

CLIENT IDENTIFICATION WITH DESIGN AND THE ARCHITECTURE FIRM: SCOPING IDENTIFICATION THROUGH DESIGN-LED VISUALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Architectural and urban identity has been explored physically and sociologically. How clients and end-users identify with buildings and those behind the design has been neglected. Recent brand management research into niche market architecture firms has shown a significant yet unarticulated link between design and client identification. Clients identify with the design approach and specific design solutions – the stronger the design the stronger the potential for identification. The client and end-users come to see design as an expression of themselves: who they are and aspire to be. Yet architects tend to focus primarily on the design, responsive engagement of the client being a secondary or implicit role. Client identification requires an adequate language, recent theoretical developments of images of brand culture being applied: the concept of the transformational mirror of consumption, triggering co-value creation that accrues as personal or social capital to the client and as social capital to the firm, applied with the concepts of snapshot aesthetics and the visual language of architecture to suit certain markets. This analysis provides a basis for empirical work into the psychology of client identification from the client perspective.

Keywords: Architecture, Client, Co-value Creation, Design, Identification, Image

INTRODUCTION

Branding and customer identification mainly focus upon analysis of the corporate perspective (Ahearne et al, 2005). The client perspective remains largely neglected. Visual imagery and design provide an important bridge for customer and client engagement in both product and service markets. It is argued that design follows the brand, design quality giving rise to the most visible and tangible image of the firm. Design becomes a tangible element of marketing (Olins, 1990) and facilitates marketing as well as brand development in particular for both the product and the promotion of the product (Bruce and Daly, 2007). Design can be decisive in facilitating customer and client identification.

An area requiring exploration is the role of design where design is the core business, recent research seems indicating brand follows design (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). The “design attitude” informing and reflected in the organisational culture, structure and processes facilitates creativity of the design firm (cf. Michlewski, 2008), giving rise to the brand that

is projected into the market and reinforced through relationship marketing (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). Architecture practices pose particular issues concerning design-led branding. Architectural and urban identity has been explored physically and sociologically (e.g. Davis, 1990) and for city marketing (e.g. Smyth, 1994). Less attention has been paid to how the clients and users identify with buildings and facilities. There is an absence of research on how these clients and end-users identify with the design, the firms and their employees. End-users fall into two categories. Under the first category fall, those who occupy the buildings and those who use the facilities as visitors. Then there is the category of “onlookers” who either experience the visual image of the external design in the built environment or experience the design through photographic images in the media, including peer promotion in the architecture press. The buildings are the core business *yet* also sculptural ‘billboards’ for prominent architecture practices.

Recent brand management research into niche market architecture firms demonstrated significant yet previously unarticulated links between the architectural process and client identification (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). The social and psychological dimensions of customer or client identification remains insufficiently articulated, partly due to an absence of conceptual parameters at the brand-client interface. This paper has the *objective* of scoping our understanding of identification at this interface. Drawing upon the work of Schroeder (2007), three concepts are applied: *the visual language of architecture*, *snapshot aesthetics* and *the transformational mirror of consumption*. The concept of the transformational mirror of consumption is dominant in design-led markets, including architecture design markets. This conceptualisation helps articulate co-created value as client identification develops. Such *co-created value* accrues as either personal or social capital to the client (individual or corporate respectively) and as *social capital* to the architecture firm. The concept of the transformational mirror of consumption applied with the concept of snapshot aesthetics and the visual language of architecture serves marketing, branding and identification functions and in different design markets.

