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Organizing the city through architectural projects: non-standard solutions, multi-sited cooperation, and stable networks in the construction of the “Elphilharmonie”, Hamburg

Introduction

Cities, today, serve as sites of organizing global economic flows, they facilitate the mobility of people, goods, and services on a global scale, and they engage in efforts to secure their central position as nodes within these global networks (Sassen, 1991; Tait & Jensen, 2007). Yet, the built environment of cities is immobile. Cities are necessarily also sites of localized construction for buildings and infrastructures. Historically, local accessibility constituted the decisive factor for the sourcing of materials for construction and building traditions have evolved in relation to local resources (Oliver, 2007). Even though architecture has evolved through transnational cultural exchange and has profited from learning experiences through travels of professionals (King, 2004; Nasr & Volait, 2003), the construction business itself has been slow to internationalize. The building industry has traditionally been constituted by local enterprises and has followed the internationalization of other service sector firms only fairly recently (Grubbauer, 2015; Knox & Taylor, 2005). Scholars have been particularly interested in the role of prominent celebrity architects and design-focused architectural firms in contributing to the recent internationalization of the building industry (Kaika, 2010; McNeill, 2005, 2007).

In this paper, we seek to examine the tensions that arise from the bounded nature of the localized construction site and the globalized nature of contemporary cities. We ask how to understand architectural projects as both *localized and globalized* and what the consequences are for understanding cities as *sites of organizing* for architectural projects and related construction activities. In responding to the questions raised in the call of the subtheme about the role of architectural projects in the branding of cities, we are interested in understanding how *iconic architectural projects* which are designed to establish cities as brands and to contribute to globally circulating imageries, are, in fact, produced and constructed on site, who the involved actors are and through what kinds of networks expert knowledge is

mobilized. We draw on a case study of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall, opened in 2017 and designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, an internationally highly renowned design studio. The Elbe Philharmonic Hall has by now acquired iconic status and is regarded as Hamburg's new landmark building.¹

In the following section, three strands of literature are discussed which are key to conceptualizing iconic architectural projects as both localized and globalized. The subsequent section reports on insights from the case study and details how we contribute to each of these three conceptual debates based on our empirical findings. The main argument which we wish to advance is that the analysis of organizational action around iconic architectural projects has to go beyond a narrow focus on the role of celebrity architects and has to take into account the specific networks of professionals and subcontracted firms which are integral to the execution of the project. We conclude with the implications for the understanding of cities as sites and drivers of organizational action.

Conceptualizing iconic architectural projects and their making

Iconicity and city branding

In the field of architecture, iconicity is understood in terms of outstanding aesthetic and symbolic qualities of buildings and urban spaces (Sklair, 2010). These qualities are further enhanced by the fame acquired by the involvement of famous architects in the design, the so-called 'starchitects' – a small but highly prominent group of architects who operate transnationally and “whose reputation adds weight to place marketing initiatives that their buildings are designed to symbolize” (Jones, 2011, p. 116). Over the last couple of decades, such iconic architectures have gained prominence within public and academic discourses (e.g. Jones, 2009; Kaika, 2011).

Although iconic designs have often been regarded as a symbol of architectural globalization and as a paramount example of site disembeddedness (Kaika, 2011; Sklair, 2010), recent studies have pointed out the need to understand the significance of local contexts for the production of iconic architecture. This includes various forms of regulation of architecture through standards, norms and codes (Imrie & Street, 2009), but also locally specific social,

¹ This case study has been conducted as part of a larger interdisciplinary research project on large-scale projects as drivers of innovation in construction. For the case of Elbe Philharmonic Hall a series of 28 interviews were conducted with professionals in firms involved in the planning, design and construction of the building, to understand how the project was organized, how the involved actors cooperated, what the difficulties and what the learning processes were, and how innovation took place. This was complemented with document and media analysis.

cultural and economic features, as well as behavioural patterns of those inhabiting the building itself (Faulconbridge, 2009; Grubbauer, 2015). Scholars have pointed out how travelling design ideas, in the same way as mobile urban policies more generally, are inevitably exposed to hybridization and translation; they are not just simply transferred and adopted but altered, reconfigured and transformed (King, 2004; McCann & Ward, 2012; Tait & Jensen, 2007). However, what has remained little studied is what kind of knowledge is mobilized in the actual process of construction, how this knowledge is sourced in specific networks between design firms and their partners, and how it is adapted to the requirements.

