

# THE FUTURE OF THE FUTURE

**The Iconic Building**

by Charles Jencks

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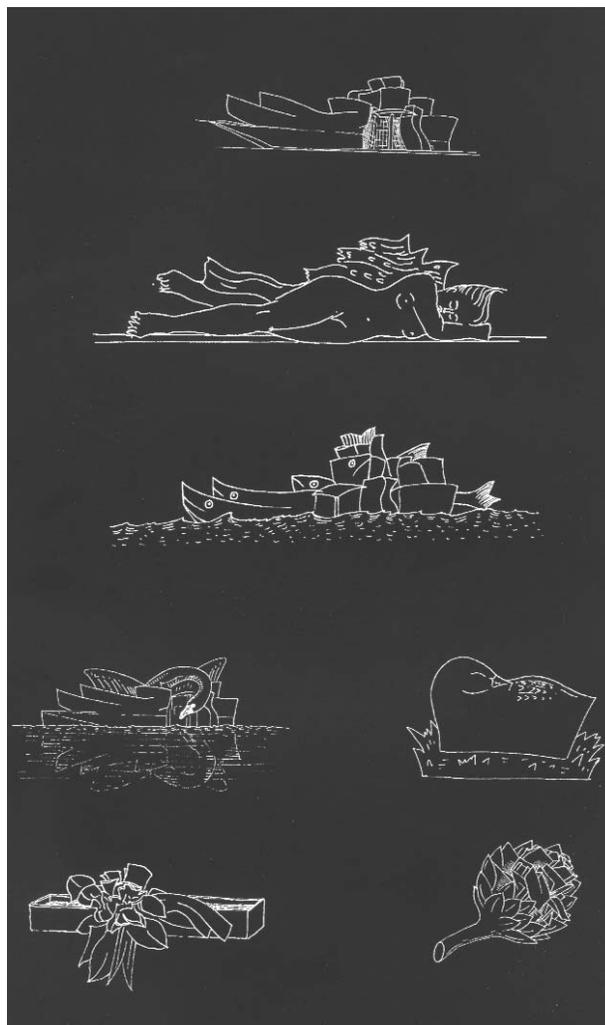
Reviewed by Douglas Klostermann

An alluring image of the fluid, colliding metal forms of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao would have predictably adorned the cover of Charles Jencks' *The Iconic Building*. Instead, Norman Foster's Swiss Re tower rises from a launching pad, with rockets firing and smoke billowing. The fabricated image effectively reflects Jencks' smart, accessible writing as he explores the rise and current developments of the iconic building, as well as the architects behind the trend.

The well-known success of Gehry's Guggenheim in revitalizing a region and attracting millions of tourists has created what is called the "Bilbao Effect." Other cities desire an icon of their own, to put them on the map and bring in tourist dollars, and corporations wish to create and occupy an instant, world-famous landmark. Since the completion of Bilbao in 1997, numerous attempts at landmark buildings have followed, designed by architects including Foster, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Santiago Calatrava and Peter Eisenman. Some have been successful, even superlative, in the critics' and public's eyes, while many have been considered failures or mere one-liners. Jencks explores not only what sets them apart, but also why it is worthwhile to look beyond the initial splash and media hype to develop standards for judging and designing this potentially enduring building type.

The author lays the path to today's iconic buildings by summarizing the recent history of modern icons: Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim, Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal and Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House. He affectionately pauses at Le Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamp, which Jencks considers "a standard against which to measure the iconic buildings of our time, and a hard one to equal." Those buildings succeed, he contends, because they are "enigmatic signifiers," a concept that runs as a cohesive thread throughout the book. The enigmatic signifier suggests but it does not name, it allows the viewer to map onto it their own symbols or interpretations, and it stands up to repeated study as one attempts to decode and fathom its multiple meanings. As Jencks writes, "We map the unknown on to the already said and a successful iconic building will always elicit a flurry of bizarre comparisons, a veritable blizzard of idiotic similes..." Several of these comparative expressions from critics and the public have been illustrated throughout the book in white on black line drawings, or "metaphorical analyses," by Madelon Vriesendorp: the Guggenheim in Bilbao as an artichoke, the Swiss Re headquarters as a pinecone, Renzo Piano's concert hall in Rome as an armadillo.

