

Q1: How far is cinematic starchitecture primarily a western phenomenon? If so, why?

Merrill Schleier and Paul Newland: In our introduction to the book *Cinematic Starchitecture*, we argue that what we call “cinematic starchitecture” is a process that forms in, through and around complex visual and spatial relationships encompassing the material, aesthetic, but also imaginative qualities of architecture. We show that cinematic starchitecture is informed by the aesthetic aspects of filmmaking (performance, camerawork, editing, lighting, sound, and music). We draw on a diverse range of disciplines, particularly Star Studies (within the field of Cinema Studies) to show how cinema’s architectural stars are constructed, circulated and received. Echoing Richard Dyer’s remarks about human stars, cinematic starchitecture is an intertextual bundle of meaning, creating idealized structures of singularity and excellence, or icons that possess what architectural critics refer to as a “wow” factor. We also acknowledge that cinematic starchitecture is an outgrowth of global capital and is disseminated internationally for publicity and profit across various media platforms, further enhancing its architectural and filmic stardom.

An early form of cinematic starchitecture emerged from the conditions of Western urban modernity. Soaring industrial and commercial structures—skyscrapers, bridges, amusement park rides—as well as the architectural spectacles of World’s Fairs in cities such as Paris, Chicago, and New York created new environments of visual drama and mass spectatorship. Crowds gathered around these urban icons, transforming them into events in themselves. At the same time, advances in film technology enabled filmmakers to shoot on location from a variety of vantage points, forging an intimate relationship between the camera and the architectural landmark.

As Anne Friedberg argues, the new communication systems of modern cities, of which cinema was a part, produced an “accumulation of spectacles.” This fostered new ways of experiencing urban space. Giuliana Bruno describes this process as “site-seeing,” a form of embodied and virtual mobility through which viewers traverse the city. In our book, we argue that the iconic architectural sites encountered along these urban itineraries became the precursors of contemporary cinematic starchitecture.

Many of these structures were dramatic in both form and scale and occupied prominent positions that allowed their designs to be viewed unobstructed. Paris’s Eiffel Tower was perhaps the first global cinematic architectural star. The Lumière brothers filmed it in 1897 and again in 1898, presenting it simultaneously as an engineering marvel, a transportation device, and an elevated platform from which to survey the city. René Clair’s *Paris Qui Dort* (1924) and *La Tour* (1928) further consolidated its stardom by emphasizing its iron latticework, mechanical systems, and panoramic viewing capacities. Through panning shots, tilts, and dynamic framing, Clair highlighted the tower’s monumental scale while linking the modernity of the camera to the modernity of the structure itself. *Paris Qui Dort* also foregrounded the interaction between architecture and bodily performance as characters move through and around the tower, further establishing its cinematic celebrity.

A similar process occurred with New York's Flatiron Building. Its distinctive triangular form and prominent position at the intersection of Broadway and 23rd Street made it one of the city's most recognizable landmarks. Described as a "stingy piece of pie" or a "ship's prow in motion," the building attracted crowds fascinated by the wind currents generated around it. The Flatiron's architectural distinctiveness and the theatrical urban life surrounding it invited cinematic attention and helped produce its star status.

Even when cinematic starchitecture shifts beyond the West to locations in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, it retains many of these foundational characteristics. *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) features the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, echoing long-standing desires for spatial prominence and architectural distinction. Likewise, as Anthony King argues of Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers, featured in *Entrapment* (John Amiel, 1999), such structures were intended to "catapult the Third World to the First World" whereby iconic architecture becomes a symbol of economic power and global relevance. These films also continue the tradition of linking star buildings with star bodies, as exemplified by the pairing of the Burj Khalifa and Tom Cruise, each contributing to the production of cinematic starchitecture.

Ekin Pinar: As far as the history of cinematic starchitecture is concerned, we can definitely point to a Western genealogy going back to early European and American cinema's fascination with skyscrapers and other symbols of urban modernity. Such fascination certainly attests to the complex relations among cinema, architectural celebrity, tourism, and Western capitalist modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. Hollywood, in its turn, played a decisive role in transforming already celebrated buildings such as the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York into globally recognizable icons. As Merrill Schleier and Paul Newland argue in the introduction to the book, however, architectural stardom never simply concerns the intrinsic qualities of a building but also repeated acts of mediation across cinema and other media. This understanding of cinematic starchitecture as a mediated phenomenon also suggests that its contemporary operation cannot be understood solely through its Western origins. Architectural celebrity has become transnational to the extent that it circulates through unequal global networks of media, tourism, capital, and spectatorship. The continuous appearance of buildings such as the Burj Khalifa, the Petronas Towers, and Hong Kong's skyline in platforms spanning local film cultures, Hollywood productions, tourism campaigns, and streaming venues evinces this. This does not, however, mean that architectural visibility is produced and circulated evenly. Contemporary cinematic starchitecture may be global, but the infrastructures generating global recognition—from Hollywood and international festivals to tourism industries and digital platforms—remain deeply asymmetrical. The issue, therefore, is less whether cinematic starchitecture is Western than how historically Western regimes of visibility continue to shape what becomes globally legible as architectural spectacle.

