

## CHAPTER SIX

## Edge Blending: Light, Crystalline Fluidity, and the Materiality of New Media at Gehry's IAC Headquarters

SHANNON MATTERN

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Barry Diller's original plan was to build his company's new headquarters on a pier extending into the Hudson River. Admitting that city planning officials would never approve such a proposal, he settled for a river *view*. Now, on the site of a former truck garage, between 18th and 19th streets on the far west side of New York's Chelsea neighborhood, is the new headquarters for Diller's InterActiveCorp (IAC).

The building is hard to miss. Driving south on the West Side Highway, where the road curves at 23rd Street and the massive Chelsea Piers sports complex looms to the right, one cannot help but notice the glowing iceberg a few blocks ahead. This is Frank Gehry's first free-standing building in New York—and his first all-glass structure. Its western façade zigzags around angled structural columns, creating five distinct bays. Five floors up those five bays fold into three, which extend up to the tenth floor. The folds here are gentle creases rather than razor-sharp pleats, thanks to a slight curve in the glass. The building's 1,500 glass panels were "cold warped," torqued several inches to fit the façade's curves, on site (Iovine 2007). The waves are fewer and gentler on the north and south façades, and a portion of the eastern façade, which faces more traditionally rectilinear neighbors, is straight.



Fig. 1. IAC's glowing iceberg, or "glass schooner." (c) Albert Vecerka / Esto.

At some point during the design phase, Gehry showed Diller a model with a white material standing in for the windows, and Diller "got hung up on the building being all white, which, of course, you can't do with glass," the architect said (cited in Lieberman 2007). The solution was to use "frits," ceramic dots applied to the glass. The dot pattern is dense near the top and bottom of each panel and transparent at the middle—at occupants' eye level—thus framing their city views with a blurred edge. The fritting also serves to reflect light and reduce glare, thereby increasing the building's energy efficiency.

Some have likened the building to a ship—more precisely, a glass schooner with billowing white sails (Hockenberry 2007b). "The shape made sense," design writer Jade Chang (2007) says, since "several of Gehry's previous projects have incorporated sail shapes, and Diller was in the midst of building a gigantic boat." Architecture critic Paul Goldberger (2007) argues that "Gehry's buildings aren't usually based on analogies, and this one can be understood without resorting to comparisons." *Architectural Record's* Clifford Pearson (2007) agrees that Gehry's approach to form is more sculptural than symbolic: "Gehry emphasizes the purely formal aspects of the building and underscores its role as an *object* in the landscape" (ital-

ics mine). At the time of its opening, in early 2007, this was the most intricate object in the vicinity. Yet architecture critic Robert Campbell (2007) disagrees: “Whatever it is,” he writes, “this is the architecture of metaphor. You’re supposed to read meanings into it.” Whether they saw an iceberg or a schooner, or simply an intriguing sculptural form, *Business Week* and *Architectural Record* chose to name the building a 2008 Award of Excellence winner.

Could this building also represent, as Innis (1991) might have it, the new shape of space in a new media landscape? Might it also be a metaphor for the next phase of the symbolic economy, the “scapes” of Appadurai’s (1996) global cultural economy? In answering these questions, I will look first at the IAC building’s historical context—particularly New York’s existing media headquarters—and highlight its departure from the traditional corporate architectural form, which could be explained in part by IAC’s departure from the traditional corporate media model. So, in the next section, I recount IAC’s company history and describe its continuing struggles to define itself. I then situate the building within its contemporary local context, and, drawing on Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s (1972) model of architectural communication, explain how the building functions within that local context as an advertisement for the company. Turning inward, I then build on the work of Ross (2003) to address the IAC as a new media workspace. Finally, in the last two sections, I examine the continuities and breaks between the building’s exterior and interior identities; I argue that IAC’s attempts to blur the edges between outside and inside, old and new media, materiality and immateriality, instead reveal the awkward tension between old and new political economies.

## Historical Context: Media Headquarters in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century New York

Scanning the western Manhattan skyline periodically over the past decade, one might have gotten the impression that American media are booming. First, the mammoth Time Warner Center, two 80-story towers atop a curved glass base, opened on Columbus Circle in 2003. By 2006, The Hearst Corporation had added a 42-story glass tower supported by an exoskeleton of “diagridded” steel beams, set inside and atop its existing headquarters, a 6-story Art Deco building on 8th Avenue between 56th and 57th streets. Just down the avenue, at 41st, the *New York Times* Company moved in 2007 to its new Renzo Piano-designed 52-story glass tower sheathed in rows of ceramic rods. Their billion-dollar budgets, brand-name architects, and prominent sites, and their visibility from across the river and throughout the city suggest that these buildings and the institutions they house are thriving, that they hold a central place in New York’s—and the nation’s—economic and public life.

Many of these recently constructed media headquarters have adopted the modern city's quintessential architectural form: the skyscraper. The skyscraper's rise in the latter half of the nineteenth century can be attributed to the convergence of a number of engineering technologies and increasing land values (Domosh 1988, pp. 320–321). By the twentieth century, the skyscraper had become

[the] paradigmatic statement, not only of American architecture and urbanism, but of the economic ideology, mode of production and ethos from which it was largely (if not entirely) produced: capitalist land values, speculative office development and big business materialism. . . . (King 2004, p. 11; see also van Leeuwen 1990)<sup>1</sup>

But as the towers “exceeded the limits of functional efficiency”—once they grew past 10 or 20 stories, and had to devote a large proportion of their floorplates to the elevators needed for vertical transportation—“their market becomes increasingly based in symbolic capital” (Dovey 2001, p. 107).

Geographer Mona Domosh argues that “the earliest industry to translate its promotional needs and notions of corporate imagery”—its symbolic capital—“into tall structures was the newspaper industry” (p. 327). The area around Park Place in Lower Manhattan was home to the first collection of tall buildings in nineteenth-century New York. Here were the headquarters for the *New York Tribune*, the *New York World*, and the *New York Times*. These nineteenth-century newspaper buildings, media historian Aurora Wallace (2006) writes,

attempted to communicate the supremacy of the press generally and their own paper specifically. . . . Deliberate and precise plans were made for these buildings that gave citizens a recognizable and unambiguous sign that commercial media were thriving in America (p. 178).

