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on beyond koolhaas
Identity, Sameness and the Crisis of City Planning
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In his influential writings on urbanism, Rem Koolhaas' rhetoric brings to mind that of Shakespeare's Mark Antony: he is here to bury the city, not to praise it. And his words have worked well. Koolhaas' insights have lent the world new sharpness and compelled us to choose sides. Like the crowd before Antony, the profession has been swayed. Yet, for all his eloquence, Koolhaas seldom offers counsel. Only in few cases does he offer strategies for managing or improving the conditions he identifies and describes. Amoral and pragmatic, he dismisses concerns for collective good and derides nostalgia. His words draw out battle lines, identify new alliances and spread new hope for what will be when we find ourselves at peace with our urban world. But do they offer a program? I would argue so. For, on beyond the seductive allure of Koolhaas' arguments, it is possible to discern the programs that they imply - both those which Koolhaas himself continues to pursue, as well as other, possibly more powerful projects that he may have left behind.

Koolhaas begins "Generic Cities" by postulating a convergence in the contemporary world, a sameness resulting from relentless urban expansion subsuming the historical city: "Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport — 'all the same'?"[1] The compelling argument is that city used to ground local identity but in the world of today, "Identity conceived as this form of sharing the past is a losing proposition..."[2] While most architects and urban designers mourn the loss of local traditions and regional differences and even call for determined resistance, as evoked for example by Kenneth Frampton's concept of critical regionalism, Koolhaas resolutely embraces the homogenizing effects of global economy. Similar to the rhetoric of heroic modernists, Koolhaas takes a posthuman position and insists that the process of globalization is an unstoppable force that cannot be judged on ethical grounds. [3]

While Koolhaas' celebration of sameness may seem to rehash the arguments of the classic functionalists such as Walter Gropius, who insisted that repetition of the identical form should not be considered deplorable but rather be recognized as the primary medium of modern architecture and democratic society[4] – there are significant differences. For Koolhaas, sameness is not about the identical or standardization. While he prophesizes a global architecture, he stands opposed to Le Corbusier, who declared that the same building would be ideal for all climates, countries and cultures: "The same constructional principle will rule on the North Pole and in the Sahara desert, as soon as one recognizes the benefits of standardization".[5] Contrary to Corb, Koolhaas does not yearn for a rationalized urban order. Leaving all dreams of *la ville radieuse* behind, he embraces the chaos of contemporary urbanity, accepting it as given and good. Thus, Koolhaasian sameness isn't about standardization, optimization or interchangability, it refers instead to a lack of perceivable difference in and between cities around the world. It claims that cultural interconnectivity and material overabundance have created a state of indifferentiation.

What is interesting about this sort of indifferentiation is that it so completely overpowers the environment. It is produced by the industrial processes so beloved to the modernists, but is too vast and too dynamic to be structured by their principles of order. It appropriates the semiotic strategies of the post-modernists, but its cacophony renders their messages fragmentary, illegible and without context. Because their products become irrelevant in the total scheme of the city, this indifferentiation ultimately resists the traditional tools for urban planning. Hence, the claim that "(the Generic City's) most dangerous *and* most exhilarating discovery is that planning makes no difference whatsoever"[6] is a demand for new approaches to urban design. Koolhaas' breakthrough response is to reject strategies of form, space and order in favor of strategies based upon identity and perception. Now, while postmodern urbanism, as represented by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter or Aldo Rossi, also embraced the issue of identity and the city, they attempted to use form, drawn from history and context, in order to create or preserve local urban identity. In contrast, Koolhaas

adamantly disparages this intention. His point is that overabundance has killed history and context, and that we need to find new strategies of identity for this – for Koolhaas, unregrettable – circumstance.

But, why do I take issue with identity, sameness and urban planning? First off, *pace* Koolhaas, cities are not "all the same." Secondly, the differences between cities arise out of issues related to how we live in and use the city – the facts of urban life, one might say - and that identity is intrinsically tied to the social practices that are embedded in these. Thirdly, any discourse of identity that ignores these differences is biased towards a world-view that uncritically accepts the logic and processes of global capitalism, especially in respect to the creation and propagation of identity. Finally, by coupling *reception* and identity into a constitutive process for urbanism, Koolhaas strays from one of the most important realities of the city: space. Contrary to Koolhaasian assertion[7], *urban life* remains a fundamentally spatial state of being. The urban (as well as the rural, the nomadic, or any other form of social occupation and appropriation of the landscape) is a spatially conditioned and expressed social practice; thus much of identity is tied up in the *space* that the social group uses. In the end, I would argue that *the* consciousness and use of space is more important for the production of identity than our reception of the semantically active objects and artifacts that populate it.

