Book of the Month

Iconic ordure

A new analysis of iconic architecture shows how it becomes emblematic of the immaterial forces behind it, but crucially disregards the agency of architects, argues *Ruth Lang*

Some buildings are created icons, some achieve iconicity, some have iconicity thrust upon them. But what are the parameters by which such status is measured? In the case of architecture, we might derive these from the physical context of buildings: how they contrast with their surroundings, achieve monumentality through their transcendence of scale, or serve as symbols of the culture in which they are constructed.

Often, such buildings are given the task of standing in for a city's identity: the snowglobe test of identifiability. But the snowglobe is a red herring, since context is essential to a project's iconicity. It is not possible to set out to design an icon in isolation – to achieve such status, it is necessary for a building to establish a certain difference by which to be marked out as unique in comparison to its surroundings. As Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour show in their taxonomy of Las Vegas signage, a cacophonic concentration of symbols diminishes their power, each requiring some new novelty in order to supersede what has gone before. Even the Long Island Duckling would lose the power of its identity if it were set among a whole badling of ducks. (Ducks as far as the eye can see – the stuff of nightmares.)

Yet physical context is just one thing to be considered in the process of architectural gestation – one of many that are at times frustratingly absent from Leslie Sklair's *The Icon Project*, which seeks to determine which factors might contribute to iconic status from a sociological perspective. Sklair's work investigates the architectural icon as a product of market forces, and how it can be considered as a globalised product 'defending ideas rather than territory'.

The Icon Project presents a broad – though not especially deep – survey of global buildings deemed iconic, not due to their architectural design or through the ways in which people interact with them directly as environments, but through representations: drawings, photographs and digital renders. In adopting such a strategy, Sklair performs something of a discursive volte-face, the icon's production (as image) and reproduction (as building) trading their conventional positions.

Sklair considers how architecture, as product rather than profession, is appropriated as emblematic of the otherwise immaterial forces behind its creation: a statement of political or economic heft and the ceaseless rise of capitalism, an assertion of a political ideology or dominance, or a manifestation of post-colonial globalism. But prioritising this mode of production, and labelling architects 'ideologues', overestimates the agency of architects in their current economic context – the Transnational Capitalist Class or TCC, to use Sklair's term – as well as their capacity to disengage from it, as he later proposes.

A foundational tenet of Sklair's investigation is 'the centrality of image in the production of iconicity', and this phrasing of the process determining iconic status – as something that can be pre-packaged with the building and not something that can only be performed sociologically by its audience in the wake of construction – is an inherent issue in the industry, reflecting the client's intentions in commissioning in the contemporary climate. It is as if iconicity is something that can be specified as an entity unto itself; apply two coats of Icon™ to dry between applications. However, architectural icons require a physical, visible presence to achieve such status, their Différance – as Derrida would term it – framing our perception and assertion of iconicity.

It may be a reflection of Sklair's assertion of the priority of representation that his research materials have largely been taken from the internet – or, to apply the type of reversal of which the author appears fond in respect of his own work, perhaps it determines his approach. Sklair's study is rooted in considerations of the 'electronic age', determining the iconic status of buildings primarily from surveys of Wikipedia, ArchDaily and Building Design, and assessing these with reference to their designers in terms of their BD World Architecture rankings.

Cricket on a beach in Dubai, in the looming shadow of self-regarding 'iconic' buildings
Photograph by Michele Nastasi

As with any work reliant on digital materials, it was inevitable that Sklair's points of reference risked being out of date before publication. This is partly symptomatic of the length of time over which this research has been conducted, but it also demonstrates how far removed the considerations of architecture as building are from those of architecture as practice: while Zaha Hadid is already 'late', FOA is a 'thriving, young' practice, something that has not been the case since 2009.

The buildings discussed by Sklair certainly rely on the media to disseminate their purpose, their owners' identities and their location, rather than on historically evolved typological means; nevertheless, this means of dissemination is a tool among others, rather than the sole determining factor of iconicity. Sklair, however, defines a project's status as such in terms of its reception by the media. Critics 'enthuse', 'fume', 'observe', 'recall', 'philosophise', 'accuse', 'globalise' and 'explain' by turn, which must have exhausted Professor Sklair's thesaurus between pages 43 and 44 alone.

Although Sklair thereby performs a potentially productive shift in the definition of icon status, his lexicographical methodology, which separates this assessment from any material considerations, is undermined by the prevalence of journalism based on press releases endlessly labelling projects as 'iconic', and the laziness of architectural copywriting, by which iconic status is broadcast even if not achieved. This can be seen in so many of the hoardings featured on the blog Development Aesthetics, where utterly banal apartment complexes advertise themselves as 'stunning', 'awesome', or even 'history in the making'.

Can iconicity be assessed using such terminology? This introduces an intriguing contradiction with regards to authorship: according to the prevailing ideology of the icon, such buildings are always the signature work of an individual creative genius. However, the BDWA firms producing such self-proclaimed icons operate predominantly in the realm of bureaucracy, or factory production, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock would have us believe.

However, Sklair disregards the problematic question of the architect's agency, seeking instead to demonstrate that iconic architecture is emblematic of the immaterial forces behind it – the financial prowess of HSBC and Lloyd's, the political will of the Reichstag, the civic splendour of Olympic sports stadiums. And now of course these are joined by Grenfell Tower: a building that is not only physically arresting due to the starkness of its ruined materiality, but one that is symbolic of so many otherwise immaterial aspects of our society which appear to have led to its destruction. It has become iconic of our current socio-political climate, though of course it was never intended as such. London's newest and most heartbreaking icon stands as testament to the need for systemic change.

Though his perspective is removed from such considerations, *The Icon Project* is timely in questioning the role of the architect in glorifying or perpetuating the forces behind such catastrophes, and prompts the consideration that there might be an alternative. However, Sklair is frustratingly silent on the question of how we might achieve change beyond the abstract assertion of a direct connection between the agency of the architect and the creation of the icon. This negates the complex and multifaceted network of forces within which construction operates, and relies on immaterial justifications over the consideration of the material artefact.

By these means, *The Icon Project* serves – perversely, given its author's intentions – to highlight the dangers of considering architecture and sociology independently of each other. Recent events demonstrate that this tendency must be checked.

The Icon Project
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