DEFINING CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION

Customer identification is related to personal identity and social identity. Personal identity arises from a sense of self, defined in terms of feeling accepted, secure and significant (Anderson, 1990). This sense of identity is an overall condition, although associated feelings vary according to context and prevailing circumstances. Significance is particularly linked to the marketplace, for example many people get a strong sense of significance from what they achieve at work (McGee, 1998) or acquire as branded goods. Significance is related to equity, for example status and market standing, whilst acceptance and security are more related to equality. Brands therefore primarily connect to significance, for example wearing clothing of an upscale brand may lend a sense of significance to someone, which in turn may reinforce perceptions of acceptance and security. Particular brands convey messages about the nature of a person’s identity, for example it may be ‘cool’ to wear Nike compared to another major brand. The film *You Got Mail* considerably helped the Starbucks brand, Tom Hanks commenting how decisions about choosing a cup coffee give people with very ordinary lives a sense of personal identity. Capital goods, such as a house, carry more weight than a cup of coffee or T-shirt.

Personal identity theory (Stryker, 1980) states that roles help people to define their identity, roles particularly lending significance, the derived sense of self becoming an “active creator of social behaviour” (Stryker, 1980: 385). Stryker (1968) therefore linked

role identities to experiential outcomes, recognising that some identities have greater impact on outcomes than others. Commitment, for example long-term commitment, is based on relationships and their strength, and has the ability to reinforce roles and hence identity. Long-term commitment, frequently defined within specific roles, can come out of brands and customer identification in terms of the product and people delivering a service.

Social identity theory is a perception of alignment to or oneness with a group of people. Social identification arises from the types of individuals, the salience and prestige of the group. Social identification leads to activities that are congruent with and support for institutions that embody the identity (Ashforth et al, 1989). Idealised and stereotypical perceptions of self and others tend to inform identification with others and groups, for example through organisational socialisation, roles and intergroup relations.

Hogg et al (1995) linked personal and social identity theories. Personal identity theory is robust in analysing experience and internalisation, which is important for client identification, and social identity theory is strong at addressing cognitive factors, which have important confirming and reinforcing functions in client identification. Social identity in a role and within groups helps individuals maintain a sense of self and self-worth as well as a forum for projecting a positive and aspired sense of self (Tajfel, 1982).

Customer or client identification is a step on from personal and social identity. Identification invokes empathy from one person or group to another – we can put ourselves in the shoes of others. A brand soliciting a positive emotional response gives a sense of well being through the quality or label with which we wish to be associated – we want to put ourselves in their shoes! Identification therefore works at two levels. It starts with the product or service being supplied along with the corporate brand, the organisation and individuals behind the product or service. The first level of response is empathy, based upon past experience, which invokes a sense of wellbeing, primarily but not always linked to significance. Volvo cars as a brand had a reputation for safety and solidity, derived from past experience and design, which feeds a sense of security as well as significance. The second level is empathy directly informed by our aspirations for future experience – a sense of getting closer to aspired levels of wellbeing. Apple products have a reputation for quality design and ‘cool’ image, linking a sense of current peer acceptance and our aspirations as to how we wish to project ourselves to others and what we wish to become. Aspirations are based in personal and social significance. Both Volvo and Apple value design in different ways and are examples where design follows the brand. In design-led companies, such as architects, brand follows the design. What difference does this make?

RESEARCH ON CLIENT IDENTIFICATION IN DESIGN-LED FIRMS

There are few models of branding and brand development in general (de Chernatony et al, 2003), including client identification in particular. There is also a dearth of literature on branding in design-led firms, where design is the core business rather than in support. Clients identify with firm design approaches and the specific design solution for their facility. The stronger the design approach, the stronger is the potential for identification through the design. In architecture practices design strength links to terms such as “strong idea” firms (Coxe et al, 1987; Winch and Schneider, 1993) and “architstars” (e.g. Manzoni et al, 2009). Behind the strength of design is a design culture called design attitude (Michlewski, 2008) and a studio model of organisational structure (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). The potential client, the client and end-users involved with the design process come

to see the design attitude expressed in the designs as an expression of themselves, embodying self-image of who they are, who they think they are and whom they aspire to be. The psychology of this process has yet to be adequately explored for architecture practice management. Architects tend to focus primarily on the design and its delivery assigning the service and responsive engagement of the client to a secondary or implicit role, and hence are process-orientated within operations rather than proactive across management functions.