Instrumental differences

How can difference and identity be constructed in the new urbanism that Koolhaas describes? If the city is indeed as finished as the conclusion of "Generic Cities" claims it to be[8], its passing is attributable to the irresistible march of the capitalist, consumerist and medialized civilization that has spread to all corners of the world, towing in its wake universal urbanization. As Jean Attali has postulated, universal urbanization represents the terminal end of the idea of a *polis*; the uncontrollable spread of the city renders ineffectual any attempts of a concerned group of citizens to assert control over the forces guiding its growth. In response, he evokes images of autopoeitic modes through which this new urbanism could impose itself upon the world around us, pointing out that, while the processes shaping contemporary urban form draw almost universally from a common medial-industrial "reality", the "stripping of internal differences doesn't mean that everything is interchangeable".[9] In this sense, Attali raises the issue of the nature of differences and our means for perceiving and therefore constructing them: is difference embodied in the physical elements of the city, or in the abstract rules that control their systematic assemblage, or, instead, is difference created through perceptions – our readings as end users?

To produce order means to establish differences. Traditional planning was a means through which the polis could institute these goals. Koolhaas takes the position that planning is irrelevant, i.e. that it can no longer control the city, not because of the polis's demise, but also only due to the fact that traditional planning lacks the analytical tools necessary for even seeing the city that post-humanist, consumerized civilization produces across the globe today.

So, what are the analytical and synthetic methods that Koolhaas proposes instead? Eloquence and irony often cloud his precise position, but a few things are clear. Although he is not a classic-modern standardizer of space and form, Koolhaas definitely does embrace the position that global urbanism is the product of a common set of transcultural ingredients. He does also recognize that universal urbanism could be understood as a systemic assemblage of culturally activated space, yet he seems only to pay lip service to this idea. Beyond stating that universal urbanism is a systemic process – "an irrigation of territories with potential" – he expands little on how this process might work. [10] Instead, Koolhaas busies himself with issues of reception, preferring to address the constructed identities and appropriated signifiers that abound in the city of today. For Koolhaas, the potential lies not in how artifacts can be assembled together in space but rather in how potential readings are constructed and received.

Through what medium are these readings be transmitted? Whereas Attali states that "although the city and architecture are inseparable, they nevertheless belong to different orders"[11], Koolhaas downplays the connection between and the context of architectural objects, explaining that "the Generic City is held together, not by an over-demanding public realm, but by the *residual*"[12]. If the residual is that which is left

over from planning, it cannot be itself be planned. If it is not planned, it cannot carry intentional meaning. Thus, it is the objects and artifacts of Generic City which are intentional; the Koolhaasian scheme creates difference within the order of architecture, not that of the city.

Generic cities, typical plans

The key to understanding Koolhaas' concept of contemporary architecture is the text "Typical Plan", published in *S,M,L,XL*. Echoing the retroactive manifesto of Delirious New York, Koolhaas raises the typical plan of the American high-rise to the heroic stature of an "unacknowledged utopia" thanks to its two great virtues: first, it is able to accommodate the unspecific needs of the business office; second, through this accommodation, it becomes background. [13] In many ways this second virtue is redolent of Hermann Czech's well-known argument in "*Nur keine Panik*"[14], but with one important difference. Czech defined architecture as background in order to delineate its limits and to put it in its proper cultural and urbanistic place; for Koolhaas, the typical plan's neutrality and indeterminacy empowers architecture and creates "new territories for the smooth unfolding of new processes." [15]

Because it provides space for unspecified activity, the typical plan can be infinitely propagated through the city. And since the form of the plan is indeterminate, there is no longer the need for correspondence between the inside of the building and its outer shell, neither in the sense of modernism's paradigmatic form that follows function (there is no function to follow) or in the historical imperative that the building express its uniqueness through its form (there is no uniqueness to express). [16]

This is the clou of Koolhaas' discourse of identity. He turns identity around. As he posits in his more recent essay "Junk Space", the virtue of contemporary architectural space is its *lack* of uniqueness. This absence is a vacuum always needing to be filled, reworked and redefined, effortlessly remodeled to release a new identity immanent to the need at hand.[17] Buildings become floating signifiers, divorced both from programmatic content and the historical past.

Identity

Building upon Koolhaas' apotheosis of the typical plan, "Generic Cities" extends a similar principle of spatial indifferentiation from architecture to the global-capitalist, consumerist city; it rejects history both as a generative force and as the source of city's claim to uniqueness.

Much as the neutrality of the Typical Plan liberates architectural space from pre-determined hierarchies that prescribe meanings and usages, Koolhaas proposes that decentralization will be the urban process that will free the city from historically defined spatial interrelations and the restrictive socio-urban discourses they contain. He insists that historical identity centralizes and centralization identifies[18] – in the sense that a center demands that its centrality is acknowledged and addressed by the periphery: its periphery is *its* periphery. Thus, at the moment that the center disappears, the identity of the periphery goes with it too. Nothing (or everything) is periphery, for the category of 'periphery' requires the presence of its morphological antithesis 'center' in order to have any meaning at all.

