

The Role of Urban Symbols in the Global Competition

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1. Introduction

The cities, supported by the world capital and changed organization of production, services and market, form their internal and external networks, redefining the importance of their spaces, processes and flows. Although (un)prepared to respond to different civilization challenges, their urban environment is forced to balance between the various needs and the global post-modern mainstream, while the accelerating technology (r)evolution inevitably leads to the next phase of urban history.

The urban growth and the urban development become global imperatives, while the competition for the leading position in the global network of power reflects the true nature of modern urban nodes. At the same time, the myths of the new global order are playing an important role in the (un)intentional manipulation with (un)expected consequences - chasing the right opportunity for new sensations and virtual eternity, urban space, as a hybrid of our primeval needs and cyber-logic, is trying to activate its archetypal defense against the ephemeral.

The relation between globalization, new symbolism of urban space and its role in the creative economy becomes very important. Therefore, the numerous examples of global nodes reveal the essence of this urbo-social phenomenon and identify different models of its application in the process of planning. The contemporary city and its spaces - as the symbols of global initiation, urban identity (cultural, ethnical, historical) and excitation/inhibition of its citizens and visitors, have been shaping a new, recognizable and competitive urban context, capable to participate in the global game. However, the final result of this process is not easy to predict - the future shaped by globalizing contradictions will remain an enigma whose clue lies well hidden inside the evolution labyrinth.

2. The city of wonders

The cities shaped by globalization represent mediators, transmitters and transformers of global flows, adopting the imperative of global competitiveness as an aim and/or a tool of urban economical sustainability. At the same time, every city emphasizes its uniqueness and advantages based upon complex financial, technological and cultural *fundus*. However, urban potentials are, as always, projected through physical structure which should be, more than anything else - attractive. Beside loud and aggressive rhetoric and inventive marketing campaigns, urban nodes should also provide global (land)marks which connect urban spaces with contemporary networks and flows - on practical and symbolical level.

Today, the new control and command role of world cities (Friedmann, 1986; Mollenkopf, 1993; Sassen, 1991) goes beyond national borders permitting the numerous possibilities for connectivity and manipulation with global streams. The advanced technology, ensuring the higher urban and global efficiency, reduces the importance of 'the place', rapidly increases the number of different matrixes and creates various faces of the 'global community'. Like the ancient Indian god Shiva, who, from the center of vagueness emits all

the diversities of the world, globalization expresses a dualistic nature of our existence - destructive and beneficent, but miraculously ordered to function on multiple and differentiated communication levels. Therefore, the city space and its physical dimension represent the only material shelter from the unknown and frightening world of suppressed irrationality.

The post-modern logic of disjunction and numerous possibilities, forced fragmentation and negated wholeness emphasizes differences, individuality and instigates ambiguity. Is this condition just a hasty response to the fear of total uniformity, the best direction towards its realization or just one of attempts to avoid past mistakes and get out from the existing confusion - it is difficult to estimate. However, the city image of globalization, built upon these principles, has been transformed into the complete antipode of its artificial uniqueness. Consequently, the intervening of new flows and overlapping of different modes of our existence as a final result has completely changed physical and symbolical matrixes, bonds and structures still able to tame the reality and give it a metaphorical meaning.

The contemporary *cardo* and *decumanus* are raised high above the three-dimensional image of terrestrial orientation getting their new significance through the recently promoted determinative elements - communication and movement. Since the contemporary world cannot be interpreted simply as a material thing, but as an information and an idea, the urban space, as the most complex human artifact, modifies itself into the real image of continual process of space-time aggregation. As a result, the urban landscape transforms itself into the 'positive' image - oriented from the ex-industrial toxic legacy to the post-industrial business-leisure-culture patchwork, ready to host the new global elite.

The contemporary city of wonders is also built upon the idealized image(s) of purified environment, (re)symbolized skyline, deliberately removed industrial iconography and ravishing architectural monuments of human vanity. Therefore, in the attempt to regenerate or to develop their economical base global cities are using the verified 'successful' patterns which enable their metamorphosis from the old-fashioned cocoons to the positive postmodern images based upon tertiary activities. However, it is not yet clear if we are living in a fairytale or a nightmare - the answer is, as always, somewhere in the future.

