Iconic architecture and capitalist globalization

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The production of architectural iconicity and its relationship to contemporary capitalist globalization is the focus of this article by Leslie Sklair. While Sklair notes that iconicity can take a range of forms, here he is particularly concerned to understand the iconicity ascribed to buildings or spaces (or indeed architects) on the basis of their uniqueness or difference. For Sklair, this form of contemporary iconic architecture is now corporate to an extent that is historically unprecedented. He accounts for this historical shift with reference to an analysis of the new conditions of architectural production associated with the agents and institutions of an emergent transnational capitalist class. Iconicity can not be accounted for with reference to explanations which focus solely on the symbolic/aesthetic qualities of a building or space. Rather, Sklair demonstrates how the agents and institutions of the transnational capitalist class have increasingly come to define the times, places and audiences that make buildings, spaces, and architecture iconic.

Icon. 1572. 1. An image, figure, or representation; a portrait; an illustration in a book; image in the solid; a statue. 2. Eastern Church. A representation of some sacred personage, itself regarded as sacred, and honoured with a relative worship. (adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary, various editions)

On being described as an icon: “I think that’s just another word for a washed-up has-been.” (Bob Dylan, 1998, cited in Knowles, 1999)

“Iconic. An incitement to spend money.” (Anon, 2004)

This paper aims to develop a framework within which the place of iconic architecture in capitalist globalization can be analysed. The literature on globalization is enormous, and there are many competing approaches jostling for primacy. So, any attempt to present a definitive account of “globalization and architecture” (or anything else) is doomed to failure. Here I argue for a specific conception of globalization and how this works for what can be labelled architectural icons—the focus of this paper. My general approach identifies the drivers of actually existing capitalist globalization as the transnational capitalist class (TCC) and suggests how theory and research on the agents and institutions of the TCC could help us to explain how the dominant forms of contemporary iconic architecture arise and how they serve the interests of globalizing capitalists—the focus of a companion paper (Sklair, 2005). The historical context of the research is the argument that the production and representation of architectural icons in the pre-global era (roughly before the 1950s) were mainly driven by those who controlled the state and/or religion, whereas the dominant forms of architectural iconicity for the global era are increasingly driven by those who own and control the corporate sector. Iconicity in architecture is a
resource in struggles for meaning and, by implication, for power. Therefore, to explain how iconic architecture works for capitalist globalization we must ask questions about meaning and power.

The central feature of all the approaches to globalization current in the social sciences is that some important contemporary problems cannot be adequately studied at the level of states, that is, in terms of national societies or inter-national relations, but need to be theorized in terms of globalizing processes, beyond the level of the state. Many architects and critics have joined the debate about globalization (e.g. Ibelings, 1998; Migayrou and Brayer, 2003). It is clear that the umbrella concept of globalization, a concept with many meanings, would benefit from a measure of deconstruction. Let us begin by splitting it into three separate ideas, namely generic globalization, capitalist globalization and alternative globalizations.

**Generic globalization**

The idea of generic globalization focuses our attention on four new phenomena that have become significant since the middle of the 20th century:

1. the electronic revolution, notably transformations in the technological base and global scope of the electronic mass media, and most of the material infrastructure (Herman and McChesney, 1997; Castells, 2000);
2. the postcolonial revolution, whereby almost as soon as they were conceptualized as such in the 1950s, the First and the Third Worlds began to be deconstructed;
3. the subsequent creation of transnational social spaces;
4. qualitatively new forms of cosmopolitanism.

Each of these characteristics of generic globalization is significant for contemporary architecture. Tombesi (2001) shows how new technologies, particularly computer software, have promoted a new international division of labour between architectural offices in the First World and in the Third World, and Chung et al. (2001) vividly illustrate how this works in China. Many celebrated living architects readily accept that they could not have made their most famous designs without the help of computer-aided design (CAD), notably Norman Foster’s Reichstag in Berlin, Great Court in the British Museum (Pawley, 1999) and the Swiss Re Building in London, and Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao and Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (Friedman, 1999). Swiss Re and the Disney Concert Hall are often cited as prime examples of how iconic buildings have transformed city skylines (see Figures 1 and 2).

The postcolonial has had profound effects on architecture, urbanism and identity all over the world, notably illustrated by King (2004) in his powerful arguments around “spaces of global culture”. Architects are also responsible for the creation of many transnational social spaces, spaces like globally branded shopping malls, theme parks, waterfront developments and transportation centres that could literally be almost anywhere in the world and thus must have consequences for the senses of space of those who use them. New forms of cosmopolitanism are more difficult to pin down, but the most famous architects, dubbed “starchitects”, of today play an increasingly pivotal role in creating them.

These new phenomena—the electronic and postcolonial revolutions, transnational social spaces, new forms of cosmopolitanism—are the defining characteristics of globalization in a generic sense. They are irreversible in the long run (absent global catastrophe) because for the vast majority of the people in the world, rich or poor, men or women, black or white, young or old, able or disabled, educated or uneducated, gay or straight, secular or religious, generic globalization could serve their own best interests, even if it is not necessarily serving their best interests at present. Globalization impacts most people, big landlords as
Figure 1  Foster’s Swiss Re Building (2003)—a new icon in the London skyline. Source: Leslie Sklair.

Figure 2  Disney Concert Hall by Gehry (2003)—a deliberately manufactured icon to stand out in the new downtown of Los Angeles. Source: Leslie Sklair.
well as subsistence farmers in the countryside, corporate executives as well as labourers in sweatshops in major cities, well-paid professionals as well as informal workers in tourist sites, comfortable manual workers as well as desperate migrants in transit in the hope of better lives. These polarities point to the inescapable fact that we do not live in a world of abstract generic globalization but a world of actually existing capitalist globalization. So, the dominant global system at the start of the 21st century is the capitalist global system.

Global system theory

Global system theory is based on the concept of transnational practices, practices that cross state boundaries but do not originate with state agencies or actors (although they are often involved). This conceptual choice offers, as it were, a working hypothesis for one of the most keenly contested disagreements between globalization theorists and their opponents, namely the extent to which the powers of the state are in decline. The concept of transnational practices is an attempt to make more concrete the issues raised by such questions in the debate over globalization. “Transnational” acknowledges that states still exist and powerful states still have power but that the balance of power in the global system has been swinging decisively in favour of non-state transnational (thus globalizing) forces since the 1950s. Analytically, transnational practices operate in three spheres, the economic, the political and the cultural-ideological. The whole is what I mean by the “global system”. The global system at the beginning of the 21st century is not synonymous with global capitalism, but the dominant forces of global capitalism are the dominant forces in the global system.

Individuals, groups, institutions and even whole communities, local, national or transnational, can exist, perhaps even thrive as they have always done outside the orbit of the global capitalist system but this is becoming increasingly more difficult as capitalist globalization penetrates ever more widely and deeply. The building blocks of global system theory are the transnational corporation, the characteristic institutional form of economic transnational practices, a still-evolving transnational capitalist class in the political sphere, and in the culture-ideology sphere, the culture-ideology of consumerism. The importance of the transnational corporations and of consumerism are now widely recognized by proponents, opponents and those who claim to be neutral about globalization, but the idea of the transnational capitalist class is less familiar and much more controversial.