Their “thriving” contributed not only to public life, but also, as the skyscraper form with its attendant ideologies would have us believe, to New York's economic life.

Domosh similarly describes the *World* building's symbolic function: it served as an “advertisement to the mass market, as a monument to Pulitzer's success, and as a sign of the paper's legitimacy as a public institution” (p. 331). Wallace (2006) explains how George Browne Post's design for the *New York Times* building represented its occupant in form, material, and ornament:

[The building] was an architectural translation of the Aristotelian principle that all forms should have a beginning, middle, and end. The base was clearly differentiated from the middle shaft, and the capital was an ornamental and climactic finish, typically of classical buildings of the period. . . . For a newspaper building, this conscious adaptation of narrative structure added yet more layers of meaning to the design, a play on the words “story” and “storey.” (p. 184)

She also acknowledges the *Times*' “serious exterior of olive granite that paralleled the somber grey pages of the newspaper” (ibid).

The *Times*, the *World*, and the *Tribune* adopted different approaches to journalism, Wallace (ibid.) concludes, yet they all . . .

chose locations next to each other and architectural styles that would differentiate them from one another, and most importantly, built taller than their neighbors in order to declare their supremacy. . . . Despite the sensationalism of the *World* and the sobriety of the *Times*, all of the newspapers adopted architecture which was reminiscent of classical styles. This appropriation suggested a desire to convey social and cultural legitimacy on the part of businesses for whom such legitimacy was not easily won. (pp. 186–8)

These nineteenth-century media companies chose their downtown location not only to be close to their competitors, but also because of the concentration of news-making and distribution resources in this area. When the railroad terminals, theaters, and banks headed uptown in the early twentieth century, the newspapers soon followed (Turner 1999). Most big media companies today are still concentrated in Midtown, which makes notable IAC's choice to settle on the fringes of Chelsea.

Perhaps our contemporary media buildings are, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, attempting to “communicate their supremacy”—or at least the continued relevance—of their specific sectors of the media industry, and to collectively demonstrate that “commercial media [are still] thriving in America” (Wallace 2006). But rather than choosing neoclassical architectural styles to convince the public of their legitimacy, today's media companies have chosen a variety of styles to communicate a variety of new values. Height, however, is still in. The skyscraper—though not the same skyscraper we saw on Park Row or at Rockefeller Center—is still a structure, and symbol, of choice (see Koolhaas 1994).

Time Warner Center sits on the circumference of Columbus Circle. From below, its twin towers appear to bend backward, pushed by the centripetal force of the circle's swing. There is no unified front here; the building has always embodied a split—a split that will become ever more real when Time Warner was broken into two parts in December 2009. Regardless of any corporate fracture, these twin towers will have to stand awkwardly in one another's company in perpetuity. Meanwhile, Hearst's construction required the gutting of Joseph Urban's 1928 International Magazine Building; all that remains is the landmarked façade. The new composite structure has been likened to a “jack-in-the-box without the Jack”—a spring with nothing to elevate (Amelar 2006). And in the age of newspapers' precipitous decline, some doubt the Times Tower's “proposition that insists that a building can symbolize a vision for a venerable cultural institution, [and] can project the confidence of a reformulated business model for an aging product” (Hockenberry 2007a).

While the skyscraper might still suggest cultural legitimacy and financial strength, as it did on Park Row in the nineteenth century, the reality of today's media industries is quite different: hemorrhaging budgets, massive layoffs, divestments, and

closures. “Rome is definitely burning while these guys are building,” Michael Wolff, *Vanity Fair* media columnist, told “I Want Media,” a media news Web site, in 2001. He continues: “This partly has to do with the fact that these real estate deals were begun in better times, but it also reflects the bigger-is-always-better, consolidate-or-die, fortress mentality of the media business” (“Media” 2002). These fortresses may project strength and stability, but their occupants are increasingly unstable.

Yet even their projected images, the designs’ symbolism—a split tower, an eviscerated box—carries an unintended double message: these media fortresses are crumbling; their centers cannot hold. Perhaps IAC, which diversified to expand beyond the purview of a traditional “media” business, and whose identity as a digital company continues to evolve, has chosen to house itself, appropriately, in a building that is decidedly *not* a skyscraper—a building with no easily discernable structure and a shifting center of gravity. Does this new prefabricated, decentered media space represent a viable alternative to the mass media monoliths? Is it a more appropriate symbol for an industry undergoing rapid change?

As we examine the IAC building, we must keep in mind Wallace’s (2006) reminder that “investigating only the buildings does not tell the whole story” (p. 188):

[T]here can be little doubt that newspapers in the nineteenth century used architecture as a way of branding their businesses, but a formal analysis of their structures is not sufficient to explain their style. The conflation between the character of a newspaper and the character of its building was made clear through the particular way in which a new building and its construction were *reported* rather than being the natural interpretation of the characteristics of the chosen style. (ibid., italics mine)

Addressing how architecture is *reported*—or represented in a variety of media—becomes even more essential when considering modern architecture, which, according to architectural historian Beatriz Colomina (1994), *becomes* modern “with its engagement with the media” (p. 14). She writes:

[It will be necessary to think of architecture as a . . . series of overlapping systems of representation. This does not mean abandoning the traditional architectural object, the building. In the end, it means looking at it much more closely than before, but also in a different way. The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which more often we encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right. The building is, after all, a “construction.” (pp. 13–14)

The same is true, even more so, with contemporary architecture. Thus we will look at the entire “construction” of the IAC building: how the building constructs the company’s identity; how the company, its spokespeople, and the designers represent

the building and the company in various media; and how amateur critics respond to the building. We will consider how the building, as a mechanism of representation, combines with, flows into, other means of representation, to provide a composite identity of InterActiveCorp.<sup>2</sup>

IAC, of course, shares some of New York's early newspapers' ambitions. Several critics have already placed the building within the "promotional" architectural context that Domosh writes about. Sara Silver (2006) draws parallels between Gehry's schooner and two of New York's modern and postmodern architectural icons: "The building is expected to give Mr. Diller a place on the Manhattan architectural map of buildings that stand for the corporations that built them—like the Seagram Building, Lever House and Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, now the Sony Building." Reinhold Martin (2007/2008) also mentions Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, "to which Gehry's IAC will inevitably be compared." Goldberger (2007) reinforces the analogy:

[Gehry and Diller] wanted to create something that would embody the dynamism of the new, Internet economy as powerfully as the Woolworth Building represented the democratic idealism of the five-and-dime store in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the Seagram Building captured the sophistication of liquor 50 years ago.