Research conducted into five architecture practices has begun to confirm this tendency (Kioussi, 2008). All the practices were engaged with quality design, construction and development, therefore, a more intense and continuous link between the client and the practice was present than normal. These practices were motivated by the wish to preserve design quality throughout all phases of the project realisation (Kioussi, 2008). The first pertinent finding was confirmation of professional disdain for the commercialism of marketing amongst the architecture practices (Kotler and Connor, 1977). Design was perceived to be speaking for itself, and thus when clients approached these practices it was viewed as 'automatic', that is, out of merit of the design alone. Yet it was also found that a considerable amount of relationship marketing was implicitly conducted by all the practices, which proved significant to clients. Specifically, this unrecognised relationship marketing was a key element of building the brand through client identification (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). Whilst client identification commenced with an emotional response to the design approach of the firm, it deepened as relationships developed in two ways. First was the sense of identification with those with whom the clients had direct contact. For start up practices relationships were with the founder. Relationships broaden as practices grow. For large and multidisciplinary practices relationship marketing and management became more critical, for example implicit key account management (KAM) roles (cf. McDonald et al 1997; Kempeners and van der Hart 1999) in quality design-construction-development firms where research has identified the importance of KAM functions (Kioussi, 2008). This led to the second way where identification developed beyond the design attitude and sets of individual relationships with employees to identification with the practice as an organisation as corporate branding embodied in the design approach and reputation.

It is suspected that relationship building is important for most architecture practices, and awareness maybe weaker amongst strong idea compared to strong service and delivery practices (cf. Coxe et al, 1987). The quality design-construction-development firms in the study maintained constant and regular client links throughout the project (Kioussi, 2008). The traditional architectural commission sometimes involves the client with more iteration during the concept design stage, although less later. Personal relationships with the founder and key practice personnel help induce identification, which may become corporate. The relationships may wane somewhat over the project life cycle if personal management or explicit relationship management is not developed. Identification may therefore weaken too, architects not necessarily appreciating the value of marketing for maintaining and reinforcing reputation

This process has been poorly articulated for two reasons, one practice based and one conceptual. First, marketing remains a matter of some professional disdain in practice, especially amongst strong idea firms, even though embracing relationship marketing and management explicitly would help brand development and deepen client identification. Second, as recommended from the study, "a more thorough analysis as to the way in which

branding engenders customer identification” is needed (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009:9). This neglect of the process of client identification is not merely a matter of tracing the psychology of identification, perhaps aided by personal and social identity theory, but also has to do with inadequate conceptual language to articulate such an exploration, particularly at the client-architecture interface. This is where the recent theoretical developments around images of brand culture can contribute.

SCOPING AND UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION

A language for scoping and understanding client identification at the client-architecture practice interface is needed. In this analysis, emphasis is placed upon how communication from the architecture practice effects and affects clients. The impact of the visual imagery as a language of communication directly and indirectly through design is examined. This language is important in order to provide (i) an understanding as to how identification begins to take hold in the hearts and minds of clients and users, and (ii) a bridge between design and relationship building for the architecture practice.

The work of Schroeder (2007) provides a conceptual typology for beginning to articulate and categorise these design outputs. Schroeder addresses visual advertising and brand management, focusing upon the visual representation of the product, in his case through advertising. Architecture, where brand follows the design, is the product. Design is directly represented, and indirectly represented through the important process of media peer review (cf. Winch and Schneider, 1993). Further, design is also manifested in the final artifact or product as an advertisement in itself. Many buildings, particularly from eminent strong idea practices (Coxe et al, 1987) and “archistars” (Manzoni et al, 2009), become large urban ‘billboards’ that promote the architecture practice as a corporate brand (cf. Kioussi and Smyth 2009), and promote the city or urban area in the city (Smyth, 1994). Schroeder (2007) provides three conceptual categories of cultural, ideological and rhetorical images that help articulate design value creation.

