OMA and the Power of Place

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the centerpieces of Rem Koolhaas's Delirious New York, SMLXL, and Project on the City, i.e., the Manhattan skyscraper, Lille, and CCTV, as constellations of the collective. Koolhaas's work, spanning from the delirium of Manhattan's commodified version of modern architecture to later work in SMLXL, Project on the City and Content, shifts between being imageand program-driven, between text and mass media. Within this tension, projects such as the libraries (Jussieux, TGB, Seattle), ZKM and Universal Studios. The Dutch Embassy and European Union Headquarters are further case studies in the confluence of power and place.

Walter Benjamin described technology as a catalyst, actively transforming perception and participation in a consumerist urban realm comprised of panorama and arcades.Today, public space as such is weakened by technological developments at the same time that buildings are more and more becoming media infrastructures. Within this confluence of media and building, what has emergedsince Benjamin's attempt to positively use mass culture and technology in the era of liberal capitalism, in our own time of late, or disorganized capitalism and flexible accumulation, is the reconfiguration of market and place through the media industry. Not only through buildings that use media materials and technologies but also by the cultural power of the media corporation, private or public, that is reconfiguring the city both locally and globally.

Emerging since Benjamin's attempt to positively use mass culture and technology in the era of liberal capitalism is the reconfiguration of market and place through the media industry. In this aspect Koolhaas is prescient. Delirious New York presents Manhattan as a fiction, a model of reality constructed from an amalgam of historical fragments set in new combinations. SMLXL comments on the realization that media today increasingly blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction: *"We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality."*[1] Accordingly, the subject of Shopping emerges from Passagen-Werk, the 19thcentury Parisan galerie anticipating the mall and consumer culture. Project on the City depicts architecture is the spatial register of market systems. Content demonstrates how architecture's use of media to promote ideologies directed at manufactured market desires is complicit in both the production and reflection of contemporary culture.

Koolhaas portrays architecture as caught in the web of globalization and swept by market forces. In his seemingly unqualified embrace of consumer conditions he sublimates his idealist utopian desires and acts out Benjamin's prediction for capitalist society-- the culture's need to compensate for the lost aura of art and artist with the 'phony spell' of the commodity and star. His work is part of the dream world of urban space and images that colonize the everyday.

URBAN SPACE AND ALLEGORY

Delirious New York portrays Manhattan as the scene of a 'future' rife with memories, capital of the 20th-century, fulfilling Benjamin's perception of a present time composed of 'moments of revelation' that transmuted the past.[2] Koolhaas reread the pragmatic technical and typological developments of the skyscraper and the grid as avant-garde vehicles for social and historical change. By adapting conceptual, textual and pictorial techniques from Salvador Dali's paranoid-critical method (pcm) he was able to place his work with the vernacular architecture of Manhattan in the framework of the critical avant-garde. Dali's method systematized the irrational logic of desire with the production of images that registered states of consciousness. It enabled Koolhaas to 'discover' the other side of the modern movement in the opposing tendencies of Dali and Le Corbusier (rational/irrational, canonical/popular). The conjunction between the Surrealist's revolutionary project and the movement identified with the architect who declared "architecture or revolution" had already been voiced by Benjamin: "To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution--this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises... But are they successful in welding this experience to the other revolutionary experience we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution? In short, have they bound revolt to revolution? How are we to imagine an existence oriented solely toward Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, in rooms by Le Corbusier and Oud?"[3]

Delirious New York is the city "of two dimensional discipline and three-dimensional anarchy," including Cass Gilbert's Woolworth's building, an "auto-monument to the anti-monumental"; the Empire State Building, " a building with no other program than to make a financial abstraction concrete;" Raymond Hood's Rockefeller Center and Wallace Harrison's Trylon and Perisphere, icons of Manhattanism. Koolhaas found "a practical Luna Park" in the technological infrastructure of the sky-scraper and places like Coney Island, Rockefeller Center and Radio City. Dali asks, "What Piranesi invented the ornamental of your Roxy Theater? And what Gustave Moreau, apoplectic with Prometheus lighted the venomous colors that flutter at the summit of the Chrysler Building?" Manhat-

tan was City of the Captive Globe, containing all of the models and precedents important for Koolhaas--Leonidov, Ungers, Corbusier, El Lissitsky, Leonidov, Malevich, Dali, Superstudio. This city of signifying objects, of forms with meanings and associations to be recombined and transformed, would be populated by Benjamin's figures of modernity: the flaneur, the poet, the rag picker, the pimp, the criminal and the litterateur found in the arcades and the poetry of Baudelaire. Today's figures are perhaps the stockbroker, the drug dealer, the office worker. The question is, can architecture do more than invert contemporary culture's ironic reversals? Benjamin judged Surrealism was inadequate for the purpose of social transformation[4] and Koolhaas declares that New York is "delirious no more."[5]

THE PUBLIC SPACE OF INDIFFERENCE

> "The Cosmopolis of the Future: The world in later times, incessantly crowding the possibilities of aerial and inter-terrestrial construction, when the wonders of 1908 will be far out-done, and the 1000 foot structure realized; now nearly a million people do business here each day, by 1930 it is estimated the number will be doubled, necessitating tiers of sidewalks, with elevated lines and new creations to supplement subway and surface cars, with bridges between the structural heights." -- Delirious New York

> "Lille will be at the center of a virtual, theoretical community of 60 million people..." --SMLXL

13 years ago, in 1994, the exhibition held at MoMA entitled "Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture" showed OMA work of the early nineties. The exhibit highlighted the master plan for Euralille, the hub for Europe's high-speed trains at that time nearing completion.

