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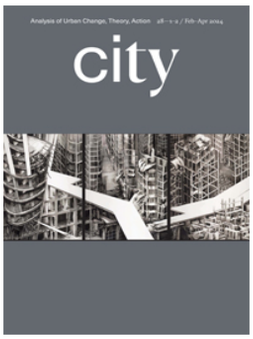

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Commanding heights: the role of wealthy 'starchitects' in city remaking

Amparo Tarazona-Vento and Rowland Atkinson

Censuses of the world's super-rich now include among their ranks several architects whose personal financial position stems from their status as influential 'starchitects'. We discuss the economic, political and social forces that concentrate fortunes in the hands of a professional elite who are increasingly also members of a global wealth elite. The rise of such starchitects exemplifies how capital flows are generative of subsidiary but important classes of professional agents who have accumulated significant fortunes as a result of city (re)making. Thus a select few in this field possess the kind of 'money power' that is generative of a capacity to direct changes in the built environment. Courted by city administrations and super-rich clients starchitects are increasingly charged with delivering symbolic projects that reinforce expansionary circulations of capital. We develop a concept sketch of how a global cadre of starchitects and their practices are fundamentally aligned with the shift of many cities to plan star-driven vehicles in order to capture capital. We discuss three elements that are crucial in determining the agency of starchitects: first, economic and political constraints or opportunities; second, normative conditions within

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industry and city institutional contexts; and, third, the important role of professional and power networks.

Introduction

This article offers a critical discussion of the factors shaping the practice, plans and designs of architecture as a field that increasingly benefits from expanding capital flows through urban settings. In many cities today we can find wealthy (star)architects operating on a global circuit in which competition for capital investment and the circulation of bodies and wealth of the super-rich are deemed important (Forrest, Koh, and Wissink 2017; Florida and Mellander 2019). In this context changes in the built environment such as mega projects (Sklair 2017), verticality (Graham 2016), and empty housing (Soules 2021) appear to be signature elements of an urbanism that is strongly imprinted by a select group of architects. Such changes speak of the closer relationship of the elite segment of this profession to cities at the centre of footloose capital movements and the interests of super-rich clients. Starchitects and starchitectural firms echo, but also express, the expanded scale of private capital in the built environment which has generated more, wealthier professionals who possess greater autonomy and thus the capacity to shape the city in their own image and that of their increasingly super-rich clients.

One key proposition to emerge in recent critical urban studies approaches posits that the look, scale and form of cities has been strongly influenced by architects working in a highly financialized, investment-oriented and socially disinterested global context (Kaika 2010; Sklair 2006, 2017; Soules 2021). The result has been processes of city-(re)making, ushered in by wealthy individuals, corporations and city administrations, by offering significant latitude for individual architects to affect the symbolic form and ambience of cities, streetscapes and key buildings. We can align these changes with the longer history of capital's fortunes wherein a massive growth in personal and corporate fortunes in the early decades of the 20th century, collapse in the mid-century and then revival from the 1980s (Piketty 2014)brought parallel changes in the political economy of cities and the projects taking place within them. Thus the spectacular fortunes of the rich appear to coalesce in two key periods, first, a 'belle epoch' of riches in the 1920s (dented by the World Wars and concessions to social democracy achieved after them) and then the expansion of a trans-national capitalist class, favoured by pro-market, anti-tax and neoliberal reforms from 1980 to date (Edgerton 2018). These moments and class beneficiaries are important to our understanding of what appear to be related shifts in the built environment of cities in these moments. This was the time of newspaper men, new corporations and their buildings that were designed to signal the money-power and social standing of the rich of the early 20th century (Domosh 1988; Leslie 2019). Today a key goal is to link local economic development strategies and design strategies to new investment, the expansion of land-property capital circuits and financialization projects, marking a form of urban capitalism

in which enablers and service professionals have themselves been major beneficiaries (Atkinson 2020).

The challenge to capital generated by the post-war settlement of the 1950s provided the impetus for the designs that underlay the class project of neoliberalism (Harvey 2007) to advance the interests of capital and capitalists living off it. But this was also distinctly an urban project in the sense that development, speculation and intensifying circuits of money flows were strongly attached to city economies and spaces (Harvey 2012). This period was marked by healthy returns to capital and to those who held it, a time when the rich saw their fortunes expand dramatically. In terms of urban life these changes also generated more polarized (Hamnett 2021) cities in which new tax and welfare arrangements generated by growing private wealth and austerity for the public realm, including the commodification of many public goods (Christophers 2023).