The focus of the book then shifts to Ground Zero: the competition for the new World Trade Center, the selection of Libeskind as the architect and the subsequent struggles and events surrounding the site. Jencks provides an informative and engaging history of this drama, which continues to unfold as multiple players clash over the future of the site. He presents the events as "The Battle of the Icons," a drama in five acts, beginning with the



Madelon Vriesendorp's metaphorical analysis of the critical reactions to Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao include a fish, a sequined mermaid, a swan, a duck, a window box and a Constructivist artichoke. Photo: © Charles Jencks The Iconic Building, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2005



The site plan for the "non-landmark landmark," Enric Miralles' Scottish Parliament Building in Edinburgh, shows the relationships of the different elements. Photo: © R.M.J.M Architects

initial studies and the ideas that emerged for the building, the site and the memorial; the involvement of the media; the competition between the seven teams and the final selection – all played out in the public eye; the compromises and changing roles; and the beginning of the current stage. Unfortunately, in this section, Jencks illustrates the media's framing of September 11th and the following series of events with several simplistic, page-filling collages of his own design that are not at all in keeping with the quality of the text they accompany.

Although this may be the best-developed section of the book, it stands apart and nearly independent from the other chapters. Jencks claims the battles over Ground Zero show how the "iconic building has moved center stage and taken on a life of its own." He ties this into his thesis by invoking the enigmatic signifier; Jencks credits Libeskind's win – with the judges as well as the public – to both his rhetoric and design skillfully evoking "mixed signs and symbols that could be understood as both precise denotations and open-ended connotations." While the other architects and teams were caught up in the language of design and shied away from emotion, patriotism and symbolism, Libeskind's "Freedom Tower denoted the Statue of Liberty, 1776, the culmination of an open spiral of crystal skyscrapers embracing the memorial site." The author joins the media and the public in calling the Freedom Tower an iconic building, though it is questionable if it actually is architecturally. He admits that the final building will probably not garner the level of praise Bilbao has, and, taken outside of its loaded context, the structure – like the numerous recent skyscrapers in Asia and the Middle East – would probably not enter into the scope of this book.



Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, CA, opened in October, 2005, after 15 years in the design process. Jencks explains that "The exterior is an icon of [the] acoustic interior." Photo: © Charles Jencks *The Iconic Building*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2005

Another project born out of a competition, which may not be as familiar as the Freedom Tower, is Enric Miralles' Scottish Parliament. Designed in 1998 and completed in 2004, the building has emerged from a drama that saw the cost rise to more 10 times its original estimate (and the resulting government investigation), and has survived the death of both the architect and the project's strongest supporter. Jencks recounts the details of this process and uses the building to demonstrate both the potential and the perils of an iconic building. It is also presented as an example of the trend of the "non-landmark landmark," or "anti-icon icon," a category in which he also places Eisenman's work. Unlike the majority of iconic buildings, this type grows organically out of its site or landscape, rather than being imposed upon it.

