ICONICITY, CONTINGENCY, JUNKSPACE
ARCHITECTURE BEYOND CRITICISM
PABLO VON FRANKENBERG

Since the second half of the 20th century, iconic building design is spreading globally. In the beginning of the 21st century, iconicity seems to be the *sine qua non* in any architectural competition.[1] Museums, concert halls, flagship stores, hotels, and corporate headquarters – they all strive for an internationally recognizable architecture. Whereas a simply spectacular architecture provokes primarily emot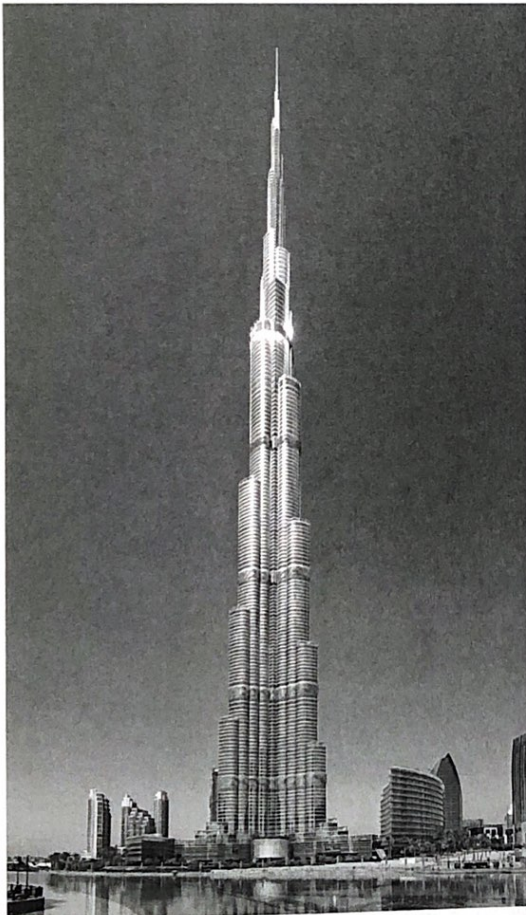ional responses by overwhelming the beholder, iconic buildings in addition challenge the intellect to decode what is seen. Iconic buildings are enigmatic and simultaneously open to multiple meanings ascribed by different social and cultural groups.[2] According to Charles Jencks, iconic architecture is an enigmatic signifier, in which "traditional, popular, and esoteric overtones are felt not named, suggested not explicit. Hinting but not stating a direction provokes the viewer to project into the puzzle certain codes or meanings."[3] In this sense, architecture is not only judged regarding its aesthetic and functional qualities, but also by its power to work as a projection screen for different interpretive, i.e. cultural, schemes.

The Burj Khalifa in Dubai, for example (see Fig. 1), is inspired by the *Hymenocallis* (see Fig. 2), a flower said to be native in the deserts of the Emirates. The outer petals of the flower resemble the Y-shaped footprint of the building, the blossom its core. The building also incorporates the patterning systems in Islamic architecture. These local and cultural references are stressed by the architectural team and the client,[4] even though they are only detectable when looking at the floor plan or from a specific angle out of a helicopter. However, also beyond these references, the image of this skyscraper is distinct and produces an emblem that is recognized worldwide.

