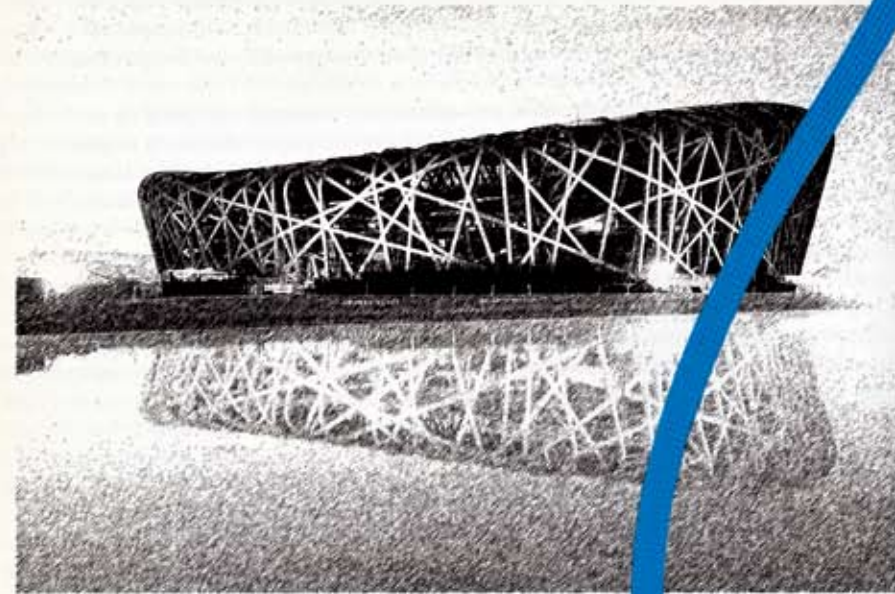


ICONS



Herzog & De Meuron
Olympic Stadium
 Beijing, 2008

Neutelings Riedijk
*Shipping and
 Transport College*
 Rotterdam, 2005




**THIS
 BUILDING
 IS A
 BIRD'S
 NEST**

ICONS REDEFINE BOUNDARIES IN OUR CULTURE, SAYS MICHIEL VAN RAAIJ. A SUCCESSFUL ICON ARISES WHEN THE PUBLIC RECOGNIZES THE IMAGE INTENDED BY THE ARCHITECT.

TEXT MICHIEL VAN RAAIJ
 ILLUSTRATIONS LESLEY MOORE

THE GROWING PRODUCTION OF ICONS, buildings with an exceptional form, has been met with a highly hostile reception in architectural criticism for a number of years. In 2006, for instance, Matt Weaver wrote in *The Guardian*: 'The truth about those iconic buildings: the roofs leak, they're dingy and too hot.' In fact the first critique of the phenomenon was recently published in book form: John Silber's *Architecture of the Absurd: How 'Genius' Disfigured a Practical Art*. Its cover features the Stata Center designed by Frank Gehry for MIT. A week after the book came out, the university took Gehry to court over structural defects. Silber's argument is the same as Weaver's: icons are often impractical and poorly built. The only thing they do right is to stroke the ego of the architect. A name has even been coined for an architect guilty of producing icons: *iconista*.

The criticisms about construction quality and usability seem to be symptomatic of a deeper distrust of the icon based on the idea that it represents an outgrowth of capitalism. In this view, the icon is nothing more than coquettish spectacle. According to the logic of 'frugal' and therefore morally superior minimalism, icons are completely beyond the pale. An icon is not about 'doing what is needed' but 'doing what can be done'. The icon counters minimalism with maximalism.

What is often overlooked is that the crux of the icon is architectural innovation. The point is not a massive deployment of architectural means or costs, but a maximization of difference in architecture. The icon redefines boundaries in our culture. It is refreshing in its content (typology, organization), it is technologically revolutionary and it is regenerative in its sculptural form. The best icons combine innovations in all three of these areas, but each architect uses his or her personal signature to place the emphasis in a different way. With the Casa da Musica and the Seattle Public Library, OMA innovates primarily in terms of form and content, whereas UN Studio, with the Mercedes-Benz Museum, places more emphasis on technology.

The most frequently cited source on the subject of the icon is the book *The Iconic Building* (2005) by Charles Jencks. Not because it is all that good a book, but because it is the first and so far the only book to define and constructively analyse the phenomenon. Jencks argues that an icon is and must be an 'enigmatic signifier'. 'This curious sign suggests many meanings without naming any of them,' is how Jencks begins his

thesis, going on to assert with great drama that these suggested meanings are often contradictory: the icon 'seeks to provoke that strange combination of admiration and disgust, delight and paranoia'. It's all terribly complicated, Jencks claims. The Swiss Re Tower by Foster + Partners occupies a key position in his argument. Is it a gherkin, a dildo, a cigar . . . ? The building defies unequivocal reading. This resistance to a straightforward classification of the building's form creates 'suspense' for the public, which means that the building remains interesting over time.

