

Iconic Architecture and the Rise of Globalizing Cities

LESLIE SKLAIR
Professor Emeritus
London School of Economics

NEVER BEFORE IN THE HISTORY of human society has the capacity to produce and deliver goods and services been so efficient and on such a grand scale. This was made possible by the electronic revolution that started in the 1960s and the global logistics revolution, which was the result of the advent of the shipping container. 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 absolute increases in human populations and the relative ease of communications brought about, again, by the electronic revolution. The results of this shift are class polarization and ecological unsustainability, both fatal contradictions to the promises of the capitalist system. These problems are disguised by what has been termed iconic architecture produced by a new breed of “starchitects” (globally renowned architects) 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.¹

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LESLIE SKLAIR is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the London School of Economics. He has been Visiting Professor at the University of Southern California, New York University, New School in New York, University of Sydney, Hong Kong University, and Strathclyde University in Glasgow. In 2017 he was awarded an honorary medal by the Czech Academy of Sciences. He has written *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000) and most recently *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (Oxford University Press, 2017). He has also written on globalization and capitalism for social science encyclopedias and has been a member of the editorial boards of the *British Journal of Sociology*, *Review of International Political Economy*, *Global Networks*, and *Social Forces*.

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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 conditions in which the Icon Project thrives. I define *iconic* in terms of fame and aesthetic/symbolic significance. The more successfully a building can convey consumer-friendly meanings and designs—ideally combining the comfortable with the spectacular—the more value the building 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.

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A successful marketing campaign, however, garnered it a high measure of popularity and esteem both at home and abroad. The opera house was originally commissioned and promoted with the aim

of boosting tourism and Australia's reputation on the world stage. It has now become a significant consumerist space and global tourist destination. It is to Sydney and Australia what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris and France: an integral part of its city's and country's brand. Essentially, the more famous a building is, the greater its commercial potential will be. One of the most defining characteristics of iconic architecture in globalizing cities is the ever-increasing importance of tourism for economic development, place marketing, and national identities. This reality should therefore be borne in mind when considering the connections between iconic architecture and capitalist globalization.

One of the consequences of capitalist globalization is the transformation of 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 into 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.

How then does the transnational capitalist class use architecture and urban design 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, and sometimes entire cities. I

argue that the TCC mobilizes two distinct but related forms of iconic architecture to spread the culture-ideology of consumerism: unique icons (buildings recognized as works of art in their own right) and successful typical icons (buildings copying elements of unique icons). 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 that turns all major social institutions—education, law, criminal justice, family life, sexuality, social services, and health—into commercial opportunities, commodifying everything. To that end, iconic architecture promotes an insatiable desire for the fruits of consumer culture.

The vast body of 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). With more and more people living in cities all over the world, a phenomenon captured by the concept of planetary urbanization, the Icon Project is an important weapon in the struggle to create and solidify capitalist hegemony, as well as to reinforce transnational capitalist control of where we live, what we consume, and how we think.²

My argument draws on two of my previous publications.³ Here, I focus on how capitalist globalization is produced and represented all over the world, especially in globalizing cities; on how the TCC inscribes its own interests in 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 processes of capitalist globalization since the second half of the twentieth century have evolved into a complex system. This system is one in which capitalist corporations increasingly dominate the built environment and promote the trend toward globalizing and consumerist cities. This, in turn, results in the virtual privatization of public space through a process of creating new consumerist spaces tailored toward privileged publics—that is, people with money to spend.

The production and representation of architectural icons in the pre-global era (roughly pre-1960s and before the rise of the electronic and then the digital revolutions) were mainly driven by those who controlled state or religious institutions. Today, however, the dominant forms of architectural iconicity for the global era (post-1960s) are increasingly driven by those who own and control transnational corporations, their local affiliates, and their government, professional, and media allies. Historically, this mirrored class structure in most societ-

ies: religious authorities dominated the first era of architectural icons (through the construction of monumental religious buildings such as Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals) and states and empires dominated the second era (royal palaces, monuments, official buildings). 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 significant 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 stadiums, transportation hubs, and gleaming megatowers become famous to everyone through the mass media, for example as background establishing shots on TV screens. Architectural landmarks of the past are turned into icons (in my terms) and routinely mobilized by the tourist trade. These buildings convey the message that the true meaning of life is in consumerism, which in turn serves as the fuel that powers the global capitalist machine and provides the profits for those who own and control the transnational corporations. Where the iconic architectures of previous eras (religion- and state-dominated) are often marked with the symbols of the dominating elites, 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 possible new forms of iconic architecture.

