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United Nations Headquarters, New York: The Cultural-Political Economy of Space and Iconicity

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In December 1946, just over a year after its inception, the United Nations (UN) accepted an offer from the United States to permanently house its headquarters in New York City.[1] The United States was chosen as the host country in late 1946, and a last minute US$8.5 million dollar donation by philanthropic businessman John D. Rockefeller Jr. secured New York as the settlement site over other potential locations, including Philadelphia, Boston and San Francisco.[2] The team of designers commissioned to work on the design were as international as their project, and included some of the most famous architects in the world: Wallace K. Harrison of the United States, and Le Corbusier of France. Construction began in October 1949 once the land was cleared of existing buildings,[3] and when it was completed in October 1952 the UN headquarters stood as one of the most daring pieces of modern architecture of the period, an 'image of bold progress for the international organisation',[4] [For image see: Fig. 1 in Appendix]. The most striking features of this construction, however, require deeper analysis: namely, the meanings and values represented by, and expressed through, the location choice for the headquarters (place), and the design of the structure (iconicity). Importantly, the geographical location of the building (chosen in a post World War II setting), and the iconic design that has come to represent the UN's physical locality, both feed off, and feed into, the cultural, political, and economic ideologies embodied in this 'world' institution from the outset.

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[1] T. Hamilton, 'Work Completed on U.N. Buildings' *The New York Times* (10 Oct 1952), p. 1.

[2] United Nations. 'The Story of United Nations Headquarters' *United Nations*, (New York, 2009), p.2. Interestingly, the General Assembly met for the first time in London in early 1946 and yet made the decision to locate the permanent headquarters in the United States (subsequently settling on New York). Other potential country-locations could have included the remaining four members of the Security Council: the United Kingdom, the Republic of France, Soviet Russia or China. However, given the urgency felt by these nations for constructing an international post-war institution, the relative destruction suffered by the United Kingdom, France, Soviet Russia and China during the war, and the prominent role the United States played in assembling the nations and pushing for this form of international collaboration, the United States was selected as the preferable host-country. J. Loeffler, 'Introduction', in J. Loeffler and E. Stoller, (eds.), *The United Nations: The Building Block Series* (New York, 1999), pp. 1-14, p.1.

[3] United Nations, 'Fact Sheet: United Nations Headquarters', *United Nations* (New York, n.d.), p. 7.

[4] P. Goldberger, *The City Observed: New York: A Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan* (New York, 1979), p.132.

Note: The UN Headquarters consists of four main buildings: The Secretariat, The General Assembly, Conference Area, and The Library (which was an additional construction, added to the complex in 1961).

Architecture is socially produced and fundamentally conditioned by prevailing politico-economic narratives.[5] Large-scale developers and their political allies have been known to foster 'placewars' through land development and the construction of "cultural superstructures". Indeed, in an analysis of the cultural construction of Los Angeles, Mike Davis has noted that Downtown arts projects have been increasingly favoured by the political elites, as cultural constructions (particularly the iconic) inflate property values and 'recenter' the region for the benefit of political and financial investors.[6] This paper seeks to build upon discourses that explore complex social constructions by analysing the simultaneous place-making and power-production dynamics that informed and represented the UN throughout the early years of its existence. Turning focus towards the construction of this iconic building in the New York City skyline, the analysis will explore the extent to which this privileged place - the 'World Capital' in a 'World City'[7] - represented an *exclusive* international imaginary, and how the subsequent architectural power-dynamics have affected international politics.[8]

Beginning with a macro analysis of prevailing cultural, political and economic changes within the era, the paper will narrow focus in order to examine the micro construction and design of the UN headquarters building. The first step in mapping wider contexts requires a contextualisation of the 1946 to 1952 period (the timeframe in which the United Nations was constructed), both in terms of post-World War II (WWII) internationalist narratives, and changing architectural practices. Drawing on theories that decode space and place, the paper will subsequently deconstruct the social power and knowledge embedded in the place-location chosen for the UN's permanent settlement. The analysis will then be narrowed to focus explicitly on the iconicity of the headquarters; the relationship between aesthetics and function, and the implicit politico-economic interconnectedness between the UN headquarters and wider ideologies surrounding the American skyscraper. Furthermore, as architecture is considered as a 'product for conspicuous consumption', the cultural political economy of the UN's iconicity, and the relation of iconicity, consumption and commerce, will be exposed and examined.[9] Finally, this paper will analyse the politico-economic value of utilising famous architects, or 'starchitects', for the construction of the UN headquarters. Starchitects represent a cultural elite but are often 'silently complicit' in aestheticising the agendas of the economically and politically

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[5] P. Jones, 'Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture', *Urban Studies,* 46 (12), (2009), p. 2520. For further discussion on general architectural types see: A. King, *Spaces of Global Culture: Architecture, Urbanism and Identity* (New York, 2004); and M. Kaika, and K. Thielen, 'Form Follows Power: A Genealogy of Urban Shrines', *City,* 10 (1), (2006), pp. 59-69.

[6] M. Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, 2006). p.71; Edward Soja also examines the urbanisation processes that have emerged in modern Los Angeles. See, for instance: E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford, 1996); A. J. Scott and E. W. Soja (eds), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996); E. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford, 2000).

[7] F. Adams, 'New York Offers U.N. 350-Acre Site at Flushing as a Permanent Home; Conveys City Building to Assembly', *The New York Times* (19 Oct 1946), p.1.

