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The internationalization of architectural practice

Mobilizing dependence to secure and enhance (relational) autonomy on the construction site

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Abstract

More than any other profession, architecture has been shaped by the tension between autonomy and heteronomy. Recently, however, this dichotomy is seen as unproductive for understanding architects' practices in-depth, especially in the context of the growing internationalization that is transforming and restructuring architectural practice. The paper applies the lens of 'relational autonomy', grasping architectural practice in relation to the actions of other built environment professionals, and to material artefacts. Dependence is framed not as a threat but as a productive potential. The focus of the paper is on the practices of less prominent architects in celebrity global firms. More specifically, the paper explores the practices enacted during the actual materialization of design-ambitious edifices, on-site and in the workshops of sub-contractors. The main argument is that less visible architects can secure and enhance the (relational) autonomy of global architects during construction, by *actively* shaping a specific working context, where they can *purposefully* mobilize dependence. Practices during construction generate new opportunities for creative engagement and enhance architects' influence over processes beyond their autonomous actions, thereby enabling the making of products with high symbolic value.

Keywords: global architects; relational autonomy; internationalization; materialization; professional practice

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the figure of the 'global architect'[2] has attracted the attention of scholars across disciplines, mainly due to their increasing influence on transnational urban development (Faulconbridge–Grubbauer 2015, McNeill 2009). The projects constituting the portfolio of global architects are often prestigious, design-ambitious ones, potentially canonized in discourses, academic curricula and the media. In the literature, these projects have often been regarded in terms of their symbolic and aesthetic qualities, yet there is still little insight into the *background work,* the specific global architectural practices, required for the actual making of international projects *on-site*.

To address this lacuna, the paper moves beyond the narrow focus on the figure of the seemingly 'autonomous' global architect, and explores the practices of less prominent project architects, responsible for the execution of ambitious projects worldwide. By taking into account the role, tasks and responsibilities of these professionals, the paper focuses more specifically on the everyday practices enacted on-site, not necessarily associated with autonomous work. During construction architects cannot reduce their actions merely to the creative and artistic component of their work; rather their autonomy is constrained mainly by their dependence on the expertise and capabilities of builders and sub-contractors. By drawing on empirical research, the paper argues that practices outside of the design studio can however secure and enhance the autonomy of architects during the execution phase and are thus central for the making of what architects consider products with high symbolic value.

More than any other profession, architecture has been shaped by the tension between autonomy and heteronomy (e.g. Larson 1993, Stevens 1998, Jones 2009, 2011). This paper however does not juxtapose these concepts as contradictory entities. By following the work of Imrie and Street (2014), the paper adopts the concept of 'relational autonomy', understanding autonomy as "constituted through, and, crucially, enhanced by, the collective interactions with other actors, and by the social contexts in which such interactions unfold" (Imrie–Street 2014:8). This conceptual lens allows architectural practice to be grasped in relation to the everyday actions of other built environment professionals. The paper explores how by not only recognizing but also by *actively* and *purposefully* mobilizing "their dependence on the social conditions, and contexts, that frame their actions" (ibid: 26) less prominent architects on-site can secure and enhance the (relational) autonomy of global firms. By applying this lens, the paper enables a more differentiated understanding of internationalization processes in architecture, more specifically of how large design firms operate on international construction sites, thereby contributing to the academic scholarship on global architects. Additionally, contributions are made to studies on the creative industry that have usually explored creative labour within design-ambitious architectural firms (Kloosterman 2008, 2010), detached from construction processes.

2 Term coined by McNeill (2009), referring to celebrity architects or (prominent) large architectural firms, both operating internationally

