Book Review

Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006

REVIEWED BY DONNA WHEATLEY

We know that in the twenty-first century a fat bank balance or owning a Porsche is not the key to happiness. As a society we are hauling ourselves up Abraham Maslow’s pyramid of needs, at the apex of which lies self-actualization. When we ask “How can I get more out of my life?” marketers have responded. For branding to be successful in the twenty-first century it must offer much more than a product or a service—it must provide a memorable experience.

Experiences are the products in the twenty-first century. Architecture, then, argues Anna Klingmann, is not about where we work and live, but who we imagine ourselves to be. The benefit for the consumer is another notch up Maslow’s pyramid and for the institutions that build them and the cities that host them: nothing less than economic and cultural transformation.

The book ties together the loose strands of branding and architecture, a theme that has remained on the frayed edges of architectural discussion. Klingmann infuses it with marketing literature giving the reader a very clear picture of how architecture is commodified in our global society; but the main insight of the book is to reveal positive social and economic outcomes of branding and architecture.

The thesis is honourable. If the practice of branding, that is, associating a favourable identity with an object, is applied to architecture, the result could be the creation of a sustainable identity for people, communities and places. Klingmann is all too aware that the irony of branding is that it has achieved just the opposite effect. The global practice of architecture, driven by economics and a limited set of images, privileges recognized signature buildings. This culture of the copy leads to buildings that forgo an identity with their site in order to create a global identity. Assuming that the processes of branding are inevitable, architects need to reject the goal of designing a global object in favour of creating local experience. Then real cultural and economic transformation can ensue. In order to achieve this, architecture will need to utilize mechanisms of branding that rely on long-lasting and identity-creating effects (rather than short-lived dazzle). In this way the new paradigm of the experience economy could direct a shift of attention from nice coffee-table book photographs to buildings as objects of use.
Initially the range of prototypes from Las Vegas and Guggenheim Bilbao to the commonality of Starbucks and Jon Jerde Plazas appears repetitive and unoriginal, but so skilfully does Klingmann argue for an engagement between architecture and branding, that towards the end of the book it can be believed that cities could still benefit when private corporations, who build the majority of urban buildings, utilize robust brand strategies.

Much of its ambition lies in suggesting further avenues of investigation. For example concepts such as architecture’s response to the experience economy and the resulting consumer engagement are used to give context for the book rather than fleshing them out (despite the use of the term “experience economy” in the title).

The book can be seen as a compelling platform for a new direction in architectural discourse, possibly even practice. Klingmann calls for branding to be used as a conceptual framework that no longer judges architecture as an artistic activity but for its effects on people and places. That architecture can attain greater significance for people by drawing on branding strategies is a very twenty-first century concept.