It is important at the outset to state that the members of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) are typically people who have globalizing perspectives as well as rather than in opposition to localizing perspectives (Sklair, 2001). These are people from many parts of the world who operate transnationally as a normal part of their working lives but who more often than not have more than one place that they can call home. This reflects their relationships to transnational social spaces and the new forms of cosmopolitanism of generic globalization, forms that encourage both local rootedness and transnational (globalizing) vision. Clearly, new modes of rapid and comfortable long-distance transportation and electronic communications make this possible in an historically unprecedented fashion. It is for this reason that the new concept of globalization is most appropriately reserved for the new economic, technological and social conditions that began to develop in the middle of the 20th century and have rapidly accelerated since then. The TCC can be conceptualized in terms of the following four fractions (based on primary institutional locus, though actual people may operate in more than one fraction).

1 Those who own and/or and control the major transnational corporations and their local affiliates (corporate fraction)

In architecture these are the people who own and/or control the major architectural, architecture–engineering and architecture–
developer–real estate firms. They are of two, minimally overlapping, types: first, the biggest of these firms, and second, the most celebrated and famous architectural firms. The magazine *World Architecture* has published annual lists of the top corporations in the industry by fee income and numbers of fee-earning architects employed (available from its website). In 2004 the biggest firms earned around $200–300 million in fee income and employed around 1000 or fewer architects so, in comparison with the major global corporations they are quite small (to gain entry to the *Fortune* Global 500 these days you need revenues of $10 billion plus). However, relatively few of the top 50 architectural firms are led by famous architects or build famous buildings. The actual importance of celebrated architects for the built environment and their cultural importance, especially in cities, far outweighs their relative lack of financial and corporate muscle (see Sklair, 2005, tables 1–3 for data).

2 Globalizing politicians and bureaucrats (state fraction)

These are the politicians and bureaucrats at all levels of administrative power and responsibility, in communities, cities, states, and international and global institutions who serve the interests of capitalist globalization as well as or in opposition to those who elect or appoint them. They decide what gets built where and how changes to the built environment are regulated. They are particularly important for issues of preservation and urban planning (Tung, 2001), and in competitions for major projects, many of which result in the creation of what are known as architectural icons (Haan and Haagsma, 1988; Lipsdtadt, 1989).

3 Globalizing professionals (technical fraction)

The members of this fraction range from those leading technicians centrally involved in the structural features of new building to those responsible for the education of students and the public in architecture who are allied, through choice or circumstance, with globalizing corporations and the agenda of capitalist globalization.

4 Merchants and media (consumerist fraction)

These are the people who are responsible for the marketing of architecture in all its manifestations and whose main task is to connect the architecture industry with the culture-ideology of consumerism.

The point of this discussion of the TCC is to suggest that the symbolism and aesthetics of iconic buildings and spaces needs to be contextualized in terms of the specific connections between the four fractions of the TCC and the production and representation of iconic architecture (see Sklair, 2005). How, then, does the iconic operate within capitalist globalization?

The icon: history and theory of an idea

What does it mean to say that a building or a space or an architect is “iconic”? The term is in common usage for those in and around architecture with a considerable overlap into the mass media. The idea has two defining characteristics. First, it clearly means famous, at least for some constituencies; and second, a judgement of iconicity is also a symbolic/aesthetic judgement. By this I mean that an architectural icon is imbued with a special meaning that is symbolic for a culture and/or a time, and that this special meaning has an aesthetic component. It is this unique combination of fame with symbolism and aesthetic quality that creates the icon. Iconicity persists, but not necessarily forever. These characteristics constitute my working definition for the purposes of this discussion. The idea of the icon comes to us with considerable historical baggage and as it has attracted virtually no discussion in the social
sciences, it is necessary to sketch out the history of the idea and show how it fits into the theory and practice of capitalist globalization.

I must first dispose of an important epistemological question. There are some who argue that contemporary life, and by implication architectural iconicity, is entirely a matter of image, an essential component of the postmodern turn in cultural theory and practice. The importance of drawings and photography in establishing the iconic status of buildings or spaces is widely assumed though rather less widely discussed in contemporary architecture (see, e.g., Rattenbury, 2002). While in no way minimizing the centrality of the image in the production and iteration of iconicity, neglecting what the image is an image of is to misunderstand this centrality entirely. The best analogy is with advertising. The images of advertising may have symbolic qualities whether or not they persuade people to buy the products they represent, but from the point of view of those who drive capitalist globalization the point of advertising is to sell products. If “symbolism”, for example figurative or cubist or surrealist or abstract expressionist images, help to sell the product that is fine, but the image serves the circuit of capital and with few exceptions has little independent existence outside this circuit. It certainly does not displace or replace the circuit of capital.

Similarly, the point of the images of iconic architecture is to persuade people to buy (both in the sense of consume and in the sense of give credence to) the buildings and spaces and lifestyles and, in some cases, the architects they represent. Thus, while the images of iconic architecture can be great art, they are not the things they are images of. Iconicity is not simply a question of image or, by implication, fashion. Iconicity works and persists because the buildings in which it inheres are built by architects and teams of others to symbolize something (possibly several things) apart from the programme (functions) of the building itself. Under the new conditions of capitalist globalization the nature and scale of the fame of icons and what they symbolize has been transformed by corporate interests in a historically unprecedented way.

The relation between image and reality may be complex. Many architects report that the images they had seen of iconic buildings and spaces had totally unprepared them for the emotional (in some cases the spiritual) experience of actually seeing and being in a building and its spaces. A notable example is Ronchamp—the full name of this church by Le Corbusier is the Pilgrimage Church of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp—a frequent object of architectural pilgrimages and even pastiche in the form of a branch of the Bank of America in Palm Springs, California (see Figure 3). And this can work in the opposite direction where actual experiences of buildings and spaces do not match their iconic images. This issue will be discussed below in the context of the different modes of architectural iconicity.

As the citations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* at the top of this paper make clear, an icon originally meant a representation—an image, figure, portrait, illustration, or in the solid, a statue. The Eastern Church turned it into a representation of some sacred personage, an object of veneration, itself regarded as sacred. Iconic in the history of art was applied to the ancient portrait statues of victorious athletes, and hence to memorial statues and busts (so the labelling of sports celebrities as icons does have classical origins). Iconography and iconology became branches of knowledge dealing with representative art. So the history of the icon is bound up with representation, symbolism and expression. Gombrich (1972, p. 124) explains: “These three ordinary functions of images may be present in one concrete image—a motif in a painting by Hieronymous Bosch may *represent* a broken vessel, *symbolize* the sin of gluttony and *express* an unconscious sexual fantasy” and then proceeds to deconstruct them (see also, Panofsky, 1955).
The icon as representation (let us call this Iconic I) does have some pedigree in architectural theory. Broadbent (1973), for example, distinguishes four approaches to design, namely the pragmatic (using available materials and methods), iconic (copying and perhaps modifying pragmatic solutions), canonical (use of rules) and analogical (using analogies from other fields or contexts). That this meaning of iconic (not very different from his canonic) is still current in some architecture schools is clear from an interesting internet debate in 2003 around the topic. Here iconic design in architecture is defined in the following terms: “a culture has a fixed image of what an object should be like and ... subsequent generations of that culture keep on building that object in the same way and with the same shape” (www.archnet.org/forum).