The decentralized, undifferentiated city that arises from these processes is a new state of urbanity, a seemingly endless and unintelligible assemblage of the past and the new. The radically new condition of today's conurbations requires new conceptual tools for making them legible and comprehensible. Much as the typical plan throws off the intrinsic connection between plan structure, façade form and architectural identity, Koolhaas' Generic City rejects the interconnection between urban space, city form and identity. The notion of identity without history or character is this tool: identity becomes a floating signifier, eminently pragmatic and able to change to fit new needs.

With this conceptual tool, Koolhaas abandons the urbanism of space, order and form, transforming in the act the discourse into the urbanism of identity. In contrast to space and form, the Koolhaasian idea of identity is dynamic, unstable and transitory, able reconstitute itself to address evolving circumstances.

Urban centers will be – and, according to Koolhaas, well should be – overwhelmed, and the new city – the "post city" [19] – will create its identity through new methods, for example through sorts of urban "wallpapers" that allow semantic mutation without spatial transformation. [20] In this way, urban identity can be simultaneously continuous and destabilized: the space of buildings and the space between buildings won't necessarily change, but their surfaces will, bringing new signs, symbols, attractors, situations and new ways in which inhabitants can use and interact with the city. Thus, "like a Hollywood studio lot, [the Generic City] can produce a new identity every Monday morning." [21]

The question is, however, what larger mechanisms or processes would this notion of identity propose for generation and assimilation of identity for the Generic City? If the premise of the Generic City is that the intrinsic connection between spatial setting and social and cultural activity has been dissolved, then there must be other, non-spatial means through which the individual can identify themselves with a larger group.[22] Or, said otherwise, through which means can we create *meaningful* differences out of this primordial soup of sign and event?

Generic and brand

Is it possible that Koolhaas' answer to this self-defined conundrum is revealed in the name that he has chosen for this new type of city? While the word ‚generic' – meaning ‚*of, or relating to a genus'* – is derived from the language of biology, its common meaning in contemporary usage is ‚*not a brand name product.'* Of course, the generic is not without qualities. In terms of most products, for example, it implies not that it is necessarily inferior, only that it just doesn't have the sort of identity that a brand would evoke.

Riding upon the idea of the generic, Koolhaas orbits around the idea of the city as a product, one to be engaged, identified, consumed; indeed, much of the thrust of "Generic Cities" is to discuss the processes of the city as a product, generic or brand. Yet, although Koolhaas ridicules the idea of a city – with the example of Paris – as a brand, "Genetic Cities" can't propose any specific methodologies for creating and managing differences within the universal urbanism of the Generic City. Maybe it is this dilemma that forces Koolhaas to try to develop new strategies for approaching architecture and the city and, ultimately, to attempt to turn brand into a despatialized machine for architectural and urban identity.

If the processes of identity are the subjects of "Generic Cities", *Projects for Prada* presents concrete proposals for their management. This is one of the few texts where Koolhaas projects rather than analyzes, and I would propose that the conception of brand applied to Prada can also be understood to be a strategy for producing collective meaning in the Generic City. Following Koolhaasian analysis, the parallels certainly seem to be at hand. Globalization couples urban and commercial expansion, bringing both city and brand into crisis. The increasing vastness of these two enterprises threatens to atomize any stable core of identity, while the mutation immanent in increasing extension ultimately threatens continuity with bifurcation and illegibility. So, where the Generic City idealizes perpetual renewal, the imperative of branded identity insists that *Projects for Prada* must postulate a more subtle relationship between the past, the present and the future. [23]

Thus, Koolhaas and Murcia Prada accede to the imperative of continuity – that is, a presence of the past – in the creation of identity. At the same time, they recognize that identity must not be static; destabilization is needed to maintain commercial interest. Continuity provides a perceivable datum against which changes can be measured; the datum of continuity makes it possible for *all* groups to be able to identify the brand; variations and mutations allow *different* groups to identify themselves *with* the brand and remain interested in it. Brand is a game between designer and public, where themes are established and variations introduced. Too much variation and the theme gets lost, not enough variation and the interest of the public goes instead. It is an inherently unstable machine; even the most effective designer can steer but cannot ultimately control just how the public will perceive the trajectory of the brand.[24]

