

# *POWER AND PLACE IDENTITY IN GLOBAL CITIES*

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*Coca Cola London Eye. © Mace Group 2019*

*With globalisation, cities across the world, regardless of their geographic predisposition can now build using similar materials, techniques and technology. This results in similar looking, towering building edifices in ‘alpha cities’ across the globe, from New York to London, Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai. Glass clad towers have become omnipresent in the last few decades as cities continue to express their political and economic foothold through their architecture, with each building vying to be taller and/or more memorable than the other.*

*In this global competition, skyscrapers are a particularly attractive symbol for cities. Owing to their sheer size and ability to accommodate large densities, they are a welcome solution to rapidly growing cities. However, another reason and an interesting use of these buildings lies in their height/size being a potential for iconic, global representation and an indication of the city’s power. “Every ambitious city wants an architect to do for them what Jon Utzon’s Opera House did for Sydney, and Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim did for Bilbao.” [1] Central Business Districts of most cities rely on ‘Corporate Architecture’ to resound their global stature to the world. This triggers a paradoxical question within the identity crisis - when cities around the world begin to look alike, what then, makes one stand out from the rest? Secondly, how does a city of such global standing resonate with its own citizens?*

London seems to have found an answer in iconography to both these questions currently plaguing global cities. For architecture in London particularly, there is the added dimension of its historically rich context. The city has been a seat of power for centuries and has constantly sought out an architectural expression

of this power. What we see is a shift over time of this power from religion, to the Monarchy and now to finance. The shift is such that one never really supersedes the other just that the world's perception of "power" has changed, without diminishing the importance of its precedents.



*The Olympic Velodrome a.k.a The Pringle. © Anthony Palmer*

It is possible that the long-standing British colloquialism led to the christening of the Elizabeth tower (earlier the Clock Tower) as 'Big Ben', and there are multiple theories of how the nickname came to be. The result of this nickname however, was unprecedented. It humanised a bell tower, converting simple stone and mortar into the people's tower watching over the city and telling time with its hourly rings. The tower became a part of people's lives, a part of the city and pivotal to the identity of London, so much that it features as the establishing shot of films set in London. [2]

This trend has furthered with the London Eye (Observation wheel) and the Pringle (The Velodrome) amongst others, with the Eye becoming a frequent appearance in pop culture of late. In the case of the Pringle, a cycling centre for the 2012 Olympics, the name coined by Londoners came out of a resemblance to the famous chips brand - an afterthought that inherently enhanced a sense of belonging to an already public space. What we can understand from this is that the distinct

form of the building lends itself to be a certain emblem for the city. Architecture is tending towards a sculpted form that captivates the eye and there is a direct relation between this form and the public's acceptance to it.

In the private sector, the phenomenon of nicknames associated with distinct forms has snowballed into a marketing tactic, a clever ruse for the developer to infuse meaning into "Corporate Architecture", which is otherwise a dull, straightforward spatial solution to business expectations. It can be argued that these are superficial gimmicks to make just another glass clad skyscraper seem enticing and do not address any real concerns of a monotonous urban fabric or the climatic implications of such building methods. Despite that, the reason why this is becoming increasingly popular in London's urban scenario is its relatability. Imagine walking along the streets of your city and suddenly seeing a monumental version of a toy from your childhood or a tool from your mother's kitchen - there's an instant, indisputable connection like no other.

Facing page- **Swiss Re Building better known as the Gherkin**. Image Credit: Vidhya Mohankumar



In light of these developments, the architectural theory surrounding buildings had to be recalibrated. [3] It was not just about how space was organised but also the meaning people associate to that space. The phenomenon of corporate vanity is seen as a symbolic asset. Per Olof Berg goes on to elaborate - "Furthermore, the emphasis on corporate surfaces can be seen as a purposeful adaptation to postmodern society with its emphasis on

appearance and mass communication. What counts today is as much the appearance of an organisation - and thus its credibility - as its performance."