Yet, I would also like to question whether geographic dichotomy is the most useful framework for understanding cinematic starchitecture. Framing the issue primarily in geographical terms risks overlooking the processes that make architecture culturally visible in the first place. The broad use in Turkish cinema of sites such as Haydarpaşa Railway Station, Galata Tower, the Maiden's Tower, Hagia Sophia, and the Bosphorus bridges, for example, goes beyond establishing shots. These structures signify modernization, migration, romance,

nostalgia, and urban transformation for large, albeit local, audiences. The analysis of such signification would require us to move beyond simple dichotomies of location to question how different cinematic traditions organize architectural attention. Such dichotomies also obscure the entangled histories through which architectural forms, images, and spectators circulate globally under profoundly unequal conditions. Films teach audiences where and how long to look, and what kinds of architecture become worthy of collective fascination. To the extent that films produce architectural celebrity unevenly, cinematic starchitecture concerns not only the global circulation of spectacular landmarks but also the diverse ways in which different film cultures produce geographies of architectural visibility.

Brendan Kredell: For this book, I approached the question of cinematic starchitecture from a very specifically Western lens. My particular approach was, however, anachronistic; while productive debates can be had about where and when to locate the inception of cinematic starchitecture, my own contribution was to consider what we might call a prehistory of the term. To do so, I considered the legacy of Albert Kahn, an architect who was very successful in his early-to-mid-20th century peak. Although he was arguably the most successful American architect of his generation (surely Frank Lloyd Wright would like a word), his career ended prior to the era in which, to borrow a phrase from Schleier and Newland's introduction, "the processes of textual and extratextual development of cinematic starchitecture" took root. It was only posthumously, I argued, as Kahn's Detroit buildings became the targets of adaptive reuse—his abandoned factories hosted the seminal techno raves of the 1980s and 1990s, the conversion of his downtown commercial buildings to lofts signaled Detroit's resurgence in the 2010s and 2020s—that we might see evidence of the process of mediated value creation that this book charts.

But Kahn's case is also instructive in thinking about this question about whether cinematic starchitecture is at root a Western phenomenon. Despite his deep connections to Detroit, Kahn's firm worked globally; as Christina Crawford observes, by 1939 his firm had buildings on all six habitable continents. Most consequentially, as Crawford and co-editors Jean-Louis Cohen and Claire Zimmerman explore at length in *Detroit-Moscow-Detroit: An Architecture for Industrialization, 1917–1945*, Kahn accelerates the development of an industrial base in the Soviet Union, overseeing the construction of more than five hundred factories while serving as consulting architect to the Soviet Union during the first five-year plan. However, despite the depth and breadth of his international body of work, the notion of his "posthumous starchitect" status that I develop in the chapter is limited to a rather small set of his buildings, all of which are in Detroit. So the question, then: is the reason why these buildings are instrumental in the invention of Albert Kahn, (posthumous) starchitect, because they are in the West? Why is it that, for instance, the Stalingrad Tractor Factory (now Volgograd Tractor Factory), would be excluded from that narrative, even though it rivals any of Kahn's Detroit commissions for its historic importance? The answer, I would submit, lies in the modifier "cinematic," and how media representations of architecture are mobilized within the chain of real estate value creation.

The last decade has seen a remarkable growth in the assessed value of the city of Detroit's real estate: from 2014 to 2024, the combined value of properties in the city has increased by 161%. The remediation of Kahn's buildings should be understood as part of a broader strategy of revaluing the city of Detroit, a strategy that has paid multi-billion-dollar dividends for the investors who bankrolled it. On the other hand, there are—at present—few economic

forces compelling similar efforts in Volgograd. Kahn's Soviet-era factories—which were, in point of fact, largely destroyed during the Battle of Stalingrad and rebuilt thereafter—aren't being converted into residential lofts for upwardly mobile young professionals; in fact, as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Volgograd is presently under attack from a foreign military for the first time since World War II. What is different, in short, is the way in which Kahn's sites participate in the flows of global capital: a factory in Detroit is seen as a potential investment, whereas a site in Volgograd is a strategic liability.

