Globalization: architecture without craftsmanship

(globalization, abstraction, locality, representation process)

The contemporary environment is guided by the phenomenon of globalization. It creates opportunity for expanding and/or merging different places. Globalization also has its impact on the business sector, transforming local companies into multi-nationals. They are driven as a money-making machine, increasing their wealth and reputation by scale, speed and effectiveness. Architectural firms are beginning to brand their designs to create recognition and introduce a reliable reproducible image.

I argue that this ‘image’ allows capitalistic companies to brand themselves globally through a universal architecture to attract creative workers and consumers. By doing so, the contextual identity of an area will disappear, leaving cities as mere copies of each other. The abstraction results in a lack of addressing context beyond this ‘image’, leading to a uniform and banal architecture.

This paper will assume the architectural profession of being a global firm. The architectural profession will be tested to which degree it is effected by globalization according to the article of M.G. Harvey and D.A. Griffith. These points will then be confronted by the absence of context and architectural craftsmanship.

So how does globalization effect the profession of architecture and what does this mean for the contextual built environment?

![Image](http://newsroom.cisco.com/image/image_gallery?uuid=4e52eae8-c94f-4c1f-b806-fb88a2aa4b31&groupId=10157, accessed on 28-04-2014)
Introduction

In the contemporary society globalization gives us the opportunity to reach beyond geographical borders. It provides us with borderless integration of economy, technology and culture all over the world. Globalization is a process based phenomena that increases scale, speed, and effectiveness of social interactions across the geographical borders. Architectural firms can mediate as a chameleon between continents and foreign cultures, creating an opportunity for exchanging or merging specific location bounded habits. Yet, globalization makes architectural firms work like manufacturing companies with its own branding product. The levels of abstraction allow architects to distant themselves from reality when needed. This abstraction within the design process creates a style for globalization, which is too shallow for its unique position. A gap is created between the design process and the actual experience in the built environment.

Architectural Profession as a firm

The article of M.G. Harvey and D.A. Griffith describes the effect of globalization on the international firms and how it can respond to that. Within the text they mention several aspects which I summarized to these three points: timespan, visual culture and product branding. The three points represent the critical aspects within the design process and in the built environment. If we assume the architectural profession to be a firm, we can look how globalization effects it. Then we can address the absence of local context and architectural craftsmanship within these points due to the abstraction that is assigned with it.

Abstraction in architectural profession

An example of abstraction is the masterplan for Chicago South Works by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill Architects. The location South Works previously housed the U.S. Steel industry that is now flattened and adjacent to a black neighborhood within poverty. It appears that the masterplan by SOM architects disregards the unique situation. Although the plan incorporates location specific strategies and solutions, their representation shows us a top-down approached plan that meets the visuality of the contemporary global lifestyle standards, showing an even bigger wall between the planned and existing neighborhood. This need of addressing these global standards suggests that people are uniform and locations are the same.

The contemporary architect is not designing a particular architectural style (anymore), but we focus on addressing issues in terms of world view and methodology to create a base of understanding. We need to understand the contradiction within the future world of architecture. One is the advancement of globalization and the other is the need of reevaluating the disappearing existence of locality and place which provides human activity and culture. Many see this contradiction as a threat, yet these two extreme paradigms may prove to benefit from their differences. We can use this as

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1 Adam Lupel, "Regionalism and Globalization: Post-Nation or Extended Nation?" Polity Vol. 36, no. 2 (Januari 2004): 155.
Nagashima describes it ‘glocal’ approach, sublimating global and local to strengthen the awareness of place within a global view.

Tzonis and Lefaivre started with the term ‘Critical regionalism’ in their essay and were later followed by Frampton. “Critical regionalism was an ‘architecture of resistance’ seeking ‘to mediate the impact of universal civilization’ and ‘to reflect and serve the limited constituencies’ in which it was grounded.”3 Critical regionalism was difficult to define for it has no stylistic unity, it was a process or method rather than a product, and it was specified to the individual projects. Frampton argues that regionalism was a powerful medium of resisting the dehumanizing effect of placeless and consumption-driven ‘universal Megapolis’.4 Mumford wrote that regionalism is not about using local materials or copying historical architectural forms, it’s about meeting the conditions of the life of the local and creating a home-like environment.5 Paul Ricoeur’s essay “Universal Civilization and National Cultures.” of 1955 had warned about the effect of universal civilization on national culture. He claimed that this phenomena will slowly destroy, not only traditional cultures, but also the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind.6

