

“The Selfish Artefact: Prioritising the Social Network In the Design of Contemporary Architecture”

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Abstract:

Modern Chinese cities provide an insightful and often disturbing look at the direction of modern commercial architecture, as corporations compete to establish their buildings as icons on the urban skyline.

The focus of the building as a corporate statement - a ‘selfish artefact’ - prioritises the iconic value of the building to the detriment of the social function of the building and the part it plays in the larger urban fabric. The physical and social edges of the site become barriers rather than boundaries, and fail to connect the building to the greater urban network. To subjugate its urban role is to ignore the social structures that bind the communities in which it is built, and thus threaten the local place identity and the value each structure has to the individual and to the greater social group.

Buildings, individually and collectively, can be regarded as places, and places are critical to individuals and communities. Many current models of place (e.g. Dovey 2009; Gustafson 2001) define place in terms of its dependence upon networks of social relationships rather than simply in terms of qualities that exist within a physical locality (Easthope 2004). In particular Massey (1992, 1995) points out that places are neither bounded nor settled, and whilst these definitions do not exclude the physical realm they do emphasise the need to recognize that the physical aspects of place are subject to interpretation within socially constructed value frameworks. The current architecture tends towards an architecture of exclusion which, at best, provides value on an elitist level only.

This paper aims to highlight the consequences of prioritizing the corporate icon to the detriment of urban connection; it argues for refocusing on the contribution of individual architecture to the greater concept of place, and how this can be achieved without ignoring the corporate goals, through prioritizing the social network over corporate and aesthetic considerations.

End.