

# SOCIAL MEDIA USE AS GLOBAL POSITIONING STRATEGY FOR ARCHITECTURE STUDIOS

## USO DEL SOCIAL MEDIA COMO ESTRATEGIA GLOBAL DE POSICIONAMIENTO PARA ESTUDIOS DE ARQUITECTURA

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### RESUMEN

La evolución de internet ha favorecido la globalización del sistema económico actual. En este escenario, los estudios de arquitectura encuentran nuevas oportunidades de negocio fuera del contexto local a través de la deslocalización de su cartera de clientes.

Este artículo propone una secuencia de actuaciones a seguir para el desarrollo de una estrategia de comunicación, a través de la cual poder mostrar las capacidades del estudio de arquitectura a posibles clientes potenciales. Dicha estrategia se centra en la difusión de proyectos a través de diversos medios sociales. Mediante pequeñas píldoras informativas, basadas en diferentes lenguajes gráficos, es posible incrementar la visibilidad del estudio en el plano internacional. Para mejorar la eficacia de la estrategia de comunicación, se propone aprovechar la inercia de la actividad social generada en torno a diferentes eventos profesionales.

#### Palabras Clave:

Social media, Arquitectura, Sociedad digital, Estrategias de comunicación.

### ABSTRACT

The evolution of the internet has promoted the globalization of the current economic system. In this scenario, architecture studios may be forced to relocate its customer base, looking for new business opportunities outside the local context.

The article proposes a sequence of actions to be taken in order to develop a communication strategy in order to show the capabilities of the architecture studio to potential customers. This strategy focuses on the dissemination of projects through various social media using small informative pills based on a graphical language, in order to increase the visibility of the study at the international level. To increase the effectiveness of the communication strategy, we propose to take advantage of the inertia of social activity generated around different professional events.

#### Keywords:

Social media, Architecture, Digital society, Communication strategies.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Today's society hinges on a capitalist system based on the globalization of consumer markets. Thanks to the forceful evolution undergone by the Internet and communication technology systems in recent years, it is possible to access almost any international market in order to position one's own products or purchase a product offered by another producer or distributor.

Similarly, the development of communication systems is narrowing direct contact with customers, so that they can easily access an almost unlimited range of products and services.

This situation is giving rise to the need to relocate the client portfolio in companies operating in many different sectors, including, for example, architectural studios. The reason underlying this change is the search for new business opportunities beyond the local territory in which they have normally operated. Today, it is necessary to explore new international markets in the search for new customers to whom we can offer our skills.

This paper proposes a series of strategies aimed at increasing the visibility of architectural studios internationally. These strategies focus on the use of Social Media, as a pluralistic and democratic channel of communication for positioning studios internationally.

The strategies proposed here can be useful for both small architectural studios in the process of consolidation and recently graduated students of architecture who want to start out on their career. It is assumed that large architectural studios already have sufficient capacity to provide the human capital necessary to effectively manage a good digital communication strategy.

For the implementation of this communication strategy, we have studied different Social Media platforms, both general and specific. The goal is for architectural studios, limited in resources, to be able to publicize their projects worldwide without having to bear the high costs of promotion at events. To do so, it is interesting to generate virtual networks through which to expand the values and skills of the studio exponentially.

The transfer of physical reality to the new digital reality is not direct, but requires new languages and modes of communication and interaction. Therefore, we present different graphic languages that can be used for the development of computer graphics or display panels that stimulate the visibility of the new studio projects through Social Media. These graphical languages must be adapted to the nature of each architectural project.

Different emerging professions such as Community Manager, specializing in various areas of digital marketing, are also presented. It is interesting to establish not only the professional profiles suitable for the dissemination of the communication campaign of the architectural studio

through Social Media, but also the skills they should possess. Thus, it is possible that somebody in the team at the studio has some of these skills or could acquire them, thereby minimizing the changes required in the workteam.

It is also proposed to link the dissemination of proposals made by the studio to specialized events related to the field of architecture. Hence, it will be possible to use the media impact caused by these Social Media without having to make specific investments in the physical territory.

Similarly, it is proposed that the communication strategy include participation in international competitions and contests. Although they do not provide direct economic benefits in the short term, they can enhance the international visibility of the studio, thereby offering benefits in the medium and long term.