Euralille spoke to the organization of social space and perception/representation. The mini-city around the TGV station, including buildings by Christian de Portzamparc, Jean Nouvel and Koolhaas, has a complexity connected not so much with typology and narrative (like the Manhattan skyscraper) but with speed. With people moving through convention halls and shopping areas and from one mode of transport to another, speed supercedes space. Koolhaas's construction at the scale of infrastructure sits adjacent to Lille's old city; it could be located anywhere (or nowhere). This is the nonspace of Marc Auge, of Koolhaas's generic city. If postmodern architecture was the

space of difference (taking on the notion in cultural theory that was theorized as the "thirdspace" of Edward Soja via Henri Lefebvre, the third meaning of Roland Barthes' signifier without a signified and the différance of Derrida's ever-shifting deferral of meaning), then Lille is the space of indifference.

Yet in this indifferent non-place of globalization, Koolhaas still attempts to embed identity. Lille contains a multiplicity of paranoid-critical correspondences linking it to both Manhattanism and Modernism. These references are tools that gave meaning to the design of the project that was notable for Koolhaas's role and participation in the governmental planning phase. The sketch of Lille's Piranesean space echoes the postcard image of "The Cosmopolis of the Future." Compare studies and images of Lille with photographs of Wallace Harrison's Albany Mall, a skyline of skyscrapers on a plinth situated like Lille at the nexus of highway interchanges. Congrexpo (renamed the Palais) like Harrison's Performing Arts Center is called "The Egg." *SMLXL* privileges none of these allusions over the others and Koolhaas gives no reading of the project.

Lille takes center stage in *SMLXL* as the manifestation of Bigness. Bigness is the connection between modernism's one-sizefits-all universalism and *SMLXL*. Koolhaas describes his notion as a concept of place that rectifies the disappearance of community values in the contemporary city: Bigness "allowed us to explore new definitions of collectivity after the demise of the public realm--public man--eroded by the onslaught of the media, pressures of the virtual, multiple privatizations, the end of the street, the plaza, etc."6 Bigness was in fact already inscribed into Le Corbusier's modernism: in the immense objects at Chandigarh and the Ville Contemporaine, City for Three Million Inhabitants; in the Marseilles block, vast for its time: more than 330 apartments, hotel, shopping streets, community services and a recreational landscape on the roof. In his book Urbanisme, Le Corbusier strove to come to terms with "la phénomène gigantesque de la grand ville and la sublimité de leurs dimensions" through statistics. Koolhaas, in his essay "Bigness or the Problem of Large," journalizes his concept rather than formalizing it. He acknowledges the authoritarian as well as collective overtones of scale, the association of Bigness with authoritarian regimes,

Albert Speer's Nazi Germany and Communism, in "Palace of the Soviets," a fictional account of the competition held in the thirties.

MEDIA, THE MARKET AND POWER IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

> *"Today's architecture is subservient to the market and its terms. The market has supplanted ideology. Architecture has turned into a spectacle. It has to package itself and no longer has significance as anything but a landmark." --Koolhaas, interview*

Koolhaas seems to be saying that the reality today is that public space is not negotiable. In this scenario, how does OMA create the space for a critical architecture?

It has been proposed that digital and global space is life on the screen as well as life in the city. That it is tactile space, an informational tectonic. Artists use billboards, facades, lcd and video screens. As building materials, digital light technology, illuminated glass and transparent plastics include reflection and camouflage strategies that simulate a seamless integration between screen and environment, becoming wall, window. facade. Writers such as Paul Virilio differentiate between screen technologies and earlier media that have a separate physical container, e.g., television, radio and telephone, to interrogate the meaning lost or altered as the frame disappears.

The work of OMA has optimistically attempted to reconcile different, everexpanding publics through media and its representation. testifying to the power of knowledge and information in the hands of enlightened institutions. This is its utopian dimension. Projects that use media to influence and shape public space at the same time they testify to the power of institutions include ZKM, Wyly Theater in Dallas and Parc de la Villette in Paris. Take, for example, the two Paris library competitions, exercises in modeling urban space. In the national library, the many rooms, functions and interior spaces are suspended in one huge, semi-transparent, rectangular box full of books, between which public spaces float like organs of the human body. "In this block," Koolhaas notes, "the major public spaces are defined as absences of building, voids carved out of the information solid. Floating in memory, they are like multiple embryos, each with its own technological placen-

ta." The compositional idea of a series of fields, intersecting patterns and movements, refers to the simultaneity of a neural network. The building is like a large city of books through and between which to saunter. The library at the University of Paris (Jussieu) was conceived as a folded urban void, rooted in the ground, connected to the Metro. Areas of the library were conceptualised as different types of landscape (vineyard, desert, forest, etc.). The building developed as an urban street, the ramped floor envisioned as a new kind of public realm, a social magic carpet on which the visitor "becomes a Baudelariean flâneur inspecting and being seduced by a world of books and information and the urban scenario."[7]

