

International Architecture

The design bug

If Brad Pitt were not a film star, he would have been an architect. In between filming, Pitt organizes 'architecture jam sessions'.¹ The architect plays the baseline and Brad supplies the groove. He's already played with Frank Gehry and he's hoping to jam with Rem Koolhaas in the near future. Rock star Lenny Kravitz is another celebrity who's been bitten by the design bug. Kravitz, who is proud of his fashion world friends, is a collector of spectacular architecture.² He owns a two-hundred-year-old farmhouse in New Orleans which was once the set for Louis Malle's film *Pretty Baby*, starring Brooke Shields. In Miami he has a recording studio in retro futuristic style with a panoramic view of the ocean and a Ferrari Spider 360 out front. Entry to his New York penthouse is via magnificent polished steel doors with white leather doorknobs. In the living room stands a Kawai grand piano that the salesman claimed had belonged to the film star Ingrid Bergman. It goes without saying that everything in this apartment is controlled by computers, including the seventy-five stereo loudspeakers. 'If I hadn't been a musician, I would have been a designer,' says Kravitz, adding, 'I love to design clothes, I love to design homes. I know the way I like a silhouette to look on my body, and I know the way I like to live. Fashion and design, it's all the same, man.'³

Function follows design

It is not only the lives of film and pop stars that revolve around the delights of design; most people in the West are only really happy when their entire life is Designed. There is a new elite, which Richard Florida calls "the Creative Class". What is different from most traditional elite groups in the past, is that almost anyone today can enjoy creative architecture. Enjoying creativity today is not based on money or breeding, on the contrary – the often special effects of displacement – are no longer privileged by wealth or an inherited style. Many of the new elite, what I call middleclass identity, who have a dominant influence upon reality are displaced suburbanites. We can afford plane tickets to fly anywhere. In the 1960's and 70's, the restless globetrotting of baby boomers, hungry for the sense of otherness largely absent from suburban life at the time started. We went in search of places to excite us, buildings and countries to show us new ways of seeing and modes of living. Richard Florida's book, "The Rise of the Creative Class," outlines the demographics of a group that David Brooks in his book "Bobos in Paradise. The New Upper Class and How They Got There" calls Bourgeois Bohemians. According to Herbert Muschamp (and myself) it is more appropriate to call them cosmopolites, a privatized transnational city-state department, with stronger allegiances to cities worldwide than to the nations in which they are located.

While architecture provides symbolic destinations for this group, design gives individuals the tools to construct their own identities – through the clothes they wear, the gadgets they use, the furniture they choose for their apartments and houses.

All of this feeds into a culture that makes new demands on buildings. In the postwar decades, global architecture still adhered to the prewar tenets of the International Style. It was thought that a limited vocabulary of forms would confer modern, machine-age unity upon the heterogeneous cultures of the world. Their designs promoted a universal *a priori* notion of freedom. Today, people and cities value difference. Instead of a universal form of freedom they look for all kinds of provisional freedoms design can provide. Gehry's design for a new Guggenheim branch in Lower Manhattan, for example, was resisted by many who felt it looked too much like Bilbao. This represents a considerable shift from the past. Few, then, would have discounted another glass tower by Mies van der Rohe on the grounds that his towers all looked alike. Today we live in the age of alterity, difference as lifestyle, as an image, that seems to be the new paradigm.

Design commands attention. Which explains why companies, cultural institutions, politicians and cities are so keen on design as a medium for their message. It seems that once our basic needs have been met, we are looking for design to enjoy the paradise of affluence. And the cultural industry has proven staggeringly successful in selling design as the optimum form of entertainment. Today's architects are required to dazzle the masses with their designs. Nowadays it is much easier to get money for a building than for an exhibition. Top-notch architecture appeals: 'The people who give money have a sense of confidence about the worth of a building. They know they're not being cheated. They don't want to spend \$ 60 million on a Van Gogh because secretly they think the real estate is worth it and the painting is not,' according to the artist Frank Stella.⁴ Art is becoming a sort of sideshow in a museum building that is itself a sculpture. This alters the meaning not only of art but also of the spaces we inhabit every day. Museums become shops and shops become museums.