## 2. BRANDING AND POSITIONING

In the field of marketing, Branding is understood as the process of building the architecture of a brand, using a number of representative assets strategically, giving it value, and allowing the consumer to have a positive image of it (Fornelli & Sanchez -Sánchez, 2013).

Delgado (2007) sets out five key branding metrics, namely: brand awareness, advertising recall, association of ideas, favorable brand predisposition, and purchase intent.

In today's highly competitive environment, organizations find it very difficult for the public to identify them and differentiate them from their competitors, as well as the products and services they offer (Capriotti, 2009). Therefore, they develop important strategic plans to publicize and place their Corporate Identity. In this sense, Capriotti (2013) highlights the following as

cornerstones of the plan: identification, which seeks to increase public awareness of the organization and its characteristics; differentiation, which seeks to be perceived in a different way to other organizations; reference, which seeks to position itself as a benchmark of the activity sector, category or market; and preference, which seeks to be the chosen option.

However, the purposes established by a strategic plan for positioning the Corporate Identity of a large multinational company seem to be beyond the reach of a small architectural studio. If we transfer the concept of Branding to the field of these small studios, we find that the services that could be identified with a brand might be those offered by the studio itself. Even if we are dealing with the case of a study made up of a single architect, we have the paradox that the product that can be identified with the studio is the architect himself or herself.

In recent years, a novel concept has emerged in the business world, that of Personal Branding, which transfers the brand-related attributes to the individual. Therefore, it might be interesting to consider the small studio as an individual, capable of performing certain tasks according to its skills. This consideration shifts the conception of the studio from a company represented by its corporate identity to an individual who represents a small group of professionals thanks to their Personal Brand or Trademark.

According to Pérez (2006: 1) "A personal brand is the perception of our environment about those attributes that make us stand out, differentiate ourselves and be taken into account by those who need our services". It is not just about being able to do something, but to feel it and to make it known (Pérez, 2008).

Benitez (2014) presents five steps to build a Personal Branding. In our case, these steps could be adapted

to the Personal Brand of the architecture studio, understood as a unique individual with their own values and skills. In this case, the steps could be the following:

1) *Define your values.* It is essential to define what the values of the studio will be because, as we develop our communication strategy, we can check that each of our actions is consistent with those values. In the event that some action does not meet one of the values, it will be automatically discarded, since coherence and consistency are indispensable for the success of the strategy.

2) *Define your positioning.* It is important to define where we intend to reach. Setting an over-ambitious scope may be an initial obstacle that is too difficult to overcome. It may be more appropriate to establish different stages of positioning, so that milestones are progressively overcome as they are reached.

3) *Identify your skills.* Not only is it important to reflect on the skills of the different members of the small studio, but also on those that we have the possibility of acquiring in the short term. This makes it possible to establish a progressive order in drawing up the evidence shown by each of them.

4) *Validate your skills.* To convince potential clients of our capabilities it will be necessary to develop evidence to prove them. Some of them will be the result of real commissions, but we will almost certainly have to set up fictitious projects providing us with an excuse to offer a solution that worked successfully in order to demonstrate the skills of the studio. In this sense we must address two key parts of the process: the development of proposals using different graphic languages, and the dissemination of evidence through Social Media. To do this, it will be necessary to develop an outreach strategy through mainstream media that can

reach a wider, though less specialized, audience. But it will also be necessary to distribute the proposals through specific Social Media in the field of architecture.

5) *Be consistent and persistent.* The positioning of the Personal Brand of the studio is not a finite task, but a continuous process that should last over time. The submission of proposals should be rhythmic and continuous, following different publication frequencies depending on the medium that is chosen. It is essential not to perform contradictory actions that could destroy what has been built, and so it is important to keep in mind both the objective to be achieved and the values and skills to be defended.

### 3. SOCIAL MEDIA. A NEW TERRITORY

In the Age of Communication, both personal and professional social relations have migrated from the physical to the virtual plane. Local relational models based on a close relationship between the company and the customer are slowly taking on a more secondary role. The current global market offers the user the opportunity to establish business relationships or to purchase a product practically anywhere in the world. Therefore, it is necessary to know this new territory of commercial activity and try to gain a position in it. To achieve good positioning it is necessary to manage the online reputation of one's own brand in an appropriate manner, as it reflects what potential customers think about the people behind it (Delgado, 2007).

