

Architecture becoming a global cliché

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Abstract. Architecture becoming a global cliché is conceptualization of a uniformity witnessed in the practice of architecture across the global society we live in today. Iconic architecture in recent times has mostly become a hegemonic project of the transnational capitalist class. Where an architects essential role has not just been that of developing cities, rather they create economic assets for agencies and international organizations reaching beyond or involving several state borders. Adapting to an increasingly capitalist society, architects today have mostly taken the responsibility to curate exhibition spaces. Spaces that make evident the economic conditions of a state. If on one hand these grandeur architecture spaces act as magnets; attracting foreign communities and creating within themselves a world of movement and mixture. These international hubs are on the other hand also constantly facing challenges of risking their cultural identity. To a greater or lesser degree urban cities are reinforced with an insecurity of building largest and biggest making use of latest technology. The research presents an account on how architectural icons are moulded through capitalist market forces. It departs from the standard analysis of “iconic”, to develop a framework within which architecture icons in our world can be analyzed based on the literature of capitalist globalization. If the role of architecture is being limited to promote new urbanity in cities. How relevant is national identity and cultural ecology of local communities in a global society? If architecture has to carve out the character of newly expanding urban cities across the globe, should the latest trends in architecture trick the consciousness of ethnic people, their vernacular language and social beliefs? Since the impact of catering to a global audience is very powerful in present times; have the ethics and values of the past already faded away?

Iconic: An incitement to spend money [Anon- Skliar, L. April 2006]

Architectural iconicity, in the past was perceived as a vital and concrete form of artistic expression. An expression that enhanced the scope of emotion and aesthetically raised the standards of the built environment to areas of taste and subjective enjoyment. Iconic building in the past were mostly a representation of great religions and dominating economic empires. The monumental scale and massive structures of iconic buildings in the past often radiated strong social and political fundamentals [[Guggenheim 2009](#)]. The self-representational and intensive proportions of pyramids itself speaks for the great political powers and social advancements of the Ancient Egyptian civilization. Similarly, the architectural order and logic applied to building designs in Ancient Greece, documents the richest form of art in ancient world. Greek architecture is important for several reasons and its iconicity could be approached and interpreted through a number of phenomena. But its clear and strong expression of tangible and intangible forces that modelled the most beautiful monumental structures in the past, are particularly of great interest here. This intellectual art is a supreme example of working with logic and rationality towards sculpting unified aesthetics. Because of the precise visual effects created in these building, the Greek orders have been an influence on other schools. These early form of architectural icons paved the way for Renaissance, Neoclassical and Victorian architecture [[King 2004](#)]. Having the highest possible influence on modern architects. Similar expressions of power and strength of governance and society have been captured by modern architects borrowing from this ancient vocabulary.

As communities around the world, increasingly recognize places that retain modern iconic values. The actual race of iconic in modern architecture began in 20th century with the first skyscraper, William Le Baron Jenney's Home Insurance Building completed in Chicago in 1885 [[Condit 1973](#)]. The use of metal frame made Jenney's building not only rise to an impressive height of ten storeys, but the architect and his clients came together to stand for an entire architecture movement commonly known as the Chicago School [[Marshall 2015](#)]. The façade of this building was covered in stone and influenced by Greek architecture forms and orders. The idea was to use vertical bands to draw the eye upwards. The architects of the Chicago School shared a common interest in creating tall buildings. Their efforts were

however boldly supported by steel industry. Some of the eminent architects from Chicago School included Dankmar Adler, Louis Sullivan, Edward Burling, Robert H. Robertson. Envisioned by these great pioneering architects some of the early skyscrapers that draw all eyes to Chicago and New York were the Rand McNally Building,¹ the Rookery Building,² Park Row Building,³ Flatiron Building,⁴ and the Woolworth Building.⁵ The functionality of skyscrapers was central to commercial offices erected to accommodate the growing population in urban clusters, soon after industrial revolution [[Bruegmann 1987](#)]. In short order, steel skeletal structures evolved from Chicago and New York with glass curtains becoming the reason behind a remarkable revolution in the history of modern skyscrapers and distinguished icons. The skyscrapers marked the beginning of the race which further accelerated with the completion of much taller buildings through rapid improvements in the limited technology available back in the day. The iconic buildings in the modern era entirely changed how the world approached architecture as a discipline.

