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## New Professional Context and new Symbolic Elites among French Architects

Véronique Biau

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# Professional Identities in Transition

Cross-cultural dimensions

**Edited by** Inga Hellberg  
Mike Saks  
Cecilia Benoit

Almqvist & Wiksell International, Södertälje

Göteborg University, Department of Sociology

*New professional context  
and new symbolic elites among  
French architects*

Véronique Biau

As socio-economic research on the building sector has shown, the last fifteen years have had an important effect on French actors of urban and architectural design. E. Campagnac and D. Lorrain have described the horizontal and vertical integration of the construction and public works sector, that led to the emergence of a "*démarche ensemblière*" (Campagnac 1992). This *démarche ensemblière* is a form of division of work. Big contractors have absorbed the medium-sized ones and concentrated even more power in their hands. Meanwhile, powerful enterprises such as Bouygues, Dumez, Lyonnaise des Eaux, etc. have broadened their field of action, working upstream in the process (operating at city management level: public transportation, technical networks, urban development) and downstream (management and maintenance of housing estates or collective facilities). Increasingly, these big contractors are in a position to negotiate very comprehensive contracts with local authorities or private firms ("keyturn contracts") as they have integrated in their staff the diverse competences that enable them to provide the right piece of land, the architectural design, the technical calculations and specifications, and finally the building itself. They control the whole process and can guarantee their clients a short completion time (which is particularly important for elected officials, who like to show results before the end of their mandate) and stick to anticipated levels of expenses. They can even relieve the owners and users from marketing, selling, maintenance and daily management tasks. Thus, even though this "*ensemblier*" process does

not yet concern all building operations, new dynamics are developing in the building sector, and many professional standards and rationalities are obviously changing.

For architects, this evolution means a severe loss of status. They tend to lose their central position in the chain of specialised tasks, often qualified as a position of “orchestra conductor”, where they used to be the only client’s advisor. On the one hand, they would coordinate for him the legal aspects the project and negotiations with the planning authorities to get the building permit. On the other hand, they would handle the building process and the site, for example helping the client in his choice of contractors.

This first figure represents this chain as it used to be :

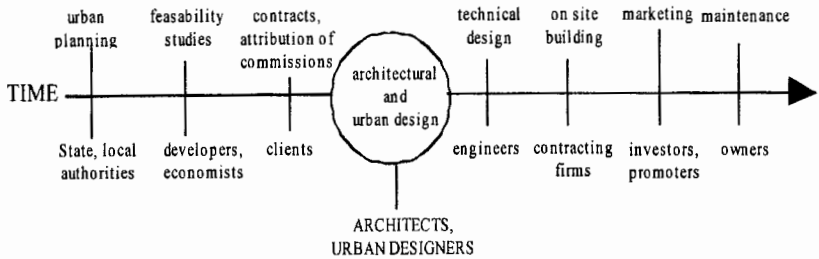


Figure 1: *The previous chain.*

As constraints of cost and timing imposed by clients are growing, the process has to be more closely monitored and negotiated, as well as less sequential. Early phases of design and decision making must increasingly take into account the constraints of marketing and execution, and can always be re-discussed. Every agent becomes more dependant upon others’ rationalities and requirements. The chain transforms itself into an intricate network of relationships where the contractors occupy the dominant position, especially because they are more able than architects to carry out organisational tasks when the latter become complex and require management methods. Contracting firms replace architects in their role of main client interlocutor, as they seem more reliable from economic and technical points of view. They can also take the main part of financial risk and technical responsibility when needed (Montlibert 1995).

