The iconic building is here to stay

Charles Jencks

The iconic building is here to stay? Charles Jencks contrasts the view that asserts the buildings’ staying power with that of, for example Deyan Sudjic, who argues that it is a short-lived phenomenon and about to disappear. It will stay, Jencks argues, because iconic buildings reflect the dominance of powerful forces and the decline of others. He sees the struggle for a religious dimension as essentially lost (contra Christopher Baker, ‘Religious faith in the exurban community’ in City 9:1, pp 109–123). At best, these buildings bring together conflicting metaphors and embody cosmic meanings. They can then tend towards meaning, but they can also tend towards meaninglessness. Jencks weights the pros and cons of these ‘enigmatic signifiers’ and explores the possible elements of a code of good practice which could ‘neutralise those embarrassing mistakes that come with any high-risk venture.’

Some people, especially English architects and critics, bemoan the emergence of the iconic building. This new genre, I believe, is fast replacing the monument. Monuments have lost their power to persuade, and enshrine permanent memories, but society has hardly lost its appetite for grand structures. Quite the opposite: the self-important building characterizes our time, partly because the size of commissions becomes ever larger under late-capitalism and partly because architects and their commercial products must compete for attention. So a strange mood has developed, something of a double-bind, where the architect and society both have misgivings about the iconic building but cannot help producing it, in ever greater numbers and ever weirder form. This is a cause for considerable irony, and a little analysis.

Decline of monuments

Consider the decline of the monument, something that sets in with the rise of modernization and the constant upheavals of the marketplace. When whole areas of the city, as Marx described them, “melt into air” because of development, when the names of squares and districts change overnight, what is the meaning of a monument? It can signify anything, and often today that might be an embarrassing change in sentiment. This can be seen clearly in places of revolutionary change, of course, and military conflict. Vietnam and Iraq have witnessed the constant toppling of monuments and renaming of squares. But the shift was already apparent in 18th-century France.

In the space of about 50 years, the major public square in Paris next to the Tuileries was re-named and restyled five times. First, in its creation, what was christened the Place Louis XV had a face-lift and a new monumental setting for the new monument to the King, an equestrian statue based on that of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Then, like Saddam Hussein’s statues, this was toppled in a revolution, and the square was named after the event, in 1789. Then, after the guillotine had its work on Danton, Robespierre, Mme...
Roland, and countless others, the Place de la Revolution was re-styled as the Place de la Concorde—for 20 years. Predictably then with The Restoration it was re-christened “Place Louis XV” and then, on schedule at the appropriate moment, “Place Louis XVI”. Finally, because of an overwhelming desire to please the people, the King Louis-Philippe re-minted the old coin for the area, calling it the Place de la Concorde. More honestly it might have been Discorde. What was the monumental strategy of Louis-Philippe? Where the guillotine was, he erected a large, granite obelisk, borrowed handily from Luxor and, underlining the point of the images and hieroglyphs carved into its surface, pronounced the great lesson for France: “it would not recall a single political event.”2 Fantastique!

Here is the first icon of calculated ambiguity, call it the “icon without a clear iconography”, or the “enigmatic signifier”, a sign that becomes its hallmark—the move was destined to be repeated.3

Ever since Louis-Philippe, artists, architects and now the general public have learned to enjoy, or suffer, their perplexing situation. The monument has been toppled as much by commercial society as by revolutions, by branding as by conscious iconoclasm. It is true the World Trade Center was destroyed as a symbol of American hegemony, as an icon of a foreign policy that was hated; but it is untrue to think that Americans ever liked the building very much, or thought of it as a venerable monument worth worshipping. That is, until it was brought down, repeatedly, on TV. At that point, the media gave the ruins and the previous image an enduring religious presence. An icon always has a trace of sanctity about it, the aura of a saint, by definition it is an object to be worshipped, however fitfully.

