

Star Style, or the evolution of the coffee table

We have been acquainted with the phenomenon of 'stardom' in architecture since the 1980s. In other fields, too, we see the rise of the celebrity, of the person whose name and fame take on a life of their own, unrestrained by real ideas or achievements. Or by failures. Whatever the person in question does, there will be a new Gehry, a new Madonna, a new Tarrt and a new Tarantino. A hype is launched, detached from all rational assessment; and suddenly the world press is bulging with specials, there are signing sessions and talk shows, and the Queen pays a visit. That is perhaps the essence of the media storm that suddenly rages and just as suddenly subsides; it has nothing to do with judgement. Rational judgement doesn't belong in a system where the winner takes all. Culture teeters on an ever smaller base of the same figures, who time and time again are launched, reviewed and pushed on to the next round of commissioning/tour/advance megafinancing. It's the recycling of talent not for the sake of talent but for the sake of recycling.

Another aspect of the same development is the emergence of the coffee table book. This phenomenon started around the same time. Coffee table editions allow the stars to sparkle without a requirement for judgment. You don't study these slabs but leaf through them while enjoying a perfect cappuccino and the sweet tones of a Michael Nyman CD (for example). Coffee table editions are always extremely bulky indeed; you are soon considered too serious with less than 1000 illustrations.

Much coffee has flowed under the bridge since that period, particularly in architecture. There are meanwhile coffee table monographs aplenty on individual architects. What is more, there are books on single projects; on single aspects of certain projects; and even on nothing at all. After all, it isn't the content that matters. The main thing is that there is a book. There it lies, a monument to fame.

Now we have reached the point where the book is a coffee table in its own right. Phaidon Press supplies its *Atlas of Contemporary Architecture*, nearly half a metre tall, weighing

almost 7 kilos and containing 7,500 pictures, complete with a special carrying case to help you get it home. They might as well have supplied it with a set of legs. You don't leave this book on a table: it is a table.

If the book is itself a table, what can you put on its top? Architecture, of course. That would be a fine installation: the Phaidon Atlas laden with Alessi's Tea and Coffee Towers, crockery designed by some of the same stars as in the book. Architecture has come down to a coffee klatch, a pastime for grandpas and grannies – or, to be less of an ageist, for people whose main feats are in the past, who sustain themselves on old fame which never needs to be justified by the force of a new idea. It has become a symbol recalling the good old times, when daring deeds still made a difference. The system has become a style - Star Style. The tragedy of this style is that it is no longer driven by an irrepressible need to impart meaning to the world, but by the promotion of a market profile. It is a style that triggers the wallet, not the brain.

If there is one thing that drives this magazine forward, it is the effort not to be sucked helplessly into this trend, but to have the grit to avoid it. It so happens that *Archis* was recently adjudicated for its role in the Dutch 'architectural order'. These pages, according to the advisory committee charged with assessment, pay too little attention to pure architecture. More precisely, they held us to be doing too little for the 'professional discourse' and the 'development of the discipline'. The observation that we display a lack of servility and granny-like conviviality is entirely correct. However, we draw an entirely different conclusion from the involuntary euthanasia plus disinheritance that the said committee had in mind for us. As to what that conclusion is, we refrain from comment for the moment. You, our reader, will of course wish to be informed as soon as possible. To be among the first to know, please send an e-mail to grassroots@archis.org mentioning the word 'archiphoenix'.

Ole Bouman