Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture

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Abstract

As well as being shaped by bureaucratically codified state regulations, architecture is also fundamentally conditioned by the broader political-economic context in which it is commissioned, designed and understood. However, drawing attention to these non-codified regulations can be controversial, as it necessitates questioning the complex social production of architecture, in the process challenging those discourses that position architecture as a practice concerned primarily with the design of socially meaningful form and meaning. Such discourses have been problematised elsewhere and, building on these contributions, this paper suggests a framework for taking seriously architecture’s distinctive relationship with aesthetics and semiotics while also maintaining a sense of architects’ position as a cultural élite working in definite political-economic contexts. Drawing primarily on theories associated with Pierre Bourdieu and cultural political economy, the paper uses the case of iconic architecture to illustrate this argument. The central role of architecture in recent place-marketing strategies is understood as a resonance between the agendas of high-profile architects and those political and economic agencies ‘selling places’. The role of architecture in providing a culturalised frame within which economic transformation is embedded is a crucial consideration here. In short, this paper suggests the necessity of a non-reductionist, political-economic foundation to the regulation and built environment research agenda.

Introduction

Kenneth Frampton has suggested that, relative to other forms of cultural production, architecture is ‘the least autonomous’ and he has compelled us to admit to the contingent nature of architecture as a practice … conditioned not only by its own technical methods but also by productive forces lying outside itself (Frampton, 1990, pp. 9 and 17).

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As is evident throughout this Special Issue, revealing exactly how social forces impinge on architecture’s production is a significant challenge, which raises fundamental questions concerning both the nature of regulation in general terms and also the social function of architects and architecture more specifically. Heeding Frampton’s call, there is a vibrant research literature that emphasises the heterogeneous, contingent nature of architectural production by drawing attention to the role of clients, state regulation, available building and design technology, the popular media and the values of other architects for the production of architecture. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to this literature.

My focus here is on what could be characterised as the non-codified regulations that shape architectural practice, those values that emerge from normalised aspects of architects’ practice, including the relation to those dominant political and economic actors responsible for the commission of architecture. While I foreground a sense of architecture’s symbiotic relationship with political and economic actors and institutions, at the same time I also argue that we must look beyond reductionist accounts that fail to interrogate the specificities of architecture as a field of cultural production, including engagement with its central and distinctive aesthetic and semiotic components.

This paper, in three main parts, argues that to understand how architecture is conditioned and ‘regulated’ by social context it is necessary to assess it from outside its own prevailing professional practices and principles, the taken-for-granted nature of which serves to obfuscate both the limits to architecture’s independence and, relatedly, the durable relationship between architecture and dominant political and corporate interest. To this end, I draw primarily on two theoretical frameworks and one illustrative case. The first section addresses Pierre Bourdieu’s wide-ranging work on cultural production, with his master concept of ‘field’ developed to assess architecture’s autonomy, which is understood not in the usual sense of freedom-from-constraint but rather as the capacity to recast external imperatives into distinctly architectural ones. Within architecture, the symbiotic relationship with capital is seldom addressed explicitly and is most often recast into an aesthetically ‘architectural’ discourse. This manifestation of autonomy provides an entry point into the second section of the paper, which suggests the framework of cultural political economy as helpful in understanding the specific ways in which corporate and state actors and institutions mobilise architecture as one way of making political-economic strategies socially meaningful.

A major challenge for any research on the built environment lies in taking seriously the aesthetics and semiotics that characterise architects’ self-understanding, while at the same time connecting such questions to broader social relations. Cultural political economy (herein CPE) opens up crucial questions in this regard as it moves us beyond the impasse that frequently sees questions of the social meaning of architecture divorced from analysis of architects’ symbiotic relationships with states and economically dominant classes.

The third section illustrates this general argument with reference to iconic architecture. Drawing together Bourdieu and CPE, the centrality of so-called icons in the context of entrepreneurial place-marketing strategies is understood as one particular expression of a far broader relationship between architecture and power, which takes very different forms in different contexts. Important questions centre on the relationship between political-economic institutions, their symbolic and material regeneration projects and the internationally famous ‘starchitects’ whose architectural projects have become a central feature of such initiatives. The general argument is that not only does the emergence of a distinct aesthetic and language of ‘icons’ reveal a resonance between the economic field and...
the architectural, but furthermore that it also expresses much of architecture’s paradoxical autonomy. The suggestion is that the aesthetic and discursive dimension of icons must be considered in light of the frequently ‘silent complicity’ (Dovey, 2000) that exists between architects and the agendas of the politically and economically powerful.

While to some readers these may seem uncontentious propositions, these theoretical frameworks provide a coherent entry point into questioning how the discourses that characterise architectural practice can obfuscate its function relative to broader social relations. A regulation research agenda is important in this regard as it not only helps us to consider the explicit constraints and regulatory contexts within which architecture is produced and conceptualised, it also provides a frame for understanding how architects and their buildings are shaped—and subsequently mobilised—in definite political contexts. A conclusion of the paper is that the valuable academic research drawing attention to the regulations enshrined in legal codes must engage with non-codified, often unspoken—but nonetheless fundamental—political-economic contexts within which architects operate.

Positioning the Architectural Field: Autonomy from Constraint

Summarising his critical perspective on architecture, the Australian architect-turned-sociologist Garry Stevens defines the profession as responsible for

producing those parts of the built environment that the dominant classes use to justify their domination of the social order … buildings of power, buildings of state, buildings of worship, buildings to awe and impress (Stevens, 1998, p. 88).

