Architecture has only a small part to play in the affairs of man. It does, nonetheless, bring together much that is important for society at large: shelter, social function, technology, art, economics, politics, science and more. Consequently, architecture can be a mirror to society. Since the early twentieth century, architects have sought to link design symbolically to express a particular analysis of society and its future direction. This analysis has often been technological, but it has also been spiritual, psychological and even cosmological. But this view can be reversed; society can be made a mirror to architecture. We can understand architecture as a natural reflection of what is current socially, politically and economically.

A series of social, political and economic changes that affect everything from the operation of nations to everyday life come under the collective title of ‘globalisation’. Often considered just to be the domination of the world by global corporations, the phenomenon of globalisation goes much further than this. It is summarised by Jürgen Habermas: “By ‘globalisation’ is meant the cumulative processes of a worldwide expansion of trade and production, commodity and financial markets, fashions, the media and computer programs, news and communications networks, transportation systems and flows of migration, the risks engendered by large-scale technology, environmental damage and epidemics, as well as organised crime and terrorism.”

Globalisation may now have its own global band of protestors but it is generally acknowledged that, save a major catastrophe, “the intensification of worldwide social relations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” is unavoidable and increasing.

Imperialism, internationalism and other forms of interchange between cultures and economies has been taking place for millennia, but globalisation is different in effect, depth and breadth.

At the end of the Second World War experience of the depression and the holocaust convinced the dominant Western powers that the world economy and the welfare of humanity could no longer be left to the vagaries of nation-states. The creation of the IMF and the World Bank at the Bretton-Woods agreement and the establishment of the United Nations and the Declaration of Human Rights, put in place the institutional framework for a global economy and a global political philosophy between 1944 and 1948. This was the foundation of globalisation and both events were based on Western or Enlightenment principles. The idea of the free market could be traced to Adam Smith. Globally enforced individual rights over and above the community or nation-state fulfilled Condorcet’s aspirations for the equality of man and Immanuel Kant’s ideal of world government.

These principles could not be realised at a global level until the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989. The IMF’s imposition of a free market system on an exhausted Russian economy was followed by the voluntary liberalisation of the Indian and Chinese economies (although not the Chinese political system) in the early 90s. This free market was a north-Atlantic economic system evangelically promoted by the USA (and often politically linked to American-style liberal democracy or “freedom”). As a consequence, globalisation can appear to be a form of American imperialism. In the short term this seems to be the effect. But the ideology is that of liberalisation, rather than imperial protection and control, and the true liberaliser must acknowledge...

‘...the two poles of globalisation – homogenisation and localisation.’
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the possibility of a loss of control over what has been liberalised.

Globalisation is a new world order. We do not know its outcome or have a full picture of its nature as we are only in its earliest stages. Some commentators consider it to be ‘high-modernity’ and the realisation of the ideals of the Enlightenment while others believe it to be a new phenomenon of equal but different significance from the Enlightenment. At this stage, however, it is clearly a Western world order, dominated by north-Atlantic culture and the most evident outcome has been the spread of north-Atlantic products and corporations. The effect is described by Helena Norberg-Hodge: “Western consumer conformity is descending on the less industrialised parts of the world like an avalanche. ‘Development’ brings tourism, Western films and products and, more recently, satellite television to the remotest corners of the Earth. All provide overwhelming images of luxury and power. Adverts and action films give the impression that everyone in the West is rich, beautiful and brave, and leads a life filled with excitement and glamour. ….. Advertisers make it clear that Westernized fashion accessories equal sophistication and ‘cool’. In diverse ‘developing’ nations around the world, people are induced to meet their needs not through their community or local economy, but by trying to ‘buy in’ to the global market.” Put more succinctly by Theodore Levitt, “everywhere everything gets more and more like everything else as the world’s preference structure is relentlessly homogenized.”

In architecture, the historical development of globalisation corresponded very closely to the ascendency of Modernism. Founding Modernist ideals had always been global in ambition. In 1919 Walter Gropius said, “One day there will be a worldview, and then there will also be its sign, its crystal – architecture.” By 1932 it had been identified as the “International Style” and, although this was really a development of “parallel experiments” between nations, it was presented as a “contemporary style, which exists throughout the world, .. unified and inclusive.” By 1948, the year the foundations of globalisation were finally laid, Modernism had so obliterated traditional architecture that it came to be described as simply “modern”. Modernism was also, quite specifically, a north-Atlantic cultural phenomenon. It was based on the ideals of the same Western Enlightenment thinking that informed globalisation: rationality, scientific innovation, progress and the end of tradition. With globalisation Modernism conquered the earth. As Maxwell Fry noted as early as 1969, Modernism is an “architectural story which is first a record of dispersal from Germany and Central Europe to the ends of the earth, but first to England and America.”