Architectural practice, in line with wider societal trends, has seen the expansion of a socio-economic gap between a small group of elite architects, who accumulate ever increasing symbolic and material power, and a wider mass of salaried architects. This has generated visible consequences for diversity within the profession, which is also reflected in the built environment (Jeong and Patterson 2021). At the top of this elite we find a group who have come to be known as starchitects. While not representative of the wider profession—starchitects are predominantly male, white and originate from or have connections to affluent global north countries—they have a significant effect on the shaping of the places we live in, that goes beyond their small number. Certainly, stararchitects do not operate simply as individual agents, but work through the teams of actors within their architectural firms. Thus their success depends on the organization and management of corporate businesses employing a myriad of other salaried architects and other professionals (McNeill 2009). Despite this interdependence however, they also need to be recognized as wealthy and thus powerful individuals whose talent, personality and public persona are promoted and are seen to embody the brand of their architectural firm. In this article we evaluate the forces generating a numerically and wealth-expanded professional elite, who are the visible heads of global—often 'boutique' (McNeill 2009)—architectural firms. In order to do so, in contrast with micro-sociological approaches such as Yaneva's (2017) that focus on the capacity of the materiality of architecture to produce a political effect, we take a macro-political approach that broadly ties this group of 'starchitects' to the intensification of capital circulation through the built environment, the increasing money power of commissioning global rich clients and the buoying of professional standing that has accrued to positionally advantaged individual professional actors. We note that the rise of starchitects—elite architects who are powerful within the profession and whose reputation reaches beyond the architectural field—is synchronous with these factors.

We offer an analysis of not just why this group has been propelled, but why they matter to questions of local economic strategy and, ultimately, to the wider social conditions. Our focus is on the contribution of an elite group among a distinct profession, who not only can be considered as actors that are key to processes of city building but are also themselves personally wealthy and

who thus have some agency over the form of exclusive and excluding city-making projects. Starchitects appear able to command high fees, face-down challenges by public and democratic bodies, often aligning themselves with capital-valorizing visions of the city or projects that symbolize such ambitions (Tarazona Vento 2015, 2022). Thus, independently of or in addition to other personal characteristics (such as gender, class and race) that have contributed to propel them to the status of starchitects, wealth brings with it a certain capacity to effect change, or to create material shifts in urban life, albeit within certain limitations.

Concentrated forms of wealth among urban design professionals are consequential to those theatres of urban life closely tied to the global financial economy. After the onslaught of the COVID pandemic, property agents brokering sales in the super-prime districts of major cities began again to talk of the 'roaring'2020s. This expression was intentionally picked to denote the similarity of the current moment to the speed, wealth and exuberance of the era, a century before, in which staggering private fortunes were made (Piketty 2014). Titans of industry derived spectacular wealth from a global-colonial economy (Leslie 2019). Raw money capital was refined into the symbolic landscape of buildings, parks and new districts (Fainstein 1994). Transformations in the skylines, form and scale of city built environments were used to display social standing (Sudjic 2006). John Paul Getty, the Rockefeller family and the Rockefeller centre in New York; Eusebi Güell and the work of Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona; Andrew Carnegie and both the Carnegie Hall in New York and the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh; and Sir William Haswell Stephenson and Newcastle's public libraries are thus names associated not only with massive personal wealth, but also major urban projects that signalled an urban political economy in which individuals appeared to stride the globe, gathering riches which were then used to cement the sense of triumph of nations in the northern metropoles.

History shows us that today's moment is not the same as what has come before, but it nevertheless offers parallels in terms of the driving forces shaping more unequal and alienating urban environments in which the logic of capital reigns foremost while subordinating human needs (Christophers 2023; Soules 2021). Today we can see how a massive growth in the numbers and combined wealth of the super-rich has generated projects in many cities, designed to attract other rich people or directed at channelling flows of investment capital to new residential and commercial projects (Atkinson 2019) or iconic 'vanity' projects symbolizing the desire for social standing of their funders (Sudjic 2006). Sales of super-prime luxury homes have returned to full bloom and projects delivering signature and iconic buildings are again being planned in many cities. This can be seen in projects like the Steinway tower (New York), 9 DeKalb Avenue (Brooklyn), Intempo in Benidorm (Europe's tallest residential building) and the Herzog & de Meuron One Park Drive at Canary Wharf among many others. Liverpool's waterfront regeneration project has brought buildings representing early 20th century's industrial wealth such as the Three Graces side by side with today's iconic architecture, such as the Museum of Liverpool designed by 3XN. These new districts, buildings and key projects require design professionals to develop them and architecture has come under particular scrutiny as handmaiden to the rich, to help produce cities attractive to the rich,

and to enjoy the patronage of consortiums of the super-rich and elite developers as funders of their projects. We argue that cities are in many ways again being built by architects who are, on the one hand, enablers of the projects of cities and the super-rich and, on the other hand, agents who are able to assert their own visions on city landscapes.

We begin by offering a historical account of the role of architects in urban life, and the significance of the rise of an elite of wealthy starchitects. Second, we work through a series of cases that help us to offer a basic theorization of the positionality and relative agency or power of elite architects. By relating their work to the concepts of structure and agency we ask whether such individuals have significant power over what is built and its function, or whether they should be considered more the recipients and conduits through which a financialized capitalist-urban formation flows? We suggest that primacy should be given to the structural position of key architects, rather than looking particularly to individual architects themselves. In other words, the rise of the starchitect is, in large part, a function of the move into a more financialized, capital-intensive circuit of city development activity that has produced this group of professional 'winners' in much the same way as it has produced the expanding ranks of the global super-rich.