Spiritual inflation

And this leads to the second reason that the iconic building has replaced the monument. In our time in the west, as the adage has it, “when people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing—they believe in anything”. This epigram by Chesterton nicely states the problem for society and the architect. Today, anything can be an icon. The philosopher, Arthur Danto, has drawn a similar conclusion. As he has written on many occasions about the post-Warhol world of the marketplace, anything can be a work of art. A Brillo Box was Warhol’s contribution to this truth, a ridiculously banal object, as unimportant as he could find. Yet with his notion of the throw-away package, one supported by Leo Castelli and then the art world, this ephemeral box became expensive art. Marcel Duchamp, originator of the Ready-Made 50 years earlier, was piqued; at least his objets-trovéés had a sculptural and industrial presence, a surreal charge, a convulsive beauty. Yet Duchamp’s ire had no more effect than other attacks on Pop Art. Along with many other contemporary art movements, the politics of the counter-culture ushered in the period of pluralism and relativity, the era of post-modernism.

The implications were not terribly pressing in the conservative world of architecture, at least for 30 years until Frank Gehry’s New Guggenheim and the so-named “Bilbao Effect” did its work (Figure 1). At that point developers and mayors could see the economic logic of the sculptural gesture, with its many enigmatic signifiers, and the same method was applied to any and every building type. This presented a semantic problem, inverting notions of appropriateness and decorum, for now an outrageously expressive museum could take on the urban role of a cathedral or public building, such as a city hall.

Lincoln Cathedral, Nikolaus Pevsner had pronounced, is architecture, while a bicycle shed is building. Architecture versus mere building, everyone carries around such a distinction because it is historic, economic, ornamental and social. So, what happens when this difference is eroded, or even reversed; when a bicycle shed becomes not only architecture, but an icon?

That is the question raised today in an age when anything can be believed. Consider
some of the more famous recent iconic buildings, the ones that receive media saturation from New York to Beijing. Prada Headquarters in New York and Tokyo by Rem Koolhaas and Herzog and De Meuron; the LVMH Tower in New York by Christian de Portzamparc; Philip Johnson’s AT&T Building; convention centres by Peter Eisenman and Santiago Calatrava; and, perhaps most symbolically, Future Systems building for Selfridges in Birmingham (Figures 2 and 3). I have selected only commercial exemplars to bring out the fact that relatively banal building tasks have usurped the expressive role of more elevated ones—demonstrating the relativism of post-modernism. But the poignant truth about the last mentioned structure is that it has appropriated the position of the church, both literally and metaphorically. Here, an all-over skin of glistening discs bumps and grinds its way to the edges of a big site, sprawling like a garrulous matron at a cocktail party, determined to strut her stuff while all the time, squashed low in the background, are the darkened bones of an unloved church—dirty, miserable and in the shade. As in a typical Thurber cartoon, the woman’s bloom brings on the man’s cringe. Selfridges, as its architects grant, is meant to be sexy and remind one of a Paco Rabanne dress, body-hugging clothes, sparkling sequins, tits and bums and, on the inside, yet more intimate parts.

Why not? This emporium markets the body image, why can’t the whole building be an icon to taking off and putting on clothes, to narcissism? If sexuality pervades the media and the arts, why can’t architecture reflect it too? If people no longer go to church, only follow politics as a sport, and dedicate themselves to shopping, then why can’t Prada become the icon of the moment? Clothes are worshipped, scanty-clad celebrities are emulated today almost like saints, and money...
is the only universal in which a global culture believes.

Put like that it sounds rather grim, which it is; but there is no decadence without at least some silver lining and redemption. Besides, many architects are learning how to exploit the iconic building for creative purposes. Before I come to them, a few general points can be made. The decline of religion, as postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard have argued, is part of the broader trend, the increasing scepticism towards all meta-narratives. Whereas in 1851 between 40 and 60% of the British population went to church regularly, today the figure is less than 7%; in absolute terms Sunday church attendance has
Figure 3  Metaphorical analysis, Selfridges (drawings by Madelon Vriesendorp).
declined, since 1968, from 1.6 million to 950,000 today. Even in 2001, a leading cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain (and now its head), Murphy-O’Connor, said “Christianity is almost dead”, while the Archbishop of Canterbury responded, “Christian churches in Britain are ‘almost vanquished’”. By contrast, others argue that religion and nationalism have actually increased, in this the age of fundamentalisms; but I think this is an unhistorical view. Fundamentally, one is inclined to say, fundamentalism is an ersatz religion, the reduction of a complex cultural discourse to a set of slogans, scriptures and programme. It is not the sign of belief but the fear of its absence, not the commitment to the church as a transcendent ideal but the Church Militant. The same is true of ideologies; they are phoney religions no matter if they are believed passionately or even unconsciously, like faith in the free-market system. As philosophers and theologians have pointed out, fundamentalism is also a modernist reaction, and most often but not exclusively a reaction to a modernization that has failed.