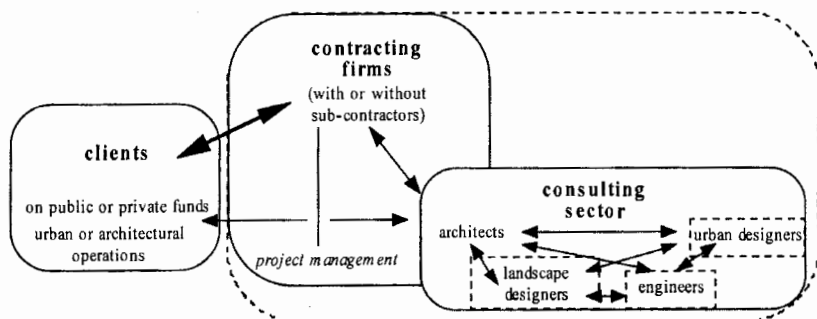


Figure 2: *The new chain.*

In this evolution, architects lose not only their specific relationship with clients, but also their specific role within the consulting sector (Haumont 1992). Other design competencies are being developed and specified in other professional groups which trespass on architects' jurisdiction: landscape design, urban design, interior design, facade design, as well as (because architectural education is – at least in France – a little weak in technical matters) the technical design largely carried out by generalist or specialised building engineers.

Even their attitude towards the piece of design that they take care of has to be reframed: their design options have to be compatible with administrative and technical standards and labels, with site logistics and organisation, with sustainability and understanding of long-term evolutions, with buyers' needs and tastes.

A traditional metaphor, often used in the 1960s and 1970s, compared the building production to the automobile and aeronautic industries, as rationalised and technically efficient types of production, able to go from the ideological to the practical field. In particular segments of the building sector, such as offices, shopping malls, hotels, or big leisure and tourism facilities, for example, worldwide operators spread, in different countries, not only standardised architectural objects but standardised processes. I propose to call their logic a "product logic" (Deforge 1990).

THE NEED AND CLAIMS FOR AN AESTHETIC  
OR "CULTURAL" LOGIC

Concurrently to this rationalisation process, which tends to standardize architectural objects and to minimise and routinise architectural intervention in design and realization, there is a strong claim for an artistic or cultural logic both in urban and architectural production. This claim is shared by a certain range of clients, whose architectural demand could be qualified as "emblematic", as we shall see below, and by the most legitimated architects. The latter defend the concept of an architectural profession oriented not only towards production of buildings driven by social needs, technical requirements and commercial profits, but also towards the creation of original architectural works adding "aesthetic and meaningful value" to their urban and social environment.

On the clients' side, actually, there is, as ever, a need to show specific, extra ordinary buildings which can bear the image of the power, innovativeness, and aesthetic taste of their owners – even when these buildings are more expensive, badly adapted to their users or to their surroundings, difficult to maintain in the future or controversial in their aspect (Dovey 1992):

This, for example, has been the attitude of the French State towards its important architectural realisations since the years of reconstruction after World War II. Since then, in effect, the alliance of engineers of the "Grands Corps de l'Etat" (Campagnac and Winch 1997), of large contracting firms and of a part of the architects' group – composing together what has been called the "technostructure" (Raymond 1984) – began to consider its work as a reference in innovation and quality for the whole building production. Whenever possible, in technical aspects and anything quantifiable, the "technostructure" implemented different norms and standards for building production. For the more qualitative aspects such as architectural expression, it had to act through exemplification. In the academic tradition, which in France ended in 1968, commissions for new important state buildings were allocated to a special elite Corps of less than a hundred persons (the "Architectes des Bâtiments Civils et Palais Nationaux") who were recruited among the winners of the very prestigious Prix de Rome (Monuments Historiques 1982). During these intense moments of social transformation, urbanisation and construction,

this oligarchy (Moulin 1973) soon proved to be much too small compared to the needs in professional expertise, and began to be harshly criticised for its inadapted competencies : lack of technical skills (especially with regard to modern building materials such as steel and concrete), inability to take into account specified economic constraints, difficulties to adapt architectural forms to new urban ways of life, confinement in an old-fashioned monumental style. State administrations, that commissioned these hospitals, schools, culture and sports facilities, social housing, etc. and had to play the role of quality reference for all privately and publicly financed architecture, were then forced to open their market to other professionals. In order to find "new architectural talent", the state personnel in charge of architecture established a set of competitions, prizes, exhibitions and publications which, as we shall see later, succeeded in promoting a new generation of symbolic architectural elites.

