



COPY CITY PASTE CITY

ON UNIQUENESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN

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Ginza Brick Town
Corbusier: Plan Voisin



IKEA opening in Tokyo

Tokyo, 1872: A devastating fire leaves a huge area in central Tokyo in ruins. The country is in a process of rapid modernization and industrialization. One year before the Japanese government sent a delegation to Europe in order to study western technology. Now they see the opportunity to use their newly acquired knowledge in reconstructing the fire struck area. The British engineer Thomas Waters is given the task to design the new plans that include wide boulevards, fireproof brick buildings, road trees and gas lighting. Within five years the project is abandoned with about one third of the original plan constructed, partly because of huge expenses caused by the expensive building materials applied. The project is no absolute success. On the bright side; it ensures a raise in land prices welcomed by the landowners. On the other side; original residents are forced to leave, the heavy brick buildings are not suitable for the tropical Japanese climate – and the alien outlook gets criticised for being too Americanised; described by Isabella Bird on a visit in 1878 as “less like an Oriental city than like the outskirts of Chicago or Melbourne”¹.

Since industrialization triggered a more extensive contact between countries than ever seen before, influences and inspirations from other places, cultures, cities are parts of our everyday life. With no reason to limit the export and import to silk, spices and fruit, ideals for development of architecture and the cities the buildings are placed in have been literally on the move for the last hundred years. Intoxicated by the seemingly unlimited possibilities offered by the modernist movement, master plans for as diverse places as Brazil, India and Paris popped up in high speed, supported by a generic toolkit of white boxes, suitable for the international man – the architect surely was one – fitting perfectly in his style; the international style.

The international style soon proved to be an oversimplification of reality and not sufficient in handling the complexity of both new and existing cities. The seemingly rational mindset behind plans such as the Plan Voisin failed in its goal of providing attractive cityscapes, failures of cities such as Brasilia showed clearly that the time of the master planner, the all knowing architect, the chess player preparing his next move on the urban chess board was over. The traditional city planner thus went to the grave together with the outdated view on what the city and the urban actually are. The defeat of the modernist city was a fact.

Tokyo 2006: The new IKEA, the first in Japan and one of the biggest in the world, opens in the outskirts of the capital. The happening has been anticipated for years; the queues are mile long. As the second time the Swedish brand tries to penetrate the difficult Japanese market, the first being in the mid seventies, they have prepared carefully this time. Big couches popular in the US and Europe but far too big for Japanese apartments have been removed from the assortment, and to avoid people bringing their smaller size couches on the metro the delivery as well as assembly service has been extended.



Cesar Pelli: Docklands, London



Cesar Pelli: World Financial Center, NYC

The cultural import is not initiated by the government, but rather a result of the ever more globalised economy – triggered by advances in telecommunication technologies rocketing international transactions and global trades to so far unseen heights. New networks established and a stronger interdependency on global markets and market forces spark a new understanding of the city and the urban. “The society has been completely urbanized”², states Lefebvre in 1970 calling for an understanding of the urban that transcends the medieval perception of a city with its core, its outskirts and its surrounding farmland. In this vast urban conglomeration, urban areas are knitted together with webs of physical as well as virtual connections, ensuring efficient transport of goods, people and information.

The players in the urban reality today are not the king nor the state, but international companies with the only goal being ever new expansion. The role of the architect has been reduced from being the Master Planner to being that of a dumb spectator – cash is king; the urban its playground, the city its victim. Important new development projects are initiated from private developers driven by opportunities for quick money, long-term planning processes are left for the nostalgic, the visionary, the naïve.

With global money doing global business, what else is there to expect than a global outlook? International investment companies are always ready with in case local investors (or worse; the government) back out – whether the money comes from Europe, the Arab world, Japan or Hong Kong makes no difference. Digitalised the golden numbers look all the same; so does the cityscapes they are producing. Olympia and York is one such investor; being responsible for extensive development projects for new financial districts such as Docklands in London and the World Financial Center in New York. Separated by no less than seven time zones, the projects are holding the same functions, realised by the same investors and with the almost exact same appearance. Not surprisingly, Olympia and York asked the same architect, Cesar Pelli – a relatively credible corporate architect, to design key projects in both the schemes.

Attempts to include something ‘unique’ into such generic schemes are most likely a long shot, as market liberalism and regulations ensuring free competition effectively obstruct such well-meant intentions. Among those who have tried to go against the cash flow are the city authorities of San Francisco, deliberately trying to ban fast food chains such as McDonald’s and Burger King in order to promote local delicatessens. However such attempts were by lawyers considered as possibly being unconstitutional; and the authorities had to look at other alternatives such as the use of the zoning laws³.