ArchNet is a forum organized at MIT for those specifically interested in Islamic architecture and the responses reflect this. One respondent identified the icon as a stereotype, as when the word “mosque” brings up the image of the dome and the minar and all domes and minars look more or less alike (Iconic I). Similarly, the respondent continues, architecture itself could provide an icon for a culture as the Statue of Liberty has become for the USA, Sydney Opera House for Australia, and Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion, used as an icon for the new post-war Germany. This point stimulated lively debate. There are two issues here. First, it is obvious that if an icon is a type then it cannot also be something unique as in the three examples cited. It is clear that within architecture the icon can refer to the ordinary, fixed and constantly repeated. This is also near the sense in which Bob Dylan responded to being called an icon: “I think that’s just another word for a washed-up has-been”, cited above. This sense of iconic
recaptures the original meaning, albeit cynically, of the iconic “Palladian villa” or mosque or even office block that is simply a copy of some archetype of the villa or mosque or cathedral or office block, because it looks like what it is supposed to be (see Figure 4).

However, iconic is more often used today in an entirely opposite sense. For example, when Will Alsop (an architect who has had his own TV programmes in Britain) won the prestigious competition to design the £225 million (at $400 million) Fourth Grace project in Liverpool, his scheme was voted the least popular of a star-studded shortlist in a poll of 15,000 Liverpudlians, well behind Foster & Partners and Richard Rogers. However, a spokesman for Alsop Architects commented: “if you propose any icon the instant response is negative because it challenges perception: it is the nature of an icon. None of the other schemes were icons. They were landmarks”. David Dunster, Liverpool University’s head of architecture, supported Alsop, saying that most of the other proposals “were simply repeating things we had seen before and were trying to pass them off on Liverpool”. This repetitive representational sense recalls the more mundane, even if loved, landmark, the way in which Lynch (1960) appears to use it. So for Alsop and his supporters, the iconic means a building or a space (and perhaps even an architect) that is different and unique, intended to be famous and to have special symbolic/aesthetic qualities. Let us call this Iconic II, with the added feature that such icons can be proclaimed iconic before they are built.

All works of art are routinely said to represent, symbolize or express things or feelings. This is relatively understandable in terms of the visual arts, or even music or dance, in the way that a painting or a sculpture or a symphony or a ballet can represent, symbolize or express a landscape or a family group or, more abstractly, longing or love. But how can a building or a space be said to represent, symbolize or express anything?

Figure 4  "Palladian-style" villa and minar of mosque, Regents Park, London (Iconic I). Source: Leslie Sklair.
Clearly, some buildings actually do look like objects. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York is commonly said to represent the spiral form in nature (see Figure 5), Jorn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House the sails of a boat (or the segments of an orange), Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao fish scales, Norman Foster’s Swiss Re tower in London (see Figure 1) is one of the latest phallic representations in a long line of tall buildings, and so on. This is because, in some sense, all these buildings actually do look like real or stylized versions of what they are said to look like. In Learning from Las Vegas Robert Venturi et al. (1977, part II) famously divided all buildings into “ducks” and “decorated sheds”. Ducks, after a drive-in on Long Island in the shape of a duck, are a kind of “building-becoming-sculpture” where all the architectural systems are “submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form”; decorated sheds are buildings where “systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program [the functions that the building is intended to perform] and ornament is applied independently of them” (1997, p. 87). The example given for the duck is Chartres cathedral (though, confusingly, Chartres is also said to be a decorated shed) and for the decorated shed, Palazzo Farnese in Rome.

It is easy to dismiss this distinction as a piece of whimsy in a book (perish the thought) on the architectural qualities of Las Vegas, but there are two good reasons to take it seriously, even if the original authors may no longer do so. First, the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown has been very influential on the thinking of those in and around architecture, and not only so-called postmodernists, who fight for the contextualization of buildings, spaces and

**Figure 5**  Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959), an instant icon despite the complaints of artists that it was difficult to hang their pictures on spiral walls—the building was the work of art. Source: Leslie Sklair.
architects themselves, against the high art canonical view of architecture. And second, the distinction does have some significance for my argument about iconicity and capitalist globalization. While duck and decorated shed are unpromising labels for a discussion of iconic architecture, the examples given are highly significant. Most people who read *Learning from Las Vegas* would have heard of Chartres cathedral, certainly an icon of the architecture of the middle ages and a building still revered by architects and tourists from all over the world. The Palazzo Farnese, less well known outside Europe, is celebrated in architectural history as one of the great monumental palaces of the High Renaissance in Rome. While its original architect, Sangallo the Younger, is not well known, after his death others including Michelangelo helped to complete the palace. So, both these examples are “great buildings” in the commonly accepted architectural sense and it is the differences between ducks and decorated sheds, not the frivolous labels, we need to focus on. The main difference is symbolism. Venturi *et al.* (1997, p. 87) argue: “The duck is the special building that is a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that applies symbols”. They illustrate the point with (1) a picture of the famous “Long Island Duckling” and a sketch of the building with the words “Duck” and “Highway” and a little car from which, presumably the duck can be seen; and (2) a picture of a typical road scene in the USA (now typical all round the world) of gas stations and large signs advertising their products, and a sketch with the words “Decorated Shed” plus one little shed with a large “Eat” sign outside plus another shed with “Eat” emblazoned on the exterior. They go on to illustrate the distinction in rather more detail by contrasting two contemporary buildings, both designed to house the elderly, namely Crawford Manor in New Haven (1962–1966) by Paul Rudolph (who was chairman of the Department of Architecture at Yale from 1958 to 1965) and Guild House in Philadelphia (1960–1963) by Venturi’s own firm. In a typically provocative manner, Venturi *et al.* contrast the “heroic and original” qualities of Crawford Manor with the “ugly and ordinary” qualities of Guild House, concluding that what is needed is more of the latter (architecture of meaning, symbolism, representational, societal messages, etc.) and less of the former (architecture of expression, abstraction, and abstract expressionism, architectural content, etc.).

The duck–decorated shed distinction suggests ways of seeing why a few buildings, at least, become iconic under different social systems while the vast majority of buildings do not, as well as suggesting different types of iconicity. If all buildings are both ducks and decorated sheds we can argue that iconicity may be a way of celebrating the “duckness” of special buildings through what they are agreed to symbolize or express. Gombrich (1972, p. 21) argues: “Iconology must start with a study of institutions rather than with a study of symbols”, and though his field of scholarly interest is Renaissance art, his conviction is just as relevant for contemporary iconic architecture. Whereas Iconic I icons, like landmarks, do not necessarily raise questions about symbolism and expression, Iconic II icons do and it is precisely in the ways in which they do that we can find the different, special and unique qualities of Iconic II buildings, spaces and architects. To find these qualities we must, as Gombrich suggests, start with a study of institutions rather than with a study of symbols, in this case with the institutions of capitalist globalization.

So, there is clearly a good deal of ambiguity if not confusion about the use of iconic in and around architecture. From now on, I want to file away the representational, mimetic meaning (Iconic I) and restrict the term to what is its much more common use in discussions of architecture today, reference to the symbolism and expression of difference, the special and the unique, as in the “iconic status” of notable buildings and spaces and their sites, and architects (Iconic II). While both forms of iconic status have
symbolic significance, it is the institutional structures that dominate the times and places and audiences of buildings, spaces and architects that makes them famous, and that provide the explanations for their iconicity that symbolic/aesthetic qualities on their own cannot furnish. However, under conditions of capitalist globalization unless these qualities are acceptable to the transnational capitalist class, it is unlikely—though not impossible—that large-scale architectural icons could be built, given the financial risks involved.

