

## IMPLOSIONS INTO AN INNER VOID

Global architecture, the credit crunch and the irrepressible M. Derrida

### *1. Build the towers — the people will come*

Riyadh is newing itself up: new plazas, new institutes, new towers. They're digging out a million and a half square metres of subterranean parking for a planned five million square metres of new financial district. The renderings show sleek elevated monorails — gliding past oddly diced high-rise, gliding on beneath tropical skygardens .... Design contracts for the district's tallest buildings will go out to international competition and, as masterplanner Jacob Kurek puts it, "the right people"<sup>1</sup> are being invited to compete.

The "right people" as a phrase is at once curious and transparent. While making a show of discretion, it insouciantly lets fall the well-known unsaid: that a shortlist of names — Fosters and Partners, HOK, Zaha Hadid etc. — is conjoined to expensive distant projects from their very moment of conception. Taken en masse, these names form an elite club of architects to the global city, or suppliers of city-iconography to the global image repertoire. While the latter is a function long-served by architecture itself, the global architect individually, and the formation of a global architects' club, is a more recent development. The last two decades in particular have advanced their hand, and will be looked back upon by club members as a golden era. Sustained years of high oil prices and swelling merchandise exports yielded a crop of urban regions across Asia and the Middle East that were at once cash rich and architecture light. Architects rapidly gathered to sell faces to cities that were worried they didn't have one, and to mayors who moaned in their sleep, "Build me a landmark!" For a while these four words formed the archetypal global brief, though more recently the language of landmarks and icons has come under critical opprobrium. It is too crass, too brash, too toe-curlingly *nouveau riche*. Instead the lexicon has shifted (though the raw sentiment remains) toward talk of the "world class". Clients want "world class architecture" to delineate the skylines of their freshly "world class cities".

The concept of the "world class city" is itself a product of the same period of strong global growth, ballooning volumes of global trade, and the receding profile of the nation state. Following the opening up of China and the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, a billion new workers as well as some 30 million square kilometers of land came into the global marketplace — effectively doubling its reach, and hugely augmenting its transnational potency. Within, competition focused less on countries than on urbanised or urbanising zones, whose attractiveness to capital was determined by tax packaging and infrastructure rather than by internal political strategies. Instead of looking to their own national governments for development money, these zones vied with each other for foreign direct investment and international processing contracts. At the same time, a second more sophisticated layer of competition was informing the disbursement of human capital. The leading executives, financiers and creative innovators were able to retain the top ends of product value chains even while the lower links were being meted out with comparatively little reference to geography. Furthermore, this upper echelon economy and its key personnel proved to be every bit as mobile as any other element in the hierarchy. Easily transcending national boundaries, these knowledge classes moved between London, New York, Shanghai, Singapore et al., thereby stringing a global nexus of upper-tier-urbanism, and defining the premier league of world class cities. The global rank of any individual city, and its placement upon the world map — which had become mostly ideology-insensitive, but was nevertheless highly attuned to cultural draw — was suddenly contingent

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Jacob Kurek, Principal of Henning Larsen Architects (HLA) Middle East, February 2009. Kurek leads the HLA masterplan for Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District (KAFFD).

upon its visibility to these people, its allure, and its traction within a new global marketplace of urban desirability. To be important, and to get rich, cities had to be seen, and to be wanted.

The combination of ascendant municipalities and dominant soft power elevated architecture from being the most tangible expression of a city's global consequence to being a means to assume that consequence. In its former signifier-role, architecture was used merely to articulate visually a pre-eminence which was intrinsic to the city itself. Grandiloquent buildings were befitting to the august capital, and so forth. However in the newer context of urban desirability, architecture not only denoted cities with global allure, but was also capable of generating that allure. As urban allure itself was a driver for global socio-economic power, it followed that architecture could be used as a transformational force. This use was facilitated by the crucial fact that while architecture communicated the global standing of a city, it was not dependent upon that standing for its creation. A city without overt consequence could gain recognition simply by using built volumes to voice a status which, it was assumed, would follow. Thus the ignoble industrial zone flips itself into the global premier league merely by making the architectural declaration that it is in fact already there. It is a process of uttering the thing in order to bring it into being: the signifier in use to invoke the signified. If world class architecture states a world class city, then to be a world class city, one need only state world class architecture.

