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The icon project: architecture, cities and capitalist globalization: introduction

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THE ICON PROJECT

architecture, cities, and capitalist globalization

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Introduction

Never before in the history of human society has the capacity to produce and deliver goods and services been so efficient and so enormous, thanks to the electronic revolution that started in the 1960s and the global logistics revolution made possible by the advent of the shipping container. And, paradoxically, never before in the history of human society have so many people wanted goods and services that they cannot afford to buy, largely due to the absolute increases in human populations and the relative ease of communications brought about, again, by the electronic revolution. The results are class polarization and ecological unsustainability, fatal contradictions to the promises of the capitalist system. These contradictions play out in all spheres of economic, social, and cultural life and those who have a vested interest in maintaining the ruling system are constantly attempting to distract attention from its failings. These failings are disguised by the spectacular architecture that now spans most regions of the world, from the great cities of the Global North, to the expanding megacities of the Global South, and the artificial urbanism of the oil states of the Arabian Gulf. Shopping malls, modern art museums, ever- higher skyscrapers, and urban megaprojects constitute the triumphal ‘Icon Project’ of global capitalism.

On a hot, sunny day in January 2014, I was standing in a long, bustling queue for the Peak tram in Hong Kong. I started chatting with two bright young women, sisters from Guangzhou— formerly Canton, now the third-largest city in China with a population approaching 15 million. It is a short train ride from Hong Kong and sends many tourists there. My new acquaintances told me that their father was an architect, and that this was their first visit to Hong Kong, they wanted to see what the rest of the world was really like. Clearly they were excited by the prospect of visiting the famous Peak— I am not sure they were entirely prepared for the ‘Peak experience’ that starts with a dramatic entrance and culminates when you get to the top of a spectacular building. And that is when my idea of the Icon Project really began to crystallize.

The Peak Tower, ‘a futuristic display of architecture’ (according to the informative tourist guide), was designed in 1993 by the British architect Terry Farrell, who redesigned it in 2006. It is now marketed as the most iconic landmark in Hong Kong, its distinctive gondola logo widely disseminated. The Peak experience is a seamless integration of traditional Hong Kong and the Hong Kong of contemporary consumerism. In the Lower Terminus we thron through a Peak Tram Historical Gallery, which serves as a holding area for the people waiting to board. All around us, we see the distinctive 1920s streamlined winged logo of the Tram. The tram itself is a piece of retro

infrastructure. On arriving at the Peak, we are immediately confronted with a bewildering bazaar-like labyrinth of kiosks selling a huge variety of Peak memorabilia and other tourist staples. However, those who require official souvenirs (not me) will have to wait until they reach the Official Souvenirs Boutique, several floors up the tower, and pay another entrance fee. From the tram to the Tower and its spectacular 360° viewing platform, Sky Terrace 428 (metres above sea level), we have to negotiate several more floors of shopping, a branch of Madame Tussaud's with a unique 'Scream', the first permanent scare attraction in Hong Kong; a 'Say I Love You at the Peak' Wishing Corner; and the usual array of boutiques and restaurants. In the words of the not exactly modest official guide: 'The Peak Tower is the most stylish architectural icon and landmark in Hong Kong. With an avant-garde design representing the epitome of modern architecture, the spectacular tower has been featured in millions of photographs and post cards across the world.' I lost sight of the women from Guangzhou after we left the Tram, but if the many other tourists from China milling around were any guide, they were loving every minute of the Peak experience. I have often wondered what they told their architect father about their trip, about what was out there in the world of capitalist globalization—a world that Chinese cities are both emulating and helping to create—the world of the Icon Project.¹

Icons emerge at the meeting point of power, meaning, aesthetics, and taste, where the power of those who dominate the global economy, the meanings produced by its ideologues, and the aesthetics produced by architects create the condition in which the Icon Project thrives. One of the consequences of capitalist globalization is the need to transform the social production, marketing, and reception of iconic architecture. These processes are largely driven by those who own and control most of the land and other resources all over the world, conceptualized here as the transnational capitalist class (TCC). The TCC is organized in four overlapping fractions—corporate, political, professional, and consumerist. In most societies, the TCC has the lion's share of economic resources, political influence, and mass media attention and support.