Not long ago, the need to make architectural icons turned into a political debate across the globe, that not only involved clients and designers, rather it encircled a wider audience and specialized fields of professionals in global studies and visual cultures. Iconicity in architecture today has become of keen interest to those who conceptualize it, materialize it,

¹Rand McNally Building was designed by Burnham and Root as the world's first entirely self-supported, all-steel framed skyscraper in Chicago. It was erected in 1889 at 148 feet, accommodating 10 floors.

² Rookery Building is another historic landmark in Chicago completed by John Wellborn Root and Daniel Burnham in 1888. It was considered as a masterpiece that combined and carefully blended the architecture elements of old and new. The height of the building measured 181 feet with 12 storeys. It was structured using both, the load bearing walls and an interior steel frame.

³ Park Row Building in New York was completed in 1899 at 391 feet, with 30 stories designed by Robert H. Robertson. Its façade is vertically divided in three sections and partially faced with granite, limestone, light-colored brick and terra cotta from the third till twenty sixth storey.

⁴ The Flatiron Building is a steel-framed triangular building in New York, that rises to 22 storeys. It was designed by Daniel Burnham borrowing from the rich architecture style of Renaissance.

⁵ The Woolworth Building, in New York was designed in 1910 by Cass Gilbert. The skyscraper was constructed at 792 feet and is still listed as one of the 100 tallest buildings in United States.

live and interact with it in a wide variety of ways. This study explores creation of iconic architecture as an essential factor for shaping a unified global culture particularly from a consumerist and facilitators viewpoint. Why is it becoming increasingly important to perceive the architecture of our lived spaces through the visual value assigned to them? Architecture icons as perceived today have come to symbolize various destinations or human advancements from a particular period of time. Architecture does not only fabricate urban cities but also visually documents our living spaces in ways to be instantly recognizable.

Architecture shaped by the global logistic revolution

The standardized transportation of all goods and objects through shipping containers marked a new plethora of opportunities for the architectural world. Containers emerged as a simple architectural solution for catering to the global logistic supplies. Yet it is one of the most practical inventions in the modern times. A container can almost transport any object efficiently over long distances. Their biggest advantage is that containers can be easily transferred from one mode of transportation to another, in no time. But the simpler it has become to manage and transport goods from a region to another, these containers have fundamentally altered the protocols of manufacturing industries and retailers. The powers now lie with the consumers instead of producers. This dramatic change that started in the 1960s has blurred the importance of physical locations and national borders. It is now a globalized community who perceives and predicts the future of markets and cities. Thus the results of this standardization have come out in the form of ecological unsustainability concentrated in nearly all the mega cities of the world.

The consumerist culture has further been intensified with remarkable achievements in communication technology. Media has proved to be the single most important reason for diluting architectural operations and performance of our lived spaces. Creating a complex support system for the consumers, it has architected a theatricality that is growing strong in the urban cities. It is important to think of our present living spaces and the influence of media through a blurring of what scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms “actualities” and “virtualities”. The production of here-ness, in the absence of actuality, depends increasingly on virtuality [[Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995](#)]. Consumers now use smart mobile devices for making

purchases. While relaxing in a park, one can easily plan the interior of a house in Sydney, following the latest trends in London and New York. The furniture can be ordered from Thailand, fixtures from China and oriental rugs from India. Mobile shopping has changed how many people perceive a store or a market. This kind of shopping culture now spans most regions of the world [[Uspsoig.gov 2015](#)]. Stretching across the busiest cities of the Global North, to the ever expanding cities of Global South.

Paradoxical to the availability of the market in the smart devices at hand; that one can access any time. Never before in history people have wanted objects and materials goods on such an extensive scale [[Sklair 2017](#)]. But the desire to search the market does not rest here. The production of a virtual market has also blended in itself an urge to appear in the foreground and celebrate all the icons buildings, mega brands, and global food chains. Transportation hubs, restaurants and hotels have become events in themselves [[Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995](#)]. They are often very similar from places to places. New interfaces of Disneyland themed parks are becoming common all over the world on the demand of the consumer, the industry produces a reliable environment. Meeting the standards of the consumer the same kind of architecture is reproduced and scattered in all corners of the world. The emerging trend started in the major cities of the global consumerist society has mutually connected all the living space in a way that every thing looks familiar.

Although we might not be living in a standardized container house or work in a container office, but our environment has been fabricated in a fashion that it looks very familiar to a destination across the globe. Sameness is experienced in hotel chains, MacDonald's, Starbucks, retail outlets, cinemas and even entire shopping malls. This sameness with an overzealous dedication has given rise to an architecture of the urban cities that are nothing but artificial and temporary- "a plastic urbanism".