The only full-length contemporary treatment of icons available appears to be the book that accompanied an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996, *Icons as Magnets of Meaning*. It ascribes the following characteristics to icons: (1) they provoke the “wow” syndrome, cool and hot; (2) they have the ability to create as much noise as communication; (3) there is nothing intrinsic about an icon, how it looks and feels are what matter; (4) they are formed as much by the frame (society, culture, presentation) as the content; (5) they embody human factors or emotive design; (6) they are fluid, they cannot articulate their parts; (7) they are smooth and streamlined because they are mass-produced; and for architectural icons (8) they have a sense of monumentality; (9) they are sensuous and light, they project translucency as opposed to modernist transparency; (10) they embody perfection; (11) and a sense of density, enigmatic character, that replace symbols or signs, and are generally silent, exerting a hypnotic quality in their sense of otherness (Betsky, 1997, pp. 20–51). Items (1) to (7) focus on consumer goods, the rest directly address architectural icons in terms of monumentality, translucency, perfection and (let us say) enigma plus. These are odd though interesting choices. It is true that some, perhaps most of the buildings commonly said to have iconic status are monumental in scale (see below) but this does not seem to be a defining characteristic. Certainly in the mid-1990s, with the invention of new technologies of architectural glass, translucency was a frequent ingredient in iconic buildings—especially in the Paris of the *grands projets*, of which I. M. Pei’s Louvre Pyramide is a notable example (see Figure 6)—but, again, it is certainly not a defining feature of iconicity. Perfection and enigma plus likewise may occur in jury citations but are hardly defining features of iconicity.

The case of the iconic architect further complicates the issue. Where an architect becomes iconic for a particular building and then makes more buildings that resemble the original icon, this may well be considered repetitive in the representation sense, and so the conferring of iconic status on the subsequent buildings may also confuse Iconic I and Iconic II. Indeed, such circumstances have been taken to be grounds for rejecting the value of iconicity itself and call into question the merits of what have come to be labelled signature architects (namely architects whose unique signatures, in the sense of recognizable features, are on their buildings). The principals of Foreign Office Architects, a booming young London-based transnational architectural practice (the principals Farshid Moussavi and Alejandro Zaera-Polo are from Iran and Spain, respectively), have claimed that with “iconic architecture” now cropping up in every city these buildings are starting to cancel each other out: “Gehry is peppering the world with Bilbao Guggenheim lookalikes and if you’ve seen one building by Calatrava or Meier, you’ve seen them all” (quoted in *The Guardian*, 17 November 2003). This discursive strategy of applying the law of diminishing returns to iconic architects begs the question of what it means to say that an architect is iconic. Certainly a select group of architects throughout history have been described in this way. But the problem is to explain why, when iconicity is ascribed to one or two buildings of some architects, iconicity starts to spread to all their buildings, past, present and future. For example, Le Corbusier is definitely considered to be iconic by those in and around architecture,
even for his early and at the time not much noticed buildings, including those that exist only on paper. As the blurb on a recent book tells us: “This volume explores an unbuilt yet iconic project by Le Corbusier [the Venice Hospital]” (Sarkis, 2001). Fayolle-Lussac at the DOCOMOMO Paris Conference in 2002, raises the issue of the “overprotection of the work of Le Corbusier” with respect to his housing estate at Pessac and other sites, arguing that the publicity surrounding the centennial of Corbu’s birth had the “perverse” effect of raising their status. The study by Boudon (1972) on what the press, Le Corbusier and the inhabitants of Pessac thought about their housing estate does support this view.

This is a truly subversive idea—could Corbu, Mies or Wright ever design an ordinary or even bad building? (This is tantamount to asking if Shakespeare could have written a bad play or sonnet, or Beethoven a bad symphony, and so on). In terms of the history of architecture, theorists and historians alike have to make aesthetic judgements and they do. These and other great architects have designed dozens and sometimes hundreds of buildings, and not all of them can be discussed in even the biggest book. It is notable that by and large the same few works of the masters are chosen time and again for textbooks and histories. It would be odd, for example, to discuss Wright without Fallingwater, Corbu without Ronchamp, Mies without the Seagram Building. However, in what could be called the Wright or Corbu or Mies industry (in the sense of the “culture industry” of the Frankfurt School), the more iconic sites of these and other great architects the better, each making

Figure 6  I. M. Pei’s entrance pyramid at the Louvre (1993), transparency and new technology at the service of commerce through visual excitement. Source: Leslie Sklair.
its architectural contribution to the culture-ideology of consumerism. This, then, is the defining feature of architectural iconicity under conditions of capitalist globalization, namely that buildings, spaces and architects are iconic to the extent that they symbolize the variegated fruits of the culture-ideology of consumerism.

Now that the competing conceptions of iconicity that prevail in discussions of architecture today have been set out, we can proceed to deconstruct Iconic II icons in terms of three basic questions: Iconic for whom? Iconic for where? Iconic for when?

**Iconic for whom?**

The obvious way to approach this question is to distinguish between those in and around architecture and the public at large. In what sense can a building be said to be iconic for architecture but not for the public? And conversely, in what sense can a building be said to be iconic for the public but not for architecture? The easy answer, the one that bolsters professional confidence and even encourages professional snobbery, is that iconicity is simply a matter of publicity, fashion, self-promotion by the client or the developer aided and abetted by the architect and by those who produce the images. The commercial exploitation of the art of architectural photography is often held up as an exemplar of this process—one of the best known cases is the series of iconic photographs by Julius Shulman of the Case Study houses in California, particularly Case Study House #22 in Los Angeles (see Figure 7 and the originals in Serraino, 2002).

![Figure 7](image-url) *Case Study House #22 by Pierre Koenig (1960), images and realities in the creation of iconicity. Source: Leslie Sklair.*

Lipstadt expresses this attitude well in her case study of Eero Saarinen’s St. Louis Arch, where she distinguishes between the canonic
and the iconic. The canonic is defined in terms of what the well-educated architect would value most highly, while “iconic stature is conferred by communities of non-architects” (Lipstadt, 2001, p. 11). This distinction makes sense, but is not supported by the available evidence. As has been demonstrated above, documentary sources (as well as my own interviews) show that architects, as well as critics, scholars and others who are professionally involved with buildings, spaces and architects routinely use the term iconic to emphasize the special status of objects of their esteem. A few more examples from widely varying sources accessed from their respective internet sites will reinforce the point. The Principal of the Chandigarh College of Architecture has no hesitation in calling Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh “an icon of modern architecture” (The Tribune, 7 October 2003); the Architecture School in Palermo, Buenos Aires, teaches the Great Buildings Perspective as the second of its three fundamental methods for researching and learning about architecture, through study of two “iconic houses”—Palladio’s Villa Rotonda and Corbu’s Villa Savoye—arguing that they are “beyond dispute as masterworks for historians, theoreticians, tourists, critics and aficionados of architecture alike”, clearly iconic for professionals and, by implication, some publics (and the Bartlett School in the University of London does something similar); the website of the Mies Society at the Illinois Institute of Technology proclaims that “IIT’s main campus is one of the masterworks of iconic architecture”; “Architect Colin St. John Wilson will tell the governments of Russia and Finland today why an iconic Alvar Aalto building in Russia must be restored” (“Bid to save iconic Aalto library”, Building Design, 28 March 2003, p. 6). And at the DOCOMOMO conference in the session where Lipstadt delivered a version of her paper on Saarinen’s St. Louis Arch, Edwin Brierley of Leicester School of Architecture discussed “The iconic status and historical significance of the Leicester University Engineering Laboratory designed by Stirling and Gowan”. It is unlikely that many members of the lay public, even in Leicester, have ever heard of this building though Stirling’s iconic status ensures that it has been published widely in architectural magazines and books around the world. It is an icon for professionals but not for the general public.

