

## The Branding of Architecture

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The marketing of some recent housing developments are starting to read a little like Hollywood film credits, where the architects or interior designers, or both, are given top billing. Like film producers, developers seem to have grasped the notion that buildings, like films, can be marketed purely on the strength of previous performances. They have discovered what architects have always wanted to believe - that good architecture is good business. That a name architect will not just help sell the apartments quicker, but at a higher premium. It is what is known as '*branding*'. It implies more than just the bricks and mortar of the building, but an attached lifestyle that will somehow connect the purchaser to the sophisticated world portrayed in the advertising. Beyond the fashionable aspect of the marketing, the portrayed lifestyle includes many positive attributes for architecture and the city. It implies a new understanding of the street, where café culture and street activity combined with mixed use buildings are recognized as enriching the urban experience. There is also an acceptance that design is a holistic affair that ties together the building and the interior as a conceptual idea.

It is something of a pleasant aberration for architects. They have been so browbeaten over the preceding twenty years with the demise of full services and the rise of the design and construct culture, that to have their talents acknowledged in such a public manner is surely, at last, vindication of all that they have promised. This change from developer-driven to design-driven projects is tragically overdue. Apart from a few exceptions, commercial housing developments over the last few decades have on the main been the domain of the dullards of the architectural profession, or so-called '*building designers*'. Happy to knock out expedient designs to fulfill development formulas of how to maximize a site's potential. The architecture was often treated as something that could be added later, once the critical hurdle of a Development Approval from the relevant council had been achieved. The result has been some very ordinary looking apartment buildings.

But now, throughout Sydney and Melbourne, projects are being marketed off the plan on the back of the architect's reputation. In Melbourne this probably started with the success of projects like the Melbourne Terrace apartments designed by Nonda Katsalidis. In Sydney it was Harry Seidler and the Horizon Tower, closely followed by Renzo Piano and the Macquarie Apartments and various developments by Burley Katon Haliday with the East Asia Property Group. Moore Park Gardens, by Allen Jack + Cottier with developers Dealruby, whilst not marketed on the strength of the architects' reputation, was certainly marketed on the strength of the architecture. Moore Park Gardens in particular has shown everyone that there is a demand for quality design over a much broader price range than had previously been accepted.

Some of the results have been impressive. The '*Grid*', designed by Engelen Moore, is a project of 38 apartments in the inner eastern Sydney suburb of Surry Hills. It sold in four days off the plan without an approved Development Approval. For a developer this is a very attractive situation to be in. It has worked well for Engelen Moore too. On the strength of the '*Grid*' success, (and a number of houses that sold for record prices), Engelen Moore moved onto larger developments, notably '*Altair*' for the Walker Corporation.

What has suddenly changed? Has the public become more discerning, or is that a little simplistic. Certainly what has changed is that cities like Sydney and Melbourne are becoming larger, more international, more sophisticated and generally more diverse. Perhaps this diversity has opened up new markets that previously were too small to bother with. The change has also coincided with the retro-modernist lifestyle image that magazines like *Wallpaper* and *Monument* paraphrase so well, and subsequent magazines like *Elle Decoration*, *Marie-Clare Lifestyle* and *In Design* have tried to emulate.

There are a number of other factors that cannot be ignored. Low interest rates, and therefore correspondingly low holding charges, have taken a lot of pressure off developers to rush projects through the design phase of the project and this suits the design based architectural practices. With more time available, designs can be properly worked through and projects documented thoroughly.

This all fuels an interest in inner city apartment living - giving it a sophistication and even glamour that it has never really had in Australia before. The concept of '*architectural branding*' is a natural extension of other well-designed, well-crafted products that make up the shopping list of the urbane city dweller.

The designer apartment market is still a niche thing and is not seriously being marketed to families. The market is on the whole young, urbane, childfree and with a healthy disposable income. It can also include older couples, who have fulfilled their procreation duties and are now looking for smaller, more convenient accommodation.