City branding

The instability of identity brings us around again to the issue of control and the production of perceptible order. Looking back to the essay "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?" we see Koolhaas pondering the planner's insurmountable task in confronting the complex urban machine. "Planning is dead" we are told, our dream of order and rationality lost in a jarring awakening to the Generic City; here, death means the loss of control.[25] Released from the demiurgical illusion and responsibility, the planner is freed to enter the uncharted waters and is challenged to take amoral risks: "Since we are not responsible, we have to become irresponsible".[26] We cannot control the processes of differentiation, but, as the essay "Bigness"– a meditation upon the demise of architecture *and* urban design – postulates, extravagant size stands out in the undifferentiated field.[27]

If, as Koolhaas postulates, we have lost control over the totality, then planners are left able to only make surgical invasions into the urban body and to create difference through size and extravagance. The problem is that, when made into method, extravagance becomes the norm and once again undifferentiated. In that "Bigness" describes the workings of the architecture in conceptual isolation, it presents no methodology for differentiation. Thus, the idea of brand is brought into the breach; it provides a means for the systematic differentiation of artifacts within the urban field. Brand cannot give identity to the city, the urban whole, but it can conceptually unite artifacts which – since brand is a non-spatial machine - may or may not be spatially related. It can infuse these with a perception of quality, luxury - even uniqueness – through their common association. For example, brand is capable of conceptually connecting Chase Manhattan branch offices with their central, downtown home office, or tying the Prada shops in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles in the consumers mind. When properly handled, it is, not unlike the Generic City, a system that can avoid producing "'definitive' identity"[28]. Thus, according to Koolhaas, a subtly conceived and applied notion of brand can be an engine for creating a controlled dynamism of identity; taking again the example of Prada, he says "The Epicenter Store functions as a conceptual widow: a means to broadcast future directions that positively charges the latent mass of typical stores".[29] If the Generic City produces an urbanity that demands new ideas of identity and order, and Bigness produces isolated artifacts that need a larger conceptual context, then Koolhaas' research into brand implicates a well thought out program for an urbanism of reception, readings and destabilized identity.

Textual identities

The danger with the kind of identity embodied in brand is that it can easily be trivialized. In his writings, the French *nouvel roman* author Michel Butor discusses how we read cities. He states that, even before we arrive in a city, our experience is conditioned by mental images acquired through novels, films and travel guides. Landmarks, myths and historical tales shape our expectations; they are literary representations of the identity that we project upon the stones of the city.[30] "Big Apple", "Gay Paris" or "Tinseltown" are all examples of this idea of identity, created and perpetuated by the media and projected on the physical city. In claiming that "Paris can only become more Parisian – it is already on its way to becoming a hyper-Paris" Koolhaas himself warns us that any city's intimate embrace of its literary *Doppelgänger* can make this evil twin into the city itself.[31] This is the ultimate message of "Generic Cities": in reality, we produce cities that are free of this baggage. We should not project old images upon them; instead, we must let them find their own, new identity.

In *Mutations*, Koolhaas examines the Pearl River Delta cities of China. The analysis shows that these cities do use their architectural assets to define themselves – but primarily as a means for contrasting themselves with their neighbors. Essentially, the cities are branding themselves. He names – and, with admirable consistency, effectively brands - this condition "COED" or the „City of Exacerbated Difference©".[32] This is a new level of identity for the city, a text of marketing, the text where the city creates an image of a distinct *self* in order to sell itself to the public. Naturally, this branded self is related to received or historical images that weigh the city's baggage, but it is also different: the branded image is actively projected and it represents a conscious choice.

But dangers lurk in this plane of discourse; in playing the game of identity, the market can follow its logic to its own inexorable conclusion. For example, in the early 1990's, the city of Atlanta not only attempted to tap onto the city's intangible assets, it tried its hand at selling them as well. As recounted by M. Christine Boyer in her book *CyberCities,* the city not only brewed up such boosterisms as "Atlanta: Home of the American Dream", it made Visa the "official credit card of Atlanta" and deliberated renaming its main streets in honor of its corporate sponsors. [33]

This profit-driven reprogramming of collective memory exemplifies the sort of everyday creation of identity that Koolhaas discusses in "Generic Cities." But even less virulent approaches to urban marketing can fall into the trap of banality. In his essay "City Branding," Berci Florian talks about how, as our global age makes cities more similar and brings them into increased competition, "cities must find and accentuate those specific qualities that make them unique, marketable and therefore successful in the future." [34] This is pop-psychological self-help for doubting urbs which offers ideas for making-over homely cities into potentially attractive dates to the urban-development ball. While it is no way clear that Koolhaas endorses the sort of marketing Florian proposes, it seems reasonable to speculate whether all attempts to address the weightless, ahistorical state of the contemporary city through strategies based upon the semantic reception of identities are doomed to be compromised by commercialism and salesmanship.

