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In Search of the Global Architect: the Case of Norman Foster (and Partners)

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> Sir Christopher Wren complacently advised those who wished to see his monuments to look around them: between the Royal Hospitals at Chelsea and Greenwich, he had single-handedly reinvented London. Sir Norman Foster, if he wants to catalogue his own monuments, needs to look around the world, rather than survey the length of a single river. And though Wren could review his achievements only from a vantage point on the dome of St Paul's, Foster — piloting himself between far-flung building sites in his own business jet — enjoys a loftier aerial perspective . . . Indefatigable and ubiquitous, Norman Foster is currently redesigning the world. In the contested centre of Hong Kong, a bank he built unfurls from the sky, like a mechanized Jacob's ladder, and touches ground. Another tower, in Tokyo, prods the clouds with tingling antennae, its empty atrium — 19 storeys tall — jiggling the structure's weight in order to outwit earthquakes. His telecom mast in Barcelona protrudes from a mountain, like a totem pole with magical electromagnetic powers. And, in Berlin, he has gutted the stolid bulk of the Reichstag and set a glass bubble afloat inside it (Conrad, 1999: 15).

The figure of the architect as magician, as egoist, as possessor of privileged vision, has been with us since the Renaissance (at least). In their ability to reconfigure spaces and symbols, architects have been employed by popes, royalty, civic and commercial leaders. However, the intensification of the accoutrements of globalization — time–space compression, individual mobility, the flow of images, for example — would appear to have fundamentally altered the relationship between architect and city. Within the profession itself, these processes mesh with internal debates about the future of architecture as art, and as practice (Gutman, 1988; Larson, 1993; Cuff, 2000). Here, leading architects with seemingly limitless corporeal reach are intimately involved with both the creation and enaction of globalized subjectivities. As Deyan Sudjic has argued:

> There is now an international flying circus which travels the world leaving signature buildings in its wake. The major cities of the world share a need to collect them, in the same way that art galleries from Osaka to Liège need Henry Moore, David Hockney and Julian Schnabel. So Richard Meier builds essentially the same building in Frankfurt and The Hague, and Michael Graves builds apartment towers in Yokohama and offices in Atlanta (Sudjic, 1993: 76).

The intensification of travelling images, where iconic landscapes and buildings provide the backdrop for satellite news broadcasts, or adorn magazine covers, or are touched by countless hands in the journeys of a million postcards, mean that the Bilbao Guggenheim or Sydney Opera House are now instantly recognizable forms, mediated in multiple ways. As Sudjic notes, the authors of these iconic buildings — Hadid, Piano, Meier,

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Koolhaas, Gehry, Foster, Calatrava, among others — are sought out to rebrand, reposition, or otherwise publicize the cities of advanced capitalism.

However, the need to explore and render legible the complexities of this trend should be obvious. While the architects and images travel, the buildings remain fixed within local regulatory systems, financial cycles, aesthetic discourses and histories, and political decision-making processes. Architects are, as Larson (1993) notes, members of a 'heteronomous profession', interacting with and often reliant upon urban planners, quantity surveyors, project managers, and structural engineers. And clients, those who actually pay for and commission buildings, are as a group highly diverse, including politicians on government building committees, corporate chief executive officers, property fund managers, civil servants, and so on. So, we can surmise that architectural practice is embedded within a range of practices of varying complexity and spatiality, covering corporate structure and practice, expert knowledge systems, corporeal travel and cultural trust, political expediency and culturally relative aesthetic conceptions (Olds, 2001: 150–7).

To explore these complexities, I examine one of the most recognizably 'global' architects currently practising, (Lord) Norman Foster. An analysis of Foster is important for two reasons, I would argue. First, he is significant *per se*, as an internationally recognized architectural leader, having received both the American Pritzker Prize (1999) and the Japanese Praemium Imperiale (2002). His firm, Foster and Partners (FaP), is consistently rated as among the world's largest architecture firms by number of fee-earning architects. And, as illustrated in the opening quotation, he is responsible for major iconic buildings — both public and commercial — in many of the world's most celebrated cities. Yet there is a second reason for considering Foster in the context of globalization. Despite the celebratory nature of the Wren–Foster comparison above, architects — as creative individuals — are tightly constrained by the logistics of organizing the transmission of their product over distance. They have to negotiate many of the issues raised by, for example, the deterritorialization of economic space, distanciated professional relations, and physical and material co-presence (e.g. Olds, 2001; Amin, 2002; Urry, 2002; 2003; 2004). A consideration of how Foster organizes his firm and his time may give an insight into similar challenges facing globalizing knowledge-based activities.

