

JKWIS 2014 Architecture in Society

Architecture: A Reflection of Ideology

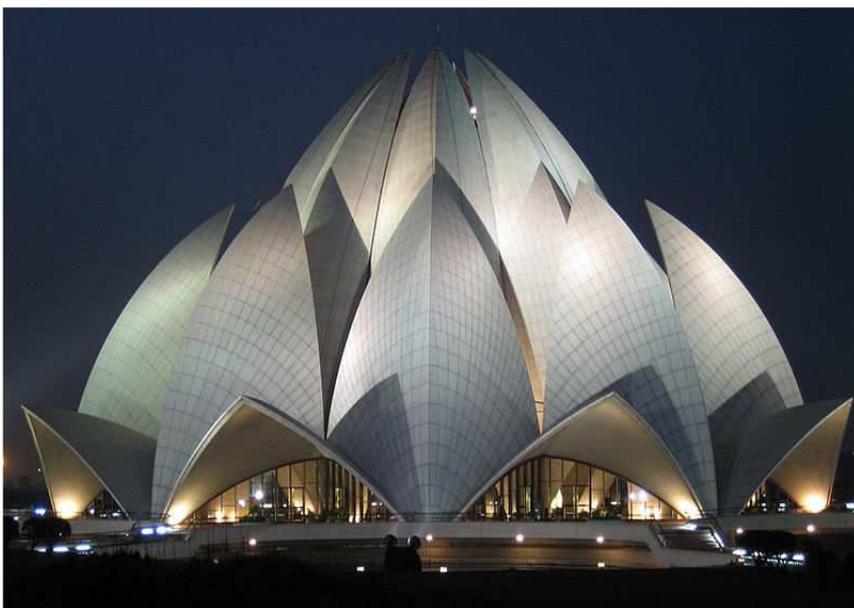
The mightiest men have always inspired architects; the architect has always been under the spell of power.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The banks, they're like cathedrals; I guess casinos took their place.
The Playboy Mansion, U2

In his 1987 documentary on economics and culture, *The Midas Touch*, British journalist Anthony Sampson commented that were aliens to land in one of the world's great metropolitan centres, they would conclude that humans were in thrall to a strange religion, one in which they apparently prayed, in towering cathedrals, before garish screens, and followed enormous charts and readouts as they flickered and moved. The story of society is one of evolution, certainly, and perhaps the most visible and literal evidence of change is that of our urban landscapes. While our planet looks the same from space, and rural change has been slow (if increasingly evident, particularly in periods of mass migration away from the land), it is in our cities where these dynamic forces have wrought the most obvious and dramatic differences. We have seen these forces as the results of architectural advance and technology, and of artistic and cultural development; in this month's discussions on architecture we look at how ideology – religious, political, economic – has shaped the built environment.

Almost all religions require people to congregate, and these congregations need to take place in sacred spaces. We have seen already how many of the iconic developments in architecture have been inspired by the need to build for religion, but this month we consider the extent to which architecture reflects a particular ideology, and thus how far the form of the building demonstrates the essence of the ideology, rather than merely providing an area for congregation and celebration (or a work space for financial transactions, or an assembly for politicians and acolytes).

How many of the great religious buildings portray the essence of their religion, or some other aspect of it, by the manner of construction? What effect is achieved, or ideology underlined, by the particular form of the [Lotus Temple](#) (below)? Would a non-adherent have an understanding or insight into the tenets of this religion from the building itself?



Lotus Temple, New Delhi; 1986

Does the size of a religious building indicate its relative importance to that religion or society? The largest and most important mosque in the Islamic tradition, enclosing the [Kaaba](#), is the [Al-Masjid Al-Haram mosque](#), in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Over the period of the annual Hajj pilgrimage (shown below) it can accommodate up to 2 million worshippers. Do all ideologies – religious or secular – need a building’s sheer size to convey a message about the ideology?