City-building: the role of the architect in urban life

The most obvious way in which architects participate in the wider economic and cultural life of cities is as designers of key buildings through which ideas of power, ideology, ambition and community are signified (Jones 2009, 2011; Kaika and Thielen 2006). Through major modifications and introductions of spaces and form they create visible and symbolic marks in the urban fabric, shaping the way we perceive and use cities. Perhaps more significant is the way that buildings and indeed much larger projects, sometimes taking-in entire districts, do much to express and reflect key ideological structures to citizens and witnesses. Thus some commentators have argued that architecture itself expresses neoliberal, capitalist, market and other signified values (Atkinson and O'Farrell 2023; Spencer 2016). We can also see how architects are able to exercise influence as members of the profession's elite, as public intellectuals or thought leaders and as conduits of economic and political power as this is expressed physically through urban projects.

The prestige of certain architects within the profession positions them as influential role models, allowing them to shape architecture as a discipline and as a profession (McNeill 2009). Considering architecture as a field that includes architects and a wider system of critics, architectural schools, museums, publishers, clients and publics, Stevens (1998) argued that the elite of this profession are constituted by what he calls the 'subfield of restricted production', a professional domain of activity that can be contrasted with that involved in systems of mass production. Such subfields have different internal dynamics and hierarchical systems that stem from the prioritization or privileging of different forms of capital—temporal (or economic) in the subfield of mass production and symbolic (intellectual and aesthetic) in the subfield of restricted production.

Increasing economic capital is the main goal in the subfield of mass production, while for those architects able to take on larger and bespoke projects the key objective is increasing their prestige as an artist and intellectual (Stevens 1998). What is important to note is that the subfield of restricted production is one that has wider hegemony, over practices, styles, motifs and other elements which help to dictate the architectural canon of their times.

The symbolic capital of elite architects, and their status as quasi-intellectuals, is recognized outside the profession, granting them the kind of public gravitas that enables them to intervene in political debate regarding cities (Jones 2011; McNeill 2009). In the UK such status was, for example, accorded to figures like Richard Rogers and Norman Foster and, in Spain, we can identify figures like Rafael Moneo and Iñaki Ábalos. Architecture as a discipline values symbolic capital (in other words, the resources that inhere in built spaces as signifiers of prestige or social power) over temporal capital. As members of the restricted production subfield, elite architects strive to be recognized as thinkers, architectural 'geniuses' or mavericks to maintain and increase their symbolic and reputational capital. They can be seen to cultivate their cultural credentials by giving public lectures, publishing articles in architectural journals and the general press, and participating in exhibitions of their work (McNeill 2009; Olds 1996; Stevens 1998).

As mediators of economic and political power, the mutually beneficial relationship between architects and their powerful clients means that the work produced by them overlaps with the interests of the powerful as these are expressed in contracts, projects and briefs which serve to construct symbols that deliver standing to both the architect and to those commissioning such projects. Here architectural competitions may function as a means of consecrating key figures in the field and to channel further commissions to winners and nominees. Prizes are considered a public demonstration of the alliance and mutual dependence between powerful elites and the architectural profession (Stevens 1998). Nevertheless, architecture has always been subordinate to other forms of power. For example, such power may take the form of raw money that gives architects the mandate and resource to cleave through the fabric of cites (Berman 1983), or the power and rules of states, governors and planning officials (Sudjic 2006). This is why some have seen architecture as a heteronomous[1] field—because architects are dependent on people commissioning them to work on a project and therefore need to establish durable relationships with those who have or manage the resources necessary for the realization of their designs, which are typically the state and wealth elites (Jones 2009; Sudjic 2006).

The fact that architects are only able to build to the extent that they are given the resources to do so determines what and how they produce—including questions of aesthetics and style. These external factors are also conditioned or delimited by the powerful actors that commission them to create new designs. It is critical to note, in this sense, that architecture is a socially conditioned and located practice that has economic and political inputs which shape practice and resulting forms (Jones 2009, 2521). However, architects may also be able to assert their relative autonomy or independence from powerful patrons by appealing to aesthetic principles or philosophic discourse to explain their stylistic and formal choices. In this way they may draw a veil over the socioeconomic conditions and

power relations underpinning architectural production and therefore contribute to reproducing them (Dovey 1999; Jones 2011). Such a sense of autonomy is useful for 'the powerful' but it also allows architects a higher degree of agency to pursue their own interests.

Another key source of elite architects' agency stems from their position as public intellectuals and mediators of political and economic power. This positionality helps to constitute their power and operates as the basis of their influence over urban life. Prestige within their profession also gives elite architects the kind of cultural credentials or weight that allows them to act as public intellectuals, and an impression of relative autonomy from the powerful allows them to act as mediators of political and economic power rather than as mere lackeys. However, even here, in the intersection of their public roles their relative agency, their ability to influence urban life, needs to be continuously negotiated. They are not only able to act within those structural constraints but are also able to modify them, and to subtly change the limits and assumptions contained within the field of architecture more broadly. Elite architects need to simultaneously adapt to powerful clients' needs, cultivate their relationship with the powerful, and maintain their prestige within the profession as well as their autonomy as artists and intellectuals. In this sense the general process is one of co-evolution rather than determinism; they have agency to act within structural constraints but also to modify those constraints through their action.

