

# Brand Aid

Or, The Lexus and the Guggenheim (Further Tales of the Notorious B.I.G.ness), by **Michael Sorkin**

**IT IS ONLY NATURAL** that the Guggenheim should be at the Venetian. Fabled Peggy, after all, dwelled by the Grand Canal. The easy comparison, though, is less than apposite: this Guggenheim is not to that one as the Venetian is to Venice.

The Vegas Guggenheim is, in fact, two, both designed by Rem Koolhaas. A small Cor-Ten box with several dozen very good pictures from the Guggenheim and the Hermitage opens off the main entrance to the hotel with all modesty. Out behind the casino is a much larger space of semi-industrial character in which the Frank O. Gehry & Associates-designed, BMW-sponsored *Art of the Motorcycle* now sits. Both components of the museum house their respective shows gracefully. The rust-patinated steel walls by the lobby are repatinated with wax and match nicely the polychrome stone floors of the hotel. The big room makes no particular pretension to being more than that. Neither gallery reads as an object—hopeless trying to compete with the pirate ship across the street.

Were photography not tenaciously

forbidden, I would have tried for a shot out of one of the two narrow windows in the steel box. Past the Picasso, through the glass and protective grating, the mock Campanile and Ducal Palace of the Venetian rise to meet. At the end of the long perspective, the top of another hotel is visible, its electric sign reading “Mirage.” The view, of course, is totally Vegas. The simulacra. The tackiness. The pretension. The brands.

Branding is the quintessence of the new Vegas, and profligate signifiers dance to the tune. It isn't so much that the idea of the brand is extended but that the concatenation is so extreme. Indeed, Vegas is the museum of branding, with its row of hotels named after Paris, New York, Luxor, Venice, Mandalay, Bellagio—hypertrophied but familiar evocations of place—recalling antebellum mansions or yachts named for some fondly remembered honeymoon spot, stuffed with artificial charm.

The motorcycles fit the paradigm well. Every example in *Art of the Motorcycle* is a brand-name factory product, no room given, for example, to

customization—to the popular transformation of the object. Indeed, the only bike that comes close is a reproduction (the one non-archival item in the show) of the red, white, and blue customized Harley from *Easy Rider* (the original having been stolen years ago). I followed a group of aging bikers—dressed to the nines in flamboyant self-assembled gear—through the gallery, witness to the *real* art of the motorcycle. My thought was that their interaction with brand was loving but resistant. But it was tough not to be

roulette tables and the high-stakes slots. Just as the way out of the museum leads through the shop, the exit from the casino is lined with boutiques and museums. At the motorcycle exhibition, the stairway is painted in Prada's signature chartreuse to reinforce the point. The retina is the point of sale: to see is to buy. In contemporary "casino capitalism," citizenship is a credit line, democracy a crapshoot.

The Guggenheim has a track record here. Joseba Zulaika quotes a city councilman in Bilbao worrying—

tive level. Particularly the American perception of what brand is, namely something that is reduced to its essence and can never be changed. I think that is a very limited form of branding. What we have been trying to do with Prada, for instance, is instead of trying to reduce it to its essence, we try to stretch it, so that more becomes possible instead of less. And that's exactly the same idea that we're trying to introduce for Europe. It extends the repertoire of possibilities instead of shrinking it.<sup>3</sup>

But what is the subtle, nuanced, nonessentialist, version of branding alluded to here? Thomas Frank, in his *One Market Under God*, describes the allure of the new market order and the rise of its avatars, Rem's progenitors:

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put in mind of the bloody fight between rival gangs the previous week in nearby Laughlin, where three bikers wound up dead.