Global architects as travelling experts

Global architectural firms are often sought out by local governments for their prestige which potentially contributes to the iconicity of a building (McNeill, 2005). However, there are also other aspects. First, city officials expect these firms to have international and rich experience which potentially minimizes economic risks and builds trust. Second, by contracting high-profile firms, city officials also hope to legitimate the project in the eyes of the public. This, thirdly, is connected with expectations that contracting global architectural firms might smooth out political debates around such projects (Charney, 2007; McNeill, 2009). Thus, the principals of such global architectural firms are often ascribed particular authority; when important negotiations or hearings take place or key decisions are made, they are expected to be present and to support the processes personally (Faulconbridge & Grubbauer, 2015; McNeill, 2015).

These requirements result in specific mobility practices of global architects as travelling experts. These practices are shaped by the need to organize construction in terms of temporary projects in different locations which require familiarity with local contexts and presence on site. Thus, globally travelling architects are conceptualized as ‘transfer agents’ (McCann & Ward, 2012), ‘cultural [intermediaries]’ (Grubbauer & Steets, 2014) and ‘knowledge actors’ (Jacobs, 2012). What has received less attention, however, is how such global architectural firms are structured internally and how their operations are organized in terms of a division of labour between the principals, the senior and the junior professionals – on site and in the cooperation with partners.

Global networks and mobility

Bound up with activities around iconic architectural projects, a profound internationalization of architectural practice has taken place (Aoun & Teller, 2016; Cuff, 1999; McNeill, 2009). Yet, because of the temporary nature of construction projects and the small number of high-

profile projects realized in a given city or region at a time, the question whether international branch offices are worth being established or whether “working at distance” (Faulconbridge, 2009) is the more feasible option remains crucial for global architectural firms. Firm networks in architecture and planning are therefore characterized by extreme mobility, on the one hand, and extreme dependence on local knowledges, on the other hand.

The high levels of mobility in terms of corporeal travel are explained with a “compulsion to proximity” (Urry, 2004, p. 29), i.e. the manifold obligations of the office principals on specific occasions in specific places and locations which require their presence, authority and charismatic personality. This results in a “seemingly limitless corporeal reach” (McNeill, 2005, p. 501), with these individuals travelling faster and more frequently than ever before. Yet, as argued by Larson (1995), architecture is a heteronomous discipline, reliant on the cooperation with other disciplines and thus intimately connected to myriad of planners, local subcontractors and specialized firms. What has not been analysed so far is what role (local and global) subcontractors and executing firms have in providing knowledge and in managing and overseeing the construction processes of iconic architectural projects, how they secure the successful execution of the buildings, and how they meet the expectations and quality demands of the design firms.

The case of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall

The following section addresses the outlined gaps in the literature by drawing on the case of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall. The project is part of Hamburg’s still ongoing waterfront development, one of the largest inner city regeneration projects in Europe. Within that context, Elbe Philharmonic Hall became not only Hamburg’s new landmark but also materialized a new “radical urban imaginary” (Kaika, 2011, p. 970) that promised Hamburg world-class city status. Initially, the project was launched by a private investor as an alternative to a failed office tower project. Once introduced to the public, the architectural draft was immediately received with strong political, civic, and media acceptance (Balke et al., 2017).

Despite the initial euphoria, the subsequent development process was accompanied by manifold problems, including severe cost increases, prolonged delays, conflicts between project partners and significant construction difficulties. In the following discussion we look beyond these notorious complications in order to explore the organizational action required to design, plan and execute the ‘iconic’ concert hall despite the circumstances. We consider the

hierarchy within Herzog & de Meuron's office, and the establishment of networks of subcontractors and executive firms, discussing the knowledge and expertise mobilized in the process and the specificities of the collaboration between different professionals for the successful execution of the project.