Capitalist globalization and urbanization has helped to transform how, and to what extent elite architects can exercise agency—choosing where they build, who they build for, what they build and how they build. These processes have been seen as important to the competition between cities with each other for mobile investment, skilled labour, and tourism (Begg 2002; Harvey 1989; Hubbard and Hall 1998). The use of prestige architecture in the pursuit of global advantage has also influenced where elite architects build, resulting in a changing geography that is often linked to geo-politics and economic supremacy. For example, these factors and processes can be seen in the emerging iconic architecture of the Gulf cities (Molotch and Ponzini 2019), Asia's new capitals (Koch 2018), and in China (Ren 2011) where there has also been some pushback. For instance, Chinese president Xi Jinping calling for the end of 'weird architecture' in 2014 (Fernández-Galiano 2015). The widespread use of iconic or prestige architecture as a strategy for urban regeneration (and/or nation building projects) has also meant that the competitive advantage, and therefore the symbolic power, of a relatively small number of architectural firms with this kind of experience and expertise has continued to increase (see Ren 2011 for an analysis of producer and consumer cities of global architecture).

Transnational elites of design professionals have acquired increasing relevance, however, as they are more connected to the geographical territory than is often understood, and have both globalizing and localizing agendas (Sklair 2006; Sklair and Struna 2013). Beyond the rising tendency towards international practice (Ward 2005; Sklair 2006) elite architects' relationship to the powerful and the composition of the powerful themselves has also undergone a transformation. In terms of economic power, a new powerful group of clients linked to finance capitalism, rather than manufacturing, as in

the past, has emerged, while local forms of political power have directed their efforts towards assisting in plans toward achieving city competitiveness.

Two relevant processes are at play here influencing what and for whom architects build. First, intercity competition for mobile capital and tourism—linked to the emergence of flagship iconic projects designed by a group of elite architects who have come to be called stararchitects. Second, financialization, that has turned real estate into a speculative wealth storage for the wealthy elites, particularly in global cities, but increasingly in second-tier cities too (Fernandez, Hofman, and Aalbers 2016). The latter aspect is also linked to processes of housing financialization (Graham and Hewitt 2013) and this factor has particularly propelled the central role of architects in many key cities. The last decade has seen the emergence of ever thinner and taller skyscrapers, many of which are residential, a result of the financialization of housing (Soules 2021). For some, as with iconic cultural buildings, these residential skyscrapers are also symbols that both represent power and take part in city competitiveness as signifiers of dynamism and economic success (Nethercote 2022).

Although the importance of technology must not be underestimated—for instance for making possible the ultra-thin as well as complicated architectural shapes such as the Guggenheim's—the role of processes of increasing inter-city competition and housing financialization in influencing questions of style deserves attention. The search for an iconicity that can be captured through visual representation has resulted in a relatively coherent stylistic repertoire that prioritizes shapes, materials and surfaces with striking characteristics (Glendinning 2010; Haddad and Rifkind 2014; Jones 2009, 2011; Sklair 2017). This can be seen in iconic buildings such as Birmingham's Selfridges building by Future Systems; the SEC Armadillo in Glasgow by Norman Foster; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) by Frank Gehry; the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center in Baku, Azerbaijan, by Zaha Hadid; the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam by Delugan Meissl; and the National Museum of Qatar in Doha by Jean Nouvel, for example.

Soules (2021) has highlighted the emergence of a kind of super-prime architectural form in many global cities, often designed by a global elite of architects, who have been allocated projects resulting from the financialization of housing as this process has switched capital flows into housing construction. To increase the liquidity of housing as a financial asset, prestige and super-prime housing construction projects need to be simultaneously highly iconic, but of standardized quality. This has translated into an architecture that is spatially and formally simplified through the use of monoform housing units that diminish the possibility of social interaction and do not reflect local characteristics, using both forms and materials that minimize the need for maintenance. Such simplification is, however, compensated for by increasing 'perceived' complexity—for instance through the use of landscaping and addition of recreational space and the prioritization of spectacular views (Soules 2021). The emergence of this form of construction has also been described as a kind of 'hotelization of home'—where residential developments include amenities often found in luxury hotels such as high-end lobbies, swimming pools, gyms, and rooftop gardens, or the 'luxification of verticality' (Nethercote 2022, 47–48).

