

The Commoners

AWILDA RODRIGUEZ

Oklahoma State University

Are starchitects dominating the architecture market? A recent viewing of archdaily.com reveals a gorgeous house in the Chilean coastal town of Zapallar, House H, by architect Felipe Assadi completed at the dawn of this year; in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, architect Francisco Mangado's Congress hall and hotel is all but mundane; and in Østerid, Norway, Cubo Arkitekter delivers a highly engaging visitors and community center. More inspiring projects follow, and more names of unfamiliar sounds: Alhumaidi Architects, Funktion Design, Hype Studio, DnA, Reiulf Ramstad Arkitekter. Sporadically, in the succession of this long list of unrecognizable architects sprout familiar faces: Jean Nouvel with new images of his soon to be completed National Museum of Qatar, Steven Holl with the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Renzo Piano proposed residential tower in Miami. The scene repeats when browsing other architectural digital platforms. Work, exceptional work, by little-known architects outnumbers the work by the starchitects.

The paths to stardom by Thom Mayne (born 1944), Bernard Tschumi, (born 1944) Massimiliano Fuksas (born 1944) and the like born prior to 1950 have similar characteristics and can greatly attributed not to talent alone, but to collateral forces, in primus their ability to cultivate relationship with the print media of Europe, the United States, and Japan. For over three decades these architects have dominated the architectural press, and their work has been the reference point for at least two generations of academics. In all these years, there was hardly any new entrant in the elite club. But in a changing publishing world where the rules do not follow archaic principles or preferential status, there will still be room for Starchitects? Or they will be relegated as just one of the many talented architects that inhabit every corner of this planet?

This paper examines how print media has unmistakably contributed to the success of few and discloses the challenges and opportunities presented to the "rest of us" by the online publishing environment and by the new era of the influencers or "influenceratis" (social media celebrities) where digital natives are less receptive to traditional publishing media but gain trust by the number of likes expressed by the shared values of a group.

PAOLO SANZA

Oklahoma State University

PRELUDE

August 14, 2018, Tuesday. Rain has been heavy in Genoa, Italy. Then at 11:36 AM disaster strikes: with no apparent warning a section of what has been known as the Ponte Morandi, or Morandi Bridge, in reference to its designer, collapses, plummeting some 150 feet below. Once the cloud of white dust disperses, 43 people are counted dead, following a free fall that they could not have possibly avoided. A handful, miraculously, survive.

Two weeks after the tragic event, Renzo Piano proposes a new viaduct, donating his architectural services to his native city, if the scheme were to be accepted. At 81 years of age, and with a remarkable career that has spanned over five decades and produced some of the most exemplary pieces of architecture all world around, Piano is not in need of notoriety. His gesture comes from a genuine desire to help and bring hope to his native city, shattered by the crumbling of one of the marvels of Italian engineering, perhaps too daring for that 1967, a time close to when Piano was experimenting with ultra light and tensile structures? Piano's noble intent was instantaneously broadcast all over Italy following his presentation to Genoa's mayor, Marco Bucci, and the President of Liguria, Giovanni Toti. On September 9, during a press conference, the CEO of Autostrade per l'Italia, the managing firm of the section of the A10 tollway where the Ponte Morandi once in its entirety stood, Giovanni Castellucci, accidentally, yet ironically, breaks the scale model. It's good luck, remarks Piano, in an effort to unstiffen an embarrassing moment.¹

Piano's proposal has received mixed responses in Italy. If some journalists saw it, as expressed by the commentaries of Antonella Boralevi in *lastampa.it* on September 9, 2018, not so much for the value of its design, but rather as a symbol to encourage taking and thinking about the future, some architects took the design at face value and have strongly voiced their disdain, finding the design archaic, remote from contemporary trends. In typical Italian fashion, rivers of ink will have flown by the time the new bridge is built.

Would have a similar gesture by any of the other 3,000 less prominent Genoese architects receive the same publicity, the same consensus, and the same keenness

Renzo Piano path to stardom can be tracked before when, at 34 and in association with Gianfranco Franchini and Richard Rogers, he won in 1971 the competition for the Centre

Georges Pompidou in Paris. Born into a prominent family of builders, soon after receiving his architectural degree from the Politecnico di Milano (Milan Polytechnic) in 1964, he began experimenting with lightweight structures in the grounds of his family’s construction company equipment yard.

