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Author

Figueiredo, Sergio Miguel

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Branding Catastrophe

Sérgio Miguel Figueiredo



The role of architecture in response to catastrophe has changed significantly in recent times. Besides addressing the physical need for reconstruction, architectural discourse and imagery are now used to raise the visibility of reconstruction efforts through branding. Strategies employed in postdisaster recovery thus contribute to the general shift to an experience economy.¹

For several decades, it has been recognized that advanced capitalist markets have become so saturated with goods and services that the only way to distinguish them is by means of the experiences they claim to offer. Companies have thus adopted a practice of selling experience by “intentionally [using] services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual.”² Branding is pivotal in this economic (and inherently social) paradigm because it engages with consumers, “not just [as] identifiers, [but]...first and foremost [as] providers of experiences.”³

Similarly, architectural production has increasingly come to be valued not only in terms of form and function but also as a catalyst for experience and symbolic transformation. This role has been thoroughly analyzed in projects like the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, a textbook example of architectural branding.⁴ Even though the museum was just one of a number of coordinated renewal and restructuring projects in Bilbao, the propagation of its image through the mass media was the major force in the city’s recovery from economic decline. The cultural historian Fredric Jameson, most notably, has argued that such flattening of architecture to image has been a powerful instrument in reducing it to commodity status.⁵

Recently, the disjunction between architectural image

and function has achieved new sophistication. At the same time—unlike conventional architectural branding, where high-profile imagery functions as a proxy for urban ambition—the reconstruction of Greensburg, Kansas, and the Make It Right Foundation’s effort to build new houses in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward have tried to use architectural discourse to garner visibility and funding.

Greensburg GreenTown

On the night of May 4, 2007, an F5 tornado, of tremendous magnitude, swept through Greensburg, Kansas, obliterating 95 percent of its buildings in a mere twelve minutes. As it passed through Greensburg, the tornado was 1.7 miles wide, and its winds were estimated at 205 miles per hour. In an act of exceptional bravery, this rural community decided to rebuild and reinvent itself as a model sustainable community.

“We’re starting from the beginning,” Steve Hewitt, Greensburg’s city administrator, told the *New York Times* in June 2007. “We’re creating a town and building it energy-efficient and building it green.”⁶ The goal was nothing less than to set the standard for eco-friendly, energy-efficient architecture, to become a laboratory for experiments in environmental sustainability.

In the fall of 2006, Leonardo DiCaprio’s production company was already developing a project called “E-topia,” a reality-TV series about the eco-friendly reconstruction of a town. As envisioned, it would “follow the construction workers, architects, planners and environmentalists as they spend several months building the burg.”⁷ The company had begun the project without deciding which town would undergo the makeover. But following the flattening of Greensburg and its decision to reinvent itself, E-topia quickly became Greensburg. A television crew soon began documenting its reconstruction, with the intent of telling this inspiring story as a thirteen-episode series.

The shows first aired in 2008. Yet despite using the inherently visual medium of television, they focused mostly on the human struggle of Greensburg’s residents, rather than the town’s proclaimed goal of “green” reinvention. This decision could easily be dismissed as a result of the long time it takes to design and build new structures. Simply put, there wasn’t much built yet, innovative or not, when the television crew was gathering its footage.

Above: A newly built house in Greensburg, Kansas. Photo by Stacy Barnes, City of Greensburg.



However, the reality of the situation has become clearer as time has passed. The first new buildings just didn't present an image that could convey the rhetoric of green design. Indeed, most new construction in the town is remarkably conventional looking. The town's green agenda has mostly been achieved by using better thermal-insulation materials (like structural insulated panels and insulating concrete forms), by reusing tornado debris, and by building energy-efficient modular homes.⁸

Yet, despite the fact that much of the rebuilt town does not look much different than it did before the tornado, at least one building has not only earned its green credentials but also externalized them in a cogent image.⁹ The 5-4-7 Arts Center, which takes its name from the date of the tornado, is the result of a design/build program (Studio 804) at the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Both its active and passive energy systems receive expression in physical form.¹⁰ Wind turbines are the most visible of its active energy systems. Its passive systems include a double skin that envelops its interior spaces, significantly reducing heating and cooling loads. Its blue tempered glass also combines with yellowish recycled wood to generate an unmistakable green aura.