Iconicity through unique products and non-standard solutions

The execution of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall proved to be complex and challenging, due to the highly ambitious design that required the development of non-standard architectural and construction elements, including the façade panels and the acoustic cladding of the 'large hall'. Similar to other internationally renowned architectural firms, Herzog & de Meuron, seek to differentiate their work through one-of-a-kind design and unique engineering solutions. The architects' focus was set not just on creating an icon but also on designing and executing a unique building. It became apparent that the ambitious design crucially depended on the detailed planning and the execution processes on the construction site. As illustrated by our interview partners, one of the greatest challenges was the development of non-standard building elements, employed in the Elbe Philharmonic Hall for the very first time. Their production required the development of new tools and technologies. These were sourced from specialized firms and implemented by local subcontractors and construction supervisors, whose contributions remained invisible and underappreciated in the public discourse.

Quality control and multi-sited cooperation through employed architects

Herzog & de Meuron are a paramount example of a strong-idea firm whose main focus is set on cutting-edge design. They secure their economic growth and celebrity status, by hiring "the best and the brightest right out of school" (Coxe et al., 1987) who have the task to develop, legitimate and implement the design concepts of their 'charismatic' employers. For the execution of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall, a branch office with around 80 architects was established in Hamburg. These professionals were responsible for the interaction with the on-site partners and subcontractors. In contrast to the principals who visited the construction site every other week, the architects on-site were in charge of the daily interaction. Additionally, they needed to travel across Europe in order to locate and contract the specialized firms afterwards commissioned to execute the ambitious project. Crucially, these employees were in charge of the supervision of these partners, interacting with them throughout the entire process and securing quality control. While having little symbolic status and no visibility to the public, these employed architects proved to play a key role in establishing professional

networks and organizing the multi-sited cooperation with subcontractors and specialized firms.

Trust and expertise through stable networks between design firms and subcontractors

The linkage to specialized firms and local partners was crucial for the construction of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall due to the project's scale and complexity. However, considering the specificity of certain details, architectural features and construction elements, only a limited amount of firms worldwide were capable of fulfilling the tasks. These firms are themselves 'global players', working mainly on large-scale, iconic projects with a focus on producing highly specialized products. Architectural firms with a focus on high quality design are strongly reliant on these specialized firms, who play a key role not only in the execution process but also during the planning phases. The interviews revealed how, over the past years, in the process of delivering ambitious designs, Herzog & de Meuron and some of the leading firms for specialized products have established partnerships and developed stable networks that are built on trust and mutual understanding and carried throughout different projects. The case of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall reveals how global architectural firms are crucially reliant on their linkages to specialized executing firms and will invest significant resources to draw on these firms capabilities.

Conclusions

The paper contributes to the literature on iconic architecture and city branding by providing an in-depth understanding of how iconic architecture is actually planned and executed, what organizational action is required and what expertise and knowledges are mobilized in this process. We show that iconicity cannot be perceived as the product of celebrity architects alone. By moving beyond the focus on the figure of the 'charismatic' and prominent architect, the paper sheds light on the mostly invisible and less 'glamorous' side of iconic structures, namely of their actual realization and construction. We show that the actual making of iconic architectural projects requires specific knowledge and specialized expertise of other disciplines beyond design, which has remained understudied and undertheorized in the academic debates. Through the case of the Elbe Philharmonic Hall, we reveal the strong dependence of global, design-ambitious architectural firms on specialized executive firms and the importance of strong and long-lasting networks between architects and their subcontracted partners for the development of large and challenging construction projects. The findings indicate that the rise of iconic buildings and large-scale development projects over the last decades has enhanced the ongoing transformation of the construction industry, enabling the

emergence, advance and economic growth of highly specialized, global execution firms. By focusing on only few exclusive products, these firms are operating trans-locally and creating their own niches in the construction industry, monopolising hereby the related markets. The actors, knowledges, and networks that shape these markets make for a vital topic for further investigations.

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