In a catalogue essay of blithe pomposity, Thomas Krens—director of the Guggenheim, famed for riding his chopper to the office—cites and then discards Walter Benjamin's distinction between the auratic original and the mechanically reproduced copy as "irrelevant in today's discourse." He is, of course, simply congratulating himself for the boldness of the idea of exhibiting motorcycles in an art museum, as if that were a remotely original idea. This dissembling, however, is also a distraction from his real innovation: soliciting corporations—like BMW, Giorgio Armani, or Hugo Boss—to sponsor "shows" of their own products, turning museums into boutiques and—with perfect business logic—the boutiques into franchises.

The match of Rem and Krens—two tall men with flat affects—is a great one: both are selling the same product: products. "Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity," opines Koolhaas.<sup>1</sup> And so we shop for Picassos and Kandinskys, for Harleys and Yamahas, for Prada shoes and Bulgari brooches, all under the aura of the covetable pots of gold at the end of the fleeting rainbows glistening about the

in the wake of the decision to invest \$500 per capita on the museum—that the decision was like "gambling in a casino."<sup>2</sup> That horse came in. The merger of art, shopping, and gambling also has a track record. Here, the innovator is Steve Wynn, whose Bellagio hotel (now sold to Kirk Kerkorian) was the standard-setter for the merger of high-end shopping ("the best assortment on the planet"), "gaming" (the new owners have reportedly removed the receptacles that had formerly muted to an elegant hush the sound of money tumbling from the Bellagio's slots), and, of course, the art collection (now decamped to Wynn's new Desert Inn).

To create the success of any commercial multiple, the brand is critical. Given his own reluctance to engage any nonquantitative criteria of quality and his conflation of consumption and nature, Koolhaas holds the concept in high esteem, elevating it to the core of his architectural ideology, something capable of subsuming all other values, including the political. And he can get huffy about it. As he remarked in a recent interview in the *New York Times* about his European Union-sponsored design for a new EU flag,

Basically I think the discussion about what brands are is held on an incredibly primi-

Just as the democratized, soulful corporation had arisen to resolve the problems of the hierarchical, elitist corporation, so a new breed of marketing thinker proposed a new conception of the brand. To think of the brand as a static thing, as a rock of Gibraltar or one of the great books, was to miss its dynamic nature. The brand, according to the new cognoscenti, was a relationship, a thing of nuance and complexity, of irony and evasion. It was not some top-down affair, some message to be banged into consumers' heads. The brand was a conversation, an ongoing dialogue between companies and the people. The brand was a democratic thing, an edifice that the people had helped build themselves simply by participating in the market. The brand, in short, was us.<sup>4</sup>

Frank describes with acerbic precision the emergence of a new "discipline" within the field of advertising—"Account Planning"—that promised "to restore legitimacy to the brand."<sup>5</sup> The frightening reach and vagueness of the concept are summed up in a British pamphlet introducing account planning to the uninitiated: "Advertising is a means of contributing meaning and values that are necessary and useful to people in structuring their lives, their casual relationships, and their rituals."<sup>6</sup> The imperative for re-

branding advertising as account planning sprang from a climate in which the average American—exposed to a million advertising messages a year—was becoming skeptical about commercial claims and deafened by the din. The conclusion: only a reconceptualization of the brand would allow products to “break out.” This demanded a fresh intellectual apparatus. Frank notes the infusion of anthropological concepts into account planning, not to mention the large number of fashionably dressed lapsed graduate students who were bringing the lessons of Lévi-Strauss to Levi Strauss. The anthropological style of studied disengagement (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call anthropology “the most important academic discipline in the production of alterity”), with its sense of superiority to its subject, is pure Koolhaas.<sup>7</sup>

This inflated concept of brand informs the approaches of both Rem and the Guggenheim, and both have been highly successful in making their marks in a crowded—or expanded—field.<sup>8</sup> In a recent TV commercial the camera pans around a silver Lexus parked in front of the titanium Guggenheim. “I like to look at things of beauty,” says the Renzo Piano look-alike actor poised between sedan and museum. The Lexus is a fine car. Bilbao is a fine building. The conversation is genuine. The products are well placed, mutually reinforcing.

