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Starchitects: walking the line between individuality and conformity

Géraldine Molina

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The stars of the worlds of architecture and urban planning are prime targets of research, with the aim of understanding the imaginative processes involved in the production of our cities. Géraldine Molina takes a closer look at today’s “starchitects” and shows how they have helped to personalise thinking and action regarding the city over the last three decades, while at the same time – and somewhat paradoxically – leading to a certain normalisation of practices.

In the fields of architecture, planning and development, the advent of sustainability has resulted in a multiplication of labels, standards, certifications, procedures and regulations. These define the boundaries of a new range of tools that play a major role in structuring professionals’ practices. Accordingly, urban production¹ seems to have very recently entered an era of standardisation of ways of thinking and doing that contrasts significantly with the preceding period. After the onset of, and in reaction to, the crisis of the modernist model, the “constructive imagination” (“*imaginaire bâtisseur*” in French; Ostrowetsky 1980) that reigned from the late 1970s to the 2000s had sought (in particular via the “urban project” method) to foster unique projects, the individualisation of practices and a “tailor-made” approach. This promotion of the adaptation and particularisation of methods for producing the city was in part developed, endorsed and embodied by certain prominent contemporary architects and planners. By taking as its starting point the leading figures of the “starchitecture system”, this article seeks to explore the period between the last quarter of the 20th century and the present day. What are the links between a phenomenon of individualisation and differentiation in the methods used to produce the city on the one hand, and a dynamic of personalisation and “star-ification” of architectural and urbanistic production on the other? Aside from the apparent distinctiveness and distinction of certain projects and the individuals that produce them, what are the collective dynamics that characterise the architecture and urban planning of this period and reveal the kinds of models or, at the very least, forms of normalisation² that are at play here?³

¹ The term “urban production” is used here to designate the processes by which urban spaces are constructed and evolve.

² In this article, the term “normalisation” will be used in a broad, sociological and anthropological, sense rather than in any narrow legal or administrative sense. Accordingly, it will be used to describe recurrent actions and commonplace, conventional practices that are not limited to standardisation approaches, and the frequency of which may also reveal forms of conformity, trends that are sometimes tacit, and conventions that are implicitly shared to a greater or lesser degree.

³ This article draws on a thesis, one of whose sections consisted of analysing the public discourse of 20 or so stars of the architecture and urban planning scenes. The corpus established reflected the diversity of forms of public discourse, including autobiographies, essays, articles, interviews, films, public conversations, and so forth.

The era of pluralism and distinctive projects: the late 1960s onwards

Architecture and urban planning appear to be highly structured by star practitioners who are constantly in the spotlight. These individuals, who are representative of, and at the same time help to shape, trends in these fields, are prime targets of research, with a view to understanding the imaginative processes at work in producing our cities. The stars who today continue to dominate the architecture and urbanism scene emerged in the late 1970s. The genesis of the current “starchitect” phenomenon dates back, in fact, to a pivotal period, namely the late 1960s and the twilight years of the Modern Movement. The unpopularity of architects as a profession and harsh criticism of system-built social housing – large housing then constitute the most prominent symptoms of the crisis in the urban fabric. The “constructive imagination” (Ostrowetsky 1980) of the generation of architects and planners that emerged and dominated the field up until the early 21st century was built in reaction to modernism (Violeau 2005). The representatives of this generation sought to rebuild the legitimacy of city-makers on new foundations. During the golden age of functionalist thinking, the planning, programming, homogenisation, systematisation and reproducibility of architectural and urban solutions (the emblems of which were blocks and towers) prevailed. This seems to have been followed by a new periods where eclecticism, the assertion of a project’s uniqueness, roots in an urban context, a concern for history, the memory of places and “processualism” (Genestier 2004) are the new watchwords. In works that have become regarded as manifestos of sorts, figures such as Bernard Huet (1981), the duo Philippe Panerai and Jean Castex (1997) and Christian Devillers (1994) have tried to put into words the principles of a “high-quality architecture”, an “urban architecture”, the “urban project”, “typo-morphological” analyses – concepts and approaches that reflect a taste for adaptability.