This should tell us something about the “why” of cinematic starchitecture. Imbuing architects with star texts enables the developers who commission their buildings, and the surrounding districts in which they are built, to capture some of that added value—in higher rents, in increased symbolic capital, in greater global legibility, etc. But without the economic incentive to do so, the processes of cinematic starchitecture cease functioning as intended. To put it in concrete terms: when Tim and Sam take their staff for a corporate retreat to Belle Isle in *Detroiters* (Zach Kanin, Joe Kelly, Sam Richardson, 2017–2018), the prominent placement of Kahn buildings such as the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory and Belle Isle Aquarium renders that episode as part of a process of cinematic starchitecture. I want to contend, insofar as it binds the architecture of the “old” Detroit (represented by Kahn) with the spirit of the “new” Detroit (represented by the Comedy Central TV show). By contrast, in Boris Yashin and Manos Zacharias' *Gorod pervoy lyubvi* (*City of Love*, 1970), much of the film is set against the backdrop of the Stalingrad Tractor Plant. We see how its construction helped to unify the rural and urban communities of greater Volgograd in the years before the war, and how its partial destruction during the war came to symbolize the resilience of the city in which it stood. But Yashin and Zacharias' film was shot in 1970 and set entirely in a distant past—it concludes with the events of the Battle of Stalingrad. There is no remediation of the contemporary context of Kahn's hulking factory in modern Volgograd, or an attempt to trade off the symbolic value of the building in contemporary times. Absent these explicit connections to the flows of global capital, I would argue, we could not understand these as examples of cinematic starchitecture.

Q2: Has the growth of starchitecture in the Middle East or Asia in recent years reflected a colonized aesthetics or is it a product of global capitalism (or both)? How is this reflected in cinematic starchitecture?

MS & PN: The proliferation of starchitecture in the Middle East and elsewhere reflects the intertwined forces of global capitalism and colonial aesthetic legacies. Iconic buildings such as the Burj Khalifa and the Petronas Towers were conceived not merely as architectural achievements but as symbols of modernization, economic power, and international prestige. These structures function as carefully orchestrated spectacles designed to attract tourism, foreign investment, and global attention, demonstrating the close relationship between architecture and transnational capitalism.

At the same time, many of these developments reproduce what may be described as Westocentric conceptions of progress. The adoption of supertall skyscrapers and monumental urban projects often draws upon architectural forms historically associated with Western capitalist centers such as New York. In this sense, starchitecture exemplifies Anthony King's notion of "Manhattan transfer," whereby emerging global cities seek legitimacy within the international order by replicating the visual language of Western modernity while selectively incorporating local cultural references to affirm national identity.

Our concept of cinematic starchitecture further illuminates these dynamics. Films such as *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* and *Entrapment* transform the Burj Khalifa and the Petronas Towers into "star buildings" through dramatic cinematography, spectacular action sequences, and narratives that emphasize their scale, technological sophistication, and symbolic power. In doing so, cinema participates in the branding of cities such as Dubai and Kuala Lumpur, extending their architectural visibility to global audiences and reinforcing their status within international networks of capital and consumption.

Yet cinematic starchitecture does not merely celebrate these developments. It can also expose the tensions and contradictions underlying them. While films often glorify architectural grandeur and urban modernity, they may simultaneously reveal the inequalities, exclusions, and social dislocations obscured by these spectacular images. Cinematic starchitecture therefore operates both as an instrument of promotion and as a site of critique, illuminating the ideological power of global capitalism and the colonial assumptions embedded within contemporary urban development.

EP: The opposition between colonized aesthetics and global capitalism seems less productive than asking how a global architectural canon is continually produced. Global competition for investment, tourism, and international visibility has driven much of the recent growth of iconic architecture in the Middle East and Asia. Yet, much longer histories of Western architectural prestige, colonial encounter, and globally circulating aesthetic models and starchitects have shaped the visual languages structuring this competition. At the same time, reducing contemporary architecture in the Middle East or Asia to derivative expressions of Western influence risks reproducing the center-periphery model that increasingly global architectural histories have sought to complicate. Such architectural canons are continually appropriated and negotiated as they move between local histories and transnational media cultures. Cinema occupies a particularly important place within these processes. Like museums that have historically participated in constructing artistic canons by determining which objects become worthy of attention and preservation, cinema increasingly adopts a comparable role for architecture. Films do not simply record iconic buildings after they have acquired celebrity. Through repetition and circulation, they contribute to the canonization of buildings—and often particular architects—within a global architectural imagination. Cinema therefore curates architectural attention, directing audiences toward certain buildings while leaving countless others comparatively unseen. In this sense, the globalization of cinematic starchitecture should not be confused with the globalization of visibility.