For countries swept up in the tide of the global economy, the association of Modernism with rationality, progress and successful and dominant north-Atlantic economies was irresistible. Furthermore, the Modernist association with the principal building types identified with key aspects of globalisation – the corporate office, the airport, the international hotel and the shopping mall – provided a clear symbolic link with the engines of global capital expansion. In a very short space of time the homogenisation of global consumerism had its parallel in the homogenisation of city centres throughout the world. It was observed by Henry Russell Hitchcock as early as 1951. The glass-walled office block has become the Coca-Cola of architecture. Now, without reference to signage or vehicle registration plates, it is often impossible to identify the global location of parts of San Francisco, Osaka, Sao Paolo, Brussels, Berlin and Shanghai.

The response of the architectural profession has been equally clear. While it is impossible to accurately estimate the increased number of international commissions, an indication of the increased globalisation of architecture can be found in the cumulative number of branch offices opened in different global regions. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 these have increased from less than 20 to more than 150 (see figure 1). Of the 55 large architectural practices with offices in other global regions, 80% have their head offices in English-speaking countries and even the two Hong Kong firms
were founded in the nineteenth-century colonial period by UK expatriates (see figure 2).

Globalised commercial architecture has developed a symbiotic relationship with a new breed of global star architects. As cities, more than nations, now compete to attract global investment and global tourism, they seek brand differentiation and symbolic modernity. The commissioning of public buildings by star architects is now an established marketing technique. The buildings must be (in the literal sense of the word) extra-ordinary and designed by one of a small band of global architects whose nationality is more accidental than significant. The names are familiar and include Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Jean Nouvel, Rem Koolhaus, Norman Foster, Santiago Calatrava and Renzo Piano. The personal status of these architects is now so great and the demand for their presence so high - from students, the lecture circuit and competitions as well as the cities themselves – that their work is almost by necessity strongly conceptual and cannot rely on any detailed study of fine grain or culture of the locality. Indeed, as it is the intention that the building should be an
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Iconic global product, local distinctiveness is often not a desirable characteristic.

The competitive marketing of these buildings by cities has set up an upward demand spiral. Out of the work of the star architects, design types and styles emerge and become identified with successful cities, even before they are built. As star architects are, by definition, limited in number, demand for symbolic and extraordinary buildings far outstrips the capacity of the star group to provide their own designs, however conceptual their original input may be. The conceptual nature of the star product allows global commercial firms (who have sometimes been acting as the executive architects for star architects) to clone the trademark design characteristics of the star product. The reproduction of the spiral or twisted forms, globular glass, planar intersection and so on is facilitated by the use of the same sophisticated computer graphics employed by the offices of the star architects to develop and present their concepts.

This trickle-down effect and the high status of star architects within the architectural profession have influenced architecture more generally than the global origins of the star product. The new architecture has been approvingly dubbed "supermodern" by the Dutch critic Hans Ibelings. "For this architecture the surroundings constitute neither legitimation nor inspiration for these are derived from what goes on inside the building, from the programme. This autonomy is in many cases reinforced by the fact that the building has an inscrutable exterior that betrays nothing of what happens inside. ….. In many instances these buildings look as if they might house just about anything: an office or a school, a bank or a research centre, a hotel or apartments, a shopping mall or an airport terminal."15

Globalisation itself is, however, more complex than the simple expansion of Western capital and concomitant spread of products, culture and style. The creation of the rights of the individual over their resident community or state has changed the role of the relationship between the state and the individual. At the same time, the free movement of global corporations and capital has restricted the ability of the state to maintain an autonomous economy. The principle that the state could control its citizens and wage war with other states, established in the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, has been significantly eroded. Aggressive nationalism, which in the nineteenth century often led to the suppression and incorporation of diverse groups to form nation-states, is no longer a functional necessity for defence or economic containment. "The nation-state has become too small to solve global problems and too large to deal with local ones."16 As the power of the nation-state declines, regional, local and ethnic identities re-emerge. In 1990 there were 800 micro-national movements in a world of fewer than 200 states.17 This is localisation, the other face of globalisation.

Localisation is closely associated with the politics of identity. Identity is community and place related and the individuality of community and place are undermined by global homogenisation. Migration, instantaneous communication and increased travel all threaten and dislocate community identity. At the same time, members of communities can intensify their association with one another and their place of origin over long distances with the internet and the other communication media. The same phenomena can also promote the local cohesion of ethnic communities or micro states. To be Catalan is not ethnic, it is to speak Catalan in Catalonia and Catalan-language television is an important agent in the consolidation of an increasingly independent
Catalonia. The widely dispersed Sami community, an ethnic micro-nation recognised across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, is brought together by a dedicated Sami website.

