

# Form follows power

## A genealogy of urban shrines

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*In this paper, Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen chart the historical development of ‘the secular shrine’—an assertion of state and corporate power that came to dominate the urban landscape from the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of the aesthetic features of this secular monumentalism can be identified in earlier sacred and classical architecture and served to legitimate its adaptation for secular purposes. With the exception of industrial architecture, it was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that the secular shrine as unadorned modernism finally emerged. The perceived failure of modernism to create live-able communities prompted a shift in emphasis towards a ‘picture postcard’ view of the city in which ‘signature buildings’ stand as new forbidden temples. Kaika and Thielen conclude that both the sacred and the profane continue to use the built form as an iconography of their respective wills to power.*

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From religious monuments to “cathedrals of technology”: the birth of the secular public shrine

Since the birth of cities, it has always been monuments dedicated to state or religious power that have dominated the urban skyline. From the Egyptian pyramids, a homage to the power of the Pharaohs, to the Athenian Parthenon, a monument to democracy, to Sienna’s Palazzo Publico, symbol of state authority and a stage for public life, monumental buildings represented authority, and functioned as focal points for public urban life and as urban landmarks. In mediaeval times, cathedrals and town halls were the most important landscape landmarks, and hosted an array of public activities, from coronations to weddings, and from political intrigues to religious festivals (Cosgrove, 1984). The sheer volume and height of these constructions made them prominently visible, while their visual

domination was further pronounced by the choice for their location—on a hill, in the centre of town, or in front of a public square that was often purpose built to host functions related to the building. Scale and location choice worked in synergy towards accentuating the symbolic character of these monuments, and cast in stone, quite literally, the power of authoritative institutions (Schorske, 1981; Zukin, 1991; Lefebvre, 1994 [1974]; Damisch, 2001). The buildings were committed to be standing proudly for as long as the authority that they represented remained in power.

However, with the shift to a modern, industrialized, secular society, state and church power, along with the power of landed aristocracy, gave way to the power of the emerging bourgeoisie. The belief in god was complemented or even replaced by the belief in money power and the power of technology. The state found a new role in supporting capitalist formation, industrialization and technological

innovation while securing social cohesion. As part of its new role, the bourgeois state quickly became the key manager of the rationalization of urban space and of urban sanitation projects, and the key provider of “collective means of consumption” (Castells, 1977). The aforementioned changes in the nature and constitution of authority and power were reflected in changes in the production of urban space and in what constitutes a monument and a public shrine. From the second half of the 19th century, cathedrals were built not to house god, but to house money, technology and innovation. From banks to factories, from pumping stations and water towers to gas works and train stations, a whole new array of secular shrines were created and dedicated to money flows, technological innovation, and industrial production. These new urban shrines, soon replaced churches and town halls as urban landmarks, and competed with them in a quest to dominate the urban skyline and the public imagination. These buildings became symbols of a new era of modernization and secularization, where the glorification of the power of capital and the promotion of industrialization would go hand in glove with the rationalization of urban space and urban life (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000).

The architectural language that was chosen for these cathedrals of money and technology was traditional, directly copied from monuments of the past. The gothic and neoclassical style of churches and town halls was now used to build banking institutions and train stations. From the Bank of England, to the Fairmount Waterworks in Philadelphia (early 19th century), to London’s Abbey Mills Pumping Station (mid-19th century) and Euston Station (early 19th century), the new secular shrines were as heavily adorned in neoclassical symbolism and ornament as cathedrals and town halls in the past. Although dedicated to innovation and modernization, these buildings borrowed the architectural language of the

past to invoke *grandeur* and to assert the power of the new authorities that produced them.

Moving into the 20th century, the use of new construction materials and techniques (notably the proliferation of steel frame constructions) did not have an immediate effect on the architectural language that was used for these new urban shrines. Battersea Power Station (1929–1939), designed by Sir Gilbert Scott (designer of the red telephone box), was constructed using cutting-edge technology. However, its steel frame construction (similar to that of the American skyscraper) was covered by brickwork hanging from the building’s external façade. The station’s interior was also highly decorated with stunning Art Deco ornament, while the building’s most characteristic feature, its four chimneys<sup>1</sup>, were also moulded in the form of Greek doric columns. Similarly, the Bankside Power Station (1947–1963, now hosting the Tate Modern), designed by the same architect, also used brickwork to cover its steel construction.

