

This recent article of Rem Koolhaas's is an excerpt from a lecture (University of Toronto School of Architecture, November 1993) in which the architect discussed his recent large-scale projects for the city, and the urban strategies devised by his firm. For a competition for the Parisian suburb of Melun-Sénart, the architect comes upon "a new conception of the city, a city no longer defined by its built space but by its absence or empty spaces." The metaphor of an "archipelago" of green spaces, places reserved from development, recurs in these essays. This idea signals his concern about unmitigated expansion into the landscape. For example, in the urban design project for Lille, the architect advocates resistance to sprawl through very high density building. Furthermore, he designed this project without the limitation of specific function, in order to maintain flexibility. (William McDonough also promotes planning for flexibility to allow reuse of buildings, which is more ecological than new construction; see ch. 8.) Flexibility underlies the modernist "open plan" (with connotations of honesty and freedom) and characterizes of investigations of shelter by Buckminster Fuller and others in the 1960s. Koolhaas's earlier projects combined functions not usually found in a single program; the results of this "cross-programming" were often surreal. (See Tschumi, ch. 3)

Now directing an immense urban development initiative, Koolhaas reflects with modesty on his "generation of May 1968," the student radicals. He expresses surprise at being entrusted with such authority. Will the Lille project actually advance beyond the modernist model of the "tower in the park," or will it simply exceed it in scale?

BEYOND DELIRIOUS

I want to talk about a number of urban projects and to hint at certain problems in the contemporary urban condition which our work tries to address.

We all know the image of [Giovanni Battista] Piranesi's reconstruction of the Roman forum and we are all aware that it represents a very intense form of the city. We recognize a number of major geometrical forms associated with the major public elements, and between these we recognize smaller debris, programmatic plankton in which presumably the less formal activities of the city are accommodated. This mixture of formal and informal elements and the mixture of order and disorder which this single image represents are the essential conditions of the city.

We also know this second kind of city, and although it happens to be a part of the belt of new cities around Paris, it could as well be a part of Toronto or Tokyo or South Korea or Singapore. What is ironic is that latent underneath this model of the city you still see the major geometrical figures, the attempt at a degree of coherence, strangely Piranesian forms and organization, but without any evidence of the urban condition that Piranesi suggested or imagined. There is evidence of the debris filling the fault lines between the major figures. Where the first image inspires a certain amount of enthusiasm, we all feel degrees of disappointment if not revulsion for the second kind of city (even though it is now the dominant form and even though it is important that we declare it "city" because otherwise we are part of a culture and civilization which is simply unable to make the city.) The works I am showing have to be read against this background.

From *Canadian Architect* no. 39 (January 1994): 28-30. Courtesy of the author and publisher. This essay was presented as a lecture in November 1993 at the University of Toronto School of Architecture.

I also want to talk about my generation, as a kind of caricature of the generation of May 1968 which shouldn't be taken too seriously but shouldn't be ignored. Our generation has had two reactions to this contemporary urban condition. One basically ignored it, or to give a more positive interpretation, courageously resisted it, as Leon Krier's big theoretical reconstruction of Washington. There is a rediscovery of the city, a new loyalty to the idea of the city and our generation has been very important in claiming the city as a very essential territory of activity. But what is paradoxical in this reclamation is that it seems as if we have completely lost the power and ability to operate on and with the city.

The other part of my generation has taken the exact opposite track. For example, take Coop Himmelblau's project for a new town just outside Paris called Melun-Sénart. Where Leon Krier and his half of the generation are rebuilding the city, Coop Himmelblau and the other half is abandoning any claims that the city can be rebuilt, throwing up their arms about our ability to even reconstruct any recognizable form of the city. Out of this debate, they make spectacle—a rhetorical play where instead of a series of formal axes there is just composition, inspired on the unconscious and an essentially chaotic aesthetic.