3. Myths of globalization?

Responding to needs, desires and aspirations of the global society the myths of globalization - identity, community, cosmopolitanism and networking, have become a specific hybrid of our unconscious inheritance and technologically shaped future. The urban space, as a place of the most intense transformations, provides new modes of social interaction, (dis)continuity and multiple identities. Its infrastructure (physical and virtual) emphasizes its ethnical, cultural, social and professional diversity, creates completely homogenized fragments and promotes this unusual collage of local-global values, as a unifying force of the evolving global networks.

Numerous communities are using technological and information networks to link their members, to interrelate with similar groups, and to strengthen their position in the unstable urban environment. However, the urban community still has its symbolical value and improvement of its technological abilities creates an opportunity for a better organization on the local and regional level, as well as its activation and participation in planning and decision-making processes. At the same time, different civil initiatives tend to regenerate the civic life and public space in the alienated and dispersed cities, but their way out from the introverted and passive urban segments is usually hidden behind the computer screen.

The cosmopolitanism, as a modern utopia and a light-motif of the globalization process, becomes an important value that should be reached. Since it could be manifested on several levels - political, economical, cultural, religious and psychological, its real power could sometimes be very frightening for a society in transition. The recognizable cultural and political identity transforms into the global cliché while the traditional way of life, modified by the global forces, loses its battle against time and the ephemeral. The new ICT concept, as a main skeleton of the present global comprehension, supports this idea and alleviates its

implementation, but, at the same time, it creates a false image of our 'cosmopolitan' reality which often does not include integration and co-operation, but isolation and total ignorance. However, information and media systems enable intensive interaction between global citizens, build a different kind of communication, and create a new, virtual frame of the human existence with a new global myth - networking.

According to Castells (1994), the technological informational revolution is an essential component of our (information) society which, following the logic of networks (i.e. 'spaces of flows') shapes the social morphology and the urban space. The importance, role and nature of contemporary networks is, of course, multiple and diverse, but their mythological background originates from the dawn of the human civilization - when the beginning of the world was described as a divine creation of terrestrial and/or celestial nets. However, contemporary networks - physical, electronic or symbolical are real, and development of information and communication technologies has influenced the emergence of advanced types of infrastructure able to backbone the growth of the urban economy and to provide the best starting position for the city.

The basic informational infrastructure of cities - telematics, becomes one of the major urban investments, although, according to some authors, it could lead to the fracturing and disintegration of urban economics and to its transformation into the collections of units under the global influence (Graham, Marvin, 1996). At the same time, one of the most important global networks is the global airline network, also responsible for the acceleration of global flows. Its main advantage is the possibility for personal contacts and increased global interactions. Unfortunately, this network reveals the alter-ego of globalization process in which terrorism becomes global category, and contemporary networks - its most frequent targets.

Causing the contradictory effects, the myth of networking could be used as a sophisticated tool for control, but, whether it will be the most efficient weapon of the globalization or its (un)expected weakness - it is unclear. The network has always been a symbol of the complex relationship beyond time and space limits, a symbol of unity and entanglement that can be recognized even today. Therefore, if the old Georgian myth of creation comes true and if the dark side of the Creator sends rats and mice to gnaw the vast sky net, the Man will be forced to confront with the series of realities which antagonize, interweave, annul each other or superimpose.

4. Towards global initiation

Every city, as a node of global networks, has to respect the global, economical logic of urban development. Therefore, the first step of the global initiation is usually creation of new city gates (airports, railway buildings) and establishment of economic and information contact zones - the impressive business areas with their vertical accents of office towers. This physical and symbolical frame, as a necessary pre-condition of globally recognizable image, raises the city above its national context and shapes its structure into the monumental landscape.

New city gates become the main contact points between different kinds of communication and transform themselves into the complex mega-structures, as the most vital organs of global centers. These symbols of the global prestige transmit symbolical messages by their attractive architectural appearance, glorifying the power of modern technologies (Osaka, Paris-Roissy), expressing the national dignity (Jeddah, Oslo, Seoul) and/or reflecting the importance of a city in the world hierarchy (London, Tokyo, Hong Kong).



Figure 1. Kansai International Airport, Osaka (arch. R. Piano, 1994) - built on the artificial island this airport complex has become not just a new city gateway, but an important symbol of technological progress.
(Pearman, Hugh (2002) *Contemporary World Architecture*, London: Phaidon Press, pp. 356)

At the same time, the railway and subway terminals, although mostly important for regional connectivity, have a twofold role. They could be interpreted as reinvented urban landmarks (Rotterdam-Blaak, Lyon-Satolas, Toyama-Takaoka) or they could be used as symbols of new urban regeneration (London, Bilbao, Seville, Lisbon etc.).

