Aesthetic Delirious Urbanism – Rem Koolhaas

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Abstract. According to Rem Koolhaas, the ‘70s had a great impact on the western economic life. It was the beginning of two twin systems: financial and political, the liberalism and the globalisation. During this decade, New York is the stage of the decaying show of organised crime, drugs and social and financial crisis. In 1977, in an attempt to save the city, the campaign “I ♥ NY” is launched. It emphasises the possibilities of New York’s urban and frenetic life. The city proclaims itself as the centre of the world, at least of the western world. As a consequence, driven by a blind patriotism, or even delirious, Manhattan’s architects took possession of the most obvious characteristics of the city’s architecture of the period before the Second World War. A new old city develops. According to Rem Koolhaas, it is an architecture made of money “shots”. In 1978, Koolhaas publishes his retroactive manifesto “Delirious New York”, where, in due course, he draws attention to the constant relation between the city and the new all over the centuries. In this manifesto, Koolhaas reveals his fascination with the modernity and urbanity. His work depicts Manhattan’s evolution since its “Prehistory” – before the European’s occupation – as an experience of modernity. An island that is a pioneer in the problems that affect the main capitals of the world today, but also a pioneer in the attempts of solving, or at least maintaining, the chaos that it contains. The aim of this written essay is to analyse and clarify how the fascination with the new technology, and the way this relates to what is banal – urban – delirium – represent aesthetic criteria in Koolhaas’s work.

1. Introduction

The present essay suggests analysing the following topic: “Rem Koolhaas’s Aesthetic Delirious Urbanism” through the explanation of an argument taken from the book Delirious New York, published in 1978 – “The first manifestation of a curse that is to haunt the architectural profession for the rest of its life arose in Cony Island: the formula technology + cardboard (or any other flimsy material = reality” [1], later termed “junkspace” by Koolhaas.

In his book Delirious New York, Koolhaas turns the negativity into the positive energy of radical reflection about the metropolitan condition. Just like Vers Une Architecture by Le Corbusier, Delirious New York is a revolutionary manifesto about the fundamentals of architecture. It shifts the disciplinary positions established, it rewrites the history of modernity in architecture, it redefines the relationship between theory and practice and it re-establishes the role of the architect in society.

This research enables us to question our contemporaneity through a key character for the understanding of the architectural practice in the late 20th century. Understanding and studying Rem Koolhaas’s work (theory and practice): the passion for technology, the concept of junkspace, the
fascination for the generic city and the return to the fundamentals of architecture will always be an opportunity to question the meaning of our time and the sense of our practice as architects.

2. TECHNOLOGY + Junkspace = Generic City
Wandering through various cultural influences and realities, Koolhaas focus on the same fascination as Reyner Banham - “the first machine age” [2] –, present in the tales about modern vanguards, the optimism of skyscrapers and the “ecology” [3] of the American city of New York. Just like Banham was surprised at Los Angeles, Rem Koolhaas was delirious about New York.

In his essay Delirious New York (figure 1), Koolhaas presents an urban reality which develops through a “feverish” construction guided by the liberal capitalism of the beginning of the 20th century. “New York turns into a “seismograph” of the American dream, progressively higher, more glamorous and more technological” [4]. The only goal of this process of the urban verticalisation, and extreme technological splendour was the massive entertainment, making the activities of the world of business easier. Here the protagonist of this new architectural theory is the skyscraper, which can concentrate a wide variety of programs on top of each other, and only connected by lifts or escalators. Each skyscraper is a city inside another city.

![Figure 1. Cover of the first edition of the book Delirious New York [1]](image)

The main capitals of business turn into the centre of a culture of congestion, and one of their main characteristics is the constant destruction and creation. The city becomes modern as it destroys itself only to rise again later: “the new model for Manhattan’s urbanism is a form of architectural cannibalism: by swallowing its predecessors, the final building accumulates all the strengths and spirits of the previous occupants of the site and, in its own way, preserves their memory” [1]. The
culture of congestion in the city is an essential condition for its continuous development. It represents all metaphors that haunt the cities, through its constant change, and it gives rise to huge buildings that extend their height, in which the use of new technologies, once sources of entertainment, perpetuates the “artificial nature”. The “technology of the fantastic” allows the reproduction of all “situations” – from the most natural to the most artificial – wherever and whenever desired.