Architecture, urbanism and identity

There are many points where the power of Koolhaas' rhetorical style renders his ultimate meaning ambiguous; there are some points where his statements are downright contradictory. One of the great sources of equivocation is the battle between architecture and urbanism for the control of the city. The struggle produces no winner: the waxing forces of urbanity produce architecture of undreamed of scales, this architecture eradicates the urban, and over-pumped urbanism and architecture destroy themselves. Each side can only achieve an *Etappensieg*. Thus, in "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" we are "left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture"[35] while in "The Generic City" "the infinite variety of the Generic City comes close, at least, to making variety (of architecture) normal: banalized, in a reversal of expectation, it is repetition that has become unusual,...exhilarating".[36] Meanwhile, Bigness seems to be the end of both architecture *and* urbanism.

It seems to be the analyst's momentary point of view that determines each battle's result. Whereas the conclusion of "Generic Cities" welcomes the disappearance of the city, the recognition of the new realities in "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" provide the germ of the city's salvation – for the city is "all we have" and therefore worth fighting for.[37] Yet, this discrepancy seems less one of analysis than of sentiment, or at least of specific interest: when the issues of reception and semantics assume a central role in the argument, as in "Generic Cities", "Pearl River Delta" or even *Projects for Prada*, the city is largely dispensable. In "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", however, the discussion is about territories, processes and infrastructure; seemingly, when we avoid symbolism, images and reception, the city can be saved! This raises the question: which sort of identity can function positively for the city, and which is better for such objects as buildings, clothes and other such urban entities? What sort of identity can encompass the complex totality of the city?

Consider how identity can be constructed. Diacritical notions of identity – whereby identity is conceived non-foundationally as having no positive terms, only differences – have the fundamental difficulty that such differences are an *a priori* conceptual necessity. Thus, we have to question Koolhaas' idea of the „City of Exacerbated Difference©", which is a process of urbanistic identity in which a city defines itself as different from others. Obviously, identity is always in some way about difference, but an urban designer or planner would need more explicit discussion of how differences should be produced in order to be able to use this insight for anything more than the production of the Atlanta-like boosterism that M. Christine Boyer describes. Furthermore, while the more complex construction of brand may be an effective means for connecting object, image and idea, it remains a non-spatial machine of identity and may not be adequate for addressing the problems of the supremely spatial entity that the city is. Although the globally active, medial consumerist culture does form us into the global village, what it propagats is a culture of images,

not of space; the media constructs difference at the level of reception and readings. It may make some aspects of the new city more identifiable and thereby more comprehensible, but it is pointless to claim that it could differentiate and organize the urban condition.

While "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" seems at first glance to be Koolhaas' bleakest assessment of city planning, closer inspection offers much hope. Compared to other texts, it speaks little of images, symbols and meanings; instead, it concentrates more upon territories, processes and infrastructures – the space of the city, and that which supports and creates it. The text speaks of how the "reinvention of psychological space" will liberate architecture from its "atavistic duties" and initiate urbanism's guerrilla attack upon architecture, winning back the city in the deal.[38]

So, while much of Koolhaas' rhetoric denies a future for both city and space, in "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" it is space that will save the city. Not any space, but the space born of a "resistance to chaos" that is doomed to failure yet heroic in the undertaking, and thus ultimately redemptive.[39] For while he declares that the urbanism that arises from this new sense of space will be like nothing that we have known before, Koolhaas implies that the production of this space will be our way for imposing a sense of ourselves upon the world around us.

But what is the nature of this space of resistance, and what is the chaos against which it struggles? While the text's last page espousal of "Nietzschean frivolity"[40] breaks from notions of territory, space and process and grasps towards the big bang urbanism of "Pearl River Delta" with its diacritical sense of identity, if we take to heart the ideas that "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" develops prior to that point, we arrive at another idea of identity, one that is not derived from comparison but from intrinsic content or structure. We might then ask how territories and processes would interact with the chaos that engulfs us. For this would no longer be chaos where "nothing happens", it would be, instead, a dynamic and growing chaos, not produced by external planning but by internal governors – an autopoietic socio-spatial system of urbanity. Koolhaas' "new psychological space"[41] would no longer be a reinvention, but rather the recognition that we are within this system in all its complexities and varied states. As *part* of this dynamic, chaotic system, we interact with it. We cannot resist or control it, but we can influence and target its attractors and the patterns that it forms. But to do this, we need concrete concepts which address the workings of the system, its elements and their spatial interplay.