The article has five sections. First, I work through the nature of architectural recognition, and the nature of fame within the profession. Second, I consider how Foster's individual corporeal mobility is essential in terms of his relationship with clients, utilizing the notion of co-presence, of being in particular places at particular times in order to execute his creative power. Third, I explore how the firm's growing success has led to an increasing reliance on other partner designers, with a resulting blurring of design authorship. Fourth, I consider the significance of the physical and communicative space of the firm's design studio as a creative milieu. Fifth, I discuss the nature of brand and signature in architecture, and discuss some alternative meanings of a 'Foster' building.[1]

1 In constructing this article, I acknowledge that analysis of Foster — as simultaneously the chair of a large private firm, as a leading figure in British intellectual culture generally, and the architectural profession more specifically — is subject to considerable research constraints. A recognition of this is important, given that architectural discourse is not neutral. Larson (1993: 12) has drawn attention to the fact that the 'discourse of architecture is autonomous as long as it is on paper: drawings, words, ideas, but not buildings'. It is in the interests of architectural practices — both in terms of professional standing and in terms of profitability and turnover through commissions — to control the discursive fields that permeate the profession. I draw on three principal categories of data in the research. First, I use material emanating directly from the firm, particularly interviews given by Foster and his partners and published in trade journals. Second, I draw on documentary sources which seek to explain the operation of the firm. These accounts (particularly Williams, 1989; Quantrill, 1999) are written with the approval of FaP, and thus have limited critical analysis. On the other hand, they do draw on unpublished archival material that would otherwise

Recognition: the architectural star system

> This roster of international celebrity architects, known outside architecture for their personas as much as for their work, is created by the critics, the media, and the architects themselves, with more than a little push from their clients. The 'stars' have devoted their lives to architecture and deserve to be considered elite designers. Yet, in an outgrowth of architecture's charismatic tradition, the consuming need that the publicity apparatus has for image, has grabbed the (not unsuspecting) architects. They seem to bask somewhat uncomfortably in the limelight, believing, or affecting to believe, that it will help publicize not only their own careers but the profession as a whole (Larson, 1993: 285).

The conditions for the emergence of a star architect have long been in place, but — as Larson recognizes — the nature of architectural 'stardom' is a complex issue. We can identify three reasons for this. First, architects — unlike major sports, film, or music stars — can rarely be considered as 'household names'. For one thing, it is often *buildings* that become famous, rather than their designers. The Bilbao Guggenheim may be inseparable from the name of Frank Gehry, but while the image of the building will prompt recognition by many outside the world of architecture, the face of Gehry would likely pass unnoticed in a crowd. Second, there is the problem of operating in an artistic field where self-publicity is not an accepted aspect of the social rules: 'There is a desire to be acknowledged without being seen to desire acknowledgement' (Chance and Schmiedeknecht, 2001: 5). There is thus a major problem facing aspiring architectural stars: to gain commercial success, architects require immediate recognition within the architectural establishment. Yet the critical evaluation of their contribution to the discipline can only be made after many years in which the longevity of both their aesthetic style and their structural design can be assessed. Third, and this is a point I discuss in more detail below, architecture as art is not like painting or sculpture or even film-making, given the incredible complexity of the design process (from the need to engage with construction professionals and quantity surveyors, to having to satisfy client taste, to meeting planning regulations and site contingencies). This problem is expressed well by Larson (1993):

> the canon of architecture consists of beautiful or innovative *built exemplars*. These buildings are not and cannot be exemplars of the architect's autonomous application of knowledge and talent alone. They are also striking manifestations of the architect's dependence on clients and other specialists of buildings, be they rival professionals or humbler executants. I call this dependence *heteronomy*, because it contrasts radically with the autonomy that is always considered a defining feature of professional work (Larson, 1993: 5, emphasis in original).

In particularly complex construction projects, the architect's concept designs must be made possible by a structural engineer. That this latter profession is rarely acknowledged publicly says much about the power of architecture as a profession.[2]

be unavailable. Third, I utilize external critical work, particularly that of Moore (2002) and Sudjic (2004), both leading British architectural critics writing in major newspapers, which rely on the careful citation of unattributed sources. Of these, Moore's (2002) essay represented a watershed in writing on Foster, seen as an 'untouchable' by many architectural critics. Moore himself speculates on some of the reasons for this, not least that modern architecture in the UK has come under serious public attack in recent years, particularly from Prince Charles, and that a certain closing of ranks has occurred within architectural critics of modernist persuasion. Nonetheless, Moore argues that Foster 'exerts an extraordinary influence over British architectural critics, even the most acute of whom will give him an easy ride' (*ibid.*: 54), and argues that a more sustained critical analysis of FaP is now overdue.

2 Cecil Balmond at Arup is one of the few engineers in recent years to have developed a (limited) public profile for his role in the design of buildings such as the CCTV (Chinese television headquarters) project with OMA/Rem Koolhaas.

So, it would be a mistake to assume that architects should be considered in the same way as other creative personalities. However, the recognition that they seek comes in three forms. First, there is the importance of *professional recognition*. In the case of FaP, this has been achieved through a numbers of phases, which could be crudely periodized as follows:

- *Phase 1*: the construction of avant-garde projects such as the Willis Faber and Dumas building in Ipswich, UK, in 1978, which were seen as being ahead of their time in terms of architectural properties, technical specifications and design;
- *Phase 2*: the successful completion of architecturally outstanding, large-scale projects, recognized in the world's architectural profession through the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank headquarters (skyscraper), Stansted airport, and Barcelona telecommunications tower (one of the most striking images of the 1992 Olympics) (Abel, 2000; Powell, 2000);
- *Phase 3*: the invitation to compete for extremely sensitive redesign contracts, particularly the Berlin Reichstag, the Great Court at the British Museum in London, and the Ground Zero masterplan in New York.