What is painful in this having on the one hand a kind of delusion of power cut off from operational effectiveness, and on the other hand an abandonment of any claims to operational effectiveness, is that a completely devastated territory is left, which, in retrospect, our generation rediscovered but with which it was unable to find a significant relationship. And that is of course a pretty tragic condition.

Our office also participated in the competition for Melun-Sénart and wrestled with the same condition, the same hopelessness of the contemporary form of the city. Paris is now encircled by a ring of new towns. Melun-Sénart is the last part of the ring, and when we started we found an incredibly beautiful French landscape. Essentially we were confronted with an innocent scene where we as architects had to imagine a new city. We felt like criminals because with the present powerlessness to imagine, build and construct a new city, and knowing the hopelessness of creating a new city with the present substance and conditions, it felt almost repulsive to have to imagine a new town on this canvas.

Using this moment of revulsion, we started to ask ourselves whether there was a new technique, a way of working with this weakness or incompetence, a potential to reverse the situation, whereby we could no longer claim that we could build a city, but could find other elements with which we could nevertheless create a new form of urban condition. We were not so much thinking about what we could build as analyzing the situation to determine where we would under no circumstances build.

To enjoy the forests, we decided not to build on the edges to the north and south. Between them was a superb zone of landscape with a number of smaller forests that French kings had used to chase deers from one forest to another and then shoot them in between, so we decided not to build there. Also, we decided not to build near the highway. We acquired by this systematic series of eliminations a kind of Chinese figure where we would make a statement about certainty—we are not going to be building here and we are not interested in building here. As we controlled this system of void spaces or landscape spaces, we systematically and enthusiastically abandoned any claim of control over the residual lands and thought that they would probably turn into what the French call "merde." The more sublime quality of the green spaces, in contrast, might give us a

new conception of the city, a city no longer defined by its built space but by its absences or empty spaces.

We were quite pleased with this project, done in 1989, in that we were imagining a way of turning incompetence into the beginning of a new relationship with the city where this weakness could be incorporated and become part of an engine of recuperation.

Another recent investigation is the idea that in certain conditions, buildings of incredible density might be important instruments to contradict or resist the expansion of every city.

We have been experimenting with types of buildings which are frankly inspired by the Forbidden City in Hong Kong, which was destroyed last year. It was an incredible block—it was only approximately 180 by 120 metres but almost solid building, with minute air shafts separating buildings, sometimes not even air shafts. The total surface of the buildings was something like 300,000 square metres, and in this illegal development there was no programmatic stability. Any program here would, over time, undergo a series of perpetual modifications, so it could start as a house, then become a brothel, then a factory, then a heroin plant, then become a hospital. The liberating formula of such a clump of a building could be that we would no longer have to be very intense about making buildings for specific programs.

If we consider these clumps of buildings mainly as permanent accommodation for provisional activities, there is a whole zone of potential relaxation for the architectural profession. We no longer have to look for the rigid coincidence between form and program, and we can simply plan new masses which will be able to absorb whatever our culture generates.

So here, around an intersection outside Antwerp, a massive cluster of buildings which is specifically designed to keep the area around it free. The area is maybe a million and a half square metres, which we calculated would then liberate two square kilometres.

Next year the tunnel between England and the Continent opens. The French imagine that the combined effort of the tunnel and the TGV high speed rail will be drastic. The train from Lille to Paris used to take two hours thirty minutes. It's now fifty minutes. Disneyland is forty-five minutes. Lille to London was thirteen hours; it will be reduced to one hour and ten minutes. It will be forty minutes to Brussels, under two hours to Germany. These facts completely redesign or reinvent this area of Europe, for instance to the point that the English will buy houses here because it will be faster to go from Lille to the centre of London than from its own periphery. If you imagine not distance as a crucial given but time it takes to get somewhere then there is an irregular figure which represents the entire territory that is now less than one hour and thirty minutes from Lille. If you add up all the people in this territory, it turns out to be 60 million people. So the TGV and the tunnel could fabricate a virtual metropolis spread in an irregular manner, of which Lille, now a fairly depressing unimportant city, becomes, somehow by accident, completely artificially, the headquarters. And, equally accidentally, we became the planners of this whole operation in 1989.

