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**Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of
the Serial Object of Architecture**

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Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, a new generation of corporate architectural ‘icons’ have sprouted across the globe. These commissions are hailed as ‘iconic’ often even before they are erected, receive wide media attention, and have become the object of academic enquiry in architecture, geography, sociology and urban studies. However, as intellectual inquiry focuses on the proliferation of contemporary corporate ‘icons’, the question that Gottman (1966) posed back in 1966, i.e. whether, as the skyscraper spreads around the world it still has the same meaning and function as it had in the beginning, remains unanswered and becomes more relevant than ever. An analysis that links the proliferation of new to the banalisation of older corporate ‘icons’ is still to be undertaken.. In this contribution, I sketch an interpretative framework for interpreting this parallel process of ‘banalisation’ of old and proliferation of new ‘iconic’ corporate architecture as the Janus-faced manifestation of a qualitative shift in the relationship between capital and architecture. Highlighting the shift from place-bound, place-loyal urban elites, to footloose transnational elites, I argue that, after the 1970s, the need to develop a new set of building specifications and *use-values* to accommodate the requirements of the new urban economy is matched by an equally pressing need to develop a new set of *symbolic values* and a new *radical imaginary* for a new generation of transnational elites. Using Castoriadis’ analysis of the *radical imaginary* I conceptualise architecture as the narrativisation of the desire of elites at any given era, and argue that, if place loyalty was the driver of urban change in early 20th century, when urban tycoons funded monuments to their life and their city, it is the evasion of place loyalty alongside urban managerial practices that fuels urban renewal today. Within this context, I identify a number of significant differences between contemporary and earlier corporate ‘icons’ and argue that these set contemporary corporate commissions apart from the category of ‘iconic’ objects, and closer to what Baudrillard terms ‘serial objects’. The different symbolic, material, and social role of contemporary corporate buildings, I argue, puts them into a new category, which I term *Autistic Architecture*.

Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture

‘Each new situation requires a new architecture’ (Jean Nouvel 2005, np)

1. Architecture as narrativisation of desire.

This building ... [will] be a monument to my life ... the last skyscraper ever built in New York ... the greatest and the last ... the last achievement of man on earth ... a statement of my life. After I am gone that building will be Gail Wynand ... I’ve waited for it from the day I was born. (Rand, 1947): 579-580.

The above excerpt from ‘*The Fountainhead*’, Ayn Rand’s influential 1947 novel, recounts a fictional conversation between Gail Wynand, a powerful New York media tycoon and Howard Roark, a talented young architect. Homage to modernist architecture and a manifesto of enlightened architectural patronage, *The Fountainhead* depicts an almost erotic relationship between architecture and private capital. The ‘monument to his life’ that Mr Wynand asks the architect to design is what most self-respecting early 20th century urban tycoons with enough capital and a sense of place-loyalty aspired to commission. Although Mr Wynand is a figment of the imagination, his words echo those with which Hilla Rebay, art advisor to Solomon R. Guggenheim, wooed Frank Lloyd Wright into designing the New York Guggenheim Museum in 1943¹. She stated that her client wanted nothing less than a ‘temple of spirit’ and ‘a monument.’ Indeed, while European skylines were still dominated by buildings commissioned mainly by the state or civil society organisations like the Church,² late 19th and early 20th century American skyscrapers became the first temples erected in the name of private capital³. The Chanin Building,⁴ the Rockefeller Center,⁵ the Seagram building,⁶ the Woolworth building, later known as the ‘Cathedral of Commerce’⁷, the Trump Building, the ‘Crown Jewel of Wall Street’,⁸ all carried the names of their patrons, and were erected as homage to their life and achievements. Clad in luxurious material, and conspicuously displaying wealth and power, these buildings were elevated by the public imagery to the status of ‘urban icons’ soon after their erection (Twombly, 1996) and became sought after business locations. Headquarters in the Empire State, the Chanin or the Seagram building signified ‘cultural capital’, kudos, and a sense of achievement for any corporation that would occupy them (Abalos *et al.*, 2003); (Sklair 2006).

However, from the 1970s onwards, these iconic buildings lost much of their allure as desirable business locations, and, one after the other, were shunned by corporations. Amongst many others, the magnificent Chanin building in New York (Sennett, 2001), many of the emblematic locations in London’s City (Kynaston 2005); (Jacobs, 1994) the Helsinki Telephone Company’s ‘granite castle’ (MacKeith, 2005), the luxurious AT&T office building in New Jersey, were all abandoned or rejected as possible headquarters locations in favour of new, often nondescript headquarter buildings.⁹ In less than half a century, across the western world, corporate elites went from funding and building urban icons, to refusing to occupy them. Corporate buildings that were once made to last forever and to be on a par with the great monuments of humankind became obsolete. However, while these earlier icons are rejected, abandoned, or redeveloped, a new generation of corporate ‘icons’ sprout across the globe: amongst many other, London’s Swiss-Re Headquarters¹⁰, Birmingham’s Selfridges¹¹, Munich’s BMW Welt¹², Beijing’s Central Television Tower (CCTV)¹³, Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Twin Towers¹⁴, Dubai’s Porsche Design Towers¹⁵, and Abu Dhabi’s Ferrari World¹⁶. The new corporate commissions are hailed as ‘iconic’ often even before they are erected, receive wide media attention, and have become the object of academic enquiry in architecture, geography, sociology and urban studies (Alexander, 2008); (Bouzarovski, 2009); (Sklair, 2001); (Sklair, 2005); (Sennett, 2001); (McNeill, 2002); (McNeill, 2005); (McNeill 2005b);

(McNeill, 2006; Sklair, 2006); (MacKeith, 2005); (Domosh, 1990); (Jacobs, 1994); (Jacobs, 2006) and (Zukin, 1988, 1991, 1995). However, as intellectual inquiry focuses on contemporary 'iconic' buildings, an analysis that links the banalisation of the old and the proliferation of new corporate 'icons' is still to be undertaken, and the question that Gottman (1966) posed back in 1966, i.e. whether, as the skyscraper spreads around the world it still has the same meaning and function as it had in the beginning, remains unanswered and becomes today more relevant than ever.

In this contribution, I sketch an interpretative framework for unpacking the parallel process of, on the one hand, the 'banalisation' of early 20th century corporate icons, and, on the other hand, the proliferation of a new generation of 'iconic' architecture. Within this framework, this parallel process is seen as the Janus-faced manifestation of a qualitative shift in the relationship between urban elites and architectural patronage. Highlighting the recent shift from place-bound, place-loyal urban elites, to footloose transnational elites, I argue that, after the 1970s, the need to develop a new set of building specifications and use-values to accommodate the requirements of the new urban economy is matched by an equally pressing need to develop a new set of symbolic values and a new *radical imaginary* to accommodate the needs of a new generation of transnational elites.

Building on Castoriadis' (Castoriadis, 1987) work on the 'imaginary constitution of society' I depict iconic architecture as an urban totem, i.e. not only a means of *expressing/signifying* existing elite power, but also as one of the most effective means for *instituting* power, and constituting new authority or new social relations as real or naturalized during moments of social, economic, or political change. Within this framework, the rejection of old icons and the frantic race across the world to build the next global icon are both linked to the need to institute a new 'urban imaginary' for a new generation of elite power. Seen through this interpretative framework, the rejection of the Chanin 'palace', the Helsinki Telephone Company's 'granite castle', AT&T's 'Pagoda' and the sublime City banking locations is linked to more than just the lack of provision of up to date infrastructure specifications, or 'flexible' workspace. I argue that these buildings were rejected also -and arguably mainly- on the grounds that they alluded to a now transcended relationship between private capital and the city.

Drawing a comparison between early 20th century and contemporary corporate 'icons', I argue that, although these buildings share in common the commitment to impressive design and the desire to dominate the urban skyline, they nevertheless are distinct in significant ways, notably their symbolic role, the ways in which they relate to the city that surrounds them, their relationship to time/ruination, their production process, as well as the ways in which they become scripted into the public imagery.

I conclude by arguing that the new symbolic and material role, and the distinct social characteristics of contemporary corporate buildings, as well as the new rituals of 'iconification' that accompany their commission, demand a reconceptualization of contemporary corporate commissions, one that removes them from the category of 'iconic' objects¹⁷, and puts them closer to what Baudrillard terms 'serial' objects, and into a new category that I call *Autistic Architecture*. Like its patrons, who do not engage with urban political life, this type of architecture does not engage with the city that surrounds it, and demonstrates a 'pathological self-absorption and preoccupation with the self to the exclusion of the outside world'¹⁸. The emergence of this type of architecture across the world, I argue, has profound effects on city life and on the production and use of urban public space.

2. Iconic Architecture as totem.

'The ruin is a way to dominate history continuously' (Speer, 1970)

Architectural icons hold a special place in human history as part of a system of imaginary significations and symbols. Like the name and symbols of a nation, a tribe, or a country; like the symbols and rituals of a religion; like the rules and institutions of a community; iconic architectural objects have functioned across history as totems of a particular social order, as part of a system of significations that define the collectivity of a society across time and ‘beyond its perishable molecules’ (Castoriadis, 1987: 147). The Pyramids, the Parthenon, the Medieval Cathedral, the American skyscraper, still exhume immense power as signifiers that define distinct historical moments and narrate the desires and aspirations of particular social organisations and their élites (Koepnick, 2001). They are part of a system of significations ‘which provide each society with answers to fundamental questions of origin, identity, purpose, relation to other societies, etc.’ answers that, ‘neither “reality”, nor “rationality” can provide’ (Castoriadis, 1987: 147).

Castoriadis terms this system of imaginary significations that plays a key role in organizing human behaviour and social relations the *actual imaginary*. Castoriadis’ definition of the *actual imaginary* and its importance in maintaining a certain social order and regulating human behaviour is close to Lacan’s concept of the symbolic order, and to Freud’s analysis of the symbolic as ‘the pact which links... subjects together in one action.’ (Miller, 1991): 230). However, in his *Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis (1987) offers a more radical reading of semiotics, which goes beyond asserting the link between language and power. This reading asserts that history not only exists in and through language; it also *gives itself* this language, it *constitutes and transforms* this language according to its needs (Castoriadis, 1987: 138). In short, the system of significations that each society institutes is important for organising or reproducing its collective identity and rituals, but is also responsible for *producing* the collective identity of a society/collectivity as a real and existing entity. In short, a society is not only defined by language; it also produces the language it needs in order to perpetuate itself through time. Symbols provide *not only* the necessary means for a collective identity to *express* itself; they also provide the means for this collective identity *actually to exist* in the first place, to *come into being* as a collective.