The iconic buildings that have arisen recently in Asia, Africa and the Muslim world often underscore these general points. They appear to have little faith in the iconography and symbolism they sport (Figure 4). Like slogans they hang around, with embarrassment, in the air. In this sense, failed iconic architecture is a very good symbol of failed belief, which is why some people hate the genre. Icons without a supporting iconography are like spots on the skin that signify measles, an unintended betrayal of meaning, a symptom waiting for the doctor’s analysis, often a denial of the very meaning they hope to assert. In such cases, the genre should be re-christened Ironic Iconic for it sends self-cancelling messages. Graham Morrison, an English architect and critic of the movement, speaks of the Thames River transformation into the “Costa del Icon”. Like Mrs Malaprop putting on airs and confusing words, the failure of iconography can be funny, as long is it is happening to other people.

The double bind

The problem, of course, is that it is happening to us and the trend will not go away simply because architects and critics do not like it. The iconic building is an over-determined genre, it has many deep causes that find support in the economy and society. The two I have mentioned, the decline in belief and the eclipse of the monument, are powerful enough, but consider the other forces. Politicians, such as John Prescott in Britain and mayors such as Bloomberg in New York, demand the “wow factor” in new building, explicitly ask for the “Bilbao Effect”, which brought in millions of dollars to that rust-belt city. Developers have always had one eye on this factor, it is nothing new for skyscrapers or the recent spate of competitive tall buildings that Mayor Livingstone is supporting for London. Architects who don’t compete for these jobs may consign themselves to the second rank, don’t themselves become the “iconic architects” who are on everybody’s lips, and short-lists. It is no accident that the list is now global and recurs like a litany: Foster, Gehry, Libeskind, Koolhaas, Herzog and De Meuron, Hadid, Calatrava, Alsop, Nouvel—the usual suspects. A new arrival, such as Ken Shuttleworth at his newly designed firm, MAKE, shows this pattern and, with his iconic skyscraper design, the strategy. His tall projects are all enigmatic signifiers with sculptural shape and suggestive overtones, corkscrews and vortex. As one of the team that designed Foster’s “gherkin” for Swiss Re, he knows how to position the image and function of the landmark building. And these, typically, cost a lot of money, often more than a £100 million.

Global society and its largest corporations, those commissioning the expensive landmark, in turn force architecture to be mediated by the mass media—above all TV, the Sunday supplements, airline magazines and international weeklies such as Time. Partly global clients must use the media to organize consent and raise a huge amount of risk
capital, and the “Starchitect” is essential in getting this attention. Partly the big clients need a judicious mixture of fame and controversy to keep the media interested. The “iconic architect” is thus encouraged to take risks, break the rules, upstage his competitors and shamelessly grab the spotlight. Philip Johnson, notoriously leading this charge in the 1980s, proclaimed to the media—“I am a whore”—not only because he would work for anyone who paid him a lot, but also because he exulted in saying what his competitors were denying: that he would go to any lengths to get the job, and design in any strange manner to keep it. The necessity to shock and take risks, within a high-voltage

Figure 4  Taipei 101, Taipei Financial Center, 2005, C.Y. Lee Partners, architects. The largest skyscraper in the world is themed as a Chinese pagoda with Egyptian and Futurist details—an exotic Asian hybrid typical of the “race to the top” in this part of the world.
corporate culture, explains the distaste of architects for the whole business. For them it is a double bind: they are damned if they don’t compete to be outrageous, and damned when their risks look stupid, which is most of the time.