Fig. 1: Burj Khalifa

Fig. 2: Hymenocallis flower

Fig. 3: Rocky Mountains close to Denver
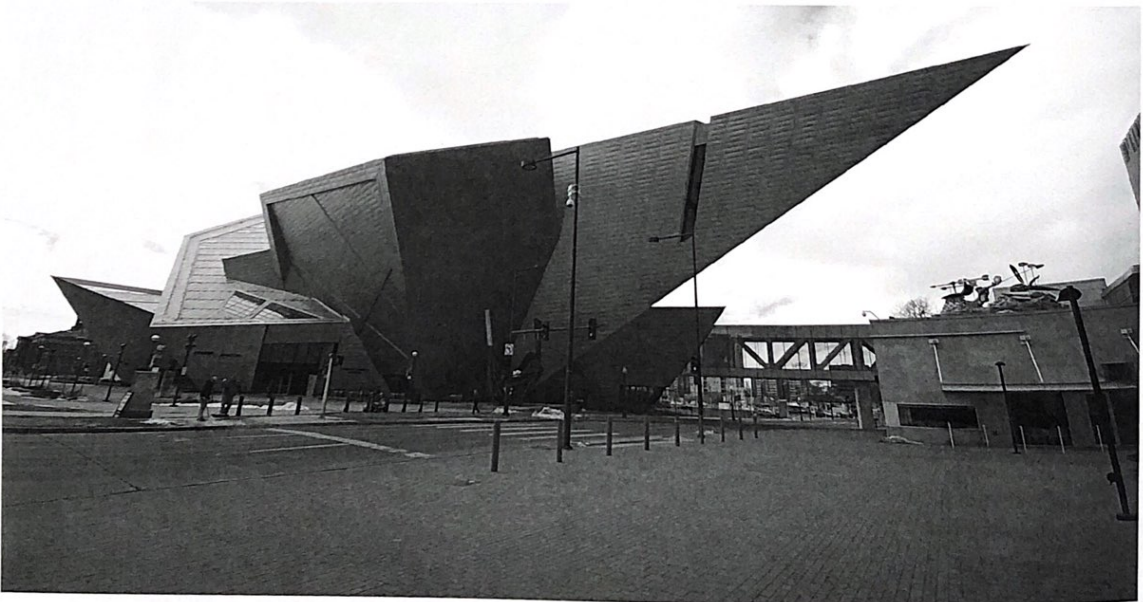
Fig. 4: Denver Art Museum

The Daniel Libeskind extension of the Denver Art Museum (see Fig. 4) is a similar case. It plays with local references (according to the architectural team)[5] such as the fissured and cuspid shape of the Rocky Mountains that rise to the west of the city (see Fig. 3). Nevertheless, the deployed design vocabulary is similar to other Libeskind buildings in other parts of the world; in other words, the Denver Art Museum allows for other readings, too. The presented image is stimulating and the beholder can associate quite freely.

The headquarters of CCTV in Beijing by OMA, another example of iconic architecture (see Fig. 5), became a symbol for Beijing's massive urban renewal and extension plans. Even though the CCTV is a megastructure (its gross floor area exceeds that of the Burj Khalifa), its loop-shaped exterior appears simple and catchy. Its silhouette is easily drawn on a napkin. The building plays with scales. Its enormous dimensions are covered by its shape that, when looked at from far away, seems manageably small though still unique. Like the Burj Khalifa or the Denver Art Museum, the shape of the CCTV Headquarters is memorable and at the same time puzzling, significant and enigmatic.

Buildings that are described as signature architecture, such as the works of Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava, or Frank O. Gehry, are often instances of iconic architecture, too. Obviously, signature architecture is a form of marketing. With a specific design vocabulary, these architects established a certain "brand" which allows a clear distinction from other architectural designs and promises a certain recognition factor and a reliably spectacular result. Hence, signature architecture produces similar forms for different building types. Going back to the example of Libeskind, his buildings share a similar design regardless of the building type and the construction site. Local urban and cultural contexts, as well as the purpose of these buildings, do not seem to interfere with their design. The Jewish Museum, Berlin, Germany; the Denver Art Museum, Denver, USA; the Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre, Bern, Switzerland; the Military History Museum, Dresden, Germany; or the Run Run Shaw Creative Media Centre at City University Hong Kong – they appear similar in their shape, but differ highly regarding their function and content.

Signature architecture is an ideal example of the power of iconic forms in architecture. They express a variety of meanings to a variety of audiences. In other words, iconic architecture is all-purpose and prompts a potentially global media echo. On the

Fig. 5: CCTV Headquarters

other hand, iconic architecture avoids critical discussions. Almost every interpretation is right when there is no chance to prove the opposite. As a result, criticism that focuses on iconic architecture creates a bunch of metaphorical descriptions, but no concluding evaluation. [6] A penetrative, closing analysis of its technical, urban, and social functionality seems to be difficult given the elusiveness of iconic buildings.