The invention and a metropolitan style with its own architecture can be presented as a collective experience, where the whole city becomes a factory of experiences created by man; where the real and the natural disappear – fascination for modernity and urbanity. The main capitals of the world are synonymous with the modern metropolis, a world that was completely made by man, where hyper-density is the key to the development of modern social, economic and recreational activities, which gradually merge with each other. The cities grow vertically, the bidimensional rigidity gave rise to a “three-dimensional anarchy” [1], which solves the problem of the growth of the city through skyscrapers.

3. Technology + JUNKSPACE = Generic City
Koolhaas’s fascination for the liberal and intensive city leads him to write the essay “Junkspace”, where he highlights the places where the spoils of modernity concentrate – “the architecture of the well-tempered environment” [5] –, now under the control of consumption and leisure: airports, casinos, commercial centres, hotels, etc. Through modern technical means, such as the lift, the air-conditioning, the escalators, the air-conditioning pipes, the “junkspace” expands into the limits. It is continuous and interior, and it accommodates the most different programs, held together not by a structure but by a skin. The materials used by “junkspace” are ephemeral, that is to say they are flexible, joined to each other, and they are not permanent, because they have an expiry date.

Rem Koolhaas defines “junkspace” as the residue mankind leaves on the planet. The built product of modernisation is not modern architecture but “junkspace”. A new type of architecture is created, the architecture of “junkspace” according to Koolhaas, where almost all architectural projects have commercial elements for which we have to pay. This architecture is the result of the combination of modern technological inventions, used in construction, with no consideration for architectural articulation.

“Junkspace” is a domain of feigned, simulated order, where patterns imply repetition or ultimately decipherable rules. “Junkspace” cannot be grasped, therefore, it cannot be remembered (its geometries are unimaginable). It does not intend to create perfection, only interest: “Junkspace is addictive, stratified and light, it is not articulated in its different parts, but subdivided, butchered just like the carcase is dismembered – individual pieces that were separated from a universal condition” [6].

According to Koolhaas, the interstitial spaces between the buildings of the city are “junkspace”, they are spaces that seem inevitable, because they are the consequence of economic processes that urbanists cannot solve. These are shapeless spaces; they are chaotic or frighteningly aseptic spaces that make us feel unsafe.

As expected, the gradual mental fascination for the “generic” makes Koolhaas move from the analysis to the synthesis, that is, from the diagnostic in AMO (a research entity connected to OMA) to the architectural practice in Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Maybe it is not a coincidence the fact that the essay Junkspace is related to a controversial period of his history, when Koolhaas assumes responsibility for renovating scenographically commercial spaces of the famous clothing and accessories brand Prada (figure 2), but also other cultural spaces, like the installation of the Hermitage Guggenheim in the Venetian Casino in Las Vegas. “These were unsuccessful
experiences to some extent, where the creator faced the practical perversity of his own theoretical “creation” [4].

Figure 2. Prada Epicenter, 2001, New York City, USA [7]
4. Technology + Junkspace = GENERIC CITY

“The generic city is the result and consequence of delirious urbanism. Global and contemporary, it is the city liberated from the captivity of centre, from the straitjacket of identity. The generic city breaks with the destructive cycle of dependence: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small, it just expands. If it gets old, it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting- or unexciting- everywhere. It is “superficial” -like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.” [8].

The generic city is a reaction to the captivity and limitation of the traditional city, exerted by the centre over the periphery, where planning no longer makes sense. Its main characteristics seem to adhere to the capitalist system, and even to the wildest manifestations of the market, in a manifesto that is no longer retrospective but proactive, which demonstrates the virtues of capitalism. The main activity of the generic city is shopping, and the skyscraper is the typology of choice: “Density in isolation is the ideal” [8]. Ironically, these towers of residence are normally reserved for wealthy classes, maybe it is a way of embodying the metaphor “to be on top of the world”. Koolhaas is aware of this irony: “It is strange that those with the least money inhabit the most expensive commodity – earth; those who pay, what is free – air.” [8].

