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VERONA

apocalyptic economics & architectural labels

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We have learnt certain lessons from Dubai. There were huge budgets, lots of investment – but the drive behind all the development was speculation. Today, no one wants to gamble their money on speculation, they want to aim at that slice of the market that will guarantee their return – and that's not the highest skyscraper, the biggest hotel – mega-projects designed by Norman Foster, or Frank Gehry, or one of those guys.

As Europe gets worse and worse economically, real-estate investment here is going to be considered on only a small scale, and there's not going to be much major building work anytime soon. With these figures it just won't be sustainable or necessary. I foresee that the architectural practice will need to change, taking into consideration the scale of the economic change itself.

However, with the decline of the European economy (almost zero growth for probably the next ten years), and the fear that Europe could crumble at any minute, investors are increasingly looking to develop even largescale projects in the growing economies – primarily Africa, China, and other parts of Asia.

I had an interesting conversation with the vice president of the African Investment Bank, who told me the Chinese have offered infrastructure projects in exchange for mining contracts. About 3 years ago the Chinese came to Africa and went across 56 African countries, done personally by the Chinese president, sealing contracts for

mining, gold, diamonds – you name it – in exchange for road, rail, health services, and water treatment. There is around 21 billion dollars invested by the Chinese in Africa. The scales are out of control. Africa is being pumped with Chinese money & you are getting infrastructure developed really quickly, & you get Chinese workers to work on that. If you go to Africa you are surprised to see many Chinese people living and doing business there.

How does this relate to the model of architectural offices? RIBA recently announced, from their studies into the future of the architectural practise over the next ten years, that only 50% of UK practises have a business plan. This is unacceptable.

And this is why firms with more than 300 employees are making 200 redundant in one go. Because they probably did not plan their growth properly, and may never have even seen a business plan in their lives. Most of the architectural practises I know have a terrible business attitude, they're very uneducated in business – which is something unfortunately not taught in architectural schools.

The old hierarchical models of architecture we've seen up to now, where three or four leading partners command an army of employees, is something that is going to disappear for sure, because immediately what you lose when you structure your firm like this is flexibility. When you work in a collective, or a dispersed network, you are more flexible and efficient. When everything is decentralized, but still coordinated from a central position, it makes you more responsive and lighter in running costs than these bulky giant firms. My idea of the "architectural label" is precisely this type of collective, and operates not dissimilarly to a "record label".

Within your architectural label, you would have a central office or agency - responsible for sourcing developers and searching for (even creating) new projects; and you then have the firms that are part of the collective "portfolio". This would allow, for example, two very different firms to share the same brief, and work on the same project. The project might require indepth sustainable technological applications, and other innovative design features. Under the management of a label, one practise is assigned to the sustainability aspects, and another improving the design features of the project. In this way, the end result will be much stronger, and the head office will coordinate both practises. Less time will be wasted in outsourcing consultants and less money from the developer in consultancy fees, since they will only have one common fee for the collective, and not for multiple companies.

In respect to the practises, the collective model allows smaller firms to be more specialised, and to contribute to larger projects – diversifying the nature of the label's members will mean there is no need to outsource specialists. What in big firms are "inhouse" services will become "incollective" ones.

In this way a small, talented practise will get more opportunities to work on bigger projects. By turn, the collective offers diverse services at lower costs, which ultimately is also helping to generate the demand for new projects. Joining a label collective like this is something that makes a lot of sense for small practises nowadays. It would be more sustainable for them, would produce big results while still being quite small, & it would do away with outsourcing - because those other skills will be present somewhere within the collective. What makes the architectural

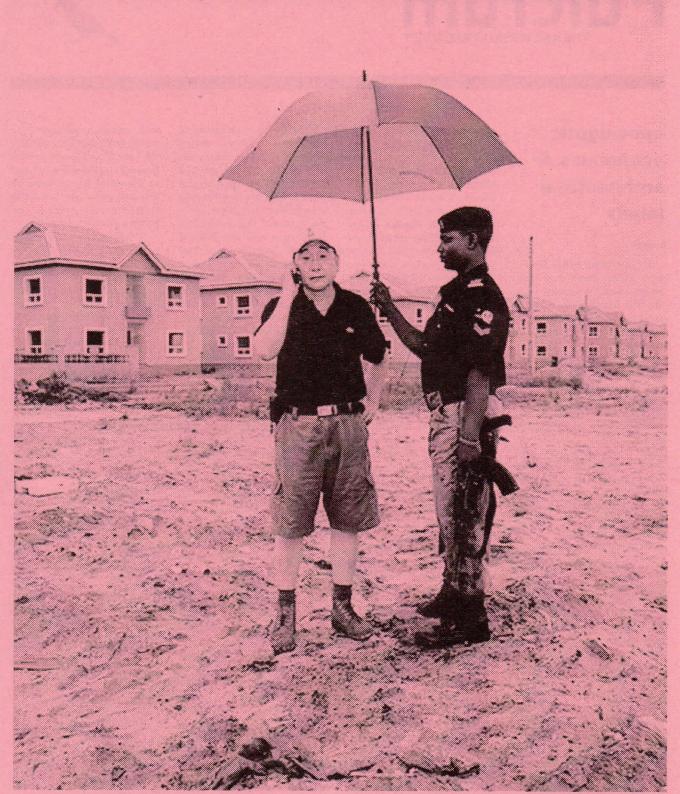
label unique, compared to a normal collective, is the fact that the central coordination offers financial support and is focussed on generating more projects for new architecture, by capitalising upon it's own network and research into the markets.

Definitely the next ten years will see more urbanisation, more satellite cities popping up all over the map, which we have already seen but will continue - because there is real demand for it. Don't be fooled into thinking these are speculative investments - they're not. If you look, for instance, at Africa there is a lot of funding linked to agricultural water treatment. There is a lot of interest in the production of agricultural farmland. When these projects begin to be successful they will fuel stable population growth, and we may see Corbusier's famous ville radieuse - once just illustrations - arriving on the drawing board in a new form.

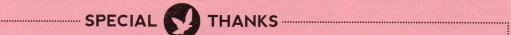
The widening gap between rich and poor is linked to this. Because at the same time as you develop these mid-range projects, let's call it for the middle class, you are also seeing more demand for niche architecture for the wealthy, & masshousing for the poor.

It is the aim of politicians to make their citizens happy, which is why I think we will see more and larger social housing projects, but they wont be in the form we know them today. We're not talking about big 60s tower block, because it is the agrarian population of Africa and Asia that is driving development – farming communities require a delocalised network thinking, which the architectural label seems best suited to provide.

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Zambia, 2007: from "The Chinese safari: In the wake of Beijing's expansion into Africa," by Paolo Woods & Serge Michel.



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