"Even as the [media] industry grapples with a nebulous, digital future," critic Justin Davidson (2004) argues, "it is still reckoning with its masonry-and-paper past." Hearst, Time Warner, *The New York Times*, IAC, Condé Nast, Bloomberg, and other media companies that have recently constructed new media headquarters "have bet not just on real estate and location but on the galvanizing power of architecture" (ibid.). Yet IAC—the design project, if not the building form or IAC's business model—is, in a way, the most traditional of all. It "represents something . . . almost old fashioned," Goldberger (2007) says: "a corporate headquarters born out of the partnership of a strong-willed executive and a strong-willed architect."

## Corporate History: IAC's Search for a Coherent Identity

Diller famously started off in the mailroom of the William Morris Agency, then moved on to join ABC's programming department in 1966. By 1974, he was chairman and CEO of Paramount Pictures, then moved to Fox, Inc., where he launched Fox Broadcasting in 1987. In the early 1990s, he left Fox and purchased a stake in shopping channel QVC. By the late 1990s, he had acquired Silver King Communications, along with the Home Shopping Network, and bought rights to the USA Network, which he later sold. Over the next few years, his company incorporated Ticketmaster, the Hotels Reservation Network, Match.com, Sidewalk city guides, Expedia, and TV Travel Group, and, in 2003, became InterActiveCorp

(see Balio; IAC n.d.a). The new company then added TripAdvisor, Service Magic, Home Loan Cutter, and AskJeeves; and, in 2005, spun off its travel businesses as Expedia, Inc.

At this point, IAC's offices were scattered around midtown Manhattan. The new building was intended to bring everyone together under one roof—and to impart some “physical coherence” to the company (Silver, January 11, 2006). Yet, as the *New York Times*' Joe Nocera (2007) argues, simply bringing together the various businesses in “an open, airy building does not necessarily mean that [Diller's] somewhat hodgepodge collection of Internet businesses will automatically turn into a seamless, integrated company.” He continues: “Ever since he started IAC 12 years ago, the rap on Mr. Diller has been that he lacks a clear, consistent vision for his company.” Diller himself, eventually recognizing that “internal complexity makes for superficiality,” sought to make IAC less complex (Ovide 2008a).

... Diller claimed that he ... was no longer interested in wheeling and dealing so frantically, and that his goal was [to] make the whole more than the sum of the parts. “There is no question that two years ago we were a holding company,” he said. “But we decided strategically that we had enough mass, and we didn't need to be in on the deal of the day.”

Instead, he said, he wants to transform IAC into a true operating company—the kind of company that shares resources, takes advantage of the expertise of the different companies to help other companies, and so on. (Nocera 2007)

According to its Web site, IAC “began looking for and finding natural synergies across many of its existing businesses” (IAC n.d.b). AskJeeves was relaunched as Ask.com; and a new site, AskCity, combined the services of Citysearch, ServiceMagic, ReserveAmerica, Ticketmaster, and Ticketweb. “To get these companies to relate to each other is very hard to do,” Diller admitted (quoted in Nocera 2007). Shareholders noticed the strain and, despite Diller's best efforts, still did not know how to make sense of IAC's collection of old and new media properties (see Fung 2008). Diller admitted: “What I've learned over the years is that focus and singular purpose is the best approach for business. How can you function across 12 different businesses from financial services to dating?” (Ovide 2008a). In November 2007, IAC announced a major change: Ticketmaster, the Home Shopping Network, LendingTree.com, and Interval Leisure Group, a timeshare company, would become separate, publicly traded companies, and what remained would become the “new IAC.”

With the divestiture completed in August 2008, the newly thinned company attempted again to explain the coherence among this motley collection of remainders.<sup>3</sup> The new IAC, its Web site explains, is an “internet company mastering expertise in online advertising, content distribution and monetization across the web” (IAC n.d.b). Despite their efforts to impose a business logic on a suite of properties that ranges from an emoticon library to a camping reservation site, the com-

pany reported a loss of \$14.8 million in the third quarter of 2008. They managed to turn profitable in the fourth quarter.

“We’re making it up as we go along in the interactive [commerce] area, and because of the nature of interactive revenue, there are few rules,” Diller told the *Wall Street Journal* (Silver 2006). IAC has to set its own boundaries: “We won’t get out of the parameters we have set for ourselves, which is pure Internet whose drive wheel is this distribution and marketing machine,” Diller said (Ovide 2008a). “To me that is focused enough, and we may get even more focused as we go.” Diller suggests that the volatile field of interactive media requires that companies continually redefine themselves. Yet he also acknowledges that this need for continual self-evaluation and redefinition is not exclusive to new media; Diller, who is on the board of directors of the *Washington Post*, says of the future of newspaper companies: “If they call themselves newspaper companies they are probably going to be toast. It will depend absolutely on what the product is” (Ovide 2008a). What is IAC’s “product”? What kind of business is it in? What does it call itself? Depending on whom one asks, IAC works in online advertising and marketing, interactive commerce, content distribution, and “monetization across the web.” Rather than focusing on content creation, as many of its uptown neighbors do, IAC is concerned with distributing and “monetizing” content that it may or may not have created itself.

How the company labels itself and how it houses itself are both mechanisms for representation and sources of power. Diller reportedly said to his staff, in “trying to pull together all these disparate businesses” into a shared space, “We can build a box, but why should that be our inspiration?” (quoted in Nocera). “We were trying to do something new with this company, and I wanted a different kind of place” (quoted in Goldberger 2007). What is that “something new,” and what makes its new headquarters different?