The social–historical sets up ... a universe of significations ... to which it owes unity and coherence, the specific structure of its elements, a certain understanding of the external natural world and its relation to society ... a certain definition of ‘real’ social needs, which the functionality of the institutions must serve

(Castoriadis 1987, 145-164, see also Kavoulakos 2006: 203; Kaika, 2010).

Castoriadis encapsulates this fundamental distinction between symbols that *perpetuate* the identity of a social order, and symbols that *institute* the identity of a social order in the concept of the *radical imaginary*. The *radical imaginary* is ‘the elementary and irreducible capacity of evoking images’ and constitutes the ‘origin of the symbolic’ (Castoriadis 1987: 147). Whilst the *actual imaginary* is the ability of a society to express an already constituted collective identity, the *radical imaginary* is the ability of a collective to institute new images and symbols for something that does not actually exist yet, but is still in the making (FIGURE 1). Take, for example, the case of nationalism. The nation-state, a 19th century European invention, was constituted as a real entity through the institution of a new radical imaginary: the symbols for state-nationalism (flag, anthem, maps, common language, etc.) acted not as representations of a homogeneous nation already existing within specific borders, but as part and parcel of constituting this nation as an actually existing ‘thing’, as a performative entity. The institution of private property is another example of a constituted historically geographically specific imaginary signification that was instituted as real through a radical imagination of symbols and institutions, and marked ‘a new way for society to live, to see itself and to conduct itself as articulated in an antagonistic and asymmetrical manner, a signification that [was] immediately symbolized and sanctioned by rules’ (Castoriadis 1987: 61).

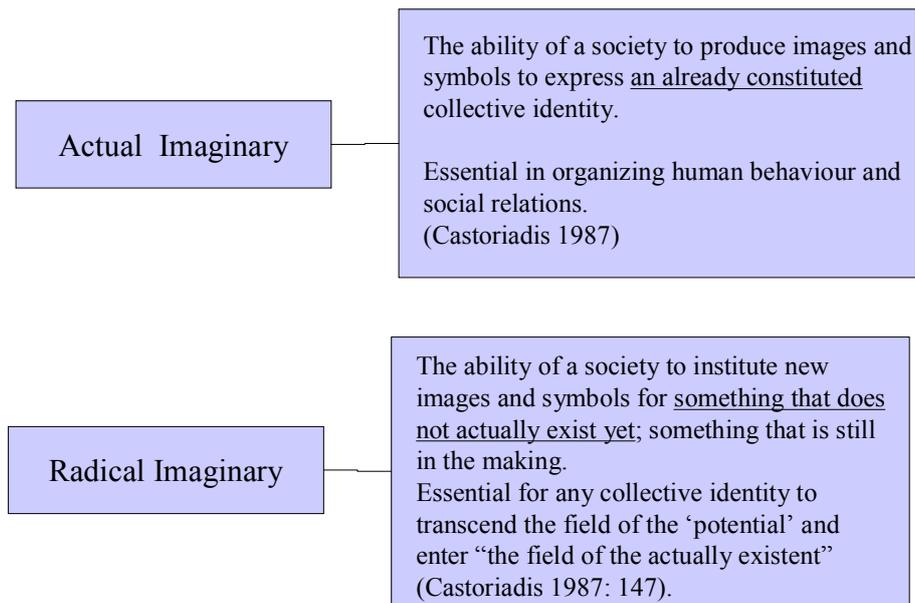


Figure 1 Actual/Radical imaginary

In short, the *radical imaginary* is essential for any collective identity to transcend the field of the 'potential' and enter the field of the 'actually existent' (Castoriadis 1987; see also Kavoulakos 1996). As I note elsewhere (Kaika, 2010: pn)

Castoriadis' distinction between radical imaginary ... and actual imaginary, offers a powerful analytical framework that enables us to go beyond the well documented link between ideology, power, and symbolism. It opens up an avenue to explore the reasons why a collective identity (e.g. a nation, a society, an institution) needs symbolic expressions in the form of language, music, art, or architecture, to institute and assert itself in the first place.

This framework also opens up an avenue to explore discontinuity, and institutes the foundations for theorizing change, 'the alteration of significations, [and] the break with tradition' (Kavoulakos 1996: 202). If collectives '*constitute* and *transform* their language according to their needs at any historical moment' (Castoriadis 1987: 138), then the need for a new radical imaginary, i.e. of instituting new imaginary significations and symbols, becomes imperative during moments of crisis and change, as it provides the symbols for new institutional arrangements, symbols that will act both as signifiers of the new order and as means of constituting this order.

Seen within this framework of analysis, the language of architecture, like that of other imaginary significations of a society, is more than just the signifier and a narrativisation of the instituted power of a corporation, a state, a church, or a city. It is also a means of *constituting* this symbolic authority as real, a means of teaching society what to desire and how to desire it (Žižek, 1989). Following this logic, architecture is not only central for sustaining the socio-political fantasy of each historical epoch; it also acts as a totem, a performative entity for constituting new authority or new social relations as real or naturalized. Particularly during moments of significant social, economic, or political change, iconic objects of architecture operate as part of the *radical imaginary*: i.e. they perform a double role: that of signifiers of power, but also that of constituting a new language, new symbols and myths for a new

configuration of power, for a society in search of a new identity, for cities, corporations, states, nations, religious authorities, in need of rebranding.

3. Instituting the myth of modernity: the rise and fall of the modernist corporate icon.

Acknowledging the imperative for secular modern society to institute itself through a new set of symbols and myths, Dadaist and surrealist pioneer Louis Aragon offered a new mythology of modernity, in which iconic architecture features as a key protagonist. His *Paris Peasant* (Aragon 1994 (1926)) is an ode to iconic technological constructions and infrastructure networks. To Aragon, these structures are more awesome and powerful than any deity of the ancient world. The importance of architecture in constructing and sustaining the myth of a modern society is also present in his *Mirror-Wardrobe one fine evening* (Aragon, 1924). In this poetic depiction of the modern city, architectural objects feature as mythical entities, guardians of the dialectic between light and shadow, thresholds between the old world and a new modern urban society (Read, 2005). Architecture is also central in Ayn Rand's work as a key performative act in instituting of a modern capitalist society. The high priestess of capitalism and 'objectivism', and one of the most controversial cultural icons of early 20th century America, Rand produced a systematic symbolic narrative through novels, philosophical musings, media publications and televised interviews, where she ranks so highly the importance of architecture in instituting an ideal capitalist society, that she places architecture on the pedestal as the central totem of this new world order, and architects on the podium as the high priests of a new social ethics. Her masterpiece *Fountainhead* is an ode to the importance of architecture in instituting her ideal modern capitalist society. In it, she makes the ruthless industrialist Mr Wynand state that there is no proper function for money, other than to become 'the financial fertilizer that will make [the construction of iconic corporate buildings] possible' (Rand 1947: 613). Although this statement could easily be dismissed as hyperbolic, Rand's fictitious character was actually drafted closely in the image of early 20th century New York tycoons, who spent lavishly in a fierce competition to produce the next tallest, most exuberant building that would project their power onto urban space and would show their commitment to the city that sustained and promoted their wealth. The great icons of early 20th century American capitalism, the Rockefeller centre, the Chanin Building, the Empire State Building, were designed to stand on a par with the great architectural monuments of humankind, instituting the power of their patrons in urban space, but also extending industrial paternalism into the realm of urban space, and casting the myth of economic stability and power of American capital in stone, marble and steel¹⁹.

The American corporate skyscraper is arguably the most paradigmatic modern manifestation of the role of architecture as the radical imaginary of a changing society. Being the first unashamedly iconic non religious building type (Kaika 2005), the corporate skyscraper became a dramatic assertion of the shift of the symbolic order from state and church power, to money and corporate power, a radically new totem in the service of a radically new secularised western world. This private architectural icon *par excellence* did more than just project its patrons' powerful image onto the urban skyline. It became a tool for narrating to the world the modern (American) myth for social emancipation through progress, design, technological innovation and corporate power (Twombly, 1996); (MacKeith, 2005). If Henry Ford's innovations 'democratised' the dream of car ownership, and turned the automobile from an item of luxury to an everyday object, modernist architecture 'democratised' the dream of quality housing and office building. The iconic corporate buildings of the early 20th century were not just signifiers of the power of place loyal tycoons; they also claimed to bring the democratic qualities of modernist design to the everyday lives of the worker and the city dweller. In a public display of commitment to the urban community, the luxuriant decorations and artwork of these buildings were not confined only to the tycoons' private offices; employees too, could feel 'at home' in their offices, and could enjoy the aesthetic delights of

the fordist new deal, alongside job security and welfare benefits. According to critic Paul Goldberger, F L Wright's Johnson Wax building in Racine, Wisconsin

was all about ennobling the worker, giving the clerical workers the nave of the cathedral. ... Even today, 70 years on, the visitor will find legions of secretaries typing away at desks Wright designed, basking in the subtle light, all of them fortunate enough, ... to experience Wright's singular genius every time they come to work

(cited in Anonymous, 1998: 1).

Commenting on the same building, architect Philip Johnson also notes that F. L. Wright 'gave the company's clerical workers one of the greatest public spaces in America. ... He built a palace, he built a church. He built something that just soared. It's the finest room, maybe, in the United States' (Burns, 1998): 310). Similarly, the Rockefeller centre (Raymond Hood principal architect) featured opulent public art in its lobbies and generous provision of open spaces that blended the private and the public in one continuous flow. AT&T's office building at Basking Ridge, New Jersey, designed by Vincent G. Kling & Associates, also objectified Fordism's new aesthetic deal through offices with wood burning fireplaces and an impressive entrance lobby that included a waterfall. Although these buildings operated as symbols of the glory of private capital, their generous provision of public space and their claims to educating the public to modernist aesthetics through cultural practices, put them squarely in the centre of the public imaginary, and turned them into monuments that inspired a sense of civic and even national pride (Twombly, 1996); (MacKeith, 2005).