As noted above, peer recognition has been provided in the awarding of the Pritzker Prize in 1999 (Hyatt Foundation, 1999) and the Praemium Imperiale in 2002, and in the plaudits received from architectural critics (gathered together in Jenkins, 2000).

Second, there is the importance of *global commercial recognition*. By 2003, the practice had received commissions from 18 countries outside the UK, including Australia, China, Poland, Saudi Arabia and the US, and was being ranked in the top 10 of the world's largest architectural firms by number of fee-earning architects (over 350). It had begun to outgrow its current studio, with a fee income of US $60–69 million in 2002 (*World Architecture 300*, 2003 survey). Here, reputation is built among key individuals in the commissioning process, such as development executives, chief executive officers, quantity surveyors, structural engineers, and so on, through the trade press, through word of mouth, through performance in design competitions, through excellence in particular sectors of construction (e.g. hospitals, office buildings, museums) through to the key 'bottom line' indicators of completing to budget and on time.

Third, there is the importance of *public recognition* for Foster *outside* the architectural profession, expressed in successive honours bestowed by the British state (a knighthood in 1990, the Order of Merit in 1997, a Life Peerage in 1999),[3] increasing media coverage, and popular name recognition. This is often achieved most effectively when the building or structure is striking, as in the 'gherkin' Swiss Re skyscraper building in London, the Millau viaduct in the South of France, or the Torre de Collserola in Barcelona, each of which have a striking impact on their surrounding skylines and landscapes. Part of this is dictated by fashion. Even 20 years ago, there were no major Foster commissions in the centre of his practice's home city — instead, it was Richard Rogers, James Stirling and Terry Farrell who were the centre of architectural attention (Glancey, 2000). The fact that his practice has now designed set-piece projects for three of the world's most mediated cities, Berlin (Reichstag), New York (Ground Zero masterplan, unsuccessful in competition), and London (major cultural and political institutions, office towers, infrastructure) is reflective of his growing status, magnified by the centrality of these projects within cities. Here, Foster is celebrated through biographical tropes that stress his working-class upbringing in Manchester, his obsession with flying, and his elevated status within British social and political circles. For example, as Rose (2002) writes semi-seriously in the British *Guardian*:

> With his playboy lifestyle, his tough-guy looks and his aggressively can-do attitude, he is the nearest thing we have to an architectural superhero. One can imagine him helicoptering into

3 Melvin (2001) provides a thorough discussion of the historical position of architects in the British state's honours system; Foster took the title 'Lord Foster of Thames Bank' in 1999.

> areas of aesthetic impoverishment at a moment's notice, thrashing out a quick airport or skyscraper, banging some heads together, then zipping back to London in time for a black-tie reception with some Whitehall dignitaries.

Each of these forms of recognition are important to Foster and the firm. To pursue such recognition, marketing and public relations become central parts of FaP's operation. Visual images of the practice's buildings, which often travel before or with the architect's name or personality, are highly significant.[4] Kazuo Akao of Japan's Obunsha Group, client for the Foster-designed Century Tower in Tokyo, provides the following testimony:

> I first came across Foster's work in the spring of 1982. The Japanese newspaper Nikkei News issued a special edition about Hong Kong which included a full-page advertisement for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation showing a photograph of its proposed new headquarters building. The image was very powerful and, for some time afterwards, I found myself thinking about the building. The name of the architect was not mentioned, but I was able to find that out for myself (2000: 285).

As Akao continues, he then made a 'pilgrimage' to the completed building to see for himself, which led to Obunsha commissioning the office tower from Foster. This vignette is nonetheless revealing of the visuality of architectural recognition, and explains the significance of the firm's strong publication output (seen in artefacts such as *Foster Catalogue 2001* (Foster and Partners, 2001), *On Foster . . . Foster On* (Jenkins, 2000), and the ongoing set of volumes that lavishly document the practice's output, *Norman Foster: Works* (Jenkins, 2004), and the presence of the firm's PR chief on the board of directors (Illoniemi, 2004)).

However, interviewed about the subject of fame and architecture by Charles Jencks (2001: 29–30), Foster backtracks from too close an interest in media exposure:

> CJ: If, for instance, you disappear from the front page in the modern world, you're dead. Amnesia and modernism are directly connected because of the business cycle, continual change, and the constant need to appear new . . . and therefore you lose potential clients and so on . . . You have a very big practice. You always have to be in the public eye.
>
> NF: I don't agree — all buildings are in the public eye. Some of our most important commissions are from those who come back a second or third time over many years or from those new potential clients who examine the performance of buildings that we might have completed a long time ago . . . I think you can overplay the media bit — I know that for every occasional interview we give, there are scores that we routinely turn down.
>
> CJ: So you're saying that the work speaks for itself?
>
> NF: In the end it has to.

