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Architects and Global Marketing – Buying and Selling in China

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the phenomenon of world-famous architects in the neoliberal age and their propagation within the Chinese market, focusing on the practice of Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG). This essay seeks to examine the mechanisms behind BIG's global stardom. It outlines BIG's rise to fame and entry into the Chinese architectural market. Taking the case of the Danish Pavilion, it then analyses specific marketing strategies BIG have adopted in advertising the Pavilion to Chinese audiences. It then discusses China's peculiar market condition and extrapolates BIG's common strategies for brand building. The essay argues that BIG's success is underpinned by the use of visual communication for self-promotion, which appeals to wider audiences. Their success is also a testimony of pervasive consumerism. However, the Danish Pavilion does relate to history, culture, or society. The phenomenon of BIG's architectural stardom is also worrying for the architecture industry and education, which is remains historically embedded in the notion of the singular author and egocentricism.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Starchitect, Consumerism, Architecture Practice, Bjarke Ingels

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1. Introduction

This essay discusses the phenomenon of world-famous architects in the neoliberal age and their propagation within the Chinese market, focusing on the practice of Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG). With the irreversible trend of globalization since Deng Xiaoping-led Communist Party economic reforms in 1978, China has stepped into the age of neoliberalism by opening itself up to the global market. Since then, there are increasing numbers of foreign practices working in architecture. Because the neoliberal market guarantees private property rights and facilitates free market and free trading [1], some architects have developed their architectural brand for better advertising. In recent years, some notable practices who have done this include Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) and BIG. Their stardom has stirred heated debate in academia, and Bjarke Ingels is, as a consequence, a controversial

figure [2–4]. Corporate architectural marketing strategies are a way to win audiences and commissions, but also can sometimes lead to a superficial interpretation of context or site. Nonetheless, BIG has succeeded in entering into the Chinese market with their Danish Pavilion entry (2010). This essay seeks to clarify the reason/s for BIG's global stardom. It begins by discussing the relationship between neoliberalism and the market. Then it outlines BIG's rise to fame and entry into the Chinese architectural market. Taking the case of the Danish Pavilion, it then analyses the specific marketing strategies BIG have adopted in advertising the Pavilion to Chinese audiences. The essay then analyses and compares the advertising method of the Danish Pavilion to other BIG designs, from which it extrapolates common strategies of brand building. The concluding discussion summarises the relationship between BIG's corporate architectural branding tools and the characteristics of neoliberal market.

2. The Relationship between Neoliberalism and the Market

According to David Harvey [1], neoliberalism implies a social provision that guarantees entrepreneurial freedoms of the individual, and which is characterized by "strong private property rights, free market, and free trade." In other words, the market substitutes the role of the State. Neoliberalism's political environment encourages freedom of the individual to participate fully in economic activities. There is a preference for more frequent and a higher range of market transactions [1]. The ways of trading have changed, and through individual competition, these changes permeate every aspect of modern life. These may include acquisition of market information, marketing strategies, reallocation of labor through out-sourcing and even the form of the commodity produced and sold in the market. In architecture, these changes may best be demonstrated by what is called 'OMA-ification' [3]. The term got its name from OMA - an architecture company co-founded by Rem Koolhaas. Koolhaas introduced 'brute force' into architecture practice - which means making as many models and proposals possible and opting for the best through a legendary 24-7 office work culture. This model of architectural production, which comes from the long-time working culture nurtured in the studio in architectural schools, has now become the standard working environment for large architecture firms [3]. Concurrently, the Bilbao Effect could also explain the making of the modern architecture market. Iconic buildings designed by world-famous architects – Frank Gehry for example – stimulate the local and national economy [3]. Thus, the starchitect (or star architect) becomes a pop-intellectual/practitioner. Each

starchitect represents a personal style. Thus personality itself becomes the product. This phenomenon of architectural stardom, as elucidated by Troiani [4], is made into capital by the media, and identity is assigned to the work as a form of cultural capital and branded talent. Similarly, William Richard [5] claims that psychological aspects play a big part of the cultural production of popular discourse. Therefore, the making of the current architectural market depends not only on the merit of the building but also on the accompanying branding and marketing strategies.

3. BIG's Rise to Fame

BIG's marketing capability has been crucial to raising its international profile. The founder, Bjarke Ingels, worked four years for OMA before he set up his own company in 2006. As a second generations of the "Koolhaasian" school [6], or 'Baby Rems' [7], Ingels adopts an economically and politically pragmatist attitude and has a talent for making his projects understandable and consensual. Different from Koolhaas, who omitted his name when setting up OMA, Ingels embraced the idea of starchitect and founded his company using his name. The company earned its fame in 2009 with the biography *Yes is More* [8]. Notably, it is a comic strip that uses images as the primary visual communication tool, similar to his mentor Rem Koolhaas when he published *S, M, L, XL* [9]. In a contemporary society that is image-driven, architecture depends on the concepts of "advertising, consuming and commercializing" [10]. In this way, Ingels appeals to a broader range of audience by using a 'flow of images' [11].