The question that this book attempts to answer focuses on how the TCC uses architecture in its own commercial interests. Capitalist hegemony, the everyday expression of the power of the dominant class, is made visible by the creation of iconic buildings, spaces, urban megaprojects, sometimes whole cities. My thesis, in a nutshell, is that the TCC mobilizes two distinct but related forms of iconic architecture—unique icons (buildings recognized as works of art in their own right) and successful typical icons (buildings copying elements of unique icons) to spread the culture-ideology of consumerism. Thus: 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,—in short, when it is *used* by us. ... In place of *all* these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses—the sense of *having*' (Marx 1961: 106, italics in original). The culture-ideology of consumerism relentlessly promotes the view that the true meaning of life is to be found in our possessions. It is the foundation of the capitalist dogma of limitless material growth. As we shall see, in the world of capitalist globalization iconic architecture promotes an insatiable desire for the fruits of consumer culture.

The huge literature on globalization and global cities has so far failed to come to grips with the social production of iconic architecture and its central role in globalizing cities (namely, cities aspiring to global status).² With more and more people living in cities all over the world, the Icon Project is an important weapon in the struggle to create and solidify capitalist hegemony, to reinforce transnational capitalist control of where we live, what we consume, and how we think.³ I define iconic in terms of fame and symbolic/aesthetic significance. The more successfully a building can convey consumer-friendly meanings and consumer-friendly design, ideally combining the comfortable with the spectacular, the more value it will have in the market. For example, the Sydney Opera House, often described as the first global architectural icon, initially provoked a storm of protest against its cost and unusual shape. However, a successful marketing campaign created a high measure of popularity and esteem, at home and abroad. Originally commissioned to boost tourism and Australia's reputation on the world stage, it was promoted with these aims in mind. The Opera House has become a significant consumerist space in Sydney and tourist destination globally. It is to Sydney and Australia what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris and France, an integral part of the brand. This suggests that the more famous a building is the greater will be its commercial potential. And what could be more famous than a global icon?

The Argument

The theoretical framework of the book draws on two of my previous publications: *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (2001) and *Globalization: Capitalism and, Its Alternatives* (2002). My focus is on how capitalist globalization is produced and represented all over the world, especially in globalizing cities, on how the TCC inscribes its own interests on the built environment, and in particular, on what has come to be known as iconic architecture. These questions are approached through two interrelated investigations: (1) how the architecture industry organizes the social production and marketing of iconic architecture, and (2) how the processes of capitalist globalization since the second half of the 20th century have evolved into a complex system in which capitalist corporations increasingly dominate the built environment and promote the trend towards globalizing, consumerist cities. This results in the virtual privatization of public space through a process of creating privileged publics, notably people with money to spend, for new consumerist spaces.

The production and representation of architectural icons in the pre-global era (roughly before the 1960s) were mainly driven by those who controlled state or religious institutions. However, the dominant forms of architectural iconicity for the global era are increasingly driven by those who own and control the transnational corporations, their local affiliates, and their allies in government, the professions, and the media. Historically, in most societies, religious authorities dominated the first era of what we now see as architectural icons, states and empires dominated the second era, and the present era is dominated by the TCC.

Iconic architecture has always been a resource in struggles for meaning and, by implication, for power and profits. Therefore, to explain how iconic architecture works for capitalist globalization, we must ask questions about meaning and power. Temples, cathedrals, and mosques become famous to the faithful, and they convey visions of the gods and the enigmas of the human condition on which all religions rest. Palaces, government buildings, and public monuments become famous to citizens and subjects, and they convey the power and authority of empires and states and the hierarchies on which all forms of class society rest. Shopping malls, corporate headquarters, museums, performance spaces, sports stadia, transportation hubs, and gleaming megatowers become famous to everyone through the mass media. These buildings convey the message that the true meaning of life is in consumerism, the fuel that drives the global capitalist machine and provides the profits for those who own and control the transnational corporations. Whereas the iconic architectures of previous eras (religious and state domination) are often marked with the symbols of the dominating elites, sometimes in combination, the icons of capitalist globalization are more varied in style, a consequence of the corporate capture of the modernist aesthetic and its offshoots. Glass, shiny metals, and spectacular shapes have been mobilized to convey messages of transparency, democracy, and consumer- friendliness in all building types. The electronic revolution that made capitalist globalization possible also makes new forms of iconic architecture possible.

Globalization in its many and varied forms has attracted an enormous literature in recent decades, as exemplified in the contributions to the five-volume *Encyclopedia of Globalization* (edited by George Ritzer, 2012). A Google search on 'architecture and globalization' on 16 February 2014 found over nine million results (in 0.24 seconds; rising to 35.6 million in November 2016). Architects and critics have joined the debate about globalization, and interest in this topic has been growing (e.g., the books by Ibelings 1998; Migayrou and Brayer 2003; Koolhaas and McGettrick 2004; McNeill 2009; Adam 2013), and a substantial periodical literature. There is obviously a good deal of scholarly and mainstream culture interest in the topic.