Other types of clients also seem to like the symbolic stratification of the architectural profession, insofar as it entails differentiated values of architectural "signatures", and distinctive strategies. Among business leaders, among elected local officials, there are decision makers for whom the architecture of the buildings that they commission and/or use for themselves reflects their own values and qualities : audaciousness, trust in avant-gardism, the right aesthetic taste, disinterestedness of the patron of the arts, a will to have a place in the history of architecture. This has been particularly obvious in the years just following the administrative decentralisation in France (1985-90). This decentralisation strengthened the power of mayors over urban management, urban planning and architectural policy. Some of these mayors – who wanted to assert the specificity and the importance of this new political arena, and to compete with a traditionally centralised political establishment – developed an innovative discourse about the management of local life. They wanted to "manage the city as an enterprise", often referred to as the business world and its marketing methods. Architecture has a role to play in the "image strategy" of the city, which combines, often implicitly, two types of action. On the one hand, influences on mental representations associated with the city, using slogans, municipal journals and advertising posters; on the other hand, "requalification" of all or parts of the urban landscape through spectacular interventions by nationally or world-famous architects.

This strong relationship between discourse and image used to claim or establish prestige justifies the use of the word “*emblematic*” to qualify this type of architectural commission. As shown by our own survey, this process did not lead – in spite of the celebration of local identity by the managerial discourse – to the promotion of local architectural elites (Biau 1992). On the contrary, it broadened the gap between very high-status architects, to whom local authorities gave great freedom to design expensive, spectacular, mediatic buildings, while ordinary modest production remained in the hands of local professionals.

On the architects’ side, the most legitimate professional claim is that the architects’ role is to transform a building from a utilitarian box into an entirely cultural object, heavily loaded with emotions. The words of H. Ciriani, one of the best known French architects, illustrate that position when he teaches his students that architecture is not about building places for people to live in, but about designing places for people to die in.

This romantic vision of the profession has very concrete consequences. At the organisational level at first, it comes with a certain reluctance towards division of labour, which altogether entails, for the professional, the loss of a creator’s control over the integrity of his work, the risk of specialisation which could narrow the range of accessible commissions, and a routinisation of tasks performed in architectural proposals. This reluctance is probably one of the reasons why French architectural firms are on average much smaller than their equivalent in industrialised European and American countries (Blau 1988). According to data from the Conseil National de l’Ordre des Architectes, 61.2% of architectural firms are solo practitioners and 1.3% only has more than 10 employees (Nogue 1997). Beside the tough economic crisis which strikes many such small practices, this small average firm size has strong effects on the ability of the profession to export itself, especially in the European Union (a little less in developing countries), where highly specialised and integrated competencies, in both architectural design and engineering, are expected.

The conception of architectural professionalism which comes with the “*aesthetic logic*” has two other aspects : the first is that it leads to a definition of architects’ professional competencies based on their ability to design something new, to represent a step in the progression of architectural doctrines, skills and styles, and to create debates among peers. Like in the visual arts, it is then



tightly related to the notion of inventivity or creativity. The second aspect is that it leads to specific kinds of self-marketing or self-promotion strategies : in effect, unlike creativity in the visual arts, inventivity can barely exist in architecture without a client who wants or accepts to get involved in a process of that kind. This means that "creative" architects have to seek out the few clients who value innovation, who have "emblematic" ideas and who will provide the best conditions to develop fully and freely their ideas and experiments. As seen above, public commissions coming from the state and from local authorities are likely to give architects these expected conditions. In France, however, these public commissions have been regulated for several decades through a system of architectural competitions, which tend to privilege architects who have already completed buildings of the kind the competition deals with, but who also have got distinctions, prizes, exhibitions and publications from their work. Since these implicit conditions are clear to many architects, typically competitive strategies are observable (Biau 1998).