Visual technology and an active social life of every individual on their mobile phone have created a relative ease along with a desire in humans to be a part of the 'plastic urbanism'. So the consumerist culture is very easily controlling how people think, what they need, where

they live and what they consume. The consumer is bound to follow an ideology based on the view that pure happiness and true purpose of life is in the possessions.

Global transportation has linked almost all the urban cities as a mega logistic hub; as a singular giant plastic city, which does not have any cultural basis. Its people are leaving behind the traditions of the past. But the disadvantage of this artificial development is that the gap between the rural and urban cities within the state borders is becoming even more striking visible than the line that exists between nation-states. Also those left behind in rural towns and in remote locations are increasingly exposed to degradation of their lifestyles and may be at a risk of being disconnected from the rest of the nation [[Finger 2014](#)]. The plastic urbanity is however giving rise to a new social group that exists between the urban and the rural. The people belonging to this particular group or class draw their reality on the patch work of “dos” and “do-not’s”, “haves” and “have-nots” borrowed from the beauty of their visual worlds. [[William 2014](#)]. This vision today is being promoted and structured by free markets of global capitalism.

Iconic architecture as an expression of strength of corporate world

The crisis of the 1970’s marked the advent of neoliberal capitalism and resulted in major changes in the framework of capital regulation and accumulation. Growing pressure on the government agencies for social reforms turned towards free market strategies. Focusing at expressions including deregulation, liberalization privatization and depoliticization [[Mudge 2008](#)]. The political face of this new market is thus bounded by certain notions regarding state’s responsibilities oriented towards concentration of the market and capital growth be understood as non-political. Thus private sector will also prove fruitful for the public sector. The collective bargain of the neoliberalism was the absence of barriers of international capital flow [[Campbell and Pederson 2001](#)], to allow people equal share in the free market. Neo liberalism can however be understood as a political myth embedded in our social environment that allows corporate capitalist to enjoy the biggest share in the economic resources, political influence and controlling tools for visual communication and media [[Sklair 2017](#), [Mudge 2008](#)].

Systematically under the umbrella of this profit-driven cultural ideology of free market architecture has become the greatest commercialized interest of the capitalist hegemony. It is an expression of the rising power of the transnational capitalist class; which often is a combination of state and non-state political actors. And their powers are made remarkably visible across the global by implanting worlds tallest skyscrapers, iconic museums, art galleries, performing art centers, sports arenas, shopping malls, transportations hubs and sometimes urban megaprojects to remodel entire cities and water front developments. These projects and other architectural practices are not state bound. A skyscraper or a modern day icon is installed on the lands where consumerism dominates, trespassing state borders. Thus, the architectural icons of the transnational capitalist class are primarily modelled to accumulate capital from the society, leaving them in a state of chaos. The global arena acts as a giant magnet that attracts societies for entertainment purposes and gathers wealth at the expense of leisure for the ordinary. A leisure that has become a sign of wealth unjustly earned and distributed. As a consequence of the free market and increasing building heights, the pace of life in our cities is quickening and lives are becoming steadily more hectic [[Blackshaw 2013](#)].

Unlike modern architecture, icons in the past were a representation of refuge and shelter; providing public with sanctuaries. These were mostly monasteries, mosques, temples and cathedrals and thus represented the power of great empires from ancient world. The Ancient Greek Parthenon was a temple constructed in the honor of goddess Athena, in 447 BC. Athens considered the goddess their patron. Later in the sixth century AD, the temple was turned into a church and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. After the Ottoman conquest in early 1460s, Parthenon was once again converted into a mosque [[Neils 2012](#), [Mikalson 2009](#)]. This significant building of the Classical Greek architecture, through out the history remained affiliated with a dominant image of the divine power [[Pedley 2005](#)]. Architecture monuments of the past can be studied as a permanent expression reflecting social values, arts, culture, ideology and human progress. But there is a fundamental change in the manner in which architectural and urban developing systems around the world operate today. The transnational capitalist class is fabricating the face of architecture icons with shining stainless steel plates, aluminum curtains, and glass walls. The architecture mirroring the individual, reflects a

portrait of the self as authoritative beings and in total control of the self. The Cloud Gate in the Millennium Park, Chicago has attracted a considerable national and international audience since it was first being installed on site by Anish Kapoor. The highly polished surface of the sculpture reflects a distorted skyline of Chicago. Visitors walk around the Cloud Gate to photograph themselves with unique reflections of city in the background [[Lavander 2012](#)]. The sculpture was installed as a result of a design competition and the artist has displaced similar works in a number of mega cities. His pieces have essentially become a photo opportunity and an architectural destination for the public, than a work of art [[Content.time.com. 2008](#)].