It does seem, though, that more than one thing is going on here. Certainly the idea of associating the product with something held in high regard—like Catherine Deneuve or Bilbao—is Advertising 101. How else to sell soap? For architecture, though, the strategy of association also represents a handy back door for the resuscitation of style as a category of judgment. While this is good news for sheepish stylists, it is non-neutral, placing expression in the service of particular values. The grafting of the anthropological model reinforces the idea of the neutrality of the brand as well as its proliferation. (“These peo-

ple are different, therefore let us sell our products differently. Indeed, let us identify more differences to sell even more product.”) But the business model—the real agenda—for the Guggenheim (or any other branding operation) is scarcely disinterested. It entails the sale of both advertising and product, and seeks to establish the superiority—or at least the utility—of what’s on offer. This provides the opportunity for the introduction of another standard of judgment, the curatorial, affirming the role of the tastemaker as the ultimate agent of brand. Style, as Stephen Brown notes, is the *substance* of postmodernity and thus must be accounted for by the authorities.<sup>9</sup> And, of course, celebrity is the main measure of authority in Brandworld.

Such standards remain usefully slippery. Even today—thirty years into postmodernity—functionalism is still the analytical default for determining architectural value. The form-follows-function formula is no less aesthetic for locating the value of visuality in the criterion of use. Of course, for architecture the relationship has generally been fraudulent, just an excuse for a shriveled system of taste. The legacy remains, however. Just as Koolhaas promotes his own brand with a blizzard of statistics, photos of the “real” world, and a weary sense of globalism’s inescapable surfeit and waste as the only legitimate field of architectural action, the New Urbanists—with their own megalomaniac formulas of uniformity—create their slightly “different” Vegas of “traditional” architecture based on its association with the imagined reality of bygone happinesses. Their tunes may differ, but both are lyricists for the ideological master narrative that validates and celebrates the imperial machine.

Like architecture, politics plays in the realm of symbols. The architecture of Vegas—in which the creative likes of Koolhaas or Gehry are trivial players—does reflect a larger reformulation of the profession’s model of practice. European Modernism based

its fantasy of self on the idea of production. Although architects may not have had genuinely strong affinities with the working class, they did promote an identification of architecture with the industrialization that produced it. Whether this was simply in the mechanical appearance of buildings, the idea of mass housing, or even the idea of factory production, the aim was to wrest architecture from the ethereal and unquantifiable realms of art and place it on a terrain where argument and quality would cleave to rational, objective standards.

Behind this lay a set of values—including such quaint notions as equality and justice—that were adduced as the ultimate rationale for subsuming architecture under the category of mass production. Modernism’s focus on working-class housing implied a politics of distribution, a largely unspoken socialism of universal access to basic necessities. But the mode of production under which most modernists flourished was anything but egalitarian. Indeed, the rapid conversion of this fragile ideology into no more than style (an oft-told tale) was the signal of this basic contradiction, as well as of architecture’s powerlessness *qua* architecture to effect change.

The debate has certainly moved on. In the post-Reagan, postmodern era, the model for architectural creativity is more and more “big” business. This is both a matter of the rationalization of architectural practice in increasingly indistinguishable corporate offices (SOM, HOK, NBBJ, . . . OMA) and of the way in which the aesthetic supplement itself comes not simply to surrender any idea of its own autonomy but to embrace the criteria and symbols of global capital. This begins as a matter of organization and nomenclature but ultimately defines value: architecture assumes the ethic of business as its highest moral imperative. The rhetoric, however, remains deliriously avant-garde.