In a research project stretching over the last decade, and in addition to surveys of the literature on architecture and urban design as social and cultural phenomena, I undertook a series of formal interviews with practicing architects and people working in and around architecture—who teach, write, promote, and curate. My respondents, who were from all over the world, were engaged in some (or all) of these activities. The primary purpose of these interviews was to establish whether or not the term “iconic architecture” is becoming part of the discourse of architecture and urban design. All my respondents were able to provide their own definitions of the term iconic (mostly in terms of fame and symbolic and/or aesthetic significance). The second purpose of the interviews was to find out if respondents could tell me what buildings or spaces

they considered iconic personally, such as from their own childhood; iconic for architects and/or for the public; and iconic on the local, city, national, and global scales. Every one of them was able to do so, usually with enthusiasm. These interviews provided me with some confirmation of what I already knew from documentary sources; pointers to buildings considered iconic at various scales (local, urban, national, regional, and global) of which I had never heard; and the often ambivalent attitude of practitioners and scholars in the field to the very idea of iconic architecture.

The origins of what I rather dramatically term the Icon Project in architecture and urban design are to be found in the celebrity culture that has become a defining characteristic of what I have conceptualized as the culture-ideology of consumerism.⁴ I define iconic architecture in terms of fame and aesthetic/symbolic significance, and I show how failure to define the concepts of iconic architect and iconic architecture clearly has led to confusion in professional and public discussion. The Icon Project in architecture is not produced exclusively by the mass media, as is widely imagined, but in many cases by architecture firms themselves. The process of iconization of buildings, spaces, and architects is shown to work in the production not only of unique icons (such as Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building in New York, and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao) but also of successful typical icons (copies of elements of unique icons—for example, the metal and glass towers and expressive, unusually-shaped museums and transport hubs that have sprung up in cities all over the world in recent decades). The evidence of several complementary empirical measures derived from

searches of newspapers and other media—including coverage of the architects themselves and their buildings labeled as iconic, major prizes and exhibitions, and recognition in gen-

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eral cultural as well as architectural media—shows the existence of three distinct groups of architects. The first group comprises the top four designers of unique architectural icons at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, and the recently deceased Zaha Hadid. The second group comprises about 30 signature architects, such as David Chipperfield in England, Thom Mayne in California, and Renzo Piano in Italy. The third, much larger group consists of firms producing many locally successful typical icons, for example, Nikken Sekkai based in Japan, HOK in the United States,

and Tabanlıoğlu in Turkey.⁵ Substantive evidence of the unique-typical iconicity distinction can be derived from the structure of the architecture industry itself. Such evidence focuses not only on the most celebrated architects but also on the much more sizeable body of largely anonymous architects responsible for most of the buildings in globalizing cities around the world. The producers of these typical icons serve to connect all globalizing cities in the collective imaginaries of consumerist capitalism. This is happening even in self-branded communist societies, most notably China.

Unique icons and successful copies occupy different spheres of the same aesthetic/symbolic space. Unique icons are proclaimed iconic because they display an original aesthetic, but their symbolism is open and they are enigmatic signifiers—their meanings are open (sometimes deliberately) to several (sometimes contradictory) interpretations. Architectural theorists, historians, and critics therefore offer imaginative metaphorical analysis of the designs of many iconic buildings.⁶ Here I confine myself to the social production and functions of such architecture. While Barthes explored this idea in his essay on the Eiffel Tower, and the phrase “enigmatic signifier” is used in psychoanalytic and cultural theory, as far as I am aware Jencks was the first to apply it systematically to the study of architectural iconicity.⁷ Successful typical icons meanwhile strive to reproduce an already successful aesthetic by copying original features, but symbolically they are not intended to be too open or enigmatic. They are expressions of the culture-ideology of consumerism. This symbolic choice is also open for the reception of unique icons, and under the conditions of capitalist globalization they too have become consumerist spaces, as well as spaces for other experiences; for example, gift shops in churches, restaurants in sports venues, and bazaars in museums. Unique and typical icons both play central roles in the Icon Project, and those who are responsible for them are complicit with the corporate fraction of the TCC in architecture and urban design.

The biggest firms in the architecture industry are rarely the most celebrated. To explain this apparent anomaly, it is useful to explore the extent to which different categories of architects connect with capitalist globalization as analyzed here by way of a TCC-based analysis of architectural iconicity. Through the distinction between unique and typical iconicity, a more accurate picture of how the system of iconic architecture works emerges in comparison to what is to be found in most mass media and even some professional accounts.

I conceptualize the TCC in terms of its four fractions (corporate, political, professional, and consumerist), whose personnel often overlap (for example, through the “revolving door” between the corporate and government spheres).

The first fraction of the TCC in architecture, namely the corporate, comprises both the biggest architect and architect-developer firms and the smaller, more celebrated firms responsible for most of the unique icons. Thus, firms of all sizes provide the built environments of cities, jostling for positions in the global hierarchies that were invented by urban growth coalitions. This is their contribution to the culture-ideology of consumerism and the growth-obsessed dogmas of neoliberal capitalism.