There are no doubts that winning the Pompidou Center competition accelerated his and Richard Rogers journey to fame (Gianfranco Franchini, on the other end, after the end of construction, opted not to cultivate celebrity). Always in search of news that calls for attention, the international press was in love with everything that led these men in their thirties winning such a prestigious competition. For beginners, it was the first time that international architects were invited to compete in France, and, as newbies, a coalition of Italian and British friends had won against prominent Frenchmen. They swept a field of 681 entries coming from 49 countries.² They never in their young career attempted to do a project of such scale, having, up to that point, executed modest buildings, or in Piano’s words, worked in an “intimate way.”³ And then there was the design. It looked it had come straight out of an Erector set, alien to a Parisian context. The prominent daily Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*, the same one that in 1909 published on the front page Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *The founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, noted: “Paris has its own monster, just as the one in Loch Ness,” It was echoed

by *National Geographic*, which reacted to the design by stating “love at second sight.” But after completion, the *monster* would attract millions of visitors, 3.745 millions recently, making it the 15th most visited museum in the world,⁴ and it has become one of the prominent attractions of Paris alongside the Musée de Louvre and the Eiffel Tower.

FINDING FACTS

In our quest to find out if starchitects were dominating the print media, we looked at the last ten years of *GA Houses Projects* and *GA Document International’s* issues. These publications were deliberately chosen because, as their titles imply, offer a view to propositioned rather than built projects, therefore possibly opening the periodical to talented but unknown or little-known architects. Or so we thought. *GA Houses*, in particular, being specialized in publishing for the most single-family residences, would be the perfect platform to launch young, creative, architects. The ten *GA Houses Projects* we surveyed did feature the work of 123 architects/firms for a total of 523 projects. Of the architects, 49 were from Japan, which did not come as a surprise considering that A. D. A. Edita, the publisher of *GA*, is Japanese. What was surprising was how often a handful of architects were repeatedly featured, especially if of already established notoriety. Hiroyuki Arima, Alberto Kalach, Hirorata Kidosaki, Mathias Klotz, Kengo Kuma, Gurjit Singh Matharo, Andra Matin, and SPBR Arquitectos were published in each issue, at times with

