

LONDON

power tower.

m.murawski

No more "iconic buildings", everyone thought. As the world's finances went bust, Calvinist austerity boomed. Peter Zumthor's 2009 Pritzker Prize win was hailed as the triumph of 'anti-starchitecture'. Closer to home, FOA's 'veiny abs' vision for London's Olympic Stadium was muscled out of the Stratford masterplan and replaced by the fundamentalist (though festively-wrapped) asceticism of the current offering by generic design consortium Populous. So where on earth did the Orbit spring from? Is the iconic cult-form born again?

INDEED, THE ORBIT HAS SPAWNED SOMETHING OF A NATIVITY STORY OF ITS OWN: IT IS SAID THAT LAKSHMI MITTAL APPEARED TO BORIS JOHNSON IN A DAVOS TOILET, AND OFFERED HIM TWO THOUSAND TONNES OF STEEL.

What's more, the Orbit ticks all the classic iconic boxes: (relatively) colossal scale (115 metres); unapologetic cosiness with corporate and political patronage; liberal deployment of visceral organic allusions; gravity-defying engineering prowess, and so on. Crucially, the Orbit is overflowing with what iconicity-evangelist Charles Jencks terms 'enigmatic signifiers': As if by design, it generates an endless multiplicity of wacky verbal caricatures: 'a mutant-sized trombone', or 'Mec-cano on crack', it farts' from its 'arsehole', while its intestines 'writhe and swell'... This thesaurus-busting fecundity betrays a problem: if we over-apply semiotic categories like 'iconicity' to architecture, we risk forgetting that buildings are not just signifiers - they do not exist solely to trigger visceral allusions in the minds of critics - they emerge from and impact on political economies and ideologies, landscapes and bodies. The paradigmatic expression of the demiurgic epoch of the twentieth century, Vladimir Tatlin's unrealised 400-metre high Monument to the

Third International (1919), continues to loom over our artistic and architectural imaginations. The tower, 'taut ... like a muscle tensed with a hammer', straddling the approach to Petrograd on the Neva River, was to both express and enact radical social norms and moral values, not to mention new architecture and art forms.

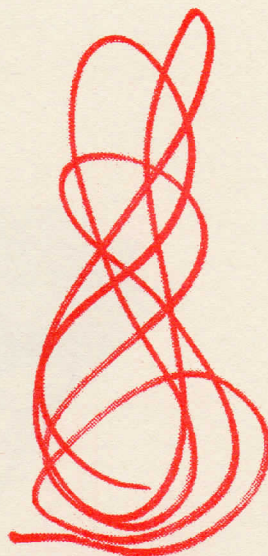
Kapoor and Balmond, anxious to emphasise the originality of their creation, acknowledge but downplay Stratford's debt to Petrograd. The echoes are too resounding, however (the red steel, the helix staircase, the tense angles), for anyone to convincingly argue that Tatlin doesn't loom over the Orbit, in form and in attitude, if not in politics. So what is the significance of this? Is the Orbit a beautiful whimper of revolutionary longing in a time of cynical neoliberalism ('Don't you think it's just amazing that they actually let us build this?' - Kapoor asked one journalist)? Or is it a spectacular material testimony to the complete cooptation of utopia by the culture of late capitalism? To begin to answer these questions, let's think about what, if anything, the Orbit is meant to actually do, beyond being an icon. Put differently, since the London Olympics are obsessed with 'legacy', what will be the Orbit's legacy? Who better to enlighten us on this point than Andrew Altman, head of the London Legacy Development Corporation: The Orbit, says Altman, 'will be a part of London's skyline and will show you that the distance [from civilisation to Stratford] is not that great.' This is important, he continues, because 'on our doorstep is the Westfield shopping centre ... It's going to have sixteen million visitors a year'. So, according to Altman, the post-2012 Orbit will function as Stratford's enticing index finger for lazy shoppers in central London. Altman is wrong on one point. You can't see the Orbit from central London. It's a bit too short. But it is a bold and curious tower, and it deserves a more considered commentary than those like Altman are prepared to give it.

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a compilation of space

c.balmond



When thinking about the Orbit there were the past references - the Eiffel tower of course, the Tatlin tower, and also the tower of Babel, all of them reaching up into the sky, but these structures go up linearly, in a straight line. We wanted to engage with a new kind of language of a tower, which could be read in many ways and if the language has sufficient complexity, people will read what they want into the form.

What we thought would be really different was an 'orbit' - something that goes around and comes back on itself and connects, remaining stable due to those connections. By turning, looping and connecting up every time it passes itself, a unique structure is created. It was not setting out to be asymmetric or symmetric, or anything. It was compiling itself and orbiting around certain points in space. And an orbit is highly stable. A little known fact is that the Orbit built itself up - there was no propping, it was pre-fabricated in 4 metre sections and put together by only four people.

Now that Orbit has finally opened to the public, I feel both relief and excitement. It certainly meets my expectations and it is what I imagined it to be - a full 3-dimensional invention of space and also an experience you participate in. I can also look back on an interesting adventure. First there was the competition - we had the freedom to think new but there also was the responsibility to create something significant for London, something that could last a long time, beyond the Olympics. I would like people to remember the Orbit long after the Olympics is over as something that compiles space around you, the visitor, as you go up and down it. Public art for me is not just about economic might, but also about human values to delight in 'play.'

Cecil Balmond is an artist, architect and engineer. He designed the Orbit in collaboration with Anish Kapoor. Image: orbit esquisse by Balmond. balmondstudio.com