What we look for in architecture is special effects, atmospheres, and emotions. Even if the functionality leaves something to be desired, design can camouflage this shortcoming. The task confronting the architect is to come up with a design capable of propagating a cultural agenda. Is the architect capable of coming up with an idiosyncratic style appropriate to the occupant's lifestyle? Does the project stand a chance of winning an award? Is the narrative behind the design innovative? Is the subject broached by the architect likely to enhance the client's public image? Is the architect famous? Will the design bring the client more status and media attention? Will it attract tourists? Make money? Raise the ratings and/or the number of visitors? More and more people and institutes are looking to styles to design life. Political convictions, religion or social class does not determine the quality of life; but you 'vote' by buying a lifestyle, without bothering your head about the ideology concealed beneath the stunning form.

A designed life

The avant-garde's ambition to unite art with life has, in a perverse way, become reality. The cultural industry has cleverly appropriated the avant-garde's tactic of subversion, not in order to interrogate the status quo or to realize other, progressive realities in opposition to the prevailing myth, but in order to tap new markets by its permanent enigma. After all, more and more consumers hanker after an intelligent and individual pleasure that transcends the passive and mass populism served up by Disney, Jon Jerde, Ikea and Hollywood. Not for nothing did Prada complain of 'a feeling of boredom'⁵ in most clothes and shoe stores. This was why it approached 'avant-garde architect' Koolhaas to impart a new kind of pleasure, 'independent' of shopping and consumption, to two hundred Prada stores. Commerce is discovering that the public is crazy about artistic architecture with a subversive and original narrative. And it doesn't matter whether the pretext for spectacular design comes from urban analyses, technological innovation, red light areas, 'droog' design, a passion for fashion, commerce, interactive systems, populist engagement, the permanent crisis of the retroactive manifesto, the commonplace, irony, pop art, modern classicism, a fascination with self-organization in Africa, professional precision, comics, film or art. What does matter is whether design is capable of comprehensively captivating the public with its narrative beauty and discourse, from boxer shorts to museum. The result is an eclectic design landscape of hundreds of different fantastic styles – lonely masterpieces in a culture of sprawl – that are all out to capture attention, high ratings and sales figures. With on top of that endless evaluations in magazines and exhibitions what has to come next – what the next mutation or Style would be.

Media Architecture

If you are unable to create a brand name, unable to think up a snappy one-liner or to develop a propagandist discourse that appeals to the media and cleverly panders to the Zeitgeist, you won't survive long as an architect in the cultural industry. Daniel Libeskind, cannily attired in Armani suit and American cowboy boots, understands better than anyone that architects need to be charismatic salesmen. Everything Libeskind could muster, his own self, his theory and his design, was thrown into winning the competition to design the new World Trade Centre in New York. It must have helped Libeskind no end to be able to present himself as a Polish immigrant whose parents had survived the Holocaust and who felt American because he had grown up in the Bronx.⁶ For the important thing in this cultural commerce is 'to add value: to wrap intelligence and culture around the product. The apparent product, the object attached to the transaction, is not the actual product at all. The real product has become culture and intelligence,' says Bruce Mau, author and designer of the book *Life Style*.⁷ When a project communicates an intelligent and cultural surplus value, it gains attention and importance in our entertainment-oriented cultural industry. What matters is whether a building is able to tell a story via its architecture, just as films and ads do via their two-dimensional display. And not just an everyday story that unfolds in space in real time, but a mediagenic narrative conveyed by a building's skin, especially on the outside. It is of no

surprize that most architecture projects are show as object without the use interacting with it, all that counts is skin architecture. It was with good reason that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour quoted the architect Morris Lapidus in *Learning from Las Vegas*: 'People are looking for illusions; they don't want the world's realities. And Lapidus asked, where do I find this world of illusion? Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it at school? Do they go to museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only one place – the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else.'⁸ Today, the film industry is not the only one in the business of creating illusions; other forms of consumer-directed communication like television, advertising, museums, fashion, design, books and magazines are equally capable of conjuring up illusions. The role of architecture is increasingly put on a par with that of the media. In architecture as in the media there is a growing demand for trendy, drama-filled images. 'You have to look at a building as a passer-by. Does it grab you or not. It's the same as a pop concert or a film,' writes Dutch architecture critic Bernard Hulsman.⁹ The focus of architects today is not static space, but dynamic space of the kind we are familiar with from films. And like film directors, architects are concerned with the manipulation of the observer's viewpoint and fascinated by movement and action.

In many projects a tension develops between two ways of looking: the construction of a place to look at, and constructions that force you to look in a prescribed manner. The dynamic between these two ways of looking depends on the story being told. Who is going to take the time to check whether the building also functions properly beyond the immediately obvious? The crux of the matter is whether this architecture is able, with its narrative, to thrust a country, a city, a town hall, a museum, a bank, a client, an amusement park, a villa – and the architect – into the limelight.

