

# A Theorist and his Practice

A critique of the architect-theorist, Rem Koolhaas



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
WEST OF ENGLAND

# A Theorist and his Practice

A critique of the architect-theorist, Rem Koolhaas

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## Bachelor of Arts Dissertation

I certify that I have read and understood the entry in the student handbook on unfair means, deception, and plagiarism, and that all material in this dissertation is my own work except where I have indicated with appropriate references.

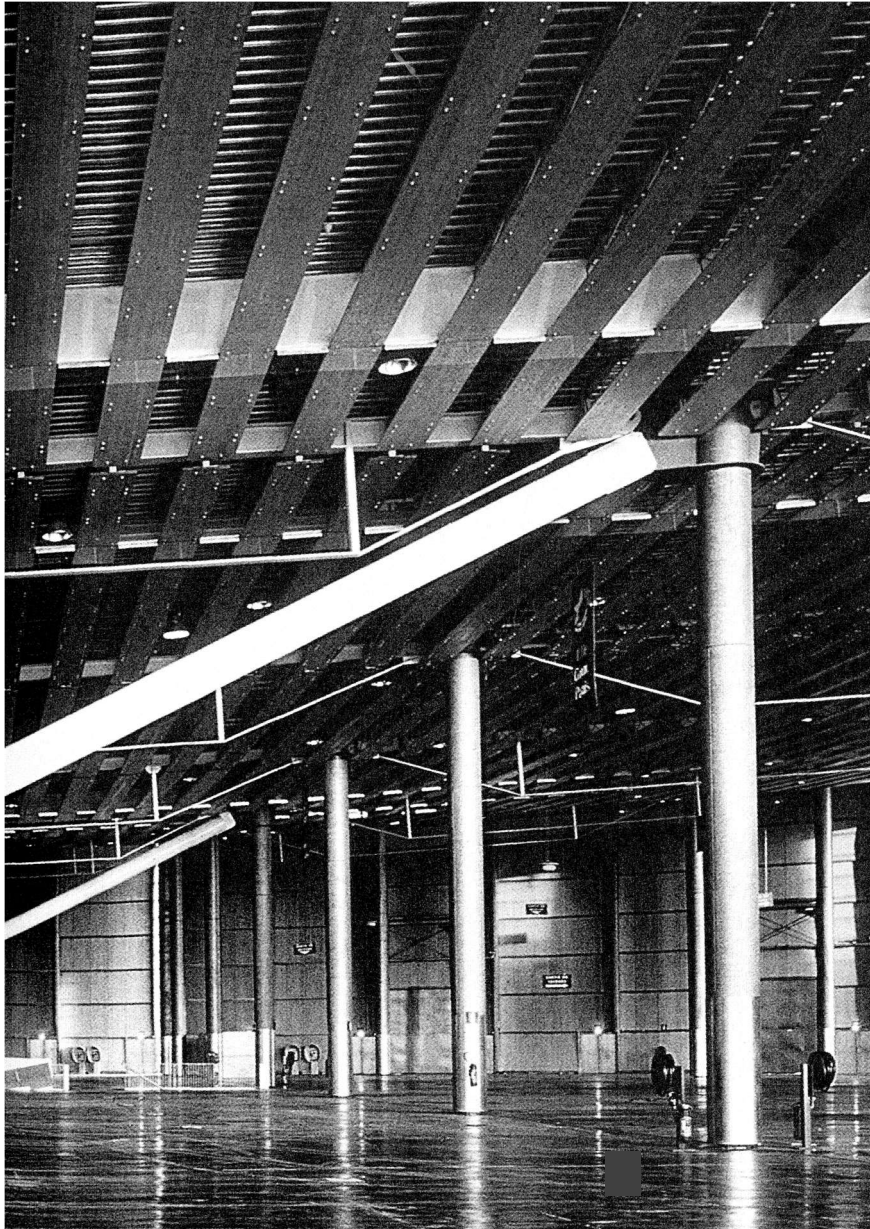
K. R. Gunawardena

## Preface

The interest for this study stems from the principle that the ‘practice’ of a discipline is inspired, structured, and progressed by some form of theoretical discussion. The study aims to understand this relationship between theory and practice from the perspective of the architect and his discipline. The vastness of this topic presents the entire breadth of the discipline and the complexities evolved over the centuries of architectural practice to be examined. This would be a substantial task, and beyond the scope of such a study as presented here. This study therefore acknowledges such historical modes of theorising and practicing as an already established groundwork, and seeks only to offer a clarification of the contemporary situation.

The hypothesis that ‘the practice of an architect-theorist is analogous to his theorising’, is explored in this study with the contemporary example presented by the Dutch architect-theorist Rem Koolhaas. The study seeks to critically examine what the French philosopher and thinker of art Hubert Damisch had described as Koolhaas’ ability to present “a rare link between a theory and a project”.

Koolhaas has been chosen as the exemplar architect-theorist for this study for two significant reasons. Firstly, he is described by various peer reviewed sources and architectural critiques as one of the most influential architect-theorists of the present-day. Secondly, his theoretical and practical work has raised considerable debate in the author’s school, particularly in relation to the contemporary definition of the architect and his craft.



*Figure 1. Main ball of the Congrexpo in Euralille, France (1990-94).*

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## Abbreviations

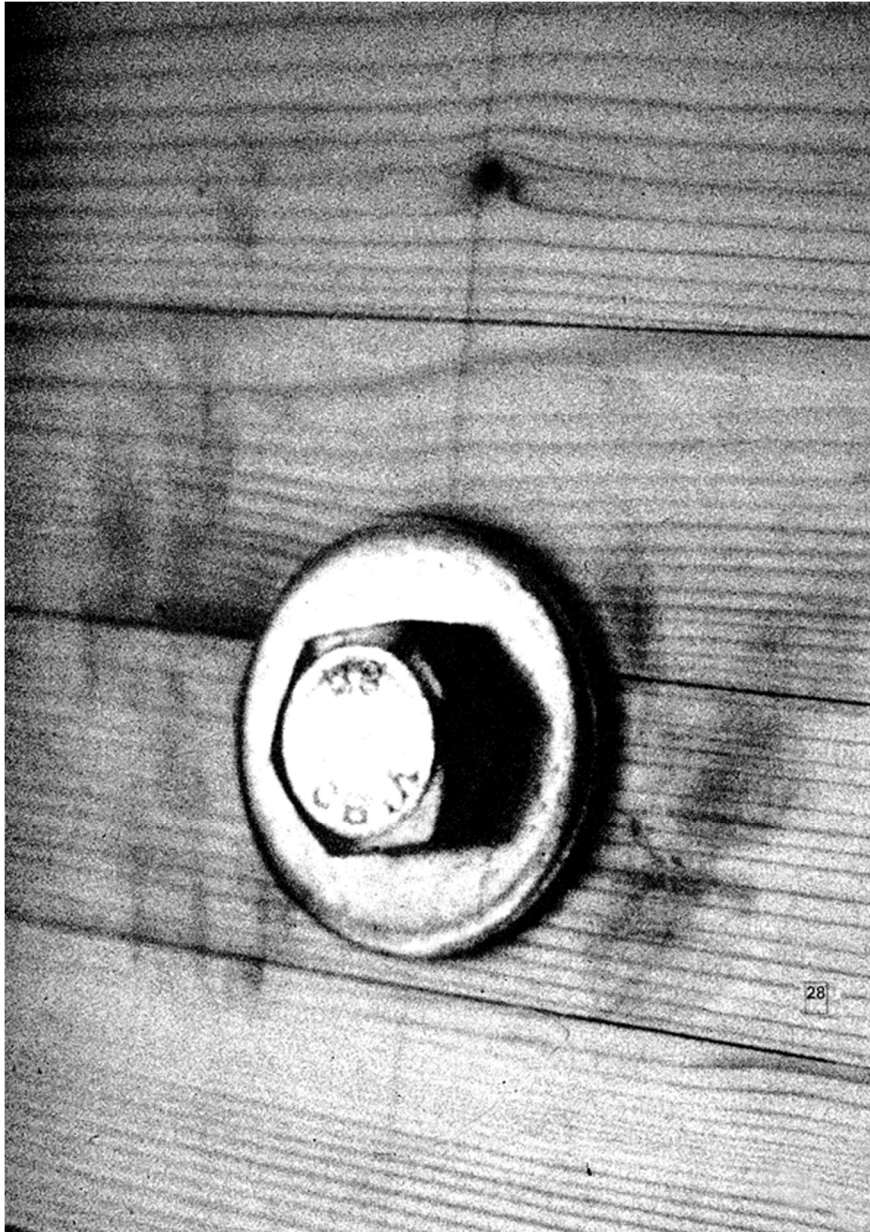
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|--------------------|--|
| AMO                | Rem Koolhaas' mirror office concerned with theory and research.  |
| OMA                | Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas' architectural practice.  |
| <i>S, M, L, XL</i> | Publication title, 'Small, Medium, Large, and Extra Large' (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995), referring to the volume's organisational structure. |
| TGV                | <i>Train à Grande Vitesse</i> (French); literally 'high-speed train'.  |



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Cover image: OMA model of the Congrexpo, from Balmond (2003).

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Source: Balmond (2003)

*Figure 2. Detail of a bolt at the Congresspo, in Euralille.*

# 1

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, the practice of the architect has diversified to include a multitude of functions and responsibilities. The most significant of such transitions has considered the architect beyond the traditional role of the master-builder, to also include the tasks of a philosopher, theorist, critic, and even that of a political influencer. This multifaceted mode of operation of the architect was introduced to the world most prominently by Le Corbusier. Throughout his practice he sought to liberate himself from the traditional bounds of the discipline to present himself as a polemical thinker, theoretician, writer, artist, urbanist, and all-round visionary of modern living. He thus established the principle that to realise a meaningful and enduring legacy, an architect must be concerned with more than just the workings of buildings.

Succeeding generations have recognised Le Corbusier as a pioneer, idolising him to levels of distinction that no other architect has managed to surpass. This distinction is exemplified by the many publications presented over the years concerning every facet of his diverse thought and practice. It is indeed a difficult task to find an architect or critic that has failed to take a position on his visionary, and at times polemical assertions. His example thus established the belief that theorising attracts lasting curiosity. An architect's desire to achieve distinction has thereafter been intrinsically entangled with the notion that one must also be a 'diverse thinker', and one's project sincerely associated with such thought. In essence, one must transition from being just an architect, to be an 'architect-theorist'.

