UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation, and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2sf7x6g3

Author

ONG, Aihwa

Publication Date

2011-07-01

DOI

10.1002/9781444346800.ch8

Peer reviewed

Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation, and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty

Aihwa Ong

The Chinese love the monumental ambition …. CCTV headquarters is an ambitious building. It was conceived at the same time that the design competition for Ground Zero took place – not in backward-looking US, but in the parallel universe of China. In communism, engineering has a high status, its laws resonating with Marxian wheels of history.

Rem Koolhaas and OMA (2004: 129)

Urban Spectacles

The proliferation of metropolitan spectacles in Asia indexes a new cultural regime as major cities race to attain even more striking skylines. Beijing's cluster of Olympic landmarks, Shanghai's TV tower, Hong Kong's forest of corporate towers, Singapore's Marina Sands complex, and super-tall Burj Khalifa in Dubai are urban spectaculars that evoke the "technological sublime." Frederic Jameson famously made the claim that the postmodern sublime has dissolved Marxian historical consciousness, but nowhere did he consider the role of architectural sublime in indexing a different kind of historical consciousness, one of national arrival on the global stage (Jameson 1991: 32–8). Despite the 2008–9 economic downturn, Shanghai's urban transformation for the 2010 World Expo will exceed Beijing's makeover for the 2008 Olympics.[1]

Spectacular architecture is often viewed as the handiwork of corporate capital in the colonization of urban markets. For instance, Anthony King and Abidin Kusno, writing about "On Be(ij)ing in the world," argue that the rise of cutting-edge buildings in Beijing is an instantiation of postmodern globalization transforming the Chinese capital into a "transnational

space" (King and Kusno 2000: 41–67), a process driven by the apparent self-realization and development of capital. Such a perspective is based on the assumption that corporate power and Western technologies are creating a global space that is effacing national identity and undermining the capacity for a nation to control how it wants to be and how it wants to act in the world. Capital here thwarts national sovereign self-determination by subjecting "local" spaces to the overarching logic of a capitalist system with translocal or placeless determinations. Metropolitan studies have long been monopolized by Marxist perspectives that see capitalist hegemony as a determinative or agentive force in the shaping of urban landscapes and symbolism. There is, however, an urgent need to expand our analytical perspectives to include the analysis of sovereign rule and its control over the production of spectacle, speculation, and urban futures.[2] Sovereignty is not simply erased or replaced by the overwhelming power of capital, but is reconfigured through a variety of processes and practices whose outcomes cannot be determined *a priori*, or separate from the singular situated moments of particular forms of entanglement.

Rather than understand the development of new urban forms as merely the reflex of the expansion of capitalism or corporate power, this chapter proposes a theory of sovereign exception in shaping urban spectacles for political and economic ends. Asian cities and governments are neither merely the passive substrate on which capital erects and constructs itself, nor are they being reconfigured in a way that can be easily understood in terms on an implicit scale of "more" or "less" sovereignty. In emerging Asian countries, the rule of exception variously negotiates the dual demands of inter-city rivalries on the one hand, and the spectacle of confident sovereignty on the other. As I have argued elsewhere (Ong 2006), the rule of exception permits political flexibility in zoning practices for variable investments in property and citizen-subjects. Spaces are thus variegated, in a state of potential flux, and always potentially amenable to rezoning as a moment in the assertion and implementation of various forms of sovereignty. The global significance of a building frenzy in Asian cities requires an approach that explores the connection between the political exception and the variegated governmentality of urban spaces, where corporate towers and official edifices stand shoulder to shoulder. The variegation of the urban spectacle requires a more subtle analysis than has been attempted, and at least an exploration of the tensions between showy and flamboyant urban architecture embodying global capital on the one hand, and the spectacle of self-assured sovereignty on the other. In other words, the play of exception permits the spectacularization of urban success as well as of national emergence; that is, two modes of "hyperbuilding" that shape the urban profile in competition with other cities, and in the process, configure

the global space of the nation, or configure the sovereign national space as one that is also emphatically and intractably global.

I borrow the term "hyperbuilding" from architect and thinker Rem Koolhaas, but use it more loosely. For Koolhaas, the "hyperbuilding" is the "anti-skyscraper"; that is, not defined by its exhilarating height, but by a striking and gigantic presence of the ground surface (*China Daily* 2004) (see Figure 8.2 below). I invoke hyperbuilding as both a verb and a noun to denote the two related urban trends in Asian cities. On the one hand, there is hyperbuilding as an intense process of building to project urban profiles. On the other, the hyperbuilding as a physical landmark stages sovereign power in the great city, or in cities aspiring, through these edifices, to greatness. The interactions between exception, spectacle, and speculation create conditions for hyperbuilding as both the practice and the product of world-aspiring urban innovations.

1   *Hyperbuilding as worlding practice.* My approach to urban spectacle centers on how different elements – a neoliberal logic of maximization, the mobilization of political exceptions, and impressive development – are brought together to propel urban makeovers and leverage city futures. Political exceptions permit the varied and variegated use of metropolitan space, including the production of spectacular infrastructure that attracts speculative capital and offers itself as alleged proof of political power. Building a critical mass of towers in a new downtown zone animates an anticipatory logic of reaping profits not only in markets but also in the political domain. As Asian cities compete with other in the construction of ever more spectacular displays, it is not surprising that remarkable buildings become invested with contradictory symbolism about the nation itself.

2   *Hyperbuilding as a hyperspace of sovereignty.* While skyscrapers have long been associated with global capitalism, a different kind of impressive structure looms in the name of political futures. Whereas powerful architecture has long been associated with totalitarian rule (ancient Egypt, Nazi Germany, Soviet constructionism, Chinese communism), gigantic and spectacular buildings in contemporary Asian cities are associated with mixed symbolic meanings. State-commissioned edifices are planted closely alongside corporate skyscrapers. Rem Koolhaas' paradigmatic "hyperbuilding," the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, will be discussed later in its aspiration to be a connective structure that creates a public space that is not obliterated in a glutted concentration of tall buildings that, in other circumstances, would dwarf it or overshadow it. The CCTV media center suggests the spectacular presence and power of Chinese sovereignty, and offers itself as a potential index and manifestation of the power that brought it to materialization – but it also engenders pornographic jokes

that criticize both the building and the agency it houses. Hyperbuilding, as both a process and the set of monuments it erects, raises broader questions about the political implications of the shift of the urban hyperspace to the Asian metropolis.

