

Book Review: The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities and Capitalist Globalisation by Leslie Sklair

In The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities and Capitalist Globalisation, Leslie Sklair investigates the institutional and economic structures that have underpinned the accelerated production of so-called 'iconic' buildings and infrastructure projects over the last 25 years. While the text could occasionally benefit from more theoretical anchoring, this will be an illuminating text for students of architecture, urban design and policy that links urban social justice, architectural form and ideology, finds Frederik Weissenborn.

***The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities and Capitalist Globalisation.* Leslie Sklair. Oxford University Press. 2016.**

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The architectural city is a place haunted by phantasms. Across it, images flicker which at once involve and express complex cultural logics. These images are not confined to the many screens distributed around the city and found in the hands of its inhabitants. They are also expressed by buildings whose outline and ornamental details constitute a much older, but no less evocative, type of 'screen'. This screen is a kind of memory store, or archive, which operates through recognition and similitude: the sense that something is identifiable to the observer who sees and interacts with it. But now, as always, identity is a process that operates through transposition. When tourists take photos of popular architectural structures and share them on their social media feeds, what happens is this: the image detaches itself from one screen and begins circulating on another. In this transposition, image and imaginary are redoubled, multiplied, as otherwise discrete circuits become mutually reinforcing.



In an age of pervasive mediation, this raises certain questions. Are images produced by architectural forms only passive – the reflections of a particular social order – or do they also involve proactive, or even strategic, objectives? Does architecture, more broadly, perpetuate hierarchical socio-economic relations; is it an active force in a more complex system, the objective of which is to entrench a hegemonic order? Questions like these received much attention from scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, with Manuel Castells and Henri Lefebvre positing architectural formations as products of deep hegemonic forces; material crystallisations of the mode of production and its ideological superstructure. However, such critical enquiries largely died out in human geography's epistemological pivot from Marxism towards phenomenology in the 1980s. They are now taken up again in a new book, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities and Capitalist Globalisation*, by Leslie Sklair, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the London School of Economics.

As indicated by the title, Sklair's book investigates the production of – and the cultural preoccupation with – so-called 'iconic' buildings and infrastructure projects. Iconic buildings are structures that actively seek out the image and the imaginary. They are buildings, like Herzog & de Meuran's 'Bird's Nest' in Beijing or Foster and Partner's 'Gherkin' in London, that are at once easily recognisable and evocative. Icons draw their power from their ability to circulate effortlessly over multiple platforms, appearing on television screens, in print adverts and as tourist memorabilia. Imbued with obvious signatures and facile memes – London alone has a 'Cheesegrater', a 'Walkie-Talkie' and a 'Shard', in addition to the aforementioned 'Gherkin' – the iconic style has become so prevalent in recent years that erstwhile proponents, such as Rem Koolhaas (the architect behind the Möbius band-inspired 'CCTV building' in Beijing), have begun arguing for the production of an anti-iconic architecture. The thesis seeking its antithesis. Such, inevitably, are the fluctuations of style.



Image Credit: The Gherkin, London ([Falk Lademann CC BY 2.0](#))

Sklair's book, however, is not about style, even if it spends some time defining what is truly iconic and what merely apes the iconic ('typical icons', in Sklair's terminology). It enquires into the success of iconic architecture and asks whether the sudden preponderance of iconic buildings reflects a deeper logic: one informed by vested interests, by power. The point of departure of such an investigation must necessarily be with the institutional and economic structures that support the production of icons, not the icons themselves. The style of iconic buildings thus fades into the background so that the outline of the icon project can emerge. 'Icons', Sklair writes, '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' (2).

It is Sklair's argument that iconic architecture is a project that has been, if not instigated, then at least co-opted by a class that has very clear interest in promoting the iconic. He refers to this as the 'Transnationalist Capitalist Class', or TCC, by which he means a capitalist class operating on a scale that has by now been largely severed from the strictures of the nation state and other such ideological remnants. A purer kind of capital, dedicated to the ever-increasing circulation of wealth, information and images. The goal of this class is to promote popular consumption (and to obscure political conflict, although Sklair never spells this out). It thus celebrates consumerism as a means to promote consumption but also to forgo critical thinking.