After years of post-war hardship, a new era of reimagining was summoned by an emerging collective of European architects. Amongst its membership included a Dutch journalist turned architect by the name of Rem Koolhaas. Building on his diverse interests, Koolhaas has sought over the years to elevate the role of the architect-theorist to become an essential feature of what is widely described as the 'iconic architect'. This study is concerned with identifying the modes of operation of such an architect-theorist, with Koolhaas considered as a leading example. The study aims to draw out subjective differentials in the form of personal idiosyncrasies in his methodologies, as well as objective similarities in the form of the general structures that characterises the architect-theorist typology.

## Structure

As it is significant to understand the nature of theory and theorising prior to examining a theory or theoretician, the study commences with a brief introduction to theorising and its purpose in the discipline of building design. Chapter 3 will accordingly seek to address the research question of what is meant by the expression 'architectural theory and theorising', and what are the modes of operation their authors or theoreticians utilise.

This study does not seek to present Koolhaas as an architectural theoretician and practitioner in isolation. As a point of comparative reference, another contemporary architectural theoretician and practitioner has been utilised. This contemporary is the avant-garde architect-theorist Bernard Tschumi. Tschumi has been elected for this purpose as he is an architect-theorist who has extensively elaborated on the associations that exist between his theorising and practice. His self-declared dedication to applying his theorising thus provides the study with a point of clarity from which Koolhaas' theory and practice is assessed, in Chapter 4.

## Methodology

Although architectural theorists are eager to express their ideas verbally, most eventually commit such material to some form of literature, as the written word is considered to be the most authoritative means of communication. The pamphlet, manifesto, essay, paper, treatise, thesis, dissertation, or the volume, in whatever format it is distributed their content represents the primary source material for this study, while the secondary source material is contributed by the critiques of such primary sources. The methodology for the study is therefore a literature review.

It is significant here to take note of the two forms of expression encountered in literature sources. The 'first order' is in which the author declares their point of view. Mies van der Rohe's dictum "less is more" is an example of a statement in the first order. The 'second order' intends to clarify this first order statement. With the same Miesian dictum, such an expression would seek to clarify what of 'less' would provide 'more' of what. The second order thus attempts to expand, elaborate, and to an extent assess the author's statement. Although most theoretical publications combine the first with the second order, in architectural theorising the first is often dominant, and in some instances the only order used. The latter are characterised by the author's intent to awaken and mobilise the reader. The second order in architectural writing is mainly utilised by critics, historians, and academics. Their intent is to seek clarity, distinction, and collective value, and as a result the language used is analytical and precise. However, it must be emphasised that critiques of architectural theory tend to be less systematic than those concerned with philosophical works, with the latter typically utilising a predefined analysis framework.

This study is as concerned with theory as it is with its practical application. Theory must therefore be assessed against some form of practical outcome. For assessing such an association in the works of an architect, it is a substantial task to measure their theorising oeuvre against their entire

portfolio of built works. That task perhaps would be the culmination of a comprehensive monograph, and not appropriate for a study of this nature. The most convincing method for a study such as this suggested the use of an exemplar situation; simply described as a 'case study'.

As a potential translation of Koolhaas' theory, the 'Euralille' project was nominated to be this case study. The project was selected as it encompassed the three principal roles that Koolhaas engages with, namely that of an urban planner, principal architect, and on-site architect. It therefore permits a complete consideration of the architect's practice. The project in addition is well-documented, with critiques from a wide range of sources providing the material needed to critically examine its outcomes.

## Limitations

The terms 'theory' and 'philosophy' referred to in this study relates to what the architect-theorist aspires to achieve in all his creative endeavours as a designer. The study is therefore not overly concerned with the specific narratives governing each architectural project.

Furthermore, the filtering of Koolhaas' theoretical and built projects into examples makes it difficult to present this study as being complete. Besides which, he is very much an architect-theorist who is still in practice, and as a result his oeuvre is expanding, as well as evolving. A definitive judgment on his oeuvre is therefore far from the intention of this study. Koolhaas is presented here as a leading example, with the study drawing from his past works to present an understanding of his current position.

## 2

### Literature review

The following is a review of literature considered for this study.

#### Understanding architectural theorising

##### *Theory and practice*

To comprehend the relationship between theory and practice, one must appreciate what theory is, and what defines ‘good’ theory. Taylor (2004) described good theory to be systematically and clearly organised, and capable of withstanding rigorous testing. Hearn (2003) and Johnson (1994) elaborated further to describe the essentials of ‘architectural theorising’, particularly its non-specific nature; while Johnson (1994) also considered its forms of practical translation.

##### *Authors of theory and the generic manifesto*

With the context of architectural theory addressed, Jencks and Kropf (1997) examined the intentions of such theorists. They identified architects to be aware of the value of theorising, and to consider it as the “engine of architecture and, like the ‘conchetto’ in the sixteenth century, the machine that invents new types of buildings”. They however found this to be not the only intention. Architectural theorists in particular were highlighted to be culpable of embracing the ulterior purpose of acquiring distinction. Theory was said to be used by such individuals to claim attention and recognition, and in certain instances even strategic notoriety.

By analysing the reasoning for theorising, Jencks and Kropf (1997) also identified the common structures evident with architectural theorising. These structures were significant as they provided this study with an awareness of the strategies used by theory writers to order and present their worldviews, while the awareness also equipped the study with the means to extract the substance of the material offered by theorists such as Tschumi and Koolhaas, without being misdirected.

## Comparative precedent: Tschumi

### *Theories of Tschumi*

*The Manhattan Transcripts* (1994) was the first publication in which Bernard Tschumi expressed his renowned theory of 'space, time, movement, and event'. The most relevant statement in this publication related to his description of his seminal project 'Parc de la Villette', where he asserted that it "...could not have existed without the Transcripts". This assertion established a clear and conscious association between his theory of 'event', and the completed project of Parc de la Villette. He further reinforced these associations along with the collaboration with the philosophy of Deconstruction in the succeeding volumes, *Architecture and Disjunction* (1997) and *Event Cities 2* (2000). The descriptions to applied theory in the former (arguably the most significant volume presenting his work) were unequivocal, and established Tschumi's conscious and decisive commitment to the practical application of his theorising.

### *Critiques of Tschumi and Parc de la Villette*

Mark Wigley (1995) was sympathetic towards the theoretical and practical associations that Tschumi had made with the philosophy of Deconstruction. As essential material, he cited Jacques Derrida's essay on Parc de la Villette, *Point de folie-maintenant l'architecture* (1986), in which Derrida had used Tschumi's material to 'taste, tease, and test, but not judge'. Save for



this concise critique of Tschumi's work, Wigley's material was characteristically impenetrable. The Papadakis (1989) anthology of essays (particularly Andrew Benjamin's), also presented valuable insights into the Deconstructivist argument and its association to the seminal project. A more accessible critique however was presented by Glusberg (1991), in which Geoffrey Broadbent's interview with Tschumi reinforced the theoretical context of the project. Notwithstanding such concise analyses, both the Papadakis (1989) and Glusberg (1991) critiques were overly concerned with Deconstructivist theory, which is beyond the focus of this study.

## Theorist: Koolhaas

### *Theories of Koolhaas*

Koolhaas' publications to date have not been structured as conventional theoretical works. His theorising is presented as autonomous episodes, with the work in *S, M, L, XL* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995) typical of this fragmented approach. The two principal theories considered for this study, namely 'the Generic City' and 'Bigness', are both included in this anthology of manifestos, narratives, and sketches. The volume was therefore considered as his principal publication for this study.

Koolhaas' first volume, *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (Koolhaas, 1994), presented the historical context of his thinking. *Mutations* (Koolhaas, 2001a), was the other significant volume considered for this study, and addressed his controversial analysis of the city of Lagos in Nigeria. Both *S, M, L, XL* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995) and *Mutations* (Koolhaas, 2001a) are in essence picture-books, designed with abundant visual indulgence. In between their glossy imagery, the text presented was broadly coherent, although each episode must be read and processed independently. At a brief glance, these episodes appear as isolated objects, making no explicit association to Koolhaas' architectural works.

### *Critiques of Koolhaas*

The anthology of essays edited by Patteeuw (2003) considered the OMA (Koolhaas' office), and Koolhaas the individual in three parts. The essays in the first part titled as 'Orbit', explored Koolhaas' origins and his present position. Of the essays in this part, Ian Buruma's presented a critique of the Generic City manifesto. The second part titled as 'Method', presented a critique of his methodologies. Neil Leach's essay was of interest, although the theory of 'camouflage' he had offered to explain Koolhaas' approach to aesthetics is open to interpretation. Also belonging to this part was an essay by Okwui Enwezor titled as 'Terminal modernity' (2003), which presented a robust critique of his Lagos project. The final part titled as 'Area', discussed Koolhaas' practice and survival ethics. The Patteeuw (2003) collection in general provided a dialectic critique of his work, drawing on essays from a wide range of critics. The anthology was therefore considered as the principal secondary publication for this section.