The general Social Networks are a fundamental core of this new digital territory, as they are what bring together a larger number of users. Facebook reached 1.31 billion monthly active users in June 2015 (Facebook, 2015) and on the same date Twitter reached 316 million users (Twitter, 2015). Because of

their great ability to reach potential customers, it is convenient to know their specific modes of operation and to ensure the presence of the studio in each of them.

Other Social Networks are generally focused on establishing communication through images. Given the field of activity of an architectural studio and the visual nature of many of its creations and interventions, it may also be appropriate to use this type of Social Media.

The most widespread general Social Media are:

*Twitter* (<http://twitter.com>). Possibly the most dynamic and effective general media. It allows you to publish evidence of the capabilities of the studio but also to cultivate the network of contacts. Its operation, based on the monitoring of the most interesting sources and the ability to tag and reference both content and users, makes it a simple and effective medium. It is important to get followers with digital prestige, known as influencers, because if they cite or share any of our publications, the dissemination will go viral and reach a larger number of users interested in our field. In this sense, there are many specialized digital publications in the field of architecture with many followers who may be interested in some of the projects presented by the studio.

*Facebook* (<http://facebook.com>). Although it is a social network based more on building bidirectional friendship relationships than unidirectional links of interest, the large number of active users makes it indispensable for any communication campaign. In this case the strategy must be geared more toward growing from a local level to an international level, in an attempt to expand the architectural studio's network of contacts.

*Google+* (<https://plus.google.com>). Although it is the least active and

busy social network of the three discussed up till now, it allows similar relationships to those of Twitter to be established, so it may be interesting.

*Pinterest* (<http://es.pinterest.com>). Although this is a general Social Network, it focuses on publishing content mainly based on images (Fig. 1). Users can create collections by grouping publications from different sources that they share with their followers. Its interface is very visual, so that access and content management is much easier and more intuitive.

Similarly, it is necessary to know different specific social networks in the field of architecture, because despite having a much smaller number of users than others that are more general, all of them respond to the same interests, so the probability of obtaining some kind of commission or collaboration is greater.

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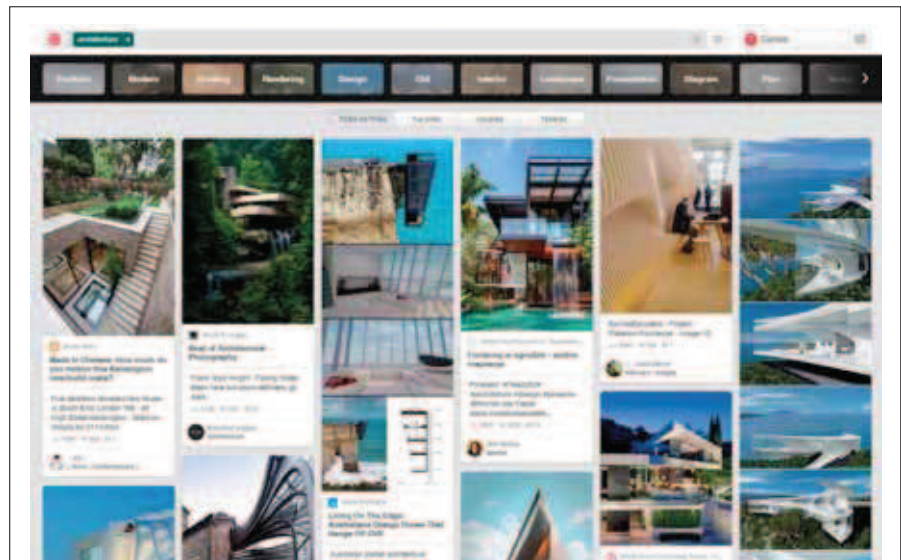


Fig. 1: Evidences of architectural projects published in Pinterest Social Network. 2015. <https://es.pinterest.com>



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*Behance* (<http://www.behance.net>). This is a social network designed like Portfolio Online by Adobe Systems, as a platform for the dissemination of creative projects from different disciplines, including architecture. Its use is fairly widespread among designers and ideas people, as it a platform that allows easy contact with other creative people to collaborate on specific projects or to delegate specific tasks that exceed the capabilities of the contractor.