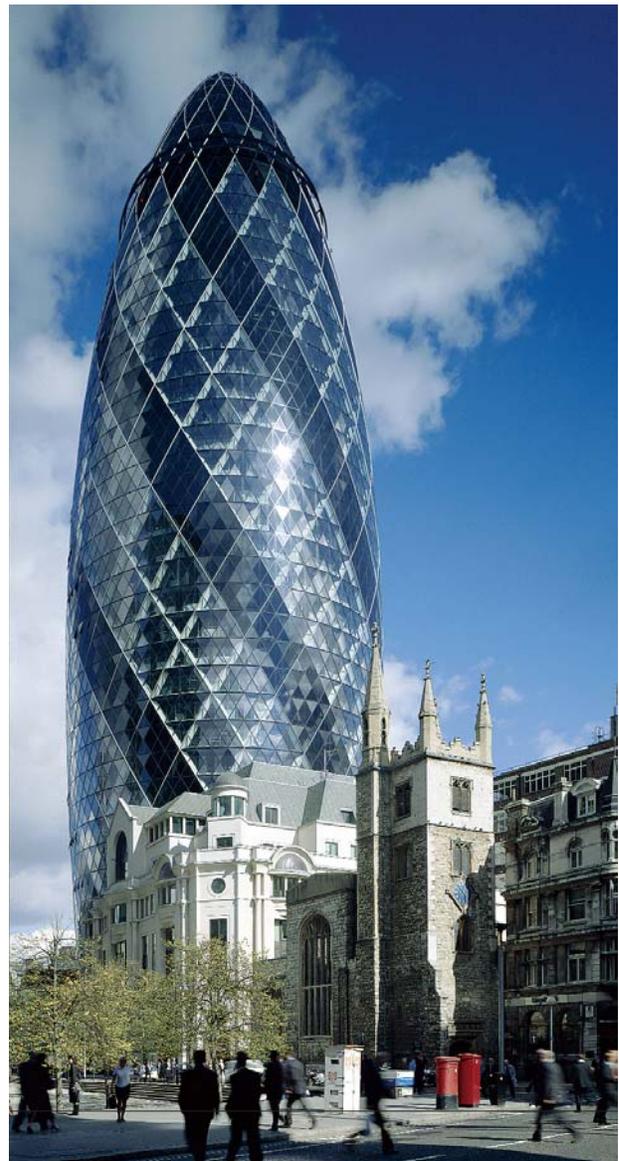
The book continues with a survey of buildings and architects who Jencks considers "The Challengers" and the "Two Winners." He explores the successes and shortfalls of projects by Santiago Calatrava, Will Alsop, Zaha Hadid and Peter Eisenman. Here, and in other sections, the author includes brief excerpts from interviews and conversations with some of the architects. These snippets, however, rarely offer insightful or elucidating thoughts from the creators of the iconic buildings. Rather, Jencks as interviewer seems to attempt to steer the subject into saying what he wishes them to, and when they fail to, he resorts to saying it himself.

The winners, in his opinion, are Frank Gehry with both the Guggenheim in Bilbao and his Disney Hall in Los Angeles, CA, and Norman Foster with his Swiss Re headquarters in London. According to the author, the Disney Hall succeeds in part because the flowing curves of the exterior are derived from the acoustically dictated design of the interior. The numerous and varied metaphors it inspired – from "rain-soaked cardboard" to "Marilyn's skirt" – support his claim that the enigmatic signifier is at work with this building. Similarly, Foster's building, in addition to inspiring the metaphor on the book's cover, is also referred to as "a baguette loaf" and more colorfully, an "erotic gherkin." Its success, however, is credited to the natural metaphors its form suggests or by which it was inspired. With the exception of these two buildings and the Scottish Parliament, Jencks focuses primarily on the exterior, and less often on the interior, forms of iconic buildings. He fails to explore the functional success or failure of the buildings.

Koolhaas' Seattle Public Library, pictured in the book but not written about, offered the perfect opportunity for a discussion of an iconic building's functionality. Koolhaas re-imagined the role, program and organization of a library for the 21st century, and then wrapped a diamond-patterned skin around it to create its striking, iconic form. One can judge its exterior, and even its interior spaces, using Jencks' standards, yet the building ultimately succeeds or fails on a functional level, which after a year and a half of continuous use, could already begin to be measured and evaluated.

In his conclusion, Jencks returns to his explanation of the icon as enigmatic signifier, and its origins in King Louis-Philippe's obelisk in the Place de la Concorde, the Eiffel Tower and Giorgio de Chirico's paintings. He states that the iconic building trend has every indication of continuing, if not increasing, due to the decline of the monument and religion, and the rise of capital culture. He concludes that the iconic building can succeed, even in this time of no collective iconography, by evoking natural and cosmic themes, just as Le Corbusier did at Ronchamp and, he contends, Gehry did at Bilbao. As he has with previous books, perhaps Jencks will revisit, amend and expand this treatise as the iconic building trend continues to develop and unfold, and as a broader historical perspective is gained. ♦

*Douglas Klostermann is a 1993 graduate of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. He currently works as a project manager in the Planning and Design Department of the Brooklyn Public Library and is a self-proclaimed expert on the library's historic Carnegie branches.*



Norman Foster's Swiss Re headquarters in London has been called a gherkin, a dirigible and a space rocket. Photo: © Foster and Partners