Similarly, in her work, Magali Safuri Larson has also foregrounded the inherent nature of architects’ reliance on the economically powerful for their practice by observing that buildings cannot be mere drawings … [they] must be realized … architects must design for someone (Larson, 2004, p. 324).

Larson notes that while other cultural producers can still operate in the face of being overlooked by their target market—an artist without a market can still paint or draw, a writer without a publisher can write, a songwriter without a record label can sing—architects are reliant on their clients’ patronage in ways that other cultural producers are not (Gutman, 1992; Dovey, 1999; and Lipstadt, 2003; have also made this observation). Drawing together Stevens’ and Larson’s arguments, we can summarise that, while architecture’s relationship with power is historically, temporally and institutionally specific, it is also sufficiently durable to provide the backdrop to social scientific analysis. Beyond this initial observation that architects are dependent on the economically powerful for their commissions, we also need to take account of: the varying ways in which architecture has been mobilised as a resource by those in power; the extent to which reliance on dominant political and economic actors for commissions conditions architects’ practice; and how architects rationalise this reliance.1

Pierre Bourdieu’s work is helpful in this regard, as it demonstrates that assuming that professional groups such as architects operate neutrally serves to obscure the role of culture in maintaining and reproducing social power relations (for example, Bourdieu, 1989, 1992). For Bourdieu, it is the latency of taken-for-granted assumptions about the practice of such professionals that most effectively disguises their power by imbuing it with legitimacy. His influential approach to cultural production seeks to reveal empirically how power operates in the cultural sphere by clarifying the role that institutions and agents have in constituting and reproducing...
social relations at particular historicised junctures (for example, see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1989, 1993). Although Bourdieu did not directly address architecture in his research programme, others have developed his theoretical framework to take account of architects as a profession (Stevens, 1998; Dovey, 1999, 2000; Lipstadt, 2003; Fowler and Wilson, 2004) and, to a lesser extent, as an aesthetic object (again Stevens, 1998; Dovey, 2000; and Jones, 2006). Those scholars in the former group have emphasised that conceiving of architecture as a ‘profession’ is to accept a “representation fostered by professional groups themselves” (Lipstadt, 2003, p. 390), which accordingly is bound up with a number of contested assumptions and self-characterisations that have been ‘smuggled’ (Bourdieu, 1992) into social science thinking. This group of scholars, broadly speaking operating in the critical tradition, have suggested jettisoning the concept of profession—which leads to value-laden discussions that obscure more than they reveal—to position architecture as a field of production (see also Dovey, 1999, 2000; Stevens, 1998; Fowler and Wilson, 2004; Lipstadt, 2003).

This replacement of the category ‘profession’ with that of ‘field’ is more than just a linguistic shift, as it has major implications for the way in which social research is carried out. The field concept is a ‘heuristic tool’ that provides a number of analytical gains over the term profession (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 182) and is designed to support empirical research sensitised to the operation of power within a given social space while also identifying both the connections and disjunctures of practice and values from other social spaces. In this sense, a field is a veritable social universe where, in accordance with particular laws, there accumulates a particular form of capital and where relations of force of a particular type are exerted (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 27).

Stevens (1996, p. 435) observes that this conception of ‘field’ has two distinct but related meanings: that of a battlefield, a site of symbolic and material struggle; and that of a field of force, a social space whose affects shape and condition the values and practices of those operating within it. So, from the vantage-point of Bourdieu’s sociology, the seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘neutral’ judgements that characterise any field are conditioned by social context and, crucially for present purposes, reflect something of broader social power relations and the imperatives of other fields. Garry Stevens draws on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (for example, Bourdieu, 1989, 1992), which describes the process of socialisation into the dominant values of a field, the process whereby consecrated tastes, languages and practices of the field become learned, internalised and actually embodied by individual agents (who in turn maintain the boundaries of the field and reproduce these values).

Crucial to any field is the degree of autonomy it enjoys from other fields, what those from a different intellectual tradition may refer to as ‘boundary maintenance’ (for example, Parsons, 1968). In Bourdieu’s usage, autonomy is not to be considered as complete freedom from constraint, as no field has total autonomy from all others because they always exist within broader social spaces and thus are not hermetically sealed. Rather, autonomy refers to the capacity of those within one field to translate the ‘rules of the game’ and logics from other fields into its own distinct field logic. In other words, autonomy seldom describes a complete rejection of other fields but instead rests on the ability to recast the ‘external’ values of another field into its own internal ones. Bourdieu himself has likened this process to how a prism refracts light (Bourdieu, 1992, pp. 163–164). Illustrating this notion of field autonomy, we could take the example
of how the ‘rules’ and capitals of the economic field are refracted into the higher education field: we can observe that it is exceedingly rare to hear academic colleagues discuss their career ambitions in explicitly financial terms, which may be considered unduly ‘ambitious’ or ‘uncollegiate’ and not sufficiently in keeping with dominant values and capitals operative in the academic field (as ‘force field’). Career advancement is more frequently recast into a collegiate language of commensurability, fairness and equity, regardless of the increased financial reward that accompanies a move to a position of objectively greater power within the social space of the academic field (as ‘battlefield’). As this example illustrates, Bourdieu’s conception of autonomy allows us to jettison the reductionist assumption that the logic of capitalist accumulation is most prevalent in practice in all fields at all times; there are always ‘field-specific’ capitals—such as publication in highly cited journals in the academic field—that require careful contextualisation if they are to be understood relative to the ‘external’ stakes, such as economic capital. The autonomy to translate ‘external’ values into internal aesthetic ones reproduces the sense that the capitals at stake within a field are not instrumentally reducible to those outwith, such as the economic, and vitally internal capitals maintain the sense that the stakes consecrated by the field are worth playing for.

