The Brave New World of Rem Koolhaas

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Abstract. In 1972, Rem Koolhaas presented his thesis project at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. The work was a collaboration of four authors: Koolhaas himself, architect Elia Zenghelis, artist Madelon Vriesendorp, and painter Zoe Zenghelis. Titled Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture, it used a pictographic storyboard to present an alternative scenario for the contemporary metropolis. The text, illustrated by eighteen drawings, watercolours and collages, envisioned the creation of a restricted (albeit expansive) enclave in central London. The new urban tissue, protected from any external influence by high walls, was designed to cut through the existing structure of the city, offering the metropolis an alternative – and superior – social environment. With this project, Rem Koolhaas joined a group of visionaries, and the work itself ultimately was a catalyst for the formation of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Studying Exodus, one cannot help noticing a number of literary parallels. The title explicitly refers to the Second Book of the Biblical Old Testament, but the design itself also bears some resemblances to the utopian novel The New Atlantis by Francis Bacon and Aldous Huxley’s notorious dystopia Brave New World, written over 300 years later. It is sure, however, that all three had a tremendous impact on shaping the mind-set of generations of readers. Drawing on Koolhaas’s merging of architecture and literature, the author seeks to offer an interdisciplinary approach to Exodus that would echo the multifaceted spirit of Koolhaas’s work. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to show that interpreting Exodus alongside these three texts allows us to see it in a new light. The author argues that the literary context allows for a more comprehensive approach to Koolhaas’s Exodus, making it possible to see him as a future “prophet of a new modern architecture”.

1. Introduction

Architects’ works usually have a utilitarian purpose: they fulfil people’s needs and desires because they are made to be used, to be inhabited. But what happens when the design is, in fact, purely theoretical? What if it is not meant to be built? How do we approach it then, when it subverts our expectations of what an architectural design is and makes our regular investigative tools inadequate?

When in 2000 Rem Koolhaas was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the jury considered his writings important enough to merit a mention in the justification: “he was as well known for his books, plans and academic explorations as he was for his buildings” [1]. This statement and the fact that his work contains a strong narrative component was the inspiration to investigate his thesis project Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture and analyse it in a literary context. This paper sets Exodus against three influential literary works: the Bible, Francis Bacon’s The New Atlantis and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. Although the selection may at first glance appear somewhat arbitrary, it is motivated by Ingrid Bock’s discussion of Koolhaas’s thesis, which offers insightful remarks on the literary parallels to be found in Exodus [2]. Yet whereas in Bock’s discussion the literature is simply one of the strands of a much broader argument, this paper proposes a different
approach: using the literary texts, it attempts to discover the key principles that govern *Exodus* and to reconstruct the possible underlying narratives to arrive at a plausible interpretation.

2. *Exodus*

In the title of Koolhaas’s dissertation, the author explicitly refers to the Bible - or, more specifically, to the *Exodus*, which is the second book of Tora. Considering the crucial importance that the author himself ascribes to the Biblical text by referencing it in the title, it is worth starting with a summary. *Exodus* tells the story of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, with which they were punished for their disloyalty to Yahveh. Aware of the danger that a strong Israeli tribe would pose to his rule, the Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites, forcing them to do back-breaking labour and ordering all male infants to be drowned in the river, thus threatening the very existence of the chosen people. This is when Moses enters the story. An Israeli child, brought up by the Pharaoh’s daughter, he is chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan. His loyalty and devotion to God are what allows him to succeed [3].

Despite being an architectural design, Koolhaas’s project is also a story that envisages London divided into two halves: The Good and the Bad one. The Good Half is a kind of restricted enclave in a form of a continuous strip cut out from the Bad Half of the city. As soon as the division is made, “[t]he inhabitants of the Bad Half begin to flock to the good part of the divided city, rapidly swelling into an urban exodus” [4]. Because nobody wants to live in the Bad Half anymore, a wall has to be erected to prevent its inhabitants from escaping to the Good Half. The promised land thus becomes a prison: “After all attempts to interrupt this undesirable migration had failed, the authorities of the bad part made desperate and savage use of architecture: they built a wall around the good part of the city, making it completely inaccessible to their subjects”[4].