Iconic buildings are overwhelming, and at the same time fundamentally neutral. They are compatible with a lot of different cultural contexts, vertically (regarding generational, educational, financial etc. backgrounds) and horizontally (regarding regional conditions). In sum, iconic buildings cover a vast array of different interests. Consequently, iconic architecture not only has the potential of making its designer a world renowned architect, but also provides a tool to deal with a variety of stakeholders with different backgrounds. In larger building projects, besides architect and client, the development of the design depends on the jurors of the competition (other architects, representatives of the client, politicians, project managers, structural engineers, etc.), funders, occupants, policy makers and other stakeholders with more or less expertise in architecture. Marketing and tourism concerns

form part of these vested interests, though personality and the will to make one's mark both on client-/funder-/politician-side and on architect-side is to be considered a stronger driving force.[7] Convincing all of these different parties of a design scheme (in the competition as well as in the design phase after the competition) is easier when discussing a shiny proposal everybody can project their specific interests onto. A more sophisticated design that takes a firm stand in a couple of fields seems to lessen the chance of satisfying the variety of stakeholders. From this angle, the basic design ingredient of iconic architecture appears to be the prevention of critique by producing a thrilling enigmatic image.

The result of trying to convince the variety of stakeholders by preventing a firm stand (which could be criticized) is related to what Rem Koolhaas describes as "junkspace." It is related but not necessarily identical. Koolhaas bemoans a profound callousness in contemporary architecture that leads to a universal program of default sensation perverting all rules of architecture. According to Koolhaas, in contemporary architecture "irregularity and uniqueness are constructed from identical elements."[8] He compares junkspace to astro-garbage, seeing it as the residue of modernism, not as a style worthy of being recorded for the generations to come. More and more, both iconicity and junkspace become phenomena to be dealt with in everyday life – beyond characterizing it as 'philistine,' globalized, homogeneous non-places[9] and beyond merely describing it with a vast amount of different metaphors. Whereas junkspace appears to be a well-defined entity, iconicity is still fluid. If the latter continues to be dealt with on a metaphorical level it might reveal the same callousness (towards style, towards society) as junkspace already does. However, its level of autism is not yet determined. Stressing its contingent aspects, iconicity could actually yield a new perspective on architecture.

As Jeremy Till states, architecture is based on the gap between practice and object, between how architects think of the design process as an independent and more or less perfect creation and how much architecture, the product of this process, is dependent on numerous external factors.[10] Taking Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatic conception of contingency, Till focuses on this gap. With the contingency of architecture in mind, this paper suggests a praxeological form of architecture critique that aims for the inherent sociocultural aspects of architecture.

Contingency, Rorty claims, describes the constant co-existence of alternative ways of describing the world. According to his concept, the world "is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary."[11] There are no "facts" beyond the language with which we describe what we perceive. Language itself, i.e. the choice of words and metaphors we use to describe what we perceive, is contingent. Thus, every perception is contingent – and so is the world that surrounds us. Usually, the contingency of our expressions does not interfere with daily life. Fundamental justifications of actions and beliefs are already executed by so called "final vocabularies," which help stabilize social life by unconsciously excluding the equality of other, possibly competing vocabularies.[12] More than any other form of architecture, iconic buildings represent contingency as they offer an ambiguous appearance and a non-dogmatic bunch of alternative descriptions. They are highly visible embodiments of the barrier between language and "fact" since they demonstrate the equality of different vocabularies describing the same object. As they obviate the aura of absoluteness, they push an enlightened, disenchanted view to the world.[13]

The contingency of new iconic buildings has to be fathomed – not only their outer appearance and technical brilliancy. The architectural aesthetic has to be contextualized socially and culturally. The building has to be criticized in use, or rather, in action. When people see architecture, when they work in it, live in it, spend their leisure time in it, it transforms into a collectively shared image and practice. Architecture builds "culture," as these images and practices become part of the multiplicity of ideas, beliefs, and values that a group of people have in common. An architecture criticism that takes this socio-culturally formative role of architecture into account should turn its focus from architecture a *priori* to architecture a *posteriori*, from drawings, renderings, models, and deserted photos to buildings that were handed over to their purpose.

This pragmatic approach to architecture criticism would analyze the effects a building has on its surrounding urban space, the flows of people it creates, the offers it provides to its occupants and how these offers are used, the way a building influences how people think and live – or at least the potential a building promises in these latter regards. Liquefying the architecture into its sociocultural momenta would be the aim of a pragmatic critique. The critics would intermingle with the visitors of a newly

built theater, concert hall, museum, or any other public building. They would watch the workers in an office building and talk to them. They would chat with the inhabitants of a residential building, stroll through a new urban piazza, check in at the new airport with all the other travelers. The criticism would move from a static point of view to a dynamic practice. Not photography, but film and physical presence would be the medium of the critics. The images and practices a building produces are unstable, and so should be its critical acclaim.