It was this role of architecture as the radical imaginary of a society in the making, its role in developing and sustaining the myth of capitalist progress that elevated architecture and planning into social engineering and promoted what (Tafuri, 1999 (1973)) termed the 'central illusion of architectural ideology', i.e. the belief that a single design project can make a difference in the production of urban space and can ameliorate urban society. This myth of architecture as social engineering combined with the fidelity to a modernist emancipatory project gave Adolf Loos the confidence to demand the sacrifice of ornament on the altar of a better society (Loos 1998), Le Corbusier the self-righteousness to promote his Unités d'Habitation across the world as the best possible way of living, and Robert Moses the nerve to state: 'I'm just going to keep on building. You do the best you can to stop it' (quoted in (Berman, 1983): 290). These bold statements resonate an era that asserted the architect's role in producing a better future society, on equal footing or even above that of the politician or the industrialist.

However, after the 1970s, the once mythical and sought after business icons that were produced as part of the new social deal became banalised. (Sennett, 2001) reports how one of New York's jewels, the Chanin building, was rejected in the 1980s as a possible location for the headquarters of an unnamed transnational corporation. A similar fate awaited the opulent 1.35-million-square-foot AT&T office building at Basking Ridges, New Jersey, featuring offices with wood burning fireplaces and a waterfall adorning the entrance lobby, which closed down in the early 2000s in favour of new offices at Bedminster, Bridgewater and Morristown.²⁰ Kynaston (2005) chronicles how, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Corporation of London struggled to persuade its banking and media institutions, as well as consultancies and lawyers, to remain loyal to their traditional locations in London's City (see also (Jacobs, 1994) and ('Reuters says goodbye to Fleet St' 2003). (MacKeith, 2005) offers a detailed analysis of how, in 2003, the Helsinki Telephone Company (HPY) abandoned its impressive 'granite castle' in the city centre in favour of a new nondescript headquarter building at the outskirts.

Indeed, after the 1970s, the relation between architecture and corporate patronage changed dramatically. Along with the eclipse of the 'traditional' economic activities in western cities, the 'traditional' species of the place-loyal urban tycoon that would tie his personal fortune with that of the city and would get involved in the production of urban space and the reproduction of urban life also eclipsed. The almost mythic figures of Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Chanin, Carnegie, Mellon, Lloyds, Ford, Pirelli, or Agnelli, were replaced by a new generation of urban elites, who are as distinct from their predecessors as the economy they produce is from the early 20th century economy. The new urban elites tend not to associate themselves with any specific city or locale, and have no particular interest in urban social and political life. According to Sennett, 'they want to operate *in* a city but not rule it; they compose a regime of power without responsibility' (Sennett, 2007) np). Sklair terms this new generation of footloose transnational elites 'the Transnational Capitalist Class' and argues that they are 'more or less in control of the process of globalization' and are 'beginning to act as a transnational dominant class' (Sklair, 2001) : 5-6).

The footloose character of new urban elites and their lack of place loyalty and place commitment inevitably affect the relationship between capital and urban space. Borrowing the term from Marcel Proust, Sennett describes this new generation of elites as the city's 'passive beloved'; like a lover who constantly threatens to leave, and by doing so makes one offer perks and gifts to make them stay, contemporary Transnational Corporations are ready any moment, to leave the city in which they locate their headquarters. By doing so, they make city councils, city officials and the state offer them increasingly more perks and gifts in the form of amenities, subsidies, tax breaks, etc., in order to convince them to remain loyal. Peter Wynne Rees, The City Planning Officer for the City of London, confirms this point.

We don't have a great deal of difficulty to attract [transnational corporations to the City of London]. But it would be very easy for us to frighten them away if we weren't doing the right thing ... if we weren't going to have high rise buildings or if we didn't have late night bars in the City or whatever it might be. ... Then they might have said oh we'll go somewhere else.

(Peter Wynne Rees, The City Planning Officer for the City of London, Personal Interview).

As stability and continuity (the once great virtues of capitalist urban development) have become character defects, the new generation of urban elites finds the loyalty expressed in earlier corporate icons unpalatable. Indeed, although the lack of spatial flexibility, increased ceiling heights, enhanced daylight, and better IT infrastructure are often quoted by essayists, analysts and architectural critics as key reasons behind the rejection of once iconic corporate buildings (Finch, 1992); (Booth, 2001), corporations themselves cite instead the commitment of these earlier corporate palaces to that old fordist pact between employer and employee as unsavoury and undesirable. The resolution of older corporate iconic architecture to make workers 'feel at home', and to make lobbies and plazas integral parts of the urban public realm have no place in contemporary corporate culture and practice. The Chanin building was rejected due to the fact that it was 'too beautiful' and on account of anxiety, from the part of employers that workers might become too attached to it and even 'feel they belong there' (Sennett, 2001: np). Along a similar narrative, while AT&T was leaving their granite castle the company's spokesman, Gary Morgenstern asserted that 'we would never build a headquarters of such magnificence today' (Antoinette, 2001), np). Geoff Schubert, managing director with CB Richard Ellis, also declared about AT&T's iconic building that "very few companies will take a building like this today'. As part of the same corporate culture that does not wish workers to feel they belong to their workplace, many of the businesses that hold offices today in the opulent Lloyds building in the City of London, do not allocate personal desk space to their employees. Instead, employees can only 'book' a desk for a few hours in the building (mainly when they wish to impress a client) and are expected to retreat

afterwards to their open plan desks in nondescript office buildings in London's suburbs (Interview, George, City Employee).

In short, the opulence and commitment to employees that used to be these corporate icons' main attraction, has now become a crucial deficiency. The continuity, stability, job security, and place loyalty symbolised by earlier corporate architecture were part of the actual imaginary of an era that is long gone. These buildings are rejected today not because they cannot fulfil the material needs of new corporations, but mainly because they represent a long gone relationship between capital and architecture, between employers and employees. They had been part of the *actual imaginary* of a social formation that changed radically after the 1970s and cannot narrate the new myth of flexible accumulation and footloose corporate existence. This new corporate existence calls instead for a new type of architecture, one that not only facilitates the new noncommittal relationship between employer and employee, but also acts performatively as the totem for instituting a new social imaginary for a new relationship between capital and space. This is exactly the role of the new generation of corporate 'icons' that are commissioned in unprecedented numbers across the world over the last 20 years.

4. Autistic architecture. The rise of the serial object of Architecture.

[autism n.](#)

A pathological self-absorption and preoccupation with the self to the exclusion of the outside world

([A Dictionary of Psychology](#) in [Politics & Social Sciences](#))

If the architectural form that best fits the footloose, non-committal existence of contemporary corporations is flexible, non-descript spaces that can be easily reconfigured at any time to accommodate the requirements of their tenants (Ada Louise Huxtable, cited in Sennett, 2001); see also (Bouzarovski, 2009), then the proliferation of the new generation of iconic buildings would be difficult, if not impossible to explain through a standard functionalist analysis of the material needs of the new economy. Indeed, the corporate buildings commissioned over the last 20 years, designed by star architects, receiving wide media attention, and being canonized as 'emblematic' 'iconic' etc. even before they are erected (Ethington and Schwartz, 2006), appears, at first glance, to defy the material needs of contemporary corporations. A standard economic cost-benefit analysis could not explain the proliferation of new corporate 'icons' either, as these building commissions also defy business gurus, who urge corporations to forego commissioning elaborate headquarters, as 'setting commitments in stone [...] can lock a company into a community [...] and [can] signal permanence and continuity that may inhibit managers' ability to rethink and reverse their former commitments' (Sull, 2003), cited in MacKeith, 2005:58). Instead, I shall argue, the proliferation of this new generation of iconic commissions has to be seen as part of the institution of a system of imaginary significations, part of a new *radical imaginary*, which is central to establishing the dominance of transnational capital and narrating flexible accumulation as a 'natural' or real existing thing. This new *radical imaginary* combines the creation of a new set of *use-values* (increased ceiling heights, extensive networking infrastructure, increased daylight exposure and 'flexible' workspace (Finch, 1992) with the materialisation of a new set of *symbolic values*. Central in instituting a new social imaginary for a new social configuration, contemporary iconic architecture narrates a myth quite different to that narrated by the early 20th century corporate icons.

Indeed, although contemporary corporate commissions appear at first glance to share many common characteristics with the corporate icons of the first half of the 20th century (notably

the commitment to impressive design, and the way they dominate the urban skyline) they have in fact more dissimilarities than meet the eye. The previous section detailed one such dissimilarity i.e. how the commitment to ‘ennobling’ workers through architectural detail and opulence, which constituted one of the design virtues of early modernist corporate icons, has become a design defect for contemporary corporate spaces. But the new relationship between capital and architecture also extends the lack of commitment to employees to a lack of commitment to the city that surrounds the corporate building. Unlike earlier corporate buildings that could easily be identified to the city’s well known tycoons, and offered opulent spaces to the urban public, contemporary corporate icons act as branding objects of transnational corporations that often have no prior links to the city in which they locate their headquarters, and who are unknown to its public. A prime example is Swiss–Re’s commission to Norman Foster (2000-2004) for the global re-insurance giant’s headquarters in the City of London. The building, at 30 St. Mary Axe, became known as ‘London’s Gherkin’, made a splash in the media, and raised Swiss-Re’s profile as a powerful new player in London’s City. However, Swiss-Re sold the building only three years after it was erected at a profit of 200 million dollars, confirming that the building’s *raison d’être* had nothing to do with Swiss-Re establishing roots in London, but acted instead as a successful brand maker and a speculative real estate venture for the company. Unlike early 20th century corporate icons which were built to confirm their patrons’ commitment to place and to inspire a sense of civic or national pride, new corporate icons comprise privatized spaces closed to the public with no desire to become embedded in urban social life.