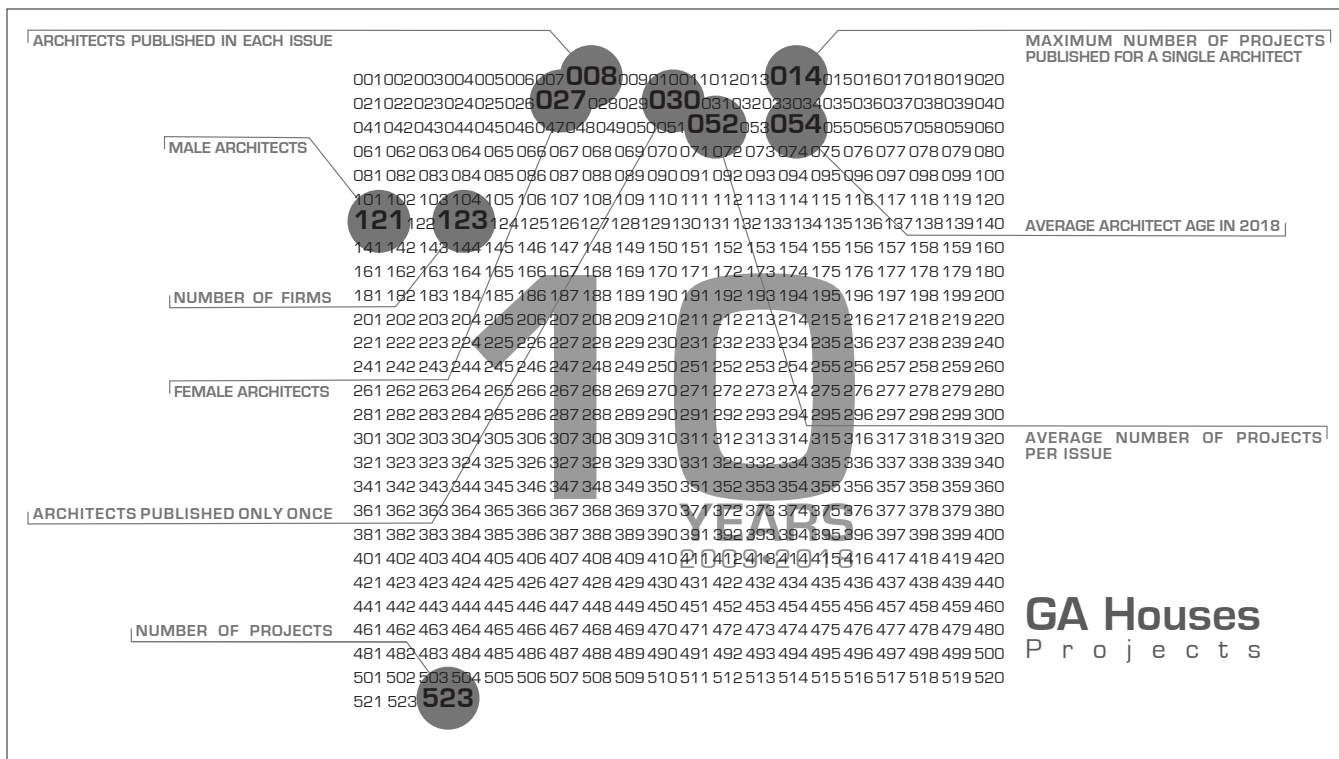


Figure 1: Data extracted by looking at ten years of *GA Houses Projects* (2009 - 2018)