The connectors of capital, with their similar skylines, emphasize the global character of financial and information flows integrated into large business districts. However, even these oases of concentrated multinational corporations are based upon powerful urban infrastructure that should provide excellent physical and electronic accessibility, as a guaranty of global sustainability and progress. The monumental geometry made of steel and glass should symbolize the global potential of the urban node(s), but also represents the power of multinational or local corporations, state aspirations and, above all, the global 'landmark' which should channel international financial flows.



Figure 2. World Financial Center, New York (arch. C. Pelli, 1981) - the role model for the business areas of global nodes
(Sudjic, Deyan (1993) *The 100 Mile City*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, pp. 40)

In addition, the verticals of power in the shape of modern towers become also a symbol of advanced technological possibilities and imperative of global competition. Even their names are clear statements of urban ambitions based upon:

- multinational capital of the owner;
- role of the city in the global networks;
- position of the building in an urban structure;
- national identity;

- vision of the future.

However, their explicit symbolic (for ex. WTC in New York) could be their worst enemy. The global initiation, as its ancient ritual precedents, could be, sometimes, very painful, but there is no other entrance into the globalized world.

5. Facing the urban identity

Today, it is very obvious that cultural, political and economical globalization are very important factors in the process of city shaping. At the same time, as a response to global unification, the tradition is also searching for its new position(s) in the urban surrounding. However, it is still difficult to establish equilibrium between pro-globalization and anti-globalization flows creating the environment for the harmonized functioning of all identities which represent the unique treasure of the contemporary city.

The perception of the surrounding is not possible without the evocation of all space 'links' which we have had up to the present moment and memory itself is not possible without perception. Unfortunately, although memory presents one of important elements to be used for the directed and/or selective design of urban spaces, it could be a subject of political and/or architectural manipulations. Therefore, the city space creates and modifies collective memory while the cultural and historical symbolism are used as ideological messengers.

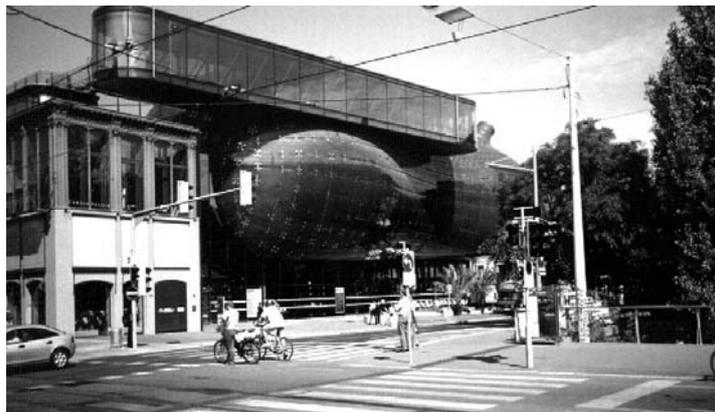


Figure 3. Kunsthhaus, Graz (arch. P. Cook, K. Fournier, 2003) - the conjunction of past and future, as well as tradition and modern technology in service of culture and global attractiveness of an urban node



**Figure 4. "Band des Bundes", Berlin, model (arch. A. Schultes, C. Frank, C. Witt, 1994) - the complex of federal buildings which points out a resolute direction towards democracy and reflects a new, open society
(Van Uffelen, Chris (2003) *Berlin - Architecture and Design*, Kempen: teNeus, pp. 4)**

Accordingly, it is not surprising that the humanity again focuses its attention on the urban waterfronts. Since the ancient times, water has been the natural symbol of our existence. Furthermore, its continual flow and the mythical role of regeneration, purification and initiation suddenly became very important for the officially imposed imperative of sustainability. As a result, images of the recently regenerated ports and docks reflect not only the power of capital, but reanimate the role of water which 'opens' the city and connects it to the rest of the world. Consequently, the chance for the balanced and comprehensive development of these areas has been found in the coordinated strategic actions whose final output reveals amalgam of complex and complementary activities and preserved identity. This model, for example, has been applied by Helsinki and Hamburg, where the independent, ecologically acceptable zones were established, while the waterfronts in the lower Manhattan, Sidney, Le Havre, London, Glasgow and along the Pacific Rim (Tokyo, Osaka) have been occupied by global business which develops the new, powerful financial/commercial front of techno-capitalistic power.