Al-Masjid Al-Haram Mosque, Mecca; 1570

In our first month’s discussions on architectural evolution, we saw how style evolved to reflect time and place, and fine demonstrations of this were the Christian churches of the Romantic, Gothic, and Renaissance styles. Do you think that this implied the nature of the Christian religion was also changing over this period, or were these merely different styles for different times and places? Would certain modern architectural styles – such as [Brutalism](#) – be unfitting for a religious building, and if so, why? Many [stunningly original](#) church styles have indeed flourished, and been celebrated, as in the recent [UK awards](#) for the best modern churches. There is a fascinating discussion of the tension between the traditional and the modern in [this article](#), and indeed the Vatican itself has made [its views known](#) (on, for example, the Fuksas church below).



Church of St Paul the Apostle, Foligno; Massimiliano Fuksas, 2009

While imposing concrete structures reflect a departure from traditional religious architecture, other ideologies have used them to reflect the power and stability of their own belief systems. Perhaps none has done this more emphatically than the statist ideologies of communism and fascism. Whilst at opposite ends of the politico-economic spectrum, and ideological enemies, these two twentieth-century worldviews have used architecture – and architects – to make similar bold statements.

[Albert Speer](#) rose to fame / infamy as Adolf Hitler's architect, and created buildings to reflect Nazi power and its beliefs, and produced many other unrealized plans for Hitler's supposed thousand-year empire. Perhaps Speer's most dramatic illustration of the ideological basis for his architecture – the rallying and populist elements within National Socialism – was his design for the [Nuremberg parade grounds](#). Best seen at night, as below, Speer referred to it as a "cathedral of light", and it is one of his few buildings to survive largely intact.



"Cathedral of Light", Parade Grounds, Nuremberg; Speer, 1934

Hitler recognised the power of architecture to reflect the core aspects of his ideology; indeed, he saw the whole world of art and architecture as reflecting the values of society. Thus he was scathing about what he termed "degenerate" art of Germany in the 1920s, and sought to give an unequivocal message about the new German state of which he was leader. This would reach its ultimate expression in the [reshaping of Berlin](#) under Speer's direction. An illustrated essay on Nazi architecture can be found [here](#).



Model for the reconstruction of Berlin; Speer, 1937

In 1937 an [international exposition](#) was held in Paris, and Speer, on learning of the Soviet plans for an enormous pavilion (designed by Palace of the Soviets' architect, [Boris Iofan](#)), created a larger German one directly opposite. This presents the fascinating juxtaposition below, with the Eiffel Tower as a backdrop.



German (left) and Soviet (right) pavilions for International Exposition, Paris; Speer and Iofan, 1937

In the Soviet Union, the era of communism (1917-1991) left many buildings redolent with the spirit of a new age – and left yet others on the drawing board. We encountered Le Corbusier in Block 1 of JKWIS, and in his winning entry for the [Centrosoyuz](#) building in Moscow in 1933, he attempted to combine his trademark principles (e.g. the flat roof, ribbon windows) with those of “a nation that is being organized in accordance with its new spirit”.



Centrosoyuz, Moscow; Le Corbusier, 1933

In late 2011 the Royal Academy of Arts in London exhibited [Building the Revolution](#), on the early years of Soviet art and architecture from 1915-1935. You can listen to the curator’s accompanying public lecture [here](#).

The Soviet leader Stalin felt the need to demonstrate muscularity in architecture that told of collective strength and togetherness. He organized a number of competitions for great palaces and offices of the people; we saw an example in the never-completed Palace of the Soviets in the first month of JKWIS. As with Hitler, Stalin planned for the rebuilding of Moscow; examine [this fascinating Youtube video](#) of his largely *unrealized* 1935 architectural plan for the reconstruction (this included the completed and asymmetrical, [Moskva Hotel](#) below). *Do you think these plans aimed to demonstrate Soviet power primarily to those outside the Soviet Union, or to those inside it?*



Moskva Hotel, Moscow; Savelyov and Stepan, 1934

Tower blocks were built in several countries in the Soviet era; these below are in Prague, and known as [Panelaky](#). They reflected communist ideology in the sense they were meant to be low-cost mass housing, and also foster a collectivist or communal spirit in their inhabitants; nevertheless, on coming to office in 1990, Czech President Vaclav Havel said many must be “slated for liquidation” (due primarily to concerns about the enduring quality of construction).