Facts and dispositifs

In the *Tractatus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed his "picture theory" in order to remove a number of thorny questions in the philosophy of language. The problem was a variation of the old body-mind dilemma: how can words point to the physical world when they clearly do not look like the things that they mean? Wittgenstein suggested that „the world is the totality of facts, not of things", and that a proposition is a picture of a fact.[42]

While cities are not language, they do communicate and perpetuate the facts of the societies that built and inhabited them. In this way the Wittgensteinian insight can be modified to the urban condition to propose that the city should be seen, not as a collection of things, such as buildings, but rather as an extremely complex totality of facts which are pictured or embodied by buildings and other architectural elements. The facts that I have in mind are a mixture of cultural conventions, ranging from laws and regulations to religious practices and traditions, and physical ramifications, such as location, climate, physical geography, etc. In theoretical terms, what I refer to as „facts" come close to Michel Foucault's concept of *dispositif*. It can be characterized as a heterogeneous apparatus of material and non-material elements which participate in a given, strategic form of coordination. A *dispositif* may include include, for example, "discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic propositions, morality, philanthropy". [43] In Stefano Boeri's reading of Foucault, the *dispositif* is understood as a historically instituted, spatially initiated process that lends (built) form to social relationships. [44] But the concept of "fact" addresses the codification of these relationships in specific formal and informal rules that govern how spaces are designed, built and used. These facts interfere with

any attempts to realize an abstract architectural agenda and infiltrate any conscious aesthetic with particular impurities.

These facts are rooted in history and extend it into the future. They are interactive: they not only shape practice but also are shaped by it, they can adapt to new, external influences without losing the continuity of identity. If understood as a language, these facts can be said to be meaningful, but they neither refer to anything but themselves, nor do they have an author, whether individual or collective.[45] At most, these facts give rise to spatial forms that can be seen, to borrow an expression of Siegfried Kracauer's, as the dreams of society.[46]

What would be the difference, for example, between the identity of Tokyo and of New York at the level of such facts? Maybe Tokyo is not the sum of its temples, or of its wartime destruction; maybe it is a broad landscape shaped by how property is divided, connected, financed and built upon in order to fulfill the specific social needs of its inhabitants. And New York is dense urban crystal shaped by the same socio-economic issues — which New York resolves in a dramatically different way. The point isn't that New York has charming brownstones and the Empire State Building; it is that New York has property divisions, zoning laws and a tradition of using land as a commodity that allows row houses to be transformed into skyscrapers. Tokyo does not: urban practice here produces low-lying, fine-grained buildings and driving ranges for golf. Talking about the Generic City, Koolhaas cryptically remarks: "Golf courses are all that is left of otherness."[47] Someday the golf nets in Tokyo will be gone. Will that change the identity of that singular city?

The answer to this question depends on which kind of identity we wish to emphasize. If we concentrate upon the image of the city as a media phenomenon and its reception, as Koolhaas seems to do, the answer would be probably in the affirmative. A future generation of Tokyo citizens might indeed pine for the lost city of their youth with its golf nets and indoor skiing, just as many of the pre-war generation miss the older city's canals and wooden temples. However, the sort of facts that I am talking about differentiate at the level of urban assemblage; to return to the question of the construction of difference, it matters less which medial–industrial materials are assembled, the issue is how they are put together. These facts are an intrinsic component of how they city builds itself and upon itself; they change without an overall plan and typically at a slower speed than a global-economized make-over. At this level, the identity of Tokyo will certainly not only persist but will continue to remain different from New York, Paris or Hong Kong.

The persistence of identity

The persistence of identity which is embodied in these facts is neither unimportant nor irrelevant. It will not – certainly not in the foreseeable future – be overwhelmed by urban expansion, simply because these facts will be *embedded* in that urban expansion. If we accept that these facts exist and are the codes that regulate, for example, formal and informal land usage, property ownership and the spatial structure of the public private dichotomy, they will be present in both virgin constructions and in the rebuilding or overlaying of the old. They would determine, for example, the volume of space available to a city dweller of particular economic means, which spaces would be available, how these spaces would be connected to the public realm and the nature of the public realm itself. Take again Tokyo as an example. It is simple but not without meaning to say that it would persist in being used differently than Los Angeles. Although the Japanese love their cars, the city's small-scale plot structure, dense demographics and under-dimensional street network make it difficult for it to become a city of long-distance automobile commuters; the front lawn, the driveway and the large garage can only in the rarest of circumstances become significant urban forms in the Asian city.

The city as a collection of facts may be generic, or without brand, but it can never lack unique identity. The facts of one city are by definition different than those of the next; they can grow nearer together or further apart, but their different historical, cultural and geographical evolution insure their individuality. This conception of identity as an integral, constitutive and generative structure escapes many of the pitfalls of identity as representation and reception. For one, it re-empowers the planner, endowing not a totalizing

control, but rather a tangible matrix of parameters than can be followed, questioned and, within the range of the possible, adjusted. While they can empower, they also restrict. They allow only certain possibilities. As an historical (yet mutable) continuity, they have always coexisted with and determined the material city. In this sense, city planners have not lost control over the city; they never had it. Faced with the city of universal urbanism, we are not less helpless then in the past. It is only that the problems are newer, different, vaster.