In general, adherence to traditionalism characterized the early urban shrines that were dedicated to the coupling of the power of money and industry with state power, or hosted state-funded and -managed projects of public sanitation and urban infrastructure. It was ironic that the innovations of an era otherwise committed to the future would originally be vested in the symbols of the past. The reasons behind the choice of a traditional architectural language for new functions related to state-funded technological innovation projects were threefold: firstly, because borrowing the language of a traditional style provided an easy design solution for building a new type of monumental non-religious building for a secular society; secondly, because invoking elements of the iconography of the past would make technological innovation and its new cathedrals more palatable and publicly acceptable (Vaxevanoglou, 1996; Kaika, 2005); and thirdly, because traditional styles, in particular the Greek Revival and the neoclassical

style, were considered to be more ‘noble’, as they had adorned churches and town halls in the past (Chant, 1989; Kaika, 2006). It was only towards the second half of the 20th century that the public secular shrines would resume a more innovative aesthetic form. For example, the boldly designed BT Tower (1961–1965, designed by Eric Bedford) was a decidedly modern construction and the tallest structure in the south-east of England at the time.

In this early period of state-funded urban innovation, it was only ephemeral state-funded constructions that dared to shed the symbols of the past and assert the bare aesthetics of new building materials. This is why many of the buildings that hosted International Exhibitions became unique urban landmarks. They marked the urban landscape for as long as the exhibition lasted, but were expected to fade away/be dismantled along with the end of the event. The spectacular constructions that hosted or became emblematic cases of International Exhibitions could afford to be bold precisely because they were ephemeral. Since they were built to accompany a momentary “urban pulsar” (Beriatos and Colman, 2003), their designers did not have to worry about complying with public “taste”. The Exhibitions themselves were dedicated to innovation, technology and internationalization of trade and to innovative urban experience. Therefore, International Exhibitions became ideal playgrounds for engineers and architects to assert the aesthetic beauty of new materials and new technology: the Eiffel Tower (1889) and the Crystal Palace (1851) owe their bold design to their then assumed ephemeral character. Indeed, it is well documented how the Parisian public hated the Eiffel Tower originally, precisely because its designer—an engineer—attempted a new design language, using the bare aesthetics of the construction materials. In short, apart from ephemeral constructions, little change occurred in the architectural “language”, that was used for the new urban monuments. This continued to be traditional.

It was only in the cases where private capital was decoupled from state power that more innovative design approaches were undertaken. Famously, the AEG High Tension factory in Berlin, designed by Peter Behrens in 1910, was the first Corporate Logo building to follow the modernist motto ‘form follows function’, while still following the time old motto “form follows power”. Behrens shed the traditional ornament and devised a new architectural language (Frampton, 1983, p. 152), that would correspond to the company’s forward-looking vision, thus producing one of the first privately commissioned secular shrines. However, like the early state- or church-funded monuments, the form of the innovative private shrines would also try to inscribe power into urban space.

### **The private secular shrine: building as homage to private capital**

From the first half of the 20th century onwards, western cities underwent important changes as they assumed their role in the newly configured international division of labour. Once again, these changes were reflected in the production of urban space. The expansion of the size and importance of the Central Business District (CBD) was one such significant change (Hall, 1996). The CBD had existed since the late 19th century. However, as corporations became larger, the CBD expanded accordingly and between 1920 and 1930 office space in the 10 largest American cities increased by 3000%, while by 1929, 56% of America’s national corporations had located their headquarters in New York City or Chicago (Tabb and Sawers, 1984; Hall, 1996).

For the first time we had private commissions for bold architectural statements that would be neither private houses nor public monuments, that would glorify neither god, nor state or clergy power, but the achievements of one single individual, or one single company. Buildings that would become

identified with corporations, and would work as a kind of logo for these corporations, gave for the first time the opportunity to architects to combine impressive design with innovative building practices in a construction that was neither public, nor ephemeral in character.