Cinematic representations of contemporary architecture in the Middle East and Asia most certainly signify aspirations toward global finance, technological innovation, and national branding. Yet, their repeated appearances across a variety of visual media also position them within a circulating architectural canon simultaneously global and locally inflected.

Products of a continual negotiation between regional histories and transnational regimes of visibility, their cinematic identities are never reducible either to imported Western aesthetics or to purely local expressions of identity. The point, therefore, is not to determine whether these buildings are authentically local or imported, but to recognize that architectural meaning is itself produced through unequal yet reciprocal processes of circulation. Here, the architectural canon itself emerges less as a fixed collection of exemplary buildings than an ongoing process of canonization. Repeated acts of cinematic mediation play a significant role in how buildings enter, leave, and are continually reinterpreted within a circulating architectural canon. Cinema therefore participates not only in generating the global architectural imagination but also in reproducing—and occasionally unsettling—the unequal regimes of visibility organizing that imagination.

BK: I'm afraid the particulars here are a bit beyond my domain. But from where I sit, I would begin by observing, as the question implies, that it is difficult—if not impossible—to separate aesthetics from capitalism. In fact, if anything, it may be more productive here to think about their intersection: how should we understand the design choices of “starchitects” within the broader context of a system of global capital that creates and reinforces their value? Some years back, a group of sociologists introduced the notion of “aesthetic capital,” extending Bourdieu’s differentiation of capital in *Distinction* to argue for a way of thinking about how aesthetic appeal—and in the original literature, this was primarily *good looks*—introduced measurable benefits.

It strikes me that we might apply the notion of aesthetic capital to the built environment in trying to think about the globalization of capital in the twenty-first century. To take perhaps the most obvious case as an example: Zaha Hadid’s biography attests to the importance of understanding “postcolonial globality,” to borrow a phrase from Pinar Bilgin—that is, to attend to the ways in which postcolonial subjectivities intersect with global flows of capital. Hadid embodied this concept: raised in Iraq, trained in Beirut and London, successful initially in Europe before spreading her practice worldwide. And yet, we would do well to also think about the *value* (aesthetic, and as a result, financial) of a Hadid building; her Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, Azerbaijan has become a symbol for the city internationally—used as a Google Doodle or in Eurovision—and symbolically signifying the city’s position as a node within a globally networked flow of capital.

Q3: Does targeting starchitecture for destruction in sci-fi or war films create and/or increase their star power in cinema and reality?

MS & PN: Across cinematic history, destruction and ruination have played a crucial role in the production of architectural stardom. By repeatedly placing iconic buildings at risk of damage, collapse, or annihilation, films transform architecture into emotionally charged symbols through which collective anxieties, memories, and aspirations are dramatized. In this sense, cinematic destruction often functions as a form of architectural consecration, elevating buildings from urban landmarks to enduring cultural icons.

In New York, the Empire State Building achieved cinematic immortality through *King Kong* (Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1933), where the skyscraper became the dramatic site of spectacle, danger, and tragedy. Later films such as *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013) continued to depict the building under threat or in ruin. These repeated encounters with destruction transformed the Empire State Building into more than a landmark; it became a cinematic character associated with romance, catastrophe, memory, and American modernity.

A comparable process occurred in Japan with Tokyo Tower. Monster films such as *Mothra* (Ishirō Honda, 1961) staged the tower's destruction as an expression of postwar anxieties concerning nuclear trauma, militarism, and Cold War instability. Its cinematic collapse symbolized fears about the fragility of Japan's postwar recovery and modernization. Yet later films and television dramas reimagined Tokyo Tower nostalgically as a symbol of resilience, hope, and collective memory, demonstrating how acts of destruction can strengthen rather than diminish architectural significance.

In Hong Kong, action and science-fiction films such as *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2013), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Michael Bay, 2014), and *Godzilla vs. Kong* (Adam Wingard, 2021) transform the city's skyscrapers into spectacular battlegrounds for monsters and robots. Structures such as the Bank of China Tower and HSBC Building become central participants in narratives of urban devastation, their repeated exposure to cinematic violence heightening their visibility and symbolic power. Even the Hong Kong "Monster Building," a residential complex rather than a conventional landmark, has achieved international recognition through its association with cinematic destruction, fan tourism, and social media circulation.

Across all three cities, destruction functions as a powerful mechanism of architectural consecration. Buildings acquire star status because cinema repeatedly turns them into unforgettable sites of spectacle, danger, memory, loss, and survival. Far from diminishing their cultural significance, cinematic ruination enhances their visibility, ensuring their continued prominence within both local and global imaginaries.