While this may be seen as somewhat disingenuous, it fits with Larson's suggestion that celebrity status is built up through peer recognition, rather than through factors extrinsic to the design process:

> Nowadays, an architect's professional recognition is contaminated by the designer's 'media celebrity,' but its chief expression is still the standing it confers in the circles that follow the profession's discourse. Standing may be local, national, or international; it includes a good measure of client satisfaction, especially for strong-service firms; yet it depends primarily on publications, awards, professional societies, rankings in important design competitions, lectures, nominations to juries in awards programs or elite schools, faculty appointment in a renowned school — in sum, the marks of recognition bestowed by esteemed fellow architects, educators, and architectural critics (1993: 101).

4 Similarly, the image of the Bilbao Guggenheim art museum simultaneously marketed three distinct institutions: the Basque regional government, the Guggenheim Foundation as a brand with global aspiration, *and* the architect, Frank O. Gehry and Associates Inc.

Regardless of how this is achieved, such activities require a high degree of mobility, as the elite designer seeks to maximize his or her *presence* in the profession and design process in various ways.

Mobility and co-presence

Architectural practice has been transformed in recent times for a number of reasons (Gutman, 1988; Tombesi *et al.*, 2003). Since the 1950s, jet travel has liberated major architects, allowing them to build portfolios and client bases in numerous countries in the world; since the 1990s, email and fax have eased inter-office communication, essential in allowing head office–site office iteration in the design process; in the last few years, larger bandwidths have facilitated the transmission of large, complex data-files at long distances, almost completely removing the need for intermediate branch offices. Yet this is to caricature the complexity of the architectural design process, especially in complex urban areas, and some specification of the autonomy of the architect is required. For example, working with concepts of co-presence and event obligation, Urry (2002; 2003; 2004) has drawn attention to the importance of qualifying understandings of how often and why people move. Here, 'corporeal travel happens only on specific occasions, occurring *intermittently*, and this can be explained through a "compulsion to proximity" ' (2004: 29, emphasis in original). In this context the scope of action of the corporeally hypermobile architect is extremely limited, with blind spots in terms of locally specific knowledge about building conditions and planning regulations, constrained opportunities to discuss briefs with similarly time-poor clients, and various culturally specific norms regarding face-to-face communication styles.

Of all the challenges faced in the design commissioning process, that of communicating with clients is often seen as the most challenging (see Larson, 1993: 119–22 in particular). This is particularly difficult when commissioning takes place through a design competition, where various firms are — often working at a loss — required to submit reasonably detailed briefs and models for client perusal. In this context, the commission often depends on the principal architect performing in such a way as to convince sceptical clients of the merits of their model or sketch. For example, Foster's presence was required in the public presentation of his proposed masterplan for the redesign competition for Ground Zero in 2002, held in the Winter Garden adjacent to the site. Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, captured his delivery — and those of the other finalists including the winner Daniel Libeskind — as follows:

> He [Foster] addressed the audience with the air of a man who was accustomed to having boards of trustees, chief executives, and public officials treat him with deference, whereas Libeskind was constantly trying to please by tugging on the heartstrings. Foster was not without his own insecurities, however. One of the oddest aspects of his presentation was the frequent mention he made of specific subway lines that crisscrossed the area of Ground Zero — the 1 and 9, and the N and the R — and also the PATH trains, as if he worried that the one thing that could keep him from winning was a perception that he was too much of an outsider, and so he had to prove that he could drop New York references like a native (2004: 10).

The presence of Foster in a meeting is, of course, to buy into the charisma, reputation and 'name' that the globalized star system brings with it. But it also demands a high level and range of communicative skills, which may include — as the above example reveals — the need to convince the client committee of the ability to understand the local context. The protocol of such circumstances is often difficult to negotiate, as in the visit of the Building Committee on the Reichstag project to London:

> They went first to the Royal Academy to look at the Sackler Galleries [a Foster-designed building]. Mark Braun [German member of FaP] and I met them and introduced them to our former client, Sir Roger de Grey, who took them on a tour of the building. The visit over, we

> invited them back to the studio to get a feel for the way that we worked. It was not clear quite what the correct protocol was, but we assumed that elaborate hospitality would be inappropriate, so we had drinks, and they seemed to enjoy their visit . . . I heard later that they . . . had been impressed, not only by 'British understatement', but by the fact that our studio was still buzzing with activity very late into the evening (Foster, 2000: 64).

The treatment of important clients is thus given the utmost thought by Foster and the practice, even if this involves a restrained response to client hospitality, and an over-eagerness to express knowledge of local context. Ultimately, however, the choice of architect made by the client will depend on a combination of factors. As Williams (1989: 33–49) demonstrates, the commissioning process for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building was undertaken by Roy Munden, assistant general manager of the Bank's management services, who drew on the recommendations of existing clients, visits to the offices of each architect, and analysis of the submitted material by each firm (which included a portfolio of written justifications for the project, models and sketches).