In the past, a lot of classic and monumental architecture was abused to represent and embody the ideology of totalitarian regimes. Nowadays, oddly enough, design often no longer has to refer to anything at all. It is as if architecture has evolved into a new kind of narcissism – display as ornament – that has no need to refer to a symbolism outside itself. The whole project is dressed inside and out with design without leaving much running room for anything else.¹⁰ The architect is becoming a special effects master, an 'imaginist' who concentrates on the symbolism of the skin, of the discourse of the building itself only. Obviously, the surface and the formation of volumes of a project are in the best position to conjure up the desired design effects. How are we to interpret this return of ornament? Architecture as display, as image?

Many famous and international architects creating this design world seem no longer to be part of any specific local culture, these architects never land, instead they float above the world, creating a world of objects which make up a virtual world of global design. Not only are they always in transit, working in the airplane, sleep at international hotels of reassuring comfort, manage their offices all over the world like a twenty-four hours architects directing the Japan office while Europe sleeps, no they are also international in another sense.

International architects developed a discourse beyond national borders, are part of a fight club of friends where all that counts is who makes the most challenging and promising masterpiece, or makes the best analyses and has the best ideas. The international architecture of these architects operates independent from one particular local culture. Although it is built with local clients, financed by a municipality, embedded in a particular region, its perspective is based on the traveling discourses of architects, critics, international worlds of connoisseurs, tourists and global economic systems – the Guggenheim or Prada imperium – inviting the international architects Gehry, Koolhaas, Herzog De Meuron all over the world for instance illustrates this trend.

International Slovenian architecture

It is this international architecture the Slovenian architects presented in this publication have been able to enjoy, took their advantages and react upon when they studied at the postgraduate institutes like the Architectural Association in London, University of California Los Angeles school of Art and architecture in America, and the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. They have learned to be a media player, think strategic, are able to catch the attention of the press, enjoy the international network of expertise and innovative experiment, and they can tap into issues, discourses and techniques larger than the locality ever could have imagined. The advantage of having touched upon the qualities of global architecture is that it helps these young practices – when they start their office in their country again – to look beyond the scope of their national identity. Above all they have learned to develop an own argued discourse and position. In the confrontation with international culture at postgraduate level they have been forced to choose a side, to develop with reason what the performance of their work could be. They have learned to question what they are doing, instead of “just” following the codes earlier education indoctrinated them in silence. They understand better than ever that architecture is part of a larger whole. That they have to integrate cultural, commercial, philosophical, historical and technological aspects in their work. As a side effect of the professional lessons learned by global architecture they could catch the ego or star architecture disease. But if they do well any prejudice – including the ones they have become so familiar with in the international discourse – could be brought further by their innovative work at home and abroad.

The work of the six Slovenian architecture offices presented in this catalogue are very much part of the above mentioned developments. Their return to home doesn't only speed up the globalization of the local in Slovenia. But foremost their international expertise could help to improve – even stop – the many horrifying corporate globalization developments we see happening in the Slovenian landscape right now. The Americanization of housing, cities and for instance the new shopping centre outside of Ljubljana in and around old factory areas demands a more intelligent approach. It's my believe that the international skills the Sixpack architects have developed at the postgraduate

institutes can result in a much richer idea of how the influences of our international culture could be beneficial for the local. Lets stand still for a moment, which dimensions their work, is part of.