In contrast, cities like Bristol, Buenos Aires, Genoa or Jakarta used their own urban heritage, emphasizing the importance of collective memory embodied in the old activities, their spaces and cultural uniqueness. However, the example of Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires (Schneier-Madanes, 2000) is a reflection of global dichotomies which could be found even in a sustainable planning approach. From the beginning, the urban regeneration of this waterfront was oriented towards the promotion and preservation of the old port identity, rehabilitation of the docks and internal restructuring. New infrastructure, along with the whole set of global activities and famous architectural names, certainly has been attracting many investors but for the total success and its future sustainability few problems have to be solved. One of them is economic, social and spatial exclusiveness of this area which again underlines the huge social gaps, the second one is the lack of proclaimed city-river interaction and, finally, there is the question of further investments which is always sensitive, especially in the cases of unstable national economies.

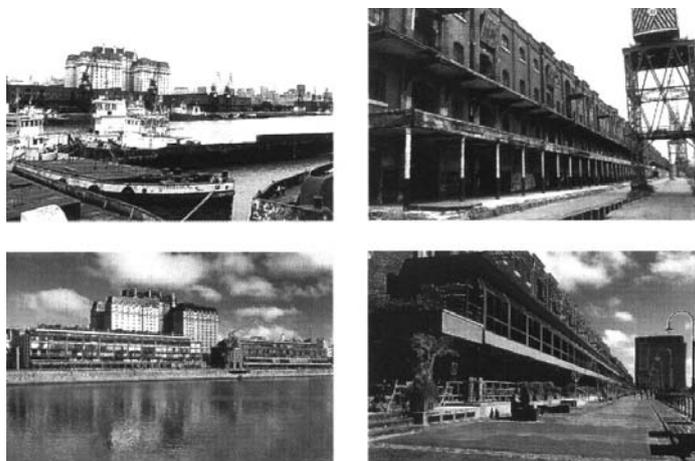


Figure 5. Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires (1999) - regeneration of the port area as an attempt to protect historical and cultural heritage, as well as to upgrade its urban identity. (Schneier-Madanes, G. (2000) "Buenos Aires aborde son estuaire", *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 332 (jan-fev), pp. 58)

Evidently, urban history is recalled whenever a city needs new financial resources which would be helpful for the further development. The successful renewal and transformation of polluted and abandoned river banks, seashores, ex-industrial areas and old city quarters enables important infusion of capital imposing a new (or rediscovered) urban identity as a collage of business, shopping and housing. Molded to attract exclusive clientele, these urban changes have a significant symbolical value for the circle of sustainability because the overcrowded urban nodes are forced to recognize their own hidden potential which has been often neglected and misinterpreted. Consequently, the culture as an

important resource of memories, images and events, the purification and regeneration as an opportunity for reanimation of neglected areas, and, finally, the national dignity and reconciliation as catalysts of numerous global and local tensions have been emphasized as the places of urban identity. The cultural, historical and national symbols are activated, crystallized and redefined, and the result of this process is the multidimensional urban puzzle without a beginning and an end - which every part represents the microcosm of its own.

6. Between excitation and inhibition

The routine which we are facing everyday could lead us to the reconsideration and re-examination of deep layers of our consciousness. Concealing our wishes and ideals, they entangle the superficial and meaningless with intellectual, spiritual and enlightened, successively exciting and inhibiting our senses, thoughts and instincts. However, the global economy have taken advantage of this processes as well, and its play with conscious and unconscious levels of our psychological being becomes a new generator of capital - clearly manifested in the city space as well.

Entertainment, consumption and promotion on one side, and the genuine spiritual revelation on the other side define a new image of uncountable desires which make our limited existence more fulfilled and justified. Simultaneously, the city networks enrich themselves with places, buildings and events releasing out our frustrations. The effect, although brief and commercialized, provides us a possibility to step aside and to outdistance from the global current which takes all of us in the same direction. Therefore, the modern arenas and the shelters of profane and sacred, represent a great number of urban nodes which are incessantly pulsing, offering an escape from monotony.

