

---

POSITION PAPER

## Reading Rem Koolhaas

Bart Verschaffel\*

---

'Once tradition is no longer animated by a comprehensive, substantial force but has to be conjured up by means of citations because 'It's important to have tradition', then whatever happens to be left of it is dissolved into a means to an end. (...) Anyone who thinks that art can be reproduced in its original form through an act of the will is trapped in hopeless romanticism. Modernizing the past does it much violence and little good. But to renounce radically the possibility of experiencing the traditional would be to capitulate to barbarism out of devotion to culture. That the World is out of joint is shown everywhere in the fact that however a problem is solved, the solution is false' (Adorno 1981: 175–76).

It *does* make a difference where one thinks or writes, whether from within the walls of the university or outside.<sup>1</sup> The position of an academic is, in many respects, much more comfortable than the position of a designer or an architect – or a politician. The academic does not have much to decide. An architect who receives a commission first has to oversee and schematize the situation, quickly noticing obstacles and opportunities, distinguishing between what is invariable and changeable, isolating the obstacles that cannot be turned into opportunities, and imagining possibilities, and then turn one of these possibilities into a proposal and defend it convincingly. This is what designing comes down to. In the world of academia, however, and certainly when the game is played nowadays, we usually proceed differently, and we play it much more safe. The operation formerly known as 'synthesis' – that is, combining what we know and understand to get a general view on a subject – is almost abandoned as a scientific endeavor. The question, 'What is happening? What is going on in the world?' has been passed on to artists, writers, journalists, intellectuals. It is not considered as a 'scientific' question (anymore). Academics tend to limit their research to 'analysis', and do so for a reason: synthesis always comes too early. We never know enough to know and understand scientifically and methodologically 'what is happening in the world'; there is no 'method' for finding that out. So why would one risk one's reputation as a scientist for the sake of risky 'global thinking'? The simple fact that a university decides to give

an honorary doctorate to such a figure as Rem Koolhaas, though, implies an acknowledgment that elsewhere, *outside* the university, there exists a kind of knowledge, of thinking, that is different, motivated by a sense of possibility, urgency and necessity, and takes the perspective of action.

The title of one of Koolhaas' lectures, 'Navigating modernity', is programmatic, and formulates exactly what Koolhaas aims at: orientation, finding out what our situation is, and which way to go from there. From the title one can deduce where Koolhaas situates himself, the position from which he writes: on the boat, embarked, on a turbulent sea. And for those aboard, the very unscientific question, 'What is going on? Where does the specific combination of an unlimited growth, demographic explosion, globalization and capitalism lead to? What does it do with the world?' is vitally important.

When Koolhaas writes about architecture, he does much more than explain and give reasons for his own projects – in fact, this is precisely what he often does *not* do. He develops, as famous colleagues such as Loos and Le Corbusier did in their writing, a kind of cultural criticism that discusses the work of the architect (including his own), but also covers it up, to make free space. On the one hand, his texts aim at the general picture, and on the other, they point to where exactly action needs to be taken. That is what navigating is about: looking around, orienting oneself and deciding which way to go, adjusting constantly.

With *S, M, L, XL* (1995), composed in collaboration with Bruce Mau, Koolhaas introduced a new 'format' of cultural analysis and presentation: a dazzling collage of diagrams, maps, key words, glosses, manifestos, photos with captions, essays, quotes and references. It is documentary and very visual; very dense, yet open at the same time, and seemingly chaotic. In reality, it is strictly organized. The book closes with one central, now very well-known and important text: 'Generic City'. The book is a guide, a mugshot of the uniform, everywhere-the-same kind of urbanity that characterizes all new big cities and urban complexes. And, then, ten years later, in 2004, came *Content*, the follow-up of *S, M, L, XL*, another chameleon that took over the 'style' of its subject to present the new projects of OMA and to present the central text of this book: 'Junkspace'. In this essay Koolhaas pictures and conceptualizes that new kind of throw-away-space, a kind of *corporate* space, not inhabited by people but by brands, that kind of 'generic space' without origin, probably with a 'mission statement' but without a history, of which shopping malls, airport halls, mega-hotel lobbies, bank offices

---

\* University of Gent, Belgium  
[Bart.Verschaffel@ugent.be](mailto:Bart.Verschaffel@ugent.be)

and television studios are made – the kind of space that is to architecture what international English is to the languages of the world. Both texts exemplify the ‘pointillistic’ writing of Koolhaas: they consist of a staccato sequence of very dense, sharp, often witty statements and remarks, provocative and without much nuance, each isolating and grasping a perception or a fact. But seen all together, these monochrome dots create a global, shaded image. In both essays Koolhaas argues that the ideas and concepts underlying the western architectural tradition we still use to ‘navigate’ through these turbulent times are not in themselves wrong or meaningless, but belong to a very specific context and history, and should not be considered essential or eternal, and not valid everywhere. Europe is not the measuring stick for the world.