Hyperbuilding: Exception, Spectacle, and Speculation

Our reading of spectacular urban spaces has been dominated by a Marxist focus on the proliferation of postmodern corporate forms that instill a sense of disorientation and placelessness among ordinary people. In his landmark book on postmodern culture, Frederic Jameson has influenced subsequent views on urban spectacles as mirrors of the global circulation of corporate sign-values; that is, hegemonic images that have a depoliticizing effect of displacement and disorientation among urban-dwellers (1991: 43–5, 95–6). Building on Jameson's claims, David Harvey remarks that the "stable aesthetics" of Fordist modernism gave way to an aesthetics of difference, ephemerality, and spectacle – a kind of flexible aesthetic regime that parallels and constitutes the accelerated commodification of cultural forms (1989: 156). More recently, Scott Lash and Celia Lury directly tie the function of capitalist spectacles to urban strategies (2007: 141–8). They argue that zones of spectacle are about city branding, a mode of value-making in symbolic differentiation that makes a site stand apart from others. Branding intensifies city associations with certain objects or indices of globality (often the insignia of an increasingly globalized commercial sphere: Nike, Samsung, Coca-Cola), thus improving the host city's capacity to mobilize and mediate among things and actors. In this account, by amassing spectacles – associated with certain industries and special events – urban centers are involved in the creation of regimes of (capitalist) iconicity that influence the quality of experience in these cities. Despite an interest in city branding, the focus is again on the effects of corporate iconography on materializing and driving our consumer imagination. This is an argument about the cultural hegemony of corporations and the domination of their surroundings. At a broader level, Guy Debord (1995) has argued that the spectacle society orders all relations of accumulation, producing a momentary unity among spectators who have become profoundly alienated by the processes of both the production and the consumption of the commodity. In short, for Marxist theorists, the spectacle is primarily associated with all aspects of capitalism, including the use of modern media as a technology of manipulation that also conceals the social fact of domination. The spectacle is thus taken to be embedded in a set of technologies aimed at maintaining specific forms of hegemony, creating the conditions of a dangerous and mystified political alienation and effectively thwarting the possibility of social change.

While the above analyses linking spectacle to disorientation and alienation are important, my approach looks at the state and its promotion of hyperbuilding and technologies of spectacle for political ends. These spectacles are thus productive, playing a constitutive and performative role in the assertion and realization of different political and politicized ends. Just as early twentieth-century Chicago stood as a potent projection of American dreams of being a rising industrial superpower, urban spectacles in Asia today play an aesthetic role in promoting future values and new political orientations. As Georg Simmel notes, value is not based on fixed, objective or enduring causes. Rather, economic, social, and aesthetic values are purely relational, emerging only in the context of specific exchange relationships and regimes of exchange (1900: 577–603). In other words, cultural values do not merely serve to reproduce an existing social system, but can expand geometrically through a proliferation of connections. In conditions of uncertainty, the spaces of spectacle animate an anticipatory logic of valorization; that is, speculations that anticipate economic, aesthetic, and political gains through circulation and interconnection. The political exception also engages value-making by permitting the spectacular zones that engender speculation in urban assets and thus accelerate the rise of a metropolis.

We can identify two the kinds of hyperbuilding logic at work in Asian cities. First, building frenzy helps to leverage gains beyond the market sector; that is, not only by inflating real-estate values, but also by raising hopes and expectations about urban futures and, by extension, the nation's growth. The hyperbuilding becomes part of an anticipation of a future that is asserted as a guarantee. Second, in a related phenomenon, hyperbuilding inter-references spectacular structures in rival cities, thereby fueling a spiral of increasing speculation in urban forms. The dynamic of this inter-referential practice constitutes competitive hyperbuilding as a parameter in which urban rankings will be understood, and, in this condition, hyperbuilding generates more hyperbuilding. A dynamic approach to spectacular cities thus shows that the stakes in urban spectacles go beyond mere capital accumulation to include the generation of promissory values about the geopolitical significance of the city and the country that it stands for in metonymic relation. The skyscraper megalomania of Asian cities is never only about attracting foreign investments, but fundamentally also about an intense political desire for world recognition.

From Shanghai to Dubai, cities in emerging countries are renovating at a furious rate, amassing glittering malls, museums, opera houses, and science parks. They have also been busy staging world events such as the Olympics, art biennales, world fairs, and scientific conventions. Visually stunning urban projects can be viewed as leveraging practices that anticipate a high return not only in real estate but also in the global recognition of the city. We must thus challenge Jameson's claim that the centrifugal proliferation of

commercialized cultural forms destroys our sense of "critical space" shaped by history, class, and politics (1991: 43–5, 95–6). They in fact become emblematic of certain situated historical imaginaries and aspirations. While the commodity-saturated environments of a Ginza in Tokyo or of Wangfujing in Beijing can indeed induce disorientation, the proliferation of signs does not destroy a need for cultural hierarchy, or diminish a sense of critical spatial politics. One should point out that in developing countries, the critical spaces of the nation trump those of purported class mobilization (Jameson's concern). Indeed, the glittering surfaces of global capitalism are added value to the political emergence of the nation on the world stage, rather than the sign of their imminent replacement by a disembedded corporate-capitalist process.

Urban-dwellers in Asia's big cities do not read spectacles as a generalized aesthetic effect of capitalism, but rather as symbols of their metropolis that invite inevitable comparison with rival cities. Shanghai sees itself as the international gateway to China, and is therefore a critical site of China's urban representations, as well as its symbolic encapsulation of the world and the potential of globality. A city of 12 million, Shanghai has been trying to spread its ever-growing population beyond its city limits. It has constructed a ring of nine satellite cities to accommodate at least half a million residents. Given the craze for faux-European urban environments and lifestyles, each mini-city is designed by international planners and named after a Western country or town such as Weimar, Thamestown, London, Bellagio, and Santa Monica. Perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek, Shanghai authorities declared in 2002 that "foreign visitors will not be able to tell where Europe ends and China begins" (Beech 2005). In this series of developments, Shanghai is of course implicitly and sometimes explicitly rivaling Hong Kong, China's leading commercial center, and both cities are competing with Singapore, which is remaking itself as an international knowledge hub and casino center (Ong 2005).