In the light of the Biblical context Koolhaas introduces in the title, the Good Half can be seen as a modern-day equivalent of the promised land the Israelites were hoping to enter, as Ingrid Bock aptly observes [2, p.40]. This raises three questions that the following discussion will attempt to answer:

1. What kind of danger are the inhabitants of the Bad Half escaping from?
2. What makes the Good Half the desired promised land?
3. Why does Koolhaas’s Strip have to be a prison?

3. The Escape

The answer to the first question can be found in Koolhaas’s descriptions. He calls the Bad Half “the behavioural sink of London” [4]. This immediately brings to mind John B. Calhoun’s experiment known as the “Behavioural Sink” or “Mouse Utopia Experiment”. The aim of the experiment was to observe the rodents’ behaviour under what may be called utopian circumstances. The rats and mice were provided with food, water, nesting materials, protection from predators and even given medical care. They were, however, constrained by the size of the cage they were kept in [5]. The experiment was conducted several times from 1947 onwards, but the conclusions of each attempt were invariably dire: the rodents exhibited aggressive behaviour (including cannibalism), were unable to breed and the population became virtually extinct, with the few remaining mice losing “the ability to co-exist harmoniously” [6].

The impact of the experiment was major: it resulted in widespread debate among the scientific community and the discussion, as Ramsden and Adams note, revolved around the “problem of density in the city, home, and institution as impinging directly on health and development” [6, p. 766]. Calhoun’s findings also had a considerable influence on popular culture, provoking “a rush of popular books and films which rehearsed an apocalyptic view of a future crippled by overpopulation, many drawing directly on Calhoun’s work” [6, p.768].

What does this mean for *Exodus*? It is rather unlikely that Koolhaas used the expression “the behavioural sink of London” unaware of Calhoun’s experiment and the larger debate surrounding it, seeing as, according to Ramsden and Adams, it is precisely this phrase that was “the most resonant way” in which Calhoun’s work “travelled outside its experimental setting”[6, p.770].
Consequently, it does not seem like a long shot to suggest that it was the potential threat of degeneration and self-extinction caused by the density of the human population in the metropolis that made the inhabitants of Bad Half seek the rescue in the Good one.

4. The Refuge
According to Koolhaas, there are several reasons why the inhabitants of London voluntarily choose to live in prison. First of all, the Strip is an “architectural oasis” vastly superior to the old city: “[c]ontrary to modern architecture and its desperate afterbirths, this new architecture is neither authoritarian nor hysterical: it is the hedonistic science of designing collective facilities that fully accommodate individual desires” [4].

The phrase “hedonistic science” seems key here. The word “hedonism” derives from the ancient Greek term for “pleasure”, which points to its ancient roots. Hedonism becomes the main principle of the society of refugees, and as such is worth investigating in more detail.

The entry to the Strip is possible via a Reception area, the atmosphere of which is described as evoking “luxury and well-being” [4]. There is nevertheless a jarring contrast between this statement and the illustration that accompanies this particular portion of the text. The illustration depicts the admittance of newcomers to this new architectural paradise: naked young males, deprived of their privacy and belongings, marching in front of the police. In the foreground, an elderly couple can be spotted, accompanied by their dog and with all their belongings. They have apparently just been rejected and are now sitting with their backs to the Strip. The atmosphere of the scene is neither luxurious nor are there any signs of well-being; it brings to mind the terror of a prison rather than the joy of the hedonistic paradise Kolhaas promises.