## Local Context: Architectural Pioneers on Manhattan’s Western Frontier

According to IAC’s real estate coordinator Shannon Johnson (November 19, 2008), Diller and Joseph Rose of the Georgetown Group, the project’s developer, scoped out the West Chelsea location around 2000. Right down the street from the building site was The Kitchen, an experimental art space that has been in the neighborhood since the mid-1980s—around the same time that the Dia Art Foundation moved here and precipitated the move of Manhattan’s art center from Soho to Chelsea. The old Nabisco factory on 9th Avenue between 15th and 16th streets was transformed in the late 1990s into the Chelsea Market, a ground-floor collection of restaurants and food shops, with upper-level office space for several media companies. And cutting between the West Side Highway and 10th Avenue was the

High Line, an elevated railway unused since 1980 but which, shortly before Diller chose his site, inspired local supporters to advocate for its preservation and reuse. Directly across the highway from IAC's site is a set of four historic piers that, in the mid-1990s, was transformed into the 28-acre Chelsea Piers Sports and Entertainment Complex.

Diller “envisioned his new headquarters as a catalyst for transforming a part of town he has long championed,” writes Pearson (2007). “An early and generous supporter of the High Line, Diller—along with his wife, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg . . . prides himself on being an urban pioneer.” The local context has indeed changed tremendously since Diller's early “pioneer” days and even since IAC's groundbreaking in 2004. Diller's \$130+ million project was financed in part by \$80 million in tax-exempt Liberty Bonds, intended to aid the revitalization of Lower Manhattan after 9/11. While Chelsea is about four miles north of Ground Zero, it is indeed in the middle of its own major construction zone. The High Line park is now under development; the project has drawn celebrity supporters and developers with plans for new restaurants, clubs, and hotels. Rising next door to the IAC building are Shigeru Ban's Metal Shutter Houses, an 11-story condominium with “garage doors” on each duplex unit; and just across 19th Street is Jean Nouvel's 23-story “vision machine” apartment tower. “No other block in America will have such a concentration of high-end architecture,” writes Davidson (2007a).<sup>4</sup>

Some critics and bloggers have noted how the local context provides inspiration for the building's form. The nautical metaphors are of course appropriate for a building so close to the river. Martin (2007/2008) also acknowledges the building's compliance with “the contextualist ideology built into the New York zoning code by reproducing a zoning envelope that holds the street edge and steps back above” (p. 3). He finds parallels between the IAC Building and the “streamlined, horizontal fenestration of the comparably nautical *Starrett-Lehigh Building*,” a 2.2 million-square-foot former freight distribution building on 26th Street that is now home to companies like Martha Stewart, Palm Pictures, and Hugo Boss. The IAC building's references to its context, its Web site's acknowledgment of Chelsea's assets—and Diller's casting of himself as an “urban pioneer”—suggest that IAC is rooted in its local context. “It is an embryonic neighborhood,” Diller said, “where we could be a participant instead of just tacking onto the Rockefellers' legacy”; in other words, what the old money of the RCA era was to Midtown, Diller and other entrepreneurial developers could be to the city's western frontier (Silver 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Still, Pearson (2007) says, “you might expect the IAC to reach out and engage its neighbors more directly than it does.” Instead, the building “seals itself off from its neighborhood”; a more appropriate visual metaphor for the building might be a “cocoon.” Its object-quality makes it feel unrooted; it has “no base to sit on, so you get the impression it could be lifted up and taken away as easily as it was placed here”

(ibid.). Martin (2007/2008) also notes its “tentative encounter with the ground plane” (p. 4). Furthermore, the glass fritting pattern, while conducive to exterior views from the inside, makes the building appear opaque to those walking or driving by at ground level; they have a hazy view into the ground floor, but no higher. The main entrances on 18th and 19th streets do not reach out to meet the sidewalk, and on West Street, there are only a few inconspicuous emergency-egress doors. Diller agrees that “the entrance to the building is in the wrong place. . . . It really should be on . . . [West] street,” although pedestrian traffic on the highway is typically light (cited in Hockenberry 2007b). Moreover, when the building first opened, there was no signage to introduce it to the neighborhood; Iovine (2007) reports that Diller was “adamant that no signs should mar the structure’s monolithic It-ness.” Now, there are large—apparently none-too-popular—blue and yellow signs, at “driving-by-at-high-speed”-scale, on the highway side of both the 18th and 19th street entrances.

## Architectural Billboards: Spaces of Projection and Display

It is telling that the “tall-ships-at-full-sail metaphor . . . that inspired the building’s form is experienced most immediately and effectively by the cars whizzing by [on West Side Highway], making the IAC the city’s first LA building” (Iovine). This is spatial design and experience at the scale and speed of the highway. We might wonder if this is the same “antispacial” architecture Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour wrote about in 1972, in *Learning from Las Vegas*:

[It is] an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape . . . . But is it for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs. (p. 8)<sup>6</sup>

In Venturi et al.’s terms, there are two primary ways to construct communicative structures: a “duck” is a building that, through its sculptural form, is a symbol, while the “decorated shed” is a shelter with *applied* symbols. Along the West Side Highway, we have exemplars of both types situated directly across the street from one another: the IAC building is a “duck,” a sculptural object whose form reveals itself fully only to drivers-by, and Chelsea Piers is the “decorated shed,” a huge box with mega-signage. The IAC’s exterior, Davidson (2007b) says, “is an advertisement for itself,” an “office building wrapped in a gimmick.” Gehry and his persona were brought on board “so the building would function as a cryptic billboard for a company that hides behind more-public brands” (Match.com and Ask.com are more recognizable names than IAC) (ibid.).

Light and projection are the organizing principles of the building's lobby, which is purportedly open to the public—although Johnson told me that visitors are typically not permitted to wander far beyond the reception area. The expansive, concrete-floored ground level is divided into a large gallery and a smaller reception lobby. A few sinuous Gehry-designed benches, resembling driftwood, are scattered throughout the floor—but two video walls are the centerpieces.<sup>7</sup> The wall behind the reception desk features a globe displaying current worldwide use of IAC's sites; visitors can use a touch screen on the reception desk to select a particular property, then spin a blue trackball to rotate the globe and see where people are using, say, Match.com anywhere in the world at that moment. Inside IAC's west lobby and facing the highway is an 11-foot high, 120-foot long video wall—upon installation, the largest high definition video wall in the world. Bruce Mau Design, the building's graphics consultant, proposed a "giant presentation device for large audiences"; it just so happens that those audiences are zipping by in automobiles (Hall 2007). According to the building's official Web site, "an average of 75,000 cars pass by the IAC building daily, all with a clear view of the West Wall"—"clear" through the un-fritted middle portion of the ground-floor panes of glass, at eye-level for drivers-by, but hazy around the edges (IAC n.d.c). "This unique video wall provides a powerful marketing tool," the Web site reports, and plays "a communications role for the community"—presumably a community of drivers, since few people walk along West Side Highway. The screen offers performances that "blur the boundaries between video art and commercial communications"; its programming ranges from promotional videos, to video art created by NYU students, to LED light shows (ibid.).