Such inter-city competition drives the building frenzy that one encounters throughout East Asia, as well as putting at risk anticipated gains in the urban economy and/or in politics. Real-estate values are especially parasitic upon an excess of corporate signifiers. For instance, Hong Kong is home to dozens of corporate towers above 700 feet, the most important of which operate as part of a symbolic code for the port's commercial fortunes, especially since the return of the former British colony to mainland rule in 1997. Hong Kongers give their iconic buildings pet names, and tend view them like pieces in a chess game. The Cheung Kong Building is called "The Box that the Bank of China came in." Meanwhile, the nearby HSBC Building, a venerable colonial structure with roots in British imperialism, is seemingly being menaced by the I.M. Pei-designed Bank of China. Fondly referred to as the Cleaver Building, its sharp edges are interpreted as sending

bad *qi* toward the HSBC building. The close juxtaposition of these warring buildings reinforces the palpable feeling of tension between the powers of the global financial world and of the Chinese state intersecting in Hong Kong.

Thus, far from merely serving as props of capitalist hegemony, Asian urban skylines advertise their own city brand of can-do-ism, providing a visual and infrastructural attraction that draws international actors, capital, and information and cultural flows to the city. Elsewhere (Ong 2007), I have analyzed the synergy between flamboyant cityscapes and the influx of "pied-a-terre" residents and international workers whose very presence adds further economic and cultural clout to Singapore or Dubai. Hyperbuilding as a mechanism to leverage global funds and status has been most obvious in inter-city rivalry to raise the tallest tower, build the sleekest airport, or set up the latest knowledge or design center.

Singapore's models of science parks and biotechnology hubs has spawned copycat projects in other cities (see Chua Beng Huat, this volume), but other urban templates are also being developed in East Asia. Recently, Seoul metropolitan authorities boasted of the city's innovative "Global Zones" plan to turn the metropolis into "a remarkably business-friendly – and business savvy – global city" for global actors.[3] As self-proclaimed "World Design Capital 2010," Seoul will design a "universal, ubiquitous, and unique" sustainable city dedicated to cultural, environmental, aesthetic, and social living. Architect Zaha Hadid will design a modern center for fashion and design. Clearly, the political ambition is to go beyond the old industrial model and become a world cultural city that hopes to rival or even surpass Tokyo or New York. Urban innovations in Asia are thus caught up in this larger game of translating spectacular towers into schemes for scaling political heights, but there are pitfalls in some attempts to bring about joint urban–national ascendancy.

There is no guarantee that hyperbuilding practices in any particular city can leverage global investments and draw global actors in significant numbers, or guarantee the rising fortunes of an ambitious nation. For instance, in the 1990s, Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir of Malaysia spent lavishly on urban development, following the premise of "if you build, they will come." Unfortunately, the multimedia corridor, including a new cyber-capital, failed to blossom into an Asian Silicon Valley, and has been operating as a node in a second-tier circuit dominated by Indian cyber-firms (Ong 2005). The Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur were for a few years the highest buildings in the world, until overtaken by Taiwan's Taipei 101 tower in 2004. Despite costing billions of petrodollars, the Petronas' telecommunications function is obsolete in an age of satellites, while its location contributes to a traffic gridlock in the capital's downtown area. This underused structure has become a white elephant, reminding citizens of their leaders' profligacy and desire for hollow symbols of national advancement. At the street level,

Malaysians casually refer to the Petronas towers as Mahathir's "double erections." The symbolism of these towers can stand for stalled attention-grabbing urban showpieces that stir the imagination of citizens about the danger of their governments grasping for glory beyond their reach (even with billions of lost dollars). In short, hyperbuildings cannot always leverage actual values, or realize a city's dreams for its nation. As Tim Bunnell has noted, the multimedia corridor's attempt to link up with the information age has merely "reaffirmed Malaysia's global peripherality" (2004: 3).

The hoped-for synergy between urban spectacle and speculation has been taken to an extreme in Dubai, the most flamboyant urban wonder-land of the new century. Despite being the least oil-rich of the nine United Arab Emirates, Dubai has built 1,000 skyscrapers in less than a decade. This brand new city is most famous for its indoor ski slope and offshore palm-shaped and globe-shaped manmade islands, all suggesting a level of ecological unsustainability and decadence in a desert redoubt. Beyond its skyrocketing rise as a global financial and transportation hub and a play-ground of the rich and famous, the city is made up of special zones with independent laws. There are also over 100 independently master-planned commercial, industrial, and residential districts. The spectrum of mini-cities includes a financial center, an academic hub, an information-technology center, a free media zone, and even a humanitarian service site. Special jurisdictions cater to foreign professionals, with relaxed rules for drinking and lifestyles that are exceptions to laws imposed elsewhere in the city. The over-zoned city is a vivid example of the urban effects of graduated rule; that is, the constitution of variegated spaces for expatriates, guest workers and citizens, each zone regulated by different kinds of biopolitical investments and social controls (Ong 2006). During the boom years, this urban mirage in the desert attracted billions of investments from global banks as the city projected itself into the global stratosphere of international banking and living.

By the fall of 2009, a year after the global recession, Dubai had gone into free fall as its profligate borrowings created a debt of $3 trillion that it could not repay. Dubai has turned to oil-rich Abu Dhabi for a $10 billion debt-relief package. The completion of the Burj Dubai, renamed as the Burg Khalifa after Sheikh Khalifa of Abu Dhabi, has become a symbol of gratitude and of hope. As the world's tallest skyscraper at over 2,700 feet, the rocket-like tower is expected to stimulate and oversee Dubai's revival as a global business hub. Nevertheless, the gamble of betting on spectacular skyscrapers to draw in global capital has its limits, and the city has become a symbol of over-leverage. In contrast, Shanghai and Hong Kong are deeply anchored in the world's most dynamic economy, the so-called "banker to the world." But are there, even in Chinese mega-cities, political hazards to the leveraging powers of urban spectacles?