1) Not critical but projective

Because we now live in a society dominated by the spectacle, visual simulations, illusions, copies, design, reproductions, imitations and fantasies, we are, according to Jean Baudrillard, deprived of the real. The image no longer represents reality; instead, it masks and perverts reality. We are surrounded by simulations of reality, in a hyperreality where meaning is increasingly blurred. This reading of contemporary society has prompted many commentators to portray our visual culture as superficial and bad. Critics like Kenneth Frampton and architects like Tadao Ando believe that the language of tectonics – the haptic and physical realm as an antidote to the symbolic – is only capable of giving us back our reality. This approach in architecture, art, philosophy, and theory belongs to an era of negative critique. Instead of renewing from within the critical position of Frampton or Ando prefers to sidestep what they consider corrupt society. Other critical positions believe that the only true measure of beauty can exists by exposing the contradictions our reality is made of. This kind of negative critique can be existential as in the work of writer Samuel Beckett where despair is a result of questioning, as a result to unravel the language of the conventionally given answers, or like in the apocalyptic work of painter Francis Bacon. Bacon does not even question life anymore, for him the worst has happened; there are no alternatives within the human condition. All these critiques are against an existing norm, always re-active and in need of representating – making worldwide – its critique in a work. They want to disestablish the status quo. In fact what they dislike so much provides them all the alibi's to be creative, while it would have be more fruitful to use their imagination to produce a work far beyond what they dislike. Currently there is a tendency to move away from critique all together. Instead of critique they talk of the projective. Robert Somol¹¹ is increasingly less interested in critical practices. "What all-critical practices share is that the most important fact about them is that you have to read them, and so the issue of their legibility is paramount. That attentiveness is the first requirement and effect of criticality. Whereas Projective might mean that the thing is invisible in a certain way, not particularly readable or retrospective [mirroring or a metaphor for something], but it might nonetheless organize the world in a way that instigates other liberating kinds of events or behaviors." The architecture of Sixpack is not against a norm, not after an alienating or uncanny effect, or after sabotage from authority from within as has been often the case in the work of Rem Koolhaas. No, the works of Sixpack is truly projective.

2) Deep surface

Instead of disqualing our visual culture Sixpack embraces the success of the image – the symbolic and the role of representation as an opportunity for breaking new ground rather than simply ignoring the whole phenomenon. Not

only are images, the act of looking, being looked at more crucial and important than ever, but also architecture simply cannot deny its symbolic force; the symbolic of its materials, technology and its typographic effect. Besides, not all images are bad. There are also images capable of breaking through the passivity and fixity of the viewer's gaze.

The fact is that in today's visual culture it is no longer possible to pretend that architecture has nothing to do with decoration. Yet we have to understand that the idea of decoration can be a total different one. Not only are we confronted with a kind of pop-art façade's in Slovenia – with many different sign functions – when the program of requirements doesn't allow any transformation, we also come across a kind of interfaces – or deep surfaces – covering the building or even becoming the building itself, a deep surface where the use moves through. A deep surface is full of interferences between inside and outside, it opens through its thickness ever multiplying interpretations between the inside, the outside and itself.

3) The singular object

In the Netherlands scanning reality before you start to think of a project – what made the Netherlands famous abroad – is central to the Dutch contemporary practice, as in the work of MVRDV and Rem Koolhaas. It is an architecture and urbanism based upon sociology and other kinds of information outside the profession. Life and not architecture is their central concern. Although Sixpack architects are also scanning the many mutations of life, are concerned about the program of life in a building; their main attention is focused upon the qualities of the singular object of architecture. Or how the *formations* of the volume, the skin, the structure and the trajectories through space create and structure the building with a specific program. Sixpack architects are foremost interested what the language of architecture is able to communicate. Almost all the buildings they create stand far from photoshopping – instead their projects are abstract and often minimal of character, invest in spatial performances which are too a high extend depending on the representational effect the materiality of the singular object in relation to the city and its use communicates. A new monumentality or relative autonomy of the singular object is emerging.

4) Laughter

To destroy the fullness of oversignification we impose on things Jean Nouvel uses *oblique* singular objects, that reaches the inexplicable, a nontransmissible reality, something that is in no way interactive as a counteract to the legibility to everything. Baudrillard and Nouvel are after – what I call – foreign singular objects that create holes, interstices, and voids in opposition to the metastatic fullness of culture. Their foreign language of the singular object is after the aura of nothingness; even the seduction of worthlessness says Baudrillard; or in the words of Virilio; after a mute and silent space in radical opposition of the fullness of our design culture. The singular object of Sixpack architects may perhaps look minimal and abstract just like Jean Nouvel's work but Sixpack is not after any kind of nothingness. Their projects allow all kinds of signification. Their work is not smooth, not alienating, void of meaning, but instead wants to communicate on all fronts. It even stimulates and supports new possibilities of occupation, including the one of our oversignificated consumption culture. The use of color, light effects, dots printed on the surface, urban effects, dynamic landscapes and other features are all an indication of the optimism and for the pleasure Sixpack architects locate and find in our contemporary culture. Nouvel's work is still a critique against a norm while the Sixpack generation plays joyfully with the modern mutations you can find in our reality.

5) Promenade architectural

In many instances Sixpack architect create different kinds of architectural promenades through space. The sequence of movement through the projects is often an experience in itself; both are representation and physical experience. It is through this movement that one can perceives the brilliant compositional arrangements. This is very different from someone such as Frank Lloyd Wright for whom the processional route prepared one to

experience the principal spaces in the design. The procession in the Unity Temple of Wright is very controlled, and very much controls the perception of the church hall. In the work of Sixpack architect, the circulations allow one to see and appreciate the forms and compositions from multiple vantage points.