The empirical analysis is based on thirteen[3] semi-structured interviews conducted in two design-ambitious global architectural firms. The interviews focus on the practices of less prominent architects with experience in different design and execution phases, which allows them to work with less supervision, and assume significant responsibility for demanding tasks. In the terms of Reckwitz (2003), practices refer to everyday actions and interactions with others, and relate to material objects. These architects operate as (sub-)project leaders on a single project over years, dealing in detail with the actual execution, ensuring that the final product fulfils the demands for high aesthetic quality (as posed by their celebrity employers and the discourse). To generate a conceptual understanding of the project architects' practices on-site, the analysis of the qualitative empirical material follows a grounded theory approach (Strauss–Corbin 2010). For this purpose, 14 (out of the original set of 40) codes were chosen to grasp how architects work on international projects in relation to other actors, their practices, knowledges and resources, as well as to artefacts and materialization processes. The data was analysed in an iterative process, by going back and forth between conceptual literature and empirical material, and through multiple steps of re-coding. Newly generated codes included "being present", "foresee", "explore", "mutual dependence/autonomy", "adapt", "open", and "critical reflection". By narrowing down the categories, the actions required for securing and enhancing the (relational) autonomy of architects were conceptualized as practices of "engaging with sub-contractors", "engaging in construction processes" and "opening up practice"; these categories inform the analytical structure of the third section.

The paper proceeds as follows: In the second section the concepts of autonomy and heteronomy are discussed. The third section draws on the empirical data. Finally, some concluding remarks are introduced.

Oscillating between autonomy and heteronomy

The 'autonomous hero'

Professional organisations seek to secure their members an exclusive social and cultural status by enhancing their specific attributes and qualities (Imrie–Street 2014). This is mainly achieved by drawing clear boundaries to other professionals (Abbott 1988), securing thus an exclusive claim over distinct disciplinary knowledge, and monopoly over a specific market of professional services (see Cuff 1991).

In architecture, design as conceptual work is regarded as the primary architect's expertise (Gutman 1988) and is therefore attributed alone to the efforts of the individual, often perceived as a 'lone genius'. Professional associations have secured architects' exclusive status by "raising the status of creativity and design expertise within society at large, and positioning architects as the construction professionals best placed to deliver such expertise" (Cohen et al. 2005:3). Universities have successfully reproduced the image of the autonomous architect. As Cuff (1991) argues, classic architectural education is defined by the cult of individual brand-name architects and celebrates creativity as a 'master value' (see also Blau 1984). In a mono-disciplinary setting, centered on the 'design studio', students are trained to desire the responsibility for design tasks and the building's aesthetic components[4]. Architects are thus socialized to conceive of themselves as autonomous agents in the building process, who are responsible for creating an architecture that is merely "a representation of itself, of its own values and internal experience" (Eisenman cited in Imrie–Street 2014).

Most recently, the archetype of the autonomous architect-hero has been epitomized by the so-called global architects (Grubbauer–Steets 2014, McNeill 2009). This minor fraction of the professional community has been associated with higher levels of autonomy for several reasons: First, global architects have the priv-

3 With the exception of one, all interviews were recorded, and eleven have been transcribed verbatim.

4 Aesthetics-focused approaches have recently been challenged by educators, yet despite suggestions for a more process-oriented approach, curricula have not been broadly revised (Grubbauer 2019).

ilege to work on prestigious commissions, characterised by cutting-edge designs (Faulconbridge 2009, Jones 2009, 2011). Second, in an international context, they can outsource routine and less creative tasks (such as construction documents) (Cuff 1992) and embrace the artistic component of their work. Third, through their celebrity reputation global architects are dominant in the processes of discourse making, being entitled to define categories of evaluation, and to decide which projects are worth recognition (Jones 2011, Stevens 1998). This privileged and powerful professional status enables global architects "to dictate their own terms and tell clients what is good for them" (Stevens 1998:95), reproducing the image of leading designers as autonomous creators.

Architecture's intrinsic dependence

Despite the continuous reproduction of the image of the autonomous artist-hero through professional associations and universities, scholars across disciplines define architecture as a heteronomous profession. The building, Larson (1993) notes, is not an example of architects' autonomous execution of talent and knowledge, but reveals their dependence on the skills and expertise of numerous professionals. Similarly, other scholars have emphasized the specific working and organizational context, over which architects (or any built environment professionals) rarely have sole control: Due to their complexity and inherently interdisciplinary nature, building processes are collaborative, communication-based and interorganisational, presupposing collective actions, negotiations and compromises (Harty 2005, Yaneva 2005). Moreover, the autonomy of architects is further constrained by the demands imposed by clients, consultants, and authorities, which differ from the symbolic and aesthetic ones imposed by the discourse (Stevens 1998).