The sociological, political and economic impact of region and identity is a powerful force in the globalised world. Dislocated identity can lead to fundamentalism and terrorism. Regional revival can lead to civil war and national fragmentation. The need to attract global capital can divert cities from the interests of their national governments.

It has been recognised for some time that international modernism had a homogenising tendency. Post Modernism was a direct response to this but had a short life. In 1982 Kenneth Frampton, principally as a Modernist rebuff to the overt cultural symbolism of Post Modernism, published the first of a number of essays on “Critical Regionalism” to highlight what he saw as localising tendencies in current Modernism. The definition of what made a building regional, however, was vestigial and amounted to as little as building to the contours of the site. When combined with the insistence that it “should not be sentimentally identified with the vernacular,” the theory was a long way from any readily-comprehensible form of local identity.

Architectural interest in any kind of literal contextualism is now a minority activity.

There is, nonetheless, independent evidence of a new concern for localisation of place. A 30% increase in the last ten years makes urban tourism the highest growth tourist sector in Europe. The principal demands of the urban tourist are for high quality, cultural and “authentic” (or apparently authentic) places. In 2004 Richard Florida followed up his ground-breaking book The Rise of the Creative Class, which identified the key role of innovators in the information-age economy, with Cities and the Creative Class. With empirical research he demonstrated that “the quality of place, a city or region, has replaced access as the pivotal point of competitive advantage. Quality-of-place features attractive to talented workers of a region have thus become central to regional strategies for developing high-tech industries.” In 1992 the mayors of Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona, brought together respectively by the correspondence of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development and the Olympic Games, signed the Rio-Barcelona Declaration. Point 4 included the statement: “We also favour cultural differences, every city’s own identity, and we believe that city planning and architecture should emphasize these proper symbols.”

Concern with the identity of place is, not surprisingly, more evident in urban design and urbanism than in architecture – although many urbanists are architects. In the last fifteen years there has been a growing urbanist movement specifically concerned with the individuality and identity of place. One of the earliest and the most successful is the American Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) which was founded in 1993 and seeks “the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighbourhoods and diverse districts” and “the redevelopment of towns and cities [to] respect historical patterns, precedents and boundaries.” A Vision of Europe was founded a year previously in Bologna with the objective of “the creation of villages, neighbourhoods, cities and even metropolises, marked by new structural and formal qualities that will make them comparable to their historic counterparts.” Ten years later, a sister organisation to the CNU, the Council for European Urbanism (CEU), was established in Bruges and promotes “the distinctive character of European cities, towns, villages and countryside [and] consolidation, renewal and growth in keeping with regional identity and the aspirations of citizens.” In 2006 the Academy of Urbanism was created out of an initiative by the then president of the RIBA, George Ferguson, and asserts that “the design of spaces and buildings should be influenced by their context and seek to enhance local character and heritage.”

While the rhetoric suggests that there is an association between the minority traditional movement in architecture and the urbanist movement (and indeed there is), the broad base of the urbanist movement is indicated by the UK Government’s 1999 report, Towards an Urban Renaissance, written by an “Urban Task Force” chaired by the leading Modernist, Richard Rogers. In common with the other urbanist organisations it had a concern for identity and context: “The diversity of urban neighbourhoods means that different places will respond to the pressure for change in different ways. … This diversity reflects the full richness of the English urban tradition.”

This interest in local contextual identity runs contrary to the homogeneous international architecture of star architects and their followers. The contrast is illustrated by a famous clash between the two ideologies which
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took place, appropriately enough, in Berlin – flashpoint for both the Cold War and the fall of the Russian empire. When the Bundestag voted to move to Berlin in 1991, the regeneration of the reunited city was under the control of Hans Stimman, Director of Municipal Construction. Stimman strictly regulated reconstruction to maintain the distinctive historic character of the city by reinstating traditional city blocks and limiting building heights and materials. He said, “I wanted to go back to a city structure that I call a European city. I wanted to make Berlin readable again.”

Stimman for his part told Libeskind that his museum was “an architectural fart.” Libeskind left Berlin for Los Angeles.

These two poles of modern architecture – supermodernism and the particularity of place – are clear reflections of the two poles of globalisation – homogenisation and localisation. As joint products of globalisation they must not be seen as totally distinct. The city of Bilbao did not just erect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim, the definitive iconic building, it restored the fabric of its historic centre. The future of both architectural persuasions will be tested in the latest and most urgent global crisis – the survival of the ecology of the planet such that it will continue to support our global civilisation. This is the supreme challenge for globalisation: the cause, the effect and the resolution are and will be global and local. It will affect all aspects of social, political and economic life and it will, as day follows night, have a profound impact on architecture.

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