In an urbanism of constitutive facts, identity would neither reside in fixed orders or forms, nor in symbolic constructions. It would manifest itself as an underlying, substantial entity, expresses as facts, able both to be embodied and to undergo evolution and changes of state. The facts would be a tool and a guide for the planner. Of course, in contrast to the Koolhaasian idea of a *tabula rasa,* this notion of identity embedded in facts reinfuses urbanism with structures that he might classify as atavistic, and ties the present with the course of the past. But it is fair to question whether history is really dead, or whether the city that we have are the cities that we have always had, only evolved or evolving into a new state of urbanity. Just as systems theory tells us that the same entity can develop into new states, often unrecognizable when compared to their preceding form, might it be possible that the generic and the historic city are not totally unrelated[48] – and that we could look at and use the past in new ways, so as to better shape our future. This plea to recognize the past is in no way a call to historicism. It is simply a suggestion that, if we conceive of the city as a systemic entity governed by a matrix of evolving socio-spatial facts, we are forced to accept the presence of the past in the system of today - much like the ancient information that is encoded in DNA of the youngest newborn, or how Latin roots can be found in the slang spoken in the student bar next door.

Other paths beyond rhetoric

Certainly, Brand, Bigness and Junkspace are not ideas without import but it is important to look beyond and behind Koolhaas' spellbinding rhetoric, and ask if all that is being said adds up to the sort of urbanism that we want. If we turn away from space and embrace the luxury of Brand and the capital intensity of Bigness, are we really addressing a new urbanism, in particular one that can be applied to the poverty-stricken conurbations of the emerging third world? Has modern technology and media truly erased differentiation in social practice and the spatial microstructures in which these practices are embedded? Or is it possible to take Koolhaas' stated interest in territories, structures and process in another direction, one that doesn't denigrate the importance of space but rather intensifies its centrality? Might it be possible to hold up a practice-based, systemic and spatial understanding of urbanism as an alternative to the image-based, aspatial market appeal of the type Koolhaas describes?

Although some of the complex facts of the city have been thematized by Koolhaas and his followers, including Winy Maas who occasionally develops urban and architectural designs by datascaping building ordinances and the like, the strategy has hardly been exhaustively explored. As of yet, neither Koolhaas nor Maas seem to have located the untapped potential of the urban "facts" as the deep structure of urban configurations and the source of the continuing identity of a city. To theorize and design the city as the complex of facts is a legitimate project for urban design and planning and a valid, alternative interpretation of Koolhaas' apocalyptic rhetoric.

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1 Rem Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau (Eds.), *S, M, L, XL* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1997), p. 1248.

2 ibid.

3 „...urbanization everywhere – after decades of acceleration - is on its way to establishing a definitive, global 'triumph of the urban condition'.", Rem Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 961. "In this apotheosis of multiple choices it will never be possible to reconstruct cause and effect. They work – that is all.", Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1255. cf. Mies van der Rohe as quoted in: Ulrich Conrads, *Programme und Manifeste* (Berlin: Ullstein Bauwelt Fundamente 1. Berlin West: Verlag Ullstein GmbH, 1964) p. 114. cf. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: Edition Crès & Cie., 1924), p. x.

4 "the repetition of the same things for the same purposes exercises a settling and civilizing influence on men's minds…(the reiteration of) typical buildings notably enhances civil dignity and coherence." Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*; translation Morton Shand (Great Britain: Charles T. Branford Co., 1935) p. 37.

5 Willy Boesiger, O. Stonorow (Eds.), *Le Corbusier und Pierre Jeanneret. Oeuvre complète. Ihr gesamtes Werk von 1910-1929* (Zürich: Verlag Dr. H. Girsberger & Cie, 1930), p. 43.

6 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1255.

7 cf. Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1250, cf. Koolhaas, "Bigness", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 508, 514.

8 ibid., p. 1264.

9 Jean Attali, „A Surpassing Mutation", in: Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2000), p. 269f.

10 Rem Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 969.

11 Jean Attali (2000), p. 271.

12 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1252.

13 Rem Koolhaas, „Typical Plan", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 338. This treatise on the generic in architecture (1993) details Koolhaas' conception of how the abstract programs of the modern service sector produce indeterminate spaces; his essay "Junk Space" addresses how this space is shaped to fit the programmatic needs of the service-oriented, consumer society. vid Rem Koolhaas, "Junk Space", in: *Oktober 100* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 175-190.

14 Hermann Czech, "Nur Keine Panik" in: *Zur Abwechslung* (Löcker Verlag, Wien, 1996), p. 63

15 Koolhaas, „Typical Plan", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), pp. 336f., 341.ibid., p. 337.

16 ibid., p. 337.