Crucial among those classical ideas and concepts that have become problematic is our relation to time. The way western culture and western societies deal with the past is deeply rooted in the languages we use and in the basic metaphors underlying our world views. At the heart of both ‘Generic City’ and ‘Junkspace’ is the meaning of origin, history, tradition, heritage and ‘identity’ – identity as embracing a specific, particular set of meanings and signs. And the starting point is the awareness that the concepts and ideas we have at our disposal are insufficient to find the answers, are indeed part of the problem: ‘To the extent that identity is derived from physical substance, from the historical, from context, from the real, we somehow cannot imagine that anything contemporary – made by us – contributes to it’ (Koolhaas 1995: 1248).

‘We do not leave pyramids’ (Koolhaas 2004: 162). How come? The opening paragraph of ‘Generic City’ describes our situation in a nutshell: ‘The past will at some point become too ‘small’ to be inhabited and shared by those alive. (...) Identity conceived as this form of sharing the past is a losing proposition’ (Koolhaas 1995: 1248). In other words: in the future, *there will not be enough past for everybody*. This statement is, as are many by Koolhaas, a booby trap. The idea seems limpid, clear and simple at first, but then, when one gives it a second thought, it is full of far-reaching and uncontrollable implications. Indeed, we are accustomed to think of time as a stream, as a natural force, as something that fills the present and is already there when we wake up in the morning. We wake up in a world that is the end result of everything that happened before, in the midst of – as Nietzsche wrote – *too much* past, a heap of debris that blocks our way to the future. What is being ‘modern’ but dreaming of a present that is *not* the outcome of the past, rather the beginning of the future? There are historic cities and landscapes left, of course, but the way we deal with this ‘presence of the past’ has become itself problematic, since it is not felt and lived as powerful and strong, or as something to fight with. We cherish it instead. We freeze and preserve the old, turning it into a luxury and a touristic commodity to ‘enjoy’ – and to profit from. Koolhaas’ argument, though, concerns not Europe but those continents and megacities where a milliard people live with little or no past, in cities that until one generation ago were small villages, where now many

bodies are older than the cities they inhabit and where there *is* no past to fight with or to preserve. What can ‘origin’ mean there? How can ‘identity’ take root where there is no ‘ground’?

Koolhaas’ proposal to consider the past not as a natural force but as a raw material touches issues even beyond ‘social identity’ or the functioning of modern societies. It touches the concept of architecture itself: its self-understanding, and, beyond that, the basic conceptions with which we define ‘reality’. One undisputable insight of deconstructionism is how deeply the architectural metaphor is entrenched in Western thought. We think of architecture and building as the essential work of mankind on this planet: forming and ordering matter. Architecture is ‘work’ in the Hegelian-Marxist meaning of the word: as the gradual transformation of ‘nature’ into ‘culture’, as ‘humanization’ of the world. God is the first architect; building is to breathe life or meaning or soul into matter, shaping clay into a body, transforming stone into figure, chaos into order, ‘potentiality’ into ‘form’, nature into landscape, time into history... The common denominator of this series of bipolarities grounding western metaphysics and western thinking is the assumption that there is always a previously established fact or force, outside and before what is human, that resists our heroic, promethean endeavors to create meaning and order. But that ‘matter’ we fight with at the same time grants our work its ‘reality’ and its weight. It inscribes what we do into history and at the same time teaches the lesson of the ruin: man builds monuments, but time dissolves the form and the order back into formlessness. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust: from stone to architecture and back – to ruin, to rubbish.