Some of the largest canvasses of contemporary artwork just hang there in the foyer [of London’s St. Helen’s (Aviva) Tower], growing in value as we speak, but the public has no access to it at all

(Interview, John, London City worker)

I guess [public space] is not seen as important. If you want that kind of London if you want open space, public space to use and enjoy you go to Hyde Park, Green Park...

(Interview, Alan, City worker)

In that respect, the new corporate ‘icons’ have little in common with what Aldo Rossi termed ‘events’, that is, building that become moments and parts of a broader dream about the city. This type of architecture has very little in common with what (Tafuri, 1980) termed ‘architecture as social art’, an architecture whose object is not just the individual building but the city as a whole. Instead, today’s corporate buildings resemble more what Tafuri calls ‘Self contained machines’, islands of development that do not have, and perhaps do not wish to have, any relationship to the city that surrounds them. Like its patrons, who do not engage with urban political life, this new type of architecture, which I term *Autistic Architecture*, does not engage with the city that surrounds it, and demonstrates a ‘pathological self-absorption and preoccupation with the self to the exclusion of the outside world’²¹ Just as to transnational elites, cities function not as places of belonging, but as playgrounds for conspicuous consumption and entertainment, to this new type of *Autistic Architecture*, cities function not as a place of embeddedness, but rather as the backdrop, the setting, for their proud display. The same way that transnational elites ‘consume’ cities’ amenities without committing to them, the self-absorbed, self-referential new corporate architectural objects make a statement on the city’s skyline but are, at best, indifferent about the real city that surrounds them. As McNeill (2005b: 501) notes, ‘the intensification of the accoutrements of globalization — time–space compression, individual mobility, the flow of images [...] have fundamentally altered the relationship between architect and city’. This disregard for the city is eloquently captured in an interview that architect R Viñoly gave to Russian architectural critic V Belogolovsky. The interview was conducted in Viñoly’s New York office while

Viñoly's practice was commissioned to design some of the residential towers for Park-City development in Moscow. In response to Belogolovsky's question whether he had the chance to actually see the city of Moscow, Viñoly responds that he knows the city mainly through publications, but he knows very well

what Norman [Foster] is doing [in Moscow], which is enormous and probably not his best work. In the last year, I went there five or six times to see the site and to meet the project team. I have mostly been to the key landmarks and mostly at night after the meetings. But I think I have a very good smell for it. I can imagine it very well.

(Belogolovsky, 2008).

In this quote it is clear that Moscow the city, is not what Viñoly's buildings aim to engage with; his interest lies instead with how his building will engage with other architects' - the competitions' - designs. The architect is more interested in engaging with the skyline rather than with the city or its inhabitants. Moscow, London, Beijing, Paris, etc. operate as backdrops for architectural design experimentation, and the cities' skylines become a curiosity shop for the display of impressive architectural objects.

Another key characteristic that distinguishes contemporary from older corporate icons is the buildings' regard towards time and ruination. Early 20th century corporate icons constituted typical cases of architectural objects designed for permanence, destined to outlive both their architects and their patrons. In doing so, they shared a lot in common with what Žižek describes as the 'sublime object', i.e. an 'indestructible and immutable body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical' (Žižek, 1989): 18) see also Sohn-Retherl, 1978: 59, cited in Žižek 1989: 18). Contemporary corporate commissions by contrast, are designed with a short life expectancy. Like fashion, they are destined to be at once conspicuous and disposable. Durability now becomes a defect, since no building can be seen to outlive the corporation's operations. 'The nondescript office building in Silicon Valley can quickly adjust to new tenants, whereas the corporate monument can easily outlast the corporation, making a mausoleum of the coliseum' (Sull, 2003), cited in MacKeith, 2005:58). Indeed, the skyscrapers currently erected are built with a life expectancy of between 20-50 years, whilst most buildings are granted a maximum lease of 60 years, corresponding to an equivalent expected life-cycle (Peter Wynne Rees, The City Planning Officer for the City of London, Interview). A case in point is London's Paternoster Square, which was redesigned in the 1970s in a form that was meant to last for centuries, but was replaced by a new development only 20 years later. Similarly, the magnificent Pirelli building in New Haven Connecticut, designed by Marcel Breuer in 1969, is currently under threat of demolition to give way to an IKEA development (Architecture-Week, 2002). The TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport, a New York city landmark, and one of the most praised modernist buildings, designed by Eero Saarinen in 1962, was also vacated in October 2001. The buildings that cater for the nomadic existence of today's transnational corporations have short life spans and can easily be dismantled and go to waste as soon as they no longer serve the needs of their occupiers. The lack of commitment to duration becomes the third characteristic that, alongside lack of commitment to employees and lack of commitment to urban space, distinguishes contemporary corporate commissions to earlier corporate icons.

The aforementioned changes in the public role and life expectancy of today's 'iconic' commissions, alongside the pressure for quick turnover, inevitably have an impact on the buildings' design and production process. Whilst the dream of every self-respecting early 20th century architect was the freedom comprehensively to design every detail of their building, the pressure for quick turnover leads today's 'star architects' to take a more 'corporate' approach to the creative process. Arne Jacobsen, famous for his obsession with detail, extended his design from his buildings' fabric, to furniture, door handles, locks, sinks, taps, showers, light fixtures, even wall sockets. The result of this labour intensive, comprehensive

design process was that not only the buildings themselves, but almost every object within these buildings became iconised: Jacobsen's 'Oxford' chair and cutlery designs became as iconic as his buildings. Similarly, Frank Lloyd Wright fought tooth and nail to keep his design vision for the New York Guggenheim intact, against fierce criticism from the NY city council, planning authorities, architectural critics, the art world, and even his patron, Solomon Guggenheim. It was 'all too much for Manhattan's building-code administrators, who haggled with Wright for 15 years over the details' ('Last Monument', 1959). The New York Guggenheim was granted full permission a whole 15 years after Wright had originally designed it, and only six months before he died. Wright fought, literally, until the end to have it his way, prompting his critics to just 'wait and see'²². With the same commitment to uncompromisingly pursuing comprehensive design, [Jørn Utzon](#) fought to keep his design for the Sydney Opera House intact, and resigned after interferences with his original design, never to return to see the completed building, that he no longer recognized as his own.

A very different attitude, however, characterizes contemporary architectural production. Architectural patronage today does not allow architects the luxury to pursue creative freedom. By losing its status as social art, architecture also lost its ability to pursue totalizing design ideas and ideals. The growing complexities in the production of architecture constitute a dramatic shift that many [architects] either failed to notice or became resigned to

(Larson, 1993: xi).

A case in point is Norman Foster's silent acceptance of his clients' decision to contract the design of the interior space of the Swiss-Re building to a another design practice. In fact, most large architectural practices are today contracting out stages of the creative process, and/or have established a strict division of labour in their design studios. In 2007, the studios of Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Norman Foster, and Richard Rogers were employing between 100 and 200 designers each across the world, having instituted an unprecedented division of labour in architectural creation, but also, arguably, an unprecedented alienation in the design and production process. Even Jean Nouvel, one of the remaining agitators in the field, that still holds on to a vision of architecture as social art, and of his own role as a public intellectual, stated soberly that: 'Je suis un activiste de developpement durable! Mais c'est le client qui decide... (I am a sustainable development activist : but it is the client who decides)' (Le Chatelier, 22 February 2006): 48. Author's translation).

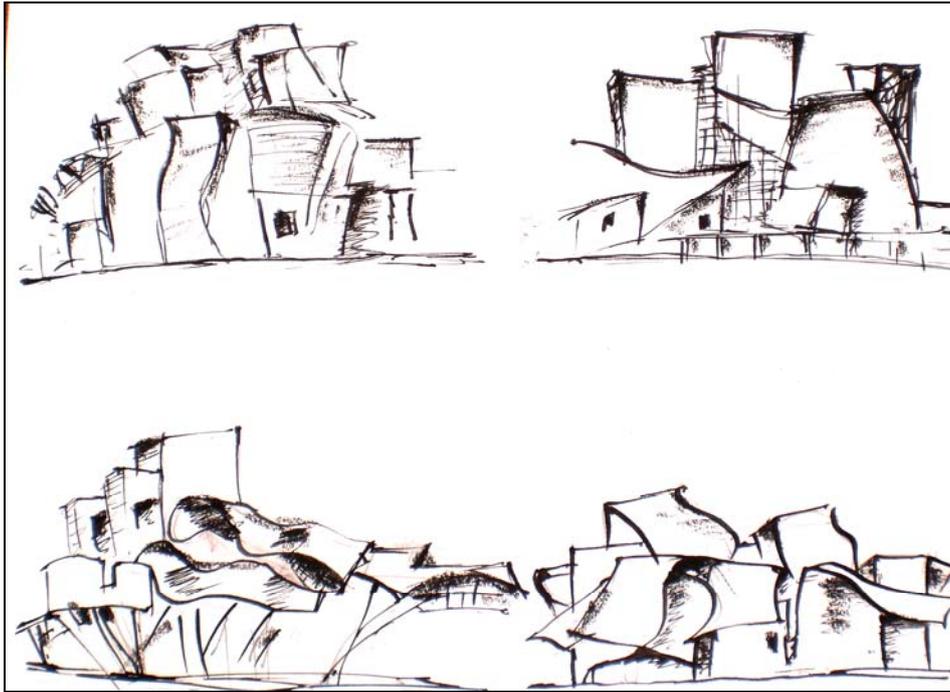


Figure 2

Oversymbolism of meaning: the same codes are used to express a multiplicity of meaning in different social and geographical contexts. Here, the successful aesthetic code of Frank O. Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim (top left, 1997) is repeated in his designs for (clockwise from top left): the Los Angeles Walt Disney Concert Hall (2002); the Marquis de Riscal Winery Expansion in Elciego, Spain (2003); the Peter B Lewis Campus of the Weathershead School of Management; Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio (under construction).