Global architects are restricted in their actions as autonomous agents as well. First, while working internationally global architects exceed the legal jurisdictions of their profession and need to form alliances with local architects (Faulconbridge 2009). Second, as they lack specific knowledge of local building and regulatory conditions, global architects rely on the expertise of partners on-site, who are responsible for the project's successful implementation in the particular local context (McNeill 2009). As a result, international architects never design "an architecturally conceived totality" (Ahuja et al. 2017:9). Also, in the context of complex and cutting-edge projects, global architects are more than ever dependent on numerous consultants, and highly specialized sub-contractors. Finally, autonomous actions are restricted due to the significant organizational challenges large firms face, including operating in internationally networked enterprises with multiple branch offices worldwide, employing hundreds of professionals and coordinating sub-contractors across the globe (McNeill 2009).

Embracing heteronomy

The prevailing autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy has shaped the debates on architectural practice across disciplines, including sociology of architecture, urban studies, and creative industry studies. This is clearly seen in the juxtaposition of design tasks and less creative ones, often concerning managerial responsibilities, dealing with problems on-site, conflicts with builders and subcontractors, and budget and time concerns (e.g. Cohen et al. 2005, Styhre–Gluch 2009). Tasks that exceed the autonomous efforts of the individual are often considered by professionals as 'non-architectural' (see Ahuja et al. 2017). Furthermore, the autonomy/heteronomy opposition is visible in the disrupted relationship between architectural practice and the construction industry. Although "it is through this industry that architects' ideas of buildings are realized" (Gutman 1988:43), there appears to be a clear opposition between the creative capacity of architects, and what is considered the routine and manual making of buildings (Sage 2013). Similarly, within studies on the creative industry there has been a clear differentiation between artistic and craft labour (Banks 2010). Thus, scholarship on design-ambi-

tious firms focuses rather on the practices of young, talented architects engaging in creative tasks, exploring their *l'art pour-l'art* motivation to design products with high symbolic value (Kloosterman 2008, 2010).

Recently, however, this dichotomy has been regarded as unproductive for a full understanding of architects' actions and practices (see Imrie–Street 2014, Till 2013). Scholars have called for a move away from the "individualistic, under-socialized accounts of architects and their practice" (Imrie–Street 2014:4), considering architects' autonomous actions as "fundamentally and irreducibly relational" (Christman 2004). Through the lens of 'relational autonomy' dependence is not understood as a threat and restriction, but rather as a productive potential. This approach is especially fruitful when exploring the growing internationalization of architectural practice. New organizational structures presuppose different working practices (e.g. designing at distance and hypermobility, see Faulconbridge (2009)) whereas the shift of professional jurisdictions questions starchitects' autonomy and control over design processes (see also Cayer 2019). In the context of new forms of dependence and restrictions, practices outside of the design office (in branch offices or on-site), and of intense interactions with other 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999) and artefacts[5] have remained largely understudied. Through the lens of 'relational autonomy', the paper explores architects' practices enacted during the *actual* making of edifices with high aesthetic value. The paper thereby argues that invisible professionals *actively* shape a specific context, where they can *purposefully* mobilize dependence, to secure and enhance the (relational) autonomy of global architects during construction processes.

Securing and enhancing (relational) autonomy on the construction site: shaping contexts and mobilizing dependence

By drawing on a set of semi-structured interviews, this section explores the practices of less prominent architects, enacted on the local site and usually associated with quarrels over cost and quality, and less with the creative efforts of 'stars' and talented, young professionals. Yet, through their engagement with other disciplines and material artefacts project architects can balance between the inherent pursuit of perfection and "the inescapable reality of the world" (Till 2013:2), to ensure the successful execution of complex and design-ambitious edifices in the international context.

Engaging with sub-contractors

Although often regarded as non-architectural and burdensome tasks, almost all interview partners emphasized communicating with, managing and coordinating between clients, builders and sub-contractors as central for meeting the high aesthetic demands of global architects. Architects perceived it as their main responsibility to build a *"nice atmosphere"* for everybody, to create strong and trusting relationships with their project partners. Thus, as described by one project leader, it is essential to be understanding and empathic, to show that you care about people even through small gestures, such as knowing the name of their dog.