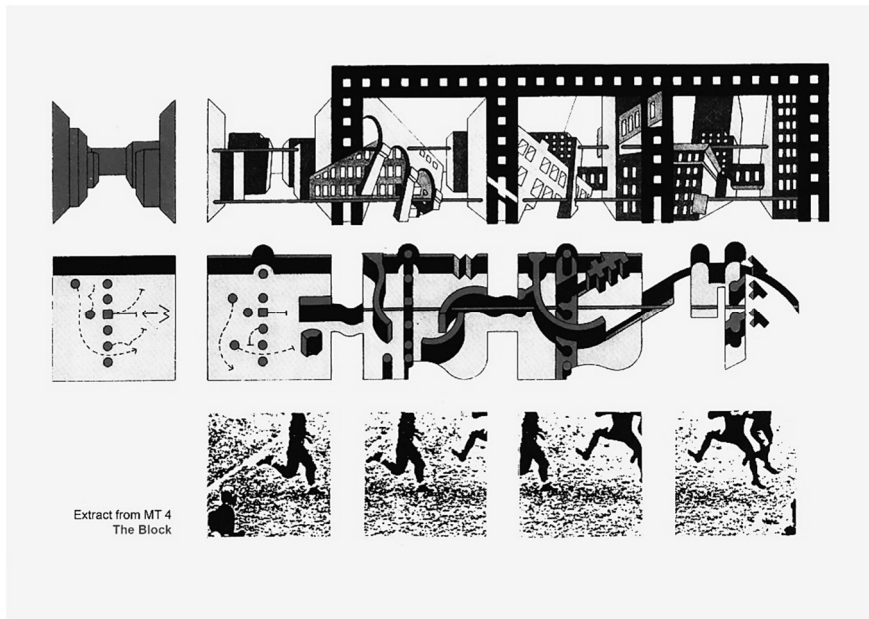
In addition to the above, the *El Croquis* omnibus volume (Levene, 1998) provided a brief account of the architect-theorist's thinking, with transcripts of two interviews with Koolhaas himself. The questions presented however were weakly structured, which in turn had elicited vague and rambling responses from Koolhaas. The most robust critiques of his theory of Bigness were included in the Menu et al. (1996) anthology of essays addressing the Euralille project, and is further discussed below.

### Project Euralille

Coupland (1997) provided a brief description of Euralille in terms of its mixed-use regeneration strategy, while a more in-depth look at the project and its history and political background was provided by Bertolini and Spit (1998). Concise and specific critiques of the project were provided by

Slessor (1993) and Meade (1994), both articles from the journal *Architectural Review*. The most authoritative analysis however was offered by the Menu et al. (1996) anthology of essays. It presented a complete account of the project including its history, scheme, and design, as well as related interviews and critiques. A noteworthy contribution to this was architect-historian Jean-Louis Cohen's essay titled as 'Bigness put to the test of construction'. The most significant contribution however was the interview with Koolhaas himself, where he presented a rare acknowledgement of the association between his theory and implemented practice. The significant question asked of him being whether the 'Congrexpo' (the OMA's most notable architectural contribution to Euralille), was a physical embodiment of his theory of Bigness, to which he had offered the direct response of "yes" (Koolhaas, in Menu et al., 1996).

The above concise literature review outlined significant publications and their material considered for this study. The arguments raised are discussed further in the following chapters.



Source: Tschumi (1994)

Figure 3. *The Block*, extract from the *Manhattan Transcripts* (1994).

# 3

## Architectural theory

It is necessary to appreciate the nature of theorising prior to considering the purpose it serves in the creation of architecture. The central question to be raised here is what is signified by the term ‘theory’. The Oxford Dictionary (2006) describes it as a ‘set of ideas that explain something’. To theorise about something is thus to ‘think’ about that ‘thing’ to clarify its essence, which in this study relates to the subject of ‘architecture’. When such a theory is purposed by its author as a guiding principle for their practice, the term becomes analogous with ‘philosophy’. While philosophy has no conclusive formalities as such, theory about theorising suggests that it is ‘clarity presented in the most comprehensible form’. The search for an ‘objective clarity’ is therefore a critical aspiration when theorising.

‘Good’ theory however requires more than just clarified thoughts. It requires those thoughts to be communicated in the most accessible manner possible. This requires structure and order to be defined. The structure defines its key constituent ideas, while the order defines their hierarchy of significance. The final qualification of this outcome is its ability to withstand critical assessment. Such an outcome that is capable of withstanding rigorous testing and criticism could then be qualified as ‘good’ theory, as an objective peer is able to comprehend it without undue burden (Taylor, 2004). This is significant for its didactic purpose, as theorising aims for outcomes that are relatable, and reproducible. If the outcomes are easily replicated by others, this gives this theory objective value and authority.

It is a challenging task to think of 'architecture' with the hope of presenting a conclusive theory, although some theorists have attempted to address this with reductive statements. Tschumi provides an example when he declared that "architecture is both about space and about the events that take place in that space". To think of complex subjects such as architecture in the hope of defining it with a reductive objective statement is an ambitious task. For each individual such complex subjects present specific meanings with varying degrees of significance. More often than not, architectural theorising evades the search for a comprehensive definition of the subject, and elect instead to address its constituent branches and features. Hearn (2003) for example identified three principal branches of architectural theorising relating to those dealing with 'form', 'construction', and 'design method'. In comparison, Johnson (1994) suggested architectural theory to have two possible branches, 'experiential' and 'reflective'. Experiential theory relates to architecture as a discipline, the experience gained from education and practice, ideas of building, and mainstream thinking; while reflective theory is more critical, moral, ethical, progressive, and relate to ideas on the state of architecture. Some consider this latter form of theorising to be 'proper' due to its progressive nature, while such reflective thoughts are regarded as the building blocks of manifesto writing.

The different branching or categorising of architectural theorising presented by Hearn (2003) and Johnson (1994) demonstrates that it is challenging to achieve agreement on the objective structures of architectural thought. Approaches toward a complex and nebulous subject such as this are diverse, in both how thoughts are organised, and priorities assigned. As Johnson (1994) suggested, the thinking that aims to clarify this complex subject varies from one theorist to another, with the branches or categories identified also distinct to each perspective.

## Theory and manifesto authors

As the master architects of the past have demonstrated, theory is the ‘engine that drives architecture’ to invent new morphologies and encourage new reactions to the environment (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). Architects typically commence their practice with the intention to comprehend their environment, and from that understanding generates a thread of ideas that eventually culminates as their ‘theories’. This theorising is initiated by a conscious and rational thought process that has the ultimate ambition to progress to some form of considered action. Theorising is thus the qualification necessary for realising a meaningful project, with such a theorist regarded as the model architect. This interpretation considers the architect as a principled thinker, altruistically seeking truths for the betterment of the wider society. However, is ‘the betterment of all’ the only motive behind this desire to theorise?

Of the many renowned architects of the past, there has rarely been one without a theory of some sort published to their name. It is as Charles Jencks describes it, a predictable relationship (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). Architects that desire distinction seek their theories to be acknowledged, and the printed medium is by which this is best achieved. Jencks illustrated this by considering Karl Marx (although not an architect), and his Communist Manifesto. He argued that Marx wrote his manifesto not in the hope of producing an outstanding literary work, nor to understand the complexities of the world, but to be acknowledged as a force for change (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). To change the world, the author must motivate others to understand and accept their worldview. This entails the use of strategies that enlist attention, sympathy, and commitment. The resulting rhetoric thus initiates, reinforces, and perpetuates the distinction of the author. Jencks argues that the need to attain this distinction is a potent driver in the architect’s desire to theorise, perhaps at times even greater than the quest to realise a meaningful project (Jencks and Kropf, 1997).

## The generic manifesto

Most architects commence their practice with a passionate manifesto, which is later refined by excluding the dramatic language to present a more academically acceptable theory (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). A manifesto of some form would have thus been the origin and foundation of many of the published theories encountered. There are also many forms of manifestos written by various individuals such as politicians, writers, filmmakers, etc. While such manifestos could have some influence on architectural practice, for the purpose of this study only those authored by architects and architectural theorists are of relevance.

The creation of a manifesto follows a structure, a diagram for how thoughts may eventually inspire actions. It is significant to identify and understand these common structures to enable the critical reading of ideas voiced by the authors, and to extract the substance of their arguments. Such generic structures also form a test against which any manifesto could be assessed, and thus forms a vital component of the study's intention to assess the theoretical works of Koolhaas.

Most architects search for some form of theoretical foundation to their practice, with some advancing this ambition to change the status quo. The latter is typically characterised by the passionate articulation of aspirations of how things ought to be. A manifesto is therefore the declaration of thoughts and ideas aimed at bringing about meaningful change. With architecture, this is usually directed at changing the established and prevailing tradition. The prevailing situation is always seen as a state of crisis. The author thus acts as a prophet that attempts to clean the slate by condemning all preceding conventions defining the status quo. To radically change the existing, the author must dismantle the existing. Attack is thus the first course of action in a manifesto. Coop Himmelblau for example begin their manifesto with a violent attack on convention. They claimed that they "...are tired of seeing Palladio and other historical masks...[and



that]...Architecture must blaze” (in Jencks and Kropf, 1997). The purpose of this violent language is to destabilise and dismantle the status quo, to suppress restoration attempts, and finally to overcome the inertia to change. After this has been achieved the manifesto is able to establish a new order, the prescient vision of the author. After Coop Himmelblau’s initial threatening onslaught on convention, they accordingly articulate their new order. They claimed that they “...want architecture to have more, architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, and that whirls and even breaks” (in Jencks and Kropf, 1997).

Manifestos are rich with literary devices with intent to convince and enlist the reader. As Jencks clarifies, among them are dreadful jokes, wordplays, satirical narratives, imaginative allegories, and oxymorons (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). Most manifestos also include a memorable motto. Mies van der Rohe’s “Less is more” (van der Rohe, 1960), Robert Venturi’s “Less is a bore” (Venturi et al., 1972), and Phillip Johnson’s “I am a whore” (Johnson et al., 1994), are but a few examples of the remarkable mottos that the authors had presented to captivate their audience and prolong the validity of their thoughts. These are devices aimed at immortalising their thinking, a distilled reference to the ‘presence’ or ‘force’ that they supposedly embody within their architecture (Jencks and Kropf, 1997).

To ingrain the particulars of the new order further, manifesto authors often attempt to establish a personal relationship with the reader. In *Towards a new architecture* (1931) for example, Le Corbusier frequently addresses the reader directly as ‘you’, and to stimulate agreement, the joint partnership as ‘we’ (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). The rhetoric thus seeks a union with the reader in a quest to ‘build a better future’, i.e., to build the author’s vision of the world as they believe it ought to be.

Unlike other manifesto authors, architects have a notable obsession with the visual aspects of persuasion. Architectural manifestos therefore often use provocative methods of representation to illustrate their content.

These include elaborate drawings of the likes presented by Lebbeus Woods, contrasting image comparatives of Augustus Pugin, or the surreal collages of Koolhaas. The direct intention of this visual material is to attract attention, while the more sophisticated applications seek to arouse both conscious and unconscious aspects of the reader's engagement.