EP: The spectacular destruction of iconic architecture undoubtedly intensifies its visibility. I would argue, however, that destruction usually derives from architectural celebrity rather than simply creating it. Were it not for their already established place within a shared architectural imagination, cinematic destruction of familiar landmarks would not carry the narrative and affective force they do. In other words, the more audiences recognize an iconic building, the more effective its destruction becomes. Destruction amplifies an already iconic architectural image that has gained cultural recognition through repeated appearances in films and other media. At the same time, such destruction plays a significant perceptual role to the extent that a fundamental paradox defines cinematic architecture. The familiarity of iconic architecture risks rendering these structures visually mundane and habitual. Where repetitive appearances tend to transform even extraordinary buildings into almost invisible backdrops, the spectacle of destruction functions as a form of defamiliarization. Compelling audiences to look with fresh eyes, it renders buildings we thought we knew vulnerable and historically contingent. Accordingly, destruction reorganizes architectural attention by making the familiar strange.

I should also note that important exceptions complicate these perceptual processes of (de)familiarization. Pruitt-Igoe, for instance, constitutes a particularly significant case in architectural history inasmuch as its demolition became more culturally recognizable than the housing complex itself. Reinforced by Charles Jencks's famous declaration that "Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 pm," the repeated circulation turned the dynamite implosion into the project's primary historical image. Unlike most other examples of cinematic starchitecture, destruction here did not reinforce an existing architectural celebrity. Its highly mediatized image became the very mechanism through which Pruitt-Igoe entered the global architectural imagination. While destruction often presupposes iconicity, it sometimes produces it as well. Accordingly, destruction is best understood as a process of re-iconization. By making familiar buildings unfamiliar again, cinema renews their visibility and extends their cultural afterlives. Whether reinforcing already canonical landmarks or producing new architectural icons through the circulation of images, destruction shows that architectural celebrity is never fixed. Like cinematic starchitecture itself, it is continually made and remade through repetition. The afterlife of architecture, in other words, depends not only on preservation but also on the persistent circulation of images—including images of disappearance

BK: In a word, yes. Spectacular violence is, before anything else, spectacular. I would observe here that cinematic destruction has a way of investing even the most banal and functional of buildings with star status. The Brach's Candy Factory on the west side of Chicago was no one's idea of celebrity architecture, and had fallen largely into disuse by the 2000s; its demolition (doubling as Arkham Asylum) in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) revived interest in the building, in an echo of the phenomenon I trace involving the work of Albert Kahn in my chapter in the book.

I would also observe, however, that there is something like an auratic value to spectacular violence in media. As film critic Mick LaSalle once observed, Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (2002) may be "the only great film dealing with the Sept. 11 tragedy," "as much an urban historical document as Rossellini's *Open City* (1946)." In large part, this is because of the structuring absence of the World Trade Center in the film. No one alive at the time needed a reminder of the building's symbolic and iconic value. My students today were born a few years after the towers fell, and yet the visceral feeling hits just as hard for them when Lee cuts to shots of Ground Zero, trucks still clearing the rubble from the demolition away. The tangible nature of the destruction forces the spectator to reckon with the building, what it stood for, and what its absence connotes.

Contrast that with the almost pornographic destruction of iconic architecture in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films—a Tower Bridge here, a Grand Central Station there, and throw in a little Grauman's Chinese Theatre for good measure. Pretty soon, the destruction of urban landscapes is *so* spectacular, and *so* comprehensive, as to have diminishing marginal value. I suppose it says something for the Chinese Theatre's iconicity that Shane Black chose to blow it up in *Iron Man 3* (2013), as opposed to the Hollywood Pantages down the street. And surely there are more tourists hoping to travel to the observation deck of The Shard (London) after watching it damaged in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Jon Watts, 2019). But while destroying these buildings in science fiction may make them more recognizable to global audiences, I do wonder whether the ease with which their CGI destruction is now facilitated has the opposite effect when it comes to our consideration of

the buildings themselves; whereas Lee forces us to think about exactly what the World Trade Center represented to New Yorkers in *25th Hour*, I strain to see the contextual challenge that *Far From Home* presents.

Roy Grundmann: All famous structures, whether buildings, bridges, ships, or public monuments project prowess and authority and often carry symbolism. But the star power that famous structures acquire can become a force in its own right, with fame no longer being exclusively linked to a specific symbolism or commemorative function that may have been attached to the structure initially. In such cases, the structure's real-life star status was firmly established prior to its fictional destruction, which may at best enhance it. The White House, for instance, was famous before its destruction in Roland Emmerich's 1996 science fiction film *Independence Day*. The same holds for the Eiffel Tower, which gets destroyed in several films, but whose fame was hardly dependent on those films.