Visual imagery, including design, is a powerful form of communication because it invokes and resonates with personal experience and aspirations that are open to personal interpretation and perception (cf. Bargh, 2002). *The Visual Language of Architecture* is the first and most obvious of the three categories as it employs the term ‘architecture’ albeit in a generic sense, and Schroeder frequently applies it to advertisements that include buildings. He uses the examples of banks that present classical or solid formal representations of their institution in their publicity (Schroeder, 2003). Such images communicate professionalism and institutional longevity (Schroeder, 2007). This language is also the traditional language of the architecture practice in brochures, peer media and coffee table publications. This type of image projection connects with social identity theory concerning architecture peer groups. It also facilitates client identification through the design of buildings that in some cases support and develop client corporate branding. The strong idea architects and “archistars” may allocate most promotional resources to this visual language. They appreciate design quality sells their services. Visual imagery is implicitly the doorway to stimulating client identification, initially on design merit, yet subsequently through relationship development. The strong design and service practices gain most from this language of brand management, portraying the cutting edge design and a solid professional image respectively (cf. Coxe et al, 1987).

Snapshot Aesthetics is the mostly recently popularised visual language. Small digital hand held cameras and mobile phone cameras produce instant images, reflecting the time, place and sentiment of the moment (Schroeder, 2003; 2007). This immediacy provides the source of interest in the pictures rather than formal compositions and aesthetic principles. Such images appear accessible, realistic and authentic, casual reflections of everyday life. Well known brands use this approach in their advertising, including leading upscale fashion brands such as Yves Saint Laurent and Apple (2007; 2008). Snapshot aesthetics are the least used language of architects, although some practices, like make architects (make architects, 2009), depict creativity (rather than the buildings) in this way on their website. There is scope for greater use of snapshot aesthetics to provide clients with an accessible visual bridge between the building and the relationship, plus a doorway to engage end-users by depicting building in (future) use. Thus snapshot aesthetics provides supplementary support to the visual language of architecture, encouraging identification through the human dimensions of personal and social identity of clients and end-users.

The Transformative Mirror of Consumption is the most important language for client identification in design-led branding. It is based upon the emotional response of the perceiver to the visual image. Schroeder (2007) considers this in advertising as both literal and symbolic. He uses advertisements where mirrors or reflections are literally used to reveal and reinforce attributes of the onlooker. There are precedents in art. Manet's *Woman behind the Bar at the Folies Bergères* sadly stares directly at the viewer, yet upon inspection the mirror behind her depicts the man she is looking at – the viewer being both subject and viewing the object. This device is used in the adverts for Coloma Coffee in the late 1990s (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004) and MOTO KRZR in 2006 (Schroeder, 2007). *The Rokeby Venus* by Velazquez has the women in self-reflected vanity and the viewer is drawn into the picture as the pose presents vanity as a sensual depiction for them. Yves Saint Laurent has parodied this and other works of art. They add a clothed man on the floor, also holding the mirror of self-reflection, the juxtaposition of the two figures inviting the viewer to see the product as transforming. Design is intended to inspire and raise aspirations, to be spiritually uplifting. Thus seeing a design concept for a building or entering a completed space can inspire a client or member of a client organization to feel that they are more than they were, to be more confident, perhaps even (to link with the metaphor of designer clothing) to change their clothing to be in line with whom they wish to become.

Therefore, the frequent application of the transformative mirror of consumption is symbolic – an indirect invitation to the viewer with a corresponding emotional response. The viewer starts as onlooker, the emotional response engaging the viewer who interprets the image according to their perceptions and meanings. The more a design, including architectural design, meets current requirements, reflects aspirations and inspires new levels of self-reflection and being, the greater the sense of identification through this transformative mirror. The language of architecture and snapshot aesthetics can provide images that also act as emotional doorways to this type of response, so an image can be in a dual category with a dual function. This transformational category involves both parties actively creating something – the architect the design and the client an emotional response, which is part of their socially constructed reality based upon both the concrete and the symbolic (cf. Berger and Luckman, 1984; Bourdieu, 1984). Such emotional response creates a value for the artifact in the marketplace of consumption.