Every architectural manifesto does not conform to the above generic design, with Venturi's (1972) compassionately composed declaration as a notable exception (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). What the above highlighted is that most such manifestos tend to begin their quest for meaningful change by attacking convention, followed by the voicing of the author's views and beliefs that are reinforced by dramatic language and captivating imagery. As it will be demonstrated later in the study, Koolhaas' theorising utilises most of these structural features to potent effect.

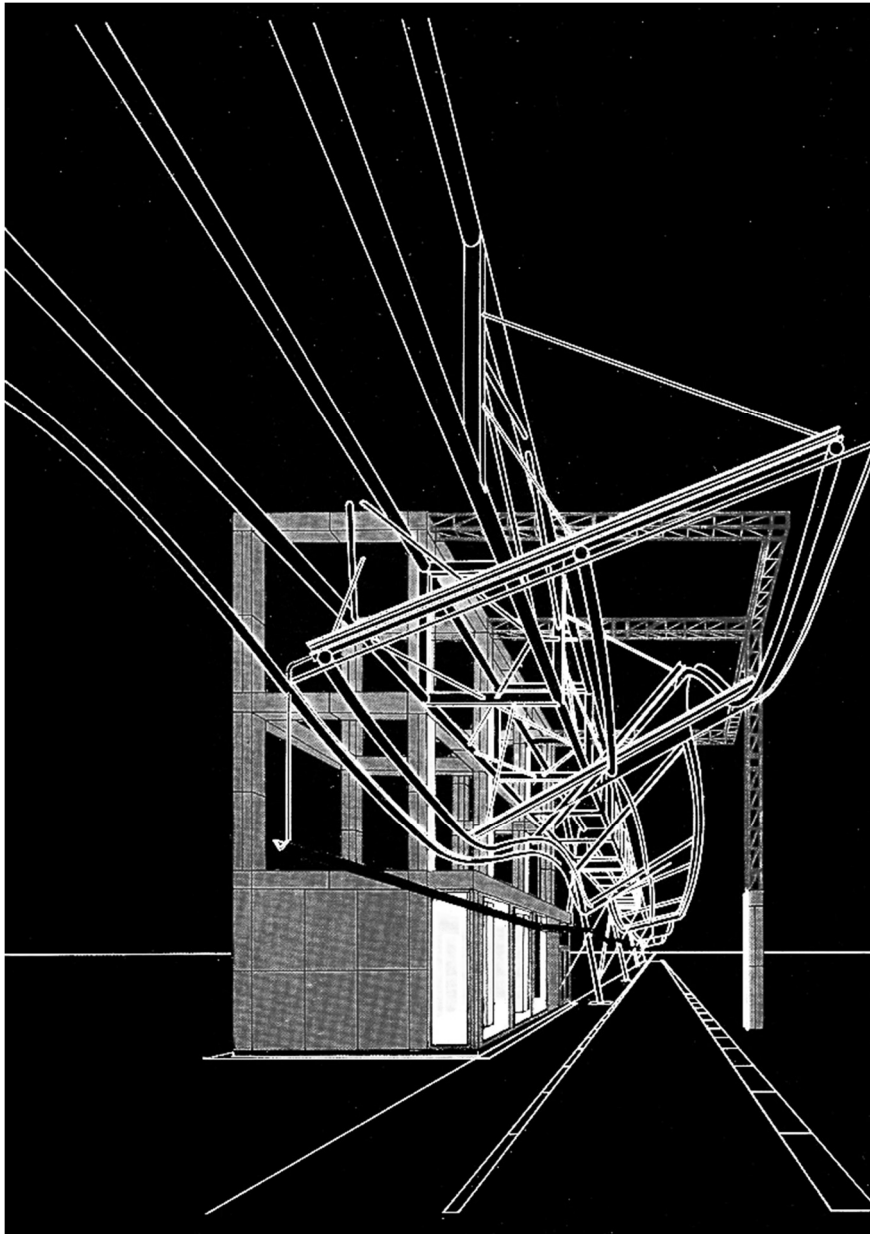
## Theory and practice

Jon Lang (1987) stressed that theory must be concerned with the practical applications of the discipline, and claimed that if "theory does not do this, it is irrelevant". The philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) went further to suggest that 'theory *is* practice'. Charles Jencks acknowledged that theory is significant to the discipline of architecture, and that most architects do use it for practical ends (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). Practicing architect Bernard Tschumi for example, acknowledged the value of engaging with theoretical issues when realising design projects (Tschumi, 2000). From thinkers to designers, there is therefore strong agreement on the significance of translating theory into practical outcomes.

Architects often relate to a 'presence' or 'charge' within their work that describes their thinking (Johnson, 1994). This relates to the notion that they embed in their architecture something that survives long after their parting. This presence makes the architecture significant to someone or

becomes symbolic of something; it commands its authenticity. Such qualities of presence could be described as the ingrained theory of the designer, the representation of values, attitudes, and actions that the designer aspires to transmit through their practice. Whether this is truly an expression of the theoretical thinking behind it, as Johnson (1994) questions is uncertain; simply because it can easily be misread. Readers bring to their experience of architectural works their own presuppositions that may influence their perception and interpretation of this presence. This interpretive quality some argue, represents the very 'poetics' of building. A conscious desire to convey a particular theory by an 'exact translation' of physical construction is likely to limit the work's interpretive potential, thereby imposing upon it an authoritarian order to their experience.

What remains clear is that there is no comprehensive agreement on how, and the degree to which the translation of theory into practice should occur. Architects from time to time have attempted to establish definitive structural links, although most have failed to make these comprehensible. As Johnson (1994) suggested, the nature of these associations vary from author to author and building to building. It is therefore reasonable to expect Tschumi's associations to take a different structure, form, and potency to that of Koolhaas'. The translation after all, is only as good as the translator, and their commitment to precision.



Source: Papadakis (1989)

*Figure 4. Parc de la Villette in Paris, Tschumi's sketch of a folie.*

## Bernard Tschumi, an architect-theorist

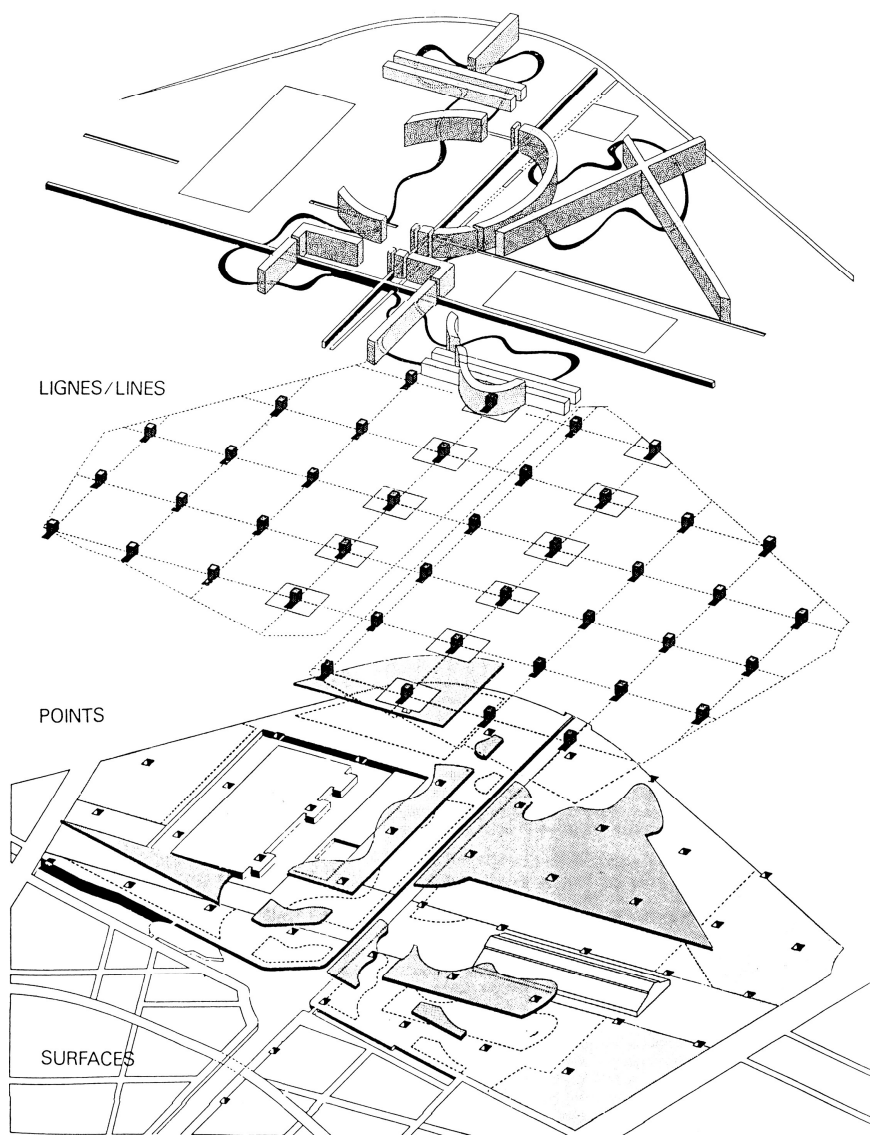
Progressing from the consideration of the prerequisites of architectural theorising, this section examines a precedent that explicitly attempted to address the translation of theory into practice. This precedent is 'Parc de la Villette', a project and programme for an urban park in Paris designed by the architect-theorist Bernard Tschumi. It is however not the purpose of this section to examine in depth the narrative development and design process of this project. That task has already been completed and published by the architect himself. The focus of this section is therefore to emphasise the associations between theory and practice that he has explicitly made in the design and realisation of the project. This in turn provides the overall study with a datum or reference-point to compare and assess Koolhaas' work later in the next chapter.

*"The themes developed in the Manhattan Transcripts have influenced much of our subsequent work... Parc de la Villette... could" not "have existed without the Transcripts"*

Tschumi (1994)

Tschumi presented the above assertion with reference to his first theoretical treatise, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1994). He later clarified its purpose by stating that, "the transcripts were only introducing, in a theoretical manner, what is to be applied at La Villette" (Tschumi, 1997).