Architectural discourse and theory have evolved in tandem with these recognizable shifts. In the semiotic battle for pre-eminence within the architectural profession, elite architects have promoted intellectual visions to underpin their practice, to help catapult them to the top of the profession and maintain their role as mediators of political and economic power. Haddad (2023) has identified two main approaches to the development of an architectural theory that, starting in the 1990s, brought it more in line with neoliberal values. The first approach is a pragmatic relation to theory, represented by Dutch architectural practices of which Rem Koolhaas constitutes a prominent figure, a 'research-oriented theoretical discourse' that rather than confronting the established order operates in line with market values. An approach—described by Tafuri as 'operative criticism'—that sees theory as a means to justify the kinds of practice that architects engage in (Haddad 2023). McNeill (2009) has gone further, interpreting Koolhaas's approach as a way to work through the architect's lack of autonomy by offering a kind of ongoing narration and theorization through books, talks and so on.

The second approach identified by Haddad is linked to the use of digital technologies in architecture with Patrick Schumacher as its most prominent figure. Drawing upon the work major philosophers Schumacher has put forward an all-encompassing theory which reduces architecture to the idea of a semiotic system essentially at the service of the neoliberal order (Haddad 2023). The primary goal of such a theoretical apparatus is the liberating of architectural form from constraint or social imperative. This form or mode of production of built environments can be seen as a metaphor for achieving freedom from socio-political constraints, including the apparent deadweight that might be generated by taxing questions of social need or justice. The expressivity of form and innovation as geometric experimentation (both made possible by the new digital technologies) become central while the social function of architecture remains wilfully moved to the status of an afterthought (Haddad 2023). Examples here include the Bosco Verticale in Milan, designed by Boeri Studio as an example of Patrick Schumacher's parametric style (based on the use of algorithms and digital technologies with design purposes) and One Hyde Park by Richard Rogers, forming a kind of social vacuum behind glass walls and panels in this pre-eminent example of design for the global, non-resident rich (Soules 2021).

Narratives that tie architectural endeavour to free-market norms rely for their apparent legitimacy on the structural position of the key actors advancing them. The status of prestigious architects who remain associated with ideas of civic contribution and the legacy of arts-based training which helps to accommodate discourses in which ideas of markets, personal freedom and capital circulation tend to be occluded. The relative agency of starchitects to simultaneously capture, and to be captured by, the emerging logics of financialization and rentier capitalism (Purcell and Ward 2023) as these forces come to relate to the designs of buildings that help to absorb and to reproduce them is evident. Analysts like Soules have, for example, focused on the kinds of podium, pencil skyscraper and empty homes, which he sees as a kind of zombie design template—the production of high value yet empty space that emerges as architecture becomes enmeshed in a more firmly financialized urban condition.

Here the symbolic architects of these conditions are permitted a level of private economic resources and authority (in the case of public projects) that confers a kind of public blessing on the designs of many iconic and key city buildings (Tarazona Vento 2015). In addition, the compatibility of discourses in which the social is rendered secondary to the spectacular and the financialized (in terms of capital inflows) brings with it symbolic support for their role in designing important politico-economic hegemonic projects (Sum and Jessop 2013).

In summary, the answer to the question of the extent to which architects are able to exert agency (how much are iconic buildings really the visions of architects as individual agents?) requires us to offer a kind of empirical basic framework that engages variations in the specific structural positions of key architects, as well as their capacity at a given time to exercise such agency. However, some notes that move us toward an attempt at a base theorization of the positionality and relative agency or power of elite architects can be sketched. Before we turn our attention to the discussion of agency and structure an important development, alluded to in the previous section, deserves closer inspection. This is the rise, within the aforementioned elite of the architectural profession, of the starchitect and the resulting situation in which the accumulation of both symbolic and economic power in the hands of a slender elite has generated profoundly wealthy members among this group.

The category and capacity of wealthy starchitects

Starchitects are powerful individuals, operating within globally co-ordinated institutional networks of actors that involve planners, city administrations, developers and city communities. Architecture has often tended to be identified as a field in which professional autonomy has been eroded or modified by negotiated encounters with other key actors and client requirements (McNeill 2009). This heteronomous quality of architectural practice, where external rules and constraints are evident (in juxtaposition to ideas of autonomy) has led some to suggest that the agency of architects is highly delimited. Yet the rise of starchitects challenges this sense of limitation and we suggest that precisely many of the kinds of projects and wealth of a select group of architects compels us to rework understandings of the practice of architecture, at least insofar as it is conducted within the ranks of this stratospheric group. One related effect of the presence of wealthy starchitects is their significant scope to choose projects and to have significantly higher levels of agency over the designs they ultimately deliver. Their membership of networks of power and influence as super-rich individuals also places them in a dual role, being both members of the transnational capitalist class while also servicing the needs of other members of this wealthy class globally (Sklair 2017).