However the transnational community is itself being constantly challenged with an insecurity to build the bigg-‘est’ and the tall-‘est’ and the large-‘est’. The concept of scale is believed to give architecture a visually symbolic character, making it further inviting to be imaged and imagined by consumers. With exploding population densities and ever increasing rate of consumption, this challenge has also turned into a theme that caters to the growing needs of mega cities. The largest architectural spaces are often are the most celebrated iconic forms of the globalised community. These are not just building rather a display- an exhibition of the power and resources of the transnational capitalist class. Exhibiting glamour and grandiose, the successful hegemonic architecture forms solidifying the capital in one place- in the hands of a few actors across the globe. The inevitable genius in architecture today lies in spectacular shape-making and it is the transnational capitalist class that decides where and how architecture is to be shaped. They announce design competitions and its winners. These are the forces that formulate the skyline of major metropolis with new generation building plugged in cities every now and then.

In this light work of architecture today, is deliberately assembled and materialized in a way that it becomes a symbolic illustration- an image communicated to a targeted audience through various sources of social media [[Datu 2013](#)]. A good example of visual image of architecture is the iconic skyline of all mega cities across the globe. The world instantly identifies cities like London, Tokyo, New York, Sydney, Dubai and Berlin through images. These cities along with many others are seen as a home of architectural innovation. But in

several ways, these cities are different types of leading business and financial centers [[Sassen 2001](#)].

Conclusion. Today, the notion of Architecture is even more contested and has become much more than buildings. The challenge is becoming only more critical as the global population increases. More and more people are moving into cities, where the pressure of daily life is growing exponentially. Even the common man feels an urgency when it comes to place making- a cyclic process bound up within the social production and reproduction [[Datu 2013](#)]. Not just architects and clients but researchers, surveyors, graphic and communication designers, socialists and many others have joined hands to shape the skyline and an overall face of cities across the globe. Sociologist Saskia Sassen argues that global cities comprise of a core community for regulating and managing businesses. This community consists of lawyers, financial advisors, accountants, and management consultants [[Sassen 2001](#)]. It is primarily the coming together of all these players that capital is regulated and their decision making channelizes the flow of resource and capital. Thus the flow is not determined or limited to state borders. It reinforces the positions of mega cities within the networks of global circulation year after year.

Sociologists believe that the living conditions of our societies can be understood better through the consumption behavior- higher standards of living are associated mostly with increased purchasing power [[Blackshaw 2013](#)]. But as architects, it does not lie beyond imagination to point out the biggest problem with consumption is that it polarizes the society and leads to unsustainable ecological setups. Families, societies or even entire nations are being divided ethnically. People are left with a sense of insecurity. Fear and hatred breeding in the hearts of poor. While the rich are lost in the memories and nostalgia for native places and festivals celebrated with relatives and friends. Consumerism has had a profound and potentially unsustainable impact on the global society.

Architecture indeed has framed time and preserved human history since man lived in caves. It has captured in its true form and reflected our thoughts, ideas, expressions, fears and worries. Therefore, as architects of today's global era we must ask, what role should we play in the

situation, especially when we have to shape the culture of urban spheres facing the weight of economic forces? In times when people are mostly driven on creating an image of the society that is destructing the heritage. Where genuine forms of cultural and traditional values are happily replaced by virtual realities- could this virtual life of a consumer worth more to the future generations than cultural narratives? Can the culture also be upgraded? Well, the situation we face today is not recent, it is not different than the challenges communities before us may have experienced. An equally important argument is presented by Pipinis, when an audience admires architectural icons, it does not admire the corporate class or the agencies and forces that shaped them. Rather the collective artistic and creative abilities to fabricate and form the environment is being admired [[Pipinis 2014](#)]. So can the argument be concluded by saying that architecture in times remains an expression of arts and progress, as it were for the societies before us. The protocols have undoubtedly changed but should we say that architecture has not yet ceased to show people a way into the future, with a new vision of possibilities?

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