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Conference Abstract

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Session #24: Importing and Exporting Worldly Urbanism: The Challenges of Studying the Global Circulation of City Models, Best Practices and Imaginaries

Organizers: David Sadoway and Anthony M. Levenda

Title:

Examining The 'Bilbao Effect': Sociological Impact of 'Star Architecture' on Small Cities

Urban regeneration by means of the local implementation of global models of flagship architecture is a vexing public concern. In particular, we observe substantial local investments in iconic buildings designed by international 'star architects'. Such strategy is increasingly common in small and medium size cities that perceive it as a distinguished model to 'export' their enhanced image by 'importing' world-class architecture. This practice typically aims at housing prestigious cultural institutions and has now been replicated across different national contexts.

The so called 'Bilbao Effect', or 'Guggenheim Effect', epitomizes a class of remarkable short-term changes galvanized by such projects and has thus attracted growing critical scrutiny. Because this phenomenon is usually imagined and measured chiefly with reference to standard quantitative variables, social scientists begin to analyze its qualitative social implications too. Sociologists are now asking one of the key questions foregrounded by this session, namely what are the impacts of such 'worldly models' of place-making when they touch down in more peripheral locations? Consequently, we can ask the broader question about generalizability of the presumed 'Bilbao effect', as well as enquire what are productive ways of further researching it.

To address these issues concretely, we draw on the the first round of field observations from the three different European sites that feature flagship projects, in Wolfsburg (Germany), Lucerne (Switzerland) and Graz (Austria). The focus is on Zaha Hadid's Phaeno, Jean Nouvel's Congress and Culture Center that houses high-end concert hall, and Peter Cook's Museum of Modern Art, respectively. We explore how the unique 'logic' of each urban context, entrenched social imaginaries, local knowledge and the specificity of the institutions at hand inflect the meanings of these 'star buildings'.