

Architecture as a Global System

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Architecture as a Global System: Scavengers, Tribes, Warlords and Megafirms

PETER RAISBECK

Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, Australia



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Modern architecture is surely most cogently to be interpreted as a gospel – as, quite literally, a message of good news; and hence its impact. For, when all the smoke clears away, its impact may be seen as having very little to do with either its technological innovations or its formal vocabulary. Indeed the value of these could never have been so much what they seemed to be as what they signified.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*. (1983; p.11), MIT Press

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About the Author

Dr Peter Raisbeck is an Architect, Design Teacher, and Researcher. He teaches Architectural Practice, Design, and Design Activism at the Melbourne School of Design. He graduated from RMIT architecture in 1992 and then taught and ran his own small practice. His work explores architecture's intersection with technology, global finance, procurement, design activism and politics, and architectural history. His PhD thesis examined the Marine and Underwater Cities of the 1960s. Since 2006 he has published over 50 research outputs including work on the Australian architect Robin Boyd. In 2010, he collaborated on Mould City one of the project's exhibited at the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale. He writes a blog entitled 'Surviving the Design Studio'.

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Too often, there are pressures nowadays on academic to avoid the longer and solitary forms of scholarship. Without the assistance of the above people, this contribution to that genre would not have been possible.

Chapter 1

Architecture as a Global System: An Introduction

Introduction

Architecture is a global system. This book describes the system, its ecologies of practice, and how those ecologies interact. This global system is the context in which all architects operate regardless of the size of their practice. Whilst there have been numerous studies on globalisation in the twenty-first century, the changes that globalisation has wrought on architecture, an increasingly global industry, have mostly gone undocumented (Harvey, 2007, 2010; McNeill, 2009; Sklair, 2002). In describing the global system, this book asks: to what degree is architectural design a domain of knowledge that is in crisis? The related question is: to what extent are the territory and agency of architecture eroding? An institutional logics framework, as described later in this chapter, informs these overarching questions.

This framework allows the global system to be described through different types of architectural firms. In employing institutional logics, these firms are designated as scavengers, tribes, warlords and megafirms. This book follows on from ten years of research in the areas of architecture and construction management and teaching architectural design and practice, as well as writing a popular blog for some years.

The words written here aim to look beyond the surface spectacle of iconic projects, celebrity architects, media channels full of architectural fragments and TED Talk thought leaders, and a panoply of minor stars and influencers. In describing architecture as a global system, this book explores the degree to which architecture remains a distinct field of knowledge. In writing in this fashion, there is no illusion of presenting a complete or totalising picture of architecture. The approach pursued here is more subtle, and the aim is to employ a structure that illuminates key territories, archipelagos, moments, and conflicts. This depiction highlights the edges at which it is being, and has been, eroded over time. It seeks to explore and map the discipline without recourse to naive rhetorics, which surround celebrity architects, design technologies, design activism, and notions of future practice. The effect of globalisation, driven by neoliberalism, on architecture in social democracies has

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been insidious. In this context merely bemoaning the erosion of the traditional markets and services for architects is perhaps not enough.

The ecologies of practice that constitute architecture as a global system have come to condition the very types of firms that operate within them. The heroic architect of modernism morphed into the coteries of star architects that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s (Sklair, 2005, 2017; Sklair & Gherardi, 2012). As will be argued in the following chapters, the celebrity architect is a part of the institutional logics that characterise architecture within this global system. In this system for architects, architecture is arguably, and perhaps imperceptibly seen as being at an endpoint because of the continuing commodification of architectural services. This reification of design knowledge is, to some extent, hidden by the optimist rhetorics, which link architecture to emerging digital technologies. These future-perfect rhetorics are too often connected to the simplistic hope that architectural design, with its associated techniques and thinking, may yet shape and order the future of cities. Rather than following this line of thought, what follows are the contours of this landscape and the ecologies of practice that make up the global system of architectural production. This order cannot be comprehensively described; something will always lie outside of it or remain invisible within it, and it would be churlish to think that it could be illustrated as a totality. However, the outline of this global system and the logics associated with it are set out later in this chapter in [Table 1](#).

This chapter introduces the overall themes of this book and sets out the framework of institutional logics which enables architecture to be described as a global system. Chapter 2 examines small practices, or scavengers, and, amongst other things focusses on the demographics and statistics related to these firms across the globe. Chapter 3 discusses tribal architects, with a particular emphasis on how these firms derive information and knowledge from their networks. Chapter 4 discusses warlords, perhaps better known as the so-called star architects. This chapter discusses how these architects manipulate social media for their ends. Chapter 5 discusses the large multinational and cross-border megafirms who are the largest architectural practices in the world. Chapter 6 summarises this system and discusses to what degree it might be in crisis.