For the first time, the power of private capital consolidated its power in urban form to this extent and with such boldness. This was the end of the Dutch ethic of “the embarrassment of the riches” that characterized merchant and proto-industrial societies (Schama, 1987) and the assertion of conspicuous bourgeois consumption as an ideal in its own right. The new urban species that was born out of advanced capitalist development, the banking, manufacturing, shipping, construction or media tycoon, considered the city to be their stage and were keen to mark urban space as their own territory. Within this context, architecture itself became a product for conspicuous consumption, along with luxury garments, cars, jewellery, gadgets, etc. and the private secular shrine was born. Of course, early 20th-century tycoons were not the first powerful people in history to commission shrines. From the Maecenas of antiquity to the renaissance patrons of architecture, the rich and the powerful had always contributed to the monumentalization of urban space. However, although these early patrons glorified their name by commissioning cathedrals in the name of god, 20th-century tycoons no longer needed to invoke god as an excuse to glorify their name and to put their mark on urban space. Instead, they erected cathedrals in their very own name, which they had inscribed on to the buildings. The Chrysler Building, a homage to the construction industry tycoon Walter P. Chrysler, was built between 1926 and 1930, and claimed the title of the tallest building in the world (319.4 m). Similarly, New York’s Rockefeller Centre (1929–1940) was a homage to the empire of a powerful individual, while the Woolworth Building, also in New York (1913), marked the

empire of the powerful merchant Frank W. Woolworth.

Still, these homages to corporate power and individual achievement were originally as shy as the state-built technological cathedrals when it came to displaying innovative building techniques and baring new materials. The early US skyscrapers would hide their steel frame behind brick or stone. The Woolworth Building (1913, designed by Cass Gilbert), known also as the “Cathedral of Commerce”, adopted a neo-gothic style and was clad in terra cotta. The Singer Building, in New York City (1908, designed by Ernest Flagg), was veneered with brick in an attempt to make the corporate face of Singer more “friendly”. The architects of these early private shrines went out of their way to “familiarise the unfamiliar” (Meejin Yoon and Höweler, 2000) and make the new shrines publicly acceptable and hopefully loved.

It was much later that private shrines would start “stripping” from ornament and their form started to follow more closely their function. This modernist turn reached its epitome with the Seagram Building (1958, Mies Van Der Rohe with Philip Johnson). A whole array of trademark modernist buildings followed suit, competing over height and importance, and tried to dominate the urban skyline and the public imagination: New York’s John Hancock Center (1969, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) and World Trade Center (1972 and 1973, Minoru Yamasaki Associates), Chicago’s Sears Towers (1974, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill), Boston’s John Hancock Tower (1976, Henry Cobb of I. M. Pei & Partners), etc.

After the 1970s, commissions for private shrines moved away from the modernist aesthetic and tried hard to become venerable, not only through competing for height, but also through competing for innovative design features (Domosh, 1992). The Lloyds Building in London (1979–1984, Richard Rogers) is imposing through its innovative high-tech design, and although it does not claim the

highest point in London's skyline, it certainly claims a very high point in lay and expert imagination and approval. The Lipstick Building (1986, Johnson and Burgee) in New York screams for attention, and so does London's recently completed Swiss Re Tower—the "Gherkin" (2004, Foster and Partners), and Barcelona's Torre Agbar, the new headquarters of the city's water company (2002–2004, Jean Nouvel). These privately owned buildings openly compete with older public monuments, and consciously try to dominate the urban skyline and the public imagination. Swiss Re Tower is openly competing with St Paul's cathedral in height and significance, while Torre Agbar competes with Gaudí's Sagrada Família.

Many amongst this new generation of private shrines did not quite succeed in acquiring the desired venerable status, proving that shape and size alone are not enough to grant a building the status of an urban landmark. For despite the fact that these buildings dominate the urban skyline, their relation to public space is very different to that of older shrines. They stand like self-assured and self-sufficient fortresses, neither needing nor desiring to engage with public space. Despite making a loud public statement, they nevertheless look inwards and more often than not even try to "protect" themselves from the public realm, by blocking access to the public, or by making access excessively expensive (e.g. group access to Swiss Re Tower's top floor is charged in excess of £200). In Manhattan, where this type of building dominates, it is only thanks to an innovative New York City legislation, which allowed higher plot-ratios to buildings that would accommodate public space on their ground floor that public plazas exist on the ground floor of private buildings, allowing public access to what would otherwise be totally secluded and fortified private urban realm at the street level (Fainstein, 1994; Zukin, 1995).