But beyond such factors as the expensive building and the media, there is a positive force: the public’s growing taste for iconic building. When done well, by Gehry at Bilbao or with his Disney Hall in Los Angeles, it finds a popular response parallel to triumphs in the art world. Both Gehry buildings became instant public sensations, tourist destinations and much loved by hundreds of thousands of visitors. I have already mentioned the well-documented case of the Bilbao Effect on the public, but also architects and critics in America, Europe, Japan and Asia hailed these two icons as victories for creative risk. Even the initially sceptical Basques, wary of big American imperial art, came round to the new museum in their heartland. Gehry enjoyed the kind of popular (and Pop) status of Bob Geldorf and artists such as Claes Oldenburg—both, incidentally, his friends and exemplars when it comes to media savvy. Architects, rarely popular at any time, had with Gehry also become newsworthy.

While a few modern artists, such as Picasso, were celebrities, it is now a well-travelled route to the top in Brit Art, and for their American counterparts. Peter Eisenman remarked that it is unlikely for an architect to have a building reviewed in The New York Times unless it is promoted by a press agent; indeed it has to be one of the best agents, because these column-inches are the rarest and most powerful commodity. Damien Hirst has said branding is most important for artists, and when architects follow suit, one appreciates that the information world has exacted its nasty revenge. Yet in spite of the hype, one should not underestimate the desire of the public for good iconic buildings. They still make people leave home, to enjoy the expressive aspects of the public realm.

Complaint about their very real problems—the simplified image, the stupid one-liner, the a-contextual building, the destruction of the city—has been made for many years. Graham Morrison repeats such arguments in his article “Look at Me!”, published widely, and Miles Glendinning adds a few more in his optimistically titled polemic, The Last Icons, Architecture Beyond Modernism. Glendinning and the Observer critic Deyan Sudjic argue that the iconic building is a short-lived fashion and about to disappear. Indeed, the latter, by his weekly attacks on the genre, actually amplifies the message of his supposed enemy. As with journalistic censure of page-three girls, the hypocritical media can’t avert their eyes from the sinners; besides, moralistic outrage not only sells well, but is an essential and calculated part of the message, both by the iconic architect and his detractor. Risk, controversy and fury are, in this sense, the message.

However, it is wishful thinking on the critics part to think the “iconic age is over” (as it is styled). The supposition is based on a false historical analogy, the confusion of a new genre with a stylistic movement or a cultural sensibility, like Art Nouveau, as if the forces at work were ones of taste. But fashion and style are a distraction from the main determinants of the trend, the economic and ideological issues of a global society, one without common religious beliefs or a shared culture.

The erosion of deference and hierarchy

The critics of the iconic building often assume we are living in a Christian, or Modern, or socialist culture, that is, one with some coherence and shared values. Or, perhaps, they hope we will soon recapture such a condition. For instance, in The Last Icons, Glendinning argues for a return to a ‘hierarchy of decorum’, in effect a new social contract going back to the 18th century and its hierarchy of the genres and the arts (with historical painting at the top and genre scenes at the bottom) and he ends up supporting
social housing and the Cumbernauld New Town, as antidotes to the iconic disease.

One only has to note the assumptions of this to see it is not about to happen. The belief in the church, the monarchy and the 19th-century social order, not to mention the ideologies that sustain them, is weakly held. The desire for state socialism has also waned. It is one thing to go to church for the ritual, or on Christmas Day, but few people believe in a creator God in a universe that is 13.7 billion years old, whose expansion rate we know. They may pay lip service to Christianity, especially when answering questionnaires, and feel they ought to believe strongly, but their actions on Sunday, and when faced with rational choices of a secular society, tell a different story.