In some cases, the structure's fame and its cinematic appeal are founded on its real-life destruction (as was the case with the RMS *Titanic*), where the star power of the structure and its destruction are inseparable in their cinematic exploitation. I can't think of many cases in which a structure only becomes famous because of its fictional destruction in a film. But such a pattern is likely to be boosted by today's Instagram-driven tourism combined with the niche knowledge of online culture, whereby someone takes a picture of themselves next to/on top of a famous structure and captions the image with a reference to a certain film, which has more recognition value than the structure itself. The Westin Bonaventure hotel in L.A. may be one such example. While the building has been featured in numerous films, I don't believe that, as a named structure, it has the same global recognition value as, say, the Empire State Building or Big Ben. But it is possible that its fame as an "Instagrammable" tourist destination has at least in part been enhanced by some of the films in which it is destroyed, such as *Escape from L.A.* (John Carpenter, 1996). Its original context of design, construction, and placement may have been far less present to many people outside the architectural world than after its destruction in films.

Q4: How did early actualities and/or more recent location shooting (post WW II–present) create cinematic starchitecture?

MS & PN: The rise of location shooting after World War II resulted from a convergence of factors including a desire for greater realism inspired by Italian Neorealism, the decline of the Hollywood studio system, the growth of leisure air travel, and the economic advantages of filming abroad. These developments contributed to the emergence of the "runaway romance" genre and encouraged audiences to experience distant places through cinema. Such films offered viewers a form of virtual tourism that transported them beyond the routines of everyday life and wage labor into worlds of adventure, leisure, and heightened experience—qualities that we identify in our book as central to cinematic starchitecture.

These cinematic journeys frequently focused on a city's most recognizable architectural attractions. Susan Sontag observed that photography is intrinsically dramatic because it identifies something as worthy of being seen and recorded. The same principle applies to cinema. Through the act of filming, architecture is visually consecrated and transformed into an object of desire. This process parallels what John Urry calls the "tourist gaze," whereby tourism industries promote iconic sites to satisfy an ever-expanding appetite for visual consumption. Such practices align closely with the interests of architects, patrons, developers, and filmmakers who benefit from the circulation of architectural spectacle.

The relationship between cinema, tourism, and architectural celebrity is vividly illustrated in the Ealing comedy *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951). The film playfully explores the connection between tourism, photographic encounters with the Eiffel Tower, and the mass production of miniature replicas. Both the monument and its souvenir reproductions function as markers of site sacralization, reinforcing the tower's status as an architectural icon while encouraging future tourist encounters.

A more conventional example of the "runaway romance" genre is *Summertime* (David Lean, 1955), which explores the intersections of tourism, filmmaking, romance, and architectural spectacle. Upon arriving in Venice, Jane Hudson, played by Katharine Hepburn, carries a suitcase covered with travel stickers, signaling both her mobility and the touristic nature of the narrative. Throughout the film, special attention is devoted to Venice's most celebrated landmarks, particularly St. Mark's Basilica and St. Mark's Square, where much of Jane's romance unfolds. Mitchell Schwarzer describes this process as "architourism," observing that architecture increasingly becomes a stage set for fleeting visual encounters, much like the aura surrounding a movie star.

The valorization of architectural monuments through tourism in films such as *Summertime* demonstrates how cinema participates in the production of architectural celebrity. By transforming buildings into objects of visual desire and touristic aspiration, cinema contributes directly to the processes of spectacle and iconization that define cinematic starchitecture.

EP: The history of cinematic starchitecture dates back to the earliest actualities. These early films went beyond simple documentation by directing viewers' attention to specific monuments and landmarks. Framing these buildings as attractions that rewarded sustained acts of looking, early cinema began to distinguish certain buildings from the surrounding urban fabric. These processes laid the groundwork for architecture to acquire cinematic visibility and celebrity. This relationship between architectural fame and cinema deepened after the Second World War with the expansion of location shooting especially in Italian Neorealism and the new waves of filmmaking that followed. Location shooting not only added realism and spatial context but also strengthened architecture's integral role in storytelling. Repeated appearances of locations and buildings across films created narrative connections, emotional resonances, and shared memories, elevating them beyond mere settings or landmarks. Over time, architecture developed a recognizable identity on screen, carrying traces of past cinematic uses into each new appearance.

