Exceptional architecture and its impact on cities

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The Guggenheim Museum, designed by star architect Frank Gehry, led to an economic boom in the Spanish city of Bilbao. This "Bilbao Effect" is appealing to many urban planners and politicians who look to better position their cities in economic and social terms by building exceptional architectural projects. Researchers at the Technical University of Munich (TUM) have studied three projects to investigate whether or not the desired effects materialize.

Can star architecture have a positive impact on the future of a city? The Guggenheim Museum made it possible for the city of Bilbao to reinvent itself. The Spanish industrial city was experiencing economic decline. After the opening of the museum, the city was able to reposition itself economically, transforming itself into a cultural metropolis.

Many cities are hoping to reap similar benefits by means of high-profile architecture. "The impact of these architectural projects on small and medium-sized cities in particular remains under-investigated," explains Prof. Alain Thierstein of the TUM Chair for Urban Development. A team comprising members from the Chair, HafenCity University Hamburg and the Technische Universität Berlin examined three case studies: the Kunsthaus Graz, the culture and convention center Luzern (KKL) and the Phæno Science Center in Wolfsburg. Since these structures have already existed for over 15 years, observation of long-term effects is also possible.

Positive effects, but no repositioning

The scientists analyzed the interaction of economic factors, the design of the buildings, and their socio-cultural effects. They determined that although the projects have positive economic effects, for example expansion of tourism and cultural programs, these effects do not result in a clearly evident repositioning.

A causal relationship between the economic effects of the projects and the socio-economic changes, for example, in the labor market or in terms of tourism, could not be identified. Furthermore, not all economic effects are immediately visible, says Dr. Nadia Alaily-Mattar, project manager and research associate at the TUM Chair for Urban Development. "In Wolfsburg, the realization of Phæno led to an increase in the self-confidence of the politicians and local administrative authorities." This social effect may also have positive economic effects on the city in the long term.

Architecture should not be overlooked

In all three cases, the researchers observed a shift in the spatial relationships of the city. In Graz, the Kunsthaus forms a bridge linking urban districts previously perceived as separate and evaluated differently in social terms. In Lucerne, the KKL has strengthened the convergence of countryside and city. The Phæno had a similar impact on Wolfsburg: The area across from the city's main train station was of significant importance for the city, but was underutilized. The Phæno integrated this area into the rest of the city.

These structural changes are the most sustainable effects of the projects, Alaily-Mattar says, adding that economic and socio-cultural effects can often be temporary and ephemeral. "Morphological effects are usually

more stable and less dependent on the 'star factor.' The desire on the part of urban planners and politicians to achieve certain impacts by means of star architecture must not overlook the contribution made by the architecture itself. In addition to economic and socio-cultural effects, the influence of star architecture on the city is spatial as well."

More information: Nadia Alaily-Mattar et al, Repositioning cities through star architecture: how does it work?, *Journal of Urban Design* (2017). DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2017.1408401

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