[8] Scott states that cities have always been integral to the facilitation of cultural and economic activity. He argues that it is only through providing a conceptual account of this phenomenon (the social construction of buildings and cities) that place-specific culture-generation can be explored and examined. A. J. Scott, 'The Cultural Economy of Cities', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* 21 (2), (1997), p.323.

[9] Kaika and Thielen, 'Form Follows Power', p.62.

powerful.[10] As a 'brand' in their own right with their own design baggage, this final section will reveal the cultural and political production of the 'individual' as they contribute to the beginning of a new institution. Drawing on the space, iconicity and starchitect lenses to highlight the cultural political economy of the UN within a built environment, this article will ultimately connect narratives of power in the UN to the built environment research agenda.

The United Nations was born in 1945 amid a storm of victory and defeat – victory for the Allied Powers of the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Soviet Russia, China and France; and defeat for Germany, Italy and Japan (the Axis Powers) among others. Building on the precedent set by the League of Nations, the founding principles of the UN included the facilitation of cooperation in international law, international security, economic and social progress, and world peace. However, the forty-five nations invited to the 1945 San Francisco Conference that cemented the existence of the UN institution had all previously declared war on the Axis Powers, and/or supported an Allied-led internationalist system.[11] Thus, from the outset, the institution was shrouded by a veil of internationalism and conditioned by the subtle dichotomous power relations of the victorious versus the defeated. The United States, instrumental in the Allies' WWII victory, was the driving force behind the establishment of the UN as an international organization for peace.[12] Furthermore, in December 1946 the US (New York to be exact) was selected as the host country for the permanent residence of the UN headquarters. The historical evolution of the UN as an international political entity is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the placement of the UN's headquarters in New York and the aesthetic place-making processes that located the UN within American space, was telling of an emerging American-dominated, cultural political economy of peace following the close of WWII.[13]

Mazower has noted that commentators in the 1940s were distinctly wary of the 'internationalism' seemingly represented by the institution and these principles, viewing the UN instead as 'an Alliance of the Great Powers embedded in a universal organisation'.[14] While the 'Great Powers' – the US, the UK, Soviet Russia, China and France – had central involvement in the creation of this institution, American political and economic hegemony was subtly expressed through a process of cultural production with distinctive semiotic and aesthetic components. Decades earlier, US President Woodrow Wilson had proclaimed that, 'the great things remaining to be done can only be done with the whole world as a stage'.[15] The

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[10] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2521.

[11] United Nations, '60th Anniversary of the San Francisco Conference' (2005), Accessed 15 May 2011, http://www.un.org/aboutun/sanfrancisco/.

[12] M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Woodstock, 2009), p.17.

[13] It is important to note that New York and the United States were not one and the same in population configuration, nor in ideas of internationalism. This paper does not aim to generalise New York outwards to the whole of the United States; rather, it seeks to clarify how the complex place-making processes of the United Nations in New York City were in a constant state of (re)negotiation and convergence with certain American internationalist/corporatist ideologies. Such work will provide a spring board onto further analysis into the tension between New York City and the United States as sites of potentially divergent 'internationalism', and how this tension has fed back into the identity-politics of the United Nations.

[14] Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, p. 7.

[15] Wilson cited in A. Eban, 'The U.N. Idea Revisited', *Foreign Affairs,* 74 (5), (Sep.–Oct. 1995), p. 50.

performative element of this 'stage' came to visible fruition in two stages - firstly in the UN's inaugural 1945 San Francisco Conference:

> 'Oliver Lundquist and Jo Mielziner - the latter famous as a Broadway designer of Musicals - had transformed the $5 million San Francisco Opera House into a glittering hall. . . . Lundquist and Mielziner adorned the stage with four golden pillars tied together with olive branch wreaths symbolizing the four freedoms that President Roosevelt had proclaimed'.[16]

The American emotional and aesthetic investment in this event at a time when a destroyed Europe was undergoing post-war reconstruction displayed a balance of wealth and power that came to define the early UN years - no effort or expense was spared 'to heighten the impact of the conference' and the global image of America.[17] These ostentatious, 'glittering' symbols of peace representing the New World Institution were a means of garnishing *existing* WWII elite power with gold trim, and served to constitute these social relations as *new* and *global* during a moment of significant political, social and economic change.[18]

The second (and more permanent) performative element that heralded the beginning of the UN - and fed off, and into, American ideological domination of the institution - was the commissioning of the UN headquarters to be located in New York, and to be designed by some of the world's leading architects. As a blueprint for a New World Order,[19] a visionary building was demanded in order to represent such hope and responsibility. Importantly, the late 1940s and early 1950s witnessed a sea-change in the design and iconography of architectural practice. The internationalism and politico-economic ideologies that marked the end of the Second World War also affected the architectural imagination of the New World Order.[20] Sklair has defined the 1950s as the beginning of the global era in architecture; a directional change from the earlier, pre-global state- and/or religion-driven construction, towards an architecture shaped by global capitalism and consumerism. This is not to say that a building which paid homage to capitalist and consumerist influences in its design was necessarily wholly capitalist and corporate; rather, Sklair has suggested that post 1950s architectural design articulated a certain struggle for global meaning and power that was affected by economic transformations.[21] This international architectural 'struggle' was influenced by significant features of the period, namely: pervasive capitalist economic discourses, the internationalisation of images and technology, and the

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[16] Schlesinger cited in D. Puchala, 'World Hegemony and the United Nations', *International Studies Review*, 7 (4), (2005), p. 573.

