

The Generic City

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S,M,L,XL

by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau

edited by Jennifer Sigler

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S*,M,L,XL* is the second book by the architect Rem Koolhaas. It is out of the ordinary in many regards, but especially in terms of its length and form: with its 1345 pages it must be one of the most voluminous books of the last decade. The 7.5 cm thick book presents a seemingly half-ordered collage of partly overlaying images, essays, drawings, graphs, manifestos, illustrations, notes, quotes, travelogues, diaries, photos, adverts, newspaper cuttings and the odd comic. In this sense it is well justified that the name of the Canadian designer Bruce Mau features prominently on the cover. It is a book that will be loved by some and will most certainly infuriate many others. What are we possibly to make of this bric-a-brac, this Merzbook, this pastiche? What alternative is there but to merely flip through the pages? *S,M,L,XL* is a cultbook. Its outrageous form and the brandname 'Koolhaas' undoubtedly contributed to this. Yet is it justified? Whoever wants to appreciate the meaning and significance of *S,M,L,XL* as an intellectual statement is best advised to read it against the background of Koolhaas's earlier work.

Koolhaas rose to fame with the publication of his first book *Delirious New York* in 1979. In *Delirious New York* – now regarded to be a modern classic in architectural and urban theory – Koolhaas celebrated Manhattan as a set of 'cities within cities' that thrive on what he called a 'culture of congestion'. This was made possible by the cumulation of different activities ('programme' in the architectural jargon) in a confined space. Manhattan

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was the unlikely marriage between appearance and performance where architecture was not a matter of mere aesthetics but had succeeded in providing the basis for a unique metropolitan form of life. The architecture of Manhattan relates, in the words of Koolhaas, 'to the forces of the Groszstadt like a surfer to the waves'. *Delirious New York* was subtitled 'A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan'. Koolhaas analysed the way in which the two characteristic features of the urban structure on the island, the grid/block structure and the skyscraper, made congestion into a recognized social and cultural quality, thus resisting the trend to see congestion as a problem for modern society. The book contained in-depth discussions of in their time utterly modern constructions in Manhattan, including the Rockefeller Center and the Downtown Athletic Club (a 38-storey high skyscraper entirely devoted to leisure and fitness). Although the possibility to accommodate a very heavy programme in a grid/block structure permeates the book, the key of Koolhaas's analysis is a social variable: Manhattanism. This was the typically modern culture of rejoicing in the maelstrom of urban life. As always half tongue-in-cheek, half serious, Koolhaas presented *Delirious New York* as a 'Blueprint for a Culture of Congestion' and thus declared himself a defender of urbanism as a socio-spatial theory.

S,M,L,XL can be seen as part two of Koolhaas's intellectual autobiography. It is the reflection of the same urbanist on the possibilities of reinventing the city 20 years later. In this respect the book gives an account of the way in which Koolhaas has sought to put his urban theory of *Delirious New York* to work. *S,M,L,XL* contains descriptions of a (large) selection of Koolhaas buildings and competition entries. Koolhaas can be seen to try and find expression for his positive appreciation of congestion, especially in the designs for public buildings. That is arguably what Koolhaas's architecture in essence is about: the quality of his public buildings tends to be in the programming, in the clever way in which he creates an intermingling of activities or organizes spaces and facilitates their utilization. Here Koolhaas has encountered a lot of resistance. On the one hand he is never politically correct: in an era in which the automobile is frequently taken to be the symbol of the defunct 'first modernity' causing environmental decline and traffic jams, cars play a generally positive role in his projects. For Koolhaas there is nothing as detestable as a pedestrianized inner city. Friction and dynamism is celebrated in a way that is reminiscent of the futurists. On the other hand he has a tendency to even involve the powerful in this combination of individual programmes or functions. For instance, for the Dutch city The Hague, Koolhaas basically designed the town hall in such a way that it would become a small city in itself: the local administration came out as just one of the many functions. Koolhaas argued that the construction of the town hall was the one chance the local government had to make the slightly dull town of The Hague into a city. This eventually led to the turning down of his proposal in favour of one of Richard Meier's sterile white buildings, a style that was much more congenial to the self-image of the city governors, and indeed the local understanding of a Town Hall.

