

# Architecture – Development of a Global Style

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## Introduction

Globalization—through travel, communications and consumerism—has opened the door to an unprecedented commercial success of individual architects who are able to cultivate a broad popular international appeal. Some of these architects such as Frank Gehry and Richard Meier offer a strong formalism and recognizable signature language. Others, such as the Italian Renzo Piano or the Spanish Santiago Calatrava pursue a more technical approach emphasizing the structural, material and systemic sophistication of buildings. This second group offers an example more easily followed by others in that they use systems of principles rather than a signature style. Superficially interpreted, however, these architects can be collectively de-

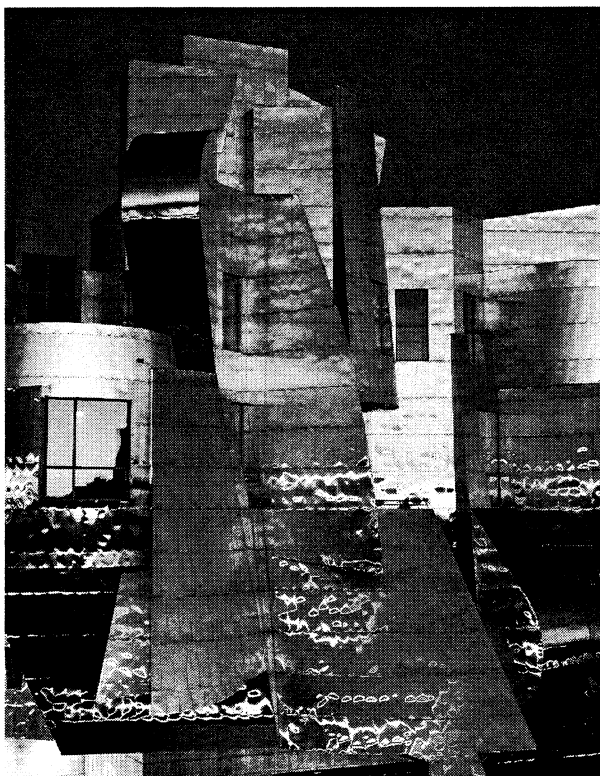


Fig. 1. Frank Gehry, Frederic R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis 1993.

scribed as “High Tech” architects and their aesthetic mimicked without meaning or understanding.

An inherent difficulty architects face is the proliferation of expression and the difficulty of connecting design to meaning. On one hand, an elite few signature architects collect prime commissions and fuel both the ambition and frequent disillusionment of aspiring designers. On the other hand, a lack of a coherent symbolic architecture language such as those found in past historic and regional styles in the past has left architects without a commonly recognized vocabulary. The great majority of architects struggle in this gap, responding to clients expectations by including eclectic architectural referents which may nostalgically reach for the past or conservatively conform to real estate market norms.

Within this context, architecture designed to display its technical virtuosity offers a different system of cross-cultural validation. Derived from structural and environmental concerns and applied to large-scale projects such as airports, stadiums, train stations and bridges, this architecture contains a system of forms connected ostensibly to the building’s performance. A close examination of successful projects reveals not only a technical know-how but also a formal savvy in appealing to clients. These apparently functional designs with their technical “look” lend a sense of economic viability in the form of apparent engineering determinism. However, even though the teams producing this performance driven architecture do not focus on a style, the structures they produce do tend to share a formal language. An extensive use of steel, glass, advanced materials, exaggerated and systematic details, exposed or heavily articulated climate control systems and highly complex shapes are among the more obvious unwritten goals of this aesthetic. As these formal attributes gain public and media attention, they congeal into an architectural style that enjoys global success.