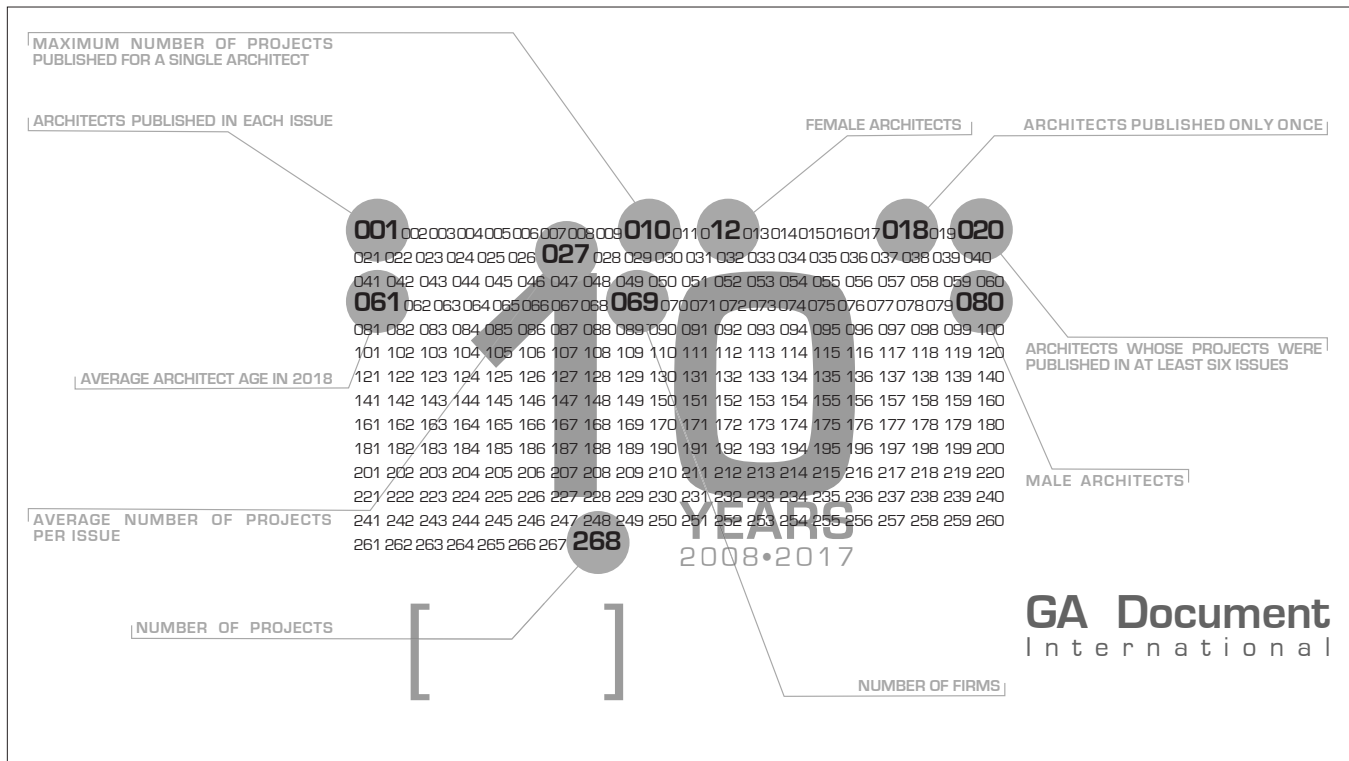


Figure 1: Data extracted by looking at ten years of *GA Document International* (2008 - 2017)

more than one project, such as the case of Chilean Mathias Klotz who had double entries several times, becoming the unmatched star of our research with a total of 14 projects published. 30 architects were published only once. An interesting fact that emerged in our research was observing that architects, now in their senior years and semi-retired, but who had established ties with A. D. A. Edita in the distant past, were still regularly showcased, almost as they were regular columnists of a magazine.

The analysis of *GA Document International* revealed comparable results. The ten issues showcased 268 projects by 69 firms. Of these firms, only Kengo Kuma was published in each issue, but 20 firms had 6 or more projects published during these years. It is easy to extrapolate from this database how tangible is the relationship between the publisher and a handful of architects. If the link between architect and publisher in the path to fame has been known, the research exercise, even within its limitation, made it visible. To further validate the case, we inquired with A. D. A. Edita about the process that led a project to be published. Regrettably, our questions went unanswered.

We also populated our database with other information such as the firms' location, and the gender and date of birth of each firm's founder(s). Having ourselves being educated in an analog environment where print media was the main if not the

only resource, we were particularly interested if those architect published in *GA* would be of our similar age, therefore, more prompt to be attracted to the tactile, romantic as much as elitist world of print publishing. The average age in 2018 of the architects published in *GA Houses* was 54 years, not very distant from our own age, while for *GA Document* the average age was 61 years, reflecting slightly more mature authors, which can be partially attributed to the type of projects published by *GA Document*, often of significant complexity and scale, and attracting architects with extensive experience. It is, therefore, safe to speculate that those published architects were also architecturally raised with an affinity with print and mesmerized by it.

But in a changing publishing world and with the proliferation of social media, are ties with publishing houses less relevant to climb to stardom?

AS THE PATH TO STARDOM CHANGE BECAUSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CREATING "STARDOM"?

Since the first printed book in the 1450's, the Gutenberg Bible, the publishing industry has operated on a fixed economic model. Getting published has not always been about talent or pushing the limits of architecture design but about the individual or studio relationship to a publishing house as well as a little luck added for good measure. Specifically, in the architecture publishing it has been tough to break thru the walls and filters that publishers and editors put up, but once one of the major publishers accepts individuals or firms, then

the royalty treatment will set in and embraced by the whole publishing industry.

With the invention and quick adoption of the Internet, this fixed business model has been turned upside-down. We are seeing an explosion of self-published books, blogs, journals, virtual galleries, etc. We have also witnessed the rise of publishers that eliminated the traditional filters such as Amazon and Barnes & Nobles and created a formal support structure for the self-publishing model. In this way, digital technologies disrupted the way that people become known via the publishing industry, promoting an alternative form of a meritocracy arbitrated by ordinary people. This is a total game changer, having people decide what they want to read about and deem important.