In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida [12] states that people who belong to the creative class share common characteristics, namely individuality, meritocracy, diversity, and openness. By definition, the creative class represents the thought leadership in modern society and produces designs that are useful and readily transferable. These all might apply to Ingels, who has a talent for self-promotion and embraces the changeful social environment.

Primarily, Ingels has a brilliant skill for opting for the best mode to articulate his ideas. For instance, he is known for producing 'paradoxical catchphrases' [13], such as 'practical poetry', 'pragmatic utopia', and 'hedonistic sustainability'. When Ingels presents his projects, his language is rich in complex jargon. For example, to describe the ornamental façade of Arlanda Hotel, Ingels invents five different forms of jargon — 'facelift', 'cosmetic variation', 'catchy headpiece', 'royal face treatment' and 'eye-catching appendage' [10]. Secondly, Ingels, as well as BIG, is adept with image-driven advertising. Following the comic strip *Yes is More* [8], Ingels has further developed his visual

dialogue through his pure, eye-catching architectural miniature diagrams. At the same time, for each of his projects, there is a gimmicky signature profile that holds appeal in photographs on Instagram [3] to appeal to a wider audience. Thirdly, Ingels is well versed in selling sustainability. BIG's latest publication *Hot to Cold* (2015) [14] begins by 'Engineering without Engines', a manifesto that advocates designing climate-driven, energy-self-sufficient buildings. By insisting there is a conviction to take care of the natural environment, BIG steers the direction towards a new trend for green-consumption [15]. Fourthly, Ingels adopts the spirit of popular culture. To quote Davidson [16] "[Ingels's] design discussions are like flurries of pop culture reference". During one discussion, Ingels refers to the Super Bowl Half-Time show by Lady Gaga, and from her wire performance installations, he proposes designing a similar invisible conceptual framework. Lastly, Ingels embraces the notion of populism [16]. In his biography *Yes is More* [8], Ingels aligns himself within the genealogy of world-famous architects in the past, whom all have a slogan-like architectural manifesto, and also the former US President, Barack Obama. Additionally, in an interview with *VOLUME* magazine [18], Ingels indicates that architecture is there to tackle political issues. For example, to design a park in a sensitive political neighborhood in Mjolnerpar, Ingels takes initiatives from the residents. He, therefore, advocates that a public procedure is transformed into the proactive proposition. Hence, this is a park by the people and for the people [17]. By asserting himself as being of and for the people Ingels gains "absolute power with the populist disguise"[2]. His de-politicization of his designs also functions as a mainstream marketing tool [4]. In all, in his extraordinary ability to say yes to almost everyone and everything, Ingels can be seen to both downplay and represent the neoliberal values of the laissez-faire creative class.

4. BIG in China

The Chinese market has particular conditions that differentiate itself from the west. The rise of big Chinese cities since the 1990s is attributed to the strong intervention of the government [18]. They attach a lot to the visual growth of the city and are alertly aware of the symbolic value of architecture [19]. As a way to build an international superpower image, there has been and remains a growing trend for commissioning western starchitects. This preference for western brand has left an impact on private companies, then followed by individuals. In China, it is a commonly shared belief by the people that western brands represent global fame, good quality and superior technology [20]. In the collective imagination of Chinese people, icon buildings act

like bridges connecting globalizing cities in all over the world [21]. The contemporary story of world-famous architects in China, arguably began in 2002 with Koolhaas's CCTV headquarters in Beijing which highlights China's superpower status [19].

Unlike Koolhaas, BIG's debut in China with a much smaller building - the commission of the Danish Pavilion in Shanghai 2010 EXPO. The pavilion exemplifies Ingels's iconic branding strategy. It is a Mobius Swirled structure of two floors, with the ground floor including a harbor pool and the first floor incorporating a bicycle lane. Anna Klingmann claims in her book *Brandscape* [22] that nowadays what matters in a trading process is not the product or service per se, but the appended experiences that allude to an ideal lifestyle. In this regard, the harbor pool and the bike lane are representative of city life in Copenhagen - a touristic panorama which middle and upper-class Chinese would possibly enjoy. The lifestyle-oriented program is crucial in the making of staged environments that connect visitors in a personal and memorable experience. Also, Ingels moved the Little Mermaid from Copenhagen to Shanghai Danish Pavilion, which caused substantial political debate in Denmark on national identity. The method that Ingels adopts is cultural flattening and irreverence for the authority of serious architecture. This is a basic technique of pop culture [23]. Moreover, in response to his nationalist critics in Denmark, Ingels collaborated with Chinese pop artist Ai Weiwei, to place a screen at Copenhagen harbor that live streamed the little mermaid in the Danish Pavilion. He thus manages to converge the dialogue of politics and architecture by diluting social differences, absorbing everything into a sales pitch. Additionally, in his publication *Hot to Cold* [14], Ingels firstly introduces 'hedonistic sustainability'. This new sustainability requires no personal sacrifice and is hedonistic in both individual and social perspective. A developed country like China has strong social pressure to follow the trajectory predetermined by the ideology of consumerism [15], while people like Ingels are steering the needs of people in a new direction of green-consumption. With its experience economy, reference to pop culture and selling of sustainability, the Danish Pavilion concludes the marketing strategies that could prevail in any cultural context, since consumerism ensures illusions of happiness, and it excludes no one and is therefore democratic [15]. With the never-ending pursuit of happiness, consumerism and its tacticians are continuously gaining popularities.