This practice of transformational architecture has proved particularly appealing to the freshly rich and socially aspirant city as architecture can of course be very easily bought. An essential operating principle of "build the towers — the people will come" has characterised ambitious development programmes throughout the global architect period, and is duly evidenced by the rendered skyscrapers of Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District, as well as by the crops of sudden high-rise in hundreds of other cities worldwide. These each testify to spells of exuberance and tigerish leaps. In many cases, where tall buildings stand empty in run down downtowns, these testify also to the inadequacy of a lone moment of glass and steel to effect comprehensive change.<sup>2</sup> The experience of isolated transformational architecture in essentially untransformed urban regions amply demonstrates the shortcomings of the partial approach. This leaves the enterprising city with the question, "What constitutes a full approach, and which specific architectural elements do I need to buy?"

## *2. Shopping for class*

It is self-evident that to attain full world city status, and the concomitant purchase upon the world's mobile knowledge classes, a world class airport is required. This fulfills not only a logistical need, but also provides an architectural gateway, and a global city framing device. Accordingly airports have been a prominent feature of global architecture, and in particular, of the global architect's penetration into expanding markets. Most notably, Foster and Partners' Beijing Terminal 3, completed in 2008, is the largest terminal building in the world, with over one million square metres of shining floorspace. It may however find itself superceded in passenger volumes by the new KPF airport in Abu Dhabi, scheduled to be ready by 2012. This in turn is set to be rapidly outsized by planned extensions to Dubai airport, though a proposed second phase of Abu Dhabi may re-outsize it sometime in the mid 2020s. Having said that, Beijing Terminal 3 is designed for maximum flexibility with respect to further expansions .... This hunger to build larger and more sophisticated airports is symptomatic of the deeper hunger to rise within the world city premier league. Such move-

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<sup>2</sup> The Asian financial crisis of the 1990s is commonly related to rash property speculation, and in particular, the over-production of business district skyscrapers. In developing world cities, empty or unfinished commercial high-rise is a well-observed indicator of developmental vicissitudes. Both can be seen as examples of failed transformational architecture.

ments are dependent on capturing global flows, but also on servicing them upon arrival, and so the world class hotel is an equally indispensable component. The airports naturally pluck on the hotels, which too have been a staple of the global architect, often appearing on larger airport masterplans, as well as studding the redeveloped downtowns and new business districts.

It is important to note the annihilation of the local executed within the perimeters of these two core elements of the global city. The airport is by definition only half there — acting as a form of border town, with the majority of its built footprint standing already in international airspace. Likewise the hotel, whose primary relationship is with the global traveller rather than the local environment, is a peculiarly neutered space. The two congregate as points along a trajectory of international travel, which serves not only collapse distance, but also to smooth it through the provision of faultlessly similar internal environments.

The servicing of the global traveller further extends to leisure needs, including shopping and, for premier league purposes, cultural programme. The requirement to build an opera house, art gallery or performance space which will position the host city on the international arts itinerary, supplies the global architect with a further line in architectural services to the would-be global city. As with airports and hotels, the weighting toward the world class provides no necessary location beyond that of being in the world. Furthermore, as the focus is on attracting globally touring shows (the Bolshoi Ballet, the international Picasso exhibition etc.), the primary fidelity is again to global conceptualisations rather than local conditions. Zaha Hadid, who has had considerable success in selling cultural architectural products to cities looking to up their global rank, is notable for designing cultural buildings that are more like each other than they are like anything else in the world. They are first and foremost Zaha Hadids, and only secondarily wherever they happen to be. As Patrick Schumacher, Partner at Zaha Hadid Architects, notes, “There is no space now for regional architecture in any meaningful sense — there are only world firms and world architecture [...] expanding cities are a platform for world architecture.”<sup>3</sup>

World architecture in this sense is best understood as an extension of world brands, whose presence confirm the effective achievement of a world environment, and in so doing, automatically efface anything specific about the actual locality. A continuum of global products and services is constructed which runs seamlessly from the Virgin flight to the Mercedes taxi to the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to the Louis Vuitton store to the Zaha Hadid Performing Arts Centre, and on. Architectural space becomes as fungible as an aeroplane seat or a product line from a multinational brand: something akin to an exclusive item of footwear, which is available only in premier league cities, but in any of them. The shoe denotes luxury and globality through its association not with an area in the world, but a with a specific tier (the top) of a particular world hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Somewhere behind this continuum of global products and services, the global city itself liquefies into the aspiration for complete indeterminability of place. Expanding cities are not only platforms for world architecture, but are dissolved into world architecture.