If they somehow do believe in the God of the Big Bang, they do with so many caveats that their conviction can only be described as idiosyncratic and weak, not shared and strong. The truth of science conflicts with the truth of scripture to the point where, if joined, both become confused. For instance, Pope John Paul II had private conferences with scientists, such as Stephen Hawking, and took on some of the ideas of contemporary cosmology and Darwinism. But he demanded that Hawking and others not pontificate on what happened before the Big Bang and Who caused it; that was forbidden territory. For the Pope, the cosmos was still designed by a deity, “God the architect of the universe” as Plato and others styled him, and one whose creation has to be benign. This desire to reconcile current science and traditional religion and morality is entirely understandable. But it leads to such anomalies as a good God who will design a universe where 99% of the species that have ever lived have been killed off in a competitive, and often accidental, slaughter. Darwinian evolution is not a moral way to run a universe. Killing nine so the tenth may live—decimation, as Steven Jay Gould describes the usual evolutionary statistics—was prohibited in most traditional religions.

Such confusion of values finds its counterpart in the architectural free for all. The old hierarchy of building types, with the church at its apex, is not much respected by developers, architects or the public. Characteristically, the media lionize the private house designed by an iconic architect and disregard the large public building, usually designed by a mediocre firm. We ritually bemoan this inversion of values, then go right on accepting the celebrity culture behind it. Hypocrisy or impotence—what is the cause of this double standard?

A similar argument can be made for the decline in deference. Since Margaret Thatcher introduced the ‘culture of contempt’ in the 1980s, the sight of one profession deferring to another out of respect, or a sense of duty, has become as rare as a stiff collar. Pluralism and competitive commercialism have eroded traditional norms of discourse as is plain in tabloid journalism, and the way this last bends public policy is perfectly plain to anyone who watched the Bush–Blair axis triumph on TV, for 15 minutes, with their display of Baghdad fireworks they shockingly exulted in as “shock and awe”. When leaders are so brazenly driven by the media spectacle, carefully filmed at night for maximum impact, their followers will lower the bar of decency. The iconic building is, on one level, just the application of shock and awe to architecture, with fewer victims.

Of course one must curse and lampoon the follies, and try to prevent them, although demanding better icons by better architects might be a better policy. In any case, the strategy of deference to a past hierarchy is at best a stop-gap and at worst a craven posture. Consider Graham Morrison’s solution to iconitis, the building that doesn’t know its social station. He puts forward Richard Rogers’ London skyscraper on Leadenhall Street as a positive icon. Why? Because it is ‘in keeping with [its] surrounding without compromising architectural integrity’ and, in particular, because it ‘brilliantly’ defers to St Paul’s Cathedral. Whether this tall structure is in keeping and
doffs its cap to St Paul’s is as likely as Global Cooling; but the real question is the more difficult one for a pluralist culture, facing up to the unpopular assumptions behind “deference”.

The unpleasant truth of the Fashion–Celebrity culture is that it substitutes fame and notoriety for traditional value. It knows the price of everything, in Oscar Wilde’s definition of the cynic, and the value of nothing. Today social hierarchies are suspect and are perceived to rely only on power and class. The value and symbolism that used to justify an integrated culture are no longer currency. That is why Modern architects, especially very commercial ones such as Morrison, sublimate iconography to technique and abstraction. They don’t ask what deeper symbols a building should provide, nor in what style should it be, because these questions are thought to be dangerous and meaningless. Instead, they take the pragmatic route of deferring to St Paul’s; and again not because they are Christians, or sudden converts to Prince Charles’ entreaties to respect this past. Rather, it is the easy way to get planning permission. “Being in keeping” means “get the job, and keep it.” Wilde’s definition of the cynic was right.

Outrage or inrage

In this light it is easier to understand the negative logic of the outrageous iconic building, the way it seeks to provoke a paranoid reaction, especially among the hypocritical media. Since the scarce resource of a celebrity culture is column-inches, these structures have to grab attention with an unusual image that annoys just as it inspires. This ironic message can be carefully double-coded. With one gesture it says “who wants to defer to the outmoded symbols of St Paul’s, especially in an age of celebrity?” Here it follows the logic of the art world, one adopted by the successful exhibits Sensation and Apocalypse at the Royal Academy. The latter, celebrating the Year 2000, featured the Holocaust carried out in gory detail by toy Nazi soldiers, and a very realistic, bloodied Pope John II being struck to the ground by an asteroid. Shock and awe against symbols of conformity.