In short, unlike the "product logic" described above, the "aesthetic logic" requires the existence of individual "signatures" on architectural design, which remains possible as long as the architect works on his own or with very few subordinates. It also requires the existence of a minimal consensus among professionals, shared with clients and public, about the differential values attributed to such signatures. Although this symbolic stratification is not strictly an economic process – because of different factors, such as the use of fee scales in public contracts, and because fees are based on the cost of the building, which makes operations such as warehouses or offices very lucrative economically but often very poor symbolically – it seems to work very much like a market. In this market, the highest values can only be attributed to very few professionals; otherwise, the values would fall down altogether. The values are constantly reassessed at the national and international levels; they are the basis for contracts, provided clients and professionals are well informed about them. One of the effects of this market is to establish stratification in the relationships between architects and clients: high status clients (symbolically and/or economically powerful clients) tend to contract with high status architects, whose signature they use in strategies of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1979), to produce high status architectural objects. The latter attract the attention of professionals because of

the prestige of their authors; they are largely known to the public because of the social position of their commissioners. This kind of stratification is very similar to that described by J. P. Heinz and E.O. Laumann (Heinz and Laumann 1982) – elite Chicago lawyers choosing the wealthiest clients because they are the most likely to give them the most comfortable economic conditions to develop creativity in their task, and thus to provide them with the highest professional status.

Although we know that there is a symbolic market in architecture, one which delivers differential marks to professionals through prizes, exhibitions, publications and institutional positions, very much like artists, many questions still remain about its functioning.

#### FINDING THE “TALENTED” CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTS

The first glimpse into the “field of architecture” makes it obvious, even to an outside observer, that, without any knowledge about its production and without any aesthetic judgement, a few select names will quickly be associated with talent and quality. This will happen because their name is recalled in every medium in the field and, more rarely, appears in the wider public media. This idea of repetition prompted us to collect and compare the names appearing in these diverse promotions and distinctions. This procedure helps investigate how symbolic elites are produced in architecture.

I elaborated a data base centralising and synthesising as much information related to the “consecration” process as possible.<sup>1</sup> This data base is actually a large table composed of 85 variables representing activities identified as contributing to architectural consecration in the period 1968-95 (columns),<sup>2</sup> and of 2,685 architects who succeeded in at least one such activity during that same period (lines). At the intersection of lines and columns, the data (if any) generally also provides the date of this activity. Biographical data such as year of birth, year of professional registration, year and school of diploma, geographical localisation, etc., have also been included in the table.

This data base is being used to describe precisely the functioning of each type of consecration; it is also a useful basis for analysing individual profiles and careers. Here, I will focus on the “systemic” approach to symbolic stratification: the way in which each diffe-

rent instance involved in the process of consecration operates, the way in which they interfere in each other's operations, and the way in which the elite that they produce divides itself in several profiles and roles.

Four main instances act in the symbolic stratification of French architects (Bowness 1989):

### 1. The system of architectural critique

Very similar to the artistic critique system, it mainly operates through specialised reviews and journals, in which lots of room is dedicated to presentations of selected single works, generally just completed. As the actual architectural production is much larger than what can be shown in these monthly journals, their selection tends to be "positive": editors think it useless, or feel uncomfortable with, showing and criticising bad realisations. They prefer to publish well-regarded work, especially when the notoriety of their authors is big enough to attract readers' interest. In addition to separate articles, journals sometimes provide entire dossiers on architects "on the rise". Still in the same system, publication of books is important too. A large proportion of such books consists of monographs about contemporary architects, describing one or several works of theirs. Some dictionaries have, like the monographs, a very strong distinctive role for quoted architects. The architectural critique system is also based on exhibitions and prizes, among which the Prix du Moniteur is attributed by a publisher.

### 2. The French state instances

These promote architectural quality created in the years 1970-80, the administrative instances in charge of architectural quality are very active in the competition arena: they organise competitions for young practitioners (AJA, PAN) and attribute highly valued national prizes. As references for the whole of architectural production, the state instances have, from time to time, organised exhibitions showing off their own realisations as clients. They also nominate hundreds of professionals as advisors or teachers, some of them specialised in landmark preservation.