While the striking form of the building becomes an asset to the developer, for architects, can the entire premise of a project rely on its reducibility into a daily object? For Norman Foster, who has many silhouettes of the London skyline to his credit, architecture has always been driven by ideas greater



*The ground plane of the Gherkin. Image Credit: Vidhya Mohankumar*

than the Vitruvian triad. His work is characterised by an artful integration of structure and services within the built, along with a poetic proclamation of form and material unlike any other. The “Gherkin” (30, St. Mary Axe Building) is a distinctive feat in its ability to have a diagrid node system for the facade - a result of Foster’s keen interest in viewing structure as an equally integral part of the ‘system’. The form in itself is derived from prevailing wind conditions and is a result of multiple iterations. The internal volumes are characterised by a series of light tunnels shifted by 5’ with each rising floor plate. This goes to show that the internal volumes are as intentionally articulated as its exterior facade. Here, the architect is akin to a juggler with multiple plates in the air - creating interesting spaces within the volume, making the entirety of the building sculpturally interesting and reinventing the usage of ‘corporate’ materials like glass and steel.

Another contemporary, the “Cheesegrater” (Leadenhall building) derives its form from constraints very specific to the site and the City of London. The city’s towering developments are governed by the views

they offer of St. Paul’s cathedral and the Cheesegrater gets its form from an attempt to prevent obscuring these views. Designed by Richard Rogers, the design claims to make use of the constraints to deliver an interesting icon, which could otherwise easily become a boring building.

The “Walkie-Talkie” by Rafael Viñoly makes clever use of planning regulations to maximise ‘lettable’ floor plates on the upper floors while simultaneously negotiating the form to give it the distinctive shape it has. However, it seems that in the attempt to add to the London skyline, the curvaceous facade now reflects enough heat to melt cars on neighbouring roads.

At a height of 309.7 metres, The “Shard” by Renzo Piano is currently the tallest building in London. Situated right near a transport hub, the height of the building was justified as an opportunity to provide adequate infrastructure near transport nodes for manageable growth of the city by providing for its commuters. It works as a mixed use facility, hosting hotels, workspaces and restaurants in its 72 habitable floors. Ironic as it is, the building gets its name



*The ensemble comprising the Walkie Talkie, Cheesegrater and the Gherkin as seen from the Shard. Image Credit: Vidhya Mohankumar*





**The Shard.** Image Credit: Vidhya Mohankumar



from a statement made by English Heritage, a charity that manages many historic monuments of the city. The organisation felt the design would ‘tear through historic London like a shard of glass’, which led to the building’s current name. [4]

With investigation, it becomes clear that these buildings are a by-product of their limitations, aspirations and intentions, which the architects used to establish distinctive silhouettes as part of the skyline. There is also an attempt to humanise these buildings in multiple ways - public plazas are articulated at their feet to withdraw from the bulky mass of the tower into a relatable scale. The Leadenhall building uses its structural system as a means to break down the scale of the entire mass. Introduction of sky decks and green pockets are attempts to integrate nature with the corporate environment, an inherently challenging combination for which an elegant solution is yet to be seen. These buildings go beyond their form to try and initiate a dialogue with their inhabitants.

Beyond all these intentions, the fact that these towers resemble familiar objects establishes an immediate connection with urban citizens. However, while their unique forms tend to garner a lot of attention both during construction and after, this in no way negates the flaws of these buildings. They rely primarily on active climate control, glass boxes are inherently inefficient in energy management and the excessive use of glass reflects heat into the immediate physical neighbourhood, increasing the heat island effect.

*While the skyline is constantly being dotted with uniquely shaped structures, a deeper investigation into the buildings reveals that they are in no way exclusive in their intent. They are propagated*

*as the answer to a city  
previously weary to  
skyscrapers, owing to  
its unorganised and  
unstructured skyline.*

**They are meant to be role models and to exemplify what ‘good’ design meant. [5] Whether they are indeed ‘good’ remains debatable and subjective. Yet, the distinctly shaped glass clad towers are here to stay for the immediate future, with the available technology and means to create a sustainable, meaningful connection to the city at large.**

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Source: *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*; Penguin, New York; 2005; Deyan Sudjic
- [2] Source: “Big Ben in Films and Popular Culture”. *The Daily Telegraph* - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/big-ben-films-popular-culture/> Accessed on 6 May 2019.
- [3] & [5] Source: *The Politics of Design: Architecture, Tall Buildings and the Skyline of Central London*; 2007; Igal Charney
- [4] Source: “History of the Shard, London Bridge”. *ShardLdn.com* - <https://www.shardldn.com/construction-history-html/> Archived from the original on 13 July 2012. Retrieved 9 May 2019.

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