Strong idea design stimulates strong emotional responses, hence transformation. Strong ideas practices tend to exclude people and live objects from their photos, helping to build the “myth” of design, which helps build client aspirations in the early stages of the architect-client relationship. Young, ambitious practices (cf. Winch and Schneider, 1993) addressing vibrant lifestyles and the social use of their facilities may use snapshot aesthetics, following in the wake of fashion designers, to portray images at the early stages of the design and project life cycle, and to convey the buildings in use.

Where client perceptions and meanings strongly resonate and align with the architecture and the intentions of the architects, personal identification is reinforced as well as social identification amongst those representing the client organisation and end-users. Resonance and alignment are reflections of (i) the self-image of the client in terms of their current requirements and their aspirations concerning their personal lifestyle (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009), and (ii) corporate ambitions, which may also be reflected through building design to reinforce the corporate brand. This is co-created value (Pralahad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; 2004b), Pralahad and Ramaswamy stating, “Points of interaction provide opportunities for collaboration and negotiation, explicit or implicit, between the consumer and the company – as well as opportunities for those processes to break down” (2004b:9).

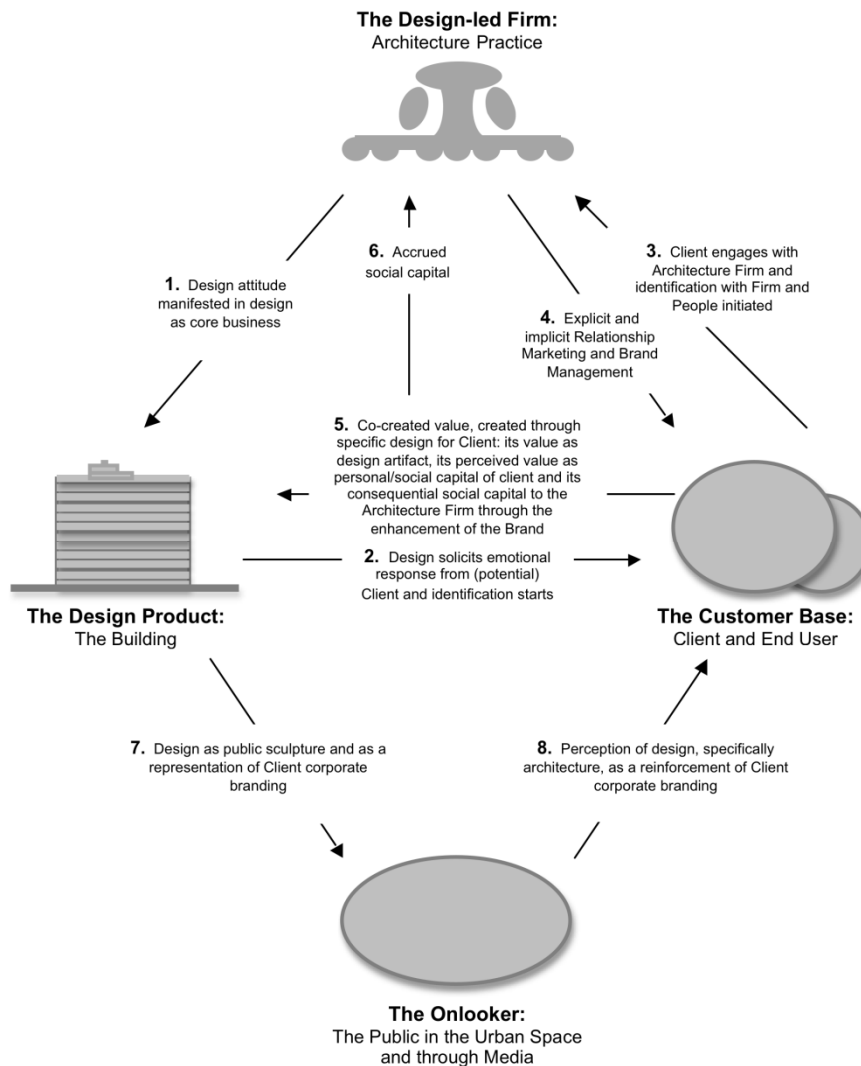


Figure 1: Value Creation Co-value Creation, Identification and Social Capital

Although architects have some disdain, relationship marketing is trying to manage interactions, whilst brand management couples “design attitude” with the relationship strength to encourage identification and develop practice profile (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). This co-created value is set out in Figure 1. This figure primarily addresses the