Singularism, personalisation and “star-making” in architecture and urban planning

This promotion of the flexibility of proposed solutions proves to be very much correlated with another trend, namely the personalisation of architectural and urban action. Architects such as Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc, Paul Chemetov, Henri Gaudin, Alexander Chemetoff and Bruno Fortier – with their prestigious brands and reputations, their countless awards and prizes, and their omnipresence in the context of architectural teaching and competitions, and the specialist and national press – stand out as members of a professional elite that has played a key role in structuring the architecture and urbanism of the last thirty years. Accordingly, the model-based approach and the normalisation of modernism seem to have been replaced by *various* references and *various* personalities whose uniqueness and originality appear to be highly valued. These decades can be characterised by the growing importance of media-based approaches, by the admission of architecture and urban planning into a “showbiz society” (to borrow a phrase used by Guy Debord) typical of the contemporary world. The predominant working logic at play has become that of stardom and of media glory focused on a few individuals and characters. This “star system” dynamic, based on values of prestige, fame and the cult of the individual, has had the effect of bringing the world of city-makers closer to other worlds strongly polarised around stars, such as the film and *haute couture* fashion industries, as studied by Edgar Morin (1972) and Pierre Bourdieu (2002).

Since the 1980s, the various forms of public discourse of these stars have been perceived as platforms for presenting and dramatising the production of the city, but also – and above all – as platforms for expression in terms of “I/me”, “my life” and “my work”: the words and writings of city-makers reflect a “showbiz-ification” and staging of individual skills. As a result, these stars are constantly preoccupied with constructing and managing their public image. Furthermore, in terms of their interventions and appearances (lectures, television documentaries, autobiographies, etc.), “starchitects” are becoming more and more like authors and actors, highlighting the characteristics of their uniqueness and their style, in the process developing a specific persona and identity. Jean Nouvel has cultivated an image as the “bad boy” of architecture and a seasoned raconteur. Henri

Gaudin, in playing with contrasts and oxymorons, adopts the posture of a contemplative soul and great scholar, with his grandiloquent tone and labyrinthine thought processes. Christian de Portzamparc's image is one of a Rimbaud-like genius and the popular poet of architecture. In this way, we can observe a staging of personalities, individuals and ways of thinking that are presented as exceptional. These forms of discourse are therefore the manifestations of strategies for individualising modes of urban production, the symptoms of aggravated personalisation, and evidence of the importance of distinction strategies.

Several factors explain this personality-based polarisation. First, from the birth of architecture as a profession – which the sociologist Raymonde Moulin traces back to the Quattrocento – architects' identities as “creators” and “demiurges” would have allowed them to set themselves apart from other, rival parties involved in construction (Moulin 1973). Personalisation would therefore seem to be a historical axis that structures the architect's professional identity. The exacerbation of uniqueness in the contemporary context of urban production can also be explained by the fact that it is still a resource in terms of strategic positioning, in both the current internal and external struggles of the profession. Demonstrating one's specificity as a producer of space enables an architect to stand out from the crowd in what is a ferociously cut-throat field, especially during competitions and calls for tender, which are the main routes into the market. More generally, in the fields of project management and urban planning, where architects have seen former prerogatives gradually chipped away (in a competitive context resulting from the emergence and proliferation of new players and professions: landscape architects, graphic designers, interior designers, etc.) (Chadoin 2007), the defence of an identity and a personal sensitivity are distinguishing arguments with regard to more technical professions such as engineers.

Observing the phenomena that unfold on the stage of urban production reveals a trend for projects that are ever more unique and a personalisation of constructive thinking and action. This pluralism of projects and individuals is very much in evidence and clearly more than a passing fad. And yet, despite the prominence of these observed phenomena, there is also a need to look behind the scenes and explore in detail the underlying processes that influence every aspect of the architecture and urban planning of this period. What will this examination of the underside of architecture reveal?

Underlying processes of normalisation

In reality, various dynamics of conformity play a key role in creating and defining the architectural and urbanistic “star system” of the last quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

First of all, an initial process of standardisation can be seen in all the projects by a given individual. In order to succeed in a highly competitive market, attract clients, be exportable and ensure a degree of longevity, stars must go beyond context and specificity and establish a trademark, a signature (Molina, 2010). Indeed, it is the assertion of characteristics that are both individual and recurrent that enables architects and planners to construct a self-image and a consistent output. In this way, the objective of creating unique projects enters to some extent into conflict with the idea of the *œuvre* of the great architect (“*œuvre*” is used here in the sense of the totality of an architect's output, as one might speak of the complete works of a writer or an artist). While projects and achievements must, of course, adapt to a site and a commission, they must also be part of a continuum and exhibit a recognisable hallmark that ties them to their author.