The news lesson is clear: if an iconic building isn’t hated enough, like the Eiffel Tower was at its inception, it will never inspire enough negative energy to be noticed, and then go on to be debated and, perhaps, defended.

It is worth recalling that, in 1888, The Committee of Three Hundred attacked this 300-metre tower and tried to stop it. The elite Parisian group fought the project every metre of its climb to the top; that is, before it became the icon, first of Paris, then of France. Part of the paranoia here concerns the raw discontinuity with the context. If the building is not new or unusual enough, it will not have sufficient charge to become iconic. Consider Thomas Heatherwick’s “B for Bang”, a calculated icon meant to give new life to a Manchester stadium. It did go off like the journalistic firecracker it was meant to be, creating a small media explosion. But after a week of awe at the cantilevered length of the stainless steel spikes, they were absorbed into the well-known image of the comic book explosion (and Andy Goldsworthy’s similar work with icicles). The one-liner was already known, assimilated beforehand, discounted. Thus it didn’t have the lasting power of a successful icon.

Here we touch one of the deep and complicated truths of the genre. How does the successful iconic building inspire paranoia, fear, even initial loathing, and then go on to win over a more permanent response? How does the architect steer between the Scylla of the one-liner and the Charybdis of mere provocation? The “Costa del Icon” on the Thames is a real cautionary tale; horrors outnumber Cinderellas, by ten to one. Obviously there is no simple strategy of design and, in all things creative, risk and failure stalk every move. Yet there are several basic guidelines, if not rules, for dealing with the iconic building.
Cosmic and multiple

In my recent book, I argue that architects, through their recent practice, have shown a few successful strategies of design. If an iconic building must have a new and provocative image, and also cannot directly call on the iconography that underlay traditional or religious architecture (because that is no longer believed), then it must produce enigmatic signifiers that allude to unusual codes. These will be affective, and some of the excitement will come from the convulsive interaction of the meanings.

In the case of Norman Foster’s Swiss Re skyscraper in London, the codes are fairly obvious—missile, screw, bullet, penis, finger, pine cone, cigar—and also somewhat far-fetched—brain and Russian Doll (Figure 5). The sketches that Madelon Vriesendorp and I have made to bring out these analogies usually map an outline or silhouette, and obviously there are many more than the ones we show: particularly visual metaphors in the details, materials and interior spaces. All these similarities make up the compound experience of relating the new and unusual shape to the old and familiar code. That relating is what the eye and brain do, when confronted by a shockingly different building. They map new on to old visual codes. This instant and largely unconscious process produces the metaphor—in Foster’s skyscraper the tabloid one, “it looks like a gherkin”—and the public and journalistic excitement. And that reaction creates the iconic building, the architecture in the shape of something uncanny, fascinating, horrible, lovely.

So far, so obvious; it’s even a strategy followed by failed iconic buildings, for instance those of Renzo Piano, his concert hall in Rome (that has overtones of a “rat and shoe”), or his Paul Klee Museum in Berne, Switzerland (that looks too much like a ride at the amusement park). Piano is a good designer, but these failures show the difficulty a functionalist architect has when he tries his hand at the sculptural gesture. It may end up malapropistic, and a one-liner. Obviously then, one answer to the problem is to carefully code the unusual image in multiple metaphors, many allusions, and be more conscious of the way aberrant readings can torpedo a building. Clearly Piano did not want to allude to the “rat” or “beetle” or “insect”; but such metaphors have been seen by the public and are underscored by the heavy hide of the Roman structure, its ponderous lead covering that leads a reading in these directions.

A more self-conscious strategy, that adopted by Le Corbusier in his Ronchamp Chapel and Gehry in his Disney Concert Hall, is to code the shapes with overtones that relate to the function—acoustic curves in the latter case—and a host of pleasant if provocative associations: sailboats, galleons, and the billowing skirts of Marilyn Monroe among other things (Figure 6). The point is that the multiple metaphors relate to divergent things some of which relate to music, and that the architect works with the skill of a sculptor. Le Corbusier and Gehry may not have trained in that artistic profession, but they certainly were well versed in it and work on their models as if they were sculpture.