According to the architect and critic Peter Eisenman the two books by Koolhaas will have a more lasting impact than all of his buildings taken together. Nevertheless, Koolhaas is a practising architect and the first and most obvious approach to the book is to read it as an account of the designs by Koolhaas the Architect. The title, *S,M,L,XL*, refers to the increase in scale in (a selection of) Koolhaas's projects. Starting off with a few villas, a theatre in The Hague and housing projects in Amsterdam and in Fukuoka (Japan), Koolhaas gets into ever bigger projects and commissions cumulating in the controversial Euralille project at the intersection of two high-speed rail links in Lille in northern France. Perhaps most remarkable is the design for a new sea terminal at Zeebrugge, Belgium (1989). Here Koolhaas sought to find an architectural answer to the challenge posed to the ferry companies by the Channel tunnel. He proposed to create a building in the shape of a mooring-buoy, 42 meters high, filled with casinos, restaurants, conference facilities, night clubs and functional spaces. The design is remarkable because it succeeds in illuminating how the 'culture of congestion' can indeed provide an alternative to the 'zero friction' technology that the Channel tunnel seeks to be. In the predominant vision of travelling, one seeks to maximize the smoothness of the journey with an emphasis on a general avoidance of conscious experiences. Koolhaas's terminal building, however, gives symbolic power to travel as a goal and experience in itself: rather than trying to hide the apparent loss of time by constantly shifting passengers about as in the typical airport terminal, people would here revel in a collective circus of movement and celebrate the transfer from car to ship. As happened to some of Koolhaas's best buildings, it won him the first prize but was not built. Another example of his brilliance as an architect is his design for the Centre for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe, Germany (1989). At that time, the centre could claim to be one of the loci of experimentation with new art forms in Europe. Koolhaas's proposal was to build one big container to 'generate density, exploit proximity, provoke tension, maximize friction'. Koolhaas purposely sited the building as close as possible to the railway station, aiming to relate the new technologies to the old technologies outside. The design was as close as architectural design could come to an explicit understanding of the ideal place and function of the new media: the essence of the new centre was the blurring of art and technology, art high and low, and art and (urban) context. Again, Koolhaas won the contest but a bizarre run of events meant that his design was never actually constructed. These are just two highlights from the architectural narrative in the book. The book provides an interesting read along these lines, in which Koolhaas explains his designs and comes up with insightful commentary on the essential role of the building process and the many procedural and cognitive obstacles for the creation of a truly 'post-traditional' approach to architecture.

The most significant contribution of the book comes from those sections where he transgresses his own building projects, turns back to the core of *Delirious New York* and explicitly reflects on urbanism, the future of

the city and of urban culture, and the role of planning in all of this. Here Koolhaas questions whether professional disciplines such as architecture or urban planning still have a role to play. In the essay 'Whatever Happened to Urbanism?' Koolhaas repositions the challenge for urbanism: it is no longer how to create the sort of congestion that he admired in New York. The new challenge is how to handle the rapid process of urbanization in the world. In face of this development, which is driven by both demography and economic growth, urban theory is constantly outpaced by the sheer growth of numbers. He criticizes the professional disciplines of urban planning and architecture for focusing their deliberations on what he now sees as a 'classical model' of the city (the sociological equivalent being Sennett's model of the 19th-century city) and for failing to come up with a new approach to understand and deal with the contemporary process of urbanization.

Koolhaas is preoccupied with the new urban question. In all the essays on the future of the city that are contained in the book, Koolhaas distances himself from the architectural mainstream. Koolhaas puts the 'parasitic security of architecture' with its emphasis on aesthetics against the search for a 'new urbanism'. Here he claims that the traditional approaches to urban planning do not face up to their task:

If there is to be a 'new urbanism' it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form ... it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts and redistributions – the reinvention of psychological space ... (1995: 969)

S,M,L,XL can thus be seen as a move away both from the 20th-century cityscape of Manhattan and the related disciplinary approaches to architecture and urban planning.