The libraries are early "big" buildings. Bigness was a concept that rectified the disappearance of community values in the contemporary city, that "allowed [us] to explore new definitions of collectivity after the demise of the public realm--public man--eroded by the onslaught of the media, pressures of the virtual, multiple privatizations, the end of the street, the plaza, etc."[8] He later acknowledged the authoritarian as well as collective overtones of scale, the association of Bigness with authoritarian regimes in "Palace of the Soviets," a fictional account of the competition held in the 1930s. The Chinese State Television network (CCTV) tower in Beijing is the epitome of a modernist political[4] project, conflating media, the market and power in one statement embodying the values and aspirations of the government. (Two other recent projects, the Dutch Embassy (also in Berlin) and the European Union Headquarters in Brussels are further case studies for Koolhaas's understanding of power.)

CCTV

CCTV may be the part of the most Chinese of endeavors, the revisioning of the urban landscape. China has historically been driven by absolute forms of power, its urban and architectural development occurring in three historical patterns: large-scale destruction and replacement of urban fabrics to inaugurate changes of emperors or dynasties; massive relocations of populations; and highly planned urban configurations enabled by centralized and unchallenged forms of authority. "Power today may not exist in the singular form of an Emperor or a Chairman, but it is managed and exercised with enough strength to channel the possibilities for urban experience, and to choose which urban traditions to preserve."[9] In this situation, OMA's ambition was to work with the organization of the program to turn the building and the broadcasting company into a media machine that is not structured hierarchically but rather sets up direct interaction between public and media. This is manifest in the two circulation loops, one for production, which is private, and another for emission (consumption), which is public. The loop is literal, like an electrical circuit; symbolic and conceptual, because there is no hierarchy; and structural, based on a system diagonal bracing. The loop is the genetics and the genesis of the building concept, like a DNA helix.

Structurally, CCTV was conceived as a continuous tube, with concrete floor plates, columns and edge beams held by a diagrid exoskeleton, a system of patterned diagonal bracing is the principal supporting element that resists gravity and lateral forces. The CCTV surface is a register expressing the uneven forces at work in the form. In areas of greatest stress, the density of the triangulated members was increased and/or members were deformed to respond more precisely to the lateral and dead loads. The cantilever overhang requires additional support in the form of a two-story-deep truss at the lower level of the overhang, which transfers its load to the perimeter tube and to the foundation level. The building's form has precedents such as Peter Eisenman's Max Reinhardt Haus in Berlin and Otto Spreckelson's Grande Arche in Paris-La Defense.

The CCTV skin made of glass and steel attached to the surface of the diagonal bracing is both transparent and opaque, metaphorically and literally. The surface is literally a glass skin like Semper's tablecloth draped over the structure, unlike the Seattle Library, whose skin stabilizes the building structurally. That the building's skin will be embedded with images representing a kind of international sign language of the media age, a handshake, a computer, and other iconic images and text, only further reinforces the surface effect of the skin. A contrast to the European enlightened model can be seen in the ideologically dissimilar project for Denmark National Public Broadcasting by Atelier Jean Nouvel. Nouvel uses screen technology in the facade to embody the "new

multimedia house" akin to OMA's project for the ZKM. He follows the practice, not uncommon today, of using the facade to "spell out the nature of a building that is fundamentally a mere container, but superficially registers an indices of its contents."[10]

In his seemingly unqualified embrace of consumer conditions, Koolhaas's idealist, utopian desires are further sublimated. Despite an opaque design and building process with regard to the government and the local architecture firm ECADI (East China Architecture & Design Institute Shanghai), with the many questions being posed by the Chinese and architecture community and the publication of Volume, co-founded in 2005 by Koolhaas, Mark Wigley and Ole Bouman, new Director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam as a "global idea platform...dedicated to experimentation and the production of new forms of architectural discourse," the building has itself become an event. The building that is a locus of media production is itself a media construct.

ENDNOTES

1. Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau and OMA, SMLXL, p. 492.

2. I am referring to Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Illuminations (1969). America must have seemed surreal to Koolhaas, who had dreamt of New York as a child and observed it from afar. Arriving in Manhattan at the age of 29, he was like a Baudelariean flaneur seduced by the urban scenario. It was as if he experienced the "interpretive delirium [which] begins only when man, ill-prepared, 5 is taken by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols." (Breton)

3. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism, the Last Snapshot of the Intellegentsia" (1929), in Reflections (New York: Shocken Books, 1978), p. 189.

4. See Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

5. Wired, Issue 11.06, June 2003.

6. Rem Koolhaas, "Thinking Big," Artforum 1994, p. 51.

7. From an unpublished competition booklet made for the office

8. Rem Koolhaas, SMLXL, "Bigness, or the Problem of Large."

9. Sze Tsung Leong, History Images.

10. Kurt W. Forster, "Surface Tension in Modern Architecture," 2005.