When applied to the architectural field, the notion of autonomy not only reveals architects’ reliance on capitalist organisations and states for funding, but also draws attention to how this symbiosis is recast into a distinct set of architectural values and practices. Indeed, the capacity to translate values originating in other fields is precisely what gives architecture its status as a field distinct from others. In common with other cultural fields, the architectural field’s autonomy is most clearly revealed in its aestheticised self-conception. Architecture—like many other fields of cultural production, such as art, music or fashion—is a highly reflexive field that has its own specialized vocabulary, enabling critics [and others in the field] to talk seriously, technically, and precisely about the architectural object as distinct from other kinds of objects (Hays, 1984, p. 17).

Such technical language serves to consolidate the rules and parameters of the architectural field, part of which entails valorising and foregrounding some aspects of architects’ practice and devaluing or backgrounding others (see also Goss, 2005). The autonomy of the field is thus a paradoxical one, which is not to be understood as complete freedom from political or economic constraint but rather the field’s celebration of itself, of its own values its capacity to transcend—or at least inflect—the imperatives of other fields into a distinct logic. Reflecting on this point, Diane Ghirado (1984, p. 111) argues that regardless of the “symbiotic relationship” between architecture, states and capitalist enterprises (including the construction and real estate industries), architects can distance themselves from such ‘hard’ economic process by emphasising their status as artists engaged in the production of aesthetically and socially meaningful form. Positioning architecture within a “sufficiently trivial” aesthetic frame leaves “something innocuous at centre stage in order to divert attention from more serious concerns” (p. 114), with fundamental questions about the politics of architecture often unasked. It is by “eschewing or inverting the rules and regularities that constitute the economic field” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 4) that architects emphasise the aesthetic and the semiotic at the expense of the political-economic.

It is important to note that an entrenched tendency towards highly aestheticised discourse does not characterise the whole of the
architectural field and, in fact, actually serves to cleave the field in two (again reminding us of the ‘battlefield’ element of the field). Those architects able to aestheticise their practice simultaneously distinguish themselves from those subordinate parts of the field characterised by competition primarily over material capital (Stevens, 1998, p. 88). While all those architects recognised as such within the field accrue capital—within and without—thanks to this status, the capacity of those in the subordinate part of the field to aestheticise their practice is much diminished relative to those in the dominant part. The American sociologist Robert Gutman has explained the relatively flat distinction between classes of architects as in large part due to the scarcity of architecture’s “natural market” for the “great, seminal, monumental buildings” (Gutman, 1992, p. 40) representing civilisational values, the type of commissions that define the work of one group of architects but not the other; it is these types of commission that encourage an aesthetic self-understanding in those architects able to gain them. In this context, it is also interesting to note, as does Larson (1993), that these types of commission were also significant in allowing architects distinction from other allied building professions such as engineering. She observes that, prior to a 19th-century ‘professionalisation project’, architects were anonymous designers and—frequently—builders, with ownership of their work appropriated by the patron (discovering and maintaining the centrality of drawing as intellectual property was key to this process).

Nonetheless, the romantic myth of the asocial, creative architect is particularly strong in some dominant conceptions of architecture (see for example, Betts, 1980; Curtis, 1982; Pevsner, 1964). Field-specific architectural discourse serves to reinforce the ‘rules of the game’ with regard to, for example, aesthetic preferences (Bonta, 1979), the gendered practice of architecture (Fowler and Wilson, 2004), the justification of relationships with unscrupulous, powerful clients (Sudjic, 2005; Arnold and Hurst, 2004), the emergence of styles (Heynen, 1999) and the ‘silent complicity’ (Dovey, 1999) of many architects with regard to political and economic projects. Developing this discussion of Bourdieu’s concept of field and architecture’s paradoxical autonomy, the paper now turns to another theoretical framework to help us address another set of frequently unasked questions about the extent to which political and economic contexts can be seen to ‘regulate’ architects and their practice.

A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture

A broader challenge implied by the regulation research agenda is to take seriously the highly aestheticised ‘soft’ elements of architecture—including those of discourse and semiotics—and the ‘hard’ political and economic relations, the combination of which characterises the parameters of the architectural field and structures its hierarchy. In the Introduction, I argued that when pursuing this agenda care must be taken to avoid the determinisms that either position an asocial conception of architectural creativity at their centre, along with the associated romantic conception of the architect as an artist, or disregard the importance of socially contingent meanings, values and practices to the production and social function of architecture. While the latter accounts risk focusing on the political-economic dimension of architecture at the expense of analysis of the complex specificities of the architectural field—leading to overcasual, ahistorical generalisation—the former tend to focus on the specificities of the architectural field (including individual architects’ practice and discourse, and readings of aesthetics) and romanticise a creative authorship for architects at the expense of an acknowledgement of ideological production of architectural
values in the context of the durable and continuous mobilisation of architecture by the politically powerful. Moving beyond such accounts necessitates reconciling architecture’s relationship with dominant political economy while maintaining a sense of the specificities of this field of cultural production.