What sets modern cinematic starchitecture apart from early examples is therefore less a change in kind than one of scale. The circulation of architectural images through international co-productions, blockbuster franchises, tourism, streaming platforms, and social media has greatly enhanced the iconic status of buildings like the Eiffel Tower, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Burj Khalifa. Location shooting not only authenticates places but also fosters a dynamic architectural imagination that repeatedly selects, reframes, and circulates buildings across various media. When viewed in a broader historical context, early actualities and contemporary location shooting share traits that shape architectural attention by influencing what and how (often) audiences look. Throughout these reflections, I have suggested that cinematic starchitecture is not an inherent trait of buildings but a relational process shaped by medial repetition and circulation. Cinema, in this sense, is not simply a medium through which architecture is represented but one of the principal cultural institutions that continually write and revise architectural history.

BK: I think of the elevation of the architect to star status as coincident with the Second Industrial Revolution, even if the term “starchitecture” is itself of much more recent vintage. Certainly we can think of architects prior to the advent of cinema whose fame made them public figures. To take one prominent example, Charles Garnier’s Palais Garnier is perhaps the most iconic of the Haussmann-era contributions to Paris’ built environment, and it bears the name of its architect. In many important ways, its mediations—the architectural renderings that won Garnier the commission to build a new home for the Paris Opera in the first instance, the model of the building displayed to the public during its construction, the photographs of that model and of its construction, and, of course, Gaston Leroux’s novel *The Phantom of the Opera*—all represent important ways in which we might understand the importance of architectural paratexts in contributing to the enduring iconicity of a building and its architect. And yet, I would be hesitant to call the Palais Garnier a precursor of cinematic starchitecture, for two reasons. One is rather obvious: the Opera opened to the public in 1875, two decades before the Lumière brothers projected their first films (coincidentally, just a few hundred meters away from the site of the Opera). But to understand the other, consider the career of a rough contemporary of Garnier’s, Daniel Burnham. Born two decades (and an ocean) apart, Daniel Burnham is in many respects the inheritor of Garnier’s legacy in the United States; he oversaw the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, almost certainly the most influential exponent in the American context of the Beaux-Arts style that Garnier had helped to innovate. Placing aesthetics to the side, here I am more interested in how Burnham was *not* like Garnier. Burnham’s firm (initially with partner John Root until the latter’s untimely death just as the Columbian Exposition was set to open) survived by winning commercial commissions, and he had a remarkable track record of doing so. One is struck, looking back on the surviving actualities of the American cityscape at the turn of the century, to see how quickly Burnham’s vision for what the city should look like becomes part of the visual shorthand for the modern city, transmitted around the globe via its cinematic representations. In films like Edison’s *State Street, Chicago* (1897) or Biograph’s *Panorama of the Flatiron Building* (1902) or *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building* (1903), we can see how little time it took for the link to be made between cinematic representation, urban landscape, and (crucially) the financial success of an architectural firm.

RG: Special effects have often enabled the film industry to substitute models, matte paintings, back-projected footage and, more recently, CGI-generated images for the real thing. But interchanging real-life locations and their filmic simulacra is something that does

not play out the same way for all types of architecture and their most famous examples. While the skyscraper is an iconic building type that is easily representable as a type, the Empire State Building will always be a unique specimen. Attempting to depict it on film by using a different building would be noticed at once and likely be objected to. But the same does not hold for other distinguished architectural structures, such as ocean liners. As an iconic ship type, the ocean liner is as easily depicted as a skyscraper. But the depiction of its most famous examples does not fall under the same “fidelity rule” as, say, the Empire State Building or the Eiffel Tower. This was established early on in film history with the representation of the RMS *Titanic*. Her unavailability as a real location made it necessary for the dozen or so films made about her sinking to use models and, more recently, CGI to depict her. And as there is no photo or film footage capturing her collision with an iceberg, the considerable artistic license taken with representing the ship often extended to misrepresenting the details of her sinking (James Cameron’s 1997 film was the first to depict accurately how her hull broke into two parts and sank in two phases).

Commercial cinema, in contrast to filming famous buildings, was never too concerned about matching the depiction of famous ships by using actual footage of them, let alone using them as actual locations for the film shoot. There are exceptions, such as the use of the SS *Liberté* in Lloyd Bacon’s film *The French Line* (1953) and in Billy Wilder’s *Sabrina* (1954). Yet, because of cost and logistics, Hollywood was often content with referencing the ocean liner merely as a type. Twentieth Century-Fox even owned a full-fledged ocean liner set built on a sound stage that was used for many of the studio’s ocean liner-set films made before World War II. If Hollywood wanted to reference a particular ocean liner, it would sometimes combine studio-built interiors with archival footage of the ship in question. But even that was not always the case. Howard Hawks’ 1953 musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, for instance, explicitly references the French liner SS *Ile de France* as one of its main settings (the ship is already referenced in both the novel and the Broadway show the film is based on). Yet we never see the *Ile de France* in the film. The studio built lavish sets to depict her interiors. For most outside shots, a model of the *Titanic* was modified and recycled from the film *Titanic*, which was filming the same year as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Only one shot in the film features an actual ocean liner, as it is docking in New York, but it is not the *Ile de France*.

