

The Conscience of a Constructor

Why it matters when good architects take on big projects for bad governments.

In a speech in Belfast earlier this year, the architect Daniel Libeskind announced that he would not accept any commissions to work in China. “I won’t work for totalitarian regimes,” he told an audience in Belfast. “I think architects should take a more ethical stance... It bothers me when an architect is given *carte blanche* and told here’s a great site, build X... [architects have a] role to play at the forefront between practical issues and issues that affect people’s lives. It’s not enough just to have a good site.”

If Libeskind meant to embarrass other architects, his timing was impeccable. While most of the world’s architects are hurting from the global housing slump, the leading lights—the 20 to 30 so-called “starchitects” and their firms—are riding high on a bounty of commissions from resource-rich, developing countries. The problem is, many of these nations are also among the more oppressive. Sir Norman Foster just completed an enormous pyramid for Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan, a country cited by the State Department for countless political

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and religious rights abuses. Zaha Hadid is building a museum in Azerbaijan to commemorate the father of the country's dictator. A herd of starchitects are falling over themselves to win commissions in autocratic Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

But in recent years no country has enriched the architectural world quite like China. Libeskind is actually among the few leading architects not to have a major commission in the Middle Kingdom. His fellow architectural bigwigs—Rem Koolhaas, Paul Andreu, Steven Holl, and Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, among others—are building airports, skyscrapers, Olympic facilities, even entire new towns, and getting rich off it. The 2008 Olympics will be in part a rollout of Beijing's new trove of cutting-edge architecture, from Herzog and de Meuron's bird's nest-like National Stadium to PTW's diaphanous National Swimming Center. In many ways, building in China is an architect's dream: huge budgets, efficient bureaucracies, and no inconvenient public to intrude on one's vision. As Koolhaas said a few years ago, "What attracts me about China is that there is still a state. There is something that can take initiative on a scale and of a nature that almost no body that we know of today could ever afford or contemplate."

Today we are experiencing a signal moment in the long and intricate history of the relationship between architecture and politics, a development borne of several strands. Never have so many architects made the successful transition into celebrity-hood, a migration driven by an expansion of cultural literacy beyond the elite. People value name-brand architecture as just that—a name brand, a marker of legitimacy, what critics call the "Bilbao effect," after the overnight fame that befell the Basque city when Frank Gehry opened his Guggenheim Museum there. Now every city wants a Gehry, or a Calatrava, or a Morphosis, and their residents want the chairs, watches, and even jewelry that the designers have spun off for a little extra coin. As a result, even casual observers can probably rattle off the names of half a dozen famous designers; in the past, they would be considered insiders if they knew anyone beyond Frank Lloyd Wright. It's no longer enough to own a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan; it has to be one designed by Richard Meier, Jean Nouvel, or Annabelle Selldorf. Architecture is now a luxury consumer good—a Fendi briefcase on a much larger scale.

At the same time, the global construction boom has created a demand for these architects' work in corners of the world once thought inhospitable to anything but yurts and cinderblock piles. High-profile architecture is no longer the exclusive property of Paris, London, and New York; now every city, state, and emirate wants to gild its lily with a top-shelf design by a top-shelf designer.

Herzog just oversaw a competition by young architects to design housing in Inner Mongolia. Hadid is redoing a city square in Cyprus. I.M. Pei just finished a museum of Islamic art in Qatar.

All of this, in turn, comes at a critical moment in global history. The old order is shifting, if not collapsing. Established political powers are finding themselves challenged by upstarts. Capital is unmoored from national boundaries, even as resource-rich nation-states reassert their power by capturing capital through sovereign wealth funds. Multinational companies are finally truly multinational, but as a result find they must establish new grounds of legitimacy in a borderless world. Developing nations are discovering new opportunities to grow rapidly by exploiting natural resources, providing low-cost labor, and serving as regional hubs for international finance. To prevent everything that is solid from melting into air, all these new power bases, like those before them, seek to ground their claims to legitimacy in stone, steel, and glass.

These trends reinforce themselves. With publics learning more about architecture, super-wealthy clients, be they private citizens, corporations, or states, are willing to spend more to buy the legitimacy that high-profile design can bring.

And that is why Libeskind's stand is so trenchant, and so uncomfortable. Architects will not decide the future of the global power balance. But their work will play an important part in granting legitimacy to those who are fighting to dominate it. Architects thus have an important choice to make: Do they imagine away this crucial relationship to power, conveniently claiming neutrality in the face of immense fees? Or do they make the difficult, and perhaps damning, decision to inject morality into the practice of building?