If multiple enigmatic signifiers overcome the bane of the one-liner, they also have another potential virtue. They can allude to nature and the cosmos. At the end of my treatise I summarize many of the key signifiers and argue that, if you scratch an iconic building hard enough, it bleeds such meanings: overtones of the sun and water; fish and animals; crystals and our body parts; rhythmical growth forms of plants and galaxies. These patterns of nature are the not-so-hidden code of the iconic building, and perhaps they are so for want of anything more pressing, faute de mieux. If the architect is going to spend an excess of time and money on an unusual image, one that does not have the sanction of religion or ideology, then in the age of the ecological crisis it will be an image that relates us to the cosmos. Not everyone agreed. Several critics have said
Figure 5  Norman Foster’s Swiss Re skyscraper mapped on to codes that are iconic to it (drawing by Madelon Vriesendorp).
Figure 6  Marilyn Monroe’s fluttering skirts and legs are actually Gehry’s real Disney Hall, Los Angeles, 2003, collaged without distortion in Photoshop (Madelon Vriesendorp, back cover of The Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma, 2005).
this conclusion was sadly predictable, a special pleading which they disliked. They didn’t want icons to the cosmos. As Woody Allen opined in *Annie Hall*, “what has the universe ever done for me?” In effect, they would prefer the return of God.

In His absence, however, it is possible I was right: cosmogenesis, the process of the universe unfolding, will become the ultimate referent of this expression. We will have to wait another 10 years to find out, but already there is some evidence. Consider three iconic buildings not in the book, because they were incomplete, or I hadn’t yet seen them: the new Library of Alexandria in Egypt; the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, and Rem Koolhaas’ Casa da Musica in Porto, Portugal. They also lend support to the theory. The three are obvious icons meant to put their city on the map, glorify their interior functions and canoodle the public with their rhetoric. The three adopt unusual, sometimes awkward geometries, to package their overall volumes, none of which is directly iconic of a single meaning but all of which allude to nature.

The Welsh Performing Arts Centre suggests a geological metaphor of banded courses as if it were a sedimentary stack of different slates laid down over millennia—in layers of purple, grey, blue and green stone. The Egyptian library sinks a circular disc partly in the ground and raises a larger section towards the heavens, an allusion to solar symbolism and solar gain, and with the angled gesture of cosmic observatory. The third example, a more sophisticated work of architecture, was originally perceived in the local Portuguese press as “the diamond that fell from the sky”, because the crystalline facets were transparent in the competition model. As built opaque it is now known as “the meteorite from heaven”, a white-cream polygon made from rectangles plus oblique triangles (Figures 7 and 8). Because of its seven-sided geometry and repetitive rhomboids, it is more like milky quartz than a meteor or diamond, but the point of such metaphors is not, primarily, denotation. It is the overall, natural connotations that matter, ones that are fresh here, slightly hostile and severe as nature can be and, importantly, ones that are transformed throughout the building.

The carrying over of the metaphor into the plan, section and detail makes the work, like Gehry’s Disney Hall, a convincing building. Even the impressive play of voided space on the inside turns the same theme outside-in. A meandering route takes one through this cavernous quartz, up and around the musical halls that are slung into the space. A satisfying consistency of geometry and material works everywhere on the route but, in certain places it is finished in an entirely different code. The rhomboid rooms, or angled facets that jut into the main hall, are faced in local tiles or an ornamental system in another taste—Pop, traditional, Baroque, or Naff (Figure 9). We are back here in the multiple coding of post-modernism, a building that speaks in several voices, some of which relate to the past and some of which relate to nature. There is awkwardness here, the resistance to an easy gesture or predictable harmony: once again the beauty is convulsive.