In 1959, the *Ile de France* would be used for actual location shooting after all, but the film at issue, *The Last Voyage* (Andrew Stone), was a shipwreck drama in which the ship played the fictional liner SS *Claridon*. In fact, Hollywood’s use of ocean liners as actual locations increased precisely at the point when the transatlantic liner as a means of travel was replaced by the jet plane. By the late 1950s, it was easier for film productions to gain access to actual ocean liners because many of them were lying fallow due to having been decommissioned. Like *The Last Voyage*, those films tended to be films about disasters, whose catastrophic theme allegorized the death of the kind of starchitecture they used as a material setting. But in most cases, the ships used for such shoots would carry fictional names. Only one ship, the MS *Achille Lauro*, served as the physical location for the real-life tragedy that took place on it, namely its 1985 hijacking, depicted in the two-part television film *Voyage of Terror: The Achille Lauro Affair* (Alberto Negrin, 1990).

Merrill Schleier is Professor Emeritus of Art and Architectural History and Cinema Studies at the University of the Pacific, specializing in the relationship of urbanism, intersectional identities, and cinema. She is the author of the books *Race and the Suburbs in American Film* (SUNY 2021), *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film* (UMP 2009) and *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890–1931* (DaCapo 1990). She has recently published on urban cinema in Stein, Halegoua, and Kredell, *The Routledge Companion to Media and the City* (2023); Matos, Massood and Robertson Wojcik, *Crossroads: Intersections of Space and Identity in Screen Cultures* (2021); and Baschiera and Di Rosa, *Film and Domestic Space* (2020). She has also published articles on such topics as cinematic production design and cinematic monuments in *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *The Journal of Architecture*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Film Studies*, and *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

Paul Newland is Professor of Film and Architecture at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. He has published widely on representations of cities, landscapes, and architecture in literature and film. Books include *The Cultural Construction of London's East End* (2008) and *British Films of the 1970s* (2013). Edited books include *Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s* (2010), *British Rural Landscapes on Film* (2016), and *British Art Cinema* (with Brian Hoyle, 2019). He has published articles in *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, *Music Sound and Moving Image*, *The New Soundtrack*, *Visual Culture in Britain*, *European Journal of American Culture*, and *Academic Quarter*.

Roy Grundmann is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Boston University. His recent research is on how ships have shaped modernity and postmodernity's cultural imaginaries about migration, encampment, de/colonization, and tourism. His book *On Shoreless Sea: The MS St. Louis Refugee Ship in History, Film, and Popular Memory* was published by SUNY Press in October 2025 and was a finalist for the 2025 Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award in the History category. He was the 2025 Fulbright-Karl Franzens University Graz Visiting Professor in Cultural Studies with his research project "Ocean Liners as Vehicles of Cultural Crossings and Sites of Cultural Exchange and Memory." His book *Floating Signifiers: Ocean Liners in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* is scheduled for publication with SUNY Press in 2028. Grundmann is a Contributing Editor of *Cineaste* Magazine. He has curated retrospectives on Andy Warhol, Matthias Müller, Michael Haneke, and Werner Schroeter and has extensively published on these artists.

Brendan Kredell is Professor of Film at Oakland University, USA. His research examines the relationship between cities and media, with particular focus on audiences and patterns of media consumption, cultural data and urban development, and film festivals. He is the co-editor of two books: *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (2016), with Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist, and *The Routledge Companion to Media and the City* (2022), with Erica Stein and Germaine Halegoua. He was a founding co-editor of *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture*, and his research has been supported by a number of grants, including a Fulbright fellowship.

Ekin Pinar

Ekin Pinar is assistant professor at the Architecture department at the Middle East Technical University, Turkey. She received her Ph.D. from the History of Art department at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in *Camera Obscura*, *animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, *Film Criticism*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Open Screens*, and *Archnet-IJAR*. Ekin's current research focuses on history of

modern and contemporary art and architecture, cinema studies, expanded cinema and moving image exhibition spaces and practices, history and theory of animation, and history of experimental film and visual culture.

Schleier, Merrill, and Paul Newland. "The Mediapolis Q&A: Merrill Schleier and Paul Newland's *Cinematic Starchitecture: The Celebrity Status of Urban Architectural Structures in Film*." *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 11, no. 2 (Sept. 2026).