Such statements are assertions of Tschumi's conviction, not only in the necessity for translating theory into built practice, but also in such theoretical material preceding the practical task. In his description he therefore leaves no room for ambiguity, with the application of his theorising meticulously planned and eventually executed. Parc de la Villette, as he situated it, was provoked by the potent desire on his part to move "from pure mathematics to applied mathematics" (Tschumi, 1997).



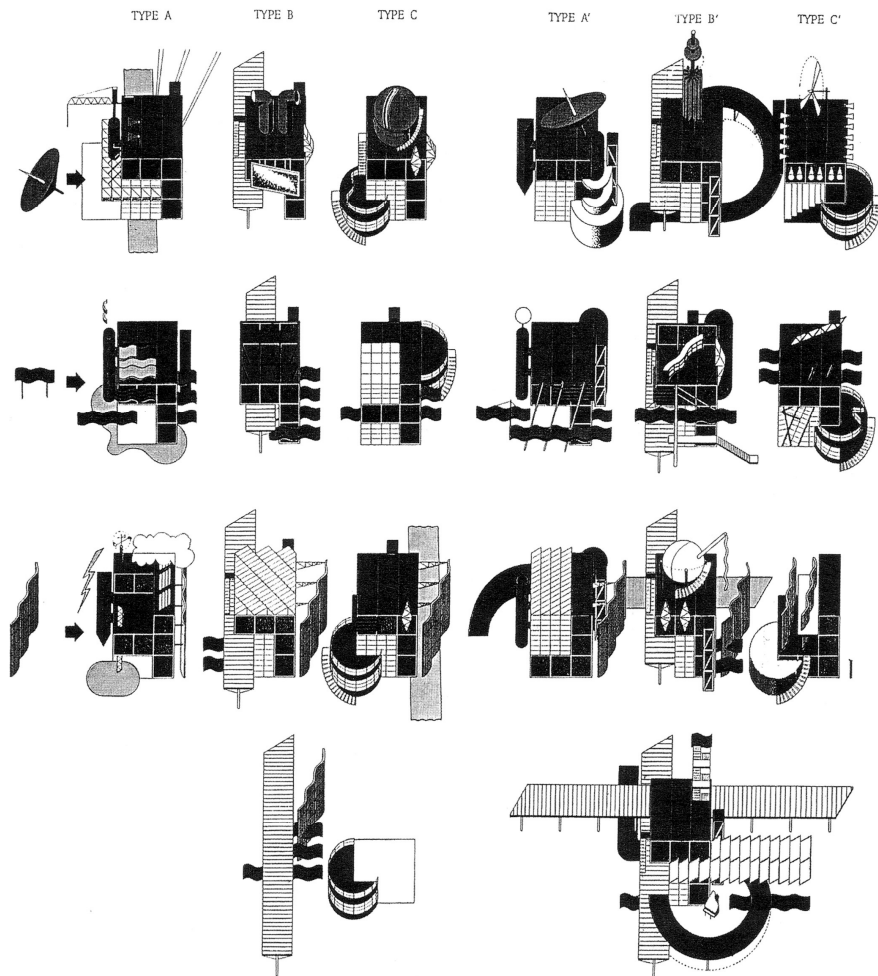
Source: Glusberg (1991)

Figure 5. Parc de la Villette in Paris; superimposition of three autonomous grids.

The significant discovery that Tschumi made through his endeavours was an understanding of the challenges associated with translating theory into practice. He highlighted that although this process of translation had its restrictions, it also managed to progress and expand his theoretical work. The technical, economic, and political constraints of the operation demanded the theoretical argumentation for the project to be refined (Tschumi, 1997). The practice of a theory thus leads to its re-evaluation, and the eventual refinement of that theory, (i.e., a feedback loop).

At the heart of the project's theoretical argument was the aim to prove that it was not only possible to theorise, but also build an architectural project without relating to the traditions of composition, hierarchy, and order. To Tschumi the park had to oppose the historical admiration of architecture being a 'harmonious synthesis'. It had to attack causality, particularly the fundamental relationship between architecture and that of the programme, (i.e., his attack on convention). The park was to be about 'architecture against itself: a disintegration', (i.e., the realisation of his new order) (Tschumi, 1997). Driving the physical manifestation of Parc de la Villette was therefore a compelling interrogation intended to deconstruct the very foundations of architecture. This questioning is meant to be implicit in the experience of the built structures of the park, with each programmatic clash serving as an argument trigger.

Parc de la Villette is also renowned for the collaboration that Tschumi entertained with the discipline of philosophy. His thinking alone was deemed insufficient, with French philosopher Jacques Derrida invited to critique and address any intellectual deficiencies (Derrida, 1986, Wigley, 1995). This collaboration meant that the park was realised with not just the application of Tschumi's theory, but also Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction. To Tschumi, deconstruction provided the means for dismantling convention using concepts derived from architecture itself, as well as from other domains such as cinema, literature, and philosophy.



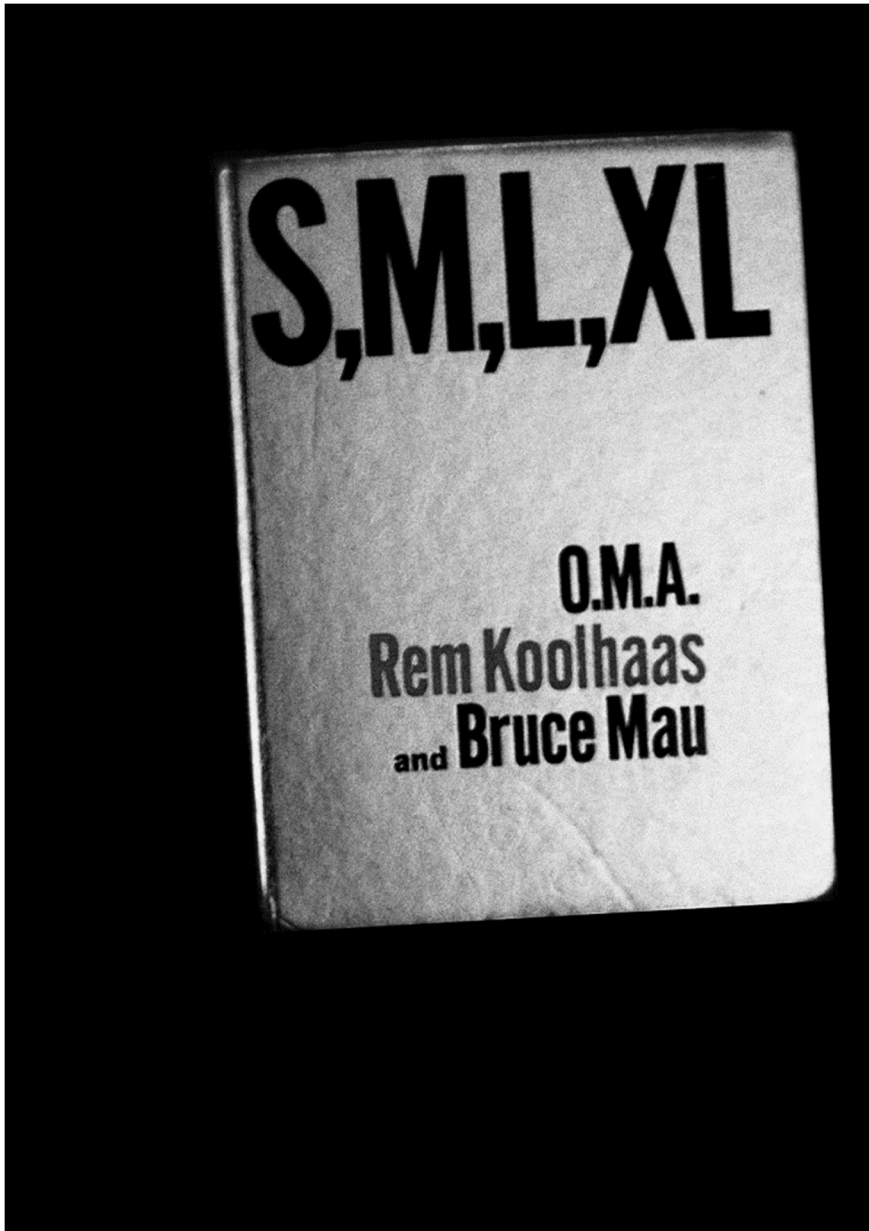
Source: Tschumi (2000)

Figure 6. Parc de la Villette in Paris; folie typologies.



There are many interpretations of how Parc de la Villette relates to Deconstruction theory, much of which is contentious. The significant fact is that these interpreted associations are asserted by the authors with conviction (in the first order). The conscious desire to associate theory and practice is therefore potent and unashamedly expressed, which is a rare occurrence in architectural discourse.

For Tschumi, architecture cannot be too 'innocent'. Every project from onset should be informed by theoretical issues and aim to make associations with the significant ideas of its time (Tschumi, 2000). *The Manhattan Transcripts* was therefore the foreword for Parc de la Villette, and its eventual construction established his theory of space, time, movement and event (Tschumi, 1997), in conjunction with the Deconstructivist philosophy of Derrida (1986). Tschumi in his published works makes it his unequivocal task to define the associations that exist between his theoretical thinking and implemented practice. This contributes to the study an example of a conscious translation that can be used to compare Koolhaas' theoretical thinking and built practice. A key question to be addressed at the end of this study is whether Koolhaas' associations and translations are as transparent and potent as Tschumi's.