The framework of cultural political economy (CPE), a perspective most readily associated with the ‘Lancaster School’ (for example, see Sayer, 1999, 2001; Fairclough, 2000; Jessop and Sum, 2000; Jessop, 2004, 2007) can help us to this end. A major strength of the CPE approach lies in its critical assessment of semiotics within a framework that supports enquiry into the centrality of cultural form to economic projects. In this sense, CPE can be understood as an engagement with the ‘cultural turn’ associated with post-modernism, which by and large sought to focus attention on the construction of social meaning by agency, but contra much of this literature, CPE analysis expresses a desire to avoid a ‘soft’ analysis that begins and ends within the cultural sphere. CPE seeks to explain how cultural forms—such as the values attached to architectural forms and aesthetics—become laden with political-economic meaning due to the contingent but nonetheless material strategies associated with their construction. A crucial question emerging from this approach concerns the role of architecture in providing the material symbols connected to capital accumulation; by taking the cultural turn seriously, CPE neither relegates culture to an afterthought nor privileges its explanatory potential, but rather takes seriously the claim that capitalist (and other) economies are embedded in, and become socially meaningful through, culture.

Retaining a Marxist foundation, CPE is based around an assumption that, due to its tendency towards recurrent crisis, capitalism is periodically in need of “social ‘repair’ work” (Jessop, 2004, p. 160)—in other words, ongoing legitimation and maintenance of the system. Bob Jessop’s work on the knowledge-based economy shows how the material political-economic strategies are embedded, and indeed come to be meaningful, within a whole repertoire of cultural forms and discourses. This is an important development of the classical Marxist perspective on culture. In stressing the life-world element of economies, be they Fordist manufacturing, ‘knowledge-based’ (Jessop, 2004; Jessop and Sum, 2001), or ‘culture-led regeneration’, CPE assesses how capitalism is not justified by culture, but rather is embedded in the socially meaningful texts and forms that constitute culture (for example, Sayer, 2001, p. 688). In this scheme, then, culture is not merely a strategy for legitimation, but rather is an integral part of economic projects. If economic imaginaries are to be persuasive and sufficiently resonant, it is vital that they chime across a number of fields; crucial to this is the capacity of cultural forms to connect with the life-world (Jessop, 2004).

This development of what Jessop (2004) calls ‘economic imaginaries’, which are understood here as the (re)configurations of material productive relations and—importantly for present purposes—the discourses and other semiotic elements through which they become meaningful, are necessary due to capitalism’s inherent instability. Capitalism’s recurrent crises are ‘path-shaping’ moments (Jessop, 2004, 2007) characterised by the emergence of new economic discourses. Jessop speaks of these recurrent crises as being “mediated semiotically as well as materially” and of “prompt[ing] a remarkable proliferation of alternative visions rooted in old and new semiotic systems and orders” (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007). Some ‘economic imaginaries’ are more successful in this regard than others and a related, and distinctive, feature of CPE is to be found in its development of regulation theory to incorporate ‘evolutionary mechanisms’. Jessop identifies the point of economic crisis as characterised

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variation in the form of a range of new economic imaginaries, some of which may build—or reject—aspects of previous ones; this stage is followed by the selection of some at the expense of others; and then next is a stage of retention, whereby the semiotic and other life-world elements of the successful imaginary are taken up and practised throughout the social order in general (Jessop, 2004). This starting-point leads to a questioning of the role of semiotics, understood as the “intersubjective production of experience” (Jessop, 2004, p. 161), in stabilising and reproducing the capitalist mode of production. The CPE approach is characterised by engagement with particular, historicised and institutional political-economic contexts (see Sayer, 2001; Jessop, 2004; Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007). Analysis of the semiotic component of given economic projects at particular junctures allows us to assess exactly how capitalism is “discursively constituted and materially reproduced” (Jessop, 2004, p. 161) and so embedded in social formations.

Hopefully, this brief sketch of some salient features of the CPE framework has highlighted its utility for understanding the architectural field. To illustrate something of this broader claim, I turn to the architectural icon, one contemporary manifestation of the resonance between politics, economy and architecture.

Icons and Autonomy: A Cultural Political Economy

What is now commonly known as ‘iconic architecture’ has come to constitute a central plank of entrepreneurial regeneration strategies in post-industrial cities. The mobilisation of bombastic, glassy buildings as objectified cultural brands has been driven by local boosterist agencies in search of instantly recognisable symbols with which to foster distinctiveness and attract inward investment (Harvey, 1989). The past decade has seen many entrepreneurial local governance organisations commissioning ‘starchitects’ with the explicit aim of competing in a highly contested symbolic economy of cities and—usually less explicitly—as a way of embedding broader political-economic urban restructuring in a socially significant and sufficiently resonant form. As elites have long used architecture both to objectify their power and to generate surplus value from space (Sudjic, 2005), the centrality of icons to contemporary city rebranding projects is best considered as a continuity rather than an entirely new development, although the distinct form this long-standing relationship is taking in given places warrants careful empirical analysis. (I pursue such an enquiry in a forthcoming book: Jones, 2010.) What follows here is a theoretical synthesis of Bourdieu’s theory and CPE that it is suggested could be of use to any such research on icons in particular and the role of architectural aesthetics and semiotics relative to political economy in more general terms.