Sklair (2017, 62) differentiates between signature architects—those with 'local and national reputations due to the iconicity of their architecture at those scales', a list of around 30 architects including among others Daniel Libeskind, Richard Rogers, Jean Nouvel, Renzo Piano and Santiago Calatrava, and star architects—those 'with truly global reputations' and globally iconic buildings. This latter group includes Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas and

Zaha Hadid. Subsequent lists of 'starchitects' have been disputed by other commentators, and open to change alongside individual reputations. We adhere to the more generalized understanding of the term, defining stararchitects as those whose reputations and professional practices are recognized as being the 'best' in aesthetic terms, as well as the most influential as determined by their clients and populations more broadly. A stararchitect may also be defined as an architect who produces iconic architecture or starchitecture, which, in Kanna's words (2011, 82): 'privileges, the role of the architect as aesthete and genius of pure form and which elevates a few notable architects, investing them with almost super-human powers of theoretical and aesthetic insight' (Kanna 2011, 82).

The terms wealthy architects or rich architects are used here when we refer to their economic power, not necessarily implying symbolic power. We use the term wealthy or rich starchitects when emphasizing that starchitects have acquired wealth as well as *symbolic power*. Measures of this starchitect status include consecration through notable awards such as the Pritzker Architecture prize, the AIA Gold Medal, the Stirling Prize, and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal. It may also involve the giving of keynote public talks; exhibitions of their work in both public and private institutions; invitations to participate in closed competitions; appearance in the press or mass media; and recognizability of their name in professional circles and outside of them.

What might we say is the analytical and practical value of the term wealthy starchitect? We suggest that this term operates in two registers. First, it denotes the immense wealth of a small cadre of design professionals whose profiles have risen alongside an increasingly financialized development sector. The second element of the meaning of this term is used here to suggest a particular degree of power and influence conferred by the winning of projects that have or will be intended to form urban icons within a global finance capital and neoliberal urban order. As increasingly sophisticated assessments consider the relationship between urban built environments, the power of wealth and the role of the wealthy (for example: Holmqvist 2017; Wiesel 2019) we consider architects to be a group that are simultaneously movers while also being those moved by capital. We suggest that in assessing the powers behind the rise and development of many financialized urban centres this group remains important, though complex in their positionality and role. We assess their degree of latitude along two axes—the first considers how agency is linked to peak professional positions, the second relates to their wealth.

We move away from a consideration of financialized architectural forms per se (such as mega projects speaking of city triumph, or designs used to attract the successful or investment capital). Instead our focus is on individual key architects as a professional sub-group that have become charismatic and profoundly wealthy individuals occupying an important positionality in the institutional networks involved in utilizing the city as a circuit of capital expansion. We propose three key elements that underwrite the positions of those in this group. First, they appear to be actors who work as ideological conduits who both talk-up, and benefit from, rising housing and other market values and the increasing role of finance within urban centres in absorbing surplus and core flows of global capital (Harvey 2012). Second, they are para-institutional mediators in circuits

and relationships between land, developers and city governments. Finally, they appear as the ultimate producers and key designers of distinctive built forms dictated by and mutually feeding the needs of capital investment, wealthy clients/developers and market-oriented governing institutions. Rem Koolhaas, starchitect par excellence, architectural theorist and professor at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, discussing in a promotional video the 121 E 22nd residential towers in Manhattan, the super-prime residential tower designed by his architectural firm OMA provides a graphic example of his overlapping roles as ideological conduit and key designer of financialized architecture (Howard 2017). Examples of the role of stararchitects as para-institutional mediators can be found in Ken Livingston's designation in 2001 of Richard Rogers as his advisor on architecture and urbanism to pursue his design vision for London (Charney 2007), and David Chipperfield's establishment of Fundación RIA, a non-for profit organization, which, in 2022, was appointed to coordinate in collaboration with regional ministries and the regional body of architects the territorial agenda for the region of Galicia in Spain (Gerpe 2023). We set out the implications for urban studies of bringing in key actor-agents of this kind to the frame of critical urban analysis.

The question of the agency and effective power of architects is important because many now believe that architecture has come to play a more clearly defined role as handmaid to a more financialized capitalism. This appears to be expressed in the form of alienating mega-projects and involves super-wealthy client groups or patrons, which has made some architects particularly wealthy in their own right. Of course there is a longer history to these issues with analysis including that of Mumford (1938), Peter Hall (2002), DeLanda (2006), Vale (1992), Dovey (1999) observing how the built environment helped to convey the values and power of individuals and urban elites. For Soules (2021) however, these issues have become increasingly about questions of personal agency and influence. Architects like Liebeskind, Piano or Koolhaas do not simply 'command' high fees but also possess the ability to state the terms and range of designs that they might wish to place in particular cities. For example, Piano's design for the Shard was widely criticized and opposed by many citizens, the local authorities and conservation groups, but was finally approved by a government (Charney 2007)who saw in the design a sign that the city was 'open for business' (by the deputy prime minister John Prescott) (Weaver 2003). In Valencia, Spain, Santiago Calatrava was able to convince the regional government to continue adding iconic buildings to the already spectacular complex of the City of Arts and Sciences (Tarazona Vento 2015), while in Bilbao he used the legal system through expensive lawsuits to protect his autonomy when he sued Bilbao's local authority for modifying one of his works after completion (Izquierdo Peris 2008). Zaha Hadid was able to prioritize her initial 'geometric concept' over structural and economic considerations in Zaragoza (Moix 2010) and Koolhaas used his academic networks as a platform to establish his positioning within international politics debate in a way that would ensure that his project for the CCTV building in Beijing came to fruition (McNeill 2009, 138). Such examples begin to show how starchitects possess a particular capacity to affect change beyond that which might appear to be locally planned. Starchitects have used their economic power and the ways of

doing linked to belonging to the super-rich to increase their autonomy (and therefore their influence on the urban environment).