Source: Author's imprompt. Copyright. The author

The endless repetition of successful architectural design forms across the world testifies further to this alienation of the design process (FIGURE 2). Frank Ghery's designs for the LA Disney Concert Hall, the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris, and Hotel Margues de Riscal in Alava, Spain, appear to be serial reproductions of an admittedly impressive original model designed by the same architect: the Bilbao Guggenheim. Similarly, the bullet-like form of the Swiss-Re Tower designed by Foster & Partners, is repeated by the same or different architects in different locations and contexts across the world. Rem Koolhaas' OMA also repeats a very similar form in Beijing (Central Television Tower (CCTV)) and Dubai (Porsche Design Towers), and is documented to have transposed the same design model from one unrealized commission to a new commission with very little change (Yaneva, 2009a, b). Sudjic endorses the same point by noting that 'Richard Meier builds essentially the same building in Frankfurt and The Hague' (Sudjic, 1993: 76). These uncanny replicas of successful early models, are not exactly original; they better described as serial reproductions 'stuck fast in their quest for uniqueness' (Baudrillard, 2005: 161). What Jacobs (2006: 12) depicts as the 'anonymous and bureaucratized middling modernism' that buries the architect 'deep in the institutional framing' has extended in late capitalism from the mass-produced residential high-rise to an equally mass produced but supposedly unique corporate building.

The characteristics detailed above, i.e. the alienation of the design process, the burgeoning uncanny imitations of successful design originals, the lack of commitment to employees and to place, the ephemeral character and quick turnover time, set contemporary corporate buildings apart from the corporate icons of the early 20th century. They also point to a yielding of architecture's creative process to economic return. This 'subordination of the creative

process to the economic process' (Piper 1985: 37) holds an interesting resemblance to the process that Piper identified as the *deformation of the art object*. Piper notes that

[f]aced with the pressures of over- production, the artist has a few alternatives, besides that of simply refusing to meet all of these demands. She may produce shoddy work; or she may modify the product in ways that make it easier to produce; or she may employ others to make the work for her

(Piper, 1985): 37).

In short, the features distinct to new corporate commissions put under serious scrutiny the status of these buildings as 'iconic', as they dissociate them from the great monuments of humankind and place them instead closer to the category of objects of mass production²³.

5. Becoming iconic: More by ritual than by design.

Leslie Sklair defines iconic architecture as buildings and spaces that are famous and known to the general public, but which also have a significant symbolic/aesthetic meaning attached to them (Sklair, 2005): 485). Alexander endorses the same point when he notes that 'iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value' (Alexander, 2008): 782). Indeed, turning a building into an icon, has always involved more than just design quality or a well known signature: it has always involved complex social, cultural and economic practices that would confer agency upon the building, and convert it into a powerful signifier of a social order. The embeddedness of a building or an art object to cultural social practices is arguably more significant than its design for granting it iconic status. Referring to art objects, (Benjamin, 1936 (1999)) attributes the specific status, the *aura* that certain art objects possess not directly to the quality of the object itself, but rather to the conditions of its production, its relation to cultural values, its line of ownership, and the structures of power that produce and maintain its exclusive character. This is true of architecture too. Even in ancient Egypt, where the value of architecture was taken for granted and so much inscribed into cultural practices and institutions that the architect was considered to be second only to the Pharaoh in social order, still, the iconic character of buildings was never considered god given, or subject to good design alone (Meskell, 2005). It was a complex set of rituals and socio-cultural practices that were enacted in/upon these buildings, that brought them squarely into everyday experience, imbued them with meaning, and conferred upon them the status of the 'icon'. The burial rituals performed inside the Egyptian Pyramids, the ritual offerings to Athena performed inside the Parthenon, the coronation of royalty inside St Paul's cathedral, are all social economic and cultural practices that conferred social meaning and iconic status to these architectural objects. Contemporary buildings that now hold an indisputable 'iconic' status, also gained this status only after becoming ritualised in everyday urban practices. The Eiffel Tower and the Pompidou centre, were both much hated originally by the Parisian public, but became ritualized as part of the Parisian landscape and part of the Parisian public imagination through decades of systematic and persistent association with key cultural and public events. Similarly, for early corporate buildings, it was the role they played in urban public life and in narrating the myth of producing a better urban society that became central in turning them into icons. It was less by design, and more through ritual that these buildings gained their iconic status; through systematic public events (public art display and performances) in the Rockefeller centre, through cinematic representations of the Empire state building as the apex of the world, through media and art references to the World Trade Centre as the epitome of the economic and social reign of the United States. Those early corporate icons became so embedded in the public imaginary, that they provided the inspiration for A.C. Gilbert's famous *Erector Set*, a mechano type toy that allowed a whole generation of American children to replicate skyscraper models at home (1912), thus appropriating the icons for the everyday.

If the architectural icon is not just an object designed and constructed to stand out visually, but also one that engages with the city that surrounds it, enhances its public space, participates in its rituals, inspires civic pride, and escapes ephemerality, then contemporary corporate architectural commissions cannot belong to this category. Unlike the corporate icons of the early 20th century, which were commissioned at best, to last forever, or at worst to become ruins that would ‘dominate the future continuously’ (Speer, 1970), contemporary corporate buildings are commissioned with their death incorporated in the design process from the beginning. Designed with an eye towards quick ruination, contemporary corporate buildings are, in fact, *not allowed* to escape the fate that awaits every object under capitalist production. Despite the fact that many contemporary corporate commissions are hailed as ‘iconic’ even before they are erected, their status is in fact closer to what (Baudrillard, 1996) terms ‘serial objects’, i.e. mass produced objects that are designed *not* to last, objects over which ‘production [emerges] as an all-surpassing agency with the power not merely of life but also of death’ (Baudrillard (1996: 158).

Closer to serial objects than to ‘icons’, contemporary architectural commissions undergo a process similar to the one objects of art underwent after industrialisation. In his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, (Benjamin, 1936 (1999)) notes that before industrialisation works of art possessed a certain *aura*, i.e. an air of uniqueness and mystique that induced a feeling of awe and admiration to the viewer. In the modern era, however, according to Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of art led to the loss of *aura*, and the viewer comes face to face with objects stripped from the powerful social and cultural rituals that in the past determined their unique character and their public interpretation as special. As noted earlier, today’s corporate commissions have also entered the domain of ‘mechanically reproduced’ objects. In a way, this hails the realisation of a modernist dream, the moment when architecture reaches the level of mass production that Le Corbusier and other modernist gurus advocated, the moment when architectural objects become the perfect machines for living and working in: quickly produced, flexible, and, like all mass produced objects, disposable. However, as with mechanically reproduced art objects, mechanically reproduced architectural objects also lose their *auratic distance* from the viewer, a distance that, according to Benjamin is central for maintaining the ‘iconic’ status of objects, for enhancing their kudos and fetish character, but also their exchange value.

Interestingly, the more architectural production moves further away from the notion of the ‘icon’, the more effort is put by contemporary architectural patronage into elevating mass produced architectural objects into ritualised global landmarks, into ‘icons’. Indeed, rarely has the desire and effort to elevate particular buildings to the status of ‘icons’ been as strong and as well orchestrated at a global scale as it is today. Commissioning ‘star’ architects to design these buildings is only one of many ways of trying to sublimate their serial character. In what follows, I shall identify the process through which contemporary ephemeral serial objects become elevated to the status of the ‘icon’, or, as Pardo puts it, the process through which ‘marks of ignominy’ are turned into ‘signs of distinction’ ((Pardo, 2006).

6. Turning the ephemeral into the sublime: The need for phantasmic seduction.

As noted above, the great monuments of humankind have acquired their iconic status through a time consuming process of ritualisation into everyday life. By contrast, many contemporary corporate buildings are hailed as ‘iconic’ even before they are erected, and despite the fact that when erected, they are hardly embedded in cultural practices or public rituals, but operate instead as secluded autistic spaces. I shall argue that, unlike the icons of the past, conferring agency upon today’s private ephemeral architectural objects relies on a well orchestrated ‘phantasmic seduction’ (Žižek, 1989: 1). This phantasmic seduction imposes levels of abstract ritualisation of architectural objects in which public authorities, architectural critics, the mass media, developers and architects, rather than the general public, participate. This phantasmic

seduction endeavours to compensate for the loss of *aura* of contemporary architecture, and aims to re-institute the *auratic* distance between the object (of architecture) and the general public/viewer. Below, I identify five levels of abstraction through which this phantasmic seduction is enacted.

Media rhetoric and representational practices: Architecture as Religious experience. Media rhetoric and representational practices have become central performative moments in conferring agency upon contemporary buildings. Through enigmatic articles and star architectural critics' orations, the public is asked to do with architecture today what Pascal suggested to do with religion: 'even if you do not believe, kneel down, act *as if* you believed, and belief will come upon you' (cited in Žižek, 1989: 6). Even if the next skyscraper to be erected in London's skyline does not relate to anything that Londoners can identify with, London's public is nevertheless bombarded by so many expert opinions on its significance, sublime design, and aesthetic value, that when it is finally erected, all that's left to do is 'kneel down' and admire it, hoping that a subsequent ritualization of the building into the city's everyday life might justify this belief. During the public enquiry over the yet-to-be-erected London Tower (nicknamed the *Walkie Talkie*) Francis Golding from Land Securities exemplified this attitude when he prophesized that: '[the] *Walkie Talkie* Tower [will] become as iconic a part of London's skyline as the Swiss Re *Gherkin*. ... [L]ike 30 St Mary Axe, the Rafael Viñoly-designed tower [will] become a loved symbol of London' (Clift, 2007). Hardly even known, let alone loved by Londoners, the *Walkie Talkie* is here depicted as iconic before it is granted planning permission. Its public defender prompts London's public authorities to trust the celebrity status of the architect, and the greatness of his controversial design. The same happened with the Swiss-Re, the first of London's new commissions to be erected, which was also hailed as 'iconic' right from the design phase. The same spirit of make believe iconized the yet-to-be erected *Shard of Glass* and its architect, Renzo Piano in newspapers, glossy magazines, and architectural review articles. *The Independent* noted:

something ... significant [is] simmering north of the Thames, right in the heart of the City; something that transcends iconic architectural statements, and is poised to deliver a key step-change in vertical city planning. We're talking size, and we're talking clumps. The *Shard*, designed by the brilliant Renzo Piano, may prove to be a building of the highest quality and drama

(Merrick, 2004: 12).