### 3. The professional organisations

French architects have two kinds of professional organisations: the traditional ones (two different Academies of Architecture) and, now the most important one, the Ordre, created by the

government in 1943 to protect the professional title of architect. The traditional organisations used to attribute the famous "Prix de Rome" which was abolished in 1968 and they still attribute various different prizes, among which is the Academy Prize.

#### 4. The non-specialised media

Little attention is paid to architectural current affairs in non-specialised media. An International (Salon) of Architecture has tried, not very successfully, for several consecutive years, to attract non-professional people to a kind of architectural exhibition. Some newspapers have occasionally items on architecture. One can also find information about architects in dictionaries and encyclopedias.

The following table sums up the different kinds of events and positions taken into account in our analysis of consecration. It classifies them according to the instances involved.

Table 1: *Classification of the analysis of consecration.*

	Exhibitions	Publications	Prizes	Key positions
<b>Critique publishers</b>	- Institut Français d'Architecture, - Centre Georges Pompidou (CCI), - Pavillon de l'Arsenal, ...	- articles in architectural journals - "anthologies" - monographs - architects dictionary	- Prix du Moniteur	- editorial boards of journals
<b>State instances</b>	- exhibitions of public architecture		- AJA - PAN, European - National Prizes	- state advisory architects - jury of AJA, PAN - architecture professors - responsibility for landmarks (BCPN, ACME)
<b>Professional organizations</b>			- Prix de Rome - Prix de l'Académie	- conseil national de l'Ordre d'Architecture - Institut (Académie des Beaux-Arts) - association AME
<b>Media</b>	SIA	- articles in daily newspapers - dictionaries and encyclopedias		

To analyse this data base, we used two indexes:

- The P (as "potential") index weighs and characterises each consecration event. Its calculation takes into account the fact that the consecration of an architect increases when few other architects have received the same nomination for this event, and when at the same time they have been nominated in many other different events taken into account in the data base.<sup>3</sup>
- The N ( as "notoriety") index computes, for each individual architect included in the table, the sum of the P indexes that he/she has gathered across all the different events where he/she has been distinguished.

The two indexes allow us rank, on the one hand, the different units or types of consecration based on their importance in the whole system; and, on the other hand, the different individuals based on their notoriety.

Although our criteria selected only 2,685 individuals as having been quoted once or more since 1968, including a few foreign architects – a figure that can be compared to the 25,000 architects now practicing in France – the scope of individual notorieties (N indexes) in the population considered in the Table is surprisingly large. On a scale from 1 to 348, more than 88% of the individuals are below 20, and only 34 are above 100. Therefore these architects at the top of the symbolic hierarchy can be set apart from the rest of the group. It is on them that the consecration system has the clearest effects. By this I mean that we can best disentangle the contribution of each source of consecration (critique, state, professional organizations, and media) in terms of their individual notoriety.

To illustrate these effects, I will simply comment here on one principal component of the analysis of the data for the 34 first architects. This analysis shows the distribution of this super-elite in different kinds of leading positions. In order to represent this analysis, the global P index was subdivided into four specific P indexes called P1, P2, P3 and P4 depending on their sources (1 = critique and publishers, 2 = state, 3 = professional organisations, 4 = media).