With no evident control mechanisms, the similarities in the international metropolises are thus increasing. Aggressive location strategies backed by heavy advertising campaigns ensure us a double

McDonald's in Venice



Zaha Hadid: Guggenheim Taichung



Toyo Ito: Concerthall, Gent

Toyo Ito: Concerthall, Taichung



decaffeinated Starbucks Caffe Latte wherever we are; there is always a BigMac at hand while we skip to the next song on our new iPod shuffle. The old city centres of Europe are struggling to keep their uniqueness and attractiveness, fighting back at the global forces with regulations on how to fit an American burger chain into a medieval building, believing that if only the yellow plastic M sign is replaced by a golden wooden one; then the vulnerable culture will be kept intact.

In the world championship of attracting business or the Miss Universe of tourists, not every city is lucky enough to have the canals of Amsterdam or the ancient streets of Rome. As a compensation for mediocre urban environments, city authorities around the world has studied the 'Bilbao effect' until their eyes were soar and wet, hoping investments in projects by the world's architectural elite will pay off by attracting people and capital. Simultaneously, the institutions fronting the so-called high culture has turned into money making machines themselves – contemporary museums are not about enjoying Jackson Pollock as much as they are seen as urban generators, directly involved in commercial activities – explicitly formulated by the Victoria and Albert Museum's former director Roy Strong's belief in that the V&A would seek to become the Laura Ashley of the 1990s⁴.

In more recent years, the Guggenheim foundation has been one of the cultural institutions with an expansive agenda only seen in the corporate world before. With branches in New York, Venice and Bilbao (and attempts with the OMA designed Las Vegas branch, the smaller SoHo branch and a Berlin branch, which all failed), the Guggenheim planned – in their most ambitious moments - on setting up branches in Taichung, Taiwan (designed by Zaha Hadid), Rio de Janeiro, Brasil (designed by Jean Nouvel) and studies for possibilities for one in Guadalajara, Mexico. The brain behind the plan, the controversial director Thomas Krens, stated that every modern museum should have 'great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a hi-tech interface via the internet, and economies of scale via a global network'⁵, while others were worried the commercialisation in the end would degrade the name of the institution.

The choice of signature architects such as Zaha Hadid and Jean Nouvel for the planned museums comes as no surprise. Belonging to a group of so-called 'jet-lag architects' with an extensive international portfolio of public prestige buildings, they are often namedropped by those looking for a new Bilbao effect. Bilbao has been inserted, almost literally, in the new Gehry designed concert hall in Los Angeles successfully putting the city on the cultural map for those not willing to travel to Europe to see its twin. Similarly, other architects such as Toyo Ito is pasting, or mildly adjusting, old designs around the world – giving the commissioners what they think they want and what they expect to get.

With distinctive French arrogance the chief curator of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Alain Sayag, commented Guggenheim's expansion plans: 'The Pompidou and the Guggenheim are on



Gehry: Guggenheim Bilbao
Amsterdam



different levels. We are world class, they are second class'⁶. The plans became too ambitious, reaching a saturation point to how much it is possible to expand before it inevitable declines again. Not so many years before saw the first close down of McDonald's stores worldwide.

Sayag's comment shows how important role quality and authenticity play in a world that is constantly turning more streamlined and similar, that franchise and copy-paste branding might be a dead end in the quest for new expansion. Deyan Sudjic points at the 'Temporary Paradise Syndrome' – discovering and over-exploitation of small, attractive cities with a high quality of life – as a real threat for cities that have a distinctive character, and calls for careful planning to avoid this⁷. Many will argue this has already happened to a number of Europe's most charming cities, with city centres cleaned up by the authorities to please the hordes of tourists; promoting gentrifying projects that leave the traditionally diverse centres as homogenous shopping areas only attractive to those with maximum capital and cultural power.

The strengthening of international institutions such as the European Union also plays a role in the process. As different industries depend on international standards when dealing with each other, the introduction of a common currency in the vast Euro area, as well as a huge number of common legal standards implemented in the different countries' laws decrease the differences between the Western countries.

Even with the new possibilities offered by better electronically connected cities, there is still a need and wish for a personal face-to-face contact. Some telecom businesses have moved parts of their activities to low-cost countries taking advantage of the improved connectedness, but a survey on the topic showed that in most cases the existing metropolitan areas were only getting more attractive caused by their easy access to national and international institutions, the arts, cultural and media industries⁸. Thus, location still plays a vital role in the development of urban areas; but being part of a multitude of intersecting and superimposed networks, the important feature is not where the city is situated on a local scale – but rather on a global scale.

