Architectural Iconicity: Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor

Despite architecture and the built environment confronting all of us in our daily lives they have received little attention in discussions of globalisation, capitalism or postcolonialism. Certain types of architecture can be hegemonic in a class sense, serving specific class interests alongside their recognised aesthetic qualities. Until the middle of the 20th century this idea was discussed mainly in terms of monumentality and political power. However, in recent decades with the spread of consumerism among the world, notably in the postcolonial, newly industrialised countries (NICs) of East Asia, Leslie Skirn argues that iconic architecture is becoming increasingly important to understanding capitalist globalisation.

Leslie Skirn

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE 1 I attempted to explain the relationships between iconic architecture and capitalist globalisation, defining iconic in terms of fame and symbolic aesthetic significance. Iconicity operates at the local urban, the national and the global levels and many buildings can become iconic locally and/or nationally without achieving this status globally, though all architectural icons also work at the levels and are constructed from the tracings of origin. My argument is that in the pre-global era—roughly before the 1950s and the onset of the electronic revolution in production, distribution and exchange, paving the way for what we now know as capitalist globalisation—architectural iconicity, usually in the form of monumental structures, was largely created by state and/or religious authorities (often parodying, where in the era of globalisation, it is more often driven by the corporate sector, often in partnership with globalising politicians and bureaucrats alike) in an emerging transnational capitalist class (see Architecture and Ideology that characterises most postcolonial and globalising cities suggests that the typical architectural form is not so much monumental as what can be characterised as consumables—lightness of materials (glass and steel) replacing monumental manifestation (store) thus encouraging the delight and the democratic propensity to spend rather than totalitarian awe.

Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)

MSC comprises a set of huge mass-produced monumental (in some cases postmodern) buildings and projects designed to transform the image of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia from an economically unimportant city to a global powerhouse for the 21st century. The then Prime Minister Mahathir first expressed his global vision ‘Vision 2020’ in 1991, highlighting the fundamental importance of Information and Communication Technologies (now more commonly labelled the Digital Revolution) and the MSC is a direct consequence of this policy. Responding to extreme overcrowding in Kuala Lumpur, through Putrajaya, the new administrative and transportation hub but a series of shopping and leisure spaces. Iconic buildings and their symbolic meaning are in evidence: with the Seri Wawasan Bridge has modernist cable structure of the Seri Wawasan Bridge has been likened to the Centre has been likened to the Empire State building is not derived from Malaysian tradition. But because it appears for the first time in Kuala Lumpur, its story is not yet written and it will be forever identified with its place.

Lloyd Wright, many architects have been influenced by Lao Tzu’s teaching that the reality of a hallowed object is in the void and not the wall that defines it. This quality of the building is not derived from Malaysian tradition. But because it appears for the first time in Kuala Lumpur, its story is not yet written and it will be forever identified with its place.

Contradictions

While MSC has staked a new claim in recent years, the rhetoric of its symbolic and aesthetic ambition, frequently hidden from the tourist gaze the iconic buildings of the MSC obscure the lives and being conditions of the poor. 2 While it may be argued that the new high quality government buildings in Putrajaya are a legitimate public expense, local critics point out that Putrajaya Conference Centre is heavily under-utilised and that it is estimated to take 20 years to recoup its original cost. This appears to be true for many globalising cities and not just those in the developing world—it is a condition of existence of capitalist globalisation, what we can identify as the crisis of class opposition. On the surface, this appears to turn the earlier critique of capitalism—private affluence and public squalor—into an enforced coexistence, by looking at and taking occasional outings in their new, gleaming, city centres, public buildings and suburban shopping malls, promoted as sources of civic and national pride in the poorest countries. In these ways under the conditions of capitalist globalisation former colonial cities are being transformed into postcolonial and globalising cities.

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References

5. See 2.