Consequently, the sports competitions (Olympic games, Championships, World cups) influence the spreading of the globalization using the powerful global financial/commercial apparatus which transforms sport into the new, glamorous kind of industry. The contemporary sports arenas modify themselves into the tools of competition directed by famous world architects and corporations becoming, at the same time, a marketing resource, and a display for regional, state and international aspirations and values. They should provide a positive, recognizable image of a city and a multiple networking but they could be also seen an important impetus of urban and regional development (Barcelona, Seoul, Athens, Madrid, Atlanta etc.). At the same time, sports arenas could be comprehended as a specific modern theater with an extravagant appearance reflecting the nature and the structure of a society, revealing the tensions and hostility, staging the moment of public catharsis and - attracting the attention of world media.

The similar logic of rational-irrational urban animation, which varies between reality and illusion, symbol and simulacrum, has been applied in the 'sacred' and 'profane' nodes whose difference cannot be clearly distinguished. The shopping areas with their 'cathedrals' (for ex. Collezione-Tokyo, Galeries Lafayette-Berlin, Toronto Galleria), fairs and Expo-s, as well as numerous theme-parks which re-create past and future, science or entertainment, become the top-spots for modern pilgrims searching for the new sensations. Unfortunately, beside obvious urban benefits - improvement of infrastructure, activation of devastated urban areas and introduction of new technologies, these places could cause environmental misbalance and/or social segregation which cannot be annulled by (questionable) economical sustainability.

In contrast to these terrestrial impulses, the global cities also contain 'oasis' dedicated to the spirituality. The meditative spaces (for ex. temples designed by Tadao Ando) and various centers of religious gathering are oriented towards introspection, but it does not mean that they do not excite and inhibit the urban space, as well as the ideas and feelings of their users. However, a great number of 'sacred' nodes, besides their usual iconography inspired by accepted canons, adjust their form to the local surrounding and, above all, to the global demands of architectural virtuosity, scenic design, unexpected symbolic and - television broadcasting. The religious buildings, deliberately destroying their mystical aura,

become spectacular sites with a very profane outlook which draws them closer to the modern Man.



Figure 6. The modern Cathedral?

(A) Toronto Galleria (arch. S. Calatrava, 1992) - this temple of consumerism inserted between globalized buildings brings human dimension to the city space

(B) Managua Metropolitan Cathedral - altar space (arch. R. Lagorreta, 1995) - even at the periphery of global flows of capital, urban nodes are always inseparable part of the religious networks. The cathedrals unite sacred and profane role becoming the place of multiple communication - the pivot of the community and a shelter for individual - using the elements of spectacle and offering a step aside from the gloomy life of marginal groups.

(A - Pearman, Hugh (2002) *Contemporary World Architecture*, London: Phaidon Press, pp. 189, B - Pearman, Hugh (2002) *Contemporary World Architecture*, London: Phaidon Press, pp. 152)

Therefore, the shelters of 'sacred' and 'profane' present just one kind of numerous global decoys used by globalization in order to achieve total multi-purpose networking manifested, almost without exceptions, through meta-symbols. They, actually, upgrade the traditional meanings of some primal symbols - vertical/axis, circle and center, use the 'democratic' orthogonal grid and transparent materials as the expression of proclaimed (but not always realized) openness and democracy and, finally, transpose the local set of symbols to the new global vocabulary. Consequently, these hybrid metaphors take over the role of a non-verbal advertising presenting an attractive pattern and becoming a powerful element of the city economy.

7. Conclusion

The global competition has started but the 'finish' line is far away on the global horizon. Therefore urban nodes have been using the complex polyvalent symbolism which shapes the new urban identity based upon numerous determinant elements - power, tradition, technology, cosmopolitanism, openness, democracy, center-periphery. However, beside these globally proclaimed 'guidelines', the symbolical code is also enriched by the local heritage which comprises cultural, religious, national and natural symbols. They all create an image full of contradictions directing the urban development towards an imaginative role model imposed by globalization.

Although designed to attract global attention, the spaces of global initiation, urban identity and excitation/inhibition, should also represent a physical and symbolical base for a society caught in the unstable nets of our reality. Therefore, although fragmented and distorted, the city continues its (r)evolution in the time continuum facing the challenges and generating the numerous incarnations. The redefined symbolic becomes a tool for the

reinforcement of the global position and urban economy, but its practical importance overcomes the spheres of spirituality and transcendence.

Between illusion and reality, deep imagination and superficial impressions, globalization, city and its new symbolism are shaping a new, but fragile cycle of urban existence - this time, its main *spiritus movens* is the global capital.

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