Another unbuilt project, the Minerva Tower, received equal praise: 'Minerva PLC's major redevelopment, ... will feature an elegant tower concocted by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, and there's no doubt that this will be a landmark building.' (Merrick, 2004). In short, more often than not, size and glitz are presented as guarantors for a building's 'iconic' status: 'glamour is one of the main drivers. On a big site you can create an iconic identity that can add to the image of the whole site - and indeed the whole city.' (McGhie, 2005: 15). 'In all the major cities around the world, buildings are being built higher and are becoming more iconic'. ('Why architects are reaching for the sky', 2006: 10).

Nick-naming buildings: Toy-Architecture and Curious Objects. A metonymic symbolic process of nick-naming buildings also contributes towards enacting an objectification and ritualization of contemporary corporate architecture without the participation of the city's public. Nick-naming has been a public response to much loved and much hated buildings in the past. However, what is new and important for the argument in this article, is that today's corporate skyscrapers are nick-named not by the city's public, but by developers themselves, not *after* but *before* they are erected. London pioneered a frenzy of nick-naming yet-to-be-erected buildings in the 1990s and 2000s, with names 'invented' by developers or planners as part of the buildings' marketing strategy and as part of the efforts to win the public's approval by endearing them (Peter Wynne Rees, The City Planning Officer for the City of London,

Personal Interview). The Swiss-Re building at 30 St. Mary's Axe in London (planning permission by special decree 2000 - completed 2003), was nick-named the *Erotic Gherkin of London* long before it appeared in the city's skyline.

The estate agents, who have their amour-propre, would much rather we referred to it as 30 St Mary Axe in itself a strange enough name. The owners, a reinsurance company called Swiss Re, would with reason like it to be known as the Swiss Re Building. But no sooner was its lovable curving profile exposed beneath the scaffolding than Lord Foster's 590ft skyscraper in the City of London became *the Gherkin*. *The Gherkin* it remains, and it is as *the Gherkin* that Londoners have taken it to their hearts.

(Popham, 2005: 28).

Leadenhall Tower (construction started 2008, originally due for completion 2012, put on hold 2008) was given the endearing name of London's *Cheese Grater*, while Minerva Tower at 20 Fenchurch street (construction started 2008, due for completion 2010), is nick-named the *Walkie Talkie* before it reached ground zero of construction. Bishopsgate Tower (due for completion 2012), changed nicknames each time it changed ownership prior to its development (*The Helter Skelter*, *The Pinnacle*). Nick-naming buildings promotes them as toy-like, curious urban objects that could trigger affect from the part of the urban public. London's public may not be able to relate the Swiss-Re building or the Minerva Tower to something in their everyday urban experience, but *London's Erotic Gherkin*, or the *Walkie Talkie* appeal more directly to the imagination.

The objectification and ritualization of non-existing buildings through language and rhetoric is complemented by the production of photorealistic media images. These projections of non-existing buildings into the city's skyline, produced by specialised architectural firms, represent buildings as if they were already fully embedded in the urban landscape. These images become a key part in the developers' marketing strategy, and a key part of the phantasmic seduction that tries to ritualise non-built architecture. The significance of these images in asserting a commission's legitimacy over urban space is such that the production of photorealistic images of buildings has developed into a full blown specialisation in architecture over the last 10 years, a specialisation whose aim is not so much to assist architects with the design process, but more to assist developers and planning authorities to 'sell' the building to the general public. In a personal interview, John Hare, the co-founder of one of the most successful practices in London, noted that:

[when we set up this practice], we thought that what we were doing was to provide some specialist advise to architects and that we would be in effect a consultancy not only on visualisation, but also on several aspects of architecture ... [but] ... 10 years ago we came to realise that what we were doing meant that we would collaborate less directly with architects and more with developers and occasionally local authorities (Interview, John Hare).

Hollywood Architecture: The architect as a media persona. The phantasmic seduction that tries to ritualize contemporary corporate buildings also recruits the persona of the architect her/himself. Architects are under pressure to match their design skills with public relations skills and public rhetoric that fuels the phantasy that will imbue their buildings with social meaning. They become media personas appearing in airbrushed photographs and interviews that sustain and accentuate their 'star' status. Within this context, Rem Koolhaas is depicted as 'tall and gaunt as a saint in an altarpiece, [with] a taste for edifying pain' (Wired, 2000). Similar religious and star connotations ring when Zaha Hadid is described as 'the first architect to be so blessed since Mies' with 'so distinctive a name [that it] might just grant

[her] entry to the glitzy cadre of the monomial: Elvis, Arletty, Sting.' (Meades, 2008):65). The press reserves equally revering adjectives for Norman Foster who

flies his own plane to meetings on the continent, spends a month each year at his St Moritz bolt-hole training for the annual Engadin Valley cross-country skiing marathon, and lives in a glazed riverside penthouse above his practice's Battersea offices (in a building he designed himself)

(Cargill Thompson, 2005).

Rem Koolhaas promotes his own myth further, by drawing the genealogy of iconic buildings across the centuries, with his own design for the China Central Television building (CCTV) featuring next to the Pyramids, to Paris' Notre Dame, and to the Eiffel Tower. By placing his own yet-to-be-built edifice on a par with the great monuments of world architecture, Koolhaas is of course doing what he does best: he is being ironic. However, at the same time, he is consciously amplifying his own myth. This is not simply an ironic statement by a star architect; it is an attempt to build kudos and secure a place in history within a climate of cut-throat international competition over architectural commissions. It is no coincidence that Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Libeskind, two amongst a handful of contemporary international star architects, started their career as journalists, and only came to practice architecture after they gained international recognition in the press and the media.

This glamorization of architects, and their elevation to star status, comes hand in glove with an unprecedented number of disputes and litigations over architectural design and copyright. Whilst architects lose the role of the creative genius in the production process of their buildings, embarrassing disputes over design ownership proliferate. The litigations between Norman Foster and his now estranged ex-partner Ken Shuttleworth over the 'true' ownership of the Swiss-Re design is well documented (Popham, 2005); (Iredale, 2004), as is Rem Koolhaas' long and bitter legal battle against his own student over design ownership (Yaneva, 2005).

Marketing architecture: Exchange value as phantasmic seduction. A fourth, and perhaps most effective, ritual employed in the process of 'iconizing' buildings, is the public announcement of the price the building can fetch as a commodity in the global market. For works of art, elevation to mythic status by virtue of announcing their market value has been common practice for a number of years now. When, in 1987, Van Gogh's *Irises* was auctioned at London's Sotheby's to Alan Bond, an Australian investor, for a then world arts market record price of \$49 million (, 1987), the figure that paraded in the global media contributed to inflating further the masterpiece's exchange value. In a very similar manner, Damien Hirst's *Diamond encrusted human skull* made a world media splash when it was sold in 2007 to an investment group for circa 50 million GBP (Kennedy, 2008: np). However, there is a catch in both of these cases of record price arts sales. In the case of Alan Bond, he was able to purchase Van Gogh's *Irises* at this price only with the assistance of Sotheby's themselves, who offered half the money for the purchase in the form of a loan; in the case of Hirst's *Diamond skull*, the 'group of investors' who purchased the artwork included the artist's own company. In general, over the last decades, developing strategies for creating fictitious value for artworks has run in parallel with elevating these artworks into a mythical status. But for architectural objects, their parading in the media by virtue of their exchange value in a globalised real estate market is a relatively recent phenomenon. London's Swiss-Re building became a prominent part of the imaginary of Londoners when it received mass media attention immediately after it was sold, soon after its completion, for a profit of 200 million US dollars (Glancey, 2007). Similarly, the attention that Dubai's or Kuala Lumpur's skyscrapers received recently was fueled not by virtue of design alone, but mainly by the

speculative practices involved in their construction and by the unattainable asking prices. As Walter Benjamin asserts, a commodity's unattainable exchange value has a perverse effect of rendering it into fetish and a wish image (Buck-Morss, 1995). The more the market value of contemporary corporate buildings increases, the more their fetish status increases, and the stronger they become inscribed in the public imagery as 'iconic'.

Creating an air of forced exclusiveness. As noted earlier, early 20th century corporate buildings appropriated the language of public space to create ritualised private spaces (Twombly, 1996). By contrast, their contemporary counterparts appropriate the language of the fortress instead, and assert their kudos by projecting an air of mystique and 'enigma' (Jencks, 2004), by promoting a self-image of a fetishised unreachable object of desire that cannot and should not be touched by the general public or civic society. Indeed, most contemporary corporate commissions have their interiors carefully sealed off from public gaze, and nobody –unless on business- is allowed to access their lobbies. Although this is often performed in the name of security (Coaffee, 2003, 2009; Graham 2004), this practice is also central in creating an air of exclusiveness and privilege for everyone who is granted access to these buildings.

I think that line, the line between [corporate] cultures [and the city] is being played out. ... [T]he corporate part ... is encroaching on [the city] whereas this area was more creative, less commercialised ... this building is ... causing a lot of tension [in its vicinity] ... I know because this is where I live.

