**Building globalization: transnational architecture production in urban China** by *Xuefei Ren*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2011, 218 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-70981-9.

*Building globalization* is a timely contribution to the study of contemporary urban China influenced by globalization and urbanization at the unprecedented scale. The intention of the book is to ‘understand the rationales and logics underlying the search for international architects among China’s urban elites’ and ‘the role of transnational architectural production in making global cities’ (p.14). The sociological approach adopted by Ren in this book enriches and complements current literature on Chinese urbanism which concentrates largely on economic, institutional and morphological transformation. Architectural production is a unique lens through which Ren reveals the embedded social network and power relation of various actors in three urban projects in China’s major global cities, Beijing and Shanghai. Based on intensive field research and interviews, Ren documents SOHU projects, funded by a private developer in Beijing; Xintiandi, a property-led urban regeneration in Shanghai; and the National Olympic Stadium. Ren carefully analyzes the initiatives, strategies, and interactions among five groups of social actors, namely domestic entrepreneurs, property owners, state bureaucrats, foreign investors, and globally mobile cultural elites, in the process of producing the state-of-art architecture in contemporary Chinese cities.

The main argument of the book focuses on the accumulation and conversion of political, financial, and symbolic capitals by and among those major actors of the projects through their complex, conflictive, and dynamic social relations. The understanding of space goes beyond physical containers of human activities, but as a strategic terrain of capital accumulation. As such, Ren’s interpretation of the Chinese cases adds valuable insights to the present study of globalization and Neo-liberal trend over continents, although this point has not been emphasized as literature in the book. The Chinese examples witness that architecture and their prestigious designers are commonly employed for place branding and commodification, a phenomenon widely observed worldwide and powered by hypercapitalism. While similar social issues such as gentrification and stratification are observed in the Chinese context, the Chinese pursuit of globalization however is unique from its western counterparts due to the particular power geography in current society, as Ren vividly explains. A comparative perspective is often offered in the three case studies to clarify similarities and differences of various social phenomena in the Chinese and western contexts. At the end, she urges that the current spatial strategies in Chinese cities produce ‘vast discontent and inequality’ (p.177). For audiences who are interested in postmodern urbanism, post-industrial regeneration, and globalization, this book provides great local insights that are relevant to the study of the global urban future.

Furthermore, *Building Globalization* pays attention on the searching for national identity by China’s urban elites and the state party in the global coordinate at the critical moment of history. It reminds Chinese citizens of a similar attempt pursued by the first generation of Chinese architects and social elites under passive western influences in the early twentieth century (Esherick, 1999). The question of what is Chinese has always been controversial and changeable for them. In relation to the current debate, Ren reintroduces the idea of Critical Architecture, which should challenge the current ideology and social injustice and she believes is lacking in China. For architectural audience, Ren poses an essential concern on the social responsibility of the profession in the market-driven environment. National identity does not only lie in the image representation of architecture, but also in socially responsive spaces that support wellbeing of all social classes. Therefore, the debate on eye-catching shapes or superficial traditional skins of architecture is rather superficial. More consideration needs to be oriented towards the social dimension. This point of view echoes Cuthbert’s (2007) claim that the design profession should engage with solid theory crossing sociology, geography, and economics for instance, so that urban form, meaning, and function are embraced in design as well as context. In this sense, for decision-makers, the choice over domestic or reputable international architects should not be driven by conservative nationalism nor global liberalism, but by creating socially sustainable spaces for Chinese citizens.

From the urban design point of view, current practices by the new generation of Chinese architects and planners are sophisticated in the generation of forms, but lacking the understanding of the social foundation. This book offers a good practice which potentially has wider applicability to help tackle issues of social sustainability in design processes. However, this advantage is limited, since the book is structured upon individual urban projects and lacks a consistent conceptual framework to map complex social relations. Ideas are introduced and independent arguments are stated regarding each project which weakens the main argument and obstacles further exploration. In addition, the book does not discuss on how architectural images of the three projects are deliberately created and remotely consumed through media by world consumers, which otherwise would strengthen the idea of the symbolic power of architecture.

References

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