Yet even if those entering the Strip were to be made anxious by this welcome, there is nothing to worry about. Nearby, they will find the Park of Four Elements with a generous offer of hallucinogens, which are used in Exodus not only to minimize unpleasant and painful feelings, but to control the mood of the prisoners: “[m]oods of exhilaration, depression, serenity, and receptivity can be evoked invisibly in programmed or improvised sequences and rhythms” [4].

This is not a new idea - in Aldous Huxley’s breakthrough novel, Brave New World (1932),1 drugs are one of the key ingredients of social stability the World State seeks above all else. [7, p.36] The author calls his invented substance “soma” and makes it so powerful that one gram is enough to cure a person of any discontent: “[t]ake a holiday from reality whenever you like, and come back without so much as a headache or a mythology” [7, p.46]. Though in Exodus, this drugging takes a different form - Koolhaas envisages it as vapours - the principle remains the same: both Koolhaas and Huxley chose to include it in their respective visions to create a pain-free world of perfectly happy people.

Surprisingly, fear and aggression are important components of the Exodus, too. It seems that Koolhaas agrees with Huxley that “man and women must have their adrenals stimulated from time to time”[7, p.211]. Similarly to the Violent Passion Surrogate treatment (“the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage”) which the citizens of the World State take every month ”[7, p.211], in Exodus, there is a Park of Aggression, a place devoted exclusively to giving vent to aggressive feelings, or, in Koolhaas’s words, to “channel aggressive desires into creative confrontations”[4]. The most prominent edifices of this part of a Strip are two towers in which inhabitants can “vent suppressed hatred, freely abusing each other”.2 The visitors of the towers are additionally inspired to further aggression by watching other people abuse and being abused. The further up the tower, the

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1 The novel is set in futuristic World State and depicts the genetically modified and conditioned society. The hallucinogens play a vital role in controlling the mood of its inhabitants.

2 It is unclear whether the association with the Two Towers – the second volume of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings was intentional, but interestingly, the two towers in both works epitomize the “dark side”. In Tolkien’s novel they represent a malicious force which threatens Middle-earth, while in the Exodus they stand for the dark side of human nature, the destructive impulses which cannot be repressed.
better the view, which encourages everyone to climb higher and higher; as a result, the structure wobbles as the prisoners “push their antagonist into an abysmal fall through the relentless spiral of introspection” and the “entire surface of the Park-the air above and the cavities below-becomes a full-scale battlefield” [4]. Koolhaas does not clarify why the prisoners need to express their aggression. One of the possible explanations might be supplied by a theory Kolhaas’s contemporary, Leonard Berkowitz, proposed in the 1960s, arguing that “a frustrating event increases the probability that the thwarted organism will act aggressively soon afterwards”, with frustration defined as “an interference with an instigated goal response at its proper time in the behaviour sequence” [8, p.2]. This seems very likely to be valid in a group of prisoners unable to escape their confinement.

There are two more zones in *Exodus* that can be traced back to literary texts: the Baths and the Institute of Biological Transactions. The Baths are described by Koolhaas as a “public condenser” created to “invent, test and possibly introduce new forms of behaviour”. [4] The collage which illustrates this paragraph may provide a clue as to the nature of the behaviour Koolhaas has in mind. On the first floor, there “is an area for the observation and possible seduction of partners who will be invited to participate actively in private fantasies and the pursuit of desires”[4]. In *Exodus* people are invited and encouraged to express sexual fancies and baths are the places to fulfil even the wildest of them.

The idea of a common bath can be found already 300 years earlier in Francis Bacon’s novel, *The New Atlantis* (1627).3 The illustrations used by Bacon and Koolhaas, although made centuries apart, look surprisingly similar. In Bacon’s vision, there are pools near every town of the New Atlantis called “Adam and Eve's pools”. They are used for a religious celebration called “Feast of the Family”. The feast lasts for several days and ends with dances and revelry of a Dionysian nature during which “it is permitted to one of the friends of the man, and another of the friends of the woman, to see them severally bathe naked.”[9]. The Feast plays an important social role: as Harvey Wheeler observes, its aim is to “fuel the high birth-rate” [10].