We should value the specific properties of an area as being a unique individual. It inspires creativity by providing recognition, safety, and diversity. This identity is linked to our memory and goes beyond mere imaging. In his article, Richard Florida states that cities have a role of being incubators for creativity, innovation, and new industries. The new working class locates itself at specific places for two reasons; economic and lifestyle. “What they look for in communities ... the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people.”7 People aren’t autonomous and need to be able to respond to their own environmental preferences, they want to be able to change their scenery. Globalization gives us the easy access to “foreign” places with its exotic culture. However this generic approach within architecture does not encourage that notion of travel. I therefore argue the fact that globalization does not necessary need translation within architecture.

**Timespan**

When we consider the notion of time, we must define two timespans of a product. The first is the time a company has to construct their product and the second is the lifespan of the product, and even more important the change of the product within the timespan. Our contemporary society asks for a continuous flow of products. The products are not used for functional purposes, but are stylistic objects. They are constructed within a tight timespan, which lead to small or no technological changes. The question is how much quality can these short-lived product provide us, is it a proud creation or a disposable child?

The second notion of timespan relates to the issue of ‘becoming’. In our society of consumerism, we tend to buy something new when the quality (or appearance) of our product changed from how we

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4 Eggener, “Placing Resistance:” 228-229.


bought it. We forget that the change itself may give even more quality to an object which was nothing more than a standard copy.

The same two things happens within the discipline of architecture. Building become disposable short-lived fashion objects. They are to be constructed within a decade and is to be a finished object. Any visual change is undesired for it resembles the old and outdated. We forget that cities like Venice or Rome took centuries to develop and community got formed in a process of trial and error. In the contemporary environment we see community as a finished and uniform object to design for. Within a short period of time, we create a ‘finished’ building in which development is not foreseen. These instant buildings function independently from their environment, resulting into ruptured cities. We forget the changing condition of a building over time. A building is not to be seen as a disposable object for its attitude within the built environment is to complex. A building and the interacting community should be seen as ‘becoming’. One building is a small part within centuries of changed built environment. “The creation of authentic community is not an automatic result of the globalization process.” It is a development, a continues change, of the society within the built environment, before, during, and after the one particular building.

Visual culture

As architecture is working within the global production stream it’s working as a well-oiled machine. The competitive attitude towards their representation requires effectiveness, which means speed and looks. Within this digital era, computer drawings and renderings are the most liable option to do so. The state of the art on the visual culture can be described as being bombarded by images. The effectiveness of images goes beyond any other medium in spreading information, of making an impact, of expressing oneself, or influencing others. The downside to this is the fact that architects tend to forget that buildings address more than one sense. They focus too must on the visual aspect of the building, even misleading their clients and themselves in the process, that they forget the true craftsmanship that was once their profession.

The fear on the effect of images increases and its flow is seen as threat to the traditional forms of learning. Images convey authority, giving them more power than its actual content. Images misleads us, for visual behavior is not about the objects we see, it includes a social agent and is part of a set of social and cultures uses. Culture, or even environment for that matter, is not purely visual. It’s about the relationship between seeing and understanding it as a part of the whole.

The design is presented as precise and realistic, but its representation is displayed as a utopian realism. As place where the building is in its fullest glory, the sun always shines and the people live

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9 Jerde, "Visceral Reality.", 308.

10 Karin Becker, "Where is Visual Culture in Contemporary Theories of Media and Communication?” NORDICOM Review Vol. 25, no. 1/2 (September 2004): 149.

11 Karin Becker, "Where is Visual Culture in Contemporary Theories of Media and Communication?” 149,151.
their perfect happily lifes. “Bad weather, local identities, the distinctiveness of culture or climate are given no expression by this new global convention.”

A second issue is the level of abstraction within the design process. In the contemporary process scale models get more often replaced with the computerized models. Creating an uncontrolled reversal of designing, going from general to specific. The traditional scale model had no detail, representing only the information needed in that stage of the design.

