**Starchitecture. Scenes, Actors, and Spectacles in Contemporary Cities**, by Davide Ponzini and Michele Nastasi, New York, The Monacelli Press, 2017, 216 pp., ISBN: 9781580934688, US$40 (hardcover)

It has been twenty years since the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. This could be enough a reason for justifying the publication of a second edition of *Starchitecture. Scenes, Actors, and Spectacles in Contemporary Cities*, a book derived from parallel research that Davide Ponzini and Michele Nastasi have conducted since 2008 on the ways in which architectural projects have been systematically used as means for urban branding over the last few decades.

Observing the phenomenon across a range of major cities – Abu Dhabi, Paris, New York, London and Milan - the book offers a twofold narrative coupling the text authored by Ponzini and focused on the decision-making processes behind the projects discussed, with Nastasi’s photographs that avoid depicting those projects as isolated objects to show their belonging to everyday urban life. These two “texts” are often arranged according to a non-congruent relation, thus interestingly diverging from a more traditional use of images as the direct illustration of what is discussed in writing. The rationale of two parallel texts adds complexity of insight into a phenomenon that finds precisely in images the source for its dominant interpretations.

It is against some dominant interpretations, and in particular the major narrative of the *Bilbao Effect* - namely the belief in the injection of a singular architectural piece to divert the destiny of a city – that the authors direct their joint efforts. To sustain the argument, the book relies on a combination of primary and secondary research. The first is mostly based on dialogues with more than seventy interviewees chosen among actors involved in different guises in major projects around the world; the second offers the reader a comprehensive and useful set of bibliographic references to expand research on the topics discussed.

Rather than as a recipe-for-all, Ponzini and Nastasi aim to show that multiple processes and logics underlie the apparent homogeneous phenomenon of recruiting architectural firms based on their fame to produce objects capable of generating value and attracting the investments needed to place their host cities on the global map of financial competition. Overall, they argue and set out to demonstrate that the phantasmagoria of architectural creations that have populated world cities over the last three decades is always related to the political framework and the specific urban policies and regulations of local contexts, with results varying widely accordingly.

This general argument is consistently sustained throughout the seven chapters of the book, and is made explicit from the outset through the choice of the first of a long list of examples presented in text and images. The Chanel Mobile Art Pavilion by Zaha Hadid Architects is introduced as a paradigmatic example of a piece of architecture that, though grounded on a principle of constant migration, achieved different effects of city-branding based on the specific location where it docked, thus evidencing the non-uniformity of results for a signature project. More generally, this example allows, in the second chapter, the demystification of *The Commonplace of Bilbao*. While somehow an obvious choice and one that has been widely debated, Bilbao is reassessed in order to prove how the success of the Basque city in being reborn from the ashes of its industrial past was not solely the result of building Frank Gehry’s museum, but depended on the orchestration of a wider array of policies and projects for urban renewal.

The book than follows on with monographic chapters on single cities offering a range of political and planning contexts to start assessing the diversity of similar strategies apparently followed by public governments, private corporations, and non-profit organisations. Showcasing some of the most publicized architectural products of the last few decades, the book tells the stories that led to their construction and reassesses them according to the specific local conditions in which those stories unfolded. So, the centralist decision-making of Abu Dhabi in which the government is both public agency and private developer is contrasted with the ‘moderately pluralistic’ City of New York (164) or with the more openly democratic and participatory context of Helsinki, or even with the extreme case of the non-city that Vitra has built in Weil am Rhein as the company’s architectural shrine.

The authors explicitly avoid approaching their subject according to a for/against line of thinking. Likewise, they do not engage with issues of architectural form, aesthetics or style – indeed, their stories never go deep into a formal analysis of the projects and, despite its presence in the title, architecture is not what this book is really about. More specifically, the book dwells ambiguously inside that gap between architecture and planning that has grown since the latter part of the 20th century. This same division is arguably also at the origins of the very dominant narratives of Starchitecture that the book aims to exorcise, yet remaining somehow trapped within their contradictions and paradoxes. Both in the subject being observed and in the way it is approached in the book, architecture and planning are clearly kept as separate domains – the first being equated to image or aesthetics and presented as dis-empowered from making any proper contribution to the urban realm, the second being associated to larger scale and scope of vision and described as too weak to cope with the complexities of power relations that govern urban territories. The way out of this impasse, the authors grant, can only be political, and hopes for the possibility of resisting a mere production of decontextualized, self-referential architectural products are proclaimed since the beginning of the book.

Despite acknowledging the political nature of their subject matter, Ponzini and Nastasi purposely decide to leave ideology apart. Their aim is not to take position in a reform/revolution divide about the future of planning. In this way, the book takes distances from other streams of recent scholarship that have dealt with the effects of neo-liberal policies on the built environment. Thus, it does not belong to the Neo-Marxist line of thinking on the growth of a global *Empire*, nor does it sympathise with the growing literature on *The City as Commons*. More ‘humbly’, as the authors claim (206), it wishes to expose the more complex mechanisms behind the glimmering surface of much architectural collecting that has turned many cities into paradoxical mirrored images of the Vitra Campus.

With this book, a new chapter in the long novel on globalism versus localisms is added: hopefully, it will help going beyond the narrowness of often-oversimplified narratives. Given its refusal of utopia, what remains to be tested is whether its a-political narrative and collection of urban stories will provide enough stimuli for decision makers to start assessing the processes of city making with more nuanced minds.

Footnotes

1 See the triad by Hardt and Negri, *Empire, Multitude, Commonwealth* . See also Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*.

2 Stravides, Common Space: the City as Commons. London: Zed Books Ltd., 2016.

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