Naturally, recurrent motifs can be derived from this technically oriented architecture and can be reduced to a formal style. As a global commercial product that offers the sobriety of engineering with the virtuosity of architectural performance, such a style is in high demand. Already, commercial architecture has picked up the performance aesthetic, with exposed steel, tensile connections, decorative ductwork and fabric roofs appearing as *aplique* to utilitarian developer boxes. Architects and students easily fall prey to the seduction of provocative images, pictures of finished buildings that lose the in-depth understanding of the design and construction processes that created them. To the other

extreme, designers can be fooled into thinking that buildings are derived entirely from technical requirements. Such buildings lack the exuberance by which a skilled architect can celebrate the performance of structures and materials. Charles Jencks put it succinctly in this way:

“Technological determinism is the occupational hazard of the High-Tech architect: at a certain stage he must believe that design just happens automatically as a consequence of an initial decision.”<sup>1</sup>

## Global Architectural Styles

Historically, attitudes toward architectural style have gone through continuous fluctuation between symbolically loaded formalisms and technologically described expression. The early Modernists attempted to break from the past and its historical named styles in the hope of finding a unifying “International Style”. After Modernism became commonplace, a renewed optimism in the 1960s saw a widening of technological expression, which embraced media culture and the idea of plug-in architecture. Later, architecture in general began to collect stylistic references with the rise of Postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s. Meanwhile, architecture that drew inspiration from technology and engineering grew beyond flexible boxes into sophisticated mechanisms handling complex programs while remaining visually exciting. At the end of the century, architectural culture continues to seek expression which can communicate globally a commonly recognized system of values.

This global context is fundamentally different than it was in the 1920’s. While global influence has been in play for centuries, only the recent decolonization of the Third World has invited these countries to join in the spiral of economic and technological progress. Global consumerism, communication, media and travel are inviting architects to solve unprecedented building problems. Communications and media technology have reached an efficiency and pervasiveness that allows effective intercontinental collaboration. At the same time, however, this climate creates a dense overlap of information that destabilizes the meaning of images.

## Development of a Global Style: Three approaches

To the credit of designers such as Renzo Piano and others, their expression shows a path to several design strategies, which avoid the confines of style yet offer a solid basis for architects to validate their skills. Rather than style unifying the design intent, the performance of the building becomes the directive. In effort to communicate this performance in its cultural context, the architect may apply design strategies to direct functionality and formal language of the building and incorporate commonly readable meaning to it. We have identified three such strategies, perceptible in designs by different architects in dif-

ferent global contexts.

A first approach, which closely follows a technical determinism, is a “realistic” approach; So-called “Eco-Tech” architecture exemplifies this attitude, concentrating on the conservation of resources and optimized building performance while at the same time attempting to create human-oriented spaces. A realistic attitude hopes to appeal to human sensibilities through a natural or authentic expression of materials and structure. The goal of design is an elegant integration of multiple structural and programmatic elements. Architecture following realistic strategies makes its appeal to human perception, enhancing a phenomenological engagement with the environment. Thomas Herzogs Wilkahn Factory in Bad Munder/Germany makes use of the aesthetic of exposed structure, expressing these elements on the building’s exterior. Herzog creates compositions of solar panels and windows emphasizing each where they function best. Design appear always to defer to the function and usability of the building. Renzo Piano’s Kansai Airport in Japan offers another example of realism embodied in the all-embracing multi-functioning steel trusses. The airport performs beautifully and efficiently, expressing itself at a scale suited to the reality of flight and international commerce.

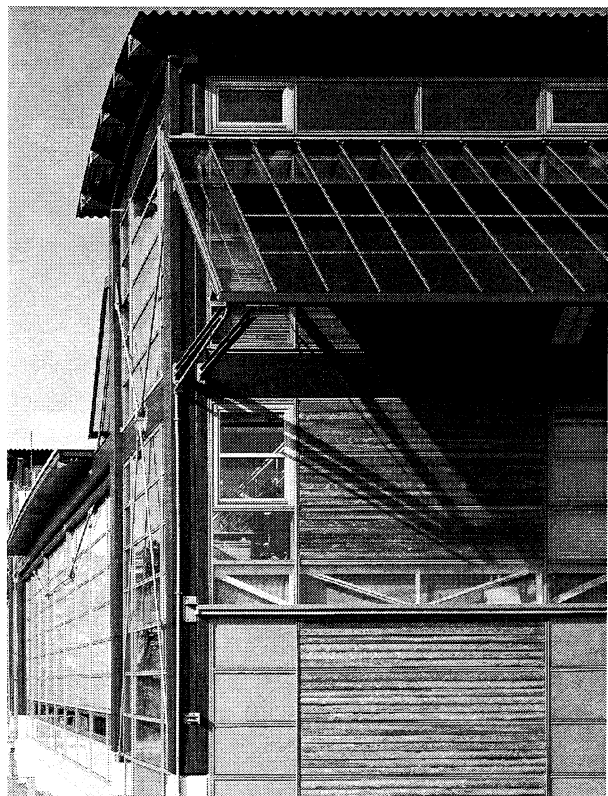


Fig. 2. Thomas Herzog Wilkahn Factory Bad Munder, Germany, 1993.