Since private shrines were built as statements to the lasting power of private

empires, their maintenance and longevity would normally be guaranteed by the continuation of the dynasty or the corporation that produced them. However, while money empires rose and fell, many of these urban landmarks acquired a symbolic status and a special place in the public imagery. Many of them became cultural icons, a process often assisted by the rise of the power of the media and of Hollywood. The Empire State Building, for example, made its first appearance on screen in the 1933 film *King Kong*, and that was followed by an array of films including, more recently, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Independence Day*.

The rise of the private icon coincided also with the reinstatement of the architect's social role (see the articles by Donald McNeill, 2006, and Leslie Sklair, 2006, in this issue; also Sklair, 2001). Architects were glorified alongside the tycoons who commissioned them. Some of them became global socialites and experienced a status similar to that of the renaissance architect, or the Egyptian architect that was second only to the Pharaoh himself in social status. Along with the birth of the urban icon came the birth of the pop-architect, the architect as fashion designer, who would compete over producing the louder and more conspicuous building statement to match equally loud patrons.

### **The collective performer: social housing projects as public shrines**

The role of the bourgeois state as a guarantor of social cohesion did not only entail funding and managing urban sanitation and infrastructure projects. When the living conditions of the working class deteriorated to the extent of jeopardizing industrial production and capital accumulation through strikes and social upheaval, the state would intervene to re-establish social cohesion. This intervention would sometimes take the form of the stick, by accentuating police and military intervention, but occasionally it would take

the form of the carrot, by launching social housing projects that would improve the living conditions of the working class. The question of social housing also attracted the interest of the architectural *avant-garde*. It became the central theme of the second CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne; held in Frankfurt in 1929), and the years before the Second World War witnessed a number of pioneering experimental social housing projects across Europe: in Holland, Michel de Klerk's five-storey blocks of flats at Spaarndammerplantsoen (1915–1916) became prototypes of modern living; in Rue du Cubisme, in the Koekelberg district of Brussels, Victor Bourgeois' group of houses (1922) pioneered flat roofs and large windows; in Vienna, the Karl Marxhof, a mini city for 6000 people, designed by Karl Ehn in 1927, became a flagship project for social housing.

However, it was not only the state that funded pioneering social housing projects. Acknowledging the importance of social cohesion many industrialists undertook themselves the building of social housing for their workers. As early as mid-19th century, the father of industrial paternalism, Sir Titus Salt, relocated his woollen mills outside crime-ridden Bradford, and created Saltaire, a town that housed both his new mills and his workers. Similar examples could be found across the western world. Much later, in 1925, Le Corbusier would build the "Quartier Moderne", a housing complex near Bordeaux, funded by the industrialist Henri Fruges, pioneering pre-fabricated construction.

After the end of the Second World War, the need to house millions of homeless people and the commitment of western states to social welfare projects led to the mass production of housing projects that won international recognition and reaped architectural awards. As with corporate shrines, these projects gave architects the chance to assert modernist aesthetics, and experiment with new materials. These historical circumstances gave Le Corbusier

the chance to realize his dream for building 'machines for living in'. His Unités d'Habitation in Marseilles (1947–1952) and Berlin (1956–1959) were massive apartment blocks for functional and efficient living. The same historical moment also realized some of Ebenezer Howard's late 19th-century ideas in the form of New Towns. Although they received fierce criticism in the 1990s, these innovative landmarks of post-war planning were hailed as they were built as the best cases of social housing and social planning. British New Towns were visited by hundreds of visitors in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, who marvelled at the ability of the post-war state to produce a totally new concept and form of urban space.