The Venice Architecture Biennale is a useful starting point in the next section to consider the global system of architecture. As this chapter suggests, the Architecture Biennale at Venice and its trajectories point to the various polemics, controversies and enthusiasms that exist within this system. The prelude that follows in this chapter, beginning with Venice, presents a mosaic of phenomena that begins to illustrate architecture's recent past. Firstly, the Biennale polemics of the architects Aldo Rossi and Patrik Schumacher, whilst separated in time, suggest the range of architectural theories present in the global system. Rossi's embrace of memory versus Schumacher's faith in technology highlights a recurring context in the chapters that follow. Architectural memory against the onslaught of the new design technologies haunts many of the pages of this book. Following this apparent polarity inevitably leads to the architectural critic Kenneth Frampton's concept of critical regionalism which is discussed later in this chapter. It is a theme evident in the curation of the 2018 Venice

Table 1. Institutional Logics Describing Architecture as a Global System.

<i>Utilising</i>	Scavenger Logic	Tribal Logic	Warlord Logic	Megafirm Logic
<i>Practice type</i>	Sole practitioners	Community architects	Star architects	Megafirms
<i>Conflict modes:</i>	Territories dominated through knowledge of personal networks. Passive-aggressive conflict mode	Territories dominated through local knowledge. Avoids conflict in order to survive	Territories dominated via media channels. Creates conflict in order to build media presence	Territories and markets constantly captured, expanded and rebuilt. Resolves and avoids conflict in order to grow
<i>Economic system</i>	Macro-economic volatility	Local capitalism	Regional and global	Global
<i>Sources of identity</i>	Personal networks	Community	The architectural canon	Revenue and profit
<i>Basis of strategy</i>	Identity	Link to community networks	Acquisition of patronage and clients	Predatory but also adaptive actions
<i>Basis of mission</i>	Survival amidst volatility	Network expansion	Knowledge and design agency	Predatory but also adaptive actions
<i>Sources of legitimacy and authority</i>	Personal networks	Reach and range of networks	Media hits, prestigious projects and academic positions	Megaprojects
<i>Basis of attention</i>	Risk	Process	Reputation in the architectural canon	Entrepreneurial futures
<i>Governance mechanism</i>	Individual	Studio and atelier	Master-servant labour practices	Integrated systems

Table 1. (Continued)

<i>Utilising</i>	Scavenger Logic	Tribal Logic	Warlord Logic	Megafirm Logic
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Conflict modes:	Territories dominated through knowledge of personal networks. Passive-aggressive conflict mode	Territories dominated through local knowledge. Avoids conflict in order to survive	Territories dominated via media channels. Creates conflict in order to build media presence	Territories and markets constantly captured, expanded and rebuilt. Resolves and avoids conflict in order to grow
Economic system	Macro-volatility	Local capitalism	Regional and global	Global
Sources of identity	<i>Personal networks</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Global media</i>	<i>Revenue and profit</i>
Basis of mission	Survival amidst volatility	Survival plus: Network expansion	Survival plus: Knowledge and range of specialisations. Reach of firm into new markets	Survival plus: Predatory but also adaptive actions
Basis of strategy	Identity (in a swamp)	Link to community networks	Increase corporate clients. Stable and recurring client base. Increase markets for services	Constant knowledge production and data acquisition
Sources of legitimacy and authority	Personal networks	Reach and range of networks	Media hits, prestigious projects and academic positions	Megaprojects (project and client statistics: size and status)
Basis of attention	Risk	Process	Avant-gardism. Reputation in the architectural canon	R&D and entrepreneurial futures
Governance mechanism	Individual	Studio or atelier	Singular warlord or star architect. Project teams	Integrated systems (corporate, multifunctional groups and networks)

Biennale by the Irish architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara and hovers over the discussion of tribal architects in Chapter 3. As discussed below, it is also a theme evident in the ideological clash between Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Alejandro Aravena and Schumacher – all too easily Schumacher appears to exemplify a type of architect. However, this clash points to the vicissitudes of architectural celebrity in the global system, an issue examined more closely in Chapter 4. But, crowded into these milieu are the evangelical gospels of digital transformation, sustainability, and design strategy. However, as suggested in what follows, the background noise that has arisen out of these gospels has tended to privilege the singular auteur and arguably blinded architects to the politics of architecture as a global system.