[17] Puchala, 'World Hegemony', p. 573.

[18] Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace,* p. 7

[19] Eban, 'The U.N. Idea Revisited', p. 39.

[20] Following the end of WWII, international changes were simultaneously global and economic. The Bretton Woods agreement was signed in 1944 and led to the creation of an international monetary political system. The International Monetary Fund (1946) and The World Bank (1947) were created shortly thereafter and underlined the emergence of a global, political economics underpinned by capitalist and neoliberal ideologies. W. Rennen and P. Martens, 'The Globalisation Timeline', *Integrated Assessment,* 4 (3), (2003), p. 141.

[21] L. Sklair, 'Iconic Architecture and Urban, National and Global Identities', in D. Davis and N. Libertun de Duren, (eds.), *Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Politics in Urban Spaces* (Bloomington, 2011), p. 179.

dispersal of design expertise.[22] As a result, the 'corporate/capitalist' image and the 'global power' image in architectural design grew simultaneously and became inextricably linked.

A key individual influence on the UN headquarters' construction was the Rockefeller Center (also located in New York), designed and built throughout the 1930s, and 'conceived as a place in which monumental architecture would spur both business and culture to new heights'. [23] Links to this institution were both economic and cultural – the UN headquarters was mostly financed by a Rockefeller donation in 1946; the headquarters' chief designer was Wallace K. Harrison, principal designer of the Rockefeller Apartments and a fierce international modernist architect; and the design process began in an office at the Rockefeller Center. The commercial success that followed the Rockefeller construction demonstrated to New York City that urban boosterism could accompany globally iconic architecture. In turn, the iconicity of the complex demonstrated to the UN the value of image-capital. Thus, within the period, emerging pseudo-internationalist narratives and changing architectural practices laid the foundation for a global 'United Nations Imaginary' that offered an American-centric cultural dimension to politico-economic prerogatives.

Certainly, the Rockefeller Center was not alone in developing this commercial culture of skyscraper-boosterism. The ever-growing skyline of New York City has often been read as a representation of corporate power and marketing. However, as Carol Willis has observed: 'skyscrapers should best be understood both as the locus of business and as businesses themselves'.[24] The 1920s saw a frenzied development of vertical structures, with over one hundred buildings of twenty stories or more being added to the skyline. In 1931 the Empire State building was unveiled as a speculative venture designed to attract business investment and, as the world's tallest building, a site to be visually consumed. Unveiled by a host of dignitaries, including Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mayor Jimmy Walker, the political fanfare and visual iconicity of the Empire State Building marked the structure as integral to the image of New York City, and bolstered representations of the city as a utopia for advanced capitalism.[25]

Moreover, the spatial connection to New York was not without meaning or consequence. The location of the UN headquarters presented (and presents) paradoxical and competing spatial narratives.[26] In official terms, the UN's headquarters are located in eighteen acres of

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[22] King, *Spaces,* p. 41.

[23] Goldberger, *The City Observed*, p.168.

[24] C. Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York, 1995), p.10.

[25] C. Willis, 'Form Follows Finance: The Empire State Building', in D. Ward and O. Zunz (eds), *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940,* (New York, 1992), p.162.

[26] Massey has defined 'space' as a simultaneity of experiences and 'stories-so-far' on a global scale; it is a process without stasis in which individual and/or collective lived moments feed into global narratives and inform wider subjective realities. The more localised lens of 'place' refers to the collection of these stories in a particular region. In other words, place – as neither fixed nor static – is the local assortment of fluid, interrelated histories and experiences, which are the result of an ongoing, transnational flow of people, knowledge and culture. As a 'story' interwoven in the process of New York City, the United Nations headquarters has both influenced, and been influenced by, New York's transnational flows. D. Massey, *For Space*, (London, 2005), p. 9. For further discussion of space as a collection of interrelated histories, see: A. Escobar, 'Culture sits in places: reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization', *Political Geography*, 20 (2), (2001), pp. 139-174. Note: The definition reference can be located on p. 146.

international territory. However, as an institution, it has faced many place-based restrictions: it is bound by US regulation to prevent individuals seeking refuge in the UN from the US; it falls under city protection and utility provision; the building was part funded by a New York City 'gift' of $7 million; and every visitor to the 'World Capital' must comply with US entry requirements and pass through US territory.[27] Such restrictions reaffirm the position of the nation-state as the arbiter of social change. Furthermore, Friedman has noted that 'cities are large, urbanized regions that are defined by dense patterns of interaction rather than by political-administrative boundaries'.[28] Consequently, the UN headquarters was inextricably spatially bound to New York City, and the implications of this spatial relationship on the UN's identity are twofold: cultural and politico-economic.

Firstly, scholars have noted that many cities seek to create a 'city image' with which to advertise and represent a specific identity.[29] The city image can 'spatialise a moment in a city's (projected) transition',[30] and the iconology of this image is not referent to one particular building, but is often linked to a wider architectural design and influence.[31] The early twentieth-century built-cityscape of New York encoded a cultural, visual transition; a new understanding of the 'urban space as spectacle'.[32] Monumental buildings and neat plazas came to dominate both the skyline and the ground-level of the city; the visual components of this occupied space denoted a dedication to modern, grand progress. Indeed, on a visit to New York in 1930, Le Corbusier marvelled at the novelty of that landscape and referred to it as 'a vertical city, under the sign of the new times'.[33] When offering the UN a site in New York in which to build the headquarters, the mayor of New York reaffirmed the importance of the modern, urban spectacle, stating that 'nowhere else in the United States was there a site comparable to "these beautiful... surroundings"'.[34] New York was presented to the UN as a city that projected success through the spectacle skyline; in turn the construction of the UN headquarters in New York was expected to complement the city's visual identity.