STAGE	FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT
1. Design attitude manifested in design as core business	Product: visual language of architecture Promotion: visual language of architecture (photographic) and snapshot aesthetics amongst some younger practices
2. Design solicits emotional response from (potential) Client and identification starts	Product: transformational mirror of consumption Response: client identification initiates desire for further engagement with the practice
3. Client engages with Architecture Firm and identification with Firm and People initiated	Architect typically sees this as a response on design merit. Client wants to develop relationship to reinforce identification Architects may implicitly build Relationship Management to reinforce design as a transformational mirror for the client
4. Explicit and implicit Relationship Marketing and Brand Management	Promotion: Explicit Relationship Marketing and Brand Management to reinforce Client Identification and enhance market profile using combinations of the visual language of architecture, snapshot aesthetics and recognising the power of design as a transformational mirror, which is guided and facilitated through Relationship Management
5. Co-value creation through specific design for Client: its value as design artifact, its perceived value as personal/social capital of client and its consequential social capital to the Architecture Firm through the enhancement of the Brand	Product: specific design developed soliciting: (i) a return to Stage 1, plus (ii) transformational mirror of consumption, the process being reinforced by: a. client feedback solicits development of concept design with Architects b. relationship deepened with Architects through the process Client identification reinforced through this co-created value process
6. Accrued social capital	Co-created value adds product value for the Client More significantly in the long term co-creation adds brand value to the Architecture Firm in the market and status to the Client, which is manifested as corporate brand value if the Client is an organisation The transformational mirror dominates at this stage, increasingly developed through the relationship rather than design per se
7. Design as public sculpture and as a representation of Client corporate branding	Product: visual language of architecture Promotion: visual language of architecture (photographic) and snapshot aesthetics (photographic)
8. Perception of design, specifically architecture, as a reinforcement of Client corporate branding	The visual language of architecture as dominant

Table 1: Co-Created Value, Relationship Marketing and Brand Management

architecture practice, client and end-user in relation to the building and its design. The wider context is important as the public, the “onlooker”, is part of the social identification and indirectly the reputational profile of a practice. The onlooker forms part of the broader co-creation of social capital. Figure 1 identifies eight stages that are explored further in Table 1, linking the stage to the type of promotion and relationship building that practices might consider in changing their roles as more active marketers and brand managers. Indicative links to Schroeder’s categories – the language of architecture, snapshot aesthetics and design as transformational mirrors of consumption – are also provided.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Previous research found that the process of client identification has yet to be fully articulated (Kioussi and Smyth, 2009). This paper has explored in greater detail some of the dimensions in the process of client identification. Client identification is conceptually part of marketing and specifically branding. It also links with issues of personal and social identity. An analysis, using three categories of visual images of branding – the visual language of architecture, snapshot aesthetics and design as transformational mirrors of consumption – have been developed, helping to provide a conceptual bridge between creating design in the market and the psychological response of clients and end-users, hence informing relationship marketing and management carried out by practices.

Two principle recommendations flow from the paper. Visual language is more conducive to the design community than management language, providing a more conducive entry into developing explicit marketing practices. The first recommendation concerning the analysis provides a basis for architecture practices to become more active in explicit relationship marketing, brand management, and managing client identification. The second recommendation is for rigorous research to be conducted on how clients and end-users identify with design and designers from their perspective, leading to practical guidelines on choosing and setting the right imaging according to the project phases or practice profile.

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