According to one of the project architects, creating trusting relationships with builders and sub-contractors proved central "*during the construction phase"* when *"decisions have to be made on site".* By winning the trust of other team members, international architects ensured that builders and sub-contractors were interested in their opinions and design-related concerns. Thus, project architects could assume that firms would "*give you a call or […] say: 'Hey, come over, look at this'"*, if problems emerged on-site. In this way, as an interviewee argued, architects *"can still influence how things are done"* and secure the aesthetic quality of their products, even in situations beyond their scope of action (international architects are not authorized to make final decisions) and outside of their field of expertise (challenges on-site refer to less design-heavy but

5 Interactions with other professionals and artefacts (e.g. drawings and models in different scales, see Yaneva 2009; Ewenstein–Whyte 2009) are often considered detached from construction sites and complex production processes.

rather technical issues). By creating trusting relationships with the construction industry, project architects actively shaped a specific project context that could enhance their "opportunities for creative engagement" (Imrie–Street 2014:22), and thus secured their autonomy in the restrictive context of international projects.

Engaging in construction processes

Central for these stable relationships, as pointed out by different architects, is being physically present and actively involved from the very beginning till the project's completion. This meant, as described in numerous accounts, regularly visiting the construction site, overseeing building processes (e.g. pouring concrete, installing doors and façade panels) but also visiting the workshops of sub-contractors, and observing how they work and develop products. By doing so, architects could grasp the restrictions and challenges sub-contractors encounter throughout the project. Those included the pressure to work fast on multiple commissions, without losing money but also to develop new working methods and acquire new skills, to execute the complex designs, characteristic of the portfolio of the interviewed firms. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of working closely with the industry on potential solutions. During intense *"one-to-one moment[s] of kind of trying to figure this out together"*, architects engaged in building processes by *"[watching] them [the sub-contractors] chisel concrete, or […] [by telling] them: 'Use two different chisels on your machine and do it like every 6 inches on [the] one and every 12 inches on the other.'"* Other interviewees revealed that sometimes they spend years developing new solutions side by side with the sub-contractors, observing their work and trying to identify the challenges emerging during the manufacturing process. Project architects also seek to secure the resources needed to tackle these challenges, for instance by negotiating longer time frames with the client on behalf of the sub-contractors.

Across the interviews, the majority of architects stressed the importance of remaining flexible and finding the right balance between the inherent pursuit of perfection and the restrictions of actual construction work – this often required the eventual negotiation of certain compromises. The interviewees however did not consider these compromises as a threat to their autonomous actions, or to the quality of their designs. Rather, by actively facing multiple restrictions, architects and sub-contractors could develop together solutions that met everyone's expectations: *"…they seem happy, we're happy. That's a good place to be."* This suggests that for architects to secure 'a piece of good design' and to fulfil their own aesthetic aspirations, sub-contractors needed to feel comfortable and confident that they can execute the design on-site. To secure and enhance their own autonomous actions, architects on-site needed to recognize their dependence on others, while embracing and grasping in-depth the restrictions of their partners, and while sharing the unforeseen challenges others face. As a result, architects potentially enhanced the autonomy of their project partners, by enabling their "sense of self to be developed and exercised" (Imrie–Street 2014:9).

Opening up design practices to dependence

The interview data reveals that architects on-site actively and consciously shaped a specific working context, in which they could embrace their own heteronomy, while making space for the restrictions of others. Architects opened up design processes and their practice to dependence, contingencies and unforeseen situations, by anticipating and purposefully exploring potential restrictions. Thus, for instance, one interviewee revealed that they often develop alternatives in advance, evaluating potential ways to reduce cost. Once the construction firm is involved, architects can already present different design options and solutions, providing the opportunity to *"discuss stuff and to reconcile and to optimize and to see, 'how do we still get the [same] image'"*. Other architects emphasized the importance of developing in advance mock-ups (1-to-1 samples) of complex elements, to test the feasibility of their designs and ensure the quality of the final product. Thus, at an

early stage, architects invite the construction industry into their practice, asking for their expertise and help. Some architects praised the good feedback that often came from the industry – firms could help architects to further develop their ideas, bringing the initial design even further than what they had expected.