A complex constellation of forces has produced individuals not only with significant wealth but also agency in relation to processes of city-making and their symbolic milieu. Architectssituated at the leading edge of popular interest and boosteristdreamings have come to achieve influence over the content of designs and social outcomes in contemporary urbanism. However, we would still suggest that the apparent power of these individuals remains circumscribed by the need to adopt styles and conventions that are supportive of pro-market or neoliberal paradigms of development and expansion. These factors were clearly in evidence even in cases where symbolism is important, such as One World Trade Centre NY in ground zero where there was a need for a signification of memorial purposes but also the profitability of commercial space. We can also find wilder examples of unbuilt designs that speak to limitations, such as the proposed 'tulip' tower in London (Kollewe 2021), and the project for the Tokyo National Stadium designed by Zaha Hadid, which was scrapped as a result of protests from the general public (Tamari 2018). But despite this we can also note a significant amount of autonomy and agentic power by architects at the elite vanguard position of the profession.

The determinants of agency among the wealthy star architects

A kind of return to autonomy and influence of architects, alongside their increasing role as emissaries of market logics, brings practice into proximity with broader debates about the form and purpose of cities today. Financialization, alienation, wealth concentration, rentierism and city boosterism collide with, and are expressed through, the work of wealthy starchitects. Thus the question of who the architectural elite are and what role they play in the making and remaking of cities around the world today is an important one. We have suggested that this group have an increasingly significant capacity to shape the projects they accept, and to impose or integrate their vision into their final form. However, the highly negotiated routes by which even the most iconic projects apparently of global starchitects are produced suggest that a nuanced reading of their agency remains warranted. What then can we say appears to explain their relative power in the amphitheaters of contemporary cities? Our discussion to this point identifies a series of elements that are important when examining the agency of architects (in particular elite architects). We suggest that three factors appear to be particularly useful in thinking through the question of autonomy.

First, economic and political constraints or opportunities are embedded within regulatory regimes. These may be integrated with neoliberal ideological formations and are important in shaping the kind of 'values' that key projects are imbued with. Structural background factors may reflect formations at a transnational scale which affect the discipline of architecture in general, and which thereby may circumscribe or delimit the agency of starchitects to shape urban environments. An alternative reading, however, also points to wider structural trends reinforcing the structural position of starchitects' themselves.

This strengthening of the positionality of these individuals may therefore help to amplify their agency. From this perspective, the increased status of architecture (and therefore of architects) economically and politically, brought about by neoliberal globalization, needs to be recognized. These shifts have helped to allow starchitects higher degrees of agency to contribute to the shaping of the designs and values integrated into flagship projects.

Since the 1970s, architecture has increasingly been seen as an important ingredient of the kind of ground conditions required to promote economic growth. For instance, it has often been claimed that Guggenheim Bilbao changed the economic fortunes of the city. Many cities have since tried to emulate this form of design-led urban renaissance, not least in the way that design was foregrounded in the work of Richard Rogers and the Urban Task Force in the British 'urban renaissance'. This work presaged many of the themes in form and development of cities like London and New York in the years that followed (Imrie and Raco 2003), the over one hundred museums built in the United States at the end of the millennium, and the many starchitect-designed cultural venues built in Asian cities in the 2000s.

Many projects seen as the lynchpin of strategic action, including Guggenheim Bilbao, can also be read as nation-building projects, or what Véron (2021) refers to as neoliberal nationalism. Such goals combine the strategic mobilization of place at a global scale with the local reinforcement of national identities. Examples of such nation-building projects can be seen in the London's Millennium Dome by Richard Rogers (Jones 2011), the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, by Pritzker Prize—winner I. M. Pei. (Peterson 2006) and the National Stadium of Beijing, also known as the 'bird's nest', designed by Pritzker prize winners Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron (Ren 2008).

Given the importance of semiosis for hegemonic projects and architecture's intrinsic characteristic as a discipline, producing both objects and symbols, architecture is particularly well suited to afford further political credibility to support neoliberal capitalism and political hegemonic projects linked to it. Starchitects in particular appear able to help offer the materialization of the vision on which those political projects rest, and to mobilize certain meanings and interpretations of place.