It’s all always perfectly quantifiable, a matter of market share. In the move to colonize ever-greater markets, no

self-respecting corporation can afford to ignore the world wide web. Hani Rashid, the Guggenheim's Chief Creative Officer and Chief Technology Officer, describes the motivation behind Guggenheim.com, the expansion of the museum (which has recently acquired its first two works of virtual art) into cyberspace. "There is a notion that art and culture exist sporadically on the Web, and in different places. There's not one location where you have a trusted brand that provides a place where I can call up all of those things." The model for the operation

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is CNN.com. "They cover a broad range of sports, financial news, etc. The question is: can we create a kind of parallel in the art and culture world?"<sup>10</sup> Rashid celebrates the utility of the net and the virtual Guggenheim as a memory box, Mnemosyne as a business model, all things for all people. What remains unremarked is the authoritarianism of such hypercentralization of choice.

Erecting their memory palaces in the house of forgetting, though, museums are really just catching up with many artists whose affection for the business model exceeds any other. Indeed, has anyone had a more acute understanding of branding than Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Mark Kostabi, Barbara Kruger, or—for that matter—Hans Haacke? Capitalism has increasingly become the subject matter of art, and architecture follows the trailblazers with docility. But as in Vegas, the lines between irony, kitsch, and criticism become monumentally blurred. This is the stage on which the branders dance, the chameleon realm that can always claim a critical position but which unfailingly operates according to the rules of the system.

The crisis of the museum is precisely in the exponential expansion of the

artistic territory. Whether the question is of housing the gigantic product of minimalism (Krens's deaccessioning of good paintings to buy a collection of instructions for minimal art is a museological Ponzi—or Panza—scheme), of the endless possibilities of appropriation, or simply of the multiplicity of mechanically reproduced objects that can be designated beautiful, the progressive aestheticization of everything makes the concept irrelevant. The curve of the space required to house the old masters becomes asymptotic, approaching the axis of neg-

ligibility as the preponderance of the museum must of necessity be devoted to "contemporary" art, which co-opts every form of material production. Tolerance becomes repression through sheer numeracy, the ultimate indifference to difference.

When the museum goes out of business by going into business, great categories die. It's the same process that Rem applies to urbanism. His formula "World Equals City" is an equation that can lead only to the elimination of the city. Preaching this inevitability is, however, a choice, and not simply an acute bit of teleological thinking about material culture. Removing yet another seam of distinction further reduces choice in the new "empire" of globalization that—for all its vaunted hybridity and flexibility—continues to impose centralized control, uniform values, and the regime of pure profit.

But there are issues here that exceed cynical mockery or crass co-optation. The Venetian Hotel is well known in Vegas for reasons beyond its inclusion of the Guggenheim franchise among the other franchises housed along its interior canals and around its food courts. The singing gondoliers, the waiters at Lutece, the

croupiers spinning the roulette wheels, and the dollies doling drinks to the high-rollers are all unorganized: notoriously, the Venetian is a non-union hotel, much resented in a town in which the unions are strong and effective. Sheldon Adelson—its owner and the client for all this fine architecture—is a legendary foe of unionization, and there are widespread reports of understaffing at the hotel to save wages. Surly service by overworked employees has been a recurring complaint.<sup>11</sup> If there's a politics to architects like Gehry and Koolhaas hawking their brands, it doesn't devolve on any arcane issues of representation or even, exactly, on the degree of complicity with the corporate powers for whom they provide jesting and high-cultural legitimation. Nor would it be right to call them union busters for making a living from a kind of client from whom architects have always made a living. Nor, for that matter, is Rem wrong to recognize—in the manner of Hardt and Negri—that under the regime of the empire of global capital there is no outside, that there is no approach to the system save from within.