17 Rem Koolhaas, "Junk Space", in: *Oktober 100* (2000), pp. 175-190.

18 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), pp. 1248f.

19 ibid., p. 1252.

20 ibid., p. 1252. An idea first formulated in the Projects for Prada, Wallpaper is the logical solution to Junkspace, in the Typical Plan and the Generic City. Wallpaper allows a chosen „identity" to be projected upon a neutral spatial carrier, and allows this identity to be changed according to need without having to intervene upon the architectural and urbanistic skeleton that supports the Wallpaper. cf. Rem Koolhaas, Miuccia Prada, et. al., *Projects for Prada Part I* (Milan: Fondazione Prada Editore, 2001), Glossary, 2nd English page.

21 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1250.

22 Drawing from Georg Simmel, Anthony Giddens and Mike Featherstone, Hans Mommas discusses how a new relationship between space, society, culture and brand has arisen out of increased affluence and mobility, creating ever larger distances between individual and collective experience and culture. vid. Hans Mommas, „City Branding: The Necessity of Socio-Cultural Goals" in: Urban Affairs (Eds.), *City Branding. Image Building & Building Images* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2002), p. 34ff.

23 „(The Generic City) is the city without history… If it is to small it just expands. If it gets old it just expands. It is ‚superficial' – like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday." in: Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1250.

24 In a recent interview in the New York Times, Koolhaas argued that "the discussion about what brands are is held on an incredibly primitive level. Particularly the American perception of what brand is, namely something that is reduced to its essence and can never be changed. I think that is a very limited form of branding. What we have been trying to do with Prada, for instance, is instead of trying to reduce it to its essence, we try to stretch it, so that more becomes possible instead of less. … It extends the repertoire of possibilities instead of shrinking it." "Yesterday, Prada; Tomorrow, the World," in: *New York Times*, June 20th, 2002.

25 "The death of urbanism – our refuge in the parasitic security of architecture – creates an immanent disaster: more and more substance is grafted upon starving roots." in: Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 967. "A profession (planning) persists in its fantasies, its ideologies, its pretension, its illusions of involvement and control…", ibid., p. 965.

26 ibid., p. 971.

27 "The containers of Bigness will be landmarks in a post-architectural world." in: Koolhaas, "Bigness", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 516.

28 Koolhaas, Prada, et. al. (2001), Introduction.

29 ibid., Introduction.

30 Michel Butor, *Die Stadt als Text* (Graz Wien: Literaturverlag Droschl, 1992), p. 7.

31 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1248.

32 Rem Koolhaas, „Pearl River Delta", in: Koolhaas, Boeri, Kwinter, Tazi, Obrist (2000), p. 309.

33 M. Christine Boyer, *Cyber Cities* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 148f.

34 Florian Berci, „The City as Brand: Orchestrating a Unique Experience", in: Urban Affairs (2002), p. 34ff.

35 Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 967.

36 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1248.

37 Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 971.

38 ibid., p. 969.

39 ibid.

40 ibid., p. 971.

41 ibid., p. 969.

42 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, [Traktat, dt.] Tr. by Danial Kolak (Mountain View/Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1998), 1.1, 1.2, 2.04, 2.1, 2.12, 2.202, 4.01, 4.022, 4.023, 4.06, 4.1.

43 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon (Ed.) (New York: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 194.

44 Stefan Boeri, „Notes for a Research Program," in: Koolhaas, Boeri, Kwinter, Tazi, Obrist (2000), p. 360.

45 cf. the conception of a morphic language in the work of Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson: "Morphic languages are the realisation of abstract structure in the real world. They convey meaning not in the sense of representing something else, but in the sense of constituting a pattern. Thus, if both space organization and social encounter patterns are morphic languages, the construction of a social theory of spatial organization becomes a question of understanding the relations between the principals of pattern generation in both." Bill Hillier, Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 50.

46 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Arbeitsnachweise. Konstruktionen des Raumes." in: *Schriften*, Bd. 5, Aufsätze 1927-1931 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1990), pp. 185-192.

47 Koolhaas, "Generic Cities", in: Koolhaas, Mau (1997), p. 1251.

48 cf. the conception of the possible applications of systems theory to various forms of self-organizing phenomenon in the work of Manuel DeLanda: "...if a simple liquid solution can harden into crystal or glass, ice or snowflake depending upon the multiplicities of nonlinearities shaping the solidification process, human societies – which have a larger range of attractor types – have far more leeway in how they develop stable configurations...there is much to be learned from analyzing in detail the actual processes of stratification and destratification that have occurred in different societies at different times...", in: Manuel DeLanda, "Nonorganic Life", in: Jonathan Crary, Sanford Kwinter (Eds.), *Incorporations,* Zone 6 (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 154.