*Archinect* (<http://archinect.com>). This is a social network specializing in architecture that has been operating since 1997. Not only does it have a broad community of professional users, but also connects many prestigious academic institutions related to architecture (Fig. 2).

*Architecture* *Linked*  
(<http://architecturelinked.com>). Although its interface could be improved in some respects, this network facilitates interaction among its members, making it easier to establish professional relationships with others.

*Architizer* (<http://architizer.com>). This

is a Social Network specializing in architecture, and is very active both in the dissemination of projects and products related to architecture and building. It is more focused on presenting the proposals of each studio than on establishing relationships between them. It also has its own Twitter account in which it periodically posts its most important projects. Thus the presence of the studio on it can be a two-way access to the Net.

*Archilovers*  
(<http://www.archilovers.com>). This is a mixture of the above media, with an interface that is reminiscent of Pinterest. It allows projects to be submitted in a very organized manner, distinguishing among different types of content such as images, sketches, project information or files with actual contents of the project.

*Archh* (<http://www.archh.com>). This is a social network that is more focused on connecting professionals with each other, in a similar way to how LinkedIn works. Similarly, it also allows the publication of projects including images and infographics.

#### 4. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

To manage the presence of a company in the Social Media specific marketing strategies must be developed. It is therefore recommended to work in cooperation with the new professionals in this medium. The emergence of Social Media has resulted in new professions related to the field of marketing, which are essential to meet the needs of the new consumer scenarios.

The role of Community Manager is essential to maintain, enhance and defend the business relationships with customers in the digital realm. Their functions are to create, analyze, understand or address the information produced by the

company to be released through the social networks. Their purpose is to establish an open relationship with their customers, thus making it possible to approach new audiences who have some affinity with the brand. Therefore, the Community Manager must have knowledge not only about the peculiarities of the Social Networks, but also about web design and programming.

Another emerging profession is the Record Manager, who specializes in finding information about the brand for which the online positioning campaign is being developed and monitoring the entire campaign to ensure that no wrong action is taken.

Another interesting strategy is Viral Marketing through the Social Media. This seeks to create an idea, position a brand, increase its visibility or sell a product, based on interpersonal relationships as a means of dissemination. In turn, it aims to create a positive reputation for the brand in order to promote its acceptance by customers. At this point the opinion of the rest of the digital community about the brand becomes especially important in order to encourage a positive attitude toward it.

Another strategy for Social Media marketing which can be interesting to architectural studios is the so-called Ambush Marketing. This consists in introducing advertising indirectly in an event that is not sponsored. Thus, it is possible to leverage the impact in the Social Media of large specific events related to the company's field of activity, in order to disseminate their products or proposals.

One of the unique aspects of Social Media which marketing strategy should take into account is the short length of time that a publication remains in a social network. A new post on the timeline of our profile on a social network like Twitter is valid for no more than a day. This means that the posting of communications

must be frequent and continuous over time so as to offer our followers a sense of continuous activity.

Despite this, it is important not to exceed a limit which can tire the reader, as this may cause the opposite effect, so that a follower interested in our posts marks the option to stop following us and to disengage completely from our website.

It is also important to manage responses, follows, retweets, etc. in an efficient manner, as they can serve to make a network of contacts gradually become increasingly wider. A false move or an inadequate response can break a well-designed communication strategy. It is important to continually update all Social Media where we are present, adapting the frequency of our posts to each of these media. Based on an analysis of normal behavior on the Net, a recommended content refresh cycle can be as follows: each month for the Web, every week for a blog, and every day for a social network.

## 5. POSITIONING STRATEGIES

To position the studio on the Social Media, it will be necessary to design and develop a strong communication strategy and maintain it over time, which will improve the perception of the studio in the medium and short term. To carry out this strategy it will be essential to determine which members of the studio can be allocated to different lines of work required for this positioning.

We can identify different roles involved in the design and development of the communication strategy for positioning the studio. Depending on the human capital available, they may be concentrated in one person or spread over several:

*Community Manager.* Responsible

for designing the social and technological aspects of the campaign. He or she must select the actions to be performed, the Social Media that will act as channels for dissemination, and the release times of different messages, in some cases linked to events that may increase the chances of impact (conferences, trade fairs, etc.).