Even more intriguing for Lipstadt’s thesis is the possibility that while iconic status is conferred by non-architects without help from the canon, those responsible for the canon might be constrained to confer canonic status on a publicly conferred icon. Such questions may usefully be asked about highly publicized buildings like Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao and Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, some skyscrapers in Chinese cities, and what is to replace the Twin Towers in New York. The first phase of my interviewing, from January to June 2004, took place in and around Los Angeles, Boston and New York. This was a time when two new buildings by Frank Gehry were very much in the news, the Disney Concert Hall in Downtown Los Angeles and the Stata Center at MIT in Cambridge near Boston. There was also talk of a project by Gehry in Brooklyn (New York). It was clear from press coverage and my interviews that Gehry and his buildings were considered iconic, even by those who were not comfortable with this terminology. Koenig has written: “It is unusual for a building to achieve status as an icon before it is built, but the Disney Concert Hall has occupied the center of attention since it left the drawing board … [its sails] embody the spirit, exuberance and place that is Los Angeles” (2000, p. 107). This is despite opposition from the displaced homeless in the locality while it was being built and complaints of glare and overheating from condo-dwellers opposite since it opened. It should be noted, however, that historically it is not uncommon for the iconicity of buildings to come after initial public opposition, as was the case for the Eiffel Tower, the Pompidou Centre (see Figure 8a) and the Sydney Opera House,
Figure 8  (a) Pompidou Centre by Rogers and Piano (1977), the drama of inside/outside, to see and be seen. Source: Leslie Sklair. (b) Monumental model of the aspirant iconic China Central Television building in Beijing by Rem Koolhaas OMA (under construction). Source: Julie Bauer.
among many other commonly cited architectural icons. Despite occasional overlap, Lipstadt's distinction between canonic and iconic is too rigid to deal with these issues. It is more useful to distinguish professional icons (a.k.a. the canons of various groups within the profession) from public icons, opening up rather than closing down the possibility that professional icons can become public icons without losing their professional iconicity, in the sense that just because a building or a space becomes famous outside the architectural community it need not lose the qualities for which it became famous in and around architecture. The comments about “Bilbao Guggenheim look-alikes” and “if you’ve seen one building by Calatrava or Meier, you’ve seen them all” cited above are patently false, ignoring for example the different materials used for the Bilbao Guggenheim and the Disney Concert Hall, the different scales of the Stata Center in Cambridge to both of these, and differences of site; and so on for Calatrava, Meier and other iconic architects. It is much more likely that people who are excited by one building by Gehry or Calatrava or Meier would be stimulated to search out their other buildings than to think that they have seen them all. This is where the unique symbolism/aesthetics of architectural icons—in terms of the corporate sanction of specific architectural production—that successfully achieve the crossover from professional to public, become relevant. This distinction encourages us to think through the processes whereby icons move from one status to the other, the differential processes of social production of icons, and how buildings and spaces might lose as well as gain iconicity. Cutting the iconic loose from its representational and professional moorings, paradoxically, gives it a powerful explanatory potential when applied in the field of architecture. Analytically, iconicity in architecture may be seen not simply as a judgement of excellence or uniqueness but, like celebrity in popular culture, as a resource in struggles for meaning and, by implication, for power. Under conditions of capitalist globalization, iconicity is a key component of what I have termed the culture-ideology of consumerism, the underlying value system of capitalist globalization. Thus: “Iconic. An incitement to spend money” (Anon, 2004). The capacity to confer iconic status on a building, space or architect is an important resource that the TCC can mobilize to facilitate the assimilation of the general public into the culture-ideology of consumerism, to keep people spending to maximize profits for the transnational corporations and their affiliates and the aggrandisement of the class as a whole.

It is in these terms that we can explain the phenomenon of deliberately manufactured icons in the global era, where those who own and control architectural projects announce their iconic status in advance as a transnational practice of the culture-ideology of consumerism. Recent typical examples reported in the architectural media of this are, from Greece: “Doubt … hangs over whether Santiago Calatrava’s iconic Olympic Stadium will be ready in time” (“UK shuns Beijing gold”, Building Design, 21 March 2003, p. 6), and from China: “Tony Blair stepped in to help Foster & Partners and Arup scoop the £1.2bn commission to extend Beijing airport, which was announced this week … The RIBA’s representative in China, Martin Iles, welcomed Blair’s involvement … Foster himself used key contacts, flying often to Beijing and meeting the ambassador … the design team has pledged to ‘create a new icon for China’” (“Blair aids Foster win”, Building Design, 7 November 2003, p. 1); and from New York: “It took a while for New York’s normally gregarious architectural community to open up after 9/11. ‘For us a lot has changed’, says Derek Moore, an associate at SOM whose offices were adjacent to the WTC … The firm had just submitted construction documents for a new Stock Exchange tower (‘a new icon of capitalism’ says Moore dryly) and that was put on hold” (“Say it with towers”, Building
Finally, the website of the ICA in Boston told us in 2004 that the new Director, Jill Medvedow, “has guided its successful bid to build a new museum on Boston’s waterfront, which will create an iconic presence for contemporary art in Boston”. The TCC in architecture, therefore, has a delicate balancing act to perform in its efforts to feed the stream of iconic buildings, spaces and architects, in the knowledge that too few means the loss of profits but too many means the devaluation of the currency of iconic architecture. Thus, the expansion of the geographical scale of iconic architecture is a pressing issue for capitalist globalization.

Iconic for where?

While it is obvious that iconic buildings and spaces have to be located in fixed places, the geographical scale of their iconicity is not fixed. Architectural icons can have local, national or global significance and recognition, or any mixture of these three. This applies equally to professional icons, public icons and those that have achieved iconic status in both respects. However, under conditions of capitalist globalization and the demands of the culture-ideology of consumerism, the social relations of production of icons will be similar whatever the intended or eventual scale of their iconicity. I suspect that this may not be the case for state and/or religious icons of the pre-capitalist globalization era.

As noted above, while many buildings and spaces are landmarks, not all landmarks are necessarily icons for professionals or the public at large. Landmarks tend to be tall in relation to their surroundings, thus there is always an element of this specific physicality that is not necessary for local icons, though many local icons are also tall. Icons, professional and public alike, invariably have specific symbolic/aesthetic qualities, which is not the case for landmarks. Different symbolic/aesthetic qualities may be claimed for professional in contrast to public icons, making the relatively rare cases of crossover iconic architecture—buildings and spaces venerated by both professionals and members of the lay public—particularly significant for questions of taste, high art and popular culture.