And all the machinery that makes it work—dozens of computers, eighteen 12,000-lumen projectors and 36 mirrors—is hidden in a sealed six-foot-deep closet immediately behind the screen. "We didn't want lots of bells and whistles," said IAC's chief administrative officer Jason Stewart; "We wanted the technology throughout the building to be seamless with the architecture" (quoted in Pearson 2007).<sup>8</sup> Architect Todd DeGarmo agrees that Diller prefers an understated currency: "Barry . . . doesn't like things techie or iconic," so, in most places, the technology is integrated into the architecture (quoted in Hockenberry 2007b). Video *is* the wall, and vice versa.

Gehry seems an odd match for a nontechnophilic anti-iconicist. The architect is, after all, known for designing signature buildings that would not be possible without advanced computer modeling systems that facilitate the translation of design to fabrication and construction.<sup>9</sup> As it turns out, however, Gehry's trademark curves translate much more easily to titanium and steel—his usual building materials—than glass. So, although the IAC building's glass, unlike the blindingly reflective steel of

his Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA, seems to “erase” itself and downplays the engineering heroics that made it possible, the building required significant technical and structural innovation. We will return to this theme of “invisible” innovation.



Fig. 2. The IAC building's media wall, visible through the West façade. (c) Albert Vecerka / Esto.

## Inside the Screen: Spaces of Media Labor

Johnson said that IAC could not afford to have a top-to-bottom, inside-and-out Gehry design, so they asked Gehry to focus on the ground floor and floors six and nine and to recommend another architect to design the other interiors. STUDIOS architecture was brought on board late in the design process, according to DeGarmo, to “find a way to mute the overwhelming gestures of Gehry’s exterior”—to “deliver a Barry Diller, not a Frank Gehry, interior”—and won a 2008 Interior Architecture Merit Award for its work from the American Institute of Architects’ New York chapter (cited in Hockenberry 2007b). Yet Gehry is the star inside the building, too. *Metropolis* magazine’s John Hockenberry writes:

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[E]verywhere you go in this glass house of offices the exterior is on display. The workers inside get the best view of IAC's lines and surfaces. There are the odd angles of glass that curve tantalizingly back into view of work spaces, surfaces that easily and deliberately mix the building's silhouette with reflected images of the city. There's the nighttime view, which is already pretty spectacular from outside; but from inside, the mixing of the pointillist lights of Manhattan with the color brilliance of the interior puts each worker inside an ever-changing sculpture of glass and light.

The building thus forms its own viewfinder, framing images of the Hudson River, the Statue of Liberty, and the palimpsest of Chelsea and Midtown to the north and east. It is its own screen, reflecting and refracting those vistas and *its own image* for its inhabitants. And it is its own projector, glowing for cars zipping by and gallery-goers wandering through the streets of Chelsea (although denying them interior views above the ground floor).



Fig. 3. The building frames both exterior and interior views. (c) Albert Vecerka / Esto.

The structure frames interior vistas, too, in a way that constructs IAC's corporate identity for its inhabitants. Many design writers comment on the vibrant, invigoratingly chaotic, interiors. The private offices on nonexecutive floors feature

glass dividers and doors in “Tropical Fruit Lifesavers” colors, Julie Iovine (2007) writes. She continues:

Austin Powers orange seating pods dot the floor, and supergraphics by Mau cover the elevator landing walls. Gehry installed a rug with a tiger-striped pattern in Diller’s executive suite. It all screams “Youth! Creativity! Energy!” which could become tiresome in the long run.

The choice of materials “creates a certain amount of visual chaos,” Pearson admits, “but seems appropriate for the kinds of employees IAC attracts,” which, judging from appearances, are twenty- and thirty-somethings in dress ranging from jeans and button-downs to Ann Taylor suits. Pearson finds the interior spaces “energized without being wacky or contrived.”



Fig. 4. The IAC building’s “Tropical Fruit” corporate interiors. (c) Albert Vecerka / Esto.

The IAC Building’s official Web site offers a virtual tour that previews different kinds of space within the building and also, notably, addresses the quality of light in these spaces. The tour highlights places for gathering (e.g., the ninth floor snack commissary), for interacting (e.g., kitchens in each elevator lobby), for collaboration (e.g., conference rooms with smartboards and high-definition teleconferenc-

ing equipment), and for work (e.g., “workstations [that achieve] . . . a balance of style, functionality and flexibility”), and addresses the central role that natural and artificial illumination plays in supporting this program. The frits on the exterior walls impart a distinctive quality to the interior light, Campbell (2007) explains:

[The] office spaces are utterly delightful, filled with a light that seems almost palpable, bright and white but shadowless. . . . It always seems to be lightly snowing outside. Walking around these spaces is like walking among your unopened Christmas presents.

Yet, when I visited, the neutral carpets and uniform warm light seemed to mute the “Tropical Fruit” colors into a general aura of “pleasant”—nothing especially kinetic, nothing warranting Iovine’s exclamation marks (“Creativity! Energy!”).

Uptown, in Times Square, Gehry’s 2000 design for the cafeteria at Condé Nast, philosopher Mark C. Taylor (2003) suggests, goes beyond “delightful” by offering visitors an especially invigorating visual and kinesthetic experience:

Rippled surfaces of undulated glass shapes reflect the reflections of the titanium panels. Along a mirrored corridor, reflections of reflections create figures that flow, torque, morph, and liquefy only to reform and return to circulation. In this virtually aqueous environment, the surging currents of network culture pulsate through mind and body. As forms swirl and images flicker, everything drifts far from equilibrium and rapidly approaches the edge of chaos, where it becomes clear that this moment of complexity is where the action is. (p. 46)

Even though now, nine years after the cafeteria’s opening, magazine publishing certainly is *not* “where the action is,” the IAC building still cannot match Condé Nast’s verve. The iceberg’s eccentric exterior form creates a number of oddly shaped interiors, including boat-shaped conference rooms christened “Prow” and “Wheelhouse” and a board room known as the “Bridge.” Wave shapes continue through to IAC’s furniture design; the arcing and radiating workspaces on most floors accommodate six or eight people and, architecture critic James S. Russell (2007) notes, leave “eddies of space that encourage on-the-spot collaboration.” But in a world that stopped “surfing” the web years ago, such seafaring metaphors and nautical forms fail to conjure up the sense of urgency and excitement that Taylor experiences at Condé Nast. The currents of network culture do not “surge” through IAC’s corridors.

