

What is the Use of Starchitects?

Based on the example of Toronto, the sociologist Guillaume Ethier reflects on the cultural and urban effects involved in contemporary architectural realizations referred to as “iconic.” This architecture—a sort of sculpture on a grand scale—derives its aura from starchitects who conceive it and maintain a complex relationship with its urban environment.

Review of Guillaume Ethier, *Architecture iconique. Les leçons de Toronto*, Québec, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2015.

What is the use of *stars* in architecture? Global cities, urban marketing and “starchitecture” still constitute today the three facets of a new space designed for nomadic elites, as one could already foresee—and express concern about—at the end of the twentieth century.¹ The *Bilbao effect* dear to some city makers does not seem to have fully dissipated since the late 1990s, such that it continues to serve as a reference to measure the implementation success of any cultural facility aimed at regenerating an urban territory. The recent public triumph of the Louis Vuitton Foundation by Frank O. Gehry (October 2014), or the media tribulations of the Paris Philharmonic by Jean Nouvel (January 2015), show that this phenomenon and the questions that accompany it are still topical. Beyond the controversy, a recent book authored by sociologist Guillaume Ethier seeks to reflect on the effects of this architecture and to decipher its message: *Architecture iconique* inquires into the creation and reception of four iconic buildings constructed to renew the cultural and urban landscape of Toronto, with the aim of drawing more general lessons from them.

Paradoxically, the book opens on the least iconic of the four realizations: the Four Seasons Centre, Toronto’s opera house conceived by architect Jack Diamond in 1998. The mixed reception of this new cultural facility helps to take the measure of the changes incurred:

Modest utilization of a prominent site, lack of monumentality, inability to arouse sustained interest among the public, but also, according to some, a conservative decision to call upon a local architect despite the international exposure of the project are the main problems that plague the building (P. XV).

Indeed, the project’s creator produced an opera house with a careful acoustic and, above all, an aesthetic that blends too easily with the neighborhood. Instead of performing a monumental break with context, the architect delivered a building that respects the urban environment and is perfectly adapted to its use. This characteristic wisdom of Torontonians

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2010.

architecture could have reassured the public and encouraged its thoughtful embrace, but by then it seemed outdated, if not surpassed by new architectural forms and practices. Next to the opera house of the “gentleman architect,” other projects emerged that contributed to the program of cultural “Renaissance” of the city. This program mobilized the new stars of global architecture—i.e., creators more or less *foreign* to the city—such as the English architect Will Alsop along with his two American colleagues, the very cosmopolitan Daniel Libeskind, who had lived in Toronto for a few years, and Frank O. Gehry, who was born in the city and came to reconnect with his past.

What Are the Characteristics of “Iconic” Architecture?

Prior to examining what architects do in Toronto, with the consent of policymakers and in line with what is happening in most major cities, Ethier undertakes to define iconic architecture. The latter, which is characteristic of today’s spectacular, photographable architectural production, can be likened to large-scale sculptures that dot the urban environment to create new objects visible from *afar*, within the space of places as well as of (digital) flows. This architecture also has social significance beyond its forms. It is not just a signifier with no signified other than: *This is architecture*.² Agreeing with Christian Norberg-Schulz that “architecture also gives shape, in all eras, to the ideals of society” (p. 2), the author notes that these new monuments most often host cultural programs, “museums and concert halls, and not churches or seats of government.” Ethier also wonders whether they might now be “the only type of institution to generate consensus in society” (*Ibid.*) Drawing on the reflections of Charles Jencks, he insists that these buildings favor a “double movement of *distinction* and *retroaction* on their implementation context.” Thus, they develop a complex relationship with the urban environment in which they are inserted: They interpret the latter so as to produce a form of architecture that can stand out and embody its surroundings at once.

Defined as “avant-garde, unique, enigmatic, monumental, recognizable by the public, disruptive of its implementation context and destined to become famous” (p. 22), iconic architecture is, most importantly, produced by a small number of architects who give it its forms and symbolic powers. In order to locate the origin of this architectural style, Ethier follows the trail of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (1967-1984):

Freed from functionalist theories, and in a movement of theoretical renewal that itself eventually faltered and abandoned its critical and collectivist dimensions, the heirs of the IAUS and other practitioners began the 1980s with drawers filled with paper architecture and, especially, with the desire to create unique—in short, autonomous—objects. They quickly found corporate and private clients with similar aspirations along the way (pp. 17-18).