Local icons are buildings and spaces that are well known though not necessarily well loved within circumscribed areas, usually in cities and neighbourhoods, with definite symbolic significance for these places. They might be known to outsiders interested in these cities, and local icons in London or New York or Paris will certainly be better known than local icons in Leeds (England), Rochester (New York state) or Nancy (France). Reference has already been made to the St. Louis Arch (Lipstadt, 2001), and another interesting case is Marcel Breuer’s Pirelli building on Interstate 95 outside New Haven on the east coast of the USA. This was originally built for Armstrong Rubber in 1969 and subsequently it was taken over by IKEA who chopped off the back of the building to make room for a car park (ironically, Breuer had been the director of the furniture department at the Weimar Bauhaus in the 1920s). Not only does the building provide the iconic gateway to New Haven—in the sense that it is locally famous and that it provides a suitably impressive symbolic entrance to the city—but IKEA, like Wal-Mart, “maintains a uniform, iconic look to their enormous storage” (according to the US National Trust website). No difficulty, then, for a well-informed writer on conservation to mix Iconic I and II. The context ensures that we know what is meant. When the Hypo Center in Klagenfurt, Austria, designed by Thom Mayne’s firm Morphosis of Santa Monica, won the AIA Honor Award in 2003, the Jury’s comments illustrated a related point: “The structure of the bank’s headquarters announces itself as an iconic civic institution … It’s a great accomplishment using architecture to put this city on the map” (www.aia.org/media). This is the familiar phenomenon of urban boosterism.
Urban boosterism is the most common rationale for deliberately created iconic architecture. So, it is no coincidence that the three icons just cited were intended as icons for cities (St. Louis, New Haven, Klagenfurt), for it is those who own and control cities who, increasingly, want their cities to be easily recognizable for purposes of commerce as well as civic pride—for many there is little difference, as Dovey (1999, chap. 11) illustrates for the case of Melbourne. Those driving urban boosterism deliberately attempt to create urban architectural icons in order to draw tourists, convention and mega-event attendees with money to spend and the images they project are directed to this end. This is a truly globalizing business, from the TelstraClear Pacific development in Manukau (in Auckland, 2005) “combining theme, iconic architecture, and functionality to showcase your event”, to numerous advertisements for luxury resort hotels in Dubai (now marketed as a new “iconic city”) and elsewhere that also promise “iconic architecture” as one of their many, indeed one of the necessary, attractions; and, of course, all over North America and Europe (see Jonas and Wilson, 1999; Sklair, 2005).

The commodification of architecture, like urban boosterism, did not spring new-born into the late 20th century, nevertheless, there is a general consensus that as capitalist globalization began to be the dominant mode of production, distribution and exchange from about the 1950s, architectural practice also began to change. In his paper on “The architecture of plenty”, Kieran (1987, p. 28) expresses this succinctly: “The emerging model of the client is that of a buyer of architectural services in a free market ... When a tangible image is felt to be lacking, architecture is often turned to today for an associative icon”. He illustrates his thesis through the vision of the developer Gerald Hines, through the Chicago Architectural Club Tops competition, and Best Store designs.29 More recently the same process is (albeit gloomily) confirmed by a leading architecture bureaucrat in the UK, the deputy chair of CABE (the government-sponsored Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) who declares that architects must bend to commercialism, feeding the market a pretense of creativity while actually not doing anything risky. The context of his remarks is a discussion of the work of the “ideas” firm of ABK, who failed to win the contract for the extension of the National Gallery in London, built eventually by Venturi, Scott Brown due, it is said, to the intervention of the traditionalist coterie around Prince Charles (see Rattenbury, 2002, chap. 11). Noting the absence of ‘iconic commercial buildings’ in ABK’s portfolio, the Commissioner doubted whether any firm that rejects commercialism could survive in the current climate (reported in Building Design, 22 March 2002, p. 20). The National Gallery in London—with its new Sainsbury Wing (inviting the “supermarket of art” sobriquet)—like virtually all major museums around the world, has become much more commercialized in recent decades.

Documentary and interview evidence suggests that every place has its local iconic buildings and spaces and that these contribute strongly to place identity and the differentiation of one place from another. While it might sound faintly ridiculous to call Place Ville Marie in Montreal or the new Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam or the Rotunda Tower in Birmingham (UK) iconic, in the sense that few outside these cities would ever have heard of them or seen images of them, these buildings and spaces are iconic for their localities, for the people who see them and use them on a regular basis. When asked, most respondents in and around architecture could name such local icons, buildings and spaces that everyone in their neighbourhood or even city would almost certainly have heard of, for example places where young adults would congregate, and notably places where people would go on special occasions. When it was built in the 1960s Place Ville Marie was seen as the first really “cool, hip symbol” of Montreal as a world-class city,
known by the locals as “our Rockefeller Center”. This was the period of Expo ‘67, but now it seems banal and lost among the skyscrapers of the city—a lost icon. The Erasmus Bridge, on the other hand, is what we might call a replacement local icon, a stage in iconic succession at the local level. From the 1960s onwards the most prominent local icon had been the Euro Space Tower, a symbol of the new Rotterdam rising from the ashes of the 1939–1945 War, a “modernist” symbol that was reproduced incessantly in the marketing of the city. The new bridge has replaced the spire as both the physical icon for the city and as the symbolic icon for representing and marketing the city, for example on the front of the city map that greets you when you land at the airport and on the laundry bags in local hotels. The image of the Erasmus Bridge is a sleek high-tech structure of the type generally associated with Santiago Calatrava and plays its part in the regeneration of the Rotterdam waterfront (see Meyer, 1999). The Rotunda was the first prominent round tower in Birmingham and for no apparent reason apart from its shape (an example of what I termed the “peculiar aesthetics” of icons) it has survived as a local icon while the Bull Ring that dominates the centre of the city has been demolished and redeveloped. But it may be the very roundness of the tower in contrast to the New Brutalist architecture of the Bull Ring that accounted for its local iconic status. In 2005, the Rotunda was reinvented as a luxury apartment block by fashionable developers Urban Splash, whose spokesman enthused: “It’s amazing. We’ve been inundated before we’ve even done any marketing. Everyone wants to live in an icon” (Birmingham Post, 5 September 2005). This raises issues of the class basis of the uses of some architectural icons, a topic that would repay further research.

Can we generalize about what distinguishes local icons from all the other buildings and spaces in a neighbourhood or a city? As noted above, the idea of the landmark is fairly well developed in urban theory, especially in the work of Kevin Lynch. But landmarks in general stand out (usually up as well) and the designation of landmark has no particular symbolic significance, whereas icons need not stand out or up (in the Rotterdam example a tall spire was replaced by a relatively low-lying bridge) but they must have some institutionally sanctioned symbolic/aesthetic significance to be iconic at any level. This is what makes sense of their perceived symbolic/aesthetic qualities, what makes them iconic and thus “famous” in the local context. In the global era these processes tend to be driven by the corporate sector, whether or not specific buildings and spaces are sponsored by the state or the private sector or both. It is obvious that the business of business is business, less obvious that the business of the state is, increasingly, business too (Sklair, 2001).

National icons historically have tended to be buildings and spaces constructed by the state and/or religious bodies and traditional national icons have invariably been characterized by great legibility in terms of their monumentality and, often, representational sculptural features. There is now a considerable literature on “architecture and power” that investigates how buildings and spaces, especially monumental buildings and spaces, express power relations and how the ordinary citizen and/or believer can read off political and religious values from these icons.30 The iconic architecture of powerful states, including states that have once been powerful but are no longer, frequently crosses borders and the theme of “architecture and imperialism” has also attracted a good deal of scholarly attention.31 Buildings and spaces created by states and religious institutions continue to be built, of course, and the study of iconic architecture and capitalist globalization raises questions about whether the processes of iconicity that predated the global era (in my terms starting from around the 1950s) carried over into the global era and persist today. A corollary of the argument of this paper is the hypothesis
that whereas the iconic architecture of the pre-global era was driven mainly by church and state (often embodied in the same institutions and elites), the iconic architecture of the global era is increasingly driven by corporate interests, embodied in the leading members of the transnational capitalist class and their transnational corporations (see Sklair, 2005). Though my focus here is on icons of the global era, from the 1950s on, it is instructive to consider older icons.