By anticipating and actively exploring eventual restrictions that can compromise the aesthetics, project architects often needed to adapt their design, while seeking to preserve the core of the original concept and fulfil high quality demands. Various interviewees emphasized that it is their task to optimize and adapt, to identify new materials and products, to develop alternative details, to potentially simplify their designs, and to find the *"local means"* of realizing their ideas. Such processes of translation (see also Imrie–Street 2014) stimulated the creative capacity of architects on-site and were perceived as exciting and productive for the end result. As described by one interviewee, restrictions arising from a tight budget can lead to better solutions, *"because you somehow knead the whole thing, as often such problems […] are actually internal problems."* Another architect argued that cheaper is not necessarily bad for the quality; rather such restrictions push architects to be inventive even after the design phase.

Through their actions on-site and in the firms' workshops, project architects learnt to be flexible and open to alternatives, to question themselves and re-think their approach and ideas, to weigh up priorities, and to continuously re-evaluate what is important for the success of the project. Furthermore, by doing this, architects could gain knowledge exceeding their discipline (e.g. product manufacturing) and could remain actively engaged in processes transcending their field of expertise, and thus the scope of their autonomous actions. By actively engaging in the co-production of their products, project architects generated new opportunities for creative engagement, securing and enhancing thereby their (relational) autonomy.

Conclusion

The interviewed architects on-site engaged significantly in building strong and trusting relationships with project partners from the construction industry, and in execution processes, such as overseeing construction progress and co-developing mock-ups. The empirical material revealed that by "[embracing] the inter-disciplinary and collaborative nature of the design and production of the built environment" (Imrie–Street 2014:27), architects *purposefully* opened up design processes and their practice to other disciplines. This was achieved by facing and anticipating eventual contingencies, and by *actively* exploring and sharing various restrictions with their project partners. In this way, architects translated potential constraints into alternative design ideas and solutions, while gaining new capabilities and skills[6]. In this course, they could mobilize dependence in a productive manner for the design process and outcome, as well as for their architectural practice. The practices of architects during construction processes thus played a key role in enhancing architects' influence over processes beyond their autonomous actions and in enabling products with high symbolic value to be made.

The lens of 'relational autonomy' proved highly fruitful when exploring the practices of global architectural firms: First, the concept enabled a more holistic understanding of architectural practice, by re-positioning the matter of materiality and feasibility, and the strain of construction work into the everyday work of architects (e.g. Jacobs–Merriman 2011, Sage 2013). As a result, the paper provided insights into the background work required for the actual realization of international projects. The execution of prestigious projects across the globe is still undertheorized, being overshadowed by the discussion about the symbolic and aesthetic qualities of edifices meant to generate urban distinctiveness (Jones 2009). Second, the chosen conceptual lens provided a more in-depth grasp of the everyday work in large global firms, and thus of architectural practices that are often seen as rather burdensome. In academic scholarship the intimate relationship between these practices and those associated with artistic labour in the design office is still understudied (e.g. Cohen et al.

6 Also corresponding with the findings of Imrie and Street (2014)

2005; Ahuja et al. 2017). Yet, by moving beyond the practices of 'stars' and professionals engaging in creative design processes, the paper argued that communicating with project partners and overseeing building processes is crucial for enhancing architects' autonomy.

Perceiving architects' scope for autonomous actions as interwoven with the practices of the construction industry is pertinent in the current context of growing internationalization and digitalization of building processes. Considering the ongoing transformation of the structures and scope of architectural professional practice (Cayer 2019, Cuff 2014, Faulconbridge–Grubbauer 2015) there is a need to re-think the values transmitted through academic socialization and the processes of professional legitimation. In this setting, it is vital that architects re-consider their practice in relation to the construction site, materialization processes and their dependence on "the inescapable reality of the world" (Till 2013:2), which still bears productive capacity for creative engagement.

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