But is the new media workplace necessarily as fantastically dynamic (and psychedelic) as Taylor might lead us to believe? In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Diller said that one of the major differences between running a movie studio or a broadcast network—both of which he has done—and running an internet company, is that in “traditional” media, power is hierarchical, whereas in interactive media, the “value” is in the “distributed middle”—among the mid-level employees (Ovide 2008b). We look to see how this new social system might be embodied in the building: Wood and metal dividers between individual work stations are just high enough to offer privacy to workers who are seated at their computers, but low

enough to allow “over-the-fence” conversation. Most work stations have translucent curving “back gates,” in lieu of a back wall, that provide workers with a sense of security while not sealing them in. Almost all interior walls—including those to closed offices and conference rooms—are translucent glass, supporting the visual continuity and communal feeling and permitting natural light to flow throughout each floor. Ultimately, though, one finds these same tropes in any twenty-first-century open workspace. There are no “forms swirl[ing] or images flicker[ing]” here—in large part because IAC is not in the same business as other content-creating media companies.<sup>10</sup> There is no need for the cacophony of a newsroom or the fervor of a production facility when IAC’s primary “productions” are schemes for extracting profit from online content created, for the most part, off-site.

Similarly, while the morphing and liquefying forms in the Condé Nast cafeteria supposedly create an invigorating sense of possibility and energy, IAC’s similar shapes create confusion. Because of the 150,000-square-foot IAC building’s irregular shape, none of its ten floor plates is the same; consequently, Johnson explained, many of IAC’s divisions are imperfectly matched to their office spaces. During my visit, it was apparent that Mergers & Acquisitions, on the seventh floor, had plenty of space to spread out, while Tina Brown’s *Daily Beast* staff, on Four, had outnumbered its workstations. Ikea tables were brought in to serve as temporary desks. The *Beast*, which, Johnson informed me, is the division that operates “most like a newsroom,” needed access to news in multiple formats and to different equipment, so concessions were made to allow them to use Mac computers, while everyone else got PCs, and to mount a few flat-screen televisions on the walls. There is no room for the *Beast*’s “production facility” on the fourth floor, so we found down on Three, in a windowless private office, a trio of headphoned young workers laboring on laptops.

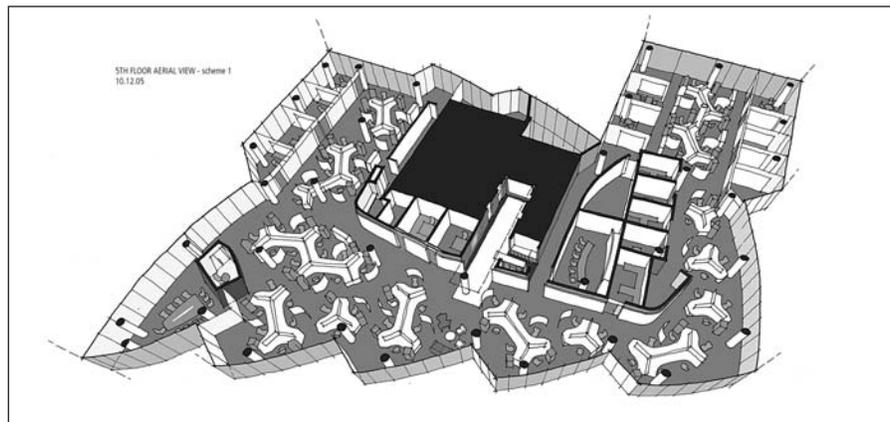


Fig. 5. The building’s oddly shaped floorplans—here, the 5th floor. Created by STUDIOS architecture.

The building's finishings do not help to clarify the program. The brown and blue carpet tile patterns alternate by floor, which, according to Hockenberry (2007b), "gives each floor a distinct identity," yet fails to clarify "what IAC businesses are grouped together [on each floor] or why." Bruce Mau Design created wall collages of IAC businesses' logos that are placed outside the elevators and that were purportedly to assist with wayfinding. The collages make for vibrant public art—yet their layered type, in different typefaces and sizes, compromises legibility. The fact that these collages include logos for companies that are no longer a part of IAC further diminishes their utility in providing spatial order. These finishings thus offer little assistance in transforming Diller's "somewhat hodgepodge collection of Internet businesses . . . into a seamless, integrated company" (Nocera 2007).

That that new spatial order was to reflect a new *social* order in online media—the distributed middle—is negated by the completely incongruous sixth floor, the executive floor, with six traditional closed offices, linked by a two-story atrium to more corporate offices on the seventh floor. Diller requested this arrangement so that he and other executives could be "in the center of things," said IAC's Stewart (cited in Pearson 2007). Yet, after moving into the building, Diller admitted, "I actually think the sixth floor is totally counterpoint to the rest of the building" (cited in Hockenberry 2007b). The new media workplace, Ross (2003) writes, is to represent a "revolt against . . . rigid office design and its formulaic expression of hierarchy" (p. 110). But here we have the same cubicles and sterile corporate offices. "The translucent glass partitions that surround the atrium are stiff and flat," the *New York Times*' Nicolai Ouroussoff (2007) writes. "A curved staircase, in pretentious tigerwood with brushed stainless steel handrails, looks imported from a Park Avenue office building"—which, given the difference in character between uptown and downtown, old money and new economy, is precisely the architectural type to which the IAC building should be defining itself in opposition (*ibid.*).