Of course, Ground Zero, the Hong Kong bank and the redesigned Reichstag were world-famous projects. With other projects, Foster's input will — by necessities of time — be restricted: 'He adds the finishing flourishes (or orders an overnight redesign); but as with any brand, work is done to a strict set of guidelines' (Rose, 2002). Despite the myth of hypermobility that attaches to him in the media, Foster cannot be 'everywhere at once'. Urry refers to these limitations as 'time obligations', requiring him to schedule 'quality time' with 'significant others' (*ibid*.: 31), linked to an 'obligation to place', where a specific location — in the case of the architect, a building site, client boardroom, or design studio — must be corporeally visited. For example, the establishment of major commissions will usually demand the creation of a permanent site or project office, headed by a design principal (in the case of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Foster would commute every six weeks from London to Hong Kong to supervise each stage of the project and meetings with the Bank, with an on-site office staffed by trusted deputies; Williams, 1989). While for many projects an alliance will be formed with local representative architects cognizant of building codes, planning regulations and construction norms, the principal architect will usually wish to pay regular visits to oversee the quality of finish and to address any unforeseen construction problems that ensue.[5]

Developments in information technology have reduced this necessity to travel, but as the practice has expanded, Foster has come to rely on others to sustain its reputation. And so the expansion of FaP from the 20 or so designers prior to the awarding of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank commission, to its current staff of several hundred, required the leadership skills of a range of partners, as I now describe.

Management structure

> Central to the organization of the practice is the strong sense of trust that exists between Norman, the partners and a number of other key members of the practice. This is crucial, especially when we have such an extraordinarily diverse range of projects, spread as they are across the world . . . Thus the design in the practice is centred around Norman, Ken, David and myself. We all work here in London in a single studio so that communication is excellent throughout. Communication takes place both informally and formally. The chance discussion, the instant design comment or informal design review create a highly charged, creative atmosphere. More formally, there are regular meetings of the directors, thirteen at the moment, to review key issues, progress on projects and general financial matters. Every project is run by a job captain, who is responsible to a director — the hierarchy is therefore very broad-based with quick communications to directors, partners and Norman himself (Spencer de Grey, in Quantrill, 1999: 57–8).

5 See Sato (1992) for an account of some of the cultural encounters between Foster Associates and the Obayashi Corporation in the construction of Century Tower, Tokyo.

For much of the firm's growth period of the 1990s and 2000s, this model would appear to have been successful. Foster had long operated with several key design partners: Spencer de Grey, David Nelson, Graham Phillips and Ken Shuttleworth. Each of these partners would typically oversee the day-to-day running of major project commissions — de Grey took the lead on the British Museum, for example, while Nelson led on the Reichstag, Shuttleworth on London's City Hall and New York's Ground Zero masterplan. Phillips, along with other major project roles, had taken on the managing director's role in the company, with jobs managed as indicated by de Grey above.[6] The key aspect here is the attention given to Foster at the apex of the firm, as figurehead, and his ability to inspire corporate loyalty.

However, while the senior partner architects may play a leading role in concept design, their names will always be subservient to that of Foster, as the following interview between Ken Shuttleworth and Marcus Fairs suggests:

> MF: What is your role in the practice?
>
> KS: Since the completion of the Hong Kong airport I've tended not to travel so much. I look after the London and UK work. That's largely because I have young children and I want to be here for them. It's worked out fine because over the past seven or eight years, about 80% of our work has been in London. So my projects have been Swiss Re, City Hall, Wembley . . .
>
> MF: Did you design all those buildings?
>
> KS: Everything comes from the office. We work together, we'll all be toying with ideas with Norman and the others. You won't get what you get at some offices — mentioning no names — where each partner produces a completely different type of architecture. We want to make sure there's consistency across the board. *Having said that, a lot of the sketches and the initial ideas have come from me. Swiss Re, for example. I don't know where they come from really; I sketch them out and they get worked up* [. . .]
>
> MF: Does it bother you that your role in all these projects is rarely acknowledged?
>
> KS: No, not at all. I've never sought publicity. I'm happy when Norman takes the credit. That's fine. He owns the company. He's the chairman. He had the guts to set the company up in the first place; he put his reputation on the line. *Architects are trained to be individuals, with a one-man-and-a-dog practice; they're trained to be artists. But in reality you can't do it on your own. It has to be as part of a team.* The biggest impact I can have is working on projects like Hong Kong airport, the Reichstag, Commerzbank — some of the most important projects in the world. And we have some of the best people in the world working here (in Fairs, 2003a, emphasis added).