If the icon awes as much to prevent reflection as to induce spending, it nevertheless is not without culture. Rather, it uses culture as a means to prevent reflection. In the icon, the commercial mixes seamlessly with the cultural, producing what some have referred to as the 'McGuggenisation' of culture. (Guggenheim Bilbao is the preeminent example of this form of thinking, and Sklair is right to remind us of Andy Warhol's warning that 'all department stores will become museums and all museums department stores'.) Successful icons are the branding instrument for cities: an outline or shape that both identifies a particular city and conjures up certain images associated with it, not unlike the brands of the corporate world. This is architecture not so much as spectacle but as catalyst of economic uplift and regional transformation: a phenomenon Sklair refers to as 'urban boosterism'. ('Those who make money out of cities naturally want their cities to be easily recognizable for purposes of commerce, tourism and investment, as well as civic pride.')

What explains the sudden emergence of iconic architecture over the last 25 years? The answer to this question involves several discrete factors which iconologists must hold concurrently in their mind. Icons partly are a function of increased computational powers. Sklair points out that many of the buildings today recognised as iconic would not have been possible to produce 75 years ago (apparently it would have taken 1000 mathematicians 100 years to carry out the calculations needed to produce the characteristic shells of the Sydney Opera House). However, the success of the icon project is not merely down to technological advances. It is a question of zeitgeist, too. In the last 30 years, the iconic, Sklair argues, has replaced the monumental: another hegemonic style but one from a different era.

Monumentalism was the expression of a kind of political power particular to the short twentieth century, characterised, as it was, by the mass movements of the interwar period and the grand military spectacles of the Cold War. Monuments celebrate collective achievements and represent the individual's participation in a greater movement, feelings which were imbricated with deeper notions of modes of production as well as nationhood. The icon operates in a fundamentally different way. It grows in the soil of a post-communist, post-industrialist world, an era defined not so much by the struggle between competing forms of production – socialist or capitalist – as between forms of consumption. What characterises the iconic, therefore, is not the spectacular celebration of social organisation but the veiled promotion of individualised consumption.

While powerful, the iconic is, however, fundamentally unstable. Like all hegemonies, iconicity involves profound contradictions, paradoxical lacunae emerging in the otherwise taut ideological fabric that envelops the classes. The main paradox is created at the intersection of 'consumerism' and 'community', producing conflicts that rise to the surface when local communities fight gentrification and cultural displacement. The pattern of displacement is one that is now familiar. A sudden influx of investment precedes gentrification, with gentrification in turn ringing in the moment of displacement. Conflicts of this nature are, for want of a better term, dialectically determined. No matter how refined the means of class exploitation, hegemonies always produce such paradoxes. Over time, this destabilises that which has achieved momentary stability, eroding the foundations of hegemony.

The Icon Project broaches an important topic, but it is not without its weaknesses. While there is a wealth of examples of iconic buildings, the analysis of the underlying hegemonic project can sometimes feel superficial and disjointed. Sklair pays only minimal attention to the (Marxist) thinkers who have explored similar problems before him. Antonio Gramsci, the first thinker to seriously discuss ideology as a function of cultural hegemony, for instance, is only mentioned in a footnote. Meanwhile, human geographers who have explored architectural and urban form through the prism of hegemony – such as Raymond Ledrut (author of *Les Images de la Ville*) and Castells – get no mention at all. This lack of theoretical anchoring inevitably weakens an otherwise important and interesting book. Students of architecture, urban design and urban policy may nevertheless find it an eye-opening gateway to a wider field of literature, now largely forgotten, which discusses the questions of urban social justice, architectural form and ideology.

Frederik Weissenborn is an independent researcher. He holds a PhD in Architecture and an MSc in Advanced Architectural Studies, both from the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. [Read more by Frederik Weissenborn.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.