Sources

In addition to surveys of the literature on architecture and urban design as social and cultural phenomena, both print and online, this book is based on various other types of material. I undertook a series of formal interviews with practicing architects and people working in and around architecture, teaching, writing, promoting, and curating. My respondents, who were from all over the world, were engaged in some or all of these activities. Most of the interviews took place in the United States in 2004; supplemented by a small number in the United Kingdom, China, Hong Kong, and Holland— 75 interviews in total. The interviews are cited at appropriate points in the text, identified by codes in square brackets as in [CA1] (see Appendix). The purpose of these interviews was, first, to establish whether the term ‘iconic architecture’ was becoming part of the discourse of architecture and urban design. An urbanist in one of the leading architecture departments in the United States commented: ‘I work at the split where architecture and planning part. My focus is on imagery, and teaching architects about urbanism is an uphill task’ [NY4]. This made me ponder if urbanists think more about architecture than architects do about urban design. All my respondents were able to provide their own definitions of iconic. The second purpose of the interviews was to find out if respondents could tell me what buildings or spaces they considered iconic from their own childhood, iconic for architects and/ or for the public, and on the local, city, national, and global scales. Every one of them was able to do this, usually with enthusiasm. These interviews provided me with some confirmation of what I already knew from documentary sources, pointers to buildings considered iconic that I had never heard of, and much information and many ideas that are followed up in the book.

In order to research the architecture industry beyond the iconic architects and buildings that attract most media attention, I collected data on the largest architecture firms globally, usually ranked by architects employed. These were obtained from professional and trade magazines, mainly *Building Design*, over the last decade. This data was used to establish the 10 largest firms over the decade (2005–14), and top 10 firms in regional markets throughout this period. This, to my knowledge, is the first systematic attempt to chart the structure and changes in the architecture industry from a sociological perspective, and to compare these measures with the more common measures of architectural prestige and fame. The almost exclusive focus of the media on iconic architecture and starchitecture presents a misleading account of the industry and profession as a whole. Very frequent use of two particular publications made it tedious always to list items these refer to in the bibliography, which is long enough already. For ease of reading and reference, most items sourced from the London- based weekly newspaper *Building Design* (now digital) are referenced as *BD* and date. Locating material from *BD* and its predecessor, *World Architecture*, proved to be challenging and I am very grateful to librarians at LSE and other universities in the United Kingdom and United States for their help. Material from the other widely cited source, the ‘World’s most visited architecture website’, is referenced as *ArchDaily* (date). Where it is felt necessary to identify the author of an article from either of these sources, this will be found by the usual method in bibliographical references in text. The websites of architecture firms and a sample of selected quality newspapers around the world were used to establish media exposure of generally recognized leaders in the profession. These searches were supplemented with searches of the LEXIS global database to establish media coverage of architects, buildings, and topics relevant to iconic architecture.⁴

Some of the material in most of the following chapters first saw the light of day as articles in peer-reviewed scholarly journals and invited book chapters (thanks again to anonymous reviewers). All of these publications have been extensively revised, updated, and reformulated for the specific purposes of the present book.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 explains the origins of what I rather dramatically term the Icon Project in architecture and urban design. I define iconic architecture in terms of fame and symbolic/ aesthetic significance, and show how failure to define the concept clearly has led to confusion in professional and public discussion. Chapter 2 explains how the Icon Project in architecture is socially produced through architecture firms and mass media. This process is shown to work in the production not only of unique icons (works of art) but also of successful typical icons (copies of elements of unique icons). The evidence of several complementary empirical measures shows the importance of three distinct groups of architects—the top four designers of unique architectural icons at the beginning of the 21st century (Gehry, Foster, Koolhaas, and Hadid), a group of about 30 signature architects, and a larger group of firms producing many more successful typical icons. Chapter 3 surveys the sociology of the architecture industry.⁵ Here I provide substantive evidence of the unique- typical iconicity distinction and introduce the idea of celebrity infrastructure. Chapters 4 to 7 apply the concept of the TCC to architecture and cities in terms of its four fractions (corporate, political, professional, and consumerist). The final chapter argues that architects and urban designers would work as creatively to provide a built environment fit for an alternative non- capitalist globalization as they currently do for global capitalism. These large transformations are not possible within the framework of capitalist globalization, and some preliminary ideas are suggested about non- capitalist progressive alternative globalizations. All types of architecture, including iconic buildings, would find a place in the new non- capitalist global society.