The most successful of the new wave of designer apartments have been packaged within a complete marketing strategy. The whole approach to marketing; the naming of the project, the project graphics, even the typeface is intrinsic to *brand* identification. By association, appropriate marketing helps to fill in some of the design detail that has yet to be created. Using the film analogy again, it is a little like deciding to see a film not just on the basis of who is in it, but who has made it, what the plot line is, and what the poster looks like.

With a product like off-the-plan architecture, brand identification becomes critical. How many potential buyers will really understand what it is that they are actually buying? Certainly they know the floor area, number of bedrooms, number of bathrooms, the cost, the annual outgoings etc, they will have seen a model or external perspective, and maybe a display unit. But even display units can be very misleading, since they are not necessarily what you are getting, but an approximation. Purposeful *branding* of the architecture can conceivably be more informative than even the display unit.

It has long been suspected that the different price tags on two similar items of clothing, one branded Armani and the other Portmans, is not entirely to do with differing qualities of styling and materials. That is not to deny the quality of the one over the other - but the brand itself will greatly contribute to the desirability and value of the garment. The brand gives the product authenticity and prestige and it

demands a level of trust from the purchaser. That is why fashion design houses, or anyone for that matter, guard their brand and trademark so diligently.

There comes a point where the brand is more valuable and important than the product itself. If the owner of that brand allows it to be used carelessly, then the reputation will not last. At least with clothing the buyer can try on what is being purchased. That it is not the case with architecture if it is being sold off the plan. There is a tremendous leap of faith on behalf of the buyer that the architecture will live up to its reputation. That the purchaser understands the difference between a range of development proposals, without resorting to the prosaic details of cost and the other measurables.

Other architects are trying to get in on the designer apartment market. Trying to get themselves coupled with a sympathetic developer and a smart agent. With so many potential developments all aiming at the same niche market, the need for brand differentiation becomes critical.

The wary architect will not be seduced by the implied flattery of a developer who has come their way because their design talents are desired enough to increase the speed and value of sales. The wary architect will be more careful than ever to guard the use of their name in any marketing of the project and will negotiate a contract that involves them in full services, including the interiors. Architects can easily find their good name being used to market projects that they inevitably have little control of. This is where architects have to be especially careful. That their name is not used purely as a marketing tool.

It was tragic to visit the original display units for the Horizon Tower in Sydney, only to find that they had been designed by others and had little to do with Seidler's building as a whole. That the developer thought the Horizon interiors could be conceptually distinct from the exterior only makes one wonder how much they really understand about architecture, especially when the building was so heavily marketed using Seidler's reputation. Many potential buyers were also disappointed and demanded Seidler's interiors. In some developments, astute buyers are demanding the involvement of the design architects in all aspects of the design, detailing and

interior fitout. Some are even cementing this in their contract of sale requiring the architect's sign-off on the completed design.

There is a process of education involved with the developers. The shift in developer attitudes is potentially exciting but has its frustrations. There is a common storey from architects that goes a little like this: "The developer arrives with a D.A. approved scheme and thinks that a bit of a makeover by a name architect might give them an additional edge in marketing and sales." In this case what the developer is really after is a look – the minimalist look, the urban industrial look, the Manhattan apartment look, the SOHO warehouse look. Whilst an architect can certainly transform a very ordinary proposal into something desirable through the astute selection of colours, materials and fittings, what cannot change is the fundamentals. Does the development have good ambient light levels, cross ventilation, efficient planning, spatial hierarchy, efficient energy systems, is there a consistent design language and has the streetscape been considered? If the fundamentals of the design are poor, then no amount of stainless steel benches, limestone floors, copper roofs or Stark fixtures can correct that.

The legacy of architectural branding could go one of two ways. At its worst it will serve to further reduce architectural design to a series of stylistic looks that one can choose between. At best, it will give architects the opportunity to introduce quality architecture back into the commercial residential market by reasserting their rightful position as design leaders. More than likely, it will be a bit of both.