The relationship of Shuttleworth to Foster became the subject of considerable speculation after this interview, a version of which was also published in the *Guardian* newspaper.[7] The contention — expressed above — over the authorship of the practice's Swiss Re (or 'gherkin' skyscraper office building in the City of London) was followed in November 2003 by Shuttleworth's resignation from the practice to set up a firm with several other FaP architects. Shuttleworth gave his new practice a generic title (Make) rather than using his own name as an explicit response to the name dominance of Foster. While the circumstances of Shuttleworth's departure were

6 For career biographies, see www.fosterandpartners.com.

7 Sudjic (2004) alludes to 'the breathlessly ill-judged interview' given a year previously to a national newspaper (Fairs, 2003b), as well as the interview published in the trade magazine *Building* from which I have drawn (Fairs, 2003a). In the week following the latter article, Shuttleworth emailed a response to the magazine stating that he was embarrassed at the emphasis given to his design leadership in the article, and that the teamworking aspect of the Foster studio should be re-emphasized (Shuttleworth, 2003).

publicly presented as being amicable, several commentators have confirmed that the issue of credit for design authorship was a key reason for the split (Kirwan-Taylor, 2004; Sudjic, 2004).[8]

Perhaps as a consequence of Shuttleworth's departure, but partly as a result of the rapid growth of commissions received, the firm announced a restructuring of its management in December 2004. The practice is currently divided into six teams, led by senior partners Grant Brooker, Nigel Dancey, Brandon Haw, Paul Kalkhoven, Mouzhan Majidi and Andrew Miller (*Building Design*, 2004), with De Grey and Nelson becoming deputy chairmen, and Phillips the company's chief executive. The trade press note an insider view that each unit would have its own accounting procedures, and may be in competition to a degree. For example, Majidi — in charge of the firm's massive Beijing airport project — is quoted as saying: 'I have always worked closely with Norman, and that hasn't changed . . . But with the group system, it follows that you have more control over your group, which is nice' (in Booth and Blackler, 2004).

The design studio

> In order to produce a body of work with integrity, individual architects must construct avenues leading out of the disorder toward collective work and coordinated practice. The milieu of each firm is unique and in flux, but underlying their uniqueness, firms share certain structural characteristics. The first is an office's heritage, which involves the origins and founders of a firm, often recollected in legends analogous to creation myths. Other characteristics include office members' use of language, their power structure, and their prevailing practices and values (Cuff, 1992: 157).

A key aspect of elite architect's role is in the management and motivation of a design *studio*, that produces work of a guaranteed quality and distinction. As a point of comparison, take the example of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) led by another 'star' architect, Rem Koolhaas. According to one OMA partner, Joshua Ramus, the Koolhaas influence is felt not in creation itself, but in the management of the creative process: 'The remarkable thing of which Rem is the author, explicitly, is the office's process . . . What the OMA process focuses on is not the creator but the critic. In our way of working, the important person is the one who is shown various options and then makes a critical decision' (in Zalewski, 2005: 117). To ensure quality control, project coordination, and provide design leadership, a single space is required for the success of the 'Foster model'. Contrary to other similar-sized architecture firms, such as Skidmore Owings Merrill or HOK, with large networks of regional offices located close to major markets, FaP is run primarily from one location, Riverside 3, designed by FaP on the banks of the Thames in Battersea, West London. Again, the grounded physical location for the practice — the design studio — is important both for establishing a functioning space for design, and for communicating a symbolic aura to clients.[9] As David Nelson describes, the firm's way of working has evolved, most critically during the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank project:

> We were spread over three floors — we couldn't expand above or below and moving is difficult when you are on the run with a major project, so the office became very dense. We took the drawing boards and positioned them back to back and facing each other because this was the

8 Sudjic (2004) notes a parallel with the personalized fall-out between two other leading UK architects, Terry Farrell and Nicholas Grimshaw, who were once partners.

9 'Most strong-idea firms cultivate an informal appearance: renovated lofts, art books and models lying around, the occasional piece of very fine art or the master's own creations . . . open drafting rooms never too far from the principal's office' (Larson, 1993: 115).

> tightest possible plan and created these long tables that were independent drawing boards. Amazing things happened — people stopped writing memos, communication improved. When we came back from Hong Kong we decided to build fixed long tables, huge long desks. Our particular flexibility was that the people were going to move, not the furniture — and that has now served us well for twelve to thirteen years. Everyone was in that one space: model-makers, secretaries, me, Norman, everybody. However, as we have expanded we now occupy other buildings as well (Nelson in Nimmo, 2004).

The significance of the space is echoed by Foster himself:

> Today in our London studio you can hear perhaps 35 languages spoken. It is so cosmopolitan that I sometimes joke that it is another country . . . It is also a very young office — the average age is around 30 — and there is an extraordinary high level of motivation. The studio is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and you will find people working there at all hours. Two crucial characteristics of the studio and the way that we work are the democracy and freedom of communication that we enjoy. The studio has no partitions or separate rooms and meetings tend to take place informally, often around the drawing board or computer screen. And every member of the office, whatever his or her role, has an identical workplace at one of the long benches that span the width of the room (Foster, 2000: 17).