“The architecture of the Generic City is by definition beautiful” [8]. It is built and conceived at an incredible pace. Materials are kept together through the use of silicone; the architecture becomes malleable and transformable. The indoor environment is controlled through air conditioning, and it recreates desirable climatic conditions. The car is the most popular means of transport, it guarantees the minimum movement on the bigger and more and more highways. These cities are inhabited by groups of people in-transit. They are cities that accommodate passengers, therefore, the airport is the element of differentiation of the city, and many times it is the only reference for those who are just passing through.

During its life cycle, the generic city does not know its decline followed by its rebirth, “it is not improved, but abandoned” [8]. The generic city dies in silence almost the same way as it is born (spontaneously). It is an endless process of self-destruction and renovation. According to Luís Santiago Baptista, in a way, the “generic city is the defeat of OMA’s metropolitan project. The negative irony combined with cynicism shows it, and later taken to extremes in Junkspace” [9].

In a way, the first decade of the 21st century has proved that “generic” architecture had become hegemonic with globalisation, to the point of becoming quantitatively “delirious”; while “delirious” architecture, by which Koolhaas was fascinated in New York, was now a post-modern and vulgar artifice, to the point of becoming qualitatively “generic”.

For Rem Koolhaas, the elements that deserve prominence now and always, “are not the ones that the architecture inscribed in high culture, but those the popular culture has always expected from the architectural performance” [9] – something which was already predictable, given his previous analysis about New York’s “delirium”.

5. Conclusions

The urbanism has developed, we have left traditional parameters behind to adapt them to the modern cities, which do not allow “detailed” urbanism, thinking with minimal rigour and calculating space by space. We no longer give importance to specificities and technicalities and we start valuing flexibility, mutation, transformation and congestion – the model for the urbanism of advanced capitalism.
For Koolhaas, the aesthetic is precisely defined by a delirious concept of urbanism, the non-existent urbanism that claims the ideology, the context and the space as a place. The “beautiful”, in architecture, is presented according to a quite widespread attitude – autist architecture - and the building is located far from any formal collaboration, it does not want to relate to anything; together with all the traffic congestion that merely passes through the city – the city as a place of flux (people, capital, energies). However, to what extent are these “solitary” buildings no longer urban? Do they have urban attributes? Should the architecture claim singularity? Shouldn’t the unitary sense of the place be more important? The buildings should have a controlled personality – projecting a public space implies the existence of a group that shares rights and duties.

Nowadays we are witnessing an aesthetic exhaustion of the landscapes, and a radical change of the public domain through the television and other means of communication, as well as a whole series of other inventions. New urban landscapes arise, surprising manifestations produced by the new aesthetic principles – they explore the boundaries of the technique and materials, almost without constraints, including the budgetary ones. Shapeless interstitial spaces are created with the aim of unifying, but the fact is that they just delimit boundaries – spaces that do not intend to create perfection, just interests (junkspaces).

“Delirium” – of urbanism and North American culture itself – assumes the taste of a fascination for technology, advertisement: urbanism is compared to Coca-Cola’s advertisement, a pure spectacular ideology of greatness, or problem of the big – the public space describes lost or missing things. Koolhaas’s aesthetic pleasure is not instantaneous, but it depends on and it is affected by the thinking processes – the generic city is the result and consequence of the delirious urbanism. For him, the real promise of the metropolitan condition is in the culture of congestion – maybe a not congested congestion - in which a shameless urbanism is created. This urbanism seeks a direction towards the dematerialisation, beloved in the same proportion as its provocative lack of aversion to itself, respecting exactly to the extent that it went too far – ecstasy over urbanism.

Since the architecture is fully connected to the aesthetics, Koolhaas’s aesthetic “delirium” is assumed through the instrumental rationality, precisely because it is a road to the unpredictable, to nonsense – “delirium” is fantasy, science and joke. A skyscraper is something sublime and anarchic, and the higher the number of floors piled around the lift shaft, the more spontaneously they consolidate in a unique shape. For Koolhaas, this is the delirium of good urban architecture: a frantic utilitarianism, no longer static but mutant, adaptable to the modern city’s needs, which are constantly changing – a beautiful monument today can be a beautiful garden tomorrow. However, Koolhaas is betrayed by an avant-garde aestheticism that prevents him from achieving its ultimate consequences.

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