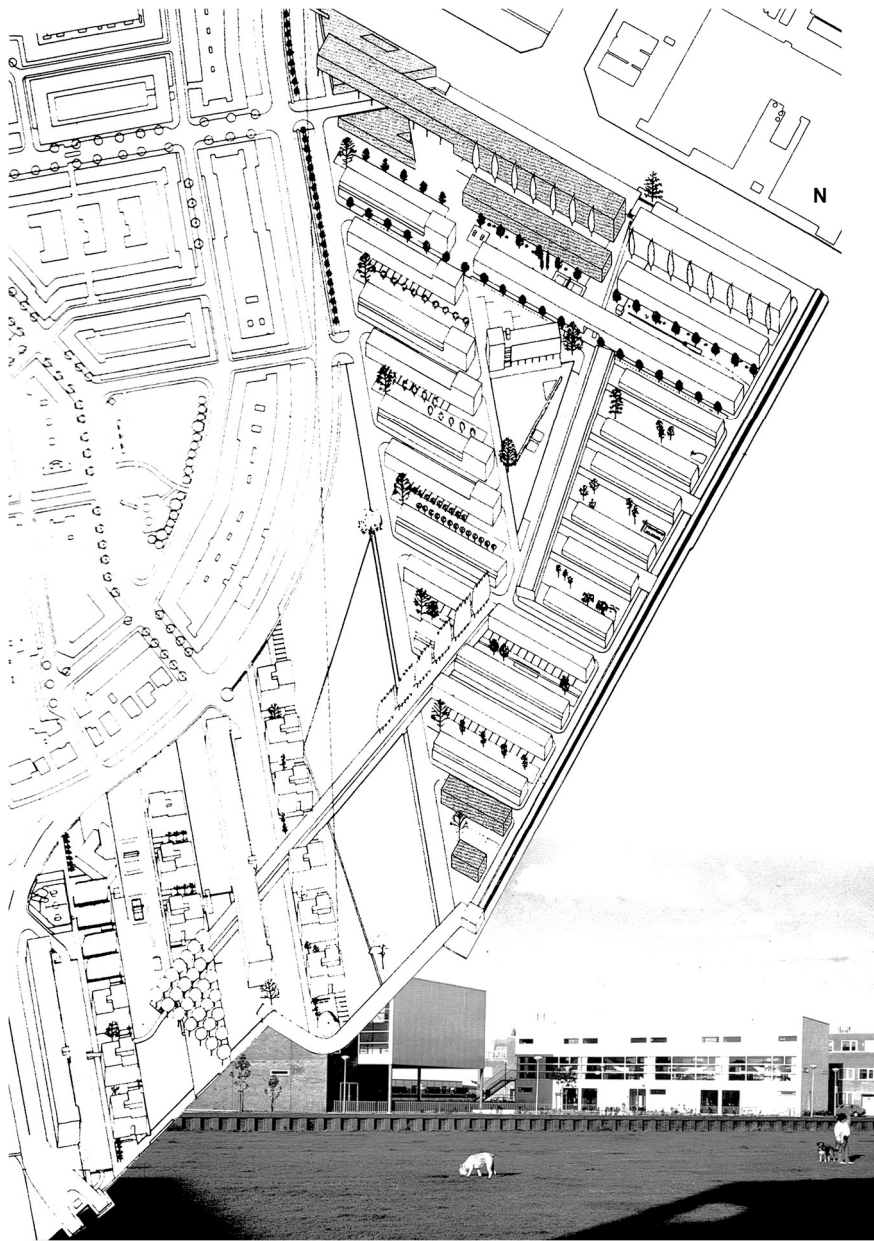
*Figure 7. Cover of S, M, L, XL (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995), principal volume.*

# 4

## Reading Koolhaas

This chapter examines the theory and practice of the architect-theorist Rem Koolhaas. As highlighted earlier, considering his theories is unlike reading a structured volume. His theoretical works as demonstrated by his own description of *S, M, L, XL* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995), are presented as narratives, manifestos, and anecdotes that describe everything he has discovered and understood prior to publishing. They read as an anthology of ‘theories of everything’, with each work as an autonomous ‘episode’ addressing specific issues and interests. It is significant to note that unlike Tschumi, he makes no overt association between these theoretical episodes and his implemented architectural practice. Neither are they explicitly presented as condition precedent to any project.

Of the many theoretical works Koolhaas has presented, only two ‘episodes’ are critically examined for the focus of this chapter. Namely, ‘The Generic City’ and ‘Bigness: or the problem of large’; both published in the anthology *S, M, L, XL* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). These two episodes have been selected for the reason that in most critiques they prove to be ‘permanent ingredients in discussing his work, regardless of the point of view’ (Patteeuw, 2003). The following presents a brief description of the two episodes, and critically examines their substance against the implemented ‘Euralille’ project in Lille, France.



Source: Jacques (1991)

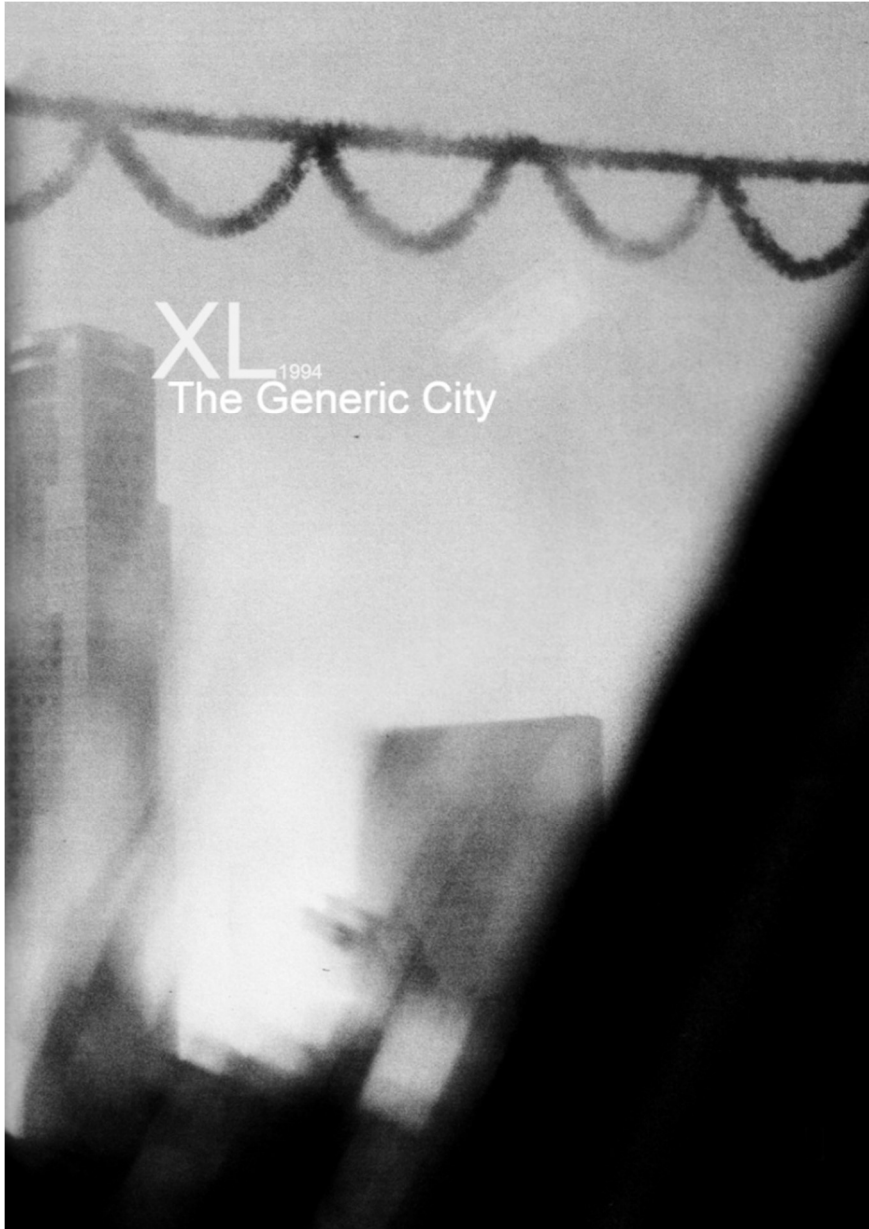
Figure 8. An urban scheme: IJ-plein, Amsterdam North (1980-89).

## Defining Koolhaas

It is challenging to define Koolhaas as being exclusively a theorist, novelist, scriptwriter, or an architect. He himself had once claimed that he is “an architect with theoretical and literary interests” (Koolhaas, in Levene, 1998). For many critics this self-description is reductive. Aron Betsky for example (in Patteeuw, 2003), described him and a few of his colleagues as a group of architects that continually strive to redefine their position. This suggests that his identity is always in a state of transition; doing his best to question the status quo and redefine his role within an ever-changing world. Clarifying his contemporary theory and practice thus requires identifying the origins of his interests to determine whether a common structure survives the many developmental transitions. The ‘city’ in this regard seems to be a significant foundation and continual thread of interest.

## An urban-theorist

*IJ-plein* (1980-89) is one of Koolhaas’ early projects for a low-income housing scheme in the north of Amsterdam (Figure 8), which appears at cursory glance as a simple arrangement of buildings. As Ian Buruma clarified (in Patteeuw, 2003), this seemingly ordinary arrangement was a subtle attempt to create an autonomous neighbourhood with shops, housing, and a playground, all connected together to form a distinct socioeconomic collective. This early project is an example of his strong interest in urban communities rather than individual buildings (Patteeuw, 2003). Even as a student he was preoccupied with urban situations, particularly its inseparable association with architecture. As the years advanced, critics have suggested that the entire history of his practice (i.e., the OMA) has been a relentless quest for a coherent urban vision (Menu et al., 1996). Thus, his continual engagement with tasks and research into all things urban, unsurprisingly serves to qualify him as an urban-theorist.



Source: Koolhaas and Mau (1995)

*Figure 9. Introductory plate to the Generic City, 'an anonymous metropolis'.*

Koolhaas first established this role of the architect as a narrator of urbanism in his seminal volume, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto* (Koolhaas, 1994). The Manhattan borough in New York was an urban playground with an intriguing story that until his arrival had not been duly considered; the product of an unformulated theory where cities exist within cities (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). He confidently claimed that “Manhattan’s the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Rosetta stone, the programme for decoding”, a statement that highlighted the triumphant discovery of its urban structures and their significance to deciphering other urbanisms. *Delirious New York* was therefore the foundation for all his work on the city; a theory of everything that he desired to use to decode and decipher all urbanisms and determine their projected form (Enwezor, 2003). Architecture in this paradigm is considered as a way of conveying an understanding of the city; a building block belonging to a much larger and complex landscape.

## Considered theories

From an understanding of the origins of Koolhaas’ interest for theorising about the city, the following considers the two main theories that were identified at the beginning of this chapter as being its focus. It is significant to note that both theories are concerned with architecture and urban studies, and complements his earlier identified principle that an architectural project must comprehend and acknowledge its urban situation.

