

Icons, architecture and commerce

Peter Stewart

Opinion piece for Tamesis website, May 2005.

Icons are sexy. Ten years ago, the word icon conjured up an image of a dusty looking painting in a Moscow gallery, impressive in its use of gold leaf but rather far from the cutting edge. Now, it's a cultural phenomenon, and icons are everywhere, from buildings to the Beckhams. What happened?

Talk of iconic architecture really got going with the 'Bilbao effect' - the increased profile of that city which resulted from architect Frank Gehry's striking Guggenheim museum building, opened in 1997. Eight years on, clients want icons in the world of commercial property as much as they do in the world of museums and galleries.

Developer Irvine Sellar obtained his planning consent for London Bridge Tower - an icon if ever there was one - with the help of a design by one of the world's leading architects, the Italian Renzo Piano. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, responsible for giving the go-ahead for what would be the tallest office building in Europe, is an avowed enthusiast of the 'wow-factor' in architecture. A more ordinary project by a more ordinary practice would probably not have persuaded him.

With French architect Jean Nouvel working for Land Securities on their New Change project in the City of London and Frank Gehry developing designs for the Brighton waterfront, it is becoming increasingly common for large commercial projects to be in the hands of 'superstar' architects. Even the Canary Wharf Group, up to now patrons of the solid rather than the startling, have commissioned Richard Rogers for their flagship Canary Riverside development - the part of their estate that will be in the foreground when seen from the new towers of the Square Mile.

Twenty years ago, comparable schemes might have been in the hands of some very conventional architects. As someone who cares about London's architecture, I welcome this change for the better. But do the developers and investors really know what they are getting themselves into? Good architecture is about substance as well as image - enduring values as well as instant gratification. Are we talking about a quick fling, or something that will last?

Any big new building has to be marketed, and today the marketers demand icons. Superstar architects have now become brands. But a building is going to be there for a while - and it's expensive to rebrand them. How dated some of those offices built in the 1980s now look, with their 'fashionable' fixtures now anything but. Plain 1960s slabs have more street cred, and can be cleverly reinvented, as some developers have shown in their enthusiastic commitment to clever regeneration schemes. Developers are reinventing themselves using excellent architects who won't always be associated with the 'iconic' craze.

I don't have many worries about Piano, Gehry or Nouvel - it's the 'me too' brigade that concerns me. As more and more 'iconic' projects appear in the pages of the journals, each trying to be more extreme than the last, I have some advice for icon-fanciers.

If you're going to give us an icon, make it a good one - not merely something headline grabbing that will date before the ink dries on the page. Not every architect should be encouraged to have a go. Cities need ordinary bits as well as special bits. Remember the merits of 'good ordinary' architecture. The builders of Georgian London understood this; we need to work out how to do it in the twenty-first century.