

Postscript: Introduction for New Research
 "The Contemporary City"
 Rem Koolhaas

Rem Koolhaas's 1978 book *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (reissued 1994), presents a surreal postmodern architect's view of New York. Written while the Dutch architect was a fellow at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, the text's cultish popularity is emblematic of renewed interest in the city. The book had lapsed from print, prompting the Japanese journal *Architecture and Urbanism* to excerpt it and include this retrospective reflection by its author.

Like many Europeans, Koolhaas is fascinated by New York's mythic power. While not a typical American city, it nonetheless epitomizes and exaggerates aspects of American character. He finds in Manhattan's "Culture of Congestion" a model for understanding the development of modern architecture. It is more difficult, however, to delineate the contemporary "urban" condition of sprawl, which appears to be a global phenomenon. His recent research, intended for publication as "The Contemporary City," notes fragmentation, a shift of emphasis from center to the periphery, and "spontaneous processes at work" in what have been termed "edge cities": Atlanta, Singapore, and the new towns around Paris. Resistant to classification or rules, these postindustrial landscapes, according to Koolhaas, contain an "unrecognized beauty" worthy of further contemplation. He claims these ubiquitous conditions have been ignored. A similar motivation prompted Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (VSBA) to write about the American strip in *Learning from Las Vegas* over twenty years ago. Koolhaas and VSBA share a contagious enthusiasm and wit in their theoretical work.

Koolhaas consciously situates his research in opposition to the various postmodern urban proposals of Colin Rowe (collage city), Aldo Rossi (the analogical city), and Leon Krier (the reconstruction of the European city), which focus to different degrees on the premodern European city as

paradigm. Koolhaas is interested in continuing the modern project with revisions, instead of abandoning it. His formal vocabulary derives from Russian Constructivism and the Modern Movement, but without the agenda of social reform that characterized both. His firm, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, actively engages urban design issues in projects for the new city center for Lille, France and built work such as the Nexus Housing in Fukuoka, Japan. Supported by this experience, his next treatise is likely to be an influential commentary on the postindustrial condition.

REM KOOLHAAS

POSTSCRIPT: INTRODUCTION FOR NEW RESEARCH "THE CONTEMPORARY CITY"

Delirious New York was a search in the influence of the metropolitan masses and culture on architecture and urbanism. It was directed towards the connection between new programmes—as an expression of new social demands and new forms. The research proved the existence in Manhattan of a reservoir of popular enthusiasm for “the new age,” upon this a number of architects reacted with virtuosity.

The—never expressed—conclusion of the book is, that between the two World Wars architecture did undergo a definitive change. The cultural significance of traditional forms had lost unmistakably its univocability. Today there is no equivalent of that New York architecture, that—starting from mutations and rapid changes—influenced contemporary developments.

The *Contemporary City* is a research into the emerging forms of architecture in the city of today, and wants to search in the consequences and possibilities of actual mutations. This will not be directed to the “official debate,” but to documentation and interpretation of a number of apparently spontaneous and independent processes, at work in cities as different as Paris, Atlanta, or Tokyo.

These processes all seem to lead to an unavoidable fragmentation of the existing city, a displacement of the centre of gravity of urban dynamics from the city centre to the urban periphery and a remarkable ingenuity in avoiding urbanistic rules.

After a period of almost exclusive interest in the historical city—and in relation to this: “housing”—a number of architects direct themselves to new territories.

Many of these projects are located in a modern “contemporary” environment, abandoned industrial sites, the periphery of the city or farther away in “new towns” or open landscapes. Programmatically existing subjects are treated in a new way, parks, company

From *Architecture and Urbanism* no. 217 (October 1988): 152. Courtesy of the author and publisher.

headquarters,...and clients change their demands. Possibilities that are still unclear, but that contain the beginning of new forms in architecture and urbanism, without post-modern nostalgia or modern tabula rasa. The common characteristic is an absence of preconceived theories, an eager liberation of a number of self-inflicted dogmas and a new sensibility for the qualities of the surrounding environment.

The Contemporary City will be a retro-active manifesto for the yet to be recognized beauty of the late twentieth-century urban landscape.