II.   The Hyperbuilding: The Hyperspace Moves East

The role of the state in building exceptional structures and even entire cities has a long and venerated tradition in many Asian civilizations, and the current state-sponsored construction of hypermodern urban spaces reveals a political urgency that surpasses urban developments elsewhere. Among developing countries, political investments in architectural icons have been crucial in establishing a particular modern national identity. Postcolonial nations in earlier decades, however, have sought to imprint their global signature by building new capitals that spoke to universalist values. In *The Modernist City*, James Holston (1989) identifies how the internal contradictions of modernist urban planning were played out in the design of a futurist Brasilia. But Holston argues that this image of an ideal city and its utopian promises of democracy failed in the daunting social realities of an emerging nation. On the opposite side of the world, New York architect Louis I. Kahn designed a capital complex for Dhaka, the capital of post-Independence Bangladesh. Kahn's template blended elements of Bengali architecture with a modernist sense of governing and clarity; the complex was to be an island of rational governance in the midst of a chaotic city. The utopian urban projects in Brasilia and Dhaka both shared beliefs that the formal structure of modernist architecture had the capacity to transform the political structure and habitus of emerging countries in accordance with the purportedly universal principles of enlightened modernity.

By contrast, contemporary Asian countries seek eye-catching urban landmarks that cannot be easily read as bearing the imprimatur of democratic modernity or capitalist triumphalism. They do not stand as integrated material metaphors of a hoped-for single modernist future. Viewing urban aesthetics through the lens of what he understands as a unified global process, Jameson claims that in the "post-industrial era," the logic of multinational capitalism erases barriers between cultures, languages and nations in a "postmodern hyperspace" of capitalist mirage (1991: 44). Jameson's conception of a multicultural hyperspace where people lose the capacity to locate and orient themselves echoes Guy Debord's (1995) observation that in the image-saturated environment, the spectacle has come to mediate the relationship between people by inducing in them the false feeling of an imaginary commonality in apparently shared spectatorship. While one can easily agree that the hyperspace can have a disorienting effect and that a virtual world may reshape social relationships, it would be a stretch to thereby maintain that urban-dwellers also lose a sense of their ties to the nation. Especially in emergent countries, a surfeit of images, cultures, and peoples in the cities becomes an index of national development. Globalized urban milieus are by definition pulsating with the constant mixing and remixing of

Figure 8.1   The CCTV tower, Beijing
Source: courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), The Netherlands.

disparate signs and symbols from business, media, culture, and politics. In China, the wildly entangled and discordant signs of unfettered capitalism, rampant consumerism, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and political authoritarianism are the expected mediated chaos that goes with *Chinese* urban growth. The kind of hyperspaces opening up in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing are distinctive from, say, postmodern Los Angeles in that the sexy handiwork of borderless capitalism bears the heavy imprint of China's state power, and cannot be understood outside a reconfigured aesthetics of this power.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Koolhaas' remarks that since the 9/11 attacks on New York City, "the parallel universe in China" (and, one may add, Seoul, Singapore, etc.) has become the space of international architectural design. Koolhaas has long been interested in the potential of architecture and urban planning to contribute to the formulation of culture worldwide. He observes that "Beijing has become the staging ground for the definitive urban design for the twenty-first century" (Ellis n.d.). As the co-designer of the Chinese Central Television headquarters (see Figure 8.1), Koolhaas self-interestedly claims that the hyperbuilding will "revolutionize" the Asian city landscape, as well as the world of urban architecture. Such assertions have inspired questions about the role of radical architecture in a

historical moment of emerging autocratic states. Will Koolhaas and his partner Ole Scheeren of the firm OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the Netherlands) participate in the opening of the forbidding Chinese state, or will they simply help build a spectacular hyperspace of sovereignty?

Post-9/11, East Asian countries are the ones with the deep pockets and the political will to commission revolutionary buildings. As Scheeren has remarked, without apology, "Historically, architects have built for those in power. How else are great buildings made? Or paid for?" But Asian sovereign wealth funds are only part of the explanation for artistic turn to Asian cities. The OMA architects defended what they considered to be rare opportunities for pushing the boundaries of global architecture, and using architecture to push open closed societies. For instance, the building spree leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics was viewed by an international cast of designers as an opportunity to inject, via avant-garde architecture, conditions of "accessibility," "accountability," "transparency," and a "new publicness" in a politically repressive society (Fong 2007). Western critics have asked whether these buildings both configure and symbolize potential freedoms that are denied by the state, or whether "starchitects" are engaging in a kind of propaganda for autocratic regimes (Zalewski 2005).

Another misgiving about Asian cities stocking up on impressive towers and structures is that the availability of huge funds and cheap labor in Asia marks a post-utopian opportunism that destroys the traditional character of the city. There are the ethics of building an extravagant foreign-designed spectacle (the CCTV project cost over $1 billion) in a developing country, and the eviction of hundreds of residents from the building site. Furthermore, only foreign firms were invited to bid for high-profile projects in Beijing, while established Chinese architectural firms that cut their teeth on socialist designs were bypassed. City planners and Chinese architects worry that such prestige structures have no connection to the surrounding landscape. For instance, the Chinese partner of a Shanghai firm complains, "When you have gargantuan projects created by administrative fiat, it looks spectacular in a photograph, but that's not the recipe for a livable city" (Frangos and Chang 2003). The criticisms echo objections by Jane Jacobs to plans for expressways that threatened to ruin the vitality of Manhattan neighborhoods in the 1960s (1993 [1963]). And unlike the Singaporean model, this project is not intended by officials to be replicable by other aspiring cities as a model for integrated urban development; its very unlivable and unwelcoming qualities, and the emphatic discord of the building from its site, are a mark of its unique character and role in Beijing's future.