Outside the architecture publishing, we have also witnessed people not necessarily trained as writers, journalists, or photographers getting notoriety because they created content that was either compelling, relevant or just plain entertaining. Therefore, the content is critiqued, appraised, filtered, and eventually shared by the consumers and not by the publishers. One of the archetypal is the rise to fame of Yu Xiuhua, a Chinese village woman with no previous educational background becoming China's most famous poet and currently holding the best selling poetry book of the last 20 years in China.⁵ This new poet laureate's work showed constant occurrence on the far reaches of the Internet, and the distant edges of the social media network made her obtain the most coveted of fame on the publishing industry almost overnight.

Under this game changer modality, the question arises if any of this will permeate or transfer into the way that architectural content is consumed. Social recommendation or endorsing is not a new phenomenon. It has been a way to create interest and validity by association. The best example of the impact on building stardom and giving a leg-up was exemplified by the influence of Philip Johnson and his politics of patronage which helped specific architects by offering them institutional support and endorsing of their particular styles of architectural modernism.⁶ But today it is predominantly relevant how social media has intensified this social pattern. The strength of this networked individualism is that it has created an invisible platform to exert influence on daily life experiences, from the political and cultural sphere to the selection of a restaurant with ours intimate social circles depending on the *likes* as well as strangers' opinions.

On the other hand, this also creates a problem. News can be altered or fabricated by the process and within the medium. As we witness on the 2016 elections, individuals can become entangled in online communities that operate with their own totally fabricated or just altered news, facts, and media, in which external opinions and influences are not only

dynamically questioned but also discredited. This has given form to a neoliberalism attitude towards news content. But there are dangerous social effects of intangible liberalization that are empowering a new social scene, one that is less tolerant and extremely polarized.

SOCIAL MEDIA CHANGED THE CONCEPT OF CELEBRITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE COMMONER

Before social media, individual's influence would be empowered and limited by locality and the outreach of that media press. Today, the current world population is close to 7.2 billion. This fact may lead us to think that as individuals we may not be able to exert much influence but that is a restrictive belief of the power of the network. Social media dismantle the way influence works today. Networked citizens have voiced their anger against social inequalities, and political and cultural protest movements have gained influence through the consensus of the commoners. People form social nodes within the global network, which as individuals they operate on a dual mode, at the center and also as a connector of the vast system of information and influence. During their lifespan, any individual throughout his or her education, work, and social circles will meet or know on average at least 1,000 people. In turn, this 1,000 people will also have individual networks that will position that initial single person to a way of one million people and so on. That is the power of influence of non-localized social networks. It has been compared to a rock dropping on a still pond causing a ripple to move outwards so that the radius of the circles formed by the ripple is amplified as it moves away. These are the effects of the actions and behaviors that collectively influence our choices or the lack of.

THE FUNCTION OF ALGORITHMS IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PARADOX OF THE STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

If we analyze one of most common building blocks of social media algorithms, named the Granovetter's "Forbidden Triad",⁷ we can start understating the way that information flows through the channels and what the network identifies as the "weak ties" connector, which takes into account a random individual relationship to two different people that do not know each other but what they have in common is a connection to the first individual. The strength of the "weak tie" is that the two diverse people belong to different social circles and bring different information to the node created by their relationship that at the same time creates a channel that amplifies the total knowledge of the node group. According to this theory, social "cliques" structures form around "strong ties" but more importantly "weak ties" form the vital bridge between two different and densely populated nodes of individuals. Why is this significant? People on social media are more open to receive and accept information via their curated networked circles.⁸ Therefore, now the traditional gatekeeper of publishing houses have been eliminated but new filters have been created and transformed by algorithms

where essentially an individual social circle determines the editing and becomes the curatorial filter, depending on this relationship the algorithms pushes content based on what your social circle considers valuable.

CONCLUSION

In the future, we will see more architects rising to notoriety coming from places that did not traditionally were part of the leading architectural scene and discourse. Architecture trends may no longer be controlled by the few, and they will rise more organically and democratically. But the rules have changed! Content is still central as well as pervasive through the network but its validity and potential to "fill in a need" is still essential for its success even in the lack of experience or authority within the subject. This may explain the trend that Instagram personalities such as @iwanbaan, which curates photography, have as many followers, if not more, of some major museums. The game has changed. Game on!

ENDNOTES

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