The Netherlands got its wealth in the 16th and 17th century because of its strategic position and proximity to the international trade routes. The international climate in the country has only become stronger since then, and cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam are now as then important centres for business and trade. Airports are new nodes – cities within cities – whose development is not only about getting passengers from one destination to the other, but rather as new commercial centres competing with each other. Schiphol airport is constantly being enlarged, taking advantage of its position in the heart of Europe to challenge other transfer hubs such as Heathrow and Frankfurt. As the ultimate generic commercial space; airports still try to offer facilities that makes them special or more attractive – at



Rijksmuseum Schiphol Airport



McDonald's Beijing

OMA: CCTV Building, Beijing



Frankfurt airport; where one half of the passengers are just changing planes, you can find no less than one hundred shops, twenty-six restaurants, three cinemas, a chapel that offers wedding ceremonies, a medical centre with five doctors equipped to handle child birth and heart attacks, and a battery of resident social workers – while Schiphol airport on the other hand offers its own small branch of the world famous Rijksmuseum for a ‘unique’, cultural experience in transfer.

In this way, connectedness itself might be looked upon as equally attractive as the picturesque cityscapes found in tourist brochures. Location is now as before still crucial for determining what places ending up as melting pots and salad bowls. A museum by Frank Gehry might redirect the art crowd in Europe to a remote Spanish former industrial city, but in the end it takes far more to reconstitute the city’s connectedness as such. With nearly all cities equally well connected to the digitalised information highways; still old fashioned parameters such as train terminals, major harbours and transit airports play a vital role in establishing or keeping the international image of a city.

Even with a newly awoken awareness as well as acknowledgement of the quality of the unique, there is no sign that the process of globalisation will take a rest. A certain tiredness of the Whopper Cheese in Berlin only makes the businesses look in another direction. With the enormous market in China opening up as never before, hamburger chains, consultant offices, textile manufacturers – as well as architects and urban planners see the opportunity for big profit and unlimited power. As much as cash is emperor in China, the vastness of the country and the volume of investments replace the architect in a position that seemed lost for many years. The dumb spectator is reborn as the Master Architect once again, anything goes and celebrities, half celebrities and luckily not yet celebrities see a chance to make their mark on the enormous construction site.

The current situation in China highlights issues that are valid everywhere, but become overexposed, embarrassingly visible and ultimately bizarrely alien in the former closed society. How to relate to the main forces shaping society – cash – has always been a pressing question for architects; but the gradually changing nature on how these forces operate calls for new ways of thinking within the architectural field. The example from 19th century Tokyo might seem slightly humorous today; still this uncritical export of ideals of built form still persist throughout the world – if not with our closest neighbours, at least with their friends or their friend’s friends. A simple copy-paste mentality might give quick easy results – whether it goes for burger outlets, concert halls or master plans – but what has worked before does not necessarily work again. As the playground for the commercial forces, the city is constantly under attack on the macro scale – in big scale developments as physical manifestations of power such as the Docklands project in London, as well as on the micro scale – in almost invisible, non physical interventions initiated by companies such as Nike.



In both cases, lobbyists, investors and marketing strategists all seem to have a greater understanding of which forces are shaping the city, how they work and how they can be manipulated in order to achieve a certain goal.

In the same way IKEA failed the first time trying to set up their business in Japan, architects and urbanists will fail if we simply try to duplicate winning formulas from elsewhere. Network based architectural practices has been established the last ten years throughout the world with both increasingly internationalised staff as well as international collaborators. This could be a good starting point towards an urban understanding that takes both the globalised and the very local forces into account when dealing with the city and its architecture. At the same time one should be careful thinking the word 'network' solves the extremely complex questions at hand; if IKEA used 30 years to refine their strategy on how to sell – or not sell – couches to the Japanese consumers, then urban processes certainly need both time, knowledge and patience.

NOTES

- 1: Sorensen, A.: The Making of Urban Japan (2002), p 62
- 2: Lefebvre, H.: The Urban Revolution (1970/2003) p 1
- 3: See Sudjic, D.: The 100 Mile City (1992) p 89
- 4: Sudjic, D.: The 100 Mile City (1992) p 131
- 5: Higgins, C.: Guggenheim's \$77m man quits as chairman (2005)
- 6: Sudjic, D.: Is this the end of the Guggenheim dream? (2005)
- 7: Holland Herald, March 2006, p 36
- 8: Amin/Graham.: The Ordinary City (1997) p 413

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