Fig. 3. Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Kansai Airport, Osaka, Japan, 1994

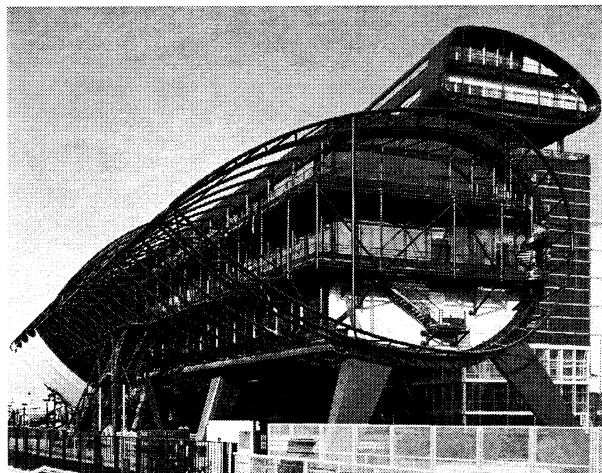


Fig. 4. William Alsop Architects, Regional Government Center, Marseilles, France, 1994

A second strategy for architecture allows metaphoric impressions to permeate architectural form-making. Design using this approach displays a savvy for both traditional and cultural contexts as well as the technological and media context of contemporary society. The building becomes expressive, even hyperbolic in its understanding of itself and the technology which creates it, and it uses these technological tools to explore unexpected, even irrational forms. It appeals to human sensibility by tapping into the mythology of technology and allusions both to its dominance over and its re-integration into nature. The key to metaphoric design strategies lies in the conscious manipulation of associations to engage a critical sensibility while mere creation of a signature style.

One example for this approach is Renzo Pianos Cultural Center in Nouméa, New Caledonia. Curved sail like facades evoke images of the traditional huts of this region and act as recognizable symbols for the cultural center. The same structures of laminated timber and stainless steel also incorporate a balancing function in the natural ventilation of the single pavilions. William Alsop in his Regional Government Center in Marseilles/France, also creates metaphoric forms, although his operate at a zoomorphic level to inspire impressionistic interpretation. However, these forms gain poignancy through their highly technical execution and skillful detailing.

A third design strategy seeks perceptual illusions in architecture, embracing both building technology and integration with media techniques and theatrical effects. Here, structures double as large screens carrying information, mirrors or layers of glass manipulate spatial perceptions, or structural gymnastics defy

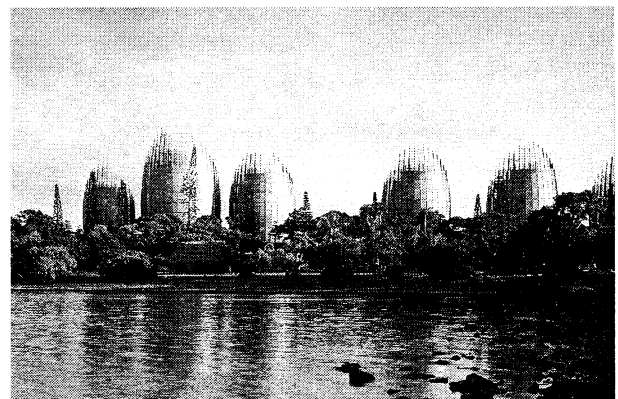


Fig. 5. Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Kanak Centre, New Calcedonia, 1998