### *The Generic City*

In *S, M, L, XL* (1995) ‘The Generic City’ was categorised as an ‘extra-large project’, simply for the reason that it considered macroscale built environments. The setting for this narrative was established with a series of ten obscure images of an anonymous metropolis. The identity of this city has been purposely withheld to facilitate an attack on prevailing urbanism, in particular its ‘identity’. “Identity is a mousetrap...” he claimed, “...the stronger the identity the more it imprisons” (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995).

The following sixteen paragraphs detailed a manifesto of a generic urbanism where the cities of the world have become one generic typology in both form and function. He described this city as being detached from its context and driven by efficiency, with history reduced to token gestures. It is an urbanism that in the end could exist anywhere in the world, with the same functions, activities, appearances, and lifestyles.

This Generic City is the projected outcome of the uncontrollable wave that is described as 'globalisation'. Cities in such a future he claimed, would "strive to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man to coincide with his desires" (Koolhaas, 1994). Identity would thus have little purpose as the desire for efficiency has gained primacy.

Among the many urban situations that he researched for this work, Singapore attracted attention as the model for what he believed to be an embryonic representation of the Generic City. In his study of this city, he identified an association between the urban fabric created and the authoritarian regime that governs that territory. Similarly the Generic City he reasoned, "has a (sometimes distant) relationship with a more or less authoritarian regime" (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). It is evident from this statement that he is intrigued by and examines not only the sociocultural climates of cities, but also their political drivers and power balances. He supposes here the need for some authoritarian control to bring about the changes necessary to generate the efficiency of a generic urbanism.

For Okwui Enwezor (2003), Koolhaas the architect assumes here the role of an anthropologist and ethnographer, employing social science methodologies to decipher the evidence within cities in the hope of understanding the complex dynamics of human habitat and culture. Even in *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1994), it is evident that his intention was not to focus on the rigid physical identity of the Manhattan Island, but on the density of human habitation and the activities that had created cities within a city. It is this reference to habitation density within *Delirious New York* that he later translated and developed into his theory of Bigness.



*Bigness: or the problem of large*

Building on a latent concept of 'Manhattanism', Koolhaas developed his argument for the 'big' in architecture (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). The essay begins with the delivery of the antithesis, the reasons for its dismissal by conventional interests as something that is non-contextual and disruptive to urban fabrics. The engineering, servicing, and economical impracticalities that the big generates have always questioned the value of attempting to build big. Bigness is consequently considered as an unsustainable approach to urban development, which leads to inevitable structural failure (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995).

With the paragraph titled as the 'beginning', Koolhaas constructed his thesis for Bigness, the counterargument for the reasons mentioned above. He defined Bigness as a state that is reached when a structure exceeds a certain critical volume. He argued that such a volume cannot be controlled by a single architectural interest, or for that matter a few. Owing to the volume that it acquires it starts to lack unity, thus leading to the autonomy of its separate parts. This he argued does not indicate fragmentation, as the autonomous parts still remain attached and committed to the whole (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). Such architecture that has the desire and means to grow will inevitably become independent of the architect's control. It will organically transform into something that is so big that in a final radical break, depart from the urban tissue to become a micro-city in its own right (Jencks and Kropf, 1997). He claimed that this evolution of "Bigness destroys, but it is also a new beginning" (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). Its growth therefore gives birth to new modes and associations between it and its surrounding urban fabric.

Bigness is a prime example of Koolhaas' interest in the interactions between architecture and urbanism. Such interactions along with the Bigness that he described are considered later with reference to project Euralille.

## Considering Koolhaas' urbanism

The two theories summarised above addressed urban situations. This section briefly examines Koolhaas' interpretation of urbanism, and draws from significant theoretical projects including his study of the city of Lagos in Nigeria (in Koolhaas, 2001a).

*"I think myself being global"*

Koolhaas (in Koolhaas and Mau, 1995)

Although for a global itinerant an urban future that resembles the Generic City might seem a welcoming utopia, it is likely to be a disconcerting existence for the typical urban dweller (Buruma, in Patteeuw, 2003). A setting that offers a monotonous existence obsessed with efficiency will inevitably take its toll on the wellbeing of its inhabitants. A generic urbanism is thus destined to disintegrate with time into a dystopia, where all sense of belonging would be lost to the tyranny of efficiency. Such an urbanism would be an uncommon ambition and its global realisation an unlikely pursuit, regardless of its early symptoms of chrome, glass, plastic, and fluorescent lighting diagnosed in any existing urban instance.

Ian Buruma (in Patteeuw, 2003) stressed the offering of this narrative of generic cities as not a sincere attempt to encourage it as a utopian urbanism. Koolhaas has consciously never attempted to express utopian views and thus far has distanced himself from a political vision of an ideal city. The narrative is therefore a satirical work that presents a hyperbolic projection of a global trend, narrated to highlight its many potentials. It is in effect a manifesto that calls for a radical assessment of this trend, and its implications for the future cities of the world.

Buruma also stressed that Koolhaas 'wants to deal with the modern world as he finds it' (in Patteeuw, 2003). He actively seeks to be aware of the present-day world rather than attempting to device and project abstract concepts. The root tendency that he amplified to describe the Generic City

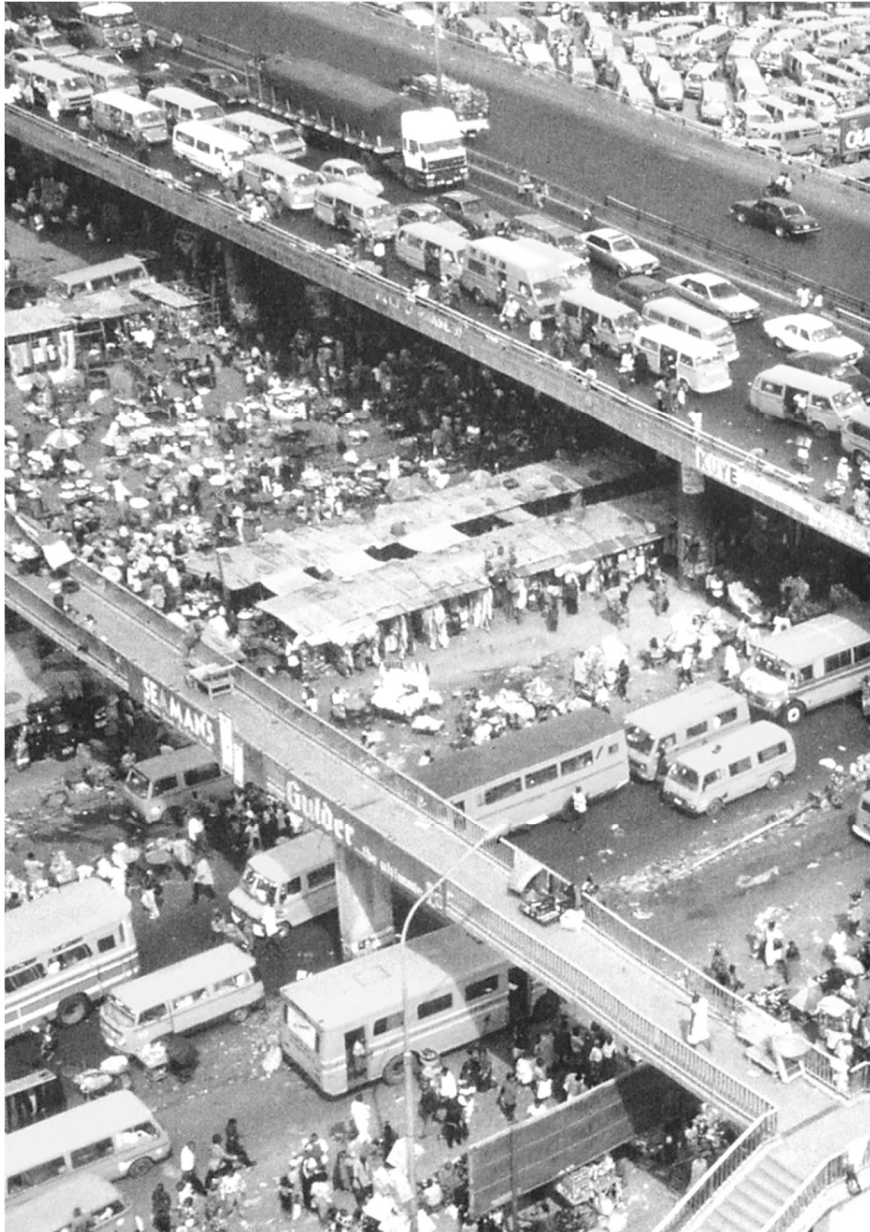
therefore exists in the urbanisms of the present. This root tendency that the narrative acknowledged was 'globalisation'. His aim was not so much to persuade in favour, but to accept and address the urban transformations that it is likely to generate. In his typical informality he had metaphorically described himself as a 'surfer' that rides the waves of this trend, with intent to adapt, evolve, and eventually attain success:

*"The force and the direction of the wave are uncontrollable, it breaks, and the surfer can only, in exploiting it, 'master' it by choosing his route"*

Koolhaas, in Patteeuw (2003)

The Generic City narrative identified the urban fabrics of global cities as undergoing a process of rapid renewal influenced by this socioeconomic and political trend. The old cities of the world are thus seen to gradually give way to the new. As Buruma argued (in Patteeuw, 2003), this urban renewal does not suggest that he was advocating an urbanism that should discard historical interests to make way for the new. Koolhaas simply identified that the old urbanism if left without the revitalising 'shock' of the new, will inevitably become an uninhabitable museum relic that fails to address the needs of a changing world. The history that has been layered onto cities must thus be shattered and rewritten time and again to redefine the state and needs of its living inhabitants.

The balance of preserving the old while introducing the new is challenging to achieve in any established city, particularly within a European context where historical building fabrics are profoundly valued. This inherent friction intrigued Koolhaas, and stressed that there is no necessity to raze the old for the sake of creating the new. Instead, the forces of change should seek to build the new out of the 'wounds of the old'. Urban fabrics with wastelands, neglected areas, and scars from disasters should be of particular interest as opportunities for the new to be realised. Dereliction therefore can be transformed to be beautiful, and despair the stimulation for this radical creativity (Buruma, in Patteeuw, 2003).