Indeed, this unusual school influenced some future architects—Eisenman, Tschumi, Koolhaas and, of course, Gehry—whom the world would have to reckon with. Theorists more than practitioners, these architects were supported by influential critics such as Herbert Muschamp, who defended them in the columns of the *New York Times* (pp. 26-27).

² Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, edited by Tzvetan Todorov, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982; Christophe Camus, *Lecture sociologique de l’architecture décrite*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996.

Recreating the City With Architecture

How do architects integrate the program of competitive metropolitan development? Ethier notes that the new architectural brand helps to sell a project and “facilitates the task of the public by showing it what is beautiful, while offering cities—a supreme gift indeed—the opportunity to significantly improve the quality of their built environment from and around this branded product” (p. 19). As stars that brand urban spaces and give them visibility,³ architects exhibit themselves and sign their messages, such that one easily recognizes a *Gehry* or a *Libeskind* when visiting a city. But one must push the analysis further, and trace more precisely the different spatial and architectural strategies that have been shaping the image of Toronto. Indeed, the new architecture does not replace the old. Iconic logic may well produce a *Toronto effect* geared towards the outside, but it maintains a dialectical relationship with the former architectural production—i.e., the *Toronto style* that provides the discreet background against which the new icons stand out.

As emblems of power—where power invests in culture and tries to fabricate a “creative city” by means of theories put into perspective by Ethier (see, in particular, pp. 98-99)—these buildings create and give shape to new, more acceptable social values. The book describes a process of euphemization of the forces that organize society, bringing to light the logic of abstraction of urban places and spaces *vis-à-vis* forces that no longer inspire confidence and no longer make sense in postmodern societies: “Icons, in short, are the opposite products of the cities in which they are set down” (p. 150).

To grasp this transformation at work, the author investigates four architectural realizations that are representative of cultural and urban renewal in Toronto. As announced already in the first lines of the book, the four projects are not equivalent, and not all of them are even iconic. Let us recall the opera house of Jack Diamond—friend and disciple of Jane Jacobs⁴—who was wary of iconic architecture and produced a building that was both functional and contextual, yet was perceived as too unspectacular. Ethier undertook to examine the three other projects through three lenses: the architectural position of the creators, their particular attachment to the city and, finally, the way in which they took into account the urban context. In contrast to Diamond’s opera house is the highly iconic Ontario College of Arts and Design (OCAD), conceived by the English architect W. Alsop and delivered in 2004. Lacking ties to the city, Alsop was critical of the quality of the architectures and spaces he encountered within it. As a result, he did not hesitate to perform an iconic rupture with the urban context: “an aluminum box with black pixels on a white background, resting on twelve pillars that resemble color crayons” (p. 182). Beyond these entrenched positions, the *Torontonian* projects of Libeskind and Gehry deserve a closer look.

³ Nathalie Heinich, *De la visibilité*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

⁴ The highly influential American theorist of architecture and the city, Jane Jacobs, spent the last years of her life in the capital of Ontario.

Libeskind's Contextual Art

The chapter devoted to Daniel Libeskind's project features an architect who showed goodwill towards the old building of the Royal Ontario Museum, but who imposed on it an avant-garde architecture that "put it back in its place" (p. 194). To solve this apparent contradiction, one must approach the project first by examining the communication policy of a museum that was initially affiliated with a university and then was later privatized. This policy was aimed at capturing the public's attention through various means and, in particular, a technological turn performed in the 1960s with Marshall McLuhan, the mass media prophet who then served as advisor to the museum. It is in this spirit that the museum management team launched an architectural competition in 2001, which explicitly requested an "iconic presence that would invite people to the Museum and position it as an important civic attraction" (p. 198). Daniel Libeskind won the competition by proposing a building with the demanded iconic presence that was completed in 2007. The architect's personal and professional trajectory is key here: Born in Poland, he followed his family to Israel, and later pursued his studies and career in the United States, with a brief stint in Toronto in the 1970s. The architect "became known internationally in 1987, when Philip Johnson included him in his MOMA exhibition devoted to deconstructivist architecture [...] until he was awarded the mandate to build the Jewish Museum in Berlin in 1993" (pp. 200-201). This building, which attracted a lot of attention, constituted the matrix for his next ones, such that Libeskind's projects can resemble each other and appear to be conceptual rather than contextual, as is the case with many iconic architects. This dimension is claimed by Libeskind himself, for whom architecture is "a way of telling a story, a 'communicative art'" (quoted from the *Toronto Star*, p. 201). To complete the picture, Ethier recalls that "the 'literary' foundation of Libeskind's work fits perfectly well with his flamboyant personality, as he is considered by some to be an outstanding speaker. In this regard, the architect does not hesitate to use colorful language to describe his architecture" (p. 202). According to Ethier, however, the trajectory and position of Libeskind do not simply lead him to negate context. While the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin is suspected by his critics of proposing the same type of project in response to any situation, he himself considers that "getting inspiration from a context means, instead, starting from a concept, from a fundamental idea that is rooted in the site, and extending it to the scale of a building" (p. 195). Thus, Libeskind's contextual "art" no longer refers to the concrete site, but functions rather as a "cultural subtext that his work is tasked with revealing" (p. 210). The architect's literary and artistic stance also seems to derive from a postmodern outlook that favors language games and local interpretations—as emphasized by Lyotard.⁵