There is natural resistance to seeing great artists as businesspeople, let alone members of something as formidable as the transnational capitalist class. Nevertheless, starchitects, signature architects, and designers of typical icons actively engage not simply in the creative work of architecture, but also in the business of architecture and the Icon Project through their active engagement with the culture-ideology of consumerism. This

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is obvious from the promotion of the iconicity of their own buildings on their own websites.⁸ To a certain extent, all great artists do this. My purpose here is not to pass judgment on these artists, but rather to explain how unique iconic architects, producing spectacular consumer-friendly buildings, work for the TCC and global capitalism and how these creative people can be considered part of the corporate fraction of the TCC in architecture and urban design. Without the larger group of signature architects and the much larger group of expansive firms producing hundreds of typical iconic buildings across the world, the Icon Project as I have conceptualized it would not be possible. The social production of iconic architecture, however, also requires the skills and resources of the political, professional, and consumerist fractions of the TCC to create and sustain the requisite connections with consuming publics distributed in a great variety of cultures globally.

The second fraction of the TCC in architecture, namely the political, is divided into two overlapping groups and two sets of institutions. First, globalizing state officials and politicians—and their nominees in public agencies—promote, award, permit, or refuse contracts for important national or subnational (usually urban) projects. Governments and local authorities organize competitions—capitalism is a very competitive socioeconomic system—sometimes inviting entries from domestic and/or foreign architects. The selection of iconic foreign architects for prestigious national and urban projects has become a prominent

feature of capitalist globalization. These politicians and functionaries are supplemented by a variety of interstate and transnational officials and politicians who have influence over which architectural projects are promoted as sites and/or buildings with regional and/or global significance (for example, the siting of the UN and other official regional institutions buildings). Others confer a sort of transnational political iconicity on existing buildings and places, notably through designations like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites. The role of the political fraction of the TCC in architecture and urban design is most visible in globalizing cities. Iconic architecture—both unique and typical—is not merely compatible with, but a necessary component of, what have come to be known as urban megaprojects (UMPs) in the era of capitalist globalization. Case studies of UMPs deliberately targeting tourist and local consumers within La Défense district in Paris, hundreds of cities in China (notably Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen) and projects at varying scales in many other globalizing cities provide ample evidence for this assertion.⁹

The third fraction, the professional, is comprised of architectural entrepreneurs. This refers to all those who play a part in the comfortable coexistence of architecture and urban planning as professions, with the tenets of capitalist globalization and its fetish for ever-increasing growth. They include people who

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work with (or for) those who own and control the major architectural firms; those engaged in facilitating construction; the education of architects; designers in general; and professional architectural

entrepreneurs, historians, and critics. The professional and corporate fractions of the TCC thus clearly overlap. There are many other professionals in architecture and urban design, however, whose relationship to the professional fraction of the TCC is problematic—sometimes even at a personal level, such as when former students turn against their teachers who might also be prominent architects. Of all the four fractions of the TCC, the professional fraction is the one in which we find the most opposition to the globalizing agenda of contemporary capitalism and, in some cases, outright condemnation of consumerism and its effects on architecture and the city. There are frequent debates between globalizing professionals who enthusiastically support and practice the agenda of

capitalist globalization and others who pursue their own, sometimes alternative, agendas. This group includes architects, engineers, and consultants, working with inexpensive and sustainable local materials and building methods, along with the teachers, historians, and critics who provide them with theoretical and practical support.¹⁰

There is no shortage of critical commentary on capitalism and consumerist societies from politically progressive proponents of architecture and urban design. Those associated with critical regionalism—the view that traditional building styles and materials have been undervalued in contemporary architecture—in its several incarnations and those under the umbrella of vernacular architecture also provide some insights about what alternative globalizations in architecture and urban design could look like. The long tradition of architecture without architects connects with more recent vernacular theories and practices in ways that challenge the pretensions of those promoting starchitecture and celebrity as it applies to architecture and urban design. The prime role of the professional fraction of the TCC here is to reconceptualize the idea of space in such a way that the more abstract aesthetic and sociological approaches to this slippery concept can be brought into line with the basic requirement that the TCC sets for contemporary iconic architecture. Whatever other function iconic buildings may serve, they must first provide appropriate levels of profit and consumer-friendly space.