Historically, national icons start their careers as local icons in important cities where holders of economic or political or culture-ideology power are or were based. This is clearly the case for the major imperialist powers of the past and the present. In the USA, national icons are found in Washington DC (the Capitol, Lincoln Memorial) and in New York (certainly the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge, and many of my respondents made the case that the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center became national icons after 9/11). In Britain, they are in London—Buckingham Palace, Westminster and Big Ben are the most commonly cited national icons; in France—the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame in Paris; in Italy—the Coliseum and the Pantheon in Rome; in China—Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City in Beijing; and so on. It is interesting to observe that most of these national icons predate the 20th century and that many attempts to build new national icons in the 20th century appear to have failed, for example, the belated Second World War memorial in Washington (though a case could be made for Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial Wall), and the ill-fated Millennium Dome in London. The truly iconic buildings of the 20th century in these countries in terms of fame and symbolic/aesthetic appeal to architects and public alike are more likely to be corporate, for example the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings in New York (pre-1950s, of course), Canary Wharf and Lloyd’s in London, the HSBC building in Hong Kong and Jin Mao Tower in Shanghai. The controversial China Central Television building in Beijing is said to be iconic though its fame and its symbolism appear more corporate than national, certainly “foreign” (see Figure 8b).

Are there any genuinely global icons? In the aftermath of 9/11 there was a good deal of commentary on what the loss of the Twin Towers meant that is relevant to the question. Under the title “Attack on iconic buildings robs us of emotional compasses” an article in the *Dallas Morning News* (18 September 2001) by David Dillon summed up the issues well: “Iconic buildings tell us where we are, at a glance. The Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House, the Gateway [St. Louis] Arch, the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Typically, they are large and exhibitionistic so that even a partial glimpse is enough to fix our visual and emotional compass. And when they disappear, a psychological gap appears, as if our memories have suddenly failed and we’ve become disoriented.” And where the buildings themselves are destroyed, the sites are made iconic (see Figure 9). The idea that global icons must be large is a very common one and connects the discussion of iconicity with that of monumentality,32 skylines and what van Leeuwen (1988) terms “the skyward trend of thought” (see also King, 2004, chap. 1). Attoe (1981, chap. 6) provides a useful discussion of how skylines can become icons, the special case being, of course, Manhattan and how it has been portrayed in the media, especially the movies (Sanders, 2001).

Buildings and spaces that have been used in establishing shots and/or foregrounded in globally successful movies and TV shows are almost guaranteed a type of public iconic status today, though this does not mean that members of the public who recognize buildings can either name them or their architects. How many people outside Miami who have seen *Miami Vice* know the name of the Atlantis Building or have heard of the architects Arquitectonica; how many outside Los Angeles who have seen *Blade Runner* know the name of the Bradbury Building or George Wyman; even outside New York,
who have seen *Men in Black*, know the name of the Guggenheim or Frank Lloyd Wright (and he is certainly the most famous architect who ever lived, so far)? So, what turns local and national icons into global icons is a mixture of publicity and the peculiar

Figure 9  The manufacture of the iconic. The plaque reads: “For three decades, this sculpture stood in the Plaza of the World Trade Center. Entitled ‘The Sphere’, it was conceived by artist Fritz Koenig as a symbol of world peace. It was damaged during the tragic events of September 11 2001, but endures as an icon of hope and the indestructible spirit of this country...”. Source: Leslie Sklair.
symbolism/aesthetics of iconicity. There is no doubt that the electronic revolution that has transformed the mass media, the first characteristic of generic globalization, facilitates this process to an historically unprecedented extent. This works for both architecture of the past and architecture of the present, but not necessarily in the same way.

Iconic for when?

For my purposes it is useful to draw a line between icons of the pre-global era (before the 1950s) and the global era. This chronology relates to the research question raised above: to what extent is it the case that before the advent of capitalist globalization most iconic architecture was a product of the state and/or religion, whereas since the 1950s the dominant driver of iconic architecture has been the corporate sector? And, if this is true, how can we explain it? Why the 1950s? The answer lies in my original criteria for generic globalization—the electronic and postcolonial revolutions begin then, and as economic, social and cultural life are more or less rapidly restructured all over the world, the creation of transnational social spaces and new forms of cosmopolitanism open up some forms of architectural expression and production (e.g. through the use of new technologies and new materials) and close down others (e.g. the widespread and rapid dissemination of images puts a greater premium on visual originality in architecture).

There is a surprisingly close general consensus about what buildings and spaces constitute the major historical global icons for both professionals and the lay public today. They tend to be monumental buildings that have survived the ravages of time in more or less recognizable form. The typical list will include the Egyptian (Great) Pyramids and the Sphinx (of Giza)—these of course are the names of building and sculptural types as well as specific icons (see Curl, 1994 on “Egyptomania”)—the Pantheon and Coliseum in Rome, the Acropolis-Parthenon in Athens, the Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, major mosques of the Islamic world and the Gothic cathedrals. Architects, teachers and critics (and probably advertising and marketing executives as well) spend endless hours trying to answer questions about what makes great buildings great, what makes famous buildings famous, and the nature of the connections between famous and great. What keeps these places famous, leaving aside the question of what keeps them great, is clearly publicity of various types, as argued above and ample evidence for this statement will be found in the travel guides and promotional literature of the places where these icons sit. The culture-ideology of tourist consumerism ensures that the pool of these historical icons is continually being enlarged, what Vale (1999) terms “mediated monuments”.

Conclusion

Contemporary iconic architecture is now corporate to an extent that is historically unprecedented. This is embodied in the skyscrapers that proclaim the wealth and power of major transnational corporations, be they banks, manufacturers of consumer goods and services or, as is often the case, the headquarters of corporations that most people know very little about. In addition, there are many iconic buildings and spaces (notably shopping malls, cultural centres and theme parks) that are corporate but not always identified with a specific corporation. Certainly there were corporate icons before 1950 and state and/or religious icons after 1950. Brasília, the manufactured capital of Brazil, was certainly inspired and built by those in control of the state in the 1950s. However, as Holston (1989) argues, the corporate sector, domestic and foreign, was deeply implicated in the creation of this Modernist City despite the statist egalitarian rhetoric of its founders (see Figure 10). While there are several examples of state rebuilding of national capitals, this may be the last great
new city to be built by a democratic state. Subsequent theories of the hundred mile city, edge city and so on suggest that the local and/or national state is powerless to direct urban planning in any meaningful sense under the conditions of capitalist globalization. Globalizing politicians and professionals can help to create successful local, national and even global icons within cities as long as they do this within the framework set by the corporate sector, as supporting members of the transnational capitalist class.

The TCC facilitates the production of iconic architecture in the same way and for the same purposes as it does all cultural icons, by incorporating creative artists, to a greater or lesser degree, to construct meanings and effectively represent its power in order to maximize commercial benefits for the capitalist class. The nature of the built environment powerfully reinforces systems of values and the choice of what buildings and spaces become iconic is never arbitrary, as the story of icons of resistance confirms. This is similar in some respects and in contrast in other respects to the ways in which state and/or religious elites before the global era facilitated the production of iconic architecture. Further study of iconic architecture in the global and pre-global eras, for example, how iconicity can be lost as well as gained and why most manufactured “icons” are unsuccessful, will expand our knowledge and understanding not only of buildings, spaces and architects but of the wider role of representation and symbolism/aesthetics in making and remaking our world.