Beyond the worry of preserving old urban character, critics making the post-utopian charge objected to its initiation by a repressive state. As a US-based architect, Sze Tsung Leong, notes, the CCTV structure can only be built in a country with an autocratic tradition of large-scale destruction

and rebuilding of the urban landscape (while dislocating huge populations in the process) in order to mark regime change (Leong 2004). Koolhaas has, somewhat elliptically, defended the destruction of some districts of historical architecture (*hutong*) in the construction of the CCTV project as "sacrificial zones" that are necessary to allow other zones to be "tourist free" (Koolhaas and OMA 2004: 129). The sacrifice of antiquated districts is not taken lightly (as in land expropriated for the construction of condominium towers, as is the case elsewhere in Beijing), but to establish a new base of state power to which foreign tourists are not especially welcome. The attraction for OMA seems to be that only state-driven projects can secure the extensive funds, population clearance, and the mobilization of resources needed to break ground for a new kind of publicness! The CCTV center is a building of barbaric beauty that presides over four city blocks in China's capital, facing off with the towers of corporate capitalism. It gives material figuration to an autocratic state grappling with the global flows in and out of a distinctive kind of hyperspace. Let us take a brief look at the Koolhaas project as a design.

The CCTV hyperbuilding

The headquarters of the CCTV is giant colossus that appears to straddle Beijing's new Central Business District, outside the Third Ring Road. Unlike the Forbidden City model laid out in rigid symmetric enclosures, Koolhaas' design defies stability; "the scary aliveness" of his design displays "elasticity, creep, shrinkage, sagging, bending (and) buckling" (Koolhaas and OMA 2004: 129). The architectural forms play with the vertical and transversal possibilities of disjointed connections, combining features of vertical overlook, sky-bridges, and ground-level flows so that instead of two separate towers (of seventy stories each) there is "a single, integrated loop." The continuous series of vertical and horizontal sections links different realms of news administration, broadcasting, studios, and program production. The overhang between the two towers includes public spaces for canteens and a public viewing deck (162 meters above ground; see Figure 8.2). This "single, condensed hyperbuilding" houses 200 television stations and such a big population that it becomes an urban center in itself (*China Daily* 2004). An entire building as a self-enclosed city suggests something like the Pentagon, the largest office building in the world, which is only slightly bigger than the CCTV fortress.

Bert de Muynck (2004), a European architect, characterizes Koolhaas' architectural intervention in China as "not phallic but vaginal, one that contributes to the modernization of communist culture and to the definition of architecture." This interpretation registers a shift in the symbolism of modern architecture from a tower reaching for the stars to an enclosing structure that absorbs power into the body politic. Designed according to
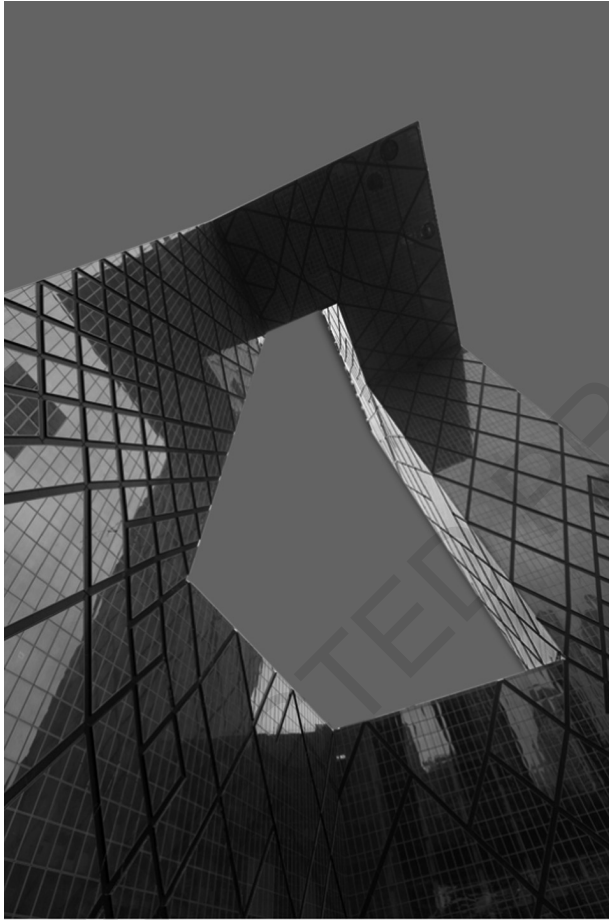
Figure 8.2 The cantilever joining the CCTV towers
Source: courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), The Netherlands.

the principles of "connectivity and opportunity," this hyperbuilding in downtown Beijing configures a kind of publicness that is circumscribed and enclosed within an immense trapezoidal loop. An army of media producers and protectors are gathered in a centralized infrastructure to manage the risks and security of information flows. Koolhaas' engineering skills in designing the building seems to achieve a diagnostic synthesis of the various information technologies and practices that will shape the Chinese picture and projection of the world. The very design of this outlandish structure broadcasts the state agency's role in regulating transnational flows while maintaining a network of enclosure.

CCTV and technological prowess

In 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao articulated a new policy that favors "independent innovation" (*zizhu chuangxin*) as a new emphasis in China's development project. The state recognizes that at stake in China's emergence as a global power is the production and control of ideas, information, culture, and invention that can be disseminated across the world. Part and parcel of this emergence, then, will be the terms in which this dissemination can be managed, stimulated, and controlled. In this broader context of China's desire to exert cultural influence at home and abroad, CCTV, as China's biggest state-controlled news organization, has spent billions of dollars not only on the construction of this revolutionary flagship building, but also on the expansion of facilities to launch respected international news organizations overseas.