We were selected and then surrounded by a table of experts looking with incredible expectation at us. Giving us a blank sheet of paper, they asked us, can you please resolve this conflict between the TGV tunnel and highway, because this is the Gordian knot of

our project. That was a very important moment for me in terms of my position as a member of this May '68 generation, because I realized that I was simply not prepared for this kind of question. In my subconscious, as an architect, I never anticipated that a position as important as this one would be entrusted to a member of my generation. Somehow, I thought that highways were designed by uncles, by people with more robust nervous systems than myself, and by more plodding horses, and I felt in comparison like a race horse and therefore free of this kind of demand. That was an important moment in realizing how our generation had conceptually cut itself off from an operational world. Because I thought that the French were simply megalomaniacs and this whole project would probably never happen, and because I was surrounded by this rope of expectant experts, I decided to bluff and said, we know exactly how to resolve this problem: where the two lane TGV railway widens to six, we will run the highway parallel to the station. We will also run it underground, and in between, we will create the largest parking lot in the history of Christendom—8,000 places, and in this way, an unbelievable metropolitan concentrate of infrastructure. We used this underground literally as the basis for our project. The advantage of having this whole thing hidden underground was that it would co-exist with the scale of Europe and would not necessarily be too oppressive for the existing city.

The project in the first phase was supposed to contain a previously unimaginable 1.5 million square metres, so we had to prove to Europe that the towers could be nice, you didn't have to be afraid of towers. We also decided that the triangular area between the old station and the new station which we first imagined as a kind of plaza, could be interpreted as a plane, and that we could tilt the plane in. As tilted, part of it could become a building, toward the city, but another part, on a shear line with the tunnel, could be pushed down so that we could liberate the flank of the tunnel, creating a window so that the arrival of the TGV train (and therefore the reason for its drastic transformation) could be revealed and made part of the urban understanding.

We proposed, in terms of pure symbolism, to put a number of towers on the station itself, integrated with the station. The French in their Cartesian manner calculated that it would be eight percent more expensive to build them as bridges over the station, but that was a justified investment in symbolism. What we could symbolize was that it was not important that the presence of these towers was in Lille (actually their being in Lille is almost a coincidence or arbitrary condition), but that the really important and defining aspect of this address is its simultaneous distance of sixty minutes to both London and Paris. It's not where this building is, but the places with which it is connected that define its importance.

We were not the architects of the entire scheme. We proposed in the first instance a series of very sober and neutral envelopes for the towers, saying that the different architects could then liberate individual buildings from this envelope. We remained in a strange mixture of power and powerlessness, the *architecte en chef*, which meant that we would negotiate with the other architects without ever really imposing anything. We had a very strange relationship with all these buildings in the sense that we established the entire section and all the relationships, but we were not the architects.

There was one interesting moment when I asked the director, a brilliant developer with whom we worked closely, why he never said no in the beginning when we came with all our insane proposals—putting the towers over the station, the sinking of the

highway. He said his strategy to succeed into the twenty-first century was to create within a limited territory what he called a *dynamique d'enfer*—a dynamic from hell, which is so relentlessly complex that all the partners are involved in it like prisoners chained to each other so that nobody would be able to escape. Unwittingly but enthusiastically we had worked on developing a *dynamique d'enfer* so that is now one of the items on our palette.

This first part of the project, which started its initial planning in 1989, will be finished next year and the whole thing is now one of the largest building sites in Europe. What was exciting here was that we introduced buildings on a scale that Europe had almost never seen, therefore we could experiment with completely new typologies. More and more our major interest is not to make architecture but to manipulate the urban planes to create maximum programmatic effect.