One major difference in the origins of this building

may account for its striking appearance. The 5-4-7 Arts Center was developed in a studio setting through design review and criticism. Not only were its form, function, and efficiency evaluated but so was the way it expressed and communicated those qualities. Since the 5-4-7 was constantly assessed in both performative and communicative terms, its underlying goal of sustainability was not hidden inside its walls. It has thus been able to engage the community and become a catalyst for further transformation.

As an attempt at branding within the larger experience economy, much of Greensburg GreenTown's new architecture may be judged a failure. Despite highly articulated rhetoric about "architecture that is to convey the character of Greensburg through the ideas and technology of sustainable design," and about "innovative solutions...[where] diversity and uniqueness are encouraged," the reality is the town doesn't support this message.¹¹ In fact, its present appearance seems to undermine that message. How can the town's reconstruction be so revolutionary, a prototype for future green settlements, if it looks just like any other rural Midwest community?

The central fact of Greensburg's media strategy to date has been that the architectural principles of

its reconstruction are more potent than the resulting images. This has led to the suppression of images and a projection of discourse in their place. However, as green discourse morphs into built forms, examples like the 5-4-7 Arts Center will need to become more prominent. The fulfillment of an ambitious green promise is undoubtedly more recognizable in the arts center than in more pedestrian structures. In the end, this is what will sustain Greensburg as a “green epicenter” and a “sustainable model community.”

Make It Right

Two years after Hurricane Katrina caused New Orleans’ levees to fail, the actor Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation launched a high-profile campaign to build 150 new single-family houses in the particularly hard hit Lower Ninth Ward.¹² The initiative derived from Pitt’s desire to be a catalyst for responsible redevelopment in the city.¹³ The Make it Right Foundation defined its goal as the construction of sustainable, affordable, safe and healthy homes, with an emphasis on innovation and high-quality design, that preserved the spirit of the community.¹⁴

In December 2007, Pitt unveiled thirteen prototypical designs developed by different architectural teams, and initiated a national campaign to raise money to build the proposed 150 houses. Determined to boost the visibility of this effort, Pitt appeared in as many media outlets as possible. From the “Today Show” to “Charlie Rose,” his image became the instrument of the reconstruction effort and a placeholder for the houses to come.¹⁵

The designs were presented in the media only as exterior and interior renderings. Plans and sections, drawings that could explain the innovative features of the new houses, were absent. This oversight was apparently due to the kind of appeal being made: to a larger public, not just the architectural community.

Nevertheless, the all-important donation section of Make It Right’s Web site relied on the floor plan of a generic house, which visitors could visit to choose items to donate to the reconstruction effort.¹⁶ The branding potential was further diminished by interior renderings of the thirteen architectural prototypes that suggested a general lack of spatial innovation. This was recognized by the architectural critic Aaron Betsky, who labeled most of the designs “too boring to provide any sense of difference.”¹⁷

In the end, only the Dutch firm MVRDV provided designs and images that were not highly generic. MVRDV’s “bent house” adapted the typical Gulf Coast



“shotgun” typology by raising its two ends off the ground. In so doing, the scheme not only drastically reconsidered the relation of house to ground but also created interior spatial differentiation and raised areas of escape for residents in case of a future flood.¹⁸

MVRDV’s radical pragmatism resulted in immediate controversy.¹⁹ At a public presentation of the prototypes, members of the local community considered the “bent house” offensive because it resembled the aftermath of the storm.²⁰ Meanwhile, in architectural circles the proposal’s explicit political message, pointing out the contradiction of rebuilding in the Lower Ninth Ward when levees still didn’t offer protection against future floods, generated heated debate.²¹ MVRDV’s method of accepting reality and reflecting it back as rational architecture may have been too blunt for the context. But as provocation, the design succeeded in prompting discussion of Make It Right’s original intention and whether the design prototypes addressed it. This question proved particularly timely because of the lack of innovation in the designs.

Residents seeking to recover past lives may naturally lean toward convention.²² Yet, even Anna Klingmann, a critic known for her consumer-centric views, has acknowledged, “if architects were merely to take consumers’ desires literally, without any imaginative reinterpretation, their work would undoubtedly be a disastrous perpetuation of the status quo, at worst mixed in with kitsch and nostalgia.”²³ Unfortunately, this assessment describes most of the houses slated for construction in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Above: MVRDV’s “bent house” proposal for the Lower Ninth Ward. Image by MVRDV Architects, Rotterdam.

