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Starchitects, Emblematic Buildings and their Effects on Urban Economics

Introducing Starchitecture

As evolution spirals into new horizons and more regions and cities want to affirm their role within the global economic, cultural and art environment, city architecture follows a similar spiralling evolution. National and regional governments are motivated to refresh their city skylines by attracting internationally renowned and distinctive architects.[1] Only these "built environment professionals" are capable of producing a new image of the city or area that reaches the heights of a music or movie production.[2]

Examples of such buildings that portray a distinct image include the headquarters of Swiss Re ("the Gherkin"), London, the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao and the Imperial War Museum, Manchester to name just a few. They were designed by Lord Norman Foster, Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind, respectively. All of them are called "starchitects" for having designed emblematic 21st century buildings. The mass media and wide penetration of the Internet foster recognition of the outstanding and break-through architectural designs which become truly emblematic buildings built by starchitects and are rewarded with "wow" status.

Despite the considerable attention the public pay to iconic buildings little is known about the impact of emblematic buildings on regional communities. This paper attempts to fill this gap and discusses the economic, socio-cultural, environmental, touristic and commercial impact of the emblematic buildings on regional economies. It claims that the overall impact generated by such buildings is higher than that made by conventional traditional structures of similar functionality.

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[1] Marshall, R., *Emerging Urbanity: Global Urban Projects in the Asia Pacific Rim*, (London, New York: Spon Press, 2000).

[2] King, A. D. "Architecture, Capital and the Globalization of Culture", Theory, Culture and Society 7, 1990, pp 397-411.

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The paper is organized as follows: first, we introduce the terms "emblematic building" and "starchitects", then we discuss the impact of emblematic buildings on local communities, concluding with a discussion of one case, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Emblematic Buildings

In the last few decades world architecture has witnessed the emergence of a new type of building, the "emblematic building". Such masterpieces as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the headquarters of Swiss Re in London (nick-named 'the Gherkin'), Beijing National Stadium (known as the "Bird's Nest") and others are shaping not only the global architectural landscape of today, but they are also becoming a powerful tool in re-defining (reinventing) the economic, cultural, environmental and social image of the cities and countries they are built in.

Table 1 provides an overview of geographical locations which contain such iconic monuments, showing that they are not evenly distributed but concentrated in a few cities, with London leading the list.

Table 1
Distribution, Density and Features of Emblematic Buildings in Selected Destinations

	Emblematic Buildings	"Starchitects" Buildings	Euromonitor's Ranking (number of tourists in millions)	GDP (in US$)	Airports
London	>200	>40	1 (15.34)	59,400	5
New York	115	13	6 (7.64)	61,000	2
Paris	84	16	5 (8.76)	46,000	3
Barcelona	51	10	11 (5.04)	31,800	1
Madrid	41	5	25 (3.40)	36,300	1
Dubai	271	5	8 (6.53)	n.a.	1
Oslo	19	0	142 (0.51)	54,064	1
Stockholm	15	0	86 (1.06)	60,700	3
Bilbao	10	4	204 (0.23)	30,050	1
Andorra	1	0	N.A. (2.2)	38,800	0

Source: http://www.e-architect.co.uk, and Euromonitor International's Top City Destinations Ranking.

The emblematic buildings, also referred to as "iconic buildings" or "signature buildings", are nothing else but the "jewels" of modern architecture. They become symbols of a city and even an entire country.[3] Such buildings are able to bring fame and prosperity to their nations, transforming a "Cinderella" city into a "princess".

Many emblematic buildings are simply different from others creating "the wow effect" by their impressive design. Human psychology is built in such a way that our reaction to

[3] When people think of Bilbao, the first thing that comes to mind is the Guggenheim Museum, while Sydney Opera House is often the image that appears in peoples' heads in association with Australia.

unusual striking shapes is emotional. People map these shapes with the images they know, and either worship or hate the result. At the same time, simply being unlike anything else does not make the building iconic.

Architect Charles Jencks defines these buildings as simply "better" than the others: they are "more interesting, cooler, more convincingly built, more ecological, more inventive, more optical... and more iconic... They suggest a historical opening to a new type of sign, a shift from the conventional monument to the unconventional landmark. This is the age of the enigmatic signifier."[4]

When did emblematic buildings emerge? Frank Gehry, author of the renowned Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, believes that the history of iconic buildings started in the 1970s in the USA, when Philip Johnson's AT&T Building appeared on the front page of *The New York Times,* which was a breakthrough for modern architecture. However, Jencks argues that the history of "modern icons" dates back to the Ronchamp Church and Unité d'Habitation by Le Corbusier, constructed in the early 1950s, which appeared on French stamps and in the media, bringing it "succès de scandale". Other examples of early iconic buildings are the Guggenheim Museum in New York by Frank Lloyd Wright (finished in 1959), TWA Terminal in New York's Kennedy Airport by Eero Saarinen (finished in 1962) and Sydney Opera House designed by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon (finished in 1973). More recent examples of iconic buildings are Swiss Re headquarters, London by Lord Norman Foster, the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, both by Frank Gehry and the Imperial War Museum in Manchester by Daniel Libeskind.

These examples demonstrate that there are no limits to the types of buildings that can be emblematic. Indeed, emblematic buildings range from office headquarters and museums to factories and corner stores. The reasons for the emergence of the emblematic buildings are both "commercial and spiritual". Key contributing factors to the rise in popularity of emblematic buildings are: decline of religious and historical iconographies; acceptance of modernism as a part of mass culture; rise of consumerism; decline of interest among the young to conservative traditions and desire of "freedom"; and modern technologies, such as personal computers. Iconic buildings, similar to many famous pieces of art, may receive appreciation a long time after they are built.[5]

Emergence of Starchitects

The term "starchitect", formed by merging the words "star" and "architect", refers to the group of highly ranked architects and design agencies that reached celebrity status among their peers and the general public and who are able to create iconic masterpieces. Starchitects occupy a privileged position within the group of architects, similarly to other industries such

[4] Jencks, C., *The Iconic Building: The Power of Enigma* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2005) p. 13.

[5] "After all the economic and political problems surrounding the Sydney Opera House (when the cost of the building appeared to be 10 times higher than originally estimated) its architect resigned in the 1970s. However, more than 20 years later, after his Sydney Opera House had become an icon of Australia seen from ships approaching the coast, the entire country had to publicly apologize to the architect." (Jencks, 2005).