Second, questions of culture and, more specifically, the importance of normative conditions within industry and city institutional contexts are critical to questions of autonomy in the field of architecture. These conditions have adapted to a more financialized context whose expansion has been predicated on use of new built environments to absorb new rounds of capital investment. Neoliberalism has influenced specific institutional and regulatory contexts, strengthening the structural position of starchitects as a group. It should, however, be stressed again that starchitects are not mere passive recipients of the power granted to them by their privileged structural position, they are also involved in the creation of such structural conditions. Accordingly, we see structural and cultural constraints/opportunities as dynamic, not fixed in time. Starchitects, have some capacity to modify the institutional context of the localities they work in by modifying their own profession and by contributing to changing regulatory and planning practices. For instance, the exceptionality measures often involved in the development of architectural megaprojects,

such as the modification of urban plans, the adjustment and speeding up of planning procedures, and the introduction of legislative changes (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). Here, Sum and Jessop's (2013, 203) concept of 'agential selectivity' becomes useful—'agential selectivity depends on the difference that specific actors (or social forces) make in particular conjunctures and/or in transforming conjunctures'.

Third, we see the question of professional and power networks as being important to the structural position of starchitects and the critical role of being 'inside' or connected to processes. In this sense, their power is linked to the power of others, such as developers and mayors. This brings the analysis to the scale of urban politics, and addresses the question of how the power afforded by the structural position is instituted in practice by individual architects. Starchitects' prominent structural position and personal wealth grants them access to the interior circuits of urban political life, both as prestigious professionals and as members of an economic elite, often situating them as key actors within local governing coalitions. The cases of Santiago Calatrava as a member of Valencia's boosterist urban regime, and Richard Rogers' role in Britain's political plans for an urban renaissance are prominent examples. This also emphasizes the value of empirical research into the role of starchitects and their personal and professional networks in the politics of city making.

Conclusion

In this article we have offered a critical examination of the role of a set of key individuals within wider projects of financialized city remaking, rebuilding and design. While some commentators have pointed to the increasing autonomy of some architects we have argued that the pronounced enlargement of fortunes among individuals within a global cadre of elite, wealthy, 'superstar' architects has been generative of greater levels of social power and influence over city form. In this sense the power to direct and control projects by a small number of architects can be linked to intensifying circulations of capital through expansionist city-making projects, processes deepening urban financialization and competition for symbolic forms of prestige among cities. We have also pointed to the significance of the presence of wealthy individuals and their agents as brokers and commissioners of projects by starchitects.

The power of starchitects is, we have suggested, not something unconditional or unchecked. Rather, it is circumscribed by the demands of clients and client cities, their planning authorities and the negotiated aspects of the development process. Despite these constraints we have been able to point to examples in which it is clear that starchitect status has enabled choice over accepted commissions and latitude to control elements of the design process in significant ways. In this sense we have seen numerous key projects around the world that clearly bear the apparent 'hallmarks' of individual design professionals who are conducting projects that deliver significant imprints on the daily life, ambience and symbolic topography of many cities.

What are the implications of our analysis for processes of urban development? Two key possibilities present themselves. First, the expansion of agency as a

result of private wealth and reputational standing by individual architects paves the wave for a kind of private urban design paternalism. This may restate or deepen tendencies toward anti-democratic and potentially unpopular projects founded in vision but lacking buy-in, consultation or engagement with citizens. The delegation of authorial control by such architects thus risks deepening tensions in urban development processes while riding over democratic controls, by individuals mostly lacking connection to these cities. A second possibility is an opposite kind of view that locates star architects as increasingly risky and unnecessary sources of ideas and designs for urban development futures. This possibility may suggest a deepening tension between forms of private-centralized mandates for planning and design, on the one hand, and the desire by urban populations and governance institutions to produce more socially sustainable and inclusive projects that are anchored in more deliberative and consultative forms of planning. Of course, this does not prevent the involvement of apex figures in the field, but it may more likely to lead to decisions to see them as superfluous or risky in reputational terms where an emphasis on reclamation, rehabilitation, renovation and re-use become more evident features of urban development processes globally.

Many of the cases we have discussed highlight the enlargement of personal reputations and riches that such projects generate, coalescing around a small elite of professional actors who are aligned with the values and goals of market-oriented urban design principles. As with the profession in the early part of the 20th century a new 'roaring 20s' partly mirrors that of a hundred years ago in which patronage by other elites plays an important role—bringing commissions, the circulation of reputations, a public presence that is also a means of setting the parameters of public design parameters and a hegemonic quality to their plans. We argue that it is important to see some architects as important and key authors of a new urban landscape that is redolent of values in which markets in cities and ideas have become key principles of public life, producing increasingly private, sole-authored designs and exclusive visions of city life in many cases. World capital flows appear to be generating enlarged fortunes among an elite of design professionals who are thereby granted greater reputational and authorial power over cities. As debates about urban inequality, fairness in city development and elite formations continue to dominate policy and social concerns, it seems appropriate to bring the field of architecture and its exponents into conversation with these challenges.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1 Heteronomous—subject to different laws (nomos law Greek); subject to outside rule or law, opposite to autonomous (Chambers English dictionary). DonaldMcNeill has argued that architecture is an increasingly heteronomous field in which there is diversity of authority, rather than there necessarily being an autonomy of direction.

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