CCTV, Chinese Central Television, is thus both a state mouthpiece and the largest conglomerate in China vested with the responsibility for controlling media in the name of "cultural security." Despite joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, CCTV has not significantly liberalized local content, but maintains control over the TV medium by defining "that which can be made commercial, that which cannot, and that which is in-between" (Wang 2008: 250). CCTV regulators favor non-controversial topics such as finance and economy, science and technology, leisure and lifestyle, but tend to control news and TV documentaries with domestic content. At the same time, CCTV is worried about the increasing presence of foreign media corporations such as CNN, CNBC, Bloomberg, and other global channels, whose broadcasting rights are limited to diplomatic compounds, elite hotels, and Guangdong Province. Nevertheless, the foreign media exerts its influence in mass market offerings such as game shows, talk shows, sports programs, and dramas that are accessible across much of the country (Wang 2008: 249–51).

The CCTV headquarters is therefore a gigantic state presence, symbolically and materially, in the world of global network media. The structure houses a hybrid state agency and commercial broadcaster, with 10,000 workers running the sixteen national channels, many broadcasting on a twenty-four hour cycle. The audience is estimated at over one billion people, and some Chinese intellectuals have charged the center with whitewashing the news, especially on the touchy issues of human rights and minorities, for a susceptible public. As a state-owned TV monopoly, it has been called one of the largest propaganda entities in the world. Indeed, the CCTV building was completed in time for the Beijing Olympics so that it could display the state's "charm offensive" by showcasing the games for an international audience. CCTV has gone global by opening a multilingual channel that broadcasts Chinese views

to the world. The hyperbuilding thus materializes, in a dramatic way, the "evolving" nature of Chinese propaganda.

Premier Hu Jintao has called for "raising China's cultural propaganda abilities," which "have already become a decisive factor for a national culture's strength" (Feuerberg 2009). The new strategy is to have CCTV replace propaganda (*xuanchuan*) with explanation (*shuoming*) and a more "informational" approach to the news. Such declarations, especially in the midst of on-again, off-again crackdowns on artists, journalists, lawyers, activists, and ordinary dissenters, seem to teach the lesson that selective news is more sophisticated than sheer propaganda. With its immense digital network, the CCTV machinery permits the technicalization of information control as a way to depoliticize the content of propaganda, to control domestic cyber-activities, and deflect global Internet penetration.

The CCTV headquarters is thus central to the state defense of official conceptions of Chinese culture, values, and identity in the midst of ubiquitous digital and news flows, as well as disseminating the definitive normative judgment for Chinese publics on matters of official political correctness. The development of an elaborate communications apparatus facilitates the strengthening of censorship of information available to private citizens and corporations. Before and after the Beijing Olympics, minority protests led to the shutdown of Internet activities in parts of Xinjiang Province. Since the Olympics, there has been a severe tightening of electronic and Internet communications, mainly in the name of uprooting pornography, piracy, and other illegal activities, or activities deemed problematic for national harmony. The authorities have closed hundreds of web sites, including the blog of artist Ai Wei Wei, which had posted 5,000 names of children who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. An anti-pornography campaign against netizens (web-based citizens) has been extended to controls on texting by cellphone users found to use "unhealthy" key words (LaFraniere 2010). The increased digital prowess of CCTV is reflected in extensive cyber-surveillance and interruptions of information flows that are viewed as detrimental to state authority.

CCTV is an emerging force as well in controlling the influx of foreign news, information, and entertainment, both on media networks and in cyberspace. Since 2006, Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo had complied with earlier demands to filter or remove political content in their China services. In mid-2009, the Chinese government demanded that all new computers to be sold in the country must carry pre-installed filtering software. The move to control free access to information is formally justified as an anti-pornography campaign by the Ministry of Health. The campaign is called "Green Dam Youth Escort" (*lvba huaji huhang*), a name that suggests the healthy protection of the young from informational pollution. Although the demand was later withdrawn by the Industry and Information Technology Ministry, the

domestic charge was that pornography was easily accessed on cyberspace, and therefore search engines must be strictly regulated.

Beyond the state objective of controlling the content of foreign media, CCTV technological capacities are also deployed for generating economic gains. For instance, global media corporations such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, Disney, Time Warner, and Viacom, among others, have created vast new media markets and audiences in China. CCTV seeks to nurture the rise of a Chinese media world that can meet these challenges by promoting Chinese cultural content. At the same time, China's new communication technologies have been linked to the escalation of cyber-attacks on the security systems of Internet firms and other kinds of foreign companies. While it has been difficult to trace Internet sabotage to the Chinese state, in 2010 the mix of cyber-censorship and cyber-attacks prompted Google to withdraw from the Chinese mainland and relocate to Hong Kong.

But whereas foreign critics have focused on freedom-of-information issues, what is often overlooked is how cyber-attacks create a bigger space for Chinese media companies to expand their opportunities and influence. There are over 430 million Internet users in China, served mainly by private companies such as Baidu.com, Alibaba.com, and Sohu.com. Already, with Google.cn's departure from the mainland, many local cyber start-ups both mimic and seek to replace foreign web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and so on. More important, the new CCTV center has laid the technological foundation for the creation of a government-run search engine as well as an online video site that will compete with Chinese cyber-companies in controlling the Internet in China. An official of Xinhua, the official state-run news agency, explains that the state-run search engine platform is "part of the country's broader efforts to safeguard its information security and push forward the robust, healthy, and orderly development of China's new media industry" (Barboza 2010). In other words, the CCTV complex is a singular expression of the state's desire to scientifically diagnose what it considers as a cultural security issue, and to effectively counter the powers of free-floating information managed by private Internet companies. The CCTV complex acts as a state filter for political news at home, and also a national battleground for China's fight against what it calls "information imperialism" by the West (Buruma 2001).

The new media technologies also help to extend China's global reach. CCTV is opening more news bureaus that publish and broadcast to international audiences by broadcasting in English, French, and Spanish, as well as other languages. There is a plan to create a twenty-four hour news channel modeled on Al Jazeera, a media outlet for the Arab-speaking world, that would reach the United States, Europe, and other regions. The CCTV headquarters stamps Beijing as a global media center, and in its technical

and symbolic forms, enables China's competition with Western media outlets in shaping international news, spreading Chinese cultural values, and improving the nation's image globally. More broadly, China often views foreign arts and films as hostile to or inappropriately interfering in Chinese internal policies, and thus the new and expanded media agency plays the crucial role of patrolling the content of outside media production and its portrayal of matters deemed to be "Chinese."[4]

Whether intended or not, the surface of the CCTV monolith brilliantly displays this tension between propaganda and news, obfuscation and transparency. The net-like gridwork on the building's glassy façades seems to give expression to the flows of information that enter and leave the structure, not freely but as though through a sieve. On smoggy days, which are plentiful in Beijing, the latticework is even more visible, as a kind of political matrix, while the rest of the building dissolves into the polluted atmosphere.