The recent embrace of iconic architecture can be understood in the context of place marketers seeking a sufficiently persuasive and socially resonant form with which to attract tourists and inward investors. CPE would not only position the emergence of distinctive, eye-catching buildings within the political-economic context that sees cities competing with each other for ‘brand recognition’, but furthermore would also stress that this political-economic context has implications for the aesthetic form and the semiotic component of architecture. The role of sections of the public, especially the internationally mobile tourist class, as a constituent ‘outside’ architecture is important in this regard, inasmuch as they are the intended target of such images and messages. Something of this context is captured by John Urry’s *The Tourist Gaze* (2002), where he suggests that tourists’ visual consumption practices are now akin to
more conventionally economic transactions such as shopping, with places of interest in cities ‘consumed’ by tourists and other visitors who are overwhelmingly concerned with the façades and surface appearances of prescribed sites of objectified cultural interest that often emphasise the spectacular and the ‘out-of-the-ordinary’. The implications of this trend for architectural production were observed by Kenneth Frampton almost 20 years ago, when he suggested that the quest for media attention leads to a context of ‘overaestheticisation’ in architecture, in which architects pursue a succession of stylistic tropes that leave no image un_consumed, so that the entire field becomes flooded with an endless proliferation of images … increasingly designed for their photogenic effect (Frampton, 1991, p. 26).

How architects respond to the intensification of the visual and aesthetic component of their work is interesting from the perspective of Bourdieu’s concepts of field and autonomy, as it allows the high-profile architects who win such iconic commissions to embrace the artistic component of their work, with the overwhelming focus on form a vehicle for framing practice in this way. The ‘force field’ effect that sees architects developing the attention-grabbing aesthetics that characterise icons must be understood relative to a valorisation of “surface appearance and visual effect” that leads to buildings designed from the outside in, from the vantage of an external gaze … ‘the public’ are positioned as consumers of visual imagery (Crilley, 1993, p. 237).

Given that it is the ‘visually consumable’ nature of iconic buildings that explains their centrality to recent place-marketing strategies, highly aestheticised notions of architecture as objectified commodity have become prevalent in that part of the field responsible for the design of such commissions.

At particular junctures, these forms are very different as the imperatives of politics, economy and, of course, architecture itself; but in the case of contemporary designs such as Norman Foster’s Swiss Re: Tower in London, Jean Nouvel’s Torre Agbar (Barcelona), or Adrian Smith’s Burj-al-Arab Hotel in Dubai, where the aim of architectural design is both to dominate media coverage and the physical landscape (see the work on skyscrapers by Domosh, 1988, 1992; Throsby, 2006; Charney, 2007; McNeill, 2009, pp. 114–35). Again, these contingent relations between aesthetics, semiotics and political-economy necessitate careful, historicised empirical engagement on a case-by-case basis, which is beyond the limits of this paper, but suffice to say that whether a building necessarily needs to be tall or to dominate the skyline is an empirically open question and one contingent on both the architectural field and the demands of those commissioning the building. Icons, while maybe or maybe not physically dominating the surrounding landscape, are explicitly positioned relative to a visual consumer—either the visitor in front of the building or more likely the viewer of a mediated image in press, television or film—and, a ‘successful’ building will necessarily develop a strong association to place through an instantly recognisable form designed to be both distinctive and widely disseminated in this mediated form.

The point about the contingent nature of architectural aesthetics is aptly illustrated in the article ‘Form follows power’, in which Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen (2006) chart the shift from the domination of the landscape by religious to state buildings and then to those ‘urban shrines’ celebrating capitalist production. In this important recent account, they observe that early shrines were characterised by “sheer volume” and “height” that were “further pronounced by 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” (Kaika and Thielen, 2006, p. 59). The attempt of regimes to use buildings such as cathedrals and town halls to capture the ‘skyline and the public imagination’ also most commonly was couched alongside the mobilisation of traditional aesthetics, a reflection of the need to stress lineage and ‘invent tradition’ (Hobsbawm, 1983). This historicism is quite at odds with the forward-looking aesthetics of contemporary icons, that are explicitly designed to spatialise a moment in a city’s (projected) transition, to give a socially meaningful form to a shift in a political-economic programme. Mona Domosh (1992) has made a similar argument about the progressive values implied by advanced construction techniques and radical aesthetics, which have long been meanings that states and corporations have sought to align themselves with (see also Jones, 2002, on the relationship between architectural modernism and the state). The desire for a materialisation of forward-looking change goes some way to explaining the aesthetic of the icons associated with selling places. In his comprehensive definition of the architectural icon, Leslie Sklair (2005, 2006) has identified close links between the iconic buildings explicitly designed to initiate a transformation of a city’s symbolic and material position.

Interestingly, Sklair, the prominent architectural theorist Charles Jencks and the architectural critic Deyan Sudjic all use the term ‘icon’ as a proxy for an aesthetic: Jencks defines an icon as a building that can survive being shrunk to the size of a TV screen, or smaller, to a letterhead or stamp … which allows it to become a brand image (Jencks, 2005, p. 23).

Sklair sees the icon as having an aesthetic component, while also drawing attention to the question of historical icons in a way not common in other literature on the subject (Sklair, 2006, p. 38); Sudjic sees the desire for bombastic, eye-catching brands as having led to the popularisation of architecture that looks best reduced to a logo on a letterhead or to the confined spaces of one of those Eiffel-Tower-in-a snow-storm paperweights (Sudjic, 2003).

