The issue of iconicity in contemporary architecture

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Introduction

The goal of the MSc3 Tall Building graduation studio is to design a mixed-use high-rise building for the European Union in the heart of Brussels. It is to convey the spirit and momentum of the EU while confronting the site’s historical context. It is to also challenge broader architectural issues, calling on us to reflect upon the role and nature of the icon in contemporary architecture practice, the condition of the high rise as an office typology, and the urban confrontation of old versus new in architecture. The studio also has a strong technical focus on building technology, environmental performance and building structures.

Iconicity, high-rises and context

The issue of iconicity in architecture is an important one as it reflects the increasing commodification of the profession and its marginalisation within society. It can be seen as an indicator of architecture’s shift from serving the public good to serving private interests; operating as a marketing instrument and symbol of wealth and excess.

The condition of the high rise as an office typology is also a very important topic of reflection due to its dominance as a contemporary typology. For my project I have tried to inject newness and innovation into this well-worn building type.

It is crucial to know where one stands in the debate between old versus new in architecture as this is an issue that will only intensify with time, as cities (especially European ones such as Brussels) become encumbered and stifled by their own heritage.

Finally, the research into building technology, environmental performance and building structures is essential for contemporary architects if we are to create responsibly designed, environmentally friendly and well-considered buildings that stand the test of time.

When undertaking a project such as this I believe that an architect should research very thoroughly the requirements of the client, explore existing precedents both built and unbuilt, and analyse and document the site. The architect should also explore wider issues surrounding the project (as I have described above).
The brief

The studio began with a highly focused and practical workshop that explored office ergonomics, EU working practices through interviews with EU staff in Brussels, urban context analysis through site visits and culminated in an initial design by groups in teams of six. After that we each began working on our own individual projects and were given free rein to pursue our own personal interests in the project.

The brief calls for 220,000m² of program that includes retail, a hotel and a conference center but is primarily an office for the European Union. My thesis for this project is to create an architectural icon for the European Union, not only in terms of form but as a new kind of optimized office typology, that challenges precedents and boldly confronts its historical context.

Counter-arguments & defense

The primary issue raised by such a thesis is the suitability of the icon for architectural purposes. It could be argued that iconicity, 'starchitecture' and such are all symptoms of the decline of the architect as servant for the public good to architect as servant for the elite. As Rem Koolhaas observes:

\[\text{The rise of the market economy has meant the end of the architect as a credible public figure. Since Philip Johnson in 1979, no architect has appeared on the cover of TIME magazine. Starchitects accepted a Faustian bargain where they became more prominent, but their role less significant.}\]

In a sense, starchitects have become stylists - commissioned to decorate with ever more outlandish and excessive designs for brand names and public figureheads rather than solving real issues. For the biggest architects, this is simply the current state of affairs. However, I would argue that despite the architect’s diminished influence in the public sphere, there is always room for maneuver - to implement your own agenda.

This approach fed into the design for my building in that I tried as much as possible to reclaim spaces as public realm while also accommodating the sheer magnitude of program demanded by the brief. So in a sense, the idea of starchitect as public servant is still preserved, albeit in disguised form.

Other arguments against iconicity include: the ruptures they induce in the city fabric, particularly for established, historical cities. However, I would argue that stunting a city’s growth in order to preserve its ‘local character’ is to put the city into an induced sleep, harming its development for purely artificial reasons. Therefore for my project, I make no qualms about proposing a huge icon as it could forward the development of Brussels as well as enhance the aura of the EU.

A third argument against iconicity is, ironically, the homogeneity that these kinds of buildings impose on our world’s cities. A Frank Gehry building looks like a Frank Gehry building whether it’s in Los Angeles or Bilbao. Many architects have
developed their own signature style which doesn't change much from place to place, seemingly ignoring local characteristics. However, I believe that this is simply an inevitable result of globalization. Rather than thinking of the world as becoming more and more homogenized, it is perhaps better to think of the world as more and more equally diverse.

My main defense for using iconicity as a feature of my design in this studio is that iconicity, or more broadly, form, is one of several characteristics that determine how well a building performs. Function is also a measure of performance as is program and so on. The balance between these qualities that make a well performing building differ from project to project. The brief that we have been presented with for the TALL Studio in Materialization demands a building that performs highly as an icon. This argument is echoed in comments by Joshua Ramus, partner-in-charge at New York-based architects REX.

Starting in the 1920s, the modernist agenda made a schism between form and function. Terrible idea -- terrible for architecture. They sided with functionalism; they failed. Architects in their infinite wisdom didn't stitch them back together; we went all the way the other way, to formalism. And now we're at the height of a formalist agenda -- total failure, terrible idea. You need to heal two things as an architect. You need to heal form and function. It's a useless, irrelevant distinction. Form performs, function performs -- forget about it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that my approach for this studio of creating an icon for Brussels representative of the European Union is valid because it fully complies with the brief's requirements for program and iconicity while I can also implement my own agenda and serve the public good by including a lot of public realm in and around the building.

I also think that the building's confrontation with its historical site is not an issue as the building being representative of the European Union is more important than preserving the local context. Furthermore, I believe that a globalized architecture is an inevitability, whereby places eventually lose some of their local identity but assume many international ones, leading to a maximum of diversity rather than supposed homogeneity.

Finally, I believe that in order to evaluate a building's performance, you need to look at several factors, from form to function to program and more. The balance between these factors differs from project to project depending on the requirements of the brief, the context, the audience and so on. In my project, iconicity, or form, plays a huge role. A building with such a prime location and massive demands of program that is to be representative of the European Union simply must operate as an icon. From all of my research, I have concluded that iconicity is indeed the strongest approach to this project.
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