Liberal sexuality is also one of the key features of Huxley’s vision of the future. In *Brave New World*, he envisions a ritual which he calls an “Orgy-porgy”. This takes place during the Solidarity Service, in which people drugged by “the loving cup” allow their sexual impulses to run free [7, p.70-73]. Both celebrations are exclusive rituals and play important roles in the two respective societies. In Koolhaas’s *Exodus*, the Baths are available to all the prisoners and they are used as a way “to invent, test, and possibly introduce new forms of behaviour” [4], which makes the visions of both Bacon and Huxley seem relatively tame.

The other component that carries literary connotations is the Institute of Biological Transactions. It performs two functions: firstly, it takes “care for babies, educating them and turning them into small adults who – at the earliest possible date – can actively participate in Life in the Strip” and secondly, demonstrates the “harmless nature of mortality”[4]. Patients in need of medical care are displayed to doctors on a moving walkway, and those who are not chosen to undergo medical treatment go straight to the cemetery; even so, but mortality cannot spoil the “festive atmosphere” of this place [4].

Koolhaas’s Institute bears some resemblance to the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre in *Brave New World*. In Huxley’s vision, this is where new citizens are created in the process of ectogenesis, brought up and conditioned to unquestioningly accept the reality they are thrust into. This includes “death conditioning”, which begins at eighteen months: “[e]very tot spends two mornings a week in a Hospital for the Dying. All the best toys are kept there, and they get chocolate cream on death days. They learn to take dying as a matter of course [7, p.142].”

In *Brave New World*, death conditioning is yet another way to ensure social stability by alienating people from one another and loosening the bonds between them. In *Exodus*, on the other hand, the elderly need to give place to the younger generations by willingly giving up their lives.

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3 *The New Atlantis* was first published after Bacon's death and depicts a utopian world where people live ideal, peaceful, enlightened lives.
5. The Prison – discussion

This brings us to the final question: why does Koolhaas’s promised land have to be a prison? *Exodus* is structured around a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, it envisions a profoundly hostile environment, on the other – offers a magnitude of attractions; it is appealing enough to make droves of people flood there, which in turn necessitates the erection of a protective wall to keep the outside world out, thus turning the Strip into a prison. Why is this so?

Unfortunately, the author does not answer this question directly, which gives us no choice but to speculate. One such speculation is offered by Bock, who suggests that in Exodus, “the form of the prison, implying the notion of institutional order, control and constraint of individual liberty, is presented as a desirable retreat from the anxiety of an isolated and therefore pointless individual existence” [2, p.34]. Nevertheless, she also allows the possibility of interpreting Koolhaas’s thesis “as an ironic comment on the Promised Land, given that the monumental scheme of Koolhaas’s Exodus rather resembles the “house of bondage” in Egypt than a desirable place to live” [2, p. 40] – that is to say, a dystopia instead of a utopia.

6. Conclusions

I would argue that the similarities between *Exodus* and *Brave New World* may serve as a crucial clue in resolving this dilemma. There is no doubt that Huxley depicts an oppressive social system – why, then, are there so many resemblances between the dystopian World State and *Exodus*? Why does Koolhaas’s hedonist paradise appear to be a nightmarish world which traps people in a reality without any alternative? Why are they given arbitrary attractions, sexual freedom and free access to drugs and yet are deprived of their basic human rights? Is this because the hedonist utopia is only a mirage? Maybe one of the ways in which we can understand *Exodus* as a warning to contemporary society: the degenerated metropolis is on its way to self-extinction, but the alternative – the enclosure of the Strip – is equally unpromising. Interpreting *Exodus* in this way allows us to see Koolhaas as a visionary whistle-blower whose first foray into the field of architectural design is, in fact, a cautionary tale about the possible consequences of further development of civilization.

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