

ARCHITECTURE IS NO PICTURE

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Alexandra Stara, Director of Graduate History and Theory in the School of Architecture and Landscape at Kingston University, turns her critical eye to the phenomena of iconic buildings and finds a lack of dimension.

Architecture is fashionable again. It seems more people can name a famous architect than ever before, and they can certainly point to a hyped new building or two. However it is unlikely that they will have actually visited that building – been up close, let alone inside it – although they will have heard about it in the media and will have seen its picture, probably also its striking silhouette on the city's skyline. The word 'iconic' will invariably be used for such a building, with the same relish that people talk about a trendy handbag or a funky pair of sunglasses. Iconic is meant, then, as a sign of approval, but is it really a good thing? In our histrionic media culture, adjectives once hard-earned and sparse now abound – 'classic' being the most obvious – but there is something more alarming about this overuse of iconic for architecture.

Reducing

Iconic comes from 'icon', meaning, primarily, picture. As well as suggesting the uncritical admiration of something, it also denotes a powerful symbol or sign. Regarding buildings, the Eiffel tower is, perhaps, the ultimate example of an icon. Erected by an engineer as a function-less landmark for the 1889 International Exhibition, its distinctive outline has come to denote Paris and all things Parisian with such force and inevitability that the building itself has become almost an irrelevance. The self-annihilation of such a formalist reduction and semantic overdrive has been covered extensively by a host of theorists, from Roland Barthes to Jean Baudrillard. But whereas before it was the dubious



Above: View of the GLA building.
(Image courtesy of the author).

privilege of the most obvious landmarks to take on this role of most-recognisable-shape-in-town, now it seems that all architecture is popularly judged in terms of its reducibility to a cliché. This is the culture of branding, of the instantly recognisable and transferable image.

Buildings reduced to pictures offer extremely limiting conditions for engagement. Such architecture as consumer image invests in a visual sensationalism, with buildings at their best from a distance, rather than carefully scaled spaces that invite inhabitation and repeated exploration. Projects like the Greater London Authority (GLA) building and the Swiss Re tower (the 'Gherkin'), both in London, share this attitude, despite having contrasting functions: the first being the city's town hall and the second corporate headquarters. The pictorialised buildings are designed for maximum visual impact, standing out in defiance of their surrounding space rather than in any kind of relationship, while they invest in conceptual one-liners to make themselves 'meaningful' – one of the most remarkable being the GLA's 'glass equals transparency equals democracy', also, incidentally, the key one-liner of the same architect's Reichstag extension in Berlin. Such catchy yet misguided – if not

outright dubious – gestures perform the same role as commercial advertising, where consumers are manipulated into a conviction they will be affected in a certain way by a product, before they have had any experience of it. As a result, it becomes impossible for these spaces to contribute to the composition and communication of a genuine sense of place and identity – which requires active participation rather than passive consumption – being, at best, autonomous abstractions and, at worst, manipulative advertisements.

Spectating

Beyond whatever message this advertising technique puts across, the biggest problem of iconic architecture results from the dramatic disembodiment accompanying such exclusive investment in the pictorial. This is felt most powerfully on the urban scale, where the reduction of buildings to outlines leave public space to emerge as a crude afterthought, an alienating non-place, rather than the living fabric of the city. The Swiss Re tower is the most recognisable shape of a modern structure on the London skyline (maybe with the exception of the London Eye), but on ground level it relates to the public



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Above: View of the Swiss Re tower.
(Image by Awa, from Wikimedia Commons.)



Above: View of Eiffel Tower.
(Image courtesy of the author.)

square around it like a rocket crash-landed in an abandoned plot. It has been argued that this is an inability on the part of the architects to deal with the ground and the human scale, but could it be that it is deliberate? The ground clearly does not matter for this project – it is merely a cumbersome necessity – and it says so. The entire project hinges on a view, or rather hundreds of them, albeit all identical, where the instantly recognisable shape jumps out of the ragged skirting of the London skyline. People are simply not expected to go up to this building, but to find the best place to ogle at it from a distance.

The post-unification Potsdamer Platz in Berlin is city life reduced to voyeurism on an even greater scale. This highly significant and historic civic space is now ringed by corporate towers competing with each other over size and shape. The space in between is just that: a leftover that allows for no further engagement than to gaze up at those towers. What we have here is a fundamental discrepancy of scale between the corporate and the corporeal, reducing the public from participants in the life of the city to mere spectators. These are the perfect conditions for commercial manipulation and the 'mall effect'.



Above: View of Potsdamer Platz towers.
(Image courtesy of the author.)

Whether because of sheer lack of options, or because of the ease with which the promise of consumption can seduce and lure in these un-civic/uncivilised conditions, the public landing on Potsdamer Platz quickly seek shelter and solace in the nearby shopping centres.

Resisting

The challenge for architecture is to resist simplification and persist with its complex role of structuring space as a realm of interaction and possibility, which becomes complete only with its open, continuous and varied inhabitation. Buildings exhaustible in a picture and, more importantly, thinking of and judging buildings based on a picture simply misses the point about architecture. Eluding the snapshot suddenly seems a great virtue for a building, as it implies that the focus is elsewhere. Of course, good architecture can also be photogenic, but it is never exhaustible in an image or, even less, an icon. In these times of extreme iconophilia it pays off to look twice when a building isn't shouting. And there's nothing elitist or tortured about this. It is simply recognition that much more, including more fun and excitement, is to be had from good architecture than just from a picture. ☐

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