The Venice Architecture Biennale

Venice has always been a site of tourism, cultural production, and urban voyeurism (Burns, 1997, 1999). Every second year at Venice in the Giardini and ancient Arsenale, the Architecture Biennale takes place, bringing together the architectures of the world. The Architecture Biennale at Venice is the shining and glittering highlight in the calendar of the global system that is architecture. Venice, that city of cities, where all the other cities of the world and their histories can be glimpsed in layers and edges around the Venetian lagoon. The Venetian Republic, with its unique form of governance, had always been a place of politics, intrigue and controversy. Venice has always been a city where the flows of territorial ambition and power collide, and then just as quickly depart.

Similarly, at the Architecture Biennale, architecture constitutes a centre of empire in a global system. For architects, it has been a site of intoxicating allure, and the Biennale is an event where much of the world's architecture is shaken loose from its local contexts, coming to rest in the Biennale gardens. In the pavilions and follies that adorn the Biennale, we are witness to the bejewelled products that architects hope to dispense as urban medicine in cities across the globe.

Two controversial moments in the history of the Biennale, separated by 25 years are worth briefly bearing in mind as we progress. Firstly, Aldo Rossi's Teatro Del Mundo (Theatre of the World), constructed for the 1979–1980 Venice Biennale (Libeskind, 1980). Secondly, Patrik Schumacher's launch of his Parametric Manifesto at the 2008 Biennale (Schumacher, 2008, 2009, 2012). In some ways, these apparent volatile swings of ideology belie a global system whose underlying structure and biases are stable, and these swings of theory are not indicative of this stability. Of course, it is easy to argue that these extremes represent, from Rossi to Schumacher, an evolution of architecture in keeping with a technological zeitgeist. All around a new global media directs our attention to the idea, and construction of, this global narrative of a technology-driven architecture. This discourse is not the only narrative to be described here, but it is perhaps one of the most pervasive, and, as I will argue even at this early stage, also corrosive.

The Polarities of Critical Regionalism

The dichotomy between Rossi and Schumacher, crude as it may seem, also points to other polarities, between technology and memory, which are still present in architectural discourse. In his influential essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', Kenneth Frampton (1993) argued that optimising technologies have diminished and constrained the ability of architects to produce significant urban reform. Whilst this concept may seem to have had its heyday, the idea of critical regionalism continues to inform and condition, if perhaps subliminally, how architects perceive architectural production. Frampton strenuously advocated for the legitimacy of localised architectural cultures and a discourse resistant to processes of universalisation. As suggested in the following essay, despite the pervasiveness and promotion of critical regionalism across architecture, it is ironic that architectural production can easily be described as a thoroughly universalised system. Citing the urban impact of the automobile, property speculation, and what he noted as the 'imperatives of production', Frampton (1993) saw architecture and urban design as being subsumed by two opposites (p. 268). At one pole, he railed against a 'high-tech' impetus based on production. At the other pole, regarding Michael Graves's Portland Building completed in 1982, he argued against the 'provision of a compensatory facade', which for Frampton (1993) was a veil that 'covered up the harsh realities of this universal system' (p. 268). Rather than an overt celebration of universal production, or its deliberate mitigation via something as flimsy as a facade, the work of critical regionalism itself was to 'mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place' (Frampton, 1993, p. 268).

It remains legitimate to ask if Frampton's fears remain, and whether global architecture can still be regarded as being polarised around these two poles. This battle between the local and the global, between regional signs and tectonics and a universalising and abstract order, has demonstrably now come to characterise architecture as a global system. The global system of universalisation that Frampton hinted at has now, at the time of writing, become evident in every aspect of architectural production and discourse. What Frampton saw as 'high-tech' has arguably been exchanged for the work of digital tools, coding, and algorithms. These are now at the heart of architectural production. Nowhere is this more evident than in the large megafirms, as designated here, that operate across regional borders. However, the new design technologies have seeped into every aspect of practice. An opposing view might be that, it is these very design technologies that have helped to dissipate architectural agency. So, as these technologies continue to evolve and with the rise of so-called big data, now linked to urban territories, and soon to be linked to the internet of things, architects may struggle to argue that they alone have spatial insights that are somehow unique. However, in this broad context, a devil's advocate, rather than a contrarian, would say that the covering mask of compensation, facilitated by a veneer of technology, is now to be seen everywhere and in all aspects of architectural discourse.