*Graphic/Web Designer.* Responsible for designing and composing the evidence that will uphold the architectural studio's capabilities and values in the Social Media. In turn, he or she will be responsible for designing the static digital spaces (website and blog) to which the messages released through the social networks will be addressed.

*Architect.* Responsible for designing the conceptual or detailed projects, which will later be presented as evidence in the Social Media. Similarly, he or she will be responsible for defining the values of the studio and determining which skills identify it and make it unique.

On the way to positioning, the first step will be to define the values that will characterize the architectural studio and will differentiate it from other competitors. This requires having the commitment of all the members of the studio, as all subsequent actions must be consistent with these values. If the team itself does not believe in those values, neither will its potential customers.

The next step will be to define a positioning objective to be reached by the team as a whole. It is desirable to start out from an ambitious but feasible goal, leaving major objectives for a little later in the future. The key is to improve the existing situation and plant seeds that will lead to future business relationships with other studios or clients. At this point, the Community Manager should identify potential customers that the studio wants to reach with the proposals that have

been presented, choosing the right Social Media for this purpose.

The third step is to define the skills of the studio, but this will require first determining the competences of the different members or collaborators, since the sum of the individual competences will result in the skills of the studio. It is important to consider these skills as a temporary situation that may evolve in one direction or another depending on the interests of the studio. That is, if the studio is interested in being able to offer services related to a particular field of architecture, but its members are not specialized in this field, it will be necessary to include training for them in the positioning strategy.

Depending on the skills to be presented to position the studio, it will be necessary to design a development plan for architectural proposals. This plan must be developed by the studio's architects. It will be essential to determine the studio's capabilities in order not to divert attention from other projects and set a schedule with defined milestones that allow advantage to be taken of the inertia of other events previously defined by the Community Manager.

For the preparation of graphic evidence to improve the positioning of the studio it will be necessary to invest a part of its human capital and it is recommended to spend at least 5-10% of the studio's capability on that task. It should be noted that it will be an investment in the medium to long term that will not generate short-term economic returns, but it may be essential for the desired positioning.

For the preparation of visual evidence different graphic languages may be used. This preparation will involve both architects, to develop the projects presented, and designers, to develop the evidence that allows such projects to be presented through the Social Media.

Similarly, it is important to define what graphic language is best suited to each proposal. In this regard it is significant to assess the level of resolution of the project, which will be determined by the architect, and the medium to which it will be targeted, selected by the Community Manager.

Traditionally, Sketching has been a technique used to present concept proposals for architectural projects. The new graphic languages that have emerged in parallel with the emergence of new technological tools have resulted in the so-called Digital Sketching, which transfers the immediacy and gestures of the manual means to the digital territory (Fig. 3). This graphic language is gaining strength in posting proposals on general social networks, as well as the submission of new projects in contests that focus on the development of conceptual architectural proposals.

Conversely, 3D rendering may be appropriate to submit proposals with a higher level of development. These may be appropriate to show not only formal aspects of architecture, but also material finishes, or environmental aspects of lighting at different moments of use, and even



Fig. 3: Development of a conceptual architectural proposal using SketchBook Pro and Wacom Cintiq. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_OAS-LmEzT0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_OAS-LmEzT0)

the weather, depending on where the intervention is performed. These more elaborate proposals can be launched through specific social networks, including linking to more detailed publications in more static digital media such as a blog or website.

3D rendering is a well-established graphic medium, but traditionally linked to projects that have already achieved a high level of detail. In this sense, the so-called parametric architecture (Fig. 4), together with generative design, make an innovative alternative to represent organic structures in conceptual architectural projects (Stavric & Marina, 2011).

A more traditional option is to prepare physical scale models to present proposals with a high level of development. In this sense, emerging 3D printing systems can enable new graphic languages as they allow photographs of physical elements printed in three dimensions to be combined with integrations in photographs of real environments.

Taking advantage of the social activity generated by an international event to present proposals can help them to reach a greater number of customers. Participating in events by making presentations can increase our visibility to a specialized audience. It is essential to study the events that are of the greatest interest to the studio in order to develop proposals tailored to the peculiarities of each of them, as the resources devoted to this purpose will be limited. Similarly, it is important to manage them effectively.