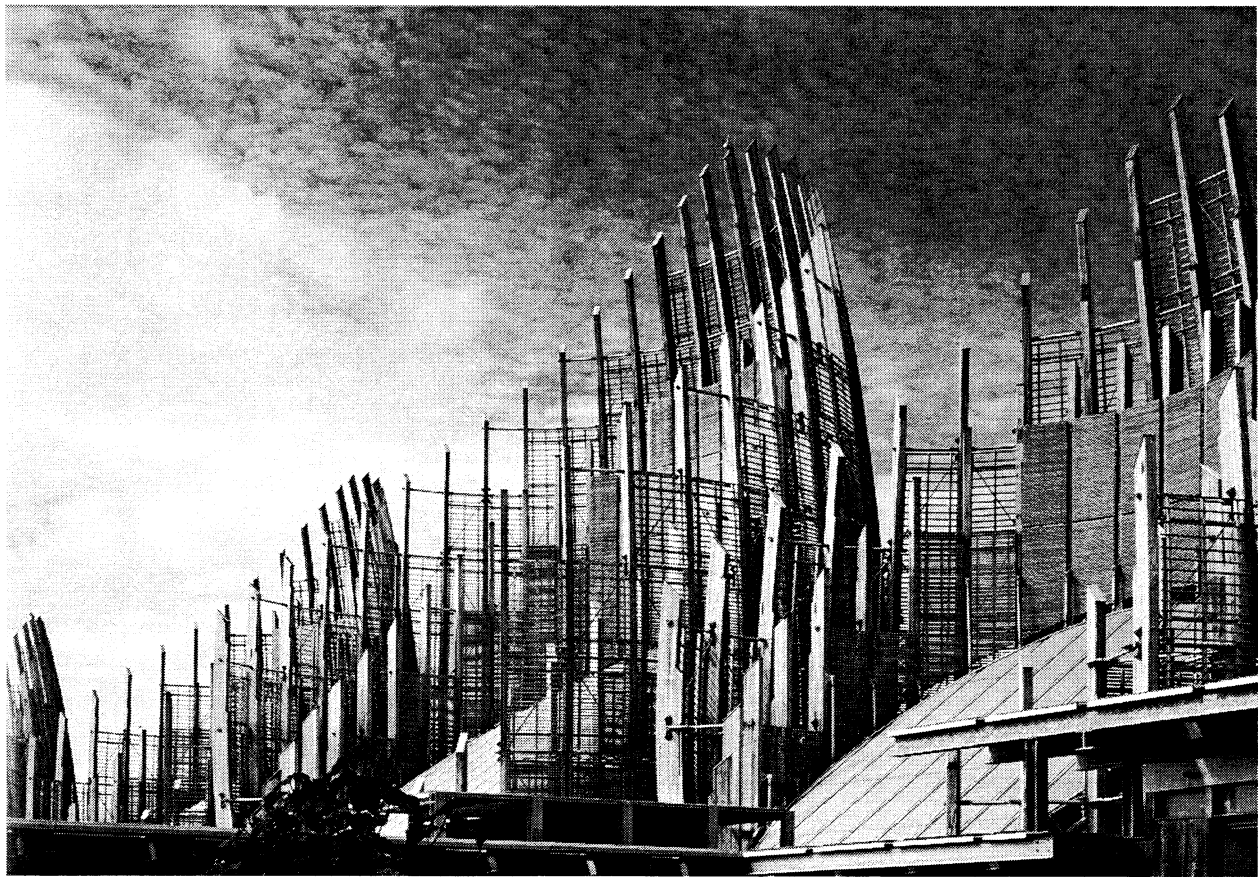


Fig. 6. Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Kanak Centre, New Calcedonia, 1998