The proposal to think of the past, not as a stream and a force, but as a rare raw material, reveals, in a flash, the possibility to think differently about the function and capacities of architecture, and, beyond that, about the human adventure. In ‘Generic City’, and even more in ‘Junkspace’, Koolhaas proposes to think of chaos, of formlessness and loss of meaning, as a collateral end product of everything what we ourselves decide and do. The end product of Enlightenment is not the autonomous, emancipated citizen, but the consumer and the trash he leaves behind. Chaos is not the matter we start from, but the end result of everything the architects invent and produce. ‘The built product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace’; ‘Junkspace’ is the “‘fallout’ of modernization’ (Koolhaas 2004: 162). What we accomplish is not the transformation of wilderness into an inhabitable, humanized world, as the modern project presents it, but the bringing about of a new, very unstable environment, one neither founded nor structured by an ‘outside’ or inhuman natural necessity, but one with ‘global insecurity’ as its opponent. How to navigate – and to ‘build’ – in the ‘global risk society’? What can architecture and urbanism be, what do they have to take on, when there is no promethean task to perform, no ‘necessity’ to deal with, no scarcity, no gravity, but instead only many forms of ‘plenty’ and the hunt for comfort and pleasure shared by all?

In 'Junkspace' Koolhaas includes a parenthesis – just a line – which destroys the 'Junkspace' bubbles as a pinprick explodes a balloon. Koolhaas evokes the kind of space of the department stores, nightclubs, entrance desks of office buildings, tax-free shops and airport seafood restaurants, the cool, clean, superficial, cheerful decency of these chemically fresh-smelling, totally monitored, infinite 'interiors' of the world of consumption, complete with codes of conduct and ideological presuppositions. And then he writes, 'a single citizen of another culture – a refugee, a mother – can destabilize an entire Junkspace' (Koolhaas 2004: 165). Refugees and mothers are, indeed, the living contradiction, the 'other' of this kind of environment. What those kinds of 'outsiders' have in common is exactly what 'Junkspace' lacks: a reality principle. 'Junkspace is like a womb that organizes the transition of endless quantities of the Real – stone, trees, goods, daylight, people – into the unreal' (Koolhaas 2004: 171). The two pre-modern modes of existence embodied by the refugee and the mother reveal and contradict the 'arbitrariness', the frivolity, the very comfortable lightness of a self-sufficient sense of well-being (sitting in a pavement café, in the massage chair near the gate) that doesn't want to be disturbed or confronted with somebody who is *really* in need or in danger, or with a crying baby. The figures of the refugee and the mother, for whom bare life is a value, whose existence is about staying alive, protecting life, transmitting life, unmask and contradict the controlled beauty and the sterile order of completely secured junkspace. The principles of the refugee and the mother are shelter and hearth – the most archaic principles of architecture and building.

Koolhaas and his office, OMA/AMO, have also developed *architectural* projects – thought experiments – that explore how late-modern societies can deal with the past,

and how architecture can relate to time. For instance, for the problems of too much past in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, with its 2000 rooms filled with antiques, and of the complete absence of a past in Beijing, they proposed a free, creative management: in Petersburg, by letting go half of the heritage and preserving it as ruins, and in Beijing, by selecting the future heritage by freezing and preserving at random parts of the city as they are now. Proposals such as these do not claim to have general validity or applicability elsewhere, and by putting the problem so bluntly they have little chance of becoming realized. Which, of course, is a pity, because radical action is so rare. Yet these proposals function primarily as texts and thoughts – as thought in the form of a *project*: loaded with that sense of urgency and action perspective of the designer.

Reading Rem Koolhaas usually doesn't make one happy. But it is remarkable, and worth an honorary doctorate, that he is probably first of all a thinker with that remarkable sense of necessity and urgency, the gravity and sobriety, of the refugee and the mother, and – some believe – of architecture.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This text was written for a symposium organized on the occasion of the honorary doctorate granted to Rem Koolhaas by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on October 19, 2012

### References

- Adorno, T W** 1981 Valéry Proust Museum. In: *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 173–185.
- Koolhaas, R and Mau, B** 1995 *S, M, L, XL*. New York: Monacelli Press.
- Koolhaas, R and McGetrick, B** (eds.) 2004 *Content*. Köln: Taschen.

**How to cite this article:** Verschaffel, B 2013 Reading Rem Koolhaas. *Architectural Histories*, 1(1): 12, pp.1-3, DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ah\\_al](http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ah_al)

**Published:** 10 June 2013

**Copyright:** © 2013 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

**]**u[ *Architectural Histories* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

**OPEN ACCESS** 