Opposite: The 5-4-7 Arts Center in Greensburg, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Studio 804.

Discourse and Images in Architectural Branding

In *Brandscapes*, Klingmann has advocated a more consumer-oriented approach to architecture, by creating an architecture informed by marketing and branding strategies. “Unlike a lot of contemporary architecture that is still driven by notions of fetishized abstraction and critical distance...brands bridge the psychological gap between product and client, forming an interactive consumer experience,” she wrote.²⁴

In both cases of postdisaster reconstruction described here, however, an effort has been made to employ branding without accompanying architectural imagery. Architectural discourse appears to work well early on, as a way to enhance visibility and attract funding—which seems logical because it takes time to build new structures. But to capitalize on this identity, such efforts need to evolve, in a second phase, into more conventional campaigns, where images become the operative elements.

This condition is particularly relevant when arguments such as innovation, prototyping, and the advancement of architectural practice are concerned. Both Greensburg GreenTown and Make It Right emphasized designs that would be groundbreaking. At some point, distinctive forms must emerge from this effort that are consistent with its rhetorical claims and that express a departure from the norm. As new buildings appear, public attention will inevitably shift from “what we will do” to “what we have done,” and at that point the campaigns will falter if they don’t have more to offer.

Such a transition from discourse to imagery also allows architecture to directly engage the public, a key criterion for success in the experience economy. Engagement is also needed to “maximize architecture’s potential to offer authentic and inventive solutions, to affect a change of public opinion, and to combine economic objectives with cultural and social objectives.”²⁵

Although these words were written by Klingmann, they are also the stated aims of both Greensburg GreenTown and Make It Right.

Notes

1. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore are credited with the original identification and analysis of this economic trend in *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. Bernd H. Schmitt, *Experiential Marketing* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. 30.
4. In his article, “Bilbao 10 Years Later” (*New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2007), Denny Lee wrote “[t]he so-called Bilbao Effect was studied in universities throughout the world as a textbook example of how to repack cities with ‘wow-factor’ architecture.”

5. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August 1984), pp. 53-92.
6. Kathryn Shattuck, “Playing a Leading Role in the Ruins of a Tornado,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2008.
7. Michael Schneider, “Leo’s Green Build Skein,” *Daily Variety*, Oct. 16, 2006.
8. Projects in Greensburg GreenTown’s sustainable building database can be seen at <http://greensburg.buildinggreen.com>.
9. Other temporary structures, such as those resulting from the design/build program at Kansas State University’s College of Architecture and Design, called “Greensburg Cubed,” also display an innovative image, which articulates the notion of sustainability.
10. The 5-4-7’s active and passive energy systems were also crucial in the building’s LEED Platinum certification award, the first in the state of Kansas.
11. Quotes taken from BNIM Architects, “Greensburg Sustainable Comprehensive Master Plan,” May 19, 2008.
12. Robin Pogrebin, “Brad Pitt Commissions Designs for New Orleans,” *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2007.
13. One year earlier, in August 2006, Pitt and Global Green USA had cosponsored the first sustainable design competition in the Lower Ninth Ward. It was won by Workshop APD, with its entry “greeNOLA.”
14. A history of Make It Right may be found on the foundation website, http://www.makeitrightnola.org/mir_SUB.php?section=mir&page=main (accessed Feb. 21, 2009).
15. In all his appearances during this media blitz, Pitt sported the same distinct cap, creating an image that was as coherent as his message of need.
16. See <http://www.makeitrightnola.org/donate.html> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2008).
17. Aaron Betsky, “Making It Not Quite Right in New Orleans,” *DB*, 142, February 2008, pp. 14-15.
18. MVRDV proposed five housing schemes. Even though each is extremely compelling, only the “bent house” is presented on Make It Right’s Web site and featured in media reports.
19. I am particularly privy to the working method and design production of MVRDV, since I worked at the office in 2006.
20. See Andrew Blum, “Letter from New Orleans: Saint Brad,” *Metropolis*, March 2008, p. 27.
21. Winy Maas, one of MVRDV’s principals, declared that the MVRDV designs were intended to address this wider perspective, and that such provocation was good because it would push people.
22. However, according to Stefan de Koning, project manager at MVRDV, one of the residents is interested in building the “bent house,” and construction drawings are expected to be produced soon.
23. Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 185.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 187.