The Toronto Effect as an Anti-Bilbao

Libeskind's Torontonionian intervention must be related to that of another star of global architecture: Frank O. Gehry. The iconic architect who, from Bilbao onwards, offered up all his architectural forms to urban marketing, does not occupy the same position vis-à-vis the city, where he came to rebuild the Art Gallery of Ontario that opened in 2008. The chapter dedicated to Gehry recalls how, prior to the project, the architect became Canadian again in 2002, in the office of the country's Prime Minister. Born in Toronto, "one of the most famous architects in the

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1984.

world” seemed to be “coming home,” before Torontonians recognized him as “*their* starchitect” (p. 214).

Thus Gehry seems closer to the city than does the cosmopolitan Libeskind, who merely passed through it. Nevertheless, the analysis of Gehry’s intellectual and professional journey helps to complete the picture. First, his approach does not exactly make him the “master of conceptual architecture,” as some would like to believe, and he is far less a theorist or a deconstructivist than is, for example, Libeskind (p. 220). In the eyes of his interlocutors and, in particular, of the museum director, Gehry is a problem-solver who “is constantly moving back and forth between sketches, models, digital modeling, on-site visits and decision meetings with the client.”⁶ He is an architect who simply looks after the space devoted to the collections and who creates from inside his building (p. 221). Yet he does this without neglecting visibility: One must still “establish a presence in the city,” but while also respecting the vicinity (p. 222).

Does the privileged link to the city and its museum result in a Gehry realization that no longer looks like a *Gehry*? Can iconic architecture be assimilated with the architect’s attention to the operation of a facility or with his attachment to a place? Though Ethier’s book opens and closes on the project of Torontonian architect Jack Diamond, it seems to be Gehry’s journey that interrogates the power of architecture, whether iconic or not. Closer, more *engaging*,⁷ and less conceptual, starchitecture is not, according to the author, a new version of preexisting principles or of earlier works, but a *monument to equilibrium* that reexamines iconic architecture:

In a way, Gehry’s monument plays on a fine dividing line between extraction and insertion with respect to context—a position that, in the end, corresponds quite well to his own ambivalent relationship with Toronto (p. 232).

Gehry and his Toronto museum appear less as *strangers*, in the quasi-Simmelian sense of the term, but they are not truly *integrated* or *familiar* either. As such, they perfectly illustrate the symbolic and social issues at stake in architecture. How can the art of building valorize creations that are radically different from ordinary real estate? How can this art demonstrate its added value or social interest, while also being integrated in a hypermodern society—understood as one fully open onto a real and virtual world, onto a space of places and flows? How can architecture create new spaces that are visible from all over the world, while taking into account local specificities? The analysis of Libeskind’s and Gehry’s Torontonian projects provide some answers to these questions, because of the way they connect readings or experiences of places with the necessity to propose new images of them. Ethier’s study shows that these architectural responses must not be construed as permanently divorced from their environment, but rather as different attempts to solve, with more or less success, the challenges of our hypermodern condition.

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⁶ Specifically, Gehry appears “not as a theoretical architect who imposes ideas on a site, but as an analytical problem-solver who applies imaginative ideas to the specifics of challenge,” Matthew Teitelbaum, quoted on p. 226.

⁷ Antoine Hennion, “D’une sociologie de la médiation à une pragmatique des attachements,” *SociologieS*, put online 25 June, 2013, <http://sociologies.revues.org/4353>.