Reading between the lines, the icon as Jencks sees it must resist rapid consumption, and the 'enigma' must lend the icon a new kind of monumentality. The icon is nothing less than the reincarnation of the monument, as Aldo Rossi identified it in Italian cities: amidst a sea of anonymous residential buildings, great monumental edifices stand on central sites in the city. These monuments are not always public, but their form enables them to make their mark on the city. Rossi includes, perhaps wrongly, 'heaviness' as an important characteristic of the monument. Thanks to this heaviness, the monument could resist change. Icons lack heaviness.

The idea of the icon-as-monument is widely accepted within and outside the architecture discipline and can be traced back to the edifice that started its current boom: Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Since the Bilbao effect, virtually every client seems to want an icon, to put his or her city 'on the map'. And this even though experience has shown that the 'allure' of the building does not really extend to the city. Visitors come for the building, not for the city. But the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao does prove that a building that innovates in form and technology can be successful with the public. The icon justifies architecture's existence (quantifiably, in visitor numbers).

Jencks is correct when he argues that a building with an extraordinary form evokes associations among the public. A building like this is iconographic. A weird building form is a sculpture that looks like something. Jencks exaggerates, however, in demonstrating nine possible associations for every building he discusses. In practice, there is usually one dominant reading shared by the community, alongside, of course, all manner of readings anyone might personally experience without expressing them. The Swiss Re, by exception, combines two readings: Erotic Gherkin. In his book, Jencks attempts to turn

this exception into a rule.

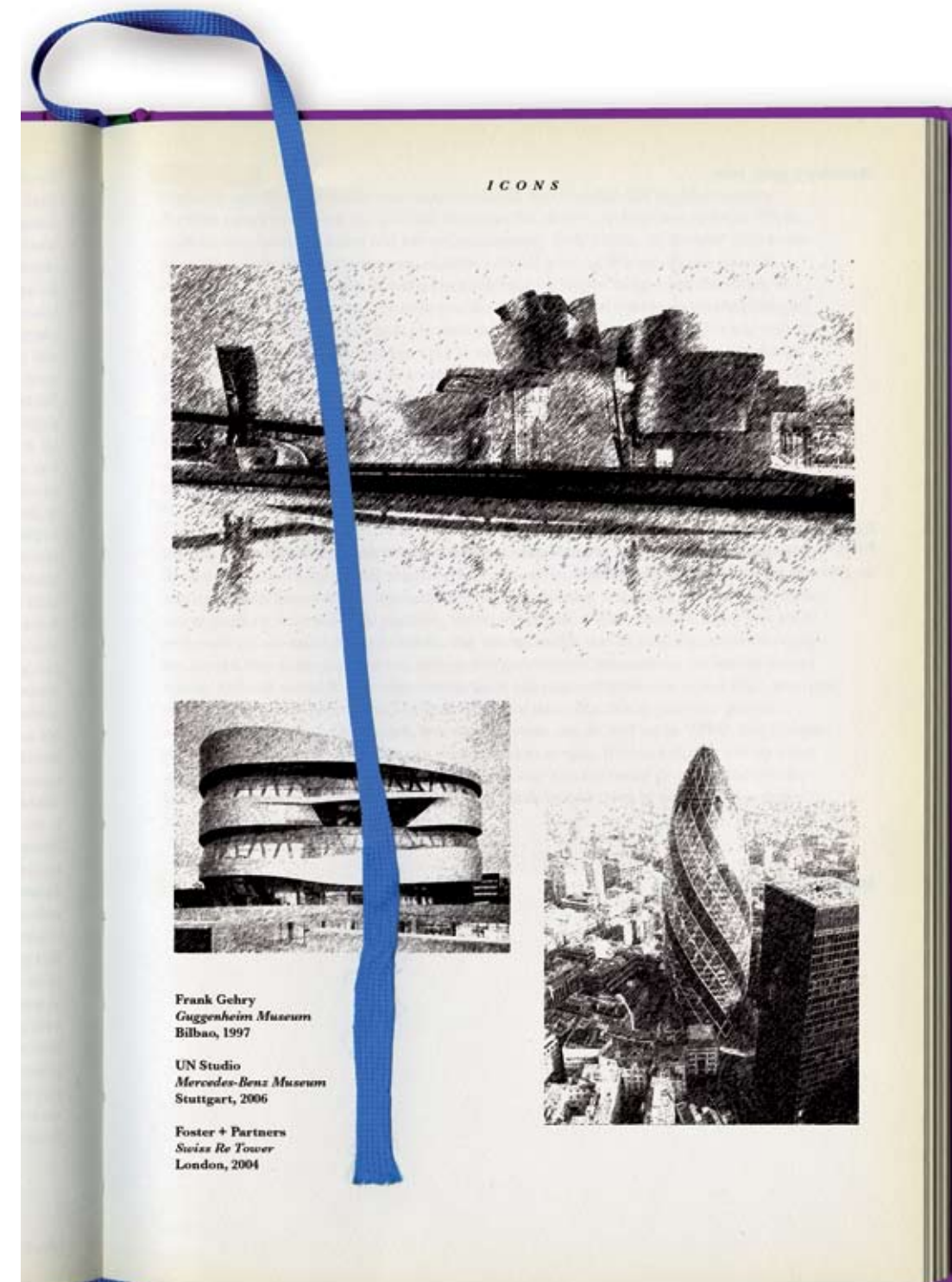
It is confusing that Jencks has tied the words 'icon' and 'iconography' together. While these terms are related from an art-historical standpoint, a clear distinction between the two is drawn in current language. The word 'icon', literally 'image' or 'picture', has now been bastardized as indicating a landmark, a uniquely striking object. An icon refers to itself. 'Iconography', literally 'image writing', on the other hand, is about representation: an image refers to something else. The roofs of the Sydney Opera House allude to the sails of the passing ships.