## Crystalline Liquidity: Where Old and New Media, Old and New Economies Meet

Here we witness a clashing of cultures: Diller's studio background vs. his new media present; the centralized authority of the studio system vs. the "distributed middle" of the new media workplace; the "masonry-and-paper past" vs. the digital future; the Midtown of the Rockefellers vs. the West Chelsea of the symbolic economy entrepreneurs; tigerwood vs. trampolines (Davidson 2004). In the building, Martin (2007/2008) writes,

[W]e find a new-economy office landscape dedicated to intra-office social life (snack bars on every office floor, cafeteria above, etc.). The plans demonstrate the difficulty of squeezing this system of social systems—quasi-modular, loose, but still systematic—into Gehry's

undulating shell and core. STUDIOS accomplishes this with a certain finesse, though the two architectures grate against one another at their many points of contact. (p. 2)

The building, ostensibly transparent and immaterial, provides a physical workspace for embodied labor dedicated to the production of immaterial media products. It is both, in Martin's words, "crystalline"—like the Seagram Building, which "evinces a sense of brute mechanical construction"—and "liquid":

Liquidity, juice: the very definition of capital, and therefore appropriate enough to describe this instance of corporate architecture. Anything more solid—geological rather than fluid or atmospheric—implies indifference (or resistance?) to capital's inexorable, circulatory pulse and therefore might seem behind the times, out of sync. But that still may be the most advantageous position from which to consider this building. Formal dynamism in architecture may or may not be related to the suppleness of today's corporations and the economic flows they channel. (p. 1)

It seems as if walls, cubicles, even *glass* are made to bend to accommodate the flows, the "scapes," of the new global cultural economy. Interior features were supposedly designed to be adaptable. Mau's collages of company logos, for instance, were designed with significant affordances for change. "[T]he beauty of the design," according to a Mau designer, "is that it's not just about the logos—it's also a gorgeous pattern. If one company comes or goes, there isn't an immediate need to replace the graphic" (cited in Cameron 2007). Corporate change is thus absorbed by indeterminate signage whose value is more esthetic than semantic. The floors and walls are not quite as adaptable, though. As Johnson pointed out to me, the oddly shaped floorplates, which wrap around the elevator core, leave variably sized and shaped "wings" or "branches" that may or may not fit the size and culture of the IAC business that are asked to occupy them. So, as companies come and go, or grow and shrink, they are occasionally asked to move, to find a floor zone that is a better fit. This rhizomatic interior space perhaps is not as smooth and fluid as it seems to be.<sup>11</sup>

Diller himself acknowledges the difficulty of balancing the competing spatial demands, forms, ideologies, and ontologies of old and new media, materiality and immateriality. "A building is a narrative," he says, "but it's more complex than a traditional narrative form. . . . Most good narrative comes from rewriting. But when they actually start digging [at a building site], you can't erase" (cited in Hockenberry 2007b). Physical architecture is not as mutable as digital code.

Hockenberry (2007b) notes that, during his visit to the new building, he was struck by the ubiquity of cups containing black no. 2 pencils featuring IAC's logo. The pencils' presence perhaps reflects Diller's ties to his "old media" past; they might also suggest that, even if the building cannot be rewritten, the work taking place inside—the work of defining a business plan for the new economy—involves revision. How does one embody an evolving corporate narrative—one that Diller and

company are “making . . . up as [they] go along”—in a physical form that, despite its *formal* fluidity, still resists easy renovation? How does one reconcile the need for spatial flexibility with the fact that architecture has limits—imposed by material affordances, budget, zoning—to how much rewriting it can withstand?

As Martin (2007/2008) suggests, however, “formal dynamism in architecture” might not even be related to the “suppleness of today’s corporations” and global economic flows. The IAC building’s foregrounding of form and surface—and its effective service as an advertisement for the company—seems an appropriate use of architecture in a symbolic economy. Yet we might wonder what connection IAC’s external skin and form have to the interior program and the spatial experience of IAC’s employees. “The workers inside get the best view of the IAC’s [exterior] lines and surfaces”—but interior life is not only about looking out (cited in Hockenberry 2007b). Behind those fritted glass sails, between those pleats, is an interior that people must inhabit, and where work must get done.

Goldhagen (2008) addresses the occasional lack of *internal* critical work in Gehry’s design:

His overall approach to design suggests nothing about how to make a plan that resolves or stimulatingly interprets the building’s program, makes spatial sequences, or folds into or works with its site. Gehry has often finessed these architectural challenges by using the building’s skin as a figurative textile that he drapes, or drops, on top of the spaces that his buildings’ users inhabit in all the usual and time-honored ways, spaces which are themselves at best ordinary and at worst incoherent and oppressively residual. (p. 33)

All skins—even “smart” or “smooth” ones—have inside them skeletons, infrastructures, functional programs that must be accommodated. Beneath all codes, architectural and digital, is a protocol, Galloway (2004) reminds us, that determines the limits of its flexibility. When we look behind the giant media wall, we find a room full of projectors that generate heat, suck up electricity, and wear out light bulbs. This equipment lives in a controlled environment custom designed to support the backstage operations. Similarly, behind the IAC building’s skin are the workers who produce the company’s 30+ Web sites. Yet they do so in spaces that, aside from the Life Savers-colored translucent panels and the organically shaped work stations, are the same open office plans implemented in insurance offices and ad agencies across the globe. IAC’s form may be more rhizomatic than Euclidean, but its underlying architectural and social “protocols” are like the corporate “box’s” in their compartmentalization of work functions and reinforcement of hierarchy. The power structures and working conditions at IAC thus end up being the same they are at any other “modernist” corporation—which may be fitting, since a media company focused on “monetizing” content tends to regard media as just another consumer product.

## Edge Blending

Yet that product, unlike those created by IAC's "old media" counterparts in their skyscraping architectural embodiments, is born digital and lives its entire life in the virtual realm. It seems fitting, then, that much writing about IAC and its building highlights their apparent immateriality. Unlike the *Times* building on Park Row, whose "serious exterior of olive granite . . . paralleled the somber grey pages of the newspaper," the IAC's "white glass palazzo," Goldberger (2006) says, "looks less like a building than like a computer-generated image of one" (Wallace 2007). Davidson (2007b) particularly appreciates when "[f]og and snow haze its edges and bleach its white skin whiter, so that it seems to be constantly evanescing and rematerializing." The building wavers between the material and immaterial.