The computer screen makes it difficult to apprehend the scale of the building and designed environment. This could be an explanation for banal architecture of today. At the same time the system of the drawing program asked for a detail precision that is not relevant, maybe even confusion. Designing certain details now and forgetting the adjustments in a later stage results in a unrefined building. The logical composition craftsmanship has “shifted to the trade in images on the market of urban seduction.”

Looking at the message of images as described by Becker, we are part of brainwashing the client and the community, in order to win the competition. This will only result in mixed or negative feelings towards the building when it is not able to represent this image in real life. We are becoming salesmen instead craftsmen. We forget that there are different cultures, each with distinctive positive and negative aspects which can both be used as designable qualities. Or have we forgotten the smell of the first rainfall in the forests, or the warm and cozy feeling when we enter our home after playing in the snow outside for too long. These too are qualities that defines the built environment, although we don’t design it ourselves, we do condition where and when its transition starts and ends. Although we can hardly explain this to our client, that doesn’t mean that we also must forget about it. We are professionals, we don’t just check the boxes, we make them.

Product branding

Branding plays a critical role when positioning your firm on a global market. It works as advertisement and show the reliability of your design. Clients know what they can aspect for there are similar references. The success of branding is a coherence on international level.

The shift of the architectural practice against ornamentation and (fascist-)monumentality created an architecture in which the distinction between different functioned building became unclear. No ornamentation or iconography was used, only the volumetric differences were visible.

As a reaction to this uncertainty, the contemporary architecture demanded a suitable expression of the created volume. The expression is so banal that they weren’t resembling the functionality of the building, but conveyed the impression that they are truly exceptional buildings. These individual

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identities resulted, against their intention, in the creation of global uniformity. Their detachment from the local circumstances unified them as one. They become a brand instead of a conditional built environment. Architecture is part of the city life and will never be an independent product, and yet we treat it as such. Providing architecture as an aesthetic product does not represent reliability. Reliable architecture starts with understanding the elements needed for the composition of a design. Using local qualities could only be beneficial when it includes more than mere visual aspects.

Conclusion

Globalization is a phenomenon which is neither good or bad, it is an evolutionary process. Architecture is able to work within this phenomenon, but architects need to understand the consequences of blindly following the process it’s carrying. The effects of globalization on speed, effective behavior, and a visual minded culture shifts the architectural profession towards an abstraction that we can’t afford.

We construct objects that could remain on the built surface for at least fifty years and yet we think can design its qualities within a compression timespan. We seduce people (and eventually ourselves) with climaxed pictures, knowing this is not the reality. We allow ourselves to generalize culture and community into one standardized lifestyle. We disassemble the different culture, religion and the local public sphere from the atmosphere and put their unique values out of the equation. Our generic approach asks for new argumentation to justify our designs. Provoking facades or utopian visions seduces our senses into thinking this is truly architecture. These new argumentation for architecture are connected within the visual culture of the contemporary society. They strive for the picture perfect and any change of that image is undesired. Real life conditions, such as aging and physical influences, do not exist within our new culture and needs to be disregarded.

We forget that our design is intertwined with the ever changing community and the specific existing built environment. Our practice of architecture goes beyond mere copying materials or obvious cultural activities, but includes understanding the elements behind the existing situation and the aspect time. We can choose to preserve or react upon it, but we cannot ignore it for it will lead to ‘ruptured’ and instant cities. We are not artists or product designers, we are condition makers and are not allowed to stay on an abstract level.

Bibliography


THESIS REFLECTION

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: Gerald Grootelaar
Student Number: 4185439
Address: Rotterdamseweg 166
Postal Code: 2628 AR Delft
E-mail address: g.g.j.f.grootelaar@tudelft.nl

STUDIO

Theme: Usage of catalyst buildings as a border for the preservation of spatial identity
Teachers: Olindo Caso, Hubert van der Meel
Title: Breaching the borders: creating a place of gathering between historic walls
The Graduation Studio of Complex Projects deals with the design of an emptied pre-industrial site in South Chicago. The 2.4 sq. km. site of the former U.S. Steel's South Works is located 15 miles south of the center of Chicago and bounded by the Calumet River on the south and Lake Michigan on the east. The adjacent neighborhood on the opposite side of the Lakeshore Drive was once filled with different immigrants who worked at the factory. After the closure of the factory in 1992, the site became inactive and the adjacent neighborhood started to decay due to lack of programmatic and spatial diversity. Several proposals have been made during the years and almost the whole area was emptied. The most recent development was Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). Yet, only the first phase next to the site is planned for development. The economic crisis, the bad local conditions and the overwhelming centrality of Chicago makes the development of this area nearly impossible.