Also included amongst the award-winning post-war social housing projects was the (in)famous Pruitt-Igoe, in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Designed in 1951 by architects Minoru Yamasaki and George Hellmuth, and completed in 1956, it was funded through the post-war US federal public-housing programme, and featured 33 eleven-storey buildings spread on a 35-acre site (von Hoffman, 2005). When built, it was praised as "the epitome of modernist architecture—high-rise, 'designed for interaction,' and a solution to the problems of urban development and renewal in the middle of the 20th Century" (Keel, 2005). In April 1951, the *Architectural Forum* announced that the project had "already begun to change the public housing pattern in other cities" (cited in Bailey, 1965).

Although these projects were hailed as pioneering by architectural critiques and the *avant-garde*, they never quite acquired a high status in the public imagination, and were never really liked by the people who actually inhabited them. From the 1970s onwards, private land speculation practices, combined with huge public deficits, made social housing projects more financially demanding and difficult to implement. Not only was there not enough funding for new projects, but existing projects also became difficult to maintain and manage. The post-

war welfare state that had produced the landmark social housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s was now crumbling and its flagship projects were left to ruin. Only 10 years after the completion of the Pruitt-Igoe, the Public Housing Administration spent \$7 million in an attempt to save the project that had already fallen into disrepair, and was vandalized by its own residents (Bailey, 1965; Keel, 2005). Unable to continue to subsidize the project, the authority finally ordered its demolition. The first block went down with a bang on 16 March 1972, and the demolition was completed in 1976 (Keel, 2005). The once award-winning project became the symbol for everything that was wrong with modernist architecture, and architectural critic Charles Jencks hailed 16 March 1972 as the end of modernism. Although this aphorism has been widely disputed since (Harvey, 1989a), the moment certainly symbolized the end of the post-war Keynesian state and the difficulty that the welfare state was faced with, in its efforts to keep up with large-scale social housing projects.

London's Barbican constitutes an interesting moment of transition in public social housing projects. Its proximity to the City of London made the development more complex than that of other areas of the capital, and while the first proposal was submitted to the Corporation of London in 1955, as part of the post-war London redevelopment plan, it was only in 1971 that construction work began, and the project was completed in 1982. While the economic and design principals were the same as those that guided the production of other areas around London after the Second World War, the delay in the Barbican's construction meant that it got caught up in the real estate boom of 1963–1973 that, as we have seen, made social housing expensive and difficult. The new design that was launched to accommodate the new real estate situation made the Barbican one of the first mixed-use projects, and one of the last large-scale social projects in the UK.

Still, in countries that continue to maintain a commitment to social welfare, such projects saw a revitalization in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In France, the Arènes de Picasso, in Marne-la-Vallee (1977–1984, Manolo Nunez-Yanowsky) as well as the Palais d'Abraxas (1978–1982, Ricardo Bofill), became self-proclaimed post-modern shrines, with imposing design details that are reminiscent of fascist architecture (Lucan, 2001). According to Bofill, his mission was to give the residents a sense of "royal grandeur" to compensate for their limited floorspace. The Palais d'Abraxas gained cult status after it became the setting for Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*.

### **The private–public shrine: the building as a temptress**

After the 1970s, sweeping international economic social and political changes introduced inevitable changes in the production of urban space. Notably, the state's role in the production of urban space shifted from being an entrepreneur, who would fund and oversee projects of urban renewal, to becoming a networking institution and a hands-off manager of projects that would be fully developed by private entrepreneurs (Harvey, 1989b). As the role of the state was waning, private developers and private capital became key actors in urban renewal initiatives. As an ever-increasing number of services that used to be public became privatized, the public's role also changed from being a citizen to becoming a consumer (Fainstein, 1994; Swyngedouw, 2000; Lees, 2001).

The new power configuration around the production of urban space entailed a shift of focus from large-scale projects, based on comprehensive economic and spatial planning, to smaller-scale projects based on urban design practices that put more emphasis on design aesthetics and were less concerned with fostering synergies between the re-designed areas and the rest of the city.