The view from below

The sophisticated building design seems to have elicited a range of reactions from ordinary people. In China, public symbolism plays a big role in political culture, shaping ideas about politics in a way that can preempt public debates. The CCTV design is an especially rich target for all kinds of allusions about the staggering nature of state power. Western journalists have compared the building to a blank TV screen, a particle accelerator, and a deformed doughnut, and other rather decontextualized terms that reference Koolhaas' playful aesthetics that belie the media center's function in conquering the airwaves. What has been the reception of people in Beijing to this startling structure?

Chinese citizens have found the CCTV puzzling, and out of place or resonance with their notion of stable and staid modernist buildings. At the same time, however, to many others, the angled arch formed by conjoining the two towers suggests a grand gateway into the heart of political Beijing. Other metaphors the media center calls up include a twisted Chinese ideograph for "mouth" (*kou*); that is, a figuration that alludes to the building's role as the mouthpiece of the government. But to some Chinese netizens, the CCTV structure seems to frame a "knowledge window" (*zhichuang*) onto a new kind of architectural space.

Cultural theorists have argued that the legibility of the urban landscape often escapes the experiences of pedestrians and viewers. What is socially marginal ("the everyday, "the low life," the pornographic) can provide central symbols to the experience of urban life (cf., Stallybrass and White 1986). The CCTV center viewed from the street level or on the web site has generated a slew of transgressive jokes that poke fun at Koolhaas (who has become a

household name among the urban elite), but also at the state's pretensions at media control. The squat and angled shape of the headquarters has inspired nicknames such as "big shorts" (*da kuzi*) or boxer shorts (*da kuzha*). Comparisons of the CCTV structure to a giant toilet or the public staging of a pornographic act mock an emerging psychic topography shaped by reconfigured relationships between foreign architects, the powerful state, and ordinary citizens. Cyber-jokes about Koolhaas' hyperbuilding trace the multiple displacements that cut local people off from massive urban transformations.

In June 2009, a Beijing architect, Xiao Mo, attacked the CCTV headquarters as "hindquarters." Xiao had earlier made a summary of posted netizen comments opposing the behemoth's design, and charged the media for not reporting dissenting opinions to the general public. With this design, was Koolhaas playing a cruel joke on "1.3 billion Chinese people"? Mo reports his shock at the finished building, which when viewed at an oblique angle, suggests a kneeling figure with its rear end (the overhang) poised in relation to a nearby annex tower (*Danwei* 2009; and see Figure 8.3). While Mo appears to be genuinely horrified by what he sees as Koolhaas' "genital worshipping" structure, netizens have had a field day posting pornographic CCTV images, some of them featuring a satiated Mao. Cyber-smuttery also takes a jab at the state, recasting CCTV as CCAV (Chinese Central Adult Video), thus suggesting that political vulgarity is part of the state broadcasting content.

The proliferation of building pornography compels the CCTV to undertake the embarrassing chore of stamping out cyber-jokes. In the run-up to the Sixtieth Anniversary of the nation's founding, in 2009, the Central Propaganda Department handed down directives to various departments to eliminate all web site and Twitter references to the "CCTV Porn Joke" the "CCTV big pants designer," "CCTV building, sex organ" and even "Koolhass, CCTV" (McCue 2009). The mixed reception to CCTV has made it Beijing's most controversial structure. Among Chinese architects, there are calls for rethinking the cultural trend of falling "in line with the West" (*Danwei* 2009). Furthermore, if viewed in non-pornographic terms, the mammoth building can seem, to passers-by below, a threatening presence looming above. Instead of hindquarters, the hawk-like angle of the cantilevered top can be experienced by pedestrians as symbolizing being put under state surveillance. As elsewhere in Asian cities, urban pornography rewrites the meaning of controversial architectural space, producing an underground narrative that subverts and overturns the symbolic hierarchy and dignity vested in overweening power structures.

The view from the West

Western critics view the flow of cutting-edge urban designs to Asia with a mix of hope and foreboding. The relocation of radical architecture to East

Figure 8.3   A view of the CCTV figure poised next to an adjacent tower
Source: courtesy of Ole Scheeren and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA),
The Netherlands.

Asian cities has been viewed as a blatant cooptation of architectural innovation by repressive states. Shannon Matten notes that "[a]s the medium of television grows increasingly decentralized through digitalization and mobilization, and as China's state media faces increasing competition from other media in other forms and from other places, the symbolic significance of a huge, monolithic structure will become even more important in signally the continuing power of this state institution" (Matten 2008: 869–908). Edwin Heathcote of *The Financial Times*, while admiring the "staggering and innovative" CCTV structure, bemoans that "China has co-opted architectural

and artistic radicalism in a manner that might be described as visionary, or perhaps as shrewd, or perhaps as coolly cynical." He calls the structure "modernism without utopia" (Heathcote 2007: 17). For Matten and Heathcote, it appears that whatever "cool" cynicism Koolhaas exhibited had been in seeking authoritarian sites to stage his outlandish designs, thus perverting the association between radical architecture and modern utopianism.

Koolhaas had expressed the desire to use risky architecture to open up authoritarian China, but has his experiment misfired in playing with the politics of opening and closure? The CCTV project is not widely viewed as a monument to transparency and openness, but rather as a condensed symbol of deep tensions as Beijing seeks to be simultaneously an open city and a forbidden capital. To many ordinary Chinese, the CCTV headquarters is experienced as a massive affront to their cultural sensibilities, a kind of collective urban shame that may induce a retreat from Western urban conceptions. For the Chinese state, however, the stunning hyperbuilding has established Beijing as a global stage, a hyperspace that is dominated by Chinese sovereignty.