6) Immaculate perfection

I have always been very surprised how much money, time and attention is invested in presenting yourself immaculate in Slovenia. In the Netherlands you go to the carwash when your car is dirty, in Slovenia you go to the carwash to preserve the immaculate look of your car leaving the showroom. Following the latest trends, being in fashion – not being out of line or against the status quo – being superclean and being perfect is in Slovenia essential¹². In the morning shops are cleaning their glass entrance doors everyday of the week. Sixpack architects – just like the rest of Slovenia – are excellent in producing immaculate buildings. They do their utmost to make a totally perfect building inside out. Not only are they excellent in detailing a project, their buildings are superperfect in their appearance too.

The risk of being perfect

The fundamental question, which is facing international architecture today, is whether it is capable of transcending the much celebrated design narcissism. Architecture must not confuse the public's need for symbols with the production of easily consumed images. The reality of the design industry and most politicians – as we have seen earlier – is to entertain, not to project other possibilities. When architecture becomes design rather than symbol, or proffers a style rather than an ideology, it no longer has the capacity to project a much-needed progressive alternative; it too becomes a form of entertainment, in other words, a spectacle. Now that architecture is seen as a profession making singular objects, the temptation to appease, rather than to question the client and the public, is paramount. The Disneyworld's, Las Vegas, the minimal masterpieces and even the idea of "junkspace" represent a thin and vulgar culture. Architecture must resist the temptation to produce the facile – to appease – and should return to its inherent social and aesthetic responsibilities: to produce symbolic and ideological content. To paraphrase the critic Robert Hughes, architecture molds the world concretely. He writes: "Of all the arts, [architecture] is the supreme expression of politics and ideology. It marshals resources and organizes substance in a way that music, painting and literature cannot."

The task is – now that architecture has successfully been relegated to the domain of the sign, reinvents itself through techniques of communication – to not only reinvent the public realm, but also a new aesthetics, a new "not easy" symbolism. Couldn't the amazing strangeness, even bizarreness of the architecture of Slovenian architect Edvard Ravnikar help to create a new "not easy" symbolism? Why are so many contemporary architects in the gym working on their perfect six-pack? Would it not be nice when Sixpack

architecture starts to spins out of control, starts to embracing the impure even more?

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Footnotes

¹ 'Brads Spielplatz', *Architectural Digest*, no. 4, June/July 2002.

² Charles Gandee, 'Rock 'n' Real Estate', *The New York Times*, July 2002.

³ Kravitz's aesthetic taste is for the 'glamorous, futuristic, clean, but at the same time, funky – not rigid. I wanted my house to feel like a gallery-museum, you know, white walls, wood floors.'

⁴ Deborah Solomon 'Is the Go-Go Guggenheim Going, Going. . .', *The New York Times*, July 2002.

⁵ Jan Kees Kokke, 'Koolhaas makes great leap forward in China. From Prada to Chinese TV, the Netherlands' most sought after architect tackles it all', *Het Financiële Dagblad*, 3 March 2003, p. 2.

⁷ Deborah Solomon 'Is the Go-Go Guggenheim Going, Going. . .', *The New York Times*, July 2002.

⁶ 'I was born in Poland, a child of Holocaust survivors, but I am an American. I grew up in the Bronx', *The New York Times*, February 2003.

⁷ Bruce Mau et al., *Life Style*, Phaidon Press, London 2000.

⁸ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT, Cambridge 1972. The quote by Morris Lapidus comes from *Progressive Architecture*, September 1970. Lapidus earned worldwide fame with his Fontainebleau hotel in Miami; of its 'stairway to nowhere', which led to a modest wardrobe, he remarked: 'Look at this: totally useless, The people loved it!'

⁹ 'Architectuurkritiek anno 2003: betekenisvol of niet? Dag des oordeels', *BladNA*, no. 1/2, January-February 2003, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ Hal Foster discusses this condition in detail in his book *Design & Crime (And Other Diatribes)*, Verso, London 2002.

¹¹ Interview with Bob Somol by Veronika Schmid & Ursa Vrhunc, Oris Magazine for architecture and culture, nr 21, 2003.

¹² Except the Neu Slovenische Kunst at the time confronting Yugoslavian communism.