Moreover, the identity politics behind the city spectacle firmly connected the UN headquarters to the city of New York. Cityscapes and monumental architectural forms are orientating – they visually fix our geographical awareness, telling us where we are. The skyline of New York City has long provided a fixed reference point for defining cultural locality, particularly due to its frequent appearance in the American media.[35] Following UN acceptance of New York as the site for construction, the UN headquarters' 39-storey Secretariat Building [See Fig. 1 in Appendix] became fixed within that cityscape and, as a stand-alone structure with acres of space around the base, it has maintained a strong presence in the midtown skyline since completion in 1952. Thus the headquarters has, in itself, become an orientating spectacle.

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[27] United Nations. 'The Story', pp. 2-3.

[28] J. Friedmann, 'Where we stand: a decade of world city research', in P. Knox and P. Taylor, (eds.), *World Cities in a World System,* (Cambridge, 2000), , p. 23.

[29] M. Balshaw and L. Kennedy, 'Introduction: Urban Space', in M. Balshaw and L. Kennedy, (eds.), *Urban Space and Representation* (London, 2000), p. 16.

[30] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2528.

[31] J. E. Buchard, 'The Meaning of Architecture', *The Review of Politics,* 20 (3), (1958), p. 369.

[32] Balshaw and Kennedy, 'Introduction: Urban Space', p. 7.

[33] Le Corbusier cited in D, Ward and O. Zunz, 'Between Rationalism and Pluralism: Creating the Modern City', David Ward and Olivier Zunz (eds), *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940* (New York, 1992), pp. 3-18, p.4.

[34] Adams, 'New York Offers U.N. 350-Acre Site', p.1.

[35] L. Sklair, 'Iconic Architecture and Capitalist Globalisation', *City,* 10 (1) (2006), p. 40.

In addition, the recognisability of a city image like the UN – or set of images in the case of a city skyline – is desirable for its ability to transform the heterogonous disorder of the general city (with its competing social groups, invasive sounds, ambiguous spatial boundaries and social anomie) into an image of overarching homogeneity.[36] The Secretariat skyscraper and the modernist, curved structure of the General Assembly were slotted into the cityscape and have remained central tourist attractions in the city; silently complying with Manhattan's touristic cityscape uniformity and homogeneousness. Thomas Bender has described the UN headquarters in the 1950s as a 'bookend' for the public space of Forty-Second Street. Lined up next to other influential constructions of the era, including the Daily News Building, the Chrysler Building, *New York Times,* the New York Public Library and the New Amsterdam Theatre, the east-west line of Forty-Second Street 'fairly represented the culture and power of the city'.[37] Therefore, as a socially produced construction embedded in the 'spectacle' of the New York City skyline, the UN headquarters could neither be visually neutral, nor autonomous. This inseparability of the UN headquarters and New York cityscape – the visual linkages of the local 'place' and global 'space' narratives – has cemented an aestheticised power-relationship whereby the governmentality of the UN headquarters simultaneously influences, and is influenced by, the iconicity of New York City.

This governmentality must be understood in cultural, political and economic terms. Importantly, this New York cityscape 'spectacle' represented, and still represents, the visual manifestation of capitalist progress. New York, as one of the prime centres of American capitalism – a 'World City', as it is frequently defined – has served as a centre through which many economically relevant (national and transnational) variables have flowed, including: money, workers, commodities and information.[38] From 1946 to 1952 the 'World Capital' of the UN headquarters was socially produced within this capitalist centre of economic flows. Beneath the layer of the cityscape 'spectacle' exists the street-level reality of daily practices of international and national employees simultaneously *working for* the UN and *living in* New York City; multinational tourists simultaneously viewing the *UN headquarters* and admiring the *wider New York City skyline*. Moreover, it is important not to overlook the surrounding Manhattan population (native, nationalised and immigrant) who have shaped the spatial and cultural identity of the city. There is often an assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture within a territorial boundary, but New York City was as diverse in population (and restricted in movement) as the world that the United Nations' building was attempting to represent.

New York saw a large influx of immigrants following the end of the Second World War. It has been described as part of the "Immigrant Belt" alongside other global cities such as Los Angeles and Miami, and the city was fundamentally changed by this movement of displaced-persons (as each individual brought their own stories, experiences and expectations into the city).[39] As a cosmopolitan 'World City', New York seemingly offered an ideal site for the internationalism the United Nations was keen to represent. However, the social stratification and hierarchies of difference that came to characterise population settlement in New York also fed into an *exclusive* internationalism woven into the United Nations' identity and practice.

[36] J. Robinson, 'Divisive Cities: Power and Segregation in Cities', in S. Pile, C. Brook and G. Mooney, (eds), *Unruly Cities?* (London, 1999), p. 150.

[37] T. Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (New York, 2007), p.4.

[38] Friedmann, 'Where we stand', p. 22.

[39] R. G. Rumbaut, 'Origins and Destinies: Immigration to the United States Since World War II', *Sociological Forum,* 9 (4), (1994), p.585.