Aravena versus Schumacher

Whilst it may seem that we are beset with polarities, other additional polarities also seem to emerge within the ecologies of practice that are at play in the current global system of architecture. Of course, it is easy to see this system as being structured around these dichotomies and opposites. Another set of polarities is evident in Patrik Schumacher's response to Alejandro Aravena's winning the prestigious Pritzker Prize in 2015. Just after Aravena won the prize, there was an unusual outburst via Facebook and across social media from Schumacher. He declaimed Aravena as a 'safe and comforting validation of humanitarian concern' going on to say that:

The PC takeover of architecture is complete: Pritzker Prize mutates into a prize for humanitarian work. The role of the architect is now 'to serve greater social and humanitarian needs', and the new Laureate is hailed for 'tackling the global housing crisis' and for his concern for the underprivileged. Architecture loses its specific societal task and responsibility; architectural innovation is replaced by the demonstration of noble intentions and the discipline's criteria of success and excellence dissolve in the vague do-good-feel-good pursuit of 'social justice'. (Schumacher, 2016)

So it would seem that Schumacher's *Weltanschauung* and proclamation about political correctness is problematic because it would be hard not to associate this statement with regressive politics: a politics intent on discounting social difference in favour of neoliberal innovation. Moreover, and more specifically, an architecture focussed on 'specific societal tasks' might be self-serving and actually mean: lucrative and profitable megaprojects. To go further towards a more cynical viewpoint, it might be interpreted that the above quote is a self-interested call for more high-density megaprojects designed by Schumacher's firm Zaha Hadid Architects and that 'architectural innovation' refers to an architecture driven by all of the new technologies: drones, 3D scanning, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, and above all, parametrics. Indeed, all of this innovation is then promulgated, perhaps all too easily and uncritically, through the new digital media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TED Talks, and LinkedIn profiles. As argued in Chapter 4, it is the technological context described above and corresponding media distribution channels that now form the new collective imagination of architecture.

A more clear-sighted and less cynical analysis might ask if Schumacher is correct in his stance – but is Aravena's position any worthier? Is it a position that is any more innovative, and to what extent does it lose any sense of 'societal tasking and responsibility'? Does the work of Elemental (Aravena's firm), and of other firms like them, posit itself as a credible and alternative architecture, both for Aravena and for others? Schumacher (2016) goes on to directly criticise Aravena in his Facebook polemic, suggesting that Elemental's work is a kind of comforting opiate for the 'humanitarian' set:

I respect [what] Alejandro Aravena is doing and his ‘half a good house’ developments are an intelligent response. However, this is not the frontier where architecture and urban design participate in advancing the next stage of our global high-density urban civilization. I would not object to this year’s choice half as much if this safe and comforting validation of humanitarian concern was not part of a wider trend in contemporary architecture that in my view signals an unfortunate confusion, bad conscience, lack of confidence, vitality and courage about the discipline’s own unique contribution to the world.

This is the voice of one polarity criticising another. Now it is not difficult to be intrigued by what Schumacher may mean by the terms ‘frontier’ and ‘our global high-density civilisation’. An altogether tantalising prospect is that a discussion of cultural theory and the cinematic form of the Western might be one way to dissect these statements (Carter, 2014). The trope of ‘architect as a cowboy’ might be a rich seam of research to explore.

Interestingly, both architects have produced schemes in Monterrey Mexico, which in its way is a frontier city (Licon & Lavoie, 2017). A city where narcotics, capital and America’s free trade agreement with Mexico collide. Monterrey is a city with little planning regulation which has grown in an ad hoc manner, and which contains affluent suburbs alongside informal settlements without sewerage. It is a city full of contradictions; a large industrial city with many factories supplying the US, whose border is only three or so hours away by truck. The total exports of Nuevo Leon’s, the state in which Monterrey sits, were claimed in 2017 to be worth USD 34 billion, 10.2% of Mexico’s total exports (American Chamber/Mexico, 2017).

In many respects, the different responses by each of these firms to the urban and economic conditions of Monterrey introduce the themes explored in the following chapters. Elemental’s 2009 project in Monterrey, Mexico summarises their approach to affordable housing (Elemental, 2019). The housing is designed to be incremental, in the sense that the inhabitants can add to the housing themselves as personal economics allow. It is both an open-ended approach and an ad hoc approach, not dissimilar to the approach taken by architects in the PREVI Lima competition of the 1960s (García-Huidobro, Torres Torriti, & Tugas, 2011). However, if this reference to the 1960s seems unexpected, the contemporaneity of the ideas evident in the PREVI schemes points to the current demise of an architectural agency concerning housing. The final form of the Elemental housing appears to respect the surrounding grid pattern and typology of Monterrey. At the least, it is an effort to forge a position in the gap between ordinary lives and ‘high’ architecture (Elemental, 2019).

In Hadid and Schumacher’s scheme for Monterrey, there is nothing ad hoc about this project; no doubt that it has been designed with a capital ‘D’. Nothing has been left to the residents to design, its hive-like cells and sinuous and curvilinear forms are at odds with the city’s surrounding typology. The central landscaped space is depicted as full of people enjoying the sun. The renders of