Jencks ignores the fact that many icons evoke no references at all. Zaha Hadid, for instance, manifestly creates icons, but to call 'fluid' an iconography would be going too far. Similarly, it is quite difficult to see a school of fish in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. This only works if you know that Frank Gehry has often used the fish form in his work and that he has progressively abstracted this motif.

The icon, therefore, is not necessarily iconographic. This has inspired UN Studio to assert that they aim to create innovative forms that 'outpace' iconography. With their Mercedes-Benz Museum, they have proven that this can indeed be done. And yet . . . the museum also proves that the architect can incorporate iconography in a design without making this explicit and without users being directly aware of it. The triangle in the floor plan is not by coincidence a distant abstraction of the Mercedes star. The inclined 'roadway' in the interior and the 'metallic paint' of the façade panels are no coincidence either.

Although Jencks is vague about how the 'enigmatic signifier' can be designed, iconography provides the architect with a sturdy instrument for the design of icons. Of no small importance either is that the use of iconography steers the public's associations in a particular direction. Even an iconographic building allows multiple readings, but it does steer them – consciously or unconsciously. Only if you're entirely uninterested in iconography can you design a giant dildo for the centre of London.

Foreign Office Architects discovered that naming the applied iconography can lead to success. When they presented their design for the Yokohama Cruise Terminal, they saw the audience swell with enthusiasm when they said the design had been inspired by a famous print of the Hokusai Wave, a tsunami. The image of the waves is woven into the undulating organization and construction of the building. The project's



'THE TRUTH ABOUT ICONIC BUILDINGS: THE ROOFS LEAK, THEY'RE DINGY AND TOO HOT'

MATT WEAVER

success led FOA to propose this integration as a general guideline: iconography with a double agenda. In this strategy, the chosen iconography does not simply serve to seduce the client and the public at large, but must always have the dual function of organizing the building and its structure.

This double agenda could potentially make the applied iconography 'more real', because it goes deeper than merely the exterior shell and orders the structure and the programme. As a concept, however, it ignores the fact that the vast majority of buildings are simply volumes with a shell. An iconography for the shell says nothing about what might take place behind it. It is therefore no surprise that Foreign Office has not managed to repeat this double agenda in another building. As a guideline it just seems too ambitious.

In practice all architects that use iconography in their designs choose the same strategy: one iconography for the building mass and the façade, possibly with related iconographies for selected spaces in the interior. A fine example is the Shipping and Transport College in Rotterdam, by Neutelings Riedijk Architects. In keeping with the building's programme, its silhouette is inspired by port hangars and loading cranes, while the block pattern of the façade cladding is derived from stacked shipping containers. In the interior, 'sails' have been hung from the cafeteria ceiling, doors feature 'portholes' and square 'life-jackets' are hung on the walls of the cantilevered lecture hall at the top of the building. While Willem-Jan Neutelings at times finds his own work too literal, he also argues that a more specific iconography is more appealing to the public. Rem Koolhaas calls iconography a decoy language, but the specific, singular iconography used by an office such as Neutelings Riedijk actually goes back to the Ancient Greeks and is thus in fact anchored in the traditions of the discipline: abstracted Acanthus leaves were carved in the capitals of temples.

Ultimately, the icon is a self-fulfilling prophecy: architects design buildings with a complex geometry because they can. The icons evoke associations among the public, and these associations are steered by the architects. Success lies in matching what the public sees in the building's form with what the architects intend: Herzog & de Meuron's Olympic Stadium in Beijing is a . . .