5. Discussion

Neoliberalism encourages the individual to take the initiative to create his or her wealth. Because of this, 'economic man' today assures that everything is for sale [4].

It is essential to maintain an image that is eye-catching and popular to all in order to facilitate trading and maximize profit. This brand-building culture initiates image-driven communication in the consumerist world. Alternatively, regarding architecture, the starchitect has standardized the norm of pervasive image culture. As an exemplar of this era, Ingels hedonistically asserts himself as an adherent of pop culture and further develops his image of a populist. Through various image-building strategies and his talent for articulate verbiage, Ingels seemingly downplays the consumerist world. With this in mind, it appears hard to foresee whether there is a limit to the neoliberalism.

Shenzhen might serve as an example to testify the impact of neoliberalism. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping set it as a Special Economic Zone based on low-tax policy, cheap and abundant labor and its foreign-oriented industrial economy. In 1997, Koolhaas referred to the Pearl River Delta as the fastest-growing economic region, where there will be plenty of *tabula rasa* taking place [24]. However, after one and a half decades, in 2012, Koolhaas comments, this is a unique city, curiously, which has no physical uniqueness at all. This generic image may as well apply to BIG's projects, their omnipresence somehow indicates a sort of absence in the end [3], since unique places had lost their complex meanings when their history has been erased for a *tabula rasa*.

Ignoring the past has been the typical case for post-modernist Chinese cities, where no cultural, social or historical context was taken into consideration during the process of making the city. This renders the city vulnerable to any established system to propagate its belief in large scaleness- be it capitalism; be it neoliberalism; be it consumerism. Ironically enough, it was Koolhaas who coined this type of building as 'Junkspace' [25]. In this lengthy, trashy and ceaseless discourse, he features the modern spaces as 'infrastructure of seamlessness', 'hierarchy-accumulation' and a one of 'continuity'. They are sheltered seamless interior spaces, equipped with the HVAC system that indulge people with consumerism. 'More and more, more is more.' The propagation is pervasive. In a typical neoliberal Chinese city like Shenzhen, skyscrapers smother the skyline, which constitute the new banality of the cityscape. In an article named "The Evil of Banality and How Architects Can Fight it" by Aaron Betsky [26] assimilates the bland cityscape to the egocentric nature of architectural education. Likewise, Franco Ghilardi [4] observes that new generations of architects are getting famous when they are students, even before graduation since they are preoccupied with selling themselves on social media. The premature fame may occur because the 'role models' of our time are advertising this self-selling ethos to younger generations and support and promote consumerism as a beacon for a successful career. This 'aesthetic elitism' [27] is eradicating the industry culture, which was about "collaboration, open-source

networking, non-hierarchical practices, entrepreneurialism, streamlined production and profit-sharing".

Each new movement in architecture is based on a change in the fundamental understanding of the physical surrounding [23]. Ingels aligns himself with the great architects by making slogans like 'Yes is More'. However, different from the precedent slogans such as 'Less is More' by Ludwign Mies van der Rohe and *'Less is a bore'* by Robert Venturi, the latter which argues for architecture styles incorporating history, Ingels advocates a management strategy that assures his personal image of success in the consumerist world. As an adherent of pop culture, Ingels is successful in creating playful commentaries. Nevertheless, he is not as successful in establishing a new basis for the design. Mark Rothko refers Pop Art to "...tons of verbiage, activity and consumption" [28]. Ingels may as well be one of the innocent accomplices in indoctrinating people into the meaning of life being consumerism. Whatever the truth may be, the neoliberal market provides an environment for free speech, and it remains to be discussed whether this condition is better for the future of the architecture industry. A suggested direction for further discussion could be how people can seek genuine alternatives to neoliberal marketing strategies, and preserve the complex and contradictory nature of regional architecture.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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