Indeed, cities in the United States underwent rapid suburbanization from the 1950s onwards, as they transformed from 'highly centralized agglomerations into scattered, decentralized metropolitan areas'. The middle class white population abandoned the centre for the suburbs and immigrants took their places.[40] Although immigrant populations increasingly inhabited the inner-cities, they maintained separate communities that were excluded from economically prosperous areas, such as Forty-Second Street. John R. Logan et al have described these communities as 'immigrant enclaves', where segregation has become a normalised part of the settlement process. One was only able to leave such an enclave (and "move up" the social hierarchy to the suburbs) when one had been assimilated into the mainstream and conformed to American socio-economic norms of "respectable" work and financial stability.[41] This street-level stratification of the American population presents a fractured underbelly that contrasts with the homogenised (transnational, commercial) skyline of New York City.[42] A culture of inequality and a pressure for conformity informed the daily lives of many inhabitants of New York, and the normalised processes of spatial segregation in the areas surrounding the UN headquarters fed into the institution's pseudo-internationalist identity and practice. Thus a subtle street-level/sky-line dichotomy created a tension between spatial narratives of the United Nations in New York City, and built-environment narratives of the United Nations' Headquarters in the New York City skyline.

What is more, further location-specific restrictions conditioned the spatial identity of this institution. Delegates *entering* the UN headquarters on official business (or otherwise) must have first passed through the United States, and to do so demanded compliance with US entry requirements. The explicit politico-economic narratives embodied in this 'lived space as a strategic location',[43] the cultural-visual representations embodied by the 'spectacle' skyline, and the tension between cityscape homogeneity and street-level diversity, have fundamentally conditioned the perceived 'place' of the institution within internationalist discourses. Legally it resides in international territory, yet ideologically it is fixed in New York City spatial discourses, and the divisions inherent in the make up of the city are continuously (re)performed and (re)worked by the United Nations as it inhabits that space. The governmentality of the UN is inseparable from its representations and spatial associations, and the institution has thus become integrated into American (particularly New York) 'urban spectacle' narratives.

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[40] D. S. Massey and N. A. Denton, 'Suburbanization and Segregation in U. S. Metropolitan Areas,' *American Journal of Sociology,* 94 (3), (1988), p.592.

[41] J. R. Logan, R. D. Alba and W. Zhang, 'Immigrant Enclaves and Ethnic Communities in New York and Los Angeles,' *American Sociological Review,* 67, (2002), p.299-300. Social distinctions in New York were not born out of immigration; the city has a history of conscious and controlled social division. In an exploration of aristocracy in New York in the nineteenth century, Eric Homberger noted a 'heightened self-awareness among the aristocrats' that constituted an exclusive (and narrowly defined) elite. Such social-demarcation was then deliberately cultivated, and 'exclusivity' remained a central component of control, as well as an identity-framing process. The history of New York can thus be seen as one of an evolving social diversity *and* division. E. Homberger, *Mrs Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age* (New York, 2004), p.4.

[42] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson present an interesting study on the politics of 'difference'. They explore the difficulty of mapping a particular 'culture' onto a particular 'place' when an area has immigrant populations that inhabit the 'borderlands'. A. Gupta and J. Ferguson, 'Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference,' *Cultural Anthropology,* 7 (1), (1992), p.7.

[43] E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford, 1996), p. 68.

King has argued that, after '[r]ecognizing that New York is imagined, and imaged, through its Manhattan skyline… attention needs to be focused on the central importance of the materiality and visibility of the *building*, in constituting and representing not only the city, but also the nation… [and] the world (or better, worlds)'.[44] The individual building embodies the cultural, political, economic and administrative values of the institution, and the iconicity of the architecture symbolises its political *presence* and economic *power*.[45] Importantly, iconicity in architecture is not contingent on height or scale, as buildings may have an institutionally sanctioned and/or symbolic significance.[46] The UN headquarters complex actually incorporates a hybrid of iconic designs, with buildings both of skyscraper-stature, and low-lying monuments. The UN Secretariat Building was influenced by mid twentieth-century skyscraper iconicity; while the General Assembly Building was created as a subtly curved, low-lying construction that offered an image of aesthetic modernist monumentality.[47]

Sklair has noted that buildings are created to symbolise something beyond their function and that the iconicity of their design is never arbitrary.[48] By 1929, 56% of America's corporations had established their headquarters in New York City or Chicago.[49] Through the prestige of location and the height of the tower, the skyscraper came to represent capital accumulation, advertisement power and the establishment of a physical presence (and corporate ego) for an unmaterial entity.[50] Embedded within a corporate American skyline, the Secretariat Building identified with New York's skyscraper-iconology and connected the UN institution to a modernist, (regional and global) corporate ideology. Certainly, tall buildings are a practical response to economic pressures for more workable space on a proposed site. Nevertheless, as well as space-efficiency, height also produces symbolic capital; a symbolic capital that is aestheticised and 'viewed' more than it is practically utilised. Dovey has asserted that capital has become increasingly concerned with the generation of images and signs rather than 'use value'.[51] The aestheticised images and signs of a building construct an authenticity linked to notions of cultural, politico-economic power and authority. As an architectural design practice pre-dating the construction of the UN headquarters, the skyscraper represented American civilisation and modernity as a capitalist enterprise.[52] From the peak of the World Trade Center in the 1970s, for instance, de Certeau described the power of height and the view it afforded of the world below:

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[44] A. King, 'Worlds in the City: Manhattan Transfer and the Ascendance of Spectacular Space', *Planning Perspectives,* 11 (2), (1996), p. 101.