In this sense, if we apply an Ambush Marketing methodology, we can introduce our graphic concepts into the media noise of a particular event related to architecture. For example, in the case of Twitter, our publication could be linked to the hashtag of the event, so that when users enter a search it will appear linked to it.

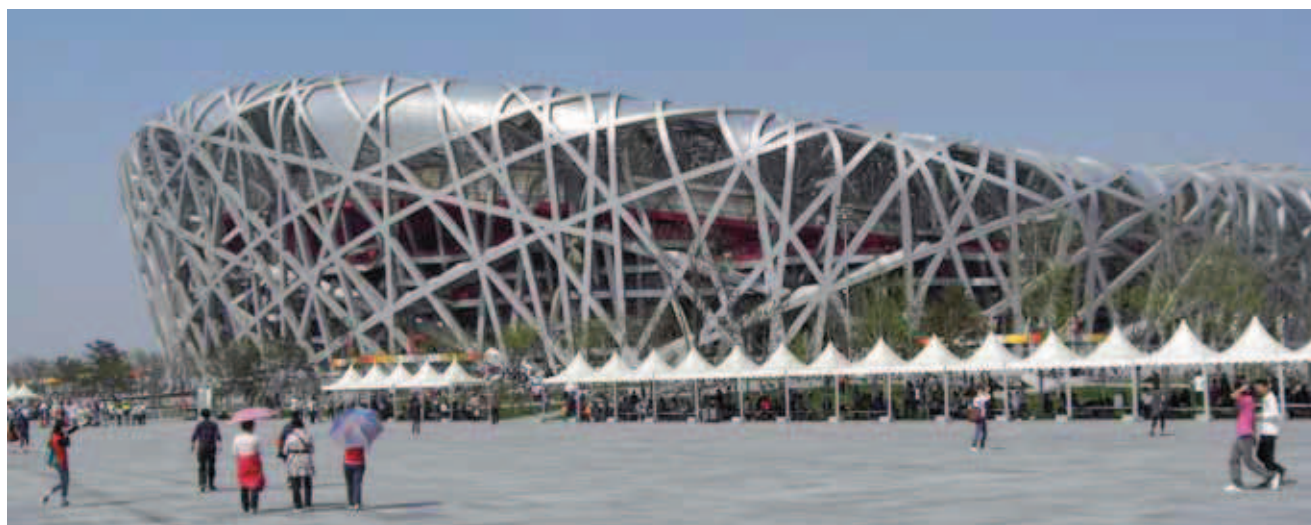


Fig. 4: An example of parametric architecture. Beijing Olympic Stadium. Photography by Larry Koester. <https://flic.kr/p/qk9Pes>

For the extended publication of proposals it is more appropriate to use a blog or a website. Using CMS platforms like Wordpress or Wix greatly simplifies this task for an inexperienced team by allowing the viewing of content to be adapted to the different display formats of many current devices using a responsive template. It is essential that the members of the studio are able to manage the contents published in all digital media, as it will be the only way to guarantee continuous updating.

Furthermore, another very interesting resource is the publication of short explanatory videos of the proposal, which allows the use of different languages or subtitles that can be posted in online repositories such as YouTube.

For the dissemination of small information capsules with the proposals through the Social Media it will be necessary first to study the means that is best suited to the proposal. However, the use of Twitter (Fig. 5) as the center of activities in which to repeat posts in other general or specific social networks is essential.

In this regard, the Community Manager will be responsible not only for posting the proposals on a regular basis, but for managing the returns offered by customers in the form of followers, retweets, favorites, replies or mentions. He or she will also be responsible for ensuring that the queries that may arise or proposals for collaboration with the studio are channeled to the technical staff.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The current situation invites small architectural studios to enhance their presence in the Social Media, as a strategy to place the studio in an advantageous position that may lead to new commissions or collaborations, both nationally and internationally.

At a time when the digital media have redefined our ways of understanding communication and relationships, it is clear that it is no longer possible to relate only to a physical territory. Both personal and professional relationships are becoming increasingly more present in the virtual territory, so it is illogical and risky to turn our backs on it. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate, as an intrinsic part of architectural studios, professional profiles related to the management of the new Social Media, or in any case to promote the learning of the necessary skills among the members of the technical team at each studio.

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