I am not arguing that the cosmic references in such buildings act as precisely as the Christian iconography in a medieval cathedral. The point of the enigmatic signifier in an agnostic age is to be carefully suggestive, a distinct trace rather than a conventional denotation, an allusion rather than a clear sign. But I stick to my hypothesis that this trace is usual and, to a degree, inevitable in the emergent genre. If one is going to spend a fortune on a prominent and uncanny landmark, it is likely to have some iconography with cosmic overtones because these remain basic patterns and affecting images. Whether the successful iconic buildings, in a decadent age, make up for the many failures is a matter of opinion, but the attempt to quash them with building codes and committees will not be fruitful. The creative forces and pluralism are too strong for the architectural police. Rather, the policy might be to demand more thought on the iconography behind the buildings, more coherence in the use of metaphors, and the
Figure 7 Rem Koolhaas’ Casa da Musica, Porto, 2005, opaque “milky quartz”, a seven-sided polygon, made in cream-white concrete. The interior spatial dynamics are a consequence of wrapping the exterior planes across shifted volumes—as Philip Johnson called it, architecture as the high art of waste space. Here it is entirely convincing.
Figure 8  Metaphors (drawings by Madelon Vriesendorp).
careful interweaving of many codes to neutralize those embarrassing mistakes that come with any high-risk venture.

Notes

1 The debate on iconic building within the profession of architecture waxed and waned since the early 1960s and Nikolaus Pevsner’s strictures. It was revived, in Britain, in the summer of 2004, when critics Deyan Sudjic and Peter Murray, among others, were joined by the architect, Graham Morrison, in attacking the genre and its deleterious effects on the Thames River, the emergent “Costa del Icon”. Morrison’s paper, ‘Look at me!’, was reprinted in The Architects Journal and The Guardian, 12 July 2004. My answer to this was ‘The truth about icons’, The Architects Journal, 9.

Figure 9 An interior polygon: the abstract crystal is often, as here, doubly-coded with local or Pop graphics.
September 2004, pp. 20–24. Previously, Deyan Sudjic had repeatedly attacked iconic buildings in his Observer column, most notably his ‘Landmarks of hope and glory’, Observer, 26 October 2003, p. 6. Such arguments were also answered by two English architects, Peter Cook and Piers Gough, in various debates, at the Architectural Association, among other places, in the summer of 2004. This was the time the English professional press amplified the arguments; for instance, see the headline article and leader ‘End of the iconic age?’, Building Design, 23 July 2004, p. 1 and Editorial. On the occasion of the publication of our books, Deyan Sudjic and I debated at various points in 2005 (such as the Hay-on-Wye Festival) and in the pages of Prospect (June 2005, pp. 22–26). His book, The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World was published by Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 2005); my The Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma, by Frances Lincoln (London, 2005). Reviews in several professional publications compared our positions.

Miles Glendinning’s The Last Icons, Architecture Beyond Modernism, published by Graven Images, Glasgow, in the Spring of 2005 became the subject of a BBC2 Scotland Newsnight debate between us (17 March 2005), and also the pretext for another larger debate, this one in Glasgow organized by the architectural magazine Prospect, in mid-April 2005.

My views on the possibilities and problems of contemporary iconology in architecture were spelled out in ‘Towards an iconography of the present’, Log (the New York architectural journal), Fall 2004, pp. 101–108. Peter Eisenman and I debated the iconic building at Columbia University, 6 November 2005, and some of this was posted on the web of Metropolis, 18 November 2005.

Critical American reaction has been led by the Columbia University historian, the Englishman, Kenneth Frampton and is being published in an anthology, Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader (University of Minnesota, 2006). See also Harvard Design Magazine, no. 23, Winter/Fall 2006, pp. 65–69.

2 For the quotes and sources on the change of meaning at the Place de la Concorde, see my The Iconic Building (op. cit.) (‘Surprising conclusions’, p. 217, n. 3). Barry Bergdoll has recounted the changes in his ‘Enlightened problems’, Royal Academy Forum, reprinted in The Architectural Review, October 2001, pp. 91–92.

3 For these phrases see my The Iconic Building (op. cit.) where they are discussed at length; I first aired the issues, particularly the concept of the “enigmatic signifier”, in The New Paradigm in Architecture (‘Multivalence and the enigmatic signifier’, pp. 29–36, Yale University Press, London, 2002).


5 See Note 1, and the following text.

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