A prime example of this is seen in Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Cultural District, which is set to become the “the world’s largest single concentration of premier cultural institutions.”<sup>5</sup> These include, along-

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Patrick Schumacher, July 2008.

<sup>4</sup> As though in corroboration of this, Zaha Hadid has released a number of exclusive retail products, including a lamp for Artemide and footwear for Lacoste. The Zaha Hadid-Lacoste sneaker, which is designed “to allow the evolution of dynamic fluid grids” (Hadid), is set for launch in September 2009.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Saadiyat Island Cultural District Fact Sheet’, distributed to the press by the Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC) of Abu Dhabi, Master Developer of Saadiyat Island.

side a Zaha Hadid Performing Arts Centre, a Foster and Partners National Museum, a Frank Gehry Guggenheim (drawing on the transformational success of the Gehry Guggenheim in Bilbao), a Tadao Ando Maritime Museum, a Jean Nouvel Louvre, and a further 19 cultural pavilions (modelled after the Venice Biennale). In its assemblage of global elements, Saadiyat itself becomes an *atopos* — the product of a concentrating force applied across the globe, but to no point in particular. It is as though the world had been placed in an alembic, boiled up, and the highest cultural fraction removed. The resulting distillate unifies elements on the sole basis of being world class, and then offers them up on a single shelf. This shelf is appositely positioned on a direct freeway link to the aforementioned KPF Abu Dhabi world class airport. Strings of hotels, villa parks, and irrigated golf courses are further integrated to ensure the visitor need never breach the continuum of fully globalised space.

Crucially, these integration efforts stitch the cultural programme into a new hotel environment as opposed to into the existing city fabric. Abu Dhabi itself is spread over Abu Dhabi Island and the adjacent mainland, while the Saadiyat Cultural District is sited remotely, on the coast of the nearby but completely undeveloped Saadiyat Island. This adjunct to the city offers no response to city interests or demands, but is wholly directed instead toward the global cultural tourist. Premier cultural institutions, as well as leisure and retail, are embedded within the system in order to attract tourist flow, and thereby extract rent. Indeed underpinned by a single Master Developer — the Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC) of Abu Dhabi — the entire Saadiyat project operates as a form of giant out-of-town hotel. The Louvre et al. are in effect laid on for guests. Notably it is this way round — rather than the guests coming for the Louvre — as it is the desire for guests which is the starting point and *raison d'être* of the venture.<sup>6</sup> And in as much as the architecture and its users are exogenous to the city, so naturally is the art.

The Jean Nouvel Louvre building, at US\$108m, is a relatively small element within a US\$1.4bn Louvre package, which includes US\$548m for the use of the word “Louvre”, and a further US\$747m for Louvre art loans and management and curatorial services.<sup>7</sup> These loans represent a primary cost for the project given that there is no art of particular note in Abu Dhabi to suggest building a gallery, or to hang in it once finished. Rather the gallery, the visitor, and the works on display are all drawn from the global context. The actual siting of any of this on Saadiyat Island is a pure property play.

### 3. Over 100 degrees proof (where the world becomes magical)

Purer still is the property play represented by King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Here the plan is for a full global city — as opposed to a mere art district — and the location entirely devised — as opposed to tacked onto an existing urban area. Spotted some 100km north of Jeddah in a flat void where the desert meets the sea, KAEC is a Manhattan-sized single generation masterplanned metropolis. The sheer absence of place is taken as the starting point for the creation of a global city as an unadulterated product of world architecture. The transformational imperative is to vault an absolute nowhere into the premier league of world cities simply by building it.

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Lord, cultural consultant for Saadiyat Island, points out the rationale behind targeting cultural tourists specifically: “cultural tourists are wealthier, older, more educated, and they spend more. From an economic view, this makes sense.” Quoted in ‘Celebrity Architects Reveal a Daring Cultural Xanadu for the Arab World’, *The New York Times*, 1 February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> This itself is tied into a larger deal between the United Arab Emirates and France, involving also the purchase of 40 French Airbus airplanes and as much as US\$10.4bn in French armaments.