Ironically, given that the aim of icons is to foster distinctiveness, Sudjic has also spoken of an architecture of diminishing returns in which every sensational new building must attempt to eclipse the last one ((Sudjic, 2003)).

The sense that the popularity of such buildings has led to ‘icon inflation’ and the semi-formalisation/standardisation of an aesthetic should also remind us of the capacity of the ‘force field effect’ to shape the aesthetic preferences of those within its parameters (also see later).

As was observed earlier, the entrenched tendency within architectural discourse and theory is to frame the high-profile architect’s practice as the development of an oeuvre, exacerbating the artistic dimension of practice and relegating the field effect and the external constraints. Highly aestheticised discussions of icons’ forms dominate media discussion, with as much ink spilt on the validity of various readings of icons as more pragmatic discussions of cost or interests. In general, it can be suggested that with icons the tension between a rooted sense of place and a more transnational space is frequently at the fore; contradictions exist between icons as “transnational social spaces … that could literally be almost anywhere in the world” (Sklair, 2006, p. 22) and as place-markers that also connect convincingly with local residents’ understandings of place/locality. Balancing such competing agendas, both in the discourses attached to the building and in its aesthetic, is a not inconsiderable challenge. Again, CPE has a contribution to make to our understandings of these questions, as it
helps us to avoid the unsatisfactory culturalist approaches that see the social world—including such meanings—as constituted entirely by the interpretations and meanings participants attach to their experience (Jessop, 2004; Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007). The problem with positioning icons as reflections of multiple stand-points, with local citizens’ meanings simply one reading amongst many, is that it generates an arbitrary account of the social world that ignores the unacknowledged conditions of action as well as the many and varied emergent properties of action that go un- or mis-recognized by the relevant actors [and] ignores the many and varied struggles to transform the conditions of action (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007).

Maintaining a sense of architecture’s political relationship with economy necessitates research equipped for a critical analysis of semiotics that approaches the construction of architectural meaning not as ‘free-floating signifiers’ or as unproblematic reflections of social pluralism, but rather as cultural forms that ‘embed’ capitalism in the life-world (Sayer, 2001; Jessop, 2004). CPE also observes that the plausibility of these narratives and their associated strategies and projects depends on their resonance ... with the personal (including shared) narratives of significant classes, strata, social categories, or groups (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007).

From this, we can consider architecture a key part of an ideological and material shift that renders an economic project socially meaningful and sufficiently ‘resonant’, albeit representing a highly partial message about the city, identity or place. (Andrew Sayer (2001, p. 690) reminds us that the “lifeworld can be a site of domination”.) The public recognition of culture is an important consideration within the social space that high-profile architects practise and ‘starchitects’ are mindful of privileging one identity discourse over another in their discursive and material constructions, and are increasingly adept at negotiating a very contentious symbolic ground when positioning their work (Delanty and Jones, 2001; Baydar, 2004). The authoring of appropriate social and political meanings is an increasingly important part of architectural practice for those in the rarefied aesthetic sphere.7

Developing this argument, the meanings attached to architectural form by architects, politicians and citizens arguably should not be dismissed by academic research, nor should they be considered simply an ‘open field’ that supports multiple readings outside broader social relations (Albrecht, 2002). Struggles over the meanings associated with icons always exist, not least because these discourses are characterised by tensions and contradictions (Jones, 2006). Indeed, we can observe that, in the case of icons, the relationship to place that is developed is as contingent as the aesthetic: architects’ own discourses variously connect their building to global spaces (Throsby, 2006), while others reject them in favour of a distinctly nationalist frame (McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones, 2003) or a regionalism (Frampton, 1983; Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1992) while others are framed in a more ambivalent ‘post-national’ way (Jones, 2006). The capacity of icons to act as a touchstone of opinion about broader social identities means that symbolic struggles over architectural meaning are so common as to be a defining characteristic of icons.

The star system within architecture, or the hierarchy of the field, is an important part of this story. In an age when ‘starchitects’ enjoy a higher profile than those who commission them, the symbolic hierarchy at the top end of the profession is crucial. Donald McNeill’s recently published book (2009) charts the intensification of élite architects’ transnational practice and reputation. McNeill convincingly shows why—by virtue of their
transnational practice and their networked firms sometimes running into thousands of employees and turning over hundreds of millions of pounds per annum—as well as embedding the meanings and values of capitalist and state projects in their designs, ‘starchitects’ can be considered as agents of capitalist globalisation.

Iconic architecture is akin to Gutman’s ‘natural market’ (1992) for major commissions, which by definition does not represent the work of the vast majority of practising architects. The emergence of media-wise architects as ‘brands’ in their own right, competing in a parallel symbolic economy for major commissions, column inches and the more institutionalised awards and prizes, is a significant part of the icon story and is assessed in detail elsewhere (Gutman, 1998; Sklair, 2005, pp. 487–488; McNeill, 2005, 2009; Faulconbridge, in this Special Issue). Getting the ‘right’ architect at the ‘right’ time—perhaps understood as their capacity to translate the ‘external’ imperatives of the tourist audience, a convincing balance between local place and transnational space, and capturing the aesthetic rules of the architectural field—goes a long way to determining whether or not a building becomes successful as an icon. ‘Signature architects’, those with a strong stylistic code, express a synergy with those high-profile building commissions bound up with place-marketing, which have reinvigorated the profession for this elite band of ‘starchitects’, a powerful group of international architects who define the aesthetic capitols of the architectural field. Recalling Bourdieu’s notion of autonomy, it is important to note that the aesthetic form of icons is not imposed on the architectural field from economic and political forces from without in a determinist way; rather, iconic designs become part of the stock-in-trade of a particular group of architects consecrated not only by their own field but by the dominant from other fields. The notion of the ‘field effect’—namely, the notion that fields exert force over those operating within them—is significant here as we can understand the emergence of a (relatively) coherent iconic style as a result of so-called starchitects being situated in a particular place within their field. Their production whether [s]he wants it or not … always owes something to his position in this space (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 1).