The second normalisation process concerns the representation of the profession. The “starchitects” themselves constitute norms and benchmarks. They participate in the structuring of the image of the profession and are both models *for* the profession and models *of* the profession. These “celebrity” figures constitute references within the profession, both for the other members of this elite and for more “ordinary” architects and students, for example. They are also reference figures outside the profession, for public- and private-sector clients, for rival professions, and also,

to a certain extent, for the general public – who, moreover, enable them to construct the public image of a profession and establish the figure of the architect.

The last few decades have also been characterised by increased competition and the quest for ever more unique cities. The stars of architecture and planning are exported and internationalised. The search for distinctiveness has led the great civic-builder mayors to use great architects and planners and their projects as “emblems” (Biau 1992). The relationship between “big” clients and elite contractors is built on a logic of mutual reinforcement: producing a great project mutually enhances the reputation and aura of both the client and the architect. However, beyond the distinction strategies of clients and contractors alike, it is clear today that the same architectural and urban signatures are found in every city around the world (Fox 2012). And every city, in its quest to be unique – just like every one of its national and international competitors – wants to have a building “signed” by Portzamparc, Nouvel, Piano or Hadid. Thus, paradoxically, what we have seen develop is a certain homogenisation and globalisation in terms of how we produce the city, and a trivialisation of brands and signatures.

Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between individual dramatisation and the reality of architectural and urbanistic work (Molina 2014). While it is true that, on the international scene, stars often have the stage to themselves, a closer examination of architectural and urbanistic production methods reveals the opposite dynamic at play, with more collaborative work, and an ever greater segmentation and division of tasks. Within the architectural practice, the great architect-cum-planner builds on the work of a whole team and a highly hierarchical organisation. In the shadow of the star, many “little hands” work away in the wings, contributing to the production of architecture and urban planning. In the field of project management, too, architects have had to share their territory with other professions, which calls for them to work increasingly in a collaborative, interprofessional way. The domain of urban planning appears to be just as pluralistic, and the great architects who have ventured down this road typically end up working in conjunction with many different groups and professions.

Finally, the cross-sectional analysis of the discourse of “starchitects” over this period reveals a fifth process of normalisation. Very often, the “I” hides a “we”, typically a group of fellow architects. In their discourse, our stars seek to promote a singular point of view. Their modes of thinking and action are presented as original and distinctive. However, a comparison of the discourse of various “starchitects” over the period in question reveals the extent to which the principles set out as the foundations of personal practices are in reality recurrent, with the result that they define the boundaries of what is in fact a shared constructive imagination. Accordingly, a number of platitudes and clichés can be identified: the virulent criticism of modernism, the dramatisation of constraints and the extant, the calling into question of a “solitary” object and claims of a contextual approach, condemnation of the *tabula rasa* approach and appeals to maintain a link with the past, and the assertion of a relational approach to inhabitants and users. What can be observed here is the return of “rules”, described by Françoise Choay as “standard procedures for the generation of built space”, which govern the production of architecture and urban design and constitute a “common teleological denominator” (1980). This phenomenon can be explained in particular by the challenges relating to the socio-historical positioning of a generation (Violeau 2005).

In conclusion, if at first glance the production of the city of the late 20th and early 21st centuries appears to be very much characterised by an individualisation of projects and an individuation of the creators of space, closer scrutiny of the underlying processes reveals that, paradoxically, urban production does not escape a certain normalisation and commodification of modes of action. We can therefore conclude that “starchitects” have ultimately *personalised* thinking and action regarding the city. Individually, they have embodied an approach that is shared collectively not just with their fellow architects, but also more generally with many different players and stakeholders in the fields of architecture and urban planning. In this way, a model – that of a form of architecture and urban planning that is concerned with the past, the context, residents and users – seems to have

been updated in the work of these individuals. Beyond these axioms, from a more pragmatic point of view, the “starchitect” personifies collective work, most notably that of the architectural practice, but also that of the various people and professions with whom they come into contact in the context of their collaborations. Architecture and urban planning therefore dance hesitantly between the strategy of distinctiveness and dynamics of conformity that inevitably define the contours of a collective urban production.

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