Conclusion

This chapter has compared and contrasted two related sets of distinctive practices associated with the hyperbuilding in ambitious East Asian cities. A notion of exception allows us to identify the variable uses of spectacular spaces for accumulating capital and for raising the metropolitan ranking in the world at large. Hyperbuilding as a verb refers to the infrastructural enrichment of the urban landscape in order to generate speculations on the city's future. Hyperbuilding as a noun identifies a mega-state project that transforms a city into a global hyperspace. Hyperbuilding is about the world-aspirations of the state, and my approach challenges studies that disconnect urban transformations from the national environment and aspirations, or view spectacular spaces as the exclusive tool of global capitalism.

A focus on exceptional city spaces highlights the politics of urban transformations and the various processes and built forms that compete to position the metropolis on the global stage, and the nation as a global actor. However, there is no guarantee that spectacular zones will realize urban dreams of world conquest. The over-leveraged city of spectacle or the arriviste nation is especially susceptible to global market gyrations abroad, and subversive disruptions at home, or perhaps, as in the Malaysian case, to continue on unnoticed.

Frenzied over-building in Asian cities gives us a picture of what happens when powerful emerging countries configure their own hyperspaces of sovereignty. The pivotal urban spectacle is not global capital alone but also

sovereign power. This should not be surprising, as massive public buildings were also erected at the peak of European empires. What is different about the contemporary emergence of an architectural hyperspace in Asian cities is the unease it has stirred among theorists of modernity. There is a new questioning about their capacity to interpret contemporary trajectories of monumental change when it happens outside the Western world. Radical architecture is responding to profound geopolitical shifts, and rapidly innovating Asian cities rupture conventional understandings of urban innovation as either modernist utopia or dystopia. While urban spectacles in Asia have been shaped by international actors and designs, Asian cities and political codes are also shaping how we use and think through contemporary architectural forms and spaces.

Notes

1   Beijing was estimated to have spent US$3.5 billion on the Olympics, while Shanghai's preparation for the 2010 exhibition was estimated to have cost over US$4.2 billion.
2   There is no space in this chapter to discuss the synergy between spectacular spaces and spectacular events in promoting the urban standing of Asian cities.
3   For examples of this, see www.seoul.go.kr or http://wdeseoul.kr
4   For instance, the Chinese authorities have protested the showing, at home and abroad, of documentaries and films produced by foreigners that deal with sensitive topics such as Tibetan or Uyghur minorities, or the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, subjects that raise questions about the actions of the Chinese state.

References

Barboza, D. (2010) New China search engine will be state-controlled. *New York Times*, August 14, p. B4.

Beech, H. (2005) Ye olde Shanghai. *Times Magazine*, February 7; http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1025219,00.html (accessed December 28, 2009).

Bunnell, T. (2004) *Malaysia, Modernity, and the Multimedia Super Corridor*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Buruma, I. (2001) Battling the information barbarians. *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30–31, p. W1.

China Daily (2004) Kool enough for Beijing? March 2; http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/English/doc/2004-03/02/content_31080 (accessed August 6, 2006).

Ellis, R., CB (n.d.) The CCTV tower: central icon of post-urban Beijing? See http://www.cbre.com/NR/rdonlyres/0B07294B-814C-450C-9A6E-C1DA079AE7D0/0/CCTVTowerMay07.pdf (accessed July 1, 2009).

Danwei (2009) Rem Koolhaas and CCTV architectural porn. August 20; http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem_koolhaas_and_cctv_porn.php (accessed December 28, 2009).

de Muynck, B. (2004) The end of the skyscraper as we know it: from CCG to CCTV. *Archis* 5.

Debord, G. (1995) *The Society of Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.

Feuerberg, G. (2009) Commission hears how China's propaganda is evolving and expanding. *The Epoch Times*, May 20; http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/17100/ (accessed December 28, 2009).

Fong, M. (2007) A deformed doughnut? No, China's TV tower. *The Wall Street Journal*, November 7, pp. B1, B8.

Frangos, A. and Chang, L. (2003) Architects go east. *The Wall Street Journal*, December 17, pp. B1, B8.

Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 156.

Heathcote, E. (2007) Modernism without Utopia. *Financial Times*, December 20, p. 17.

Holston, J. (1989) *The Modernist City: an anthropological critique of Brasilia*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Jacobs, J. (1993 [1963]) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

King, A. and Kusno, A. (2000) On Be(ij)ing in the world: postmodernism, "globalization," and the making of transnational space in China. In A. Dirlik and X. Zhang (eds.) *Postmodernism and China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 41–67.

Koolhaas, R. and OMA (2004) Beijing manifesto. *Wired 08/2004*, 1, 122; http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.08/images/FF_120_beijing.pdf (accessed December 28, 2009).

LaFraniere, S. (2010) China to scan text messages to spot "unhealthy content." *The New York Times*, January 20, p. A5.

Lash, S. and Lury, C. (2007) *Global Culture Industry*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, pp. 141–8.

Leong, S.T. (2004) The traditions of Chinese cities. *32 Magazine*, Winter; http://www.szetsungleong.com/texts_traditions.htm (accessed December 28, 2009).

Matten, S. (2008) Broadcasting space: China Central Television's new headquarters. *International Journal of Communication* 2, 869–908.

McCue, W. (2009) The latest directives from the Ministry of Truth. Working paper, US Embassy, Beijing, China, August 31.

Ong, A. (2005) Ecologies of expertise: assembling flows, managing citizenship. In A. Ong and S.J. Collier (eds.) *Global Assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 337–53.

Ong, A. (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: mutations in sovereignty and citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ong, A. (2007) Please stay: pied-a-terre subjects in the megacity. *Citizenship Studies* 11(1), 83–93.

Simmel, G. (1900) A chapter on the philosophy of value. *American Journal of Sociology* 5, 577–603.

Stallybrass, P. and White, A. (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wang, J. (2008) CCTV and the advertising media. In *Brand New China: advertising, media, and commercial culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 249–51.

Zalewski, D. (2005) Intelligent design. *The New Yorker*, March 14; http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/03/14/050314fa_fact_zalewski