[45] King, 'Worlds in the City', p. 101.

[46] Sklair, 'Iconic Architecture and Urban, National and Global Identities', p. 186.

[47] The UN headquarters complex contains two more buildings: the Conference Center and the Library Building. The Conference Center connects the Secretariat and the General Assembly buildings, and it is cantilevered over the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. This building is functional rather than aesthetically striking and the politics of power for this construction predominantly reside in the place-name: Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. Although the identity politics of naming places is beyond the scope of this paper, further analysis is needed. The Dag Hammarskjold Library Building was not added until 1961 and so falls beyond the time-parameters of this paper.

[48] Sklair, 'Iconic Architecture and Urban, National and Global Identities', p. 180 -p. 191.

[49] Kaika and Thielen, 'Genealogy of Urban Shrines', p. 61.

[50] King, 'Worlds in a City', p. 109.

[51] K. Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London, 1999), p. 107.

[52] King, *Spaces,* p. 12.

> 'A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. . . . On this stage of concrete, steel and glass … the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production'.[53]

Skyscrapers were often produced in the interests of urban boosterism, and iconic towers, such as the Empire State Building (the tallest building in the world from 1931 to 1972), were constructed to accentuate the capital potential of an area.

The Rockefeller Center exemplified (and pioneered on a grand-scale) this twentieth-century development. John D. Rockefeller Jr. enlisted a 'battery of professionals' in the 1930s (including Wallace K. Harrison, later Chief-Architect of the UN Headquarters), in order to produce an unprecedented profitable business and commercial complex that was to be 'architecturally and aesthetically of the highest order'.[54] The capital symbols of the Rockefeller Center demonstrated authenticity and power through a combination of design references, including: the utilisation of traditional European design principles (by simplifying the form of a building), an embrace of European modernism (by using glass and concrete materials), the maximisation of city-central commercial land, and the practical conformity of constructing a commercial space in line with New York zoning regulations.[55] While the production of the United Nations as an institution was a predominantly political endeavour, the production of the UN Headquarters building was implicitly influenced by the Rockefeller corporate, modernist image-capital. Harrison and the team of international architects continued in the Rockefeller tradition and embraced the inevitability of a skyscraper, as land was limited and valuable. The modernism of the glass Secretariat Tower and the curved General Assembly Building presented an image disassociated with history; and the tower was hailed as an 'expression of the functionalist ideal'.[56] The utilisation of this modernist, functional architecture for the UN was influenced by the established authenticity and authority of the tower – a structure that was underpinned by practicality, urban commercial boosterism and corporate iconicity. Moreover, the unique glass-curtain that distinguished the UN headquarters from other steel skyscrapers of the period was shortly thereafter re-appropriated by American corporate interests. Emulated by buildings such as Lever House (1952) and the Seagram Building (1958), the glass-box became an explicitly commercial symbol.[57] Consequently - as the authenticity and power of an institution is linked to the production of symbolic capital in the architectural façade - the politico-economic authority of the UN was overtly commercial.

Furthermore, the cultural-economic linkages between UN iconicity and New York City are augmented by acknowledging the building as a commodity to be consumed. Balshaw and Kennedy have argued that the act of looking is, in itself, an act of consumption.[58] Iconicity is a form of advertising and it attracts investors and tourists – cities strive to retain architectural icons, as the 'brand' recognition that comes from aesthetically and institutionally important buildings draws an increasingly mobile financial and tourist class.[59] When the search began for

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[53] M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* translated by Steven Rendell (Berkeley, 1988), p.91.

[54] D. Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City: Histories and Views of Important Structures, Sites and Symbols* (London, 1984), p. 254.

[55] Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City,* p. 256.

[56] J. Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 7-8.

[57] Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City,* p. 155.

[58] Balshaw and Kennedy, 'Introduction: Urban Space', p. 4.

[59] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2526.

a suitable site to house the UN complex in 1945, the commercial value of constructing the 'World Capital' in New York was at once realised:

> 'The Rockefellers and other city and state boosters wanted more than anything to keep the UN in New York'.[60]

As an attraction for commerce, the UN headquarters offered cultural-economic opportunity to New York City. The connotations of locating the 'World Capital' in New York strengthened the image of the region as a 'World City'. Moreover, the longevity of political investment inherent in the permanent establishment of the UN headquarters in the city underlined the permanence of the cultural-economic capital that New York could offer other cultural or commercial entities. Images often have limited capital value outside of advertising,[61] and the image capital value that the UN headquarters offered New York included the sellable notion of a city worthy of long term political and economic investment; a cultural centre whose iconic facade represented the political-world in corporate-America, and corporate-America in the political-world. Jencks has argued that it is also important not to underestimate the public desire for good iconic buildings.[62] Indeed, iconic architecture can 'provide sites of momentary, memorable definition in lives of heterogeneous flux'.[63] Iconicity is individually perceived as well as collectively conceived. Thus, as a viewed and consumed entity within the New York landscape, the UN complex became inextricably linked – both commercially and publically – to New York City narratives, and the UN headquarters offered the region further commercial opportunities. From the outset, through design and location, the UN building constituted the symbolic authority behind the UN institution and New York City as interlinked, and as a 'real' combined power for commercial transformation.[64]

In addition to narratives of building-capital, architects themselves – as designers of the project – impute certain ideological values onto an institution. The architects that designed the UN headquarters were carefully chosen and, on the surface at least, they represented the internationalism inherent in the UN. The Chief Architect was Wallace K. Harrison of the United States; the members of the board included: Nikolai G. Bassov of the Soviet Union, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret – known as Le Corbusier – of France, Liang Seu-Cheng of China, Sir Howard Robertson of the United Kingdom, Gaston Brunfaut of Belgium, Ernest Cormier of Canada, Sven Markelius of Sweden, Oscar Niemayer of Brazil, G. A. Soilleux of Australia, and Julio Vilamajo of Uruguay. First and foremost, this selection of architects represented an exclusive form of internationalism. Representatives from the defeated nations of WWII were excluded in the creation process and this served to emphasise the post-WWII dichotomous power relations that characterised the political set-up of the UN.[65]

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[60] Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 4.