Panelaky, Prague; 1960s

Prague is home to some of the most stunning architecture from both before and during the communist period; we shall experience much of it during JKWIS. There is a thought-provoking and beautifully illustrated essay on its communist era architecture, together with that of other communist bloc states, on the [Torn Curtain website](#).

Secular and religious ideologies can see as unacceptable the co-existence of constructions incompatible with their belief systems. Thus the Taliban destroyed the [Buddhas of Bamiyan](#) in Afghanistan, and Stalin had no compunction in destroying old Tsarist architecture, or in dynamiting the [Church of Christ the Saviour](#) in Moscow to provide the space for his construction of the Palace of the Soviets. The church was rebuilt in 1997.

The clash between different ideologies is always freighted. U2's song lyric at the beginning of this essay, resonating as it does with Anthony Sampson's observation, and with the financial crisis of the last seven years, should give us pause for thought. Here is the view of [Citicorp Center](#) in New York, reminiscent of a cathedral.



Citicorp Center, New York; Stubbins and LeMessurier, 1977

The construction of this capitalist cathedral is instructive, overshadowing as it does a literal place of worship, [St Peter's Church](#), and featuring architectural anomalies that almost [led to disaster](#).

The power of economics to reshape the urban (and rural) environment has always been there; from Blake's "[dark, satanic mills](#)" of the industrial revolution to the gleaming capitalist towers of New York, Hong Kong and London. *Do the modern skylines of financial centres reflect something elemental in the power of this secular ideology of money, in a way similar to those of religion and politics?*

Look at [this](#) short and powerful clip on the symbolic importance of [The Shard](#), a new glass and steel edifice on London's South Bank and the tallest building in the European Union. Standing close to Borough Market and amid a much older more traditional setting, it arouses conflicting emotions in Hal Foster, professor of art at Princeton University. Foster suggests that "if it is a symbol of anything, it is of finance capital." *Do you agree with him, and with his other sentiments?*



London skyline dominated by The Shard; Piano, 2012

The success of the United States as an economic power has come not just from financial capital – it was the leading industrial power before the growth of the financial services sector – but perhaps nothing demonstrates the power of an economic zone as much as its buildings. We witness China’s tremendous economic growth reflected in its architecture – amply demonstrated in the currently ongoing [bi-city biennale of urbanism/architecture](#) in Shenzhen.



World Trade Center, New York; Yamasaki, 1971

The Twin Towers of the [World Trade Center](#) were a literal expression of the power of capitalism to shape the urban environment and, perhaps, a statement about the wider power of capitalism. Their destruction altered the literal and figurative landscape in a way different to the attack upon the Pentagon. *Do you think that the architecture of an economic system, such as capitalism, conveys a different or similar message to the architecture reflecting the other ideologies in this essay? Which buildings in your own country carry most collective significance?*

The ideologies in this essay express their core beliefs, and the relationship of individuals to those ideologies, in a number of ways, but not least through their architecture. *One might feel included or excluded by capitalism itself, for example, but how far does its architecture give the same message to the individual? Do the great religious buildings – think of the churches, mosques, synagogues and temples in your country – say the same things to the believer as do the religions themselves? How far do the materials used in construction reflect ideology; is concrete necessarily associated with statism, marble and precious metals with religion, and glass and steel with capitalism?*

For the third essay in the JKWIS 2013-14, I would like you to address the following dual question, after a month of online debate among yourselves and with me and your teachers:

**How accurately does architecture reflect prevailing ideology?
Do all successful ideologies require architectural support?**

Post your responses, containing appropriate examples to support your argument, online in fewer than 750 words and by January 31, 2014.

Tim Parkinson, December 26, 2013