Acknowledgements

Collegial comments on various versions of this paper presented in symposia at Cambridge University, MIT, Netherlands Architecture Institute, V&A London and conferences on “Architecture and Identity”
These quotations are from the report in As usual there are exceptions. Andy Warhol's Globalization plays a central role in the writing of The only architect featured in the book is Robert Dovey (1999, p. 198, n. 3) states that the meaning According to Jencks (2005, p. 56) "The iconic building is unthinkable today without reference to … Ronchamp".

Notes

1 The most comprehensive collection on globalization to date, Lechner and Boli (2003), has 58 items. My own text on globalization splits this literature into world-systems, global culture, global polit and society, and global capitalism approaches (Sklair, 2002, chap. 3).

2 Globalization plays a central role in the writing of one of the most controversial of contemporary architects, Rem Koolhaas, who takes an eccentric position, arguing that "globalization is a special branch of architecture [and that] it might finally lead to a definitive discrediting of architecture as we know it" (Koolhaas, 1996, p. 232).

3 While, the first great wave of political decolonization took place in Latin America during the 19th century, I would argue that postcolonialism is more a product of the second great wave from the middle of the 20th century in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. See Desai and Nair (2005) and Krishnaswamy and Hawley (forthcoming).

4 Also termed globalization from above and below (see Sorkin, 1992; Marcuse and Kempen, 2000). On the creation of transnational social spaces from below by and in immigrant communities, see Smith and Guarnizo (1998) and Faist (2000).


6 However, "The tyranny of computer graphics" (Perez-Gomez, in Rattenbury, 2002, p. 20) is hotly contested.

7 See, for example, Larsen (1993), Twombly (1995) and any issue of magazines like El Croquis, Blueprint or Domus. Ockman (2002) wittily deconstructs Koolhaas in his own terms as the "YE$ Man" (Y as in Yen, E as in Euros and S as in dollars!).

8 For elaboration, see Sklair (2002), the third edition under a new title of a book first published in 1991, including a new chapter on the alternatives to capitalist globalization, a topic not discussed here.

9 This paper is informed by the findings of a series of interviews with people in and around architecture carried out in the USA and Europe in 2004 (ongoing). By “in and around architecture” is meant architects and the developers, urban planners, teachers, critics and others who come into direct contact with them in an architectural context.

10 As usual there are exceptions. Andy Warhol’s images of Campbell’s soup cans are of course much more valuable in the art market than the cans are in the soup market.

11 According to Jencks (2005, p. 56) “The iconic building is unthinkable today without reference to … Ronchamp”.

12 Dovey (1999, p. 198, n. 3) states that the meaning of iconic in architecture has shifted from mimetic (copy) to synecdoche (part for whole). I deal with this issue differently below.

13 This topic produced six pages of discussion. However, about two weeks later, “Why are famous architects famous?” produced 98 pages, suggesting that architecture students are more interested in how architects become iconic than how buildings become iconic. This is certainly related to the culture-ideology of consumerism and the cult of celebrity that accompanies it, as I shall argue below.

14 In “The myths of the Mies Pavilion”, at the DOCOMOMO Conference (Paris, 2003) E. M. Coad argues that it was the photographs Mies contrived that were largely responsible for its passing into history “as a temple to Modernist architecture” rather than the original building itself, which caused riots (see DOCOMOMO website ).

15 These quotations are from the report in Building Design (13 December 2002). In Summer 2004 it was announced that funding had been cancelled for the Fourth Grace and other “iconic” projects by Libeskind and Vinoly, leading Building Design (23 July 2004) to ask on its front page: “End of the iconic age?” See also, Jencks and Sudjic (2005). Jencks (2005)—published after my paper was substantially written—discusses the idea of iconicity in architecture in terms of enigmatic signifiers, certainly one type of the symbolic/aesthetic dimension of my definition. I discuss this important work in Sklair, forthcoming.)

16 There is, of course, still a formidable ongoing literature on religious icons. The catalogue of the major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York on “Byzantium” (Evans, 2004) is an excellent guide.

17 The only architect featured in the book is Robert Venturi and he chooses the McDonald’s Golden Arches as his top American icon (clearly an iconic choice). While all are valuable for the study of architectural icons, none of Boime (1998) on national icons, Koenig’s iconic LA (2000), the section on icons in Melbourne in Dovey (1999, chap. 11) nor Seidler (2004) in a series entitled “Icons”, is a discussion of iconicity as such.
For an exceptionally valuable discussion of glass in the architecture of the grands projets see Fierro (2003). Chapter 4 of this book contains the most insightful discussion of the pyramids at the Louvre.

This would carry more conviction if Foreign Office Architects had not won some prestigious projects and competed unsuccessfully for other major iconic projects, including the World Trade Center site.

All references to papers from this conference are from the DOCOMOMO website.

Curtis (1996), my best guide to “modern architecture”, has more than 800 illustrations, and each one in a sense could be considered iconic for architects.

This issue will be investigated with respect to the Frank Lloyd Wright industry in a forthcoming paper.

I am grateful to Julius Shulman for an informative discussion of this issue in February 2004, and to Carlota and Buck Stahl who kindly invited me to spend time in Case Study House #22 in Los Angeles “to see for myself”.

As part of a special issue on “What makes a work canonical” in Harvard Design Magazine (Summer 2001). The remarkable “Evolutionary tree of 20th century architecture” by Charles Jencks (ibid., pp. 45–46, after Jencks, 1985, p. 28), naming 400 architects, implies grave difficulties with the idea of the canon evidenced, though not without contradiction, by the majority of my interviewees.

While Koenig’s point is well taken, my research shows that the practice of claiming iconicity for buildings in advance is common. This can be explained in terms of the marketing imperative built into the culture-ideology of consumerism. For a critical assessment of the politics of Gehry’s work, see Davis (1992, pp. 236–240).

The book edited by Thiel-Siling (2005), first edition 1998, presents double-page spreads for 87 “icons of 20th century architecture” on the criteria of architectural history, popularity, originality or symbolic value. This mixes professional and popular icons.

There are, as usual, a few exceptions that prove the rule. For example, London Bridge was taken down and re-assembled in Arizona in 1971 (Dana, 2004), and a prospective buyer proposed moving the Farnsworth House from Illinois to Wisconsin. Architects are, of course, more mobile than their buildings.

Mayne won the Pritzker prize in 2005.

An earlier interview with Hines by one of the so-called New York Five is quite revealing (see Eisenman, 1982). For the political background on “Downtown Inc.” see Frieden and Sagalyn (1991) and on the cultural consequences, see Zukin (1996).


For quite different approaches, compare Crinson (1996) and Cody (2003). Crinson’s sympathetic critique of the application of “Orientalism” (Said, 1978) to architecture is of particular interest.

For the debates around the issue of “monumentality” in the 20th century, see Collins and Collins (1984), and the reprint of Giedion’s paper of 1944 “The need for a new monumentality” in this same issue of the Harvard Architecture Review. Giedion (1984) argued that monumentality needed to be recovered from its totalitarian distortions and recreated in an emotionally literate and democratic form. Restrictions of space prevent me from exploring the relations between monumentality and iconicity here—suffice it to say that members of the transnational capitalist class appear to prefer their iconicity in skyscraper form, but not entirely to the exclusion of other innovative forms (Frank Gehry, for example, has not built skyscrapers, yet!).

See also the distinction between “age-value” and “newness-value” (Riegl, 1998) in his discussion of what he called in 1928 the “modern cult of monuments”.

References


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