While Foster stresses the egalitarian nature of the space, critic Kenneth Frampton likens the studio to a Panopticon, an 'unremitting panorama of order and control' (in Rose 2002). Here, logically, Foster is able to follow how his concept designs — as well as those of others — are worked on and tested. Foster's input, embodied in the concept of the 'design review', emerges from a discussion with one of the Foster partners, Graham Phillips, interviewed by Malcolm Quantrill:

> MQ: But design reviews are not a unique process, of course. Many offices have them today. So what would you say is the 'real secret' of the design review as structured in the Foster studio?
>
> GP: Well, for a start, the way work is brought together for a review is crucial. When the collection of material is truly comprehensive, and it's put up on the wall, it's amazing what can be achieved in a relatively short meeting. The secret, I believe, is having Norman there, together with some other incisive people.
>
> MQ: Nevertheless, Norman is extremely busy and involved in a lot of overseas travel to visit sites and clients. So there must be times when he is simply so preoccupied that he cannot make himself available in the studio or on the site.
>
> GP: In the first place, you have to understand that Norman's main interest is in designing. It's the thing that gives him the greatest pleasure. For Norman, a design review takes priority over everything else . . . These reviews take place at all stages of a project — not just in the initial concept phase. They continue through to Norman's regular visits to the site to see buildings under construction, and more often than not they result in detail design sessions being held on site (in Quantrill, 1999: 59).

These may be seen as 'object obligations', which Urry (2004: 31) sees as 'the necessity to be co-present to sign contracts or to work on or to see various objects, technologies, computer screens, or written texts'. While these objects may be mobile, it is most often the design studio that is the privileged site for co-present discussions between team members involving material objects (designs pinned to walls, architectural models, the explanation of a computer visualization on-screen). As Iain Godwin, the firm's IT director, has explained, each project has 'job captains' who work in tandem with CAD coordinators (whose task is to manage the huge volumes of design data on projects). As Godwin noted in 2000, however, the use of software design technologies was still being used alongside traditional pen or pencil drawings in concept design, as well as with 3-D physical models:

> Norman has a Wacom tablet and he's still working out when it is and isn't appropriate to use. We will sketch because we don't want to be constrained by geometry in the first instance. Then the team works on how to represent the ideas in the machine in order to play with area calculations . . . With the Swiss Re project we literally had hundreds of these 'pine cone' models in the office, as team members played with floor plates to gauge the right level of twist and work out spatial relationships. That would have been very difficult to do and get everyone's input had we done that on a machine. There was a lot of testing and area checking with the 3D modelling going on simultaneously, but the physical 'pine cone' models were essential in helping process the form (in Day, 2000).

So, as Urry (2004: 32) has emphasized, 'even electronic spaces seem to depend upon moments of face-to-face copresence for developing trustful relationships' (see also Boden and Molotch, 1994, on 'the compulsion to proximity'). The heteronomy identified by Larson (1993) extends to the design process in the firm itself. And yet, within media discourse on FaP, authorship is almost without exception given to Foster as an *individual*. I now explore the reasons for this.

Foster as brand and signature

> Both the aesthetics of the signature and the aesthetics of the brand are ideologies: they are regimes of marketing and authorization which draw in rather similar ways on an imaginary of the unique person or of personality; brands have a 'personality' because they make use of strategies of personalization (the use of characters, celebrities, direct address) to create something like a signature-effect; signatures stand as metonyms of an originating author or artist, even though the making of any work of art involves an extended number of participants (editors, publishers, proofreaders, printers, paintmakers, curators . . .) and a complex commercial apparatus (Frow, 2002: 70–1).

It is increasingly common to hear mention of the 'signature' architect. However, the meaning of this term is not always clear. As Frow (2002) and Lury (2005) have shown, the signature as a statement of value has emerged from the norms of fine art and painting, where 'the signature is a guarantee of originality and its converse, the repudiation of forgery' (Frow, 2002: 58). By contrast, the emergence of the brand in forms of cultural production has a different meaning: 'the brand is a corporate rather than a personal signature: it is a *quasi-signature* . . . Brands are typically *managed* to ensure that products are consistent with brand image and that competitors do not encroach on it' (*ibid*.: 63). This imposes a tension between meeting market expectations ('the aesthetics of the brand'), and the need to produce original, or inventive, work ('the aesthetics of the signature').

The architectural star system thus feeds upon the trope of the architect as an individual 'creative genius' (Saint, 1983). Here, the tension between architectural design as a team process (and commercial apparatus) clashes with the media's desire (or, in some cases, client desire) to attribute artistic autonomy to a single person, the 'signature' architect. The architect Denise Scott Brown, business partner and wife of Robert Venturi, documents how the critical response to the practice's output is usually solely attributed to Venturi, despite proactive attempts by the practice to spell out the nature of each individual's contributions to projects and writing. Scott Brown argues that this is strongly gendered, but more generally reflects that 'A body of theory and design in architecture apparently must be associated by architecture critics with an individual; the more emotional their criticism, the stronger is its focus on one person' (Scott Brown, 1989: 238).

