

Architecture Marketing: At What Cost?

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Marketing companies and publicists working for architects have certainly adapted to increasingly hard-nosed commercial trends. They have embraced, for example, the latest trade shows, no matter how brash, along with high-profile international property conferences and moneymaking awards events (with apparent relish), hoping to place their clients in front of new, and ever more commercial, audiences.

But marketing folk sell only what they know from their own experience – experience that may or may not be relevant to architectural practice. If they do not have an intuitive or trained eye for architecture itself, or a feel for its rightful place in our culture, they can never produce a worthwhile strategy for ensuring its true relevance in society. Over the years, I have noticed that many practices focus so heavily on a bread and butter marketing approach, that they find it difficult to even think about jam, the special ingredient, that is, that turns everyday building projects into the art and science of architecture.

The fact is that the rules of the corporate world seldom apply to buildings that are, or should be, of real cultural value. Some corporate buildings do embody such value, yet these – like Mies van der Rohe's justly celebrated Seagram Building on New York's Park Avenue – have been conceived from ideas and values that go far beyond "branding" and "bottom line" commerce. The buildings that compel us to think about architecture as embodiments of the ideals of an era or social phenomenon, from cathedrals and civic libraries to munificent corporate headquarters and intelligent skyscrapers, are works of art – not machines purely for making money. Promoting architecture should be, I think, more the job of what I might call a "cultural attaché" rather than an account director. This is a role that, at its best, requires editorial and curatorial skills together with visual sophistication.

I admire practices that stick to their vision of what good architecture should be and quietly refuse to lower professional, and design, standards in the hope of appealing to the press and potential clients. They may be called the "high priests" or "prima donnas" of the profession, yet their unremittingly high standards hold them firmly above the rest.

Even so, many PRs will tell such architects that they are somehow naive: they should be thinking of events, like the international property shows, where the big spenders are supposedly looking to invest in the best design. They say: "it's all very nice being in the likes of Casabella, but it doesn't get your clients anywhere". But, architects who do get their work published in highly-regarded publications are often those who have adopted a more considered approach to their PR, helping them to win reputation – and the jobs that so many in the profession covet. If architects play their cards more subtly, and aim high in terms of design, developers may well run after them with good money – and not vice versa. I always tell clients that it is easier to dilute what they do in the eyes of the press and potential clients, but if they lack a position of artistic and intellectual credibility, ultimately no amount of industry awards and industry events will prop them up. The challenge today is: how to communicate intelligent design ideas effectively?

Architects need to escape the job-pitching mentality and engage instead with an altogether bigger picture of design issues in public. Architects share and debate many intelligent and valuable ideas among themselves, and it is these ideas, rather than their "brands" or marketing strategies, that should see the light of day in public. This is where blogs, comment pieces and social media can be highly effective tools. Too often these are used as a very narrow medium for self-promotion; project-based books that look and read like catalogues or corporate brochures also fail to inspire.

The profession could raise its image by whole-heartedly embracing the very things it ought to be doing well. Architects should occupy offices, for example, that they are proud of in terms of design. Architecture is an inherently visual medium, and so architects should produce the best possible visuals of their work – be it CGIs, sketches or models. They should work with photographers capable of catching and expressing the essence of their work. They should increasingly look at film. The right presentation tools need to convey a practice's true strengths.

Of course, architecture is also a medium embracing a huge range of ideas, including issues concerning global threats to our well-being. It is only by investing in compelling presentation materials that such wide-ranging interests can be brought to public attention – and potential clients, too. This may all seem obvious but visitors to architects' studios are often disappointed at the lack of stimulating visuals on offer – particularly when it comes to showing current projects.

In the increasingly crude, commercialised communication of architecture in recent years, the very essence – the poetry or meaning of buildings – has been little expressed, marketed, and much less celebrated. However, the so-called "star architects" – such as Rem Koolhaas, Herzog de Meuron, and David Chipperfield

have achieved this marriage between medium and message.

Their "brand" is their design talent, idealism and visual sensibility – not a corporate-style or "brand" meant to appeal to developers and commercial clients.

I would encourage young architects to think carefully about how they wish to be seen, and whom they want to be associated with both professionally, through the media, and as clients, as they build up their studios and portfolios. The strength of a practice's early ideas, and the opportunity to build on these for the future, are what really matters; ultimately, these are what they will be judged by.

Architects who understand this, and use every visual medium at their disposal to transmit their intellectual and cultural stance, as well as their practical skills, will always be – even in an increasingly ruthless commercial global economy – a long way ahead of the pack. This is provided, of course, that they are also blessed with something no amount of publicity can buy: talent.

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