

Propagating power through architecture

We see versions of power exerted in society in very many ways, including widespread subservience to an idol (God, idols, celebrities, etc.) or an induced dependence on platforms like Amazon, Google, Facebook, etc. Consistent content generation for an increase in our popularity or the platforms' abilities to pervade into so many aspects of our daily lives are examples of how we take and give authority, rationalizing the rage of the 'influencer'. We begin to understand power as the possession of control, authority or influence over others. Mobilizing ideas to gain influence also requires a certain critical mass. How does one begin to propagate their ideas to the world at large ?

While mediums of mass communication are the obvious way to go, architecture has long been a medium of mass communication of some very specific notions of authority. It has proven to be a medium that has very direct and straightforward moves with which to proclaim power. London, a city of layered histories illustrates these notions well. As a seat of power for centuries, notions of power have moved from religion to the Monarchy and more recently, to financial prowess. Considering the examples of St.Paul's cathedral, Buckingham Palace and the Shard, one can dissect the ways in which authority is exemplified. St.Paul's cathedral is characterised by its height and opulence, signifying the might of god over man, sustained for the longest time with height restrictions for surrounding buildings to not exceed the 365 feet height it scrapes in the sky. Buckingham palace on the other hand, covers an expansive area of land in a prime location in the city, boasting of privilege and luxury, ideals equally bolstered by laborious and expensive construction materials and techniques. As the neoliberal regime took steam with Thatcher, we see power morphing from public institutions into private companies. Cities across the world have to compete with their global counterparts, each proving their worth and financial standing through glossy and sleek skyscrapers. They have become status symbols, each one vying to be taller or more iconic than the other, with form and height becoming indicative of financial prowess. Examples in London include the Shard, the Cheesegrater and the Gherkin, all of which are shaped like their namesakes, in their attempt at being iconic.

Despite these changing hands of power, what prevails is a subliminal conditioning of how we operate in society, often in ways that revere (and never threaten) existing institutions of power. Concepts of height restrictions, historic view managements and air rights are all efforts to protect and sustain these edifices of power through changing times. Even the nicknames of the Shard or the Gherkin provide a sense of belonging and ownership to citizens who have no access to them. We see that architecture not only has the ability to communicate ideas of power, but to also perpetuate these ideas. If architects can make conscious design moves to communicate power, can we not also make moves to challenge these notions of power for a more equitable world ?