

This polemic, published in an issue of *Design Book Review* devoted to postmodern urbanism, develops Rem Koolhaas's "paramodern alternative" as outlined in the previous essay. A significant part of his critique is the idea that while "purity" (for example, the closure or definition of the autonomous object) may have been desirable in modern buildings, it caused disorienting problems at the urban scale. Modern architecture in the form of urban renewal had devastated historic city centers. Vast, undifferentiated "open space," intended to suggest freedom, replaced the traditional, symbolic, public realm. The automobile changed the pace of experience of the city and ripped its pedestrian-scaled density apart with expressways.

Colin Rowe suggests that urban problems result from modernism's inversion of an important hierarchical relationship: the simple house versus the complex city. Along the same lines, Koolhaas notes that Modern Movement architects like Le Corbusier neglected complexity in their urban schemes. The reduction of complexity, combined with the modern schemes' partial realization, leads Koolhaas to claim that the modern city has yet to be realized. (This parallels Peter Eisenman's claim in chapter four that modernism in architecture has yet to be realized.) Thus, Koolhaas insists on withholding judgement on modern urbanism's potential. His proposed "contemporary" urbanism will be neither "contextual-traditional" nor "urban renewal-modern."

Like Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, Koolhaas accepts the given conditions of the "edge city" and metropolitan sprawl as characteristic of a significant portion of the territory in which architects work. But his strategy of amelioration is different from their proposal in *Learning from Las Vegas*: Koolhaas seeks to intensify and clarify the existing "neomodern" condition, primarily through the provision of open space ("urban voids"), which would contrast with more dense development.

Furthermore, the essay criticizes the naiveté of "utopian" approaches (such as the large-scale reconstruction of the traditional city proposed by Leon Krier) for not recognizing the determinants of what actually gets built. Koolhaas's global architectural practice offers him the chance to test his strategies by building in varied contexts. Whether his "paramodern" proposals can improve upon the ad hoc postindustrial landscape remains to be seen.

REM KOOLHAAS

TOWARD THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

For me, the key moments of modernist composition come from Mies, certainly over Le Corbusier, and from [Ivan Ilyich] Leonidov, much before [Walter] Gropius. I could continue to make a list, but I doubt this would seem very original. Every time I flip through this series of modernist images, however, what strikes me is the extraordinary incongruity between the perfection and instant completeness in their architectural plans (take for instance Mies's Barcelona Pavilion or [Giuseppe] Terragni's Danteum) and the inflexible, nearly infantile, simplicity of their urban projects, imagined as if the complexity of daily life could be accommodated right away through the freedom offered by the free plan, or as if all the experience of fragmentation and what this meant to perspective could occur without disturbing the territory of the city. This is quite clear even in Otto Wagner's deceptive plans for the extension of Vienna. Thus, for me, the most visionary architect, the one who best understood the ineluctable disorder in which we live, remains Frank Lloyd Wright and his Broadacre City.

In the last ten years, the projects I have been working on have been situated in a territory that can no longer be called suburbia but must be referred to as the borders or limits of the periphery. It is here on the edge of the periphery that we should observe how things take shape. The contemporary city, the one composed of these peripheries, ought to yield a sort of manifesto, a premature homage to a form of modernity, which when compared to cities of the past might seem devoid of qualities, but in which we will one day recognize as many gains as losses. Leave Paris and Amsterdam—go look at Atlanta, quickly and without preconceptions: that's all I can say.

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Excepting certain airports and a few patches of urban peripheries, the image of the modern city—at least as it was projected—has nowhere been realized. The city that we have to make do with today is more or less made of fragments of modernity—as if abstract formal or stylistic characteristics sometimes survived in their pure state, while the urban program didn't come off. But I wouldn't cry over this failure: the resulting strata of neo-modern, which literally negates the traditional city as much as it negates the original project of modernity, offers new themes to work with. In them one can confront the buildings of this period and the different types of space—something that was impermissible in the pure doctrine of modernism. One can also learn from them to play with a substrata, mixing the built with the ideal project. This is a situation comparable to one for which the nineteenth century was much criticized, when in Milan, Paris, or Naples the strategy of remodeling without destroying the preexisting city was applied.

In the last fifteen years there has been an immense production of images for pieces of cities, which dense or not, have a power of attraction that cannot be denied. The problem is that they have been conceived in a sort of unconscious utopia, as if the powers that be, the decision mechanisms, and the means that are really available might be enchanted by the beauty or interest they portray. As if reality were going to latch onto these schemes and come to see how important it was to build them, which as far as I know is still not happening. Rather than count on this sort of fascination, or bet on the absolute authority of architecture, I think you have to ask yourself which way the forces that contribute to defining space are heading. Are they urban-oriented or the opposite? Do they ask for order or disorder? Do they play on the continuous or the discontinuous? Whatever the answer may be, there's a movement there and dynamics that you have to get to know, because they are the matter of the project.