In the evolution of any design firm based around a single design leader, this tension will frequently recur, for at least two reasons. First, as we have seen, the relationship between the individual designer and the firm will gradually evolve to a point where

sustained growth can only be achieved by the appointment and/or promotion of other elite designers, who may be frustrated at a lack of name recognition. Second, the lead individual's name may eventually become redundant, or merge into a corporate, depersonalized product. While the popular press may continue to individualize the design process and refer to 'Norman Foster's design for Beijing airport' or such-like as a possessive adjective, the specialist architectural and trade press will increasingly refer to 'Foster's' as a *noun*, a subtle, but hugely significant shift in meaning that signifies the *firm*, a shorthand, in other words, for Foster and Partners. Such a distinction has been made in many other firms, and is perhaps an inevitable result of growth and/or the retirement of the lead designers: once Foster retires, the transition of 'Foster's' to a brand will be complete. In many ways, this branding has long been present in the corporate style of the practice, which has a standardized publication output in terms of colour (grey), and font (Rotis). As Illoniemi (2004: 42) notes: 'A similar graphic rigour applies to most of the Foster publications with their underlying grids and pared down visual presentation, not dissimilar to the early modernist books on architecture'.

Of course, these issues are central to the production of the ultimate design product, the 'Foster building'. Here the building means more than a homogenized house style, but also the cost and creative regime used in the design and construction *process*. On the one hand, some clients are buying a 'look' (recall Shuttleworth's comment above: 'You won't get what you get at some offices — mentioning no names — where each partner produces a completely different type of architecture') and may be disappointed if they are not presented with what they expect. Other clients may be buying into a cost–benefit formula, which takes into account a complex matrix of building performance, process, site analysis, sectoral expertise and aesthetics calculated against fees. In this sense, pressure is put on the firm to supply a cost-efficient and unified brand, an identifiable style, whether in use of materials, organization of space, or expressive features. Here, the 'brand' suppresses the 'signature', to continue Frow's (2002) analysis. And as Rowan Moore argues: 'Foster is popular because he supplies the look of innovation without the pain of actually changing anything; the establishment likes him because he lets it feel daring at minimal emotional expense; he is the purveyor of radical architecture for people who want no such thing' (Moore, 2002: 52).

Conclusion

This article has examined the emergence of Norman Foster as an architect of great significance to the study of globalization and the urban. By extension, it can be argued that Foster is representative of a small number of highly individualized architects — Koolhaas, Hadid, Libeskind, for example — whose names are attached to many projects being simultaneously constructed, debated, or commissioned at various points of the globe. The article has attempted to identify a number of nuances within this figure of the 'global architect', without wishing to reify globalized cultural and economic processes. From this discussion, I think we can identify five key processes which I have tried to keep analytically distinct, but which are clearly interwoven: first, the building of a personalized fame and reputation in a way that transcends nationalized professional institutions, client knowledge bases and public discourse; second, the importance of embodied mobility and co-presence in terms of the presence of Foster in client meetings, in the head office and at the sites of new projects; third and fourth, the logistical 'stretching' of the charismatic designer's building *style* and *method* through the establishment of a design process and firm structure, as well as a material space for the successful conception and execution of the creative process which operates at a distance in a number of ways; fifth, the challenge posed in retaining the trappings of individual authorship, understood in labels such as the 'signature' architect or the 'Foster look'.

To return to the parallel with Wren that opened the article, Foster's worldwide operability says much about the transformation of architectural practice in recent times, one where the ability to design at distances far from the principal design office is increasingly feasible. However, the increasing scope offered by information technology challenges the uniqueness of the Foster model — that the key design decisions are taken from one office — and poses numerous challenges to the firm. As Powell writes:

> The phenomenal success of Foster and Partners is guaranteed to engender envy and sheer malice, particularly in Britain — where quantity and quality are seen as irreconcilable. Hence the gleeful jibes about French stone (at the time of a 'beef war') at the British Museum, of all places; the media campaign to find fault with the Berlin Reichstag . . .; and the prominence given to the Foster projects which allegedly reflect a slipping of standards and are the work of a 'B' team at his office. Such is the potency of the Foster legend, however, that the deficiencies of such schemes are often blamed on an inadequate input from the great man himself. Foster's personal charisma and sheer energy remain central to the office's success, something which even SOM in its greatest years, in the 1950s and '60s, never possessed (2000: 439).

Nonetheless, the design individuality and excellence achieved in a small number of projects has to be reconciled with the demands placed by growing economies of scale. Here, indeed, while the brand is very closely related to an identifiable individual designer, we can see this as superseding the idea of Foster as a 'signature' architect, a point that has become evident with the firm's reorganization into distinct teams. And while Foster's presence as a figurehead is seen as good for the company as a whole, even where this means surrendering or concealing individual authorship, the departure of Ken Shuttleworth highlights the problem of subsuming creative designers within one mono-named practice (Sudjic, 2004).

Finally, there is the question of whether the architect's 'star' status is undermining the profession of architecture more broadly (Gutman, 1988: 61–9). When shorn of the structural expertise offered by the engineer, s/he in extreme cases is reduced to a branding asset or public relations star, focusing mostly on aspects of façade design. As Olds (2001: 149) carefully explains, while the architect can travel, while his or her (usually his) 'abstract approach to design applies equally well in all of the world's cities or regions', the global architect is still restricted by geopolitical conditions, macroeconomic structures, and — as a result — by client demand. Thus, the 'autonomous pursuit of architecture and the heteronomous conditions of its making insert a permanent contradiction into the heart of the profession's practice and even of its discourse' (Larson, 1993: 14).

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