Koolhaas points at a paradox in contemporary urban thinking. The commitment to the historical concentric form of the (European) city leads to the search to both preserve the authentic-city of the historical inner cities and the drive to constantly modernize them to make sure they also keep their role as centres of society. In answer to this, Koolhaas points at a new urban form which he labels the 'generic city'. The generic city stands for everything the archetypical urban sociologist does not like: sprawl, sameness, repetition. It is literally, a city without history created on a plane, a surface. Koolhaas thematizes the phenomenon of urban sprawl as an essential characteristic of the future in which density is artificially created in the form of urban simulacra: shopping malls, theme parks and museum environments. In the model of Sennett's 19th-century city society is held together by its public domain. Koolhaas's generic city thrives on the liminal residual

zones in between cities. These zones are free from conscious state politics, refuge of the illegal as well as the site of endless – commercial – manipulation. Being dominated by highways connecting sites of ‘inexplicable isolated density’, the new landscape is very different from the Man-hattan grid.

Koolhaas’s ideal of a culture of congestion seems to hit on the more sociological analysis of the emergence of a generic city: the cumulation of programmes and the idea of proximity is making way for urbanization on the wider ‘plane’ in which accommodation of programmes ‘somehow, somewhere’ is all that matters.

The form of the book reflects this.

The design of *S,M,L,XL* contrasts sharply with the clarity and orderliness of *Delirious New York*. The typography and layout of *Delirious New York* convey the structure of the Manhattan grid. It contains clearly separate chapters, each with their own subject matter just as the essence of Manhattan is in the sociocultural programme contained in its individual blocks. Likewise, *S,M,L,XL* must be interpreted as an attempt to convey the sense of living in the generic city. The book is a cumulation of different typographical forms and styles with photo illustrations in every shape (from stamp size to full page, from in focus to extreme blow ups resulting in very rough impressions of the original images), with drawings as well as a long alphabetically ordered list of statements, arguments and epigrams, some ridiculous, irrelevant or mysterious, some insightful and important. If this irritates, it is the generic city that bothers the reader, not the book.

The idea of the generic city is one of the most significant statements on the future of the city of the last couple of years. This is not simply because of the content of the statement: the idea that the classical city should now be seen as a mere element in a much wider urban constellation is not new. The idea of an ‘urban field’ or a ‘non-place urban realm’ even dates back to the 1960s. Of course, we have been told about the existence of the 100-Mile City, the emergence of the edge cities, the dubious qualities of shopping malls and the ethnography of places on the margin already. Yet here we have a statement that brings it all together and relates the sociological knowledge to a much wider variety of audiences. The generic city points out the overpowering importance of infrastructure for urban life in the coming decades. Not proximity but connectivity, not history but adaptation are the key variables. Koolhaas relates these elements of a new urban sociology – that we also find in the recent work of Castells (1989, 1997) or Graham and Marvin (1996) among others – to an attack on the Western ‘obsession’ with history as a source of social identity. Koolhaas, who has a sharp polemic style of writing, despises the lack of imagination and the lack of trust in the possibility of creating post-traditional relationships that are both new and meaningful. We can no longer rely on the crutches of history especially when ‘history’ does not so much disappear in the generic city as return as hypertext:

There is always a quarter called lipservice, where a minimum of the past is preserved. . . . Its phone booths are either red and transplanted from London, or equipped with small Chinese roofs. Lipservice – also called Afterthought, Waterfront, Too Late, 42nd Street, simply the Village, or even Underground – is an elaborate mythic operation: it celebrates the past as only the recently conceived can. It is a machine. . . . History returns not as farce here, but as service. (p. 1256–7)