Take for instance the IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung) in Berlin. In 1977, before the final programming of the exhibit, Oswald Ungers and I were the lone dissenting voices from [Leon] Krier, [Aldo] Rossi, [Josef Paul] Kleihues, and the others, who had already decided to make Berlin a test-case city for the reconstruction of the European city. Ungers and I pleaded for a quite different route, one that put history first: the city was destroyed, torn apart, punctured, and *this* was its memory. Second was the economy: West Berlin was stagnating, losing population ever since the construction of the wall despite thousands of institutional and fiscal incentives, and thus one could not see how a sufficient turnaround would suddenly occur to economically justify a project of general reurbanization. These were strong enough reasons to suggest that the IBA should not have taken place. Instead one had the chance in Berlin to enhance reality, to adapt to what already existed. Above all, Berlin provided the occasion to make of the city a sort of territorial archipelago—a system of architectural islands surrounded by forests and lakes in which the infrastructures could play without causing damage. It could have been realised in an almost picturesque mode (like [Gustav] Peichl's stations) with a free periphery from which one slides into great vegetal interstices. In the long run, the historical accidents (Berlin destroyed by the war, and redestroyed by the 1950s) could have offered a metaphoric role very much the opposite of the one chosen by IBA.

Remembering the projects of Mies, of [Bruno] Taut, the twin towers of Leonidov, and the like, one must also remember that these projects were first great distributors of space, more spatial definers than mere objects. I admit that there was a utopia in this

vision that was just as strong, and perhaps in symmetry to the current desire to densify, construct, and give at all costs an architectural dimension. Nowadays every empty space is prey to the frenzy to fill, to stop up. But in my opinion there are two reasons that make urban voids at least one of the principal lines of combat, if not the only line, for people interested in the city. The first is quite simple: it is now easier to control empty space than to play on full volumes and agglomerate shapes that, though no one can rightly say why, have become uncontrollable. The second is something I've noticed: emptiness, landscape, space—if you want to use them as a lever, if you want to include them in a scheme—can serve as a battlefield and can draw quite general support from everyone. This is no longer the case for an architectural work, which today is always suspect and inspires prior distrust.

One of the current projects of OMA is the reurbanization of Bijlmermeer, the largest of the modernist *grands ensembles* constructed in Holland in the 1960s—it's something like Le Corbusier without talent, but conceived according to impeccable doctrine. It is an immense territory—just one of its twelve sections equals the area of the historic center of Amsterdam. Today on this immense surface where twelve capital cities might have been built, nothing is happening. The apartments are empty, people live there only in hopes of moving somewhere else, and there were serious discussions to demolish the whole project. But when looking closer, it seemed to us that these negative elements were beyond removal. It turned out that a lot of people—singles, couples, divorcees, those dedicated to the arts, and all of them necessarily motorized—were quite attached to Bijlmermeer and preferred to stay there. They enjoyed the light and space, and the indissociable feeling of freedom and abandonment. Thus it wasn't the spaces and buildings that were insufferable but rather the system of aberrant streets and garage connections that radically cut off people from their dwellings. For twenty years neither public nor private initiative has proposed anything to improve this forgotten territory. Our decision was not to alter the housing units but rather to try to give a force or intensity to the open spaces, superimposing on the original project (a giant beehive structure filled with trees) a design where the highways, the parking garages, the schools, and the stadiums would be articulated on islands of greenery and relate to a central armature of new services, including laboratories, research centers, and movie studios. This would constitute an indispensable investment if one wants to start national campaign to deal with what at the moment is a huge blight in the middle of Holland.

If my interest in the banal architecture of the 1950s and 1960s, the derivatives Ernesto Rogers and Richard Neutra, seems a somewhat boring source, I can only answer that to die of boredom is not so bad. There were much worse architects than Neutra. But let's face it, I like that kind of architecture, and quite often it has been magnificently built. It has also at times reached a carefreeness and a freedom that interests me—not that I'm the only one to take an interest in it. But the question at stake is what Bruno Vayssière and Patrice Noviant have defined as "statistic architecture": power architecture whose power is easy, that has moved without transition from the isolated experience to the series, from the series to repetition, and so on until you get sick of it. I'm trying to live with but also to detach myself from it. And since nostalgia disturbs me, I'm trying more and more not to be modern, but to be contemporary.