Aspect 1: the relationship between research and design

The first semester of the studio (MSc 3) focuses on creating a framework for the design process in the second semester (MSc 4). MSc 3 starts off with an extensive research into the three subjects of eco-logic, identity and shrinking. With the general research of Chicago, made by the previous semester students, we were able to go into specific characteristics of the South Works area. This allowed us to get insight into how South Works functions and where the threats and opportunities lies. The trip to Chicago gave us an additional insight into the unbalanced political and economic structure between north and south Chicago. It also showed the beauty of a untamed geographical landscape, which is a unprecedented feature in Chicago on such a big scale. The complementary trip to Detroit, showed me the beauty of gracefully aged buildings and about the active involvement of the community within poor conditions. After the research we made a manifesto and masterplan that focuses on improving the existing spatial qualities and designing a complimentary new spatial diversity. Looking at spatial improvements instead of a programmatic infill allows conditions to change in future reference without disassembling the whole principle of the masterplan.

MSc 4 is about designing an individual part, a fragment and a building, that tests the conditions stated in the masterplan. The building will focus on different socio-geographical levels that the chosen location has to offer. The biggest connection between the building and the research is in identifying and designing the unique spatial spaces. The building will be one of first developed elements on the site and therefor needs to function as a catalyst.

Aspect 2: the relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework (location/object)

Complex Projects doesn’t refer to the complexity of a location or a programmatic infill. It refers to finding a suitable solution for a project with a lot of undefined parameters. The complexity lies in defining your framework within these numerous possibilities. The conventional masterplanning ask for a top-down approach, for which there is no economic buffer and introduces no social interaction from the new or the adjacent neighborhood. Boosting existing and creating new spatial identities can be suitable locations for programmatic catalysts. The research question is: How can borders be used to create a catalyst while maintaining or increasing the identity of the surrounding spaces. We studied the adjacent neighborhoods spatial complexity and the effects of specific elements on the site. The plans main focus is maximizing existing qualities, especially those towards the water, and introducing new one where needed. As an example of an introduced qualities is a diagonal border over the whole site. The ‘spine’ allows for a different typological approach on either side, splitting the area towards the city or the water. This phenomenon allows the spine to function as a new spatial diversity, and increases the desirability in a usually rather plain spatial lot within the site.
Aspect 3: the relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student in this framework

The research conducted in MSc 3, and by the previous graduate students, gave a broad insight into the existing conditions of Chicago and South Works. The use of literature and reference studies allowed for a framework upon which a rather phenomenological process was based. The case studies gives knowledge about the considerations when designing in an intuitive manner. By analyzing case studies with similar spatial effects, an understanding of the necessary elements revealed themselves. Urban parameters such as physical and visual distances, densities and border conditions provide manipulation of the area, relative to the achievement of a certain spatial atmosphere. Consequently, the building will function as such a border within an intersection of two spatial entities and may therefor function as not only a spatial, but also a programmatic catalyst. The aim of the project is to create an creative atmosphere with the potential of becoming a catalyst by using the existing landscape as a clashing framework.

Aspect 4: the relationship between the project and the wider social context

The project questions the top-down vs. the bottom-up approach within conventional masterplanning. In a time of crisis, creative entrepreneurship stimulate the involvement of the community for they are part of the creation. The project focusses on the creation of new products by giving the people access to new technologies and facilities. The projects merges production space and public space as an indicator for interaction between maker and user. By opening up a hidden sequence of working plays with the visitors curiosity, turning passive observers intro active users. The building should function as one of the first catalysts to stimulate future development and uses the adjacent neighborhood as potential first actors. Moreover, the project focusses on what the site is and wants to be, instead of what it should be. The project doesn't focus on complex future scenarios, but tries to understand and boost existing qualities as a basic framework for future modification. The designed framework will condition the surrounding areas, allowing them to be claimable spaces instead of pre-designed sterile objects.