, and the Burrell and Kelvingrove in Glasgow.

Gentrification and packaged new-build landscapes

Gentrified neighbourhoods and new-build waterside developments, along with exclusive new suburban enclaves have become globally reproduced as the preferred residential spaces of the transnational class fractions associated with the "new economy". Gentrified neighbourhoods are recognizable not so much for the built environment as for their inhabitants, their cars and possessions, and the local shops and cafés that they support. The extensive literature on gentrification makes it clear that it is a characteristic and easily recognizable aspect of every large city in Europe.⁶⁶ The increased pool of professional, administrative, managerial, and technical workers in the new economy, together with the intensification of consumerism in European culture, has generated an expanding group of potential gentrifiers, for whom the "metropolitan habitus"⁶⁷ of gentrifying inner-city districts is especially attractive. This has not escaped the attention of city governments, many of which have pursued policies aimed at facilitating gentrification. Because it brings about improvements to the built environment, encourages new retail activity, and results in the expansion of the local tax base without necessarily drawing heavily on public funds, gentrification has become an important symbol and prospect for urban change for ideological neoliberals. In recent developments in larger European world cities, there is evidence of a "super gentrification" process in which first and second generations of middle-class gentrifiers are being displaced by households from an altogether wealthier class of "super professionals" working in the financial and associated sectors.⁶⁸

Developers have sought to meet demand from the same class fractions through new-build residential regeneration projects – preferably in canalside and harbourside settings – effectively gentrifying former industrial neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, for those households who prefer the security and status of suburban settings to the gritty sociability of inner-city districts, developers have turned to American-style packaged "New Urbanism". As premium spaces designed to accommodate the "secession of the successful", New Urbanist developments are perfectly suited to the shift in social, cultural, and political sensibilities that has occurred with the rise of neoliberalism. As a result, developers across Europe are using the label "New Urbanist" as a kind of designer branding for privatized dioramas and picturesque enclaves of what basically amount to an upscale variety of homogenized sprawl.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Within architecture and planning, the symbiotic relationship with capital is seldom addressed explicitly and is most often recast, either into an aestheticised "architectural" discourse or into a discourse predicated on "bridging concepts" such as efficiency or sustainability, in which there is potentially something for every constituency. But the reality of flows of global real estate investments, combined with neoliberal political economies, means that architecture, urban design and planning are compromised professions, geared to the vision of large-scale developers and public-private ventures. What they and their investors envision, more often than not, is the physical, aesthetic and economic upgrading to be achieved by the manipulation of cityscapes, but the result is what Neil Smith has described as a "new geographical axis of competition ... pitting cities against cities in the global economy"⁷⁰, resulting in overall blandness. As we have shown, risk minimization strategies (desired by all actors, including government bodies) and the need to maximize returns on floor space mean that the scope for innovation and distinctiveness in design is rather limited. We have argued that the net result is a broad homogenization of the built environment of globalizing European cities.

It should be acknowledged, of course, that this is a trend that overlays an enormous amount of existing urban fabric. The legacy of past phases of development, referred to by Ray Pahl as “fossilized social history”⁷¹, means that every city has its distinct skyline and instantly recognizable landmarks and districts. It must also be acknowledged that there are some who argue that while the exteriors of buildings may look alike, local conditions still frame and constrain a significant amount of architectural detail.⁷² “Star” architectural practices, meanwhile, have strong market incentives to retain a distinctive brand image, so that their signature structures are often distinctively idiosyncratic if not iconic. Finally, it must be acknowledged that, as with most socio-cultural trends, tendencies toward homogenization are invariably met with counter-trends. The more places look alike, the more that consumers seek “authenticity”⁷³, whether through new design movements, conservation, or historic preservation movements. What we doubt is that these counter-trends are powerful enough to balance out the homogenizing tendencies in urban development.

4 Postscript

In this article, we have focused specifically on the ways in which processes of architectural globalization are transforming the cityscapes of ‘old’ Europe. However we want to end by drawing attention to an alternative perspective that could be relevant for newly liberalizing cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, East Berlin and Moscow. We therefore include a short extract from Xuefei Ren’s observations on the way in which the top 100 architectural firms in the world are using and reshaping these cities, based on quantitative and ethnographic research conducted in 2003.⁷⁴ Xuefei sees these cities as the “recipients” of architecture, “willing to absorb design services sent from imaging centres” in “production sites” such as New York and London. But, significantly, she sees Western architecture as benefiting new global “consumption sites” not so much in an economic sense as a creative one.

“These places are wild frontiers and testing fields where a variety of design schemes are realized in concrete building forms, from avant-garde designs to banal and mundane ones. ... Star architects rush here to build their dream projects which probably would not be built anywhere else. Young architects rush here as well, to have a glance at what is happening in the frontier. Although no really innovative work is expected to come from here, these places further push globalisation of architectural design industry by providing loci where different ideas, cultures, and design styles clash and resolve in the built environment. As consumption sites of design services, these cities can improve their global city status both by acquiring a physical image of being a global city, and by playing the frontier function for wild architectural experiments.”

Annotations

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