[61] Sklair, 'Iconic Architecture and Capitalist Globalisation', p. 26

[62] C. Jencks, 'The Iconic Building is Here to Stay', *City,* 10 (1), (2006), p. 10.

[63] Brooker, cited in Balshaw and Kennedy, 'Introduction: Urban Space', p. 6-7.

[64] For more analysis on the construction of symbolic authority, see: M. Kaika 'Autistic Architecture: Reimag(in)ing the Square Mile', in L. Moreno, (ed.), *The architecture and urban culture of financial crisis: the Bartlett Workshop Transcripts* (London, 2008), pp. 90–9.

[65] The political set-up of the UN placed the majority of international authority in the hands of the 'Great Powers'. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (who have veto power on any UN resolution) are the five main victorious nations of WWII: the UK, the US, China, France, and Russia (which replaced the Soviet Union).

Furthermore, sitting on the board were several well-established, 'famous' architects, including Harrison, Le Corbusier and Niemayer. Famous architects, also known as 'starchitects' in contemporary academic literature, are considered as iconic brands in their own right – often, the starchitect image can determine the success of a building, as they are commissioned to represent the construction, as well as to design it.[66] The term 'starchitect' is most notably used to describe architects (such as Frank Gehry) who produce visually unusual structures (such as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao), and achieve fame through dramatic impact or notoriety.[67] Although the UN Headquarters was not as unusual in design as the Guggenheim Museum, or Rem Koolhaas' Seattle Central Library for instance, the work of Harrison and Le Corbusier et al provides an interesting pre-history to our contemporary understanding of the term. In the first instance, many of the designers came with significant image capital. Almost thirty years prior to the construction of the UN, Le Corbusier had achieved fame following publication of *Vers une Architecture,* a polemical book that dismissed stylistic architecture and pressed for a design based on function.[68] The previous architectural work of Harrison (both New York centric and iconic), included the Rockefeller Center and the Theme Center for the 1939 New York's World Fair.[69] This cultural elite, represented by Harrison, Le Corbusier and the international design team, was selected to emphasise the cultural production of the project and make the politico-economic strategies of the UN more meaningful.[70]

Furthermore, the production process achieved a certain amount of notoriety. Harrison and Le Corbusier were the primary focus of media scrutiny during the production of the UN headquarters due to their prolific design portfolio in the Western world and their, at times clashing, modernist visions.[71] One particular clash involved disagreement over how to protect the Secretariat Building from excessive heat and glare. Le Corbusier preferred stone facades but the rest of the board preferred to maximise natural sun-light and use all over glazing. Experiments were undertaken to discover the most heat-efficient material and Le Corbusier's brise-soliel lost out to tinted glass. Later on in the design process allegations surfaced that Le Corbusier unfairly took credit for some of Harrison's design ideas.[72] Koolhaas has described these (at times fractious) architectural collaborations as "enablers", as teamwork often perverts the 'master's' usual style and contributes to the more idiosyncratic elements of a building.[73]

The fame-notoriety dynamic that surrounded the design team of the UN building certainly provided one pre-cursor to the 'starchitect' persona we are familiar with today. What is more, the collaboration produced highly uneven power relations that subsequently fed into the identity of the UN institution itself. [74] The presentation of cooperation in this elite group of

[66] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2530.
[67] M. Patterson, 'The Role of the Public Institution in Iconic Architectural Development', *Urban Studies,* (2012), pp.1-17, p.9.
[68] Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture,* translated by John Goodman, First Frances Lincoln Tradition (London, 2008).
[69] Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 3.
[70] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2520.
[71] Goldberger, *The City Observed,* p. 132.
[72] D. Arnold, 'Air Conditioning in Office Buildings After World War II', *Ashrae Journal,* (1999), p.34.
[73] Rem Koolhaas cited in B. Colomina, 'Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* 58 (3), (1999), pp. 462-471, p.476.
[74] For more analysis on the influence of architectural design on power relations, see: P. Kraftl, 'Geographies of Architecture: The Multiple Lives of Buildings', *Geography Compass,* 4 (5), (2010), pp. 402-415.

architects was pervasive, deliberate, and even occasionally contrived. UN officials had realised the symbolic importance of an international, shared design and thus went out of their way to present an image of the architects working together in harmony – the Office of Public Information for the UN, for example, circulated photographs of the design team at work together.[75] This public relations campaign sought to articulate an amiable, international process of cooperation among the world's most famous architects in order to lay the foundation for an institution that would involve the cooperation of the world's politicians. Interestingly, Jones has argued that architects represent a form of public intellectual who speak to the community through their buildings.[76] As a prologue to the voice of the UN diplomat, the voices of the UN architects could ultimately be viewed as non-democratic, hierarchical, non-neutral, and oftentimes discordant.