Some who look closely notice slight imperfections that reveal the materiality—the physical constructedness—of this alternatively crystalline and fluid structure. In some spots, one can see the "code" behind the architectural interface. Ouroussoff (2007) notices that on the upper floors, where the "faceted [glass] geometry is more extreme," the "[j]oints don't line up perfectly; corners look patched together." In some places, where the fold of a window opening requires more than one piece of glass, "the additional mullion creates an odd, patchwork pattern. The effect," he says, "bristles with energy, as if the building were beginning to crack at the seams. It brings to mind early Gehry projects. . . . What you feel is someone struggling to make sense of something he has yet to fully grasp—the incompleteness of the creative struggle." We have seen Diller grappling with similar questions about the new media business.

Perhaps we could think of the building as a resonance structure or hologram, slipping between images of the ephemeral and material, the fluid and splintered. Inside is the world of the weightless and placeless product, but outside, the velocity and roar of passing cars on the highway and the river wind make one particularly conscious of gravity and physicality. The incongruity between the frictionless movement of information taking place inside IAC and the friction of distance—cars, boats, smog, clamor—outside might explain the building's "tentative encounter with the ground plane," its unrootedness.

The media wall in the lobby also reflects, literally, this slippage. "Those flat image walls," Davidson (2007b) writes, "are the company's *raison d'être*, since all that matters in the IAC world happens on a computer screen." McCann Systems programmed the wall's 18 sequential projectors for "edge-blending," so as to eliminate the visible bands that typically appear where adjacent projections overlap; the "point at which one projected image starts and the next takes over is barely discernible" (Hall 2007). At least that was the idea. Hall and Johnson report that there have been problems with jagged edges and glare and the cost of replacing the projector

bulbs—and occasional complications in their collaborations with local universities to provide content for the wall. “The idea that IAC had indulged in this project without fully considering the conditions of the site,” Hall says, “is, perhaps, an indication of the seductive power of multimedia as an architectural element.” Hall is here referring to the media walls—but we might also take “this project” to mean the building itself, for, as we have seen, architecture has tremendous seductive power as an element of corporate branding or a management tool (see Martin 2005).

In attempting to “blend the edges” of old and new media and business models—and to represent that blending in architectural form—IAC calls attention to the friction between two seemingly incompatible systems and the extreme difficulty of identifying new symbols for a new political economy. New media firms of the late 1990s, Ross (2003) writes, often found themselves borrowing ill-fitting business models from other industries, including traditional media and technology, and “figuring things out as [they went]” (p. 240). While this improvisatory “pastiche” approach led to many “no collar” firms’ demise, a very similar approach seems to define Diller’s management of IAC. No-collar firms likewise had difficulty creating workplaces that embodied their business cultures and supported the kinds of work their employees performed; many ended up recreating the exploitative corporate working conditions that they defined themselves in opposition to. Since the dot-com bust in 2000, few new media firms have had the audacity to attempt to redefine the media workspace. The media headquarters constructed since then—Midtown’s monuments for dying media behemoths—offer little in the way of spatial innovation. IAC at least exemplifies the struggle to define the identity of the new media corporation and the nature of labor in a new media economy, and to seek out their architectural embodiment.

What, Innis might ask, is the shape of this new media landscape? It seems not to be the skyscraper of the Park Row newspapers or Rockefeller Center broadcasters. Perhaps the IAC headquarters, despite—or perhaps *because of*—the incompatibility of its interior and exterior, is in fact a fitting representative of the contemporary American media company. Both crystalline and fluid, it is stuck between old and new models, unable to blend the edges between them.

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## Notes

1. Of course, throughout history, architecture has been used to exercise control and symbolize political power, authority, and economic might.
2. At the same time, we cannot reduce the building—particularly its outer shell, or “envelope”—to a representational system. In contemporary architecture, architect Alejandro Zaera-Polo (2008) argues, “the envelope has become a field where identity, security, and environmental performances interact” (p. 199). We cannot assume that the façade’s only politics reside in its ability to represent its inhabitants.

3. See “Our Businesses” at [www.iac.com](http://www.iac.com) for a current list of the company’s properties.
4. The official IAC Building website presents this busy context as an asset. “Neighborhood,” one of the four key sections of the Flash site, describes spaces to “inspire” (e.g., the Chelsea art galleries), “dwell” (e.g., new residential development), “walk” (e.g., the High Line), “dine” (e.g., Chelsea Market), and “play” (e.g., Chelsea Piers). The site also contains a static link for “Events,” which tells one how to reserve the IAC building’s lobbies for private events; we can assume that potential event hosts and the press are key audiences for this site.
5. In a small early victory, IAC successfully lobbied the Metropolitan Transit Authority to have the #14 bus stop directly across from the building on 18th Street; Johnson (November 29, 2008) said this was a great victory for workers who had to schlep three long, cold blocks from the subway when the building opened in early 2007.
6. We might also wonder if a model designed to explain a car-centric 1960s Las Vegas can be translated to explain a spatial phenomenon in twenty first-century New York. Taylor (2008) writes: “While Venturi recognized the importance of telecommunications technologies for postmodernism, he did not appreciate the significance of emerging information and networking technologies. His focus on images and superficial phenomena rather than systems and networks is more characteristic of consumer capitalism than [the] financial capitalism” of the early twenty first-century (p. 14).
7. These walls have served not only to market the company, but also to sell the building as a popular event space; the website makes it clear that event planners are a target audience.
8. On the day of my visit, however, technicians were changing some of the wall’s projector bulbs (which, I was told, burn out frequently and are quite expensive to replace), and the screen’s guts were spilling out into the lobby.
9. Gehry Technologies uses CATIA—Computer Aided Three Dimensional Interactive Application—a custom modification of the software used to design fighter jets, cars, and ships (another explanation for the building’s nautical form?), to design its buildings.
10. The most daring elements are Pronto.com’s ping pong table and Ticketweb’s trampoline—both examples of “dotcom gimmicks” (Ross 2003, p. 14). The bathrooms, with their Skittles-colored tiles, are among the most vibrant spaces in the building.
11. Some reports, which note the building-wide wireless access and the “voice-over-Internet phone connections [that] follow employees wherever they are,” suggest that workers would migrate fluidly throughout the building, untethered to any particular space; Johnson informed me that this is not the reality (Hockenberry 2007b; see also Ross 2003, p. 114).