In this regard, the ‘starchitects’ responsible for designing major iconic statements express much of architecture’s paradoxical autonomy, as they have the closest links with the capitalist class (Sklair, 2006) but, by and large, refract this in favour of aestheticised framing of what they do (for examples of this tendency, see Foster, 2000; Libeskind, 2004; Jencks, 2005; Hadid and Betsky, 2009). The paradoxical ‘autonomy’ of architects is expressed in those successful at attracting financially lucrative projects by and large, and also the group able to recast this dependence in aesthetic terms by framing these commissions as struggles over symbolic values rather than politics or economics. Indeed, the emphasis on the distinctive aesthetic of icons allows architects to be artists and to foreground the aestheticised vision of the profession that emphasises the construction of form. On this point, the leading Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has noted that this architectural elite is commissioned to maximise impact and spectacle, as though architects’ status has never been higher. … It is really unbelievable what the market demands [from architecture] now. It demands recognition, it demands difference and it demands iconographic qualities (Koolhaas, cited in Jencks, 2005, p. 101).8

These icons thus express something of the architectural field’s ‘unresolved contradictions’ (Crawford, 1991) associated with attempts to
pursue aesthetic forms that are inherently embedded in—and serve to legitimate—capitalist social orders. However, even in light of this fundamental complicity with economic élites, architects need not necessarily feel an ‘ideological identification’ with their clients; as Judith Blau (1987) notes; in this regard, CPE would also seek to highlight “the constraints involved in processes that operate ‘behind the backs’ of relevant agents” (Jessop, 2004, p. 161). The individualisation of ethical questions—as also expressed in the special issue of Building Design on this question—negates the structural nature of the relationship between the economic and architectural field. However, there are also instances when the actual function of the building necessitates a response—such as was the case with Koolhaas’ design for the CCTV building in Beijing (McNeill, 2009, pp. 138–141). Indeed, the actual function of new buildings commissioned, and of older ones that have been renovated, reveals much about urban political economy with regard to public space. The commissions for museums, galleries and sports stadia that the élite band ‘starchitects’ compete for reflect partial visions of the public. Accordingly, when the architectural theorist Mark Wigley seeks to position high-profile architects as being “a kind of public intellectual, somebody who speaks to the community through buildings” (2005; emphasis added), any contributions to public discourse cannot presuppose a democracy or a value-neutrality; architects’ role in ‘placing’ capital, or rather the socialisation and culturalisation of economy, means that it is not so much that architects disguise the operation of capitalist society, but rather that they make it meaningful.

Conclusion

Paraphrasing the British sociologist Paul Hirst (2005, p. 3), architecture is both configured by power and is a resource for power. As a cultural form that has long-standing and close links with dominant political and economic interest, architecture should not be considered solely as artistic practice concerned with aesthetic form and semiotics. The illusion of political-economic disinterest, as maintained by some of the dominant discourses and capitals within the architectural field, must be revealed as such. Research not grounded in an engagement with architecture’s explicit and implicit compliances runs the risk of reproducing and validating the misleadingly partial accounts fostered from within the architectural profession (Dovey and Dickson, 2002; Till, 2007 for expansion on the nature of these discourses). Within the context of the regulation research agenda, there is an urgent need to reveal the deep complicity of architecture with social order … as the practice of imagining and building a new world, architecture will always be political. A primary imperative is that architecture be stripped of the illusion of autonomy; there is no zone of neutrality in [architectural] practice (Dovey and Dickson, 2002, p. 90).

Architects’ responses to the norms, codes and conventions of building regulations take place against a broader background of non-codified regulations and, while there is perhaps a distinction to be made between generalised, normative control operative within the field and more technical, codified regulations, there is also much to be said for considering these as part of the same process. Researching such questions can be controversial, not least because it challenges a number of the fundamental values that characterise the architectural field and that serve to obscure this relation. Stepping outside the assumptions of the architectural field about architects’ role relative to politics is necessary if we are to research its fascinating role as a social practice that expresses much of the permeation of logics of politics and
capitalism into culture. To this end, this paper has suggested two theoretical frameworks that would support empirical analysis as part of a broader regulation research agenda. Recalling the earlier discussion on Bourdieu and autonomy, the way in which high-profile architects recast the ‘hard’ economic aspects of their role into ‘soft’ aestheticised architectural frameworks requires careful analysis, as it reveals much both about architects’ self-characterisation and also about the capacity of the profession to legitimate symbiotic relationships with capital and political power. In other words, as these narratives are selective, appropriate some arguments, and combine them in specific ways … one must consider what is left unstated or silent, what is repressed or suppressed (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2007, p. 13).