But where *Empire* proposes a politics of resistance, Rem is simply acquiescent, as if nothing were at stake. The advocacy of branding is a sell-out in architecture, reducing its meanings to mere advertising, a fine obliviousness to the larger social implications of architectural practice. No amount of bilious insistence that brand is simply the equivalent of culture and its styles of inventing identity can obliterate the transformation. But why rebrand the idea of identity in the first place? Why replace the variety of psychical, cultural, and physical constructs compounded in "identity" with the language of commercial speech? To control it, of course. Branding is just another excuse for power's concentration at the top. The pathetic spectacle of Rem consulting with a number of "leading European intellectuals" to formulate a strategy for the EU flag is precisely as authoritative as the nine out of ten

doctors who recommend Preparation H.<sup>12</sup>

This is a very old story: The Platonian critique of rhetoric rings as true for advertising and branding. Socrates' beef with the rhetoricians was that theirs was a practice that could produce persuasion in the absence of belief, a fundamentally mendacious activity. His fear was that the technique could attach itself to any objective, swaying people to act against their own interests. The brand—think of those Benetton ads depicting miserable refugees—is predicated on the same leap. I wear this sweater, therefore I am of good conscience. This is not simply a question of exploiting and cheapening the plight of the oppressed but a distraction from the question of the wretched sweatshop worker producing the brilliantly branded, conscience-saturated goods.

Conflating the defense of brand with the defense of ideas is precisely to deflate the content of the latter. In the era of mechanical reproduction and the death of aura, plagiarism and theft become irrelevant and the meaning of speech arbitrary. The value of the brand can only be defended, therefore, by greater and greater co-optation. Branding is the medium of empire. Free speech? That was *my* idea. I'll see *you* in court.

Not long ago, a former employee of OMA sued for what he claimed was the firm's plagiarism of a design he'd worked up as his thesis project. Although he lost the case after a lengthy trial, it was a fairly delicious moment and showed the real implications of the fatuous trademarking and copy-righting that have become a whimsical hallmark of Rem's big books. Is he up to the implication? What will he do should Arjun Appadurai—who long ago developed a nuanced version of Rem's mock-copyrighted and nearly empty concept of "scape"—raise an objection to the unacknowledged usurpation? How spirited will his defense of brand be? The real test, though, will be Rem's own first legal claim for infringement—bourgeois

morality's ultimate speech-act. Or has the plagiarism suit beaten him to the punch?

Las Vegas and its empire of signage are beautiful the way great advertisements are beautiful. For their technique and pumped-up visuality. For the pleasures of being deceived. For the raising of commercial speech to a shout, deafening as a rock concert. For their impressive powers of self-recreation, the move from rat-pack chic (ironically embodied in the kind of architecture, now blown down, that most closely represents Rem's own formal proclivities) to more postmodern forms of commercial illusion. For, in short, having successfully rebranded themselves as a wholesome nexus of family fun and rump urbanity.

The Koolhaas brand is likewise successful: the man is a master of product placement. As the current architect of choice for cultural institutions self-conscious about their own fading hipness, the agency has just the strategy you need. If you'll slip into this Sean John tee or this metal box or this transparent dressing room, things will begin to look better. And check out the tomes of market research, branding ideology via sheer weight of irony and statistics. There's charm here. A goof. But in service of what? More junk? Branding space is disembodied space.

#### Notes

1. Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, eds., *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), quote on inside of front cover.
2. Joseba Zulaika, "Tough Beauty: Bilbao as Ruin, Architecture, Allegory," in *Iberian Cities*, ed. Joan Ramon Resina (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 12.
3. "Yesterday, Prada; Tomorrow, the World," *New York Times*, 20 June 2002.
4. *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 253.
5. *Ibid.*, 254.
6. *Ibid.*, 252.
7. *Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 125.

8. For a truly hilarious peek down the ludicrous rabbit hole of marketing "theory" and its appropriation of all that is intellectually fashionable, see Stephen Brown's *Post-Modern Marketing 2* (London: Routledge, 1995).

9. *Ibid.*, 52.

10. Tom Vanderbilt, "The Culture Shop," *edesign*, March 2002, 46.

11. For a discussion of the role of Sheldon Adelson in the making of the "new" Vegas, see Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

12. Chee Pearlman, "First Look: Yesterday, Prada; Tomorrow, the World," *New York Times*, 23 May 2002, F11.

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