Architecture, far from being a realm distinct from ideology and politics, has always been thickly intertwined with it. To be blunt, the poor do not pay for buildings. Wealthy individuals, corporations, and the government do. And when they do, they mark their projects with their name, their image, their values—and, in turn, the buildings render their name, image, and values in concrete and stone. Architecture, argues critic Deyan Sudjic, is a way of putting off death, a way for the powerful to make us remember them long after they are gone. That goes for individuals, but also for regimes and empires. Would we remember the pharaohs so well if they hadn't built the pyramids?

Not all architecture is meant to remind—it also can express power and ideology in the here and now. Hitler famously directed his court architect, Albert Speer, to design a phantasmagoric vision of a Nazified Berlin. Speer's design was never built, but Mussolini's moderno-fascist addition to Italy's capital city, the Esposizione Universale di Roma, still sits along the train tracks between

downtown Rome and Leonardo da Vinci airport. Mao, Stalin, and East Germany's Walter Ulbricht similarly understood the ideological power of design and rebuilt their capital cities accordingly. More benignly, during the postwar era the United States deployed the best American architects—Eero Saarinen, Wallace Harrison, Edward Durell Stone—to build a bevy of new embassies abroad, a deft twin projection of American cultural and political dominance.

And yet today, precisely because the clear lines between good and bad states—or even the lines between any states at all—have blurred, it is easier for architects to claim ignorance or indifference to moral considerations. The relatively obscure Dutch architect Erick van Egeraat got significant ink for calling Libeskind's statement a "stunt." Architecture, he said, had nothing to do with power. "I could say the same thing about Russia, or France, or anywhere. To try and ideologize architecture is totally wrong.

You completely overestimate its power." Nabeel Hamdi, an architectural fellow at University College London, belittled Libeskind's stance as simplistic. "It's not a black and white thing, good guys and bad guys," he said. "That's so old fashioned. Where do you stop?"

Both are correct, as far as it goes.

Designing in Azerbaijan is not the same as designing for Azerbaijan. Moreover, not every state project is equal—a children's hospital in Beijing is undoubtedly more kosher than a state police headquarters. But complexity is not the same as impossibility. One can draw distinctions among projects, just as it is possible to draw distinctions among regimes. The brief is not for architects to sign on to the same moral code, but for them to have a moral code in the first place. If they have no problem working in China, then they should be able to defend doing so—and not simply by claiming some sort of aesthetician's exemption from political ethics.

If anything, today architects have even more of an obligation to moral consideration than in the past. For the Nazis or Soviets, what mattered wasn't *who* built, but *what* was built. Hitler was not interested in getting the best architects to design for him; in fact, he forced most of them to flee the country. What he—and Stalin, and Mao, and countless other dictators wanted—was a particular style, a concrete expression of "German" identity. But today's regimes are less interested in standing out than fitting in. Beijing doesn't want buildings that express Chinese identity; despite its ideological roots, the Chinese state wants the same brand-name legitimacy as Paris, London, and New York—and that means going

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after the same architects. It's an inversion of the past. What gets built doesn't matter. Who does the building is everything. Azerbaijan isn't shelling out extra mantas for Zaha Hadid because it thinks post-deconstructionist architecture best expresses Azeri identity.

Libeskind is nothing if not a showman, and it is fair to wonder whether his anti-China stance was simply grandstanding. And he had to qualify himself significantly when it later emerged that he was designing a building in Hong Kong, which, while having a stronger rule of law, is still a special administrative district of China.

And yet his call remains salient: Architects must pay attention to their work within a context extending beyond the studio and the blueprint. They can no longer be willing, as one-time fascist sympathizer Philip Johnson declared, to offer up their work to the devil himself. Particularly at the highest level, architects considering work in oppressive states have an obligation to question how their work will grant legitimacy and prestige to them. This is not a call for martyrdom; every project doesn't have to be a homeless shelter. But "do no harm" is a decent starting point for doctors, and it should be for architects as well.

That obligation goes both ways. Too often the non-architectural public, despite paying attention to the names behind the cantilevers and curtain walls, ignores the impact that those same cantilevers and curtain walls have on their daily lives. It is a curious elision, given that, as Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings, and afterwards, they shape us." They also shape what we think about other people—be they companies, cities, or countries. Would anyone think fondly of Bilbao if it weren't for Frank Gehry? Will we think more fondly of China and Azerbaijan when their Koolhaas' and Hadid's are complete? Hu Jintao seems to think so. Libeskind, at the very least, does too. It is a pity too few of his fellow starchitects seem to agree. **D**