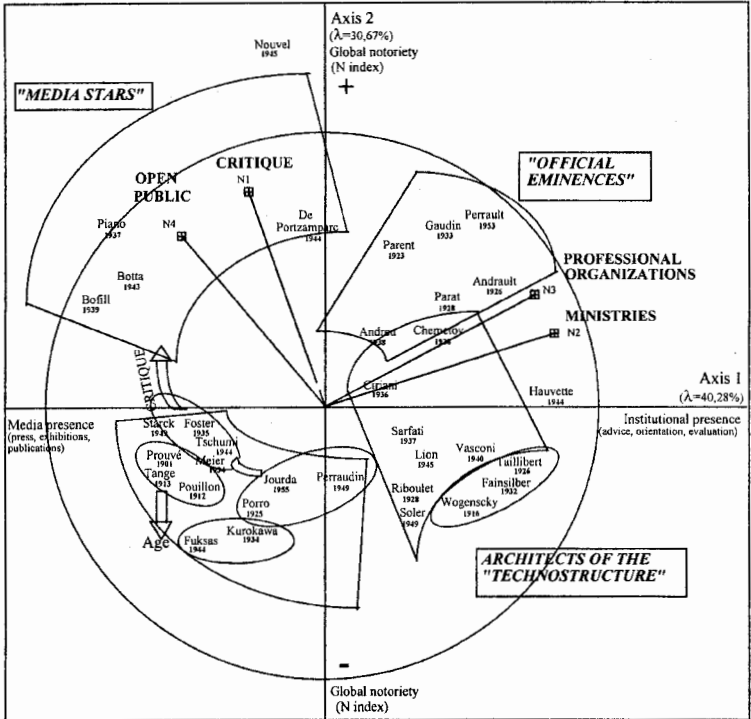


Figure 3: *The Position of French architects (P and N indexes).*

The sources of consecration seem to operate in two tight couples. First, an institutional couple, in which the traditional professional organisations such as the Academies and the Ordre paradoxically act in very similar ways to that of the modernist state instances, especially the Ministry of Infrastructure and Housing. This first couple contributes to the promotion of the same type of elites. The second couple brings together the media: on the one hand, specialised media such as professional journals, specialised publishers and exhibitions frequented by peers; and on the other hand large public media. This second couple also contributes together to the promotion of another kind of elite.

The first axis of the PCA distributes individuals according to their notoriety. On the left side, their notoriety is more organisational and based on presence in, or relations with, both the Ministry and the professional organisations, mainly through advising, teaching, evaluation, elected or nominated representa-

tion. On the right side, individuals benefit from a more impersonal notoriety based on large scale or specialised media that give priority to iconographic or skills of written expression.

The second axis of the PCA represents the global notoriety of individuals (total N index). High notoriety indexes are at the top of the Figure, low notoriety indexes at the bottom.

A third axis (not shown here) was used to check the proximities represented here, and to draw the clusters. It is related to the type of audience for these notorieties, going from the larger lay public to a small arena of peers.

This Figure identifies three profiles of elite architects : on the institutional side, there are both "official representatives" (*éminences*) and "architects of the technostructure"; on the media side there are more or less "public stars".<sup>4</sup>

Among the institutional elites, the third axis splits individuals into two groups. A very cohesive one in terms of notoriety level, position and age ( the average age is 60) is very close to the state administration in charge of architecture (the so-called "technostructure"). Both play important roles in education, competition evaluation, administrative advice to architects and clients, etc. The second group is composed of a declining group in terms of notoriety, and of a still eminent group which is or has been very powerful in the professional organisation circle: they are both members of an Architectural Academy, have been acclaimed through their Prizes, and some have been elected to the national council of the *Ordre des Architectes*.

Among the media "stars", we find the architects with the highest notorieties, also those most dependant on written diffusion of architecture: specialised and lay press and publishers. Two of these stars are French (Jean Nouvel and Christian de Portzamparc) but the three others are mainly active abroad (Renzo Piano, Italian ; Mario Botta, Swiss ; Ricardo Bofill, Spanish). This indicates a certain permeability of the French consecration system to well-known foreign (at least European) architects. Depending on the role that they play in the public arena or in the professional debates, these stars tend to split into two characters. On the one hand, those who are not yet known by the non-initiated people, who mainly have a position of stylistic leaders, who are expected by their colleagues to give their opinion about the right aesthetic code or about the appropriate ways of dealing with urban,

technical and social constraints in architectural design. On the other hand, those who have crossed the gap between peer recognition and public notoriety, and taken a position of "tribune" : they do not only speak in professional terms to professionals; they also consider themselves as mandated to speak to a large public of clients, users and consumers of architecture. On behalf of their peers, they use the most consensual notions to promote architecture and the architectural profession in society at large : the public interest of the profession declared by the 1977 Law on Architecture is one of these consensual notions. It concerns the need for architects' intervention in landmark protection and in the creation of original work to become landmarks for the future and to attract worldwide interest in French cultural production.