On their first site visit, the urban designers (again a team of “right people”, comprising this time WATG, SOM and Parsons) were riding Chevy 4x4s across the dunes, and later that afternoon, on their knees digging out the wheels. After that experience they returned to the more mannerly setting of Northern California, and worked primarily off Google Earth in the creation of a scheme of astonishingly punctilious resolution. 14 foot spreadsheets were taped to the walls of the office detailing precisely how many residents of which income bands requiring how many square metres a piece using what modes of transport .... The design anticipates not only where the CEO will live, but also where his cook will live, where his cook will shop, where the shopkeeper will live, where the university professor will blow her nose. Asked directly who these people are — given that there is no one there at present — the WATG designers asserted “a mix of international people”, working for “international companies”, and living in a “fully viable international city [...] a world city — a world class city [...] like anywhere else on the planet.”<sup>8</sup> Again, the design strategy for KAEC imagines the city as an extension of a globalised continuum of workers, of corporations, and of leisure and consumption patterns. The level of precision to which the city is designed is possible specifically because of the complete abstraction of its where and who. KAEC is in essence an anywhere-on-the-planet concept, dropped *deus ex machina* onto a globe spinning in a Google Earth window.

Carried to its apogee, world architecture thus results in the total abnegation of place. Specific architectural elements within such schemes may or may not incorporate vernacular motifs, or draw on local visual culture. Nevertheless, the plane of conceptualisation is dehitched from any notion of local democratic consensus, and is instead centred on the metaphysics of global desire, and more particularly, the desire of cities and their developers to be desired. Under such circumstances, and generously bankrolled, architecture becomes a process of magical thinking — of white lines drawn on black screens, and utopic client-architect dictatorships. Spatial concerns play themselves out in a world of pure space, where the obsession with the world class allows a worldlessness of approach. The whole thing floats beautifully before being positioned anywhere specifically. This detachment of process from actual enactment is observable in the very structure of operations: the play of the property play is superbly untethered in its choice of stage, just as the vector of transformational architecture is applied irrespective of the object being transformed.

Yet this abnegation of place is only sustainable in the absolute smoothness of the conceptual plane. Inevitably at the moment of implementation, local political realities impose new and destabilising forces which, neglected completely throughout the magical thinking phase, suddenly call into question the essential cogency of all that went before. With KAEC, the very notion of building an international city in Saudi Arabia — a nation with some of the most awkward and opaque visa processes in the world, and therefore very limited international flow — is almost an outright oxymoron. Furthermore, once within Saudi Arabia, law means sharia law; criminals are publicly beheaded by sword; women can't drive and remain segregated in restaurants, cafes and most homes; and a 10,000-man strong *Mutaween*, or Morality Police, patrols the streets daily. The basic acceptability of an internationalised metropolis to such a context, and of such a context to the million plus internationals scripted into the WATG spreadsheet (and carefully provided for with lounges and drinks cabinets) is not merely vertiginously ill-thought out — it is fundamentally disregarded in the design process. Notably, after the incident with the sand-sunk Chevy, the urban design team visited Saudi Arabia only one further time. The first phase of KAEC is now onsite, consisting of a port at the north end, and 30 kilometers down the coastline, a low investment two storey luxury villa park. In between, the aching desert stands.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Bryan Algeo, Vice President of WATG, and WATG Associate Meghna Andley, February 2009.

Similarly, with Saadiyat Cultural District, an elemental incompatibility appears as soon as the pure play is located within the United Arab Emirates. Much of the canon of Western art, and therefore of the collection contracted to hang in Saadiyat's prestigious galleries, is based upon the female nude. As such, it is automatically unfit for display in the Islamic UAE. The Abu Dhabi Louvre may be a triumph of global architecture, but once inside, visitors may find themselves drifting along strings of white walls, with only nails to indicate the positions of the paintings that have been removed. The same problem besets the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim. With modern art it may be more difficult to determine absolutely whether, for example, the women in Picasso's *Three Dancers* are naked (or indeed are women). Nevertheless, the renditions are inescapably explicit. The single and still unresolved issue of the female nude is acutely embarrassing to all involved in the Saadiyat scheme, as well as potentially crippling for the concept of the Saadiyat Island super-hotel. Moreover, it touches upon a far larger underlying tension. The enormous questions surrounding the presence and role of Western culture in the Middle East are wholly uncogitated by, and frankly resistant to, a magical thinking approach.