Bourdieu’s framework is useful in this regard as it sensitises us to the self-validating nature of fields of cultural production and allows us to question the valorisation of certain capitals and practices at the expense of others. Facilitating analysis into how capital accumulation resonates through non-economic fields (that sometimes even ostensibly refute such logic), Bourdieu opens up a number of meaningful lines of research enquiry within a broader regulation agenda.

It is precisely architecture’s status as a rich semiotic form that gives it much of the distinctiveness and social resonance that explains its continued centrality to political and economic projects. The CPE approach draws attention to the process of how economic discourses are retained and further incorporated into the life-world. In other words, CPE allows us to frame architecture as one expression of the embedding of ‘economic imaginaries’ (Jessop, 2004) and to connect architects and their designs to the interests of states and markets while at the same time taking seriously the specificities of the architectural field. In short, interrogation of the semiotic component of iconic projects vis-à-vis political and economic structures opens up empirical research questions on the role of architecture in the embedding of economic projects into distinct social formations (Sayer, 1999; Jessop, 2004, 2007). In the context of these projects, new icons are explicitly designed to be “easily recognisable for commerce as well as civic pride” (Sklair, 2006, p. 21); and framing icons as part of a socially meaningful cultural repertoire of a renegotiated relationship between state and market allows analysis of architecture’s role in making strategies such as ‘culture-led regeneration’ become tangible and recognisably rooted in place. CPE would seek to position these buildings relative to the ‘economic imaginary’ (Jessop, 2004) of culture-led regeneration, which has made extensive use of the ostensibly ‘soft’ elements of capitalism—based on information, creativity, knowledge and cultural objects (Thrift, 1998; Sayer, 1999, 2001)—to ‘sell cities’ to tourists and investors as desirable (Hall and Hubbard, 1998).

In sketching out the value of this perspective, I suggest that the mobilisation of architecture within place-marketing initiatives is a fertile ground for subsequent empirical enquiry. The so-called ‘iconic urge’ expresses one way in which the values of the architectural field chime with the interests and agendas of dominant classes (and vice versa) and such architecture represents one contemporary expression of the durable relationship between high-profile architects and political-economic agendas. The desire to facilitate the extraction of surplus value from the re-fashioning of space exemplifies the symbiotic between ‘starchitects’ and those agencies governing cities. Accordingly, any latent assumptions of neutrality with regard to such architecture must be banished, as it is “fully incorporated into the ideological apparatus of place-marketing [and plays] a major role
in mediating perceptions of urban change” (Crilley, 1993, p. 231).

Notes
1. Acknowledgements of architecture’s reliance on politically and economically powerful clients are as old as architecture itself; Ten Books on Architecture included a dedication to Augustus Caesar. Subsequent statements drawing attention to the client-dependent nature of the profession have come from, amongst many others, Edward Luytens who noted that ‘without great patrons there would be no great architecture’ and a typically acerbic Frank Lloyd Wright, who suggested three things every architect should learn: 1. How to get a commission; 2. How to get a commission; and 3. How to get a commission.

2. From this perspective, the emergence of coherent aesthetic values within the architectural field is a symbolic violence, as it presents arbitrary aesthetic values as apolitical, natural and fixed. A major concern for Bourdieu was to challenge the obfuscation of the arbitrary nature of the valorisation and stigmatisation that characterises social life, which constitutes a symbolic violence (1992), whereby a power or capital becomes “known and recognized” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 5) as legitimate rather than revealed to be arbitrary and contingent. Seeking to reveal the power relations inherent in maintaining this mystification within the field, the architectural theorist Juan Pablo Bonta describes a process of ‘collective plagiarism’ to explain the socialised nature of judgements on architectural value (Bonta, 1979). Bonta shows how coherent readings and ‘orthodoxies’ of opinion coalesce around buildings’ meanings; and while total agreement about the beauty or otherwise of specific buildings is seldom reached—ultimately these different tastes reflect something of the structural social positions—or habitus—in which we learn taste (Bourdieu, 1989; Stevens, 1998)—Bonta is concerned to show how architectural critics are cultural arbiters and have a powerful voice in the construction of values around particular buildings and styles.

3. Competition for material and symbolic capital in the higher education field is subject to typically perceptive analysis by Bourdieu in Homo Academicus (1988).

4. Anonymity was not a universal experience for architects historically, with “the Egyptian architect second only to the Pharaoh himself in social status” (Kaika and Thielen, 2006, p. 63).

5. Furthermore, the styles and architectural signatures that become popular and/or fashionable also reveal much about learned taste. The non-architectural lay critic is also subject to field effects relative to class and other social divisions (Bourdieu, 1989; Stevens, 1998).

6. The reinterpretation of 19th- and 20th-century buildings is part of the icon story that deserves discussion and the combination of new and old aesthetics leads to stylistic disjunctures within urban space, reminiscent of Harvey’s (1990) characterisation of post-modern urban space as architecturally diverse.

7. See Hélène Lipstadt (2003) for a detailed account of the centrality of the competition stage to this process.

8. Koolhaas has embraced the impact value of architecture and has suggested that in the deepest motivation of architecture there is something that cannot be critical … to deal with the incredible accumulation of economic, cultural, political and logistical issues, requires an engagement for which we use a conventional word—complicity—but for which I am honest enough to substitute the word engagement or adhesion (cited in Fraser, 2005, p. 319).

Murray Fraser refers to Koolhaas’ ambivalent position as ‘post-critical’.

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References


