ARCHITECTURE TO DIE FOR

When is a building more than a building? By Hubert Murray AIA

For those in search of Donald Trump's inner philosopher, the moment of revelation may have come. In proposing that the twin towers of the World Trade Center should be rebuilt as a replica of the original (plus one story) the self-seeking blond mogul seems to have offered an insight into our cultural identity that none of the other protagonists involved in the rebuilding seems to have cottoned onto.

In making his proposal, Trump has shown that he alone has understood the mythical power that was invested in the sibling skyscrapers by the demonic bin Laden. Prior to 9/11, Yamasaki's towers were never accorded much recognition other than as landmark or viewpoint, depending on where you were (looking at or looking out). After 9/11, however, images of the towering inferno and twisted wreckage have been seared into our collective consciousness, embracing in their representation the bundle of myths that bind us together as a country: the nobility of workers building their "ordinary American" lives within that citadel of capitalism; the heroism of New York's Finest; and the steely resolve that sought restitution for the dastardly attack on Pearl Harbor. Just as the power of the WTC as national icon was created by bin Laden, not Yamasaki, so, arguably, this mythical power cannot be supplanted by Libeskind, Childs, or anyone else on the dream team of architects and engineers who seek to rebuild and memorialize on this vast and lofty scale.

To what extent then are icons of cultural identity born, *ab initio,* from the mind of the architect, and to what extent do they achieve that status or have that greatness thrust upon them? To ask the question another way, to what degree can architecture imbue in a building its strength as cultural icon? Or is such strength derived from context, circumstance, and the spirit of the times, the architecture merely coincidental?

The World Trade Center is not alone among buildings for having attained mythic status through violent attack. Examples abound, particularly religious ones: the 2001 destruction of the Buddhist Statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan identified, at least to foreigners, the oppression of a community at odds with its Taliban rulers. The 1984 storming of the Golden Temple at

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Opposite: Golden Temple, Amritsar, India.

Above: Rynek Market Square, Warsaw, Poland.

Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, inspired members of that religion to assassinate Prime Minister Indira Ghandi, who had given the orders for this assault on the identifying sanctuary of their community.

There are also secular examples. Warsaw, utterly destroyed by the German occupation in World War II, from 1945 rebuilt its historic center in facsimile from the paintings of Canaletto, as meticulous a documentation as one could wish for. As an assertion of cultural identity, this museum-like restoration of the heart of the city gained its strength as a repudiation of Nazi destruction. In its reference to an 18th-century Italian as the (albeit unknowing) guardian of their heritage, it was also a reminder to the Soviets that Poles are children of the European Enlightenment, not of the Slavic East.

Dresden, the so-called Florence on the Elbe, has suffered in the last 50 years the annihilating destruction of Allied bombing in 1945, the punitive neglect of the workers' paradise through 1989 and, as an almost trivial afterthought, the devastating floods of 2002. Through it all, the high church of Protestantism, the Frauenkirche, has undergone an iconic metamorphosis from dignified skeleton among the ruins, to memorial of neglect reproaching those still under the influence of the people's opiate, through its most recent manifestation, fully restored, as a phoenix rising from the ashes of war and godlessness. Gottfried Semper's Opera House, thrice built and thrice destroyed, the last time by flood, is being meticulously restored for the city's 800th anniversary in 2006. One religious, the other secular, each a remarkable work of architecture in its own right, these buildings have assumed a stature in the community beyond their creators' imaginations.

The National Library in Sarajevo, long a repository of religious and intellectual culture from the three monotheistic traditions, was shelled by the Serbs in 1992. The building itself, no more than a hundred years old, became an instant symbol to Bosnians and to the world of the centuries of cultural and social pluralism that stood as the antithesis to the sectarian nationalism with which it had been pummeled.

Then there are those exceptional buildings that, while avoiding the cauterizing passage to iconic status through violent assault, have been recognized as cultural symbols from the beginning. The strictly architectural examples are rare however. In his essay on the Eiffel Tower, Roland Barthes declares that "architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience." It is striking how many of the buildings that are "born iconic" are strong on utopian dream (many of them religious) and weak on function. As Barthes notes, the Eiffel Tower itself, the symbol of Paris (if not of France), is most significant in its uselessness. It is the dreams that the Tower generates — in an industrial nation at the peak of its imperial power — that imbue it with its iconic strength. The immateriality of form, the antigravitational thrust, the conquest of space, and the promise of modernity are utopian fantasies with infinitely more power than any banal function that might be attributed to the structure as viewing platform, radio tower, or weather station. The very secularity of the structure bestows its enduring significance as a symbol of the Enlightenment.