The architects were not decided by competition, but were specially selected by Trygve Lie (the UN's first General Secretary) and Wallace K. Harrison.[77] This initial appointment of the Rockefeller-architect Harrison as leader of the design of the UN strengthened cultural associations of the institution with New York iconic architecture-narratives. Loffler has described how Le Corbusier saw the construction of the UN as an opportunity to make his mark in Manhattan, but the French designer lost out in the political battles and 'Harrison managed to sideline Le Corbusier's crusade to take control of the design process'.[78] Thus, as the Chief Architect and a New York based starchitect, Harrison imputed implicit American values onto the project from the outset. There were frequent references in the media to the fact that the construction space was donated by John D. Rockefeller Jr. [79] Moreover, the role of the starchitect in strengthening politico-economic power relations is one of unavoidable complicity. Architects are reliant on patronage and client funding, and as such they cannot escape the imperatives of the political and economic elite. McNeill has gone so far as to argue that architects should be viewed as global service providers that often embrace the power of the client in determining the design process.[80] As a cultural elite led by an American architect, directed by UN normative values, and influenced by New York's built environment, the starchitects commissioned to produce the 'World Capital' in the 'World City' immediately faced restricted autonomy and ideological client-determinism. Financial and spatial investment in the UN headquarters came from both the United Nations *and* New York. Thus the complex intersection between political clientelism, starchitect representation, and the symbolic capital of the design of the UN headquarters constituted a 'United Nations Imaginary' that was inherently underlined by an American-centric cultural, political economy of power.

Ultimately, architecture must be understood as 'referent', in that it refers to, or symbolises, 'diverse systems, intentions, histories, meanings and cultural assumptions'.[81] The cultural and politico-economic symbolism of locating the UN headquarters in New York, utilising iconic corporate, modern architecture, and enlisting famous architects cannot be understated. The semiotic and aesthetic components of the UN headquarters' design process (and finished product) articulated a global image that was neither autonomous nor neutral. In a

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[75] Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[76] Jones, 'Putting Architecture', p. 2531.
[77] Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[78] Loeffler, 'Introduction', p. 5.
[79] Adams, 'New York Offers U.N. 350-Acre Site' pp. 1-2; Hamilton, 'Work Completed', pp. 1 and 5.
[80] D. McNeill, 'Globalisation and the Ethics of Architectural Design', *City,* 10 (1), (2006), p. 51; p. 53.
[81] Kraftl, 'Geographies of Architecture', p. 405.

post-war setting the world was looking towards cooperative, internationalist reconstruction and peace – the UN represented this in institutional form. Selecting New York as the base for permanent settlement for the UN 'World Capital' underlined American post-war authority, and indicated that America would be a prominent nation behind this international institution. The Secretariat Building was embedded in the New York City skyline and thus fed off, and fed into, the image capital of New York's cityscape. Directly influenced by the Rockefeller Center – financially, aesthetically, and by the starchitect Wallace K. Harrison – the UN headquarters was built in line with emerging New York corporate and global spatial narratives. Moreover, the iconicity of the Secretariat and General Assembly buildings authenticated New York's use of the 'urban spectacle' to advertise the region as a 'World City'. Of course, it is essentialist to argue that the symbolism of the UN headquarters reduces the institution to pure corporate, American interests. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that the physically rooted headquarters of an institution is designed and constructed in accordance with surrounding social, economic, cultural and political norms.

The UN institution as a political entity operated, and still operates, within a distinctly American culture and environment; and thus UN governmentality has inevitably been conditioned by privileged and excluded image-capital and cultural representations. The privileged message inherent in the UN's iconic built form was one of exclusive internationalism (conditioned by the post-WWII power balance) and American-inspired corporate modernism. Moreover, the economic daily reality of employees working within the UN and living in New York, the cultural diversity (and tensions) inherent in the city's immigrant-rich population, the economic and political place-based restrictions imposed on the UN by New York City, and the visual homogeneity that the building offers individuals who view the city skyline, has firmly planted the UN institution within American cultural politico-economic narratives. Architecture is simultaneously configured by power and is itself a resource for power, and thus it is vital to analyse the cultural political economy that informs, and is informed by, the place-making and design processes of a building. Furthermore, analysing the built environment of an institution offers the opportunity to expose what is unsaid in the institution's agenda. The production of the UN headquarters in New York from 1946 to 1952 was fundamentally a cultural, politico-economic process that impacted on the image, and subsequent identity, of the United Nations.[82] The constructed 'United Nations Imaginary' represented by the organisation's headquarters was not (and is not) a unique phenomenon, and further study of the embeddedness of iconic architecture in local and global space narratives will not only expand our knowledge of buildings, architects and spaces; it will expose the power dynamics inherent in politically produced image-capital.

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[82] For more analysis on culture as a marker of identity and difference see: J. Best and M. Paterson, 'Introduction: Understanding cultural political economy', in J. and M. Paterson, (eds.), *Cultural Political Economy Volume 10* (Oxon, 2010), pp. 1-26.

Appendix

Fig. 1. The United Nations Headquarters, New York.[83]

On this 18 acre site the 39 storey, glass-walled Secretariat Building dominates the skyline. The long white General Assembly is visible as a low-lying curved structure on the bottom right.

[83] Photo Source: WorldIslandinfo, 'United Nations Complex', (2006), Accessed 15 May 2011, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, http://www.flickr.com/photos/76074333@N00/157652121/in/set-72157594151576488.

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