(Interview, Louise, City worker and resident)

There's a restaurant in it, but I couldn't afford the prices and apart from that it's just offices, so I would have no reason to go there and have a look around

(Interview, David, City worker)

The 'autism' of the buildings' interior spaces is extended to the urban space that surrounds them. Although in the case of London at least, many of these buildings were granted planning permission under the condition that they would provide public space, when these 'public' spaces are materialised, they are in fact privatised, inaccessible, or unwelcoming to the general public. Even photography is forbidden in the immediate vicinity of the buildings, allegedly in the name of breaching architectural copyright! (Hasslehoff, 2005). Out of 100 city residents and workers who were interviewed for the purposes of this research 64 identified 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin) as an icon in London's skyline (highest number of entries) (FIGURE 3). However, very few could actually locate the building on a map, and only two had accessed the building itself, or the open space in the building's immediate vicinity (FIGURES 4a, 4b and 4c).

as a picture of, a sort of photogenic picture of the skyline, ... [as something that] wasn't there before and now it is, yeah, that's put it into my memory ... but I wouldn't say that I know it, I still couldn't name the specific streets that it's on or anything like that

(Interview, Andrew, London resident)

No I haven't [been inside the Gherkin], I've been passed it but I've never been near to it. ... [T]here's nothing there, there's no reason for me to go, I mean it's a landmark, but, it's a landmark that you can look at from a distance, there's no, I mean

(Interview, David, City worker)

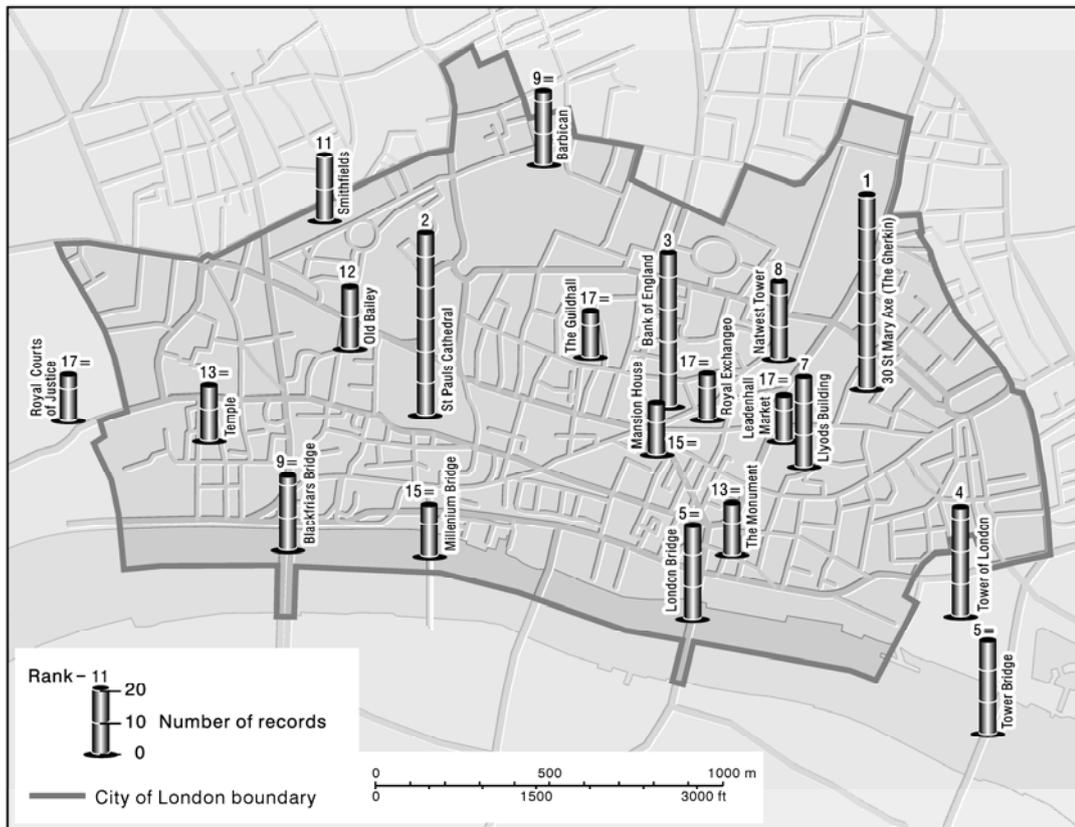
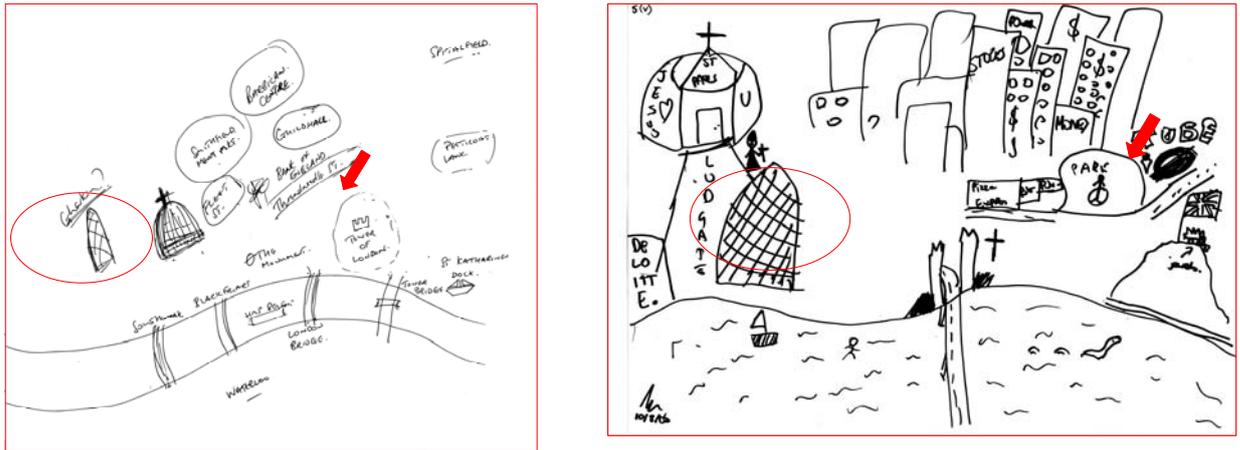


Figure 3

Identifying icons on the skyline: 30 St Mary Axe (the *Gherkin*) received the highest number of entries (64) as an icon in London’s City, dwarfing traditional buildings such as St Paul’s cathedral (59 entries) or the Bank of England (49 entries).

Source: *Compiled from fieldwork material of 100 cognitive mapping exercises and interviews with London residents and City workers. Copyright: the author*



Figures 4a & 4b

Inability to locate icons in the city's streetscape: Examples of interviewees who would identify 30 St Mary Axe as an 'icon' on London's skyline but were nevertheless unable to locate its correct place on a map. The assumed position on the map, as this was drawn by the interviewees is highlighted with an ellipse. The arrow indicates in approximation, the correct position of the building in relation to other buildings identified on the same map.

Source: *Fieldwork material: cognitive mapping exercise and interviews with London residents and City workers. Copyright; the author.*

30 St Mary Axe, in particular, was given planning permission also under the condition that it would open to the public for at least one day a year. The queues outside the Swiss-Re on heritage day (the only day of the year that the general public of London is granted access to the building) have an immediate sensationalizing effect and receive considerable media attention. The practice of generating fictitious demand to see the building by granting access to it for one day a year only, is reminiscent of the marketing strategies that some retailers often adopt: they control entrance (often by locking doors) and allow only a few customers at any given time to access the shop, thus producing unnecessary queues outside shops. The queues operate as an effective signifier at the street level that something special is happening inside. After the long wait, the customer feels compelled to feel privileged for being granted entrance, but cannot help registering that s/he finds him/herself inside a most banal space, browsing banal commodities. Similarly, upon entering the Swiss-Re building, the pang of disappointment for the blunt, surgically clean interior spaces, shares nothing in common with the delight of the senses upon entering the Rockefeller, the Empire State, or the Chanin buildings.

The urban public finds it difficult to attach any meaning to contemporary corporate icons, that related to anything other than their form of with how they dominate the urban skyline.

There's something about the Gherkin ... it's sort of more, it's not as angular, it's not as aggressive, it's a lot more sort of rounded and just, it looks like a round version of a regular tower block if you know what I mean

(Interview, John, London resident).

Lacking place loyalty or a ritualized embeddedness in urban social life, and sealed off from public access, the contemporary corporate 'icons' remain empty signifiers, open to symbolic over-determination. For example, in her imaginative illustrations for Jencks' book *Iconic Building: the power of Enigma* (Jencks, 2004), Madelon Vriesendorp attaches a playful and ironic multiplicity of meanings to Amanda Levete and Jan Kaplicky's Selfridges at

Birmingham, which becomes a tongue, a dress, breasts, a monster or the inside of a whale! In Vriesendorp's playful metaphors, Foster's Swiss-Re building, is depicted as brain, phallus, screw, bullet, rocket, or gherkin.

Charles Jencks (2004) performs his own search for a meaning in contemporary 'icons' and locates it in the cosmic, the supernatural order. Architects today, he asserts, in their effort to reconcile often opposing demands, resort to the 'power of enigma', i.e. they produce 'enigmatic' signifiers that suggest many meanings, without committing to any of them. To Jencks, the contemporary global icon has a 'more difficult task to perform than the traditional monument: in need of instant fame, it has to be both provocative and practical, an amazing piece of sculpture that can speak to diverse audiences across the world' (Jencks 2004: cover). According to Jencks, these buildings have a difficult task to perform as their reach and ambition goes beyond the *petit* locales of London, Bilbao, New York, Paris, Kuala Lumpur, or Dubai.

Jencks', however, is a generous reading that makes a virtue out of the ways in which contemporary architecture relates to an internationalised scene of circulation of money and power, and out of the buildings' lack of place specificity or loyalty. It is an aesthetic reading that fails to engage with the social and economic processes that produce today's global 'icons'. His direct comparison of the alleged enigmatic power of contemporary 'icons' with that of the ancient pyramids is a gesture and explication that takes architecture out of its historical, social and geographical context. As we have seen, any enigmatic power that the pyramids may exert to us today is mainly due to the fact that we are not (and cannot) be fully familiar with the rituals that made them part of the everyday life of ancient civilizations (Meskell, 2005). However, any 'enigmatic power' that contemporary architecture may exert on us is that of the discomfited existence of fetishised objects that are called upon to constitute the language for a society in search of a new identity, for corporations and cities in need of rebranding. The repetition of 'successful' forms in different social and geographical contexts²⁴ produces an 'oversymbolism of meaning', which is combined with an overdetermination of symbols, i.e. a process where one single signifier can be attached to a signified multiplicity. Cornelius Castoriadis (1977) identified the co-existence of these two phenomena as symptomatic of a crisis in the social imagery of a society and a corrosion of the institutions and elites that hold this society together. The overproduction of 'iconic' architecture today is a way of providing an architectonic 'fix' to the need to institute a new social imaginary for a new economic and social configuration.