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Another case of a powerful identifier bereft of material function is the Voortrekker Monument in South Africa. High on a hilltop south of Pretoria, this 40-meter granite cube commemorates the Great Trek of the Afrikaaners from the Cape to the Transvaal in the 1830s. More than a monument to an event, however, this shrine to Afrikaanerdom purportedly represents the triumph and determination of God's chosen people (their Calvinist selves) over the oppression of the imperialists (the British) and the forces of barbarism (the Xhosa, Zulus, and other African peoples). Erected at the time of fascist domination in Europe and completed in the year of the Nationalist Party ascendance to power in South Africa (1948), this monument to white supremacy, of questionable artistic merit even then, was at the peak of its iconic strength. While it has physically survived the transition to democracy, however, this vast and trunkless block of stone stands abandoned, its meaning nullified by universal suffrage.

A contrary case can be made for bridges. For the most part decidedly un-useless, bridges are often cited as cultural icons signifying place and, sometimes, community. The Golden Gate Bridge and Sydney Harbor Bridge are inseparable from their cities and topographies. The Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia are inseparable from their histories.

But bridges, however functional, are the stuff of fantasy. Tunnels do not have that cachet. A possible exception — at least until recent events — was the London Underground,

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which in the minds of Londoners of a certain age represented the safe haven that it became during the Blitz of 1940. Henry Moore's sketches of mothers and children asleep in each others' arms on platforms and within the tunnels themselves invested this stinking and dysfunctional infrastructure with a numinous quality that may now be gone forever.

In this period of nomadic voyeurism, it is important to distinguish between the icons of consumption tourism (the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids) that are simply items on a checklist of the visiting foreigner and those buildings that have served to define and to give identity to their native populations. To the international art set for instance, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is celebrated as one more brilliant product in a constellation of such cultural destinations.

For those wishing to revive their cities, the "Gehry object" is as reproducible as any work of art in an age of mechanical production. For the Basques, however, the building derives its strength uniquely from its place and political context. The anarchy of form, though striking in itself, attains its fullest meaning when viewed as a reflection of Basque resistance to the central authority of Madrid and 60 years of fascism. Considered in this way, Gehry's inspired creation is not a fungible commodity that can be traded in New York and Los Angeles with indifference.

Infinite reproduction does not necessarily dilute the power of the symbol. The Parthenon is unique in its site and in its expression of the Doric. It has been reproduced in generic form wherever the institutions of Graeco-Latin culture prevail. Far from diminishing the authority of the original, however, the latter-day facsimiles found even in their meanest form in the portals of a bank or a high school serve to fortify the meaning of the original and the Athenian humanism for which it stands. Paradoxically, the Parthenon Marbles, the contested sculptures that constituted the frieze and metope of the temple that were "rescued" by Lord Elgin and taken to the British Museum, have become for Greece a more eloquent national symbol in their very absence.

Do any of Boston's buildings repay examination in this way? Is there an architecture in this city that embodies the collective consciousness of Bostonians, that gives the city its identity? Russell Banks once cleverly remarked that the vernacular architecture of farms and villages is to New England as reggae is to Jamaica. Or, one might add, as red brick is to Boston. Try as one might, it is hard to say whether the icons of democracy such as the State House and City Hall, or the places of worship such as Trinity Church and Old North Church have any more stature in the public mind than, say, Fenway Park or the Citgo Sign.

Whereas the seats of government and the churches have an iconic stature embodied in their architecture as intended symbols of community, the same cannot be said of the ballpark and its gasoline advertisement neighbor that, despite their architecture, have inherited their shrine-like status through historic association with the much beloved resident team of erstwhile losers. Old North Church, beyond its inherent elegance, has a national stature attributable as much to Paul Revere and Longfellow's poem as to the architecture itself. The latter day symbol of the city is of course the Big Dig, ranging from the sublime image of Christian Menn's cable-stay bridge, to the literally sub-liminal weeping walls of Tip's Tunnel. As a symbol of a city whose glass from one day to the next is either half-full or half-empty, it is not an unfitting monument.

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