#### 4. *Magical thinking in China*

The vulnerability of noumenal world architecture to the realpolitik of places is equally observable in its other primary field of operation: China. Alongside the Middle East, China has been a leading exponent of global architecture over the recent golden period, and a key client for global architects. New districts and indeed cities have landed almost wholecloth upon China's eastern seaboard, which frequently presents to the architect less a desert for property play than a moonscape of rubble. Preceding settlements get cleared, and the transformational architectural elements imported. As with the Middle East, the two elements of cash (this time not petrodollars but merchandise exports converted into foreign currency), and urban ambition, create the potential for global architecture projects. A terrific concentration of power facilitates a magically tabula rasa approach, even to densely populated areas. The construction of Foster and Partners' Beijing Airport Terminal 3 involved moving out tens of thousands of Beijing residents, and moving in tens of thousands of migrant construction workers. An estimated 1.5 million people were displaced by Beijing's 2008 Olympics buildings. Zaha Hadid, taking a boldly magical position with respect to a country with 5,000 years of continuous history, has described China as "an incredible empty canvas for innovation."<sup>9</sup>

However China, and the implementation logic of the Communist Party, is more chaotically atomised than the structures found amongst the Sheikhs of the UAE or the Saudi Princes. Rather than emerging complete as the single visions of supreme Master Developers — as Saadiyat is a product of the TDIC, or KAEC one of the SAGIA (Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority) — Chinese cities are beset by numerous appetitive developers, and multiple entrepreneurial district administrators. While collectively these actors are still able to reinvent the city almost *de novo*, a more specific local market is created, and the pure play of true global architecture is alloyed within a ruder context. Nevertheless certain individual high-profile projects emanate from the centre, and retain their fully magical qualities.

Notably Dongtan, led by the global firm Arup, was generated on the basis of a pure world class concept: to be the world's first zero carbon city. Sited again on an uninhabited island — this time off the coast of Shanghai — Dongtan was to be a global paragon of environmental urbanism. This was to be borne out not only by its energy self-sufficiency, but also with respect to being able to feed itself and manage its own waste. As with KAEC, complex technophilic modelling of city

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in 'Soaring Ambitions', *Time Asia*, 26 April 2004.

demographics and behaviour was used to produce streams of theoretical outputs, and to develop strategies to neutralise them. As Arup continued perfecting their rationalised concept for the city, the Shanghai Communist Party Chief, Chen Liangyu, who was the prime political mover behind Dongtan, enjoyed the global attention generated, and the establishment of Shanghai as a global leader of sustainability, and thus of the global future. Unfortunately however, the accusation, conviction and current house arrest of Mr. Chen under corruption charges, has dealt Dongtan a withering blow.

The internal machinations of the Chinese Communist Party are mostly indeterminable. General opacity shields it from external scrutiny, but also serves to obscure behaviour within the Party, much of which is hidden from itself. Corruption is certainly endemic, but the lack of clear regulation, and the use of enterprise-incentivising tax structures, frequently render corruption almost indistinguishable from process. Within this darkness, the levelling of corruption charges, especially among upper Party ranks, is invariably politically motivated. This is critical as the house arrest of Mr. Chen signifies less the removal from office of a single corrupt official than the falling from favour of Mr. Chen himself. In some ways Chen may be unlucky: his fall is most likely bound up with a larger power shift within the Party away from the Shanghai-dominated 1990s of former President Jiang Zemin (himself a former Shanghai Party Chief), and toward the “Chinese socialist countryside” proposed by current President Hu Jintao.

Altogether these conditions compose a complex political backdrop, fundamentally tied to the people and places involved, and which, as with the issues surrounding Occidental-Middle East relations, lie wholly outside of any purely rational approach to designing a zero carbon city. Excepted from the design, they nevertheless impinge upon the reality. Mr. Chen is tarnished personally, and so too are his projects. Consequently Dongtan is now “on hold”. The site stands empty save for the developer’s business centre, and a shuttered up villa which once belonged to none other than Mr. Chen. Neither centre nor villa appear on the original Arup masterplan, which now languishes in a drawer.

##### *5. Nothing is certain nor ever was*

An unnerving level of contingency besets projects in China. The local environment of continuous rapid flux both allows architecture to happen very quickly, and subjects it to savage reverses and annulments. The legal and political context roils as competing Party factions struggle for control over ideological direction, while practical plans are assailed by incertitude and the lack of precedent as to how to maintain growth, control inflation, suppress dissent, and prevent the disintegration of an enormous and accelerating society. Spatially this plays out as uncertainty over land, regulations, and successive waves of clearances and reconstructions. There is a sense that the rambunctious energy of China, as it “drives forward on five wheels”,<sup>10</sup> is engaged in a form of catastrophe-creation, and is at every moment at risk of tearing itself apart or bursting into flame. Spectacularly this is exactly what occurred with China’s largest single global architecture project, OMA’s CCTV project in Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The slogan “Driving forward on five wheels” (*wuge lunzi yiqi zhuan*) was first coined by the local administration in Nanhai (Guangdong province) to describe the transformation of the rural economy through simultaneous urbanisation of the county, township, district, village and individual. It has since been picked up to characterise urbanisation processes across China.