6. Conclusion: Beyond the Architectonic 'Fix', or, the changing social role of architecture.

The article argued that the changing ethnography of urban patronage, and the new relationship between private capital and architecture that emerged after the 1970s can account for the banalisation of early 20th century landmarks and the proliferation of a new generation of 'iconic' architecture. In the hands of early 20th century urban tycoons money became a 'fertiliser'²⁵ that created the symbolic representations of the fordist deal and of the modernist myth for social emancipation through technological innovation. It was this same myth that elevated architecture and planning into social engineering, promoted what (Tafuri, 1999 (1973)) termed the 'central illusion of architectural ideology' and assigned architecture a central role in the production of a better future society. It was precisely this relationship between capital and architecture and the myth of potential social emancipation that it signified, that the new urban economy found unpalatable. If place loyalty used to be the driver of urban change and renewal in early 20th century, with urban tycoons funding monuments to their life and their city, today, it is the evasion of place loyalty (Sennett 2001; Sklair 2001)

alongside urban managerial practices (Harvey, 1989); (Brenner, 1998; Brenner et al., 2002) that fuels architectural production and urban renewal. Contemporary footloose corporate elites constitute the perfect neoliberal citizen: not involved in urban life by virtue of not being place bound, indifferent to the politics of place, defined only by their positionality in a global labour market, reluctant to be part of local civil society.

The new generation of urban elites either avoids commissioning architectural projects altogether, or commissions projects that are part of practices of aggressive urban renewal. Contemporary, so called 'iconic', architecture produces an immediate startling effect that is often over soon after the building is completed. And whilst the guise of architecture as 'social' art is peeled away, architecture is stripped down to its bare essence, i.e. that of an object and a driver for real estate speculation. From Milan's recent conversions to the historical Bicocca, to the City of London's changing skyline, to Dubai's and Kuala Lumpur's transmuted landscapes, contemporary architectural production and patronage seem to be disinterested to engage in efforts 'to restore meaning or synthesis' to cities (Tafuri, 1999 (1973)): 123). As Tafuri put it (Tafuri, 1999 (1973)) 'having accepted its elements as 'pure signs', architecture abandoned any attempt to reclaim, recommend or re-impose meaning.' Stripped from ideological capes, but with an increased emphasis on the spectacular, architecture today constitutes the perfect object for capital accumulation. Operating under capitalism's most cynical phase, this type of architecture produces self-referential monosemantic *Autistic* products.

Of course, the commodification of architecture is not a new phenomenon. As Hannah Arendt noted, culture in all its forms has always been treated like a commodity by bourgeois societies (Arendt, 1961), and, as we noted earlier, architecture has always projected the dreams and visions of the elites of the societies within which it operates (Klingmann, 1998-99). Within this context, the 'sobering up' of architecture noted above, the new 'pragmatism' that admits that architecture cannot operate outside and beyond the logic of capital accumulation, should perhaps be celebrated as the most 'honest' phase in architectural production under capitalism, the same way that Damian Hirst's £50m diamond-clad skull constitutes perhaps the most sincere art object ever constructed for a capitalist art market. But, like the diamonds glittering over death in Hirst's skull, the impressive design of contemporary architecture can be seen as the aesthetic replacement of a lost collective myth, an attempt to infuse thaumaturgy in an era that has forgotten how to dream about alternatives. Maybe this is the only honest response an artist can give to a system that makes or breaks him, but which s/he nevertheless needs to survive. If we were to be generous with this new aesthetic, we could agree with Žižek that it is a 'desperate attempt to infuse pre-modern enchantment into the process of modernization' (Žižek, 1989): 132. However, architecture's new 'pragmatism' comes at a great cost. Although the end of the architect as a social engineer and as the urban master minder with unchecked creativity may indicate a shift towards the 'democratization of the genius' (Bell, 1976), the same moment when not even artists can dream of alternatives, also signals the end of alternative visions. Seen in this light, it is difficult to distinguish contemporary architectural pragmatism from a deeply seated cynicism, and from the rise of a spineless architecture, increasingly eager to please its clients and the media. Today, both architectural critics and architects shelter in the concept of architecture as 'pure art', an art that dwells outside society and outside the logic of capital accumulation, a 'cosmic' art that refers to something 'bigger' than human societies, while at the same time pays homage to the mantras of 'flexible space' and 'corporate values'. As McKeith eloquently puts it, turning the concept of the flexible corporation and the flexible city on its head, today's corporations are actually not flexible, but rather 'dissolving, and in the process become the 'dissolving agents' of our cities' (MacKeith, 2005): 44.

However, even if there is no desire to fashion alternative consciousness any more (Bell, 1976: 16), it is important to remember that F L Wright's aphorism that whilst a physician can bury his mistakes the architect can only advise his clients to plant vines, still holds true. Huxtable

amplifies this point by noting that ‘when architects put themselves into the same category as art personalities and ignore every way that their art touches the world, it’s not socially responsible. It has a bad physical effect’. (Ada Louise Huxtable, cited in (Lopate, 2006). McNeill amplifies this point when he notes that ‘buildings remain fixed within local regulatory systems, financial cycles, aesthetic discourses and histories, and political decision-making processes’ (2005b: 502). As Jean Nouvel puts it ‘every new situation requires a new architecture’ (Nouvel 2005, np). But, if indeed, any change, nay, history itself, is inconceivable without a productive imaginary, without what Castoriadis terms the *radical imaginary* (Castoriadis, 1987 (1975): 146), and if architecture plays a central role in the production of such a radical imaginary for every new era, then, a time whose radical imaginary is stalled in the production of ephemeral autistic architectural statements begs the question of whether is there any scope in salvaging architecture as the art that can give material form to the dreams of the future, as the most eloquent spatial expression of the perpetual quest to ‘sweep away all fixed, fast, frozen relations’ (Marx, 1935): 210)?

¹ Completed in 1959

²² See, for example, the [Turun Sanomat Building](#) in Turku, Finland, headquarters to the homonymous newspaper, founded as the mouthpiece for the liberal [Young Finnish Party](#) (designed by A Aalto 1927-1929); Aarhus Town Hall, (designed by A Jacobsen 1937); Centennial Hall, Breslau, Poland, (designed by M Berg 1912); Exhibition Hall in Turin (designed by P L Nervi 1949); Finnish Pavillion at Paris, France (designed by [A Aalto](#), 1935-1937); [Helsingborg Concert Hall](#) at Helsingborg, Sweden, (designed by S Markelius 1932).; [Karl Marx Hof](#), at Vienna, Austria (designed by K [Ehn](#) 1930); [National Pensions Building](#), at Helsinki, Finland (designed by A Aalto 1952); [Police Headquarters](#) at Copenhagen, Denmark (designed by H [Kampmann](#), 1918 –1924); [Stockholm Library](#) at Stockholm, Sweden (designed by E G [Asplund](#) 1918 -1927).

³ Italy was early to import American industrial practices in Europe. The Pirelli building, engraving the power of the Pirelli family into the Milanese skyline constitutes one of the few early privately funded landmark buildings in Europe, immitating the american tycoons. Pirelli’s son’s visit in the US was crucial in importing fordism, industrial paternalism, and american corporate culture to Italy through the Pirelli family’s enterprises. Similarly, Fiat’s Lingotto factory in Turin, built by Giacomo Mattè Trucco and finished in 1923, pioneered a vertical arrangement in industrial Taylorism.

⁴ Designed by Sloan and Robertson, 1929, as an tribute to the life of Irwin S Chanin, New York developer and entertainment tycoon

⁵ Designed by Harrison and Hood, 1939

⁶ Designed by Van der Rohe and Johnson, 1958, headquarters to Canadian distillers Joseph E Seagram & Sons

⁷ Designed by Cass and Guilbert, 1913

⁸ Designed by architect: Severance, Matsui, and Shreve & Lamb, 1930

⁹ Designed by Vincent G. Kling & Associates

¹⁰ Commissioned 2000-2004 Norman Foster

¹¹ Commissioned 2001-03 Amanda Levete and Jan Kaplicky (Future Systems) Architects

¹² Commissioned 2007 to Coop Himmelb(l)au

¹³ Commissioned 2002 to Rem Koolhaas

¹⁴ Completed 1998. Designed by [César Pelli](#) and [Djay Cerico](#)

¹⁵ Commissioned 2007, OMA and Porsche Design Studios

¹⁶ Scheduled for completion 2010. Benoi architects

¹⁷ For this reason, in the article I use ‘iconic’ in inverted commas when referring to contemporary corporate commissions.

¹⁸ *Autism n.* in *A Dictionary of Psychology in Politics & Social Sciences*

¹⁹ When the son of Pirelli, one of Italy's most prominent industrialists visited the US, he brought back to Italy the spirit of fordism and industrial paternalism, but also the american corporate attitude towards architecture. Subsequently, Pirelli commissioned a number of corporate buildings, notably the iconic Pirelli Tower in Milan (1950, designed by The [Gio Ponti](#), with the assistance of [Pier Luigi Nervi](#) and [Arturo Danusso](#)), one of the few early corporate skyscrapers in Europe.

²⁰ Designed by Vincent G. Kling & Associates

²¹ *autism n.* in *A Dictionary of Psychology in Politics & Social Sciences*; Online etymology dictionary <http://www.etymonline.com>)

²² During the inauguration, Mrs. Wright's statement amplified her husband's status as an uncompromising artist, by expressing doubt that Wright would ever have shown up, if he had been alive. 'He was too great an artist,' she stated firmly, 'to forgive the slightest transgression in a creative work.' 'Last Monument' 1959, *Time Magazine*.

²³ It has to be noted that the repetition of similar architectural forms across the world by the same or different architects is not a new phenomenon. It was pioneered by modernist gurus, F L Wright and Le Corbusier amongst them. However, the commitment of modernist design to cheap mass productions, is quite different to the claim for uniqueness to be found in each one of the contemporary forms. Le Corbusier's Unites d'Habitation were *designed* to be cheap, mass produced, and ephemeral, and were promoted by their architect as such. By contrast, the Swiss-Re, the Foundation Louis Vuitton, etc. are promoted as unique, and as exquisite 'icons'.

²⁴ Similarly, the Swiss-Re form is replicated in Barcelona in the form of the Torre Agbar (designed by Jean Nouvel)²⁴, in Chicago with the Chicago Spire (designed by Santiago Calatrava), etc.

²⁵ This is the way Ayn Rand puts it, in the Fountainhead, exaggerating the 'love affair' between private capital and architecture in the early 20th century.

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