The fourth fraction of the TCC, the consumerist fraction, comprises those who sell architecture and urban design (mostly redesign and usually conceptualized as gentrification) to the consuming public. All space is potentially consumerist space, but there is certainly a continuum from maximally consumerist space—in which users are provided with many opportunities to spend money and few opportunities not to, as in shopping malls—to minimally consumerist space—in which there are very few, if any, opportunities to spend money—cemeteries, for example. Iconic architecture, through the Icon Project, plays a central role in promoting consumerism in the interests of the TCC. Such connections are already common in popular culture, fashion, sports, and so on, but there is relatively little systematic research on the links between iconic architecture and capitalist consumerism.

In architecture and urban design, the process begins with transnational social spaces: globally branded shopping malls, theme parks, waterfront developments, and transportation centers that could be located almost anywhere in the world. What makes them transnational is that they are designed to represent one or more global architectural styles, recognized through the mass media as

much as through direct experience by quite different communities of people from a multitude of class, geographical, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Where they are successful, they provide visual references that mark out specific senses of belonging identified with each of these communities. They aspire to do this without offending the sensibilities of members of other communities—one connection with what may be conceptualized as consumerist postcolonialism. This is the sphere in which globalization, iconic architecture, and consumerism relate most directly insofar as consumerism provides them with a common set of defining practices and beliefs: shopping and other retail opportunities that aspire to transcend the very real differences between various communities at home and abroad. The social production of both unique and typical iconic architecture is integral to this process. Iconic buildings of all sorts attract customers and keep the wheels of the culture-ideology of consumerism, and thus of capitalist globalization, rolling. For example, even the reconstruction of Ground Zero was marketed in these terms: “World Trade Center. Features the newest, greenest, most exciting commercial office spaces in New York City. Distinctive buildings designed by celebrated architects, world-class restaurants and shops, and much, much more.”¹¹

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Antonio Gramsci (borrowing from Romain Rolland) warned us that it is important to balance our “pessimism of the intellect” with a healthy dose of “optimism of the will.”¹² It is all too easy for progressive-minded people (especially democratic socialists) to feel helpless when they contemplate the world, which is faced with democratic deficits and ecological unsustainability in even the most fortunate communities and daily horrors in the most unfortunate. The twin crises of capitalist globalization—class polarization and ecological unsustainability—appear to be getting worse rather than better on a global scale, as debates around the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, highlight.¹³ It would be absurd to expect architects and urbanists to design us out of these crises. Nevertheless, architects and urban designers can work creatively to provide a built environment fit for an alternative noncapitalist globalization as they currently do for global capitalism. These large transformations, I believe, are not possible within the framework of capitalist globalization and its alter ego, the hierarchical state. Progressive alternative globalizations, in my view, can only be possible to the extent that we start to think about a world free of the capitalist marketplace, wage labor, and the hierarchic state. As utopian and unrealistic as this may sound, it is no more so than the complacent belief that our peoples and planet can continue to muddle through the existing order as it deteriorates. Despite the dominance of corporate architecture there is an impressive array

of alternative approaches and practices in circulation.¹⁴ All types of sustainable architecture, including iconic buildings, would have a place in new noncapitalist, inevitably smaller-scale, and more resilient communities all across the world. 

NOTES

1. This paper summarizes the central arguments of my new book: *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Please consult the extensive index and the 25-page bibliography in the book for detailed references on all the topics covered here.

2. N. Brenner, ed. *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

3. Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Leslie Sklair, *Globalization: Capitalism and Its Alternatives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

4. See: Sklair, *Globalization*, ch. 7; Sklair, *Icon Project*, ch. 7.

5. All of these architects and firms have offices in and build all over the world; the place names simply indicate home office location. This is one indicator of the globalization of architecture.

6. For example, see: A. Boime, *The Unveiling of the National Icons: A Plea for Patriotic Iconoclasm in a Nationalist Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); C. Jencks, *The Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2005).

7. C. Jencks, *The Iconic Building*.

8. On iconicity claims on corporate websites, see: Sklair, *Icon Project*, 57–62; On corporate attitudes to iconicity, see: Sklair, *Icon Project*, Table 2.2; On typical icons, see: Sklair, *Icon Project*, 93–95.

9. Sklair, *Icon Project*, 170–93.

10. For the criticality debate around business orientations of architects, see: Sklair, *The Icon Project*, 194–200.

11. For the reproduction of a photo taken in April 2012 of a hoarding with this text (which also iconises Calatrava's Transportation Hub) see: Sklair, *The Icon Project*, 39.

12. In Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 175, n.75.

13. See: Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); and for its connections with architecture, see: D.A. Barber, "Architectural History in the Anthropocene," *Journal of Architecture* 21, no. 8 (2016): 1165–70.

14. For the Critiques series of the Architectural Humanities Research Association, which offers an example, see: R. Morrow and M.G. Abdelmonem, eds., *Peripheries: Edge Conditions in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013); I. Weizman, ed., *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence* (London: Routledge, 2014); and countless small independent architecture practices all over the world.