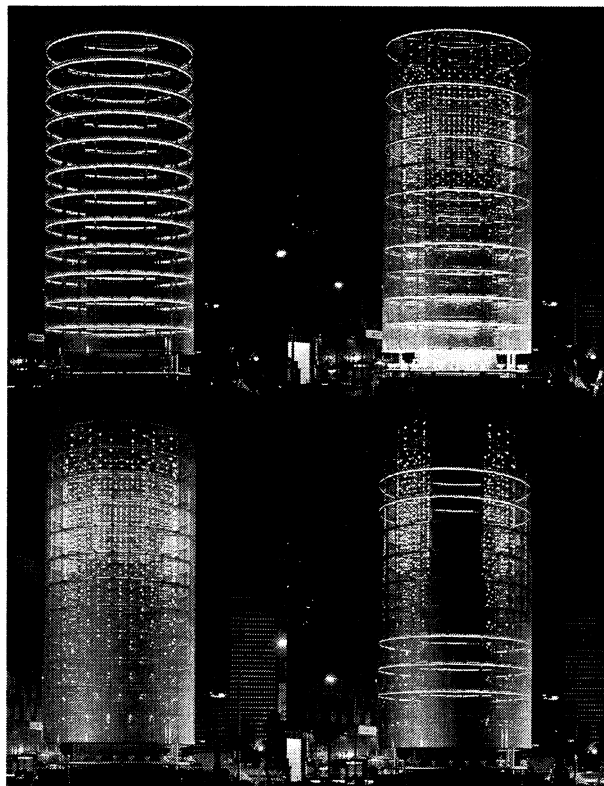


Fig. 7. Toyo Ito, Tower of the Winds, Yokohama, 1986 (removed 1995).

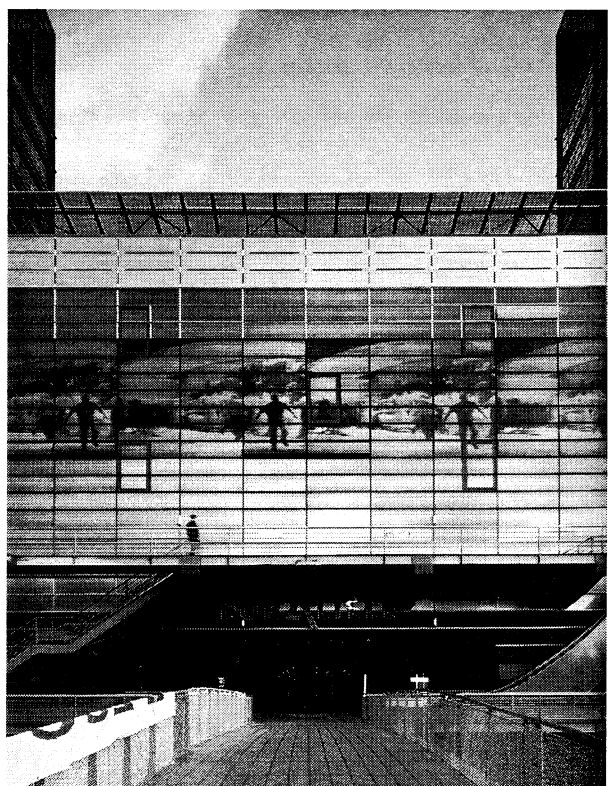


Fig. 8. Jean Nouvel: Centre Euraille, Lille, France

physical expectations. This approach considers the positive aspects of media culture, the ability to transform environments through time and create unprecedented experiences. It can generate social cohesion by “performing” for audiences and adding a level of theatricality into public life. While this expression can trace origins back to theater or the circus, current generations follow the proliferation of media explorations into perception and visualization. Toyo Ito’s Tower of Winds comes alive with moving lights at night, transforming the shape and physicality of the building continuously. Jean Nouvel has also pursued a career in architectural illusion, with various explorations into glass and reflections that dematerialize or alter the surface of his buildings.

The best examples of performance-derived architecture demonstrate design thinking in more than just one of these principles, attributing meaning to the architecture while allowing a degree of independence from stylistic determinism. At the same time, design guided by such principles allows for an architecture to delve deep into a particular expression.

## Conclusion

As a profession, architecture must maintain a sense of purpose from a practical standpoint while at the same time interpreting the stylistic or artistic demands of culture. Although some signature architects are able to exploit the latter artistic requirements with varying degrees of regard for the technical side, such luxury is not available to the majority of the profession. Though less outwardly heroic, many architects and teams of designers are finding more meaningful ways to design in a global consumer culture. By using systems of design principles rather than style these designers accept the cultural and technological context of globalization and generate buildings in forms that both

express and reflect performance criteria.

Our examples of realism, metaphor and illusion identify some strategies for this design, which evade the traps of empty style and technical determinism, while creating buildings in a broad range of contexts. Rather than emphasizing the heroic individual designer, these methods encourage a set of skills and attitudes that effectively contribute to team efforts. Just as architects of the past learned systems of formal styles with which to create engaging buildings, architects today can share common principles of design to create meaningful environments in a complex global context.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Jencks, “Organitech,” *ANY* 10 (1995)

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