<sup>11</sup> At over US\$700m, and almost 500,000m<sup>2</sup> floorspace, CCTV Headquarters will take its place among the biggest and most expensive office buildings in the world.

The 20 hectare CCTV (China Central Television) site hosts two main buildings: the oddly knocked quadrangle of CCTV headquarters, and the drop-shouldered “TVCC” tower. This latter was ravaged by fire in February 2009 when CCTV bosses, keen to wow Beijing with the freshly-fitted reflective glass of their two new buildings, launched a gargantuan fireworks display, and misdirected a rocket into its upper stories. The flames licked downwards fast, engulfing the tower and lighting up the Beijing night. The display was timed to coincide with the Chinese Lantern Festival when, according to tradition, the old is burnt away and the new issued in ... only the burning TVCC tower couldn't have been newer. The sight was awesome, as was the layering of ironies — in particular that the guilty CCTV bosses, who had no doubt originally asked for an icon, now found themselves standing at the foot of a blazing emblem. There was something unmistakably magical about the tower burning down on a night rich with lunar portents, while its owners cringed and wrung their hands, and thousands of Beijingers looked on, holding camera phones in the air, and sucking silently on the special sweet rice dumplings that are traditional to festival night. It is a moment which has fixed itself in the Chinese national imagination. Meanwhile, the charred concrete shell of TVCC still stands, though its future remains uncertain.

The fire at TVCC was rapidly interpreted worldwide as the symbol to mark the end of the golden era. The alignment of elements was too perfect for it not to be: a global recession was setting in, credit had run dry, thousands of projects around the world were being either frozen or cancelled, Dubai had cracked and architects were pouring out (lawyers pouring in), and in the midst of this, one of the world's premier pieces of global architecture was burning down. The fact that the fire itself was literally the result of an act of client hubris (a monster and unlicensed fireworks show) gave it a mordant power, and tied it to the wider story of the credit crunch as global retribution for so much greed and overreaching. All of a sudden, transformational aspirations were being sucked away, and the once aspirant mayors and their developer-partners, now stripped of capital, were left to stand before wrecked or empty sites, looking not only cupidinous but ultimately foolish. Furthermore, the concept of the world city itself took a pummelling, as its wounded proponent-cities retreated back to their nation states, looking pleadingly to governments for stimulus money, while beyond global trade was plummeting.

Yet while it is tempting to see TVCC as the dramatic denouement to two decades of gaudy architectural performances, the deeper story I've been building over the above examples is one of a long-standing series of holes, no-shows and vanishing acts. From the huge desert gap between port and villa park that is KAEC, to the empty walls of the Abu Dhabi Louvre, to the overnight evaporation of Dongtan, to the immolation of TVCC, these high points of the global architecture era present a concatenation of absences. The aggressive act of delocalisation at the core of the global architecture movement yields a striking pattern of inexistences and unhappenings — things that fold themselves out of being, and whose most powerful expression is their moment of disappearance. Brought up against reality, the magical thinking sublimates, and the world is left with a no-place, an unbuilding. The architecture dematerialises almost as instantaneously as something conjured, thus revealing an essential hollowness. In an odd resonance, the Beijing Olympic Stadium or Bird's Nest — almost certainly the best known and most iconic global architecture project of the golden decades — is physically a giant hole.<sup>12</sup> It is all hilariously postmodern: hilarious in that global architecture had always protested its postmodern credentials, only now to substantiate them in the inadvertant act of — what else? — its own deconstruction.

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<sup>12</sup> This building does still stand, though its long-term future is a continuing puzzle. It is currently in use as a tourist attraction: visitors pay 50RMB (c. US\$7) to go inside and gawp, rather confusingly, at the big nothing taking place within.



The meltdown in global finance has unquestionably brought on a collapse in global architecture. More subtly though, it has also uncovered the void that was ever at its centre. What we are seeing now are simply a series of implosions into an inner void.

Adrian Hornsby  
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