The generic city is one of the rare concepts that explicitly position architecture and planning in the context of the process of globalization. Yet despite the effective rhetoric, Koolhaas seems himself uncertain how to respond to the generic city. The book contains graphs indicating the increasing number of airmiles travelled by Koolhaas, showing how the Office for Metropolitan Architecture became a global player itself. On the other hand Koolhaas dreams of reducing his office to just ten people as opposed to the increasing number of assistants that comes with a globally active architectural practice. What is clear is what he does not like: unimaginative defenders of traditional urban structures that fail to see the new challenges. In this regard Koolhaas is the modernist who continues to look for new formations that will set free new identities. 'The past is too small to inhabit', is one of Koolhaas's favourite phrases. This is why Koolhaas feels attracted to the new constellation of the generic city where houses are literally build on golf courses and urbanization simply springs up wherever one can exit the highway. In this sense he provides a biting critique on the American variation of the 'new urbanism' where the public domain is reinvented in a neo-traditional form on the level of the (gated) neighbourhood or as the Disney manufactured town of 'Celebration'. On the other hand the generic city is too much of a conceptual antithesis to Western historicism to help to define a powerful response to the new patterns that are now emerging. The emphasis on new liminal zones (that we also know from Sharon Zukin), on the 'plankton' between the cities, on the strength of the anarchy of the periphery, are all somewhat suspicious attempts to avoid addressing the discourse-coalitions that produce generic cities. Koolhaas signals that he is aware that the generic city tends to be the product of an authoritarian political culture. One step further one would argue that if Europe is preoccupied with history, it is so by choice: the modernist era of town planning was effectively brought to a standstill by a shout in the street, in Marshall Berman's (1983) wonderful phrase.

It is typical for the debate in our age that we are aware of the democratic correction to the usage of space, but dissatisfied with the net result. The generic city should in this sense be understood in relationship to the research themes such as the reinvention of citizenship, the technological culture and individualist suburbanism as a dominant lifestyle. After all, it is technology that produced the collapse of time and space (Harvey, 1989) that eroded the orientation of physical presence and proximity and that, combined with individualist consumerism, produced the generic pattern of

urbanization. Here the very idea of a public domain, that has always been central to urban theory, is in a deep crisis. Is there a future for the public domain beyond the historical city? This is an issue that deserves attention and preferably from a more mixed group of intellectuals than over recent years. This is a group that is potentially united as readers of *S,M,L,XL*. An interesting initiative is that of Benjamin Barber who chooses to relate to the reality of the generic city in his attempt to invent what he calls a 'malltown square'. Obviously, it is not self-evident that a metaphor of such a public structure can be used in a commercial setting without losing the essence of its meaning. Koolhaas does not explicitly deal with these sorts of issues in the essays of *S,M,L,XL*. In that sense the essays in the book are perhaps disappointing. However, Koolhaas recently admitted in interviews that the older he gets, the more he realizes how much he has been influenced by the agenda of 1968. Both in his projects and in his theory one can find the references to that frame of mind. He, too, searches for the creation of a public domain, as is clearly shown in his entry to the competition for the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris or the aforementioned Town Hall for The Hague. He is very conscious of the fact that a library seems in many regards an antiquated concept in the age of electronic communication. Yet in projects such as these, he explicitly chooses to go against the tide. So on the one hand his recent thinking on urban matters suggests the generic city is inevitable and simply coming towards us, on the other hand his very own projects prove his macro theory wrong: the sea terminal for Zeebrugge would be an example of how architecture can respond to the anonymous zero friction network society. It seems a small example that shows that planning and design can actually change discourses of travelling and create new nodes of urbanity. Yet Koolhaas has not managed to relate the sort of intervention on the level of individual projects to the urban theory of the generic city. *Delirious New York* was a wonderful but with hindsight perhaps slightly traditional programmatic statement for an architecture of congestion. *S,M,L,XL* is a remarkable statement and certainly points at the issues for contemporary urban society but also does not escape the intellectual crisis in urban theory that Koolhaas himself pointed out. The true significance of the book might be in the combination of its statement and its cult book status. In that sense it might have more political effects than the more disciplined sociological texts on the subject. *S,M,L,XL* gives us an idea about the bizarre form in which statements sometimes must be made to generate wider attention than can be achieved alone by the ideas of the author.

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