



What's wrong with iconic architecture

Description

Described as ["iconic, ambitious and sustainable"](#), the [V&A in Dundee](#) by Japanese architects Kengo Kuma & Associates will open September 2018.

As I've been studying semiotics of late, in particular C.S. Peirce's concepts of the *icon*, *index* and *symbol*, I can't resist a brief reflection on the concept of the icon in architecture. See my last post [Invisible icons](#).

Iconic buildings

I think most people understand the idea of iconic architecture. As I wrote last time, an iconic object is usually a prime example of an artefact or person that is considered worthy of admiration or respect according to the OED.

C.S. Peirce had something else in mind though. An icon is simply a kind of sign that looks like the thing it is referring to. A painting of a building is an icon in that it bears a visual similarity to the building it references.

It is more difficult to classify a building according to this definition of an icon, as a building signifies so much. A building (e.g. the V&A) shaped like a series of geological strata might serve as an icon in that it evokes, through resemblance, a series of fragmented cliff faces. It does that, but much more as well.

Iconic design

The design theorist Geoffrey Broadbent had developed the idea of iconic *design*, which is merely copying, by resemblance, a past design. The V&A might be the product of that kind of iconic design if it was designed to resemble other work by the same or a different architect. It does bear some similarities to the interior of a Kengo Kuma [building in Taipei](#).

Broadbent highlighted some difficulties with the idea of iconic architecture, and the difficulty he had relating his own concept of the icon with that of Peirce. Broadbent thought that C.S. Peirce's sign

categories of *icon*, *index* and *symbol* lie along a spectrum, from resemblance (*icon*) at one end to the convention-bound nature of the *symbol* at the other. The *indexical* sign is between these two.

Broadbent also positioned the *icon* and the *symbol* at extreme ends of a spectrum of lesser to greater perceptual sophistication. An *icon* accords with direct physiological response, as a child delights in how one thing resembles another. The *symbol*, at the other end of the sign spectrum, requires a much more sophisticated "culturally sanctioned response" (319). In either case, *icons* don't come off all that well.

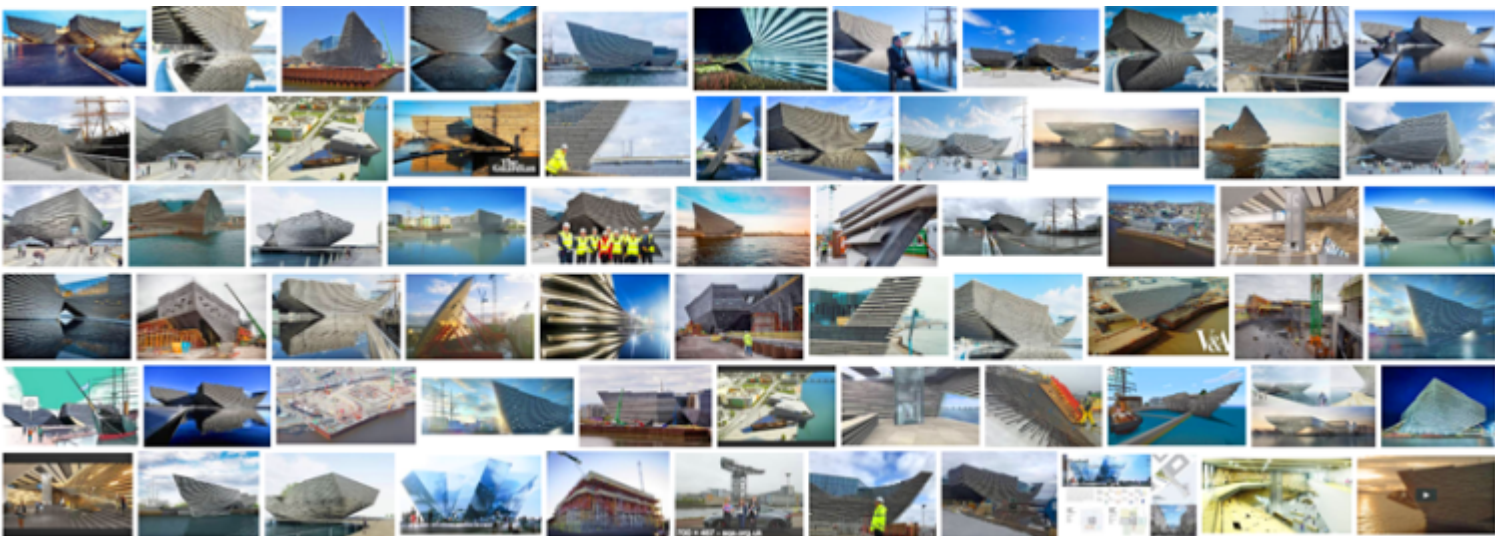
Typologic design

Broadbent circumvented the problem he had with *icons* and relabelled his original *iconic design* category "typologic design," to avoid confusion with Peirce's *iconic sign* category.

"It seems therefore that my analogic and canonic design types represent different aspects of iconicity whilst my iconic design has little or nothing to do with Peirce's original concept. That is why I now call it Typologic, thus bringing it into that long tradition of design by typology" (326).

A typological design therefore belongs in the category of *symbolic* design, following a system, convention, rule or schema. Broadbent traces such typological design to Abbé Laugier and Quatremère de Quincy.

The main problem with *iconic* architecture is that it doesn't always work as a descriptor. I'm inclined to say that what a building means, ie. what it references, is a matter of interpretation. Interpretations depend on the social, cultural, technical and other contexts in which the description (*iconic*, *indexical*, *symbolic* or other) is being applied and, like all art, is subject to constant re-interpretation. See posts tagged: [hermeneutics](#).



Bibliography

- Broadbent, Geoffrey. 1980. Building design as an iconic sign system. In Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, and Charles Jencks (eds.), *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*: 311-331. Chichester, England: John Wiley and Sons.

- Jencks, Charles. 2005. *Iconic Building*. New York: Rizzoli

Category

1. Architecture

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