The vibrant state of iconic architecture shows the limits of a criticism that is bound to images while excluding the practices architecture stimulates. For a pragmatic approach in architecture criticism, though, iconic architecture is a promising starting point. As demonstrated above, iconic buildings evade a complete, fixed meaning in favor of an interpretive openness to numerous understandings. They challenge criticism, since the criteria for an analytic and reproducible critique lack definition – facing engineering possibilities that enable the use of a seemingly infinite design vocabulary. The resulting interpretive openness of iconic architecture calls for a new modus operandi in architecture criticism. In order to regain keenness, architecture criticism should focus to a greater extent on external factors such as the use and acceptance of architectural structures and the social dynamics it triggers.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, searching the architecture platform World Architecture News (WAN) for announcements of architecture competitions and openings of new buildings that contain the word "iconic" will result in more than 670 hits in the time from 2005 until today (source: www. worldarchitecture news.com; own calculations; 12/31/13).

2. Jencks, Charles. 2005. *The Iconic Building. The Power of Enigma.* (London), 22.

3. ibid., 111.

4. See https://www.som.com/project/burj-khalifa and www.burjkhalifa.ae/en/TheTower/ Design.aspx. See also the article "Burj Khalifa: Towering challenge for builders" in *Gulf News*, January 4, 2010 (http://gulfnews.com/business/property/burj-khalifa-towering-challenge-for-builders-1.561802) (01/26/13)

5. See website of Studio Daniel Libeskind: http://daniel-libeskind.com/projects/extension-denver-art-museum-frederic-c-hamilton-building (01/26/13)

6. There are a myriad of examples for this tendency in architecture criticism when looking at iconic buildings. For Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, Charles Jencks analyzed a few critics. The building was described as a boat in full sail, the cardboard boxes of homeless people, Marilyn Monroe's skirt, a broken fortune cookie, a waste basket, a tornado, and other contradictory and profoundly empty words (see Jencks 2005, 180-182).

7. As distinct from the discourse of building heritage through architecture and its consumerist implications (see e.g. Nezar AlSayyad (ed.). 2001. *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Form in the Age of Mass Tourism*, (New York). Iconicity can create images that are suitable for tourism and doubtlessly consumed on a global level, though it still is a subdomain of iconicity, since tourism is one, but definitely not the major aim of the involved stakeholders (see e.g. Pablo v. Frankenberg. 2013. *Die Internationalisierung der Museumsarchitektur. Voraussetzungen, Strukturen, Tendenzen* (Volume 31 of the Berlin Series for Museum Studies) Berlin).

8. Rem Koolhaas. 2002. "Junkspace," *October 100*, 175-190 (183 and 178).

9. The concept of junkspace resembles Marc Augé's non-places. Non-places "play no part in any synthesis, they are not integrated with anything; they simply bear witness [...] to the coexistence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected. [...] When individuals come together, they engender the social and organize places. But the space of supermodernity [the non-place] is inhabited by this contradiction: it deals only with individuals (customers, passengers, users, listeners), but they are identified (name, occupation, place of birth, address) only on entering or leaving. [...] The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society." Marc Augé. 1995. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* (London/New York), 111-112. See also Hans Ibelings. 1998. *Supermodernism. Architecture in the Age of Globalization.* (Rotterdam).

10. Jeremy Till. 2009. *Architecture Depends.* (Cambridge), 2. With a group of architecture students, Till visited Aldo Rossis's housing at Gallatarese in Milan, Italy. The "pure architecture" they studied beforehand on drawings and pictures vanished in favor of all the different contexts that formed the architecture: "The drawing as autonomous object was not there, architecture was." (ibid. 23)

11. Richard Rorty. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* (Cambridge/New York/Oakleigh), 7.

12. ibid., 1989, 73.

13. See also Jencks 2005, 20. Contingency could prove to be an advantageous concept to analyze the formation of signature architecture, too. Often condemned as a homogenization of style, signature architecture contains more insights to be revealed by an analysis that takes into account the external and coincidental factors of the development and success of a signature architect. Basically, this approach would consist of a stylistic analysis that is informed by sociology, cultural studies, economics, and art history.