## CONCLUSION

It is now well accepted to describe the architectural profession as split between creative goals (very similar to designers and artists) and business efficiency (satisfaction of clients, high level of productivity, high technological quality products). This tension makes sense in the organisation of the architectural firms : architects who consider creativity as a main value tend to work in small teams and in a less divided organisation of labour. The duality also has an effect on the architectural market, i.e. the kind of clients and commissions sought by professionals, and the kind of self-promotion strategies that they develop. Because some clients are more open to architectural innovation (public commissioners in France, for example), the "creative" architects try to reach these specific clients, and adopt the rules of the competition which lead to these specific clients. In addition, the duality has an effect on the debate about the education system: should architects be trained as designers, able to use their creative skills in architecture as well as in every other fields of activity (industrial design, cinema, fashion) or should they be efficient professionals, ready to own their firm as soon as they get their diploma, and become knowledgeable about technical issues, economics, law, organization, marketing, etc.?

The last two decades have strengthened this bi-polarization. The rationalisation of the technico-economic process and the homogenisation of the legal and administrative frame due to the creation of the European Union have privileged the model of the



business-architect. The rising professional identity is one for architects involved in negotiation rather than in creation, who become more interchangeable as the system of actors develops and grows more complex. The model of the creative architect could then be seen as an archaic "Beaux-Arts", destined to disappear behind the domination of other kinds of professionals, better adapted to the requirements of standardisation, profit maximisation and technical and financial risks reduction.

What we observe, at least in France, does not confirm this hypothesis but shows that the rise of the industrial logic in architectural production has not weakened, but stimulated the rise of the aesthetic logic. Our data show that the elite is not a declining group of a few individuals who casually managed to succeed in creative careers. There is, on the contrary, a whole system of selection and promotion of elites, which involves the state and professional organisations, the media and professional critique.

Like every elitist system, this one has its own strengths and weaknesses. Its main weakness stems from the following paradox : the creativity and the originality of architectural work are at the core of the professional *illusio* and are emphasized by the media's image of the architect as a "culture hero". But because most clients do not demand that kind of service, competition among architects for the very few commissions allowing them some freedom of design is becoming very tough. Thus, very few architects can actually pretend to satisfy the professional *illusio*. Most have to adapt to the production logic in spite of the fact that they have been trained to despise it, not to master it with adequate skills.

The strength of this elitism, and the reason for which it remains consensual among French architects and some of their clients and partners, probably has to do with the protection of an architectural "jurisdiction". The protection of this jurisdiction is not so much, nowadays, an issue of boundary conflicts, either with engineers or with constructing firms. It is rather to obtain recognition of the difference between building and architecture, and the need for buildings to be more than livable boxes, to be original aesthetic and significant works. This claim, inevitably associated with the notion of artistic genius and thus a symbolic stratification, remains the only claim allowing architects to keep their professional and individual leadership in the building process.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We will use here the word "consecration" without any religious connotation, in a meaning close to the French one.
- <sup>2</sup> Through 20 semi-directive interviews with architects and informative interviews with different personalities involved in critique, professional organisations or state institutions dealing with architecture see Biau V. (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> The calculation of the P index is, for a variable V, the average number of occurrences in the whole table of the individuals belonging to the group of "winners" of the variable V.
- <sup>4</sup> In the bottom-left quadrant, subgroups which are better defined when one uses the "axis 1 by axis 3" diagram are more heterogeneous: some of them, quite young, seem to rise to the star position; others, older or dead, will probably go slowly down in the notoriety scale during the coming years.