Part of the new managerial role of urban governance was to attract capital to invest in cities through forging public-private partnerships. Thatcher's Britain pioneered private-public developments with the redevelopment of London's Docklands acting as a flagship project for the new ethics of conservative urban renaissance. However, it was Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum that stole the title of the exemplary global 'iconic' private-public project (see Jencks, 2004; also Jencks, 2006 in this issue). Many other cities across the western and non-western world followed suit in an effort to build 'iconic' in the hope of putting themselves on the map as global cities. An array of Guggenheim-like buildings were commissioned to a handful of star architects over the last decade, anticipating a Bilbao-like effect: Birmingham's Bull Ring and Selfridges; and Barcelona's Euro-Forum 2004 (see Brenner, 1998; Moulaert *et al.*, 2003).

The recent public-private partnerships were expected to act as catalysts for further urban renaissance. This new type of development, however, often produced sleek islands of development in the middle of decaying urban areas. The 19th- and 20th-century preoccupation with large-scale landscaping and planning gave way to a practice of urban design that aimed at producing 'postcard views' of the city, that could be photographed and used to promote the contemporary metropolis to the tourist industry and to international capital. The strategy adopted by local authorities to this end, i.e. to commission star architects to design public-private buildings that can act as logos for their city, is identical to the strategy adopted by private corporations. Indeed, it is often the same architects who are commissioned to build for both the private and the public sector. From museums and stadiums to shopping malls, the recent public-private projects that act as symbols of prosperity for a location bear remarkable similarities in style and function, and use almost identical architectural language. For example, the

most recent home to the Mayor of London gives a corporate iconography to a state function, marking the new managerial role of urban governance (McNeill, 2002). Indeed, if we compare the public London's New City Hall, designed by Foster and Partners (1998-2002) and the private Swiss Re Tower, designed by the same architectural partnership, we can easily identify the same desire to make a statement and to 'stand out'. Regardless of their very different functions, the two buildings hold a cunning resemblance. The similarities in the architectural language used on both occasions undermines the power of symbolism that these buildings try to convey, as it blurs the boundaries between the iconography of the private and the public in the urban skyline.

The now widespread ideology of using design as a siren calling for further urban renaissance did not produce only new 'iconic-to-be' buildings. It also had an interesting effect on earlier (late 19th- and early 20th-century) shrines—power stations, gas, train stations, etc.—that had undergone a process of ruination and had long become dead capital. The London Docklands, that had become obsolete with the introduction of container technologies, was one of the first landmarks of the past to undergo such a transformation. The buildings along London's South Bank are a more recent example of the same process. London's Old County Hall (designed by Ralph Knott, and officially opened in 1922) had been 'hollowed out' of its original function, after Margaret Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council in 1986, but was later turned into the Saatchi Gallery. Similarly, the old Bankside Power Station that was closed down in 1981, only 20 years after it had become fully operational, was revamped in 2000 by Herzog & de Meuron into the Tate Modern and has since become one of London's landmarks. The Battersea Power Station is also on its way to undergoing such a transformation through a controversial public-private partnership that will turn



**Figure 1** The private secular shrine ‘competes with older public monuments and tries to dominate...’. The Swiss Re Tower and the Royal Exchange in the City of London. Photograph: Maria Kaika.

it into a commercial and entertainment centre.

## Conclusion

Despite the recent focus of journalistic and academic discourse on ‘iconic building’, the idea and practice of monumental building that serves the glorification of authority is not new. By performing a genealogy of urban shrines that were constructed in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries in the western world, this article identifies changes in the public perception of this type of building and searches for the driving forces behind these changes. The article asserts that changes in the way urban shrines are

commissioned as well as changes in their form and function can only be interpreted by looking at changes in the nature of the institutions or power brokers that fund these projects. Five types of urban shrine have been identified: pre-modern monuments—deference to state and church authority; public cathedrals of technology and money power—tributes to a new era of secularization and industrialization; private secular shrines—homage to individual achievement under capitalism; social housing projects—patially inscribed bold statements of the post-war welfare state; and private-public shrines—temptresses for global finance. The article identifies the struggle for power under capitalism and the role of the state as key driving forces behind changes in

what constitutes an urban shrine and changes in the iconography of buildings. The rise and fall of urban shrines, the rise and fall of styles, as well as the rise and fall of pop-architects, has always been linked to the rise and fall of public or private empires.

## Note

- 1 Two chimneys are part of the original 1939 building, while the other two were built as part of Power Station B, between 1953 and 1955.

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