

THE STUPID STARCHITECT DEBATE



“Here’s to the demise of Starchitecture!” wrote Beverly Willis, in [The New York Times](#) recently. Willis, through her foundation, has done much to promote the value of architecture. But like many critics of celebrity architecture, she gets it wrong: “In my 55-plus years of practice and involvement in architecture, I have witnessed the birth and — what I hope will soon be — the demise of the star architect.”

The last few years has seen the rise of the snarky, patronizing term “starchitect,” (a term I refuse to use outside this context, much to the annoyance of editors seeking click-bait). But big-name architects creating spectacular, expensive buildings that from time to time prove to be white elephants have always been with us. Think Greek temples, Hindu Palaces, Chinese gardens, and monumental Washington, DC.

The *Times* clearly struck a nerve by running a [starchitecture story](#) of utter laziness by author and emeritus professor Witold Rybczynski. That story led to a “[Room for Debate](#)” forum offering a variety of solicited points of view, and

another more recent forum in which the Times asked readers to respond to a thoughtful [letter](#) by Peggy Deamer, an architect (and friend) who teaches at Yale.

WHINING ABOUT CELEBRITY ARCHITECTURE

I have written a great deal about celebrity architects as well as practitioners of what Rybczynski calls “locatecture.” He names no architects that stick to their own city, however, which says to me he doesn’t really care about the kind of practitioner he claims to celebrate. He’d rather just complain about flashy architecture than deeply examine it. I find this typical of celebrity-architecture skepticism.

Architecture, Rybczynski writes, “is a social art, rather than a personal one, a reflection of a society and its values rather than a medium of individual expression. So it’s a problem when the prevailing trend is one of franchises, particularly those of the globe-trotters: Renzo, Rem, Zaha and Frank.”

Wrong, wrong and wrong. Architecture is a *public* art. No architect can build a spectacular museum, concert hall, or skyscraper without a client willing to underwrite it, a city willing to permit it, and a public that wants it. It’s often a very complicated dance; the Disney Concert Hall Rybczynski admires (as do I) overcame 17 years of cost overruns, funding woes, political difficulties, and redesigns. In so-called progressive cities like Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle, unique architectural expression rarely survives an endless public process that tries (impossibly) to please everybody. These cities have mostly driven out homegrown talent because they are never hired.



Architecture can be a social art, but that means society must embrace it, commission it, and build it. In the U.S., however, private interests build most buildings, and they mostly choose to build strip malls, identical office parks, and asphalt-wrapped “garden” apartments. We could say architecture is a social art in America if we built schools that did not look like warehouses, government buildings that express community values rather than distinguishing themselves only for penny-pinching, and nurtured great public places and spaces. Celebrity architects did not create these enervating cityscapes. Dull architects did them because clients won’t commit to better, and communities accept the junkscapes they are handed.



Sorry, Witold, architecture is a medium of individual expression. Individual talent, whether local or global, sees the uniqueness in circumstances that architecture can express. Individual talent, not the big faceless, yet prolific HOKs or AECOMs advance the state of the art, whether in amenable energy efficiency or theatrical expression. Yet those big firms are designing cities to house millions around the world. Can they possibly be humane? *That* is one of the big questions of our time, not whether you like Thom’s or Richard’s style. Rybczynski makes a specious comparison of Moshe Safdie’s Yad Vashem museum, in Israel, as “integrated” versus the same architect’s Marina Bay Sands megaproject in Singapore, which he calls “theatrical.” In both cases Safdie is about as subtle as a bulldozer, but also savvy. A museum devoted to the Holocaust deserves a big affirming gesture, while Singapore sought an iconic form for its skyline, and got it in the form of three giant towers surmounted by a park that’s shaped like a surfboard. Such completely different intentions speak not at all to Rybczynski’s argument. Both clients got exactly what they sought.

In Seattle, where I grew up, local architects are timid, and outsiders have often brought welcome energy. Rem Koolhaas and his Dutch firm OMA created a widely admired public library that’s a magnet amid downtown towers

as dull as the cloudy skies. The New York firm Weiss/Manfredi designed the stunning Olympic Sculpture Park, a composition as locally sensitive as anyone could hope.

BASKING IN THE BRAND-NAME GLOW

Celebrity architecture is not a franchise (McDonalds is a franchise), but *branding*. Branding is repellently ubiquitous, and it is pure romanticism to think architecture can escape a trend that so powerfully guides spending. A friend became a museum director in part because building a new building was part of the job. I thought he would bring up an energetic young local talent, but he ended up with an international big name because, he said, only the stars would bring in the donors. That's sad, but emblematic of an era when private wealth builds the cultural facilities the public won't pay for. That's why celebrity architects are brands—a title none of them sought, though all are adept at exploiting. Even wealthy, sophisticated trustees like to bask in the glow of a name that's got cachet, rather than look hard for someone with obvious talent but who is not well known.

Rybczynski writes that architecture should be “a reflection of a society and its values.” That's inevitable. Ours is a society of great, concentrated wealth, and wealth will build what it wants. That wealth is sometimes devoted to creating great public buildings and places, like Millennium Park in Chicago, where international-standard art, architecture, and landscape architecture combine in a way that's unique and invites everyone.



But America builds little housing for those who can't afford it—and expecting charity to do it is ignorant and naive. It largely fails to engage with architecture adapted to climate change. America builds investment-repelling highways instead of layered mobility infrastructure that is community friendly and meets today's needs (like the London's Kings Cross project that avoids a maze of passages below through bravura engineering).

NURTURING A SENSITIVITY TO PLACE

Rybczynski is right about our need to create alternatives to the cycling of the same two dozen names through every prominent project in every city. In Europe that's done through mandatory design competitions for even small public projects (like libraries) that can help rising talents gain experience. We can't have "locatect's" unless communities hire them. Most American architects of talent must work nationally and internationally to survive.

If not big-name designers, who? Some architects fly below the celebrity radar but embody truly public values and local sensitivity. I'm a fan of Ennead (formerly the Polshek Partnership), of New York; Bohlin Cywinski Jackson (known as Apple store architects, but also sensitive designers of houses and academic buildings); BNIM, of Kansas City (pioneers of green architecture); and Lake/Flato, a truly regional firm that practically owns Texas talentwise, even though it is from San Antonio rather than Houston, Dallas, or Austin.

To be honest, these firms are not always bold enough. They can be a little bit too comfortable. So why are these not household names? Because we like urban spectacle, theatricality, expressiveness, and grand gestures. And we like to argue about style and the streetscape.

What to do? Look, experience, and think about innovative, esthetically demanding architecture. Don't dismiss by drive-by or by looking at pictures. If you like local talent that's sensitive to circumstances—that thinks about climate, setting, and history—find them. Advocate for their hiring by businesses and government.

Consider why you travel thousands of miles to look at architecture you cannot find at home. The Guggenheim Bilbao was not built in a vacuum, but pursuant to a large-scale program to remake a dying industrial city in a new image. In replacing an abandoned shipyard it was joined by mixed development, a tram line, a waterfront esplanade, and beautifully designed pedestrian connections to downtown.

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