Source: Koolhaas (2001a)

*Figure 10. Lagos in Nigeria, chaos glorified as an order of a different kind.*

The attraction to dereliction and dysfunction as opportunities appears to be the motivation behind Koolhaas' exploration of Lagos. His study embraced the notion of the city suffering endless 'mutations', and acknowledged the 'beauty' of decay and disorganisation as constructive generators of its self-organisation (Enwezor, 2003).

*"Lagos as an icon of west African urbanity, inverts every characteristic of the so called modern city. Yet, it still - for lack of a better word - a city; and one that works"...*

*... "These shortcomings have generated ingenious, critical alternative systems, which demand a redefinition of ideas such as carrying capacity, stability, and even order"*

Koolhaas (2001a)

Okwui Enwezor (2003) was critical of this glorification of decay and disorganisation, and believed that Koolhaas had insensitively overlooked the data to idealise Lagos' desperation. He found the study to have failed to empathise with the suffering amidst the chaos, and to distort it further with visual distraction. The need for generalising issues had resulted in a resistance to local truths that defied 'his' anthropo-urbanism. The agenda of the author therefore had taken hold of the facts to manipulate events to complement a pre-designed purpose. Enwezor (2003) expressed his strong discontent with this perceived manipulation by quoting another critic's unforgiving description of Koolhaas' Lagosian study as a mere 'drive-by-urbanism'.

*"Many of the trends of modern western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise in Lagos suggests that to write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London or Los Angeles"*

(Koolhaas, 2001a)

As with the Generic City, Koolhaas' intention with Lagos was to identify universal tendencies rather than a specific manifestation of how things are, or even as they ought to be. The generalised findings of Lagos were meant to be a foreshadowing, an imagery of what could happen to western urbanism if it ignores the evolution and escalation of undesirable trends.

Lagos in this framework is at risk of only being a means to an end; where it was used to reinforce identified universal structures, but neglected the specifics that described its uniqueness, particularly its relatability to the African context. Koolhaas has thus been accused of attempting to focus on certain data that best complemented his desire to relate back to a European perspective, i.e., a study of an African city as a foreshadowing to Europeans. It is this perceived condescension that Enwezor (2003), along with many other critics have found to be disconcerting. The use of this specific city is almost irrelevant to the reader as it fails to give a true comprehension of its situation. If the purpose was to present an understanding of Lagos, as Enwezor emphasised, “the research project ... (could have been) more properly localised”, and focus on the principles of understanding rather than on the ‘erotics of chaos’ (Enwezor, 2003).

The research project on Lagos as well as other Asian cities have compelled many critics to question the true purpose behind Koolhaas’ theorising. Is he truly an architectural anthropologist who genuinely considers these urban situations to comprehend and formulate his theories of urbanism, or is it all just a promotional ruse? As Enwezor (2003) emphasised, Koolhaas is in any case unlikely to truthfully decipher the urbanisms of the ‘elsewhere’ (beyond Europe), as his established theories of western urbanism contaminates and haunts his framework.

Cities are more than just mountains of data that can be decoded to validate reductive theories. They are dynamic systems with high complexity that adapt in response to a multitude of socioeconomic and political stimuli. Koolhaas’ studies on Lagos and Asian cities have exemplified this complexity in the way that they have defied his decoding and narration (Enwezor, 2003). The triumphal declarations of his *Delirious New York*, does him disservice in this regard as it taints all his research as arising from a decipherer’s task. It is unwise, and to an extent conceited to assume that the elsewhere in particular can simply be deciphered and narrated with reference to a ‘Rosetta stone’ of the west.

## Euralille: a translation of theory?

The project was initiated with the signing of the 1986 Franco-British agreement to build the Channel Tunnel, and the agreement with northern European countries in 1987 to develop the TGV network. Although the original proposal for the Paris-Brussels line was planned to bypass the city of Lille, following rigorous lobbying by local interests it was decided in 1987 that the TGV would pass through its centre. Lille's location is exceptional, situated between London, Paris, and Brussels, and thus within reach of some of the most densely populated and prosperous regions. The economic context of the city at the time was also exceptional, with the steady decline of industry in the region driving its economy into a state of desperation. This project was therefore intended to revitalise Lille to become a new epicentre for European activity (Bertolini and Spit, 1998).

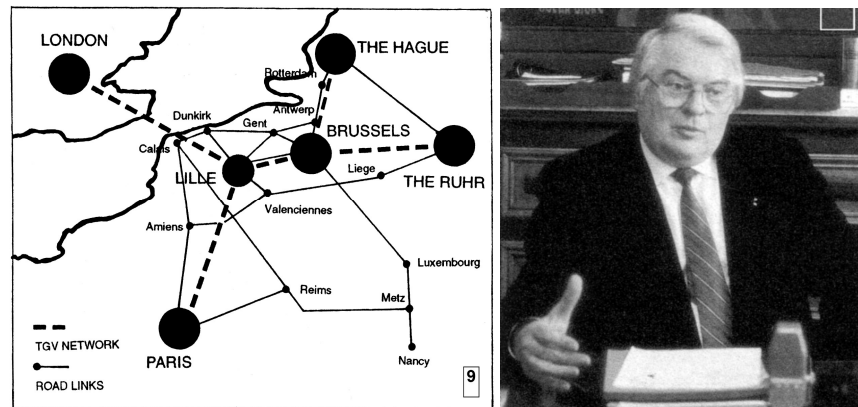


Figure 11. TGV network map (left), and Pierre Mauroy (right).

### *The brief*

Pierre Mauroy, Lille's longstanding Mayor and former Prime Minister of France, was the political architect of this vision. Under his guidance, a public-private study partnership was setup in 1988, which conducted feasibility studies and produced a brief for an urban project.



Source: Levene (1998)

Figure 12. Euralille site in Lille (above), and under construction (below).

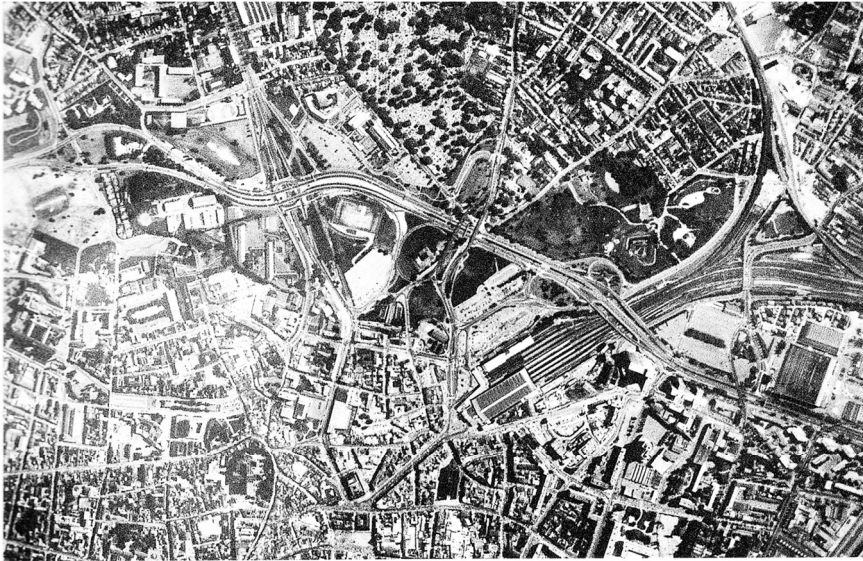


The site selected was next to the existing Flandres Station, a greenfield site in public hands that had remained vacant owing to military ownership. The first objective of the brief was to build a new TGV central station. Following this, an international business centre was to be built between the old and new stations. To avoid any commercial conflicts, a diverse programme was suggested incorporating offices, services, shops, housing, open spaces, and cultural and public facilities (Bertolini and Spit, 1998).

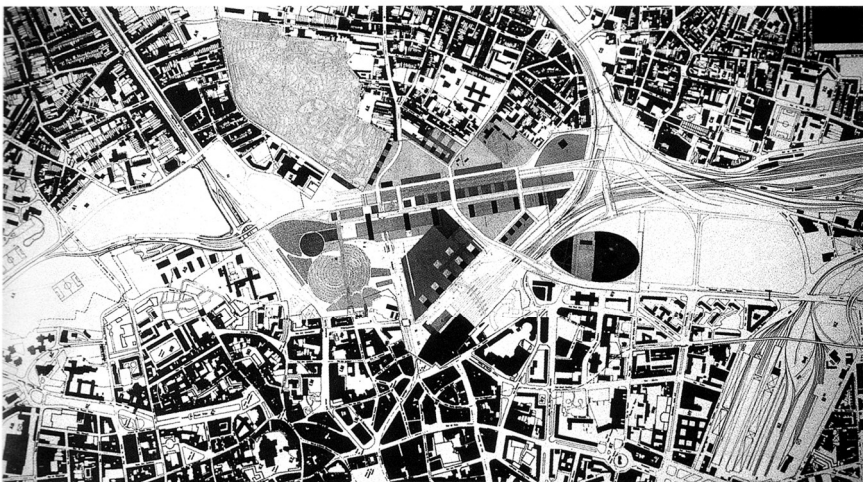
As *S, M, L, XL* described the programme, the project was intended as a new city named as 'Euralille', placed walking distance from old Lille (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). With this brief in mind, a master architect was required to direct the development. After oral presentations from a shortlist of eight European architects that included renowned names such as Claude Vasconi, Koolhaas was appointed as the masterplanner in 1989. It was later publicised that 'he was chosen because he had a vision of the city, not of a project' (Bertolini and Spit, 1998). The masterplan was developed by Koolhaas' OMA with constant consultation with Mayor Mauroy, and mediated by the Executive Director of Lille (Jean-Paul Baïetto). In 1990, a public-private development partnership was formed to implement this new instant city (Bertolini and Spit, 1998).

### *The scheme*

Koolhaas was delighted with the audacity of the brief for Euralille. He described the task as "to make a quantum leap towards a radical future as exotic as imminent" (Koolhaas, in Bertolini and Spit, 1998). Encouraged by unprecedented political and client support, the OMA masterplan for the project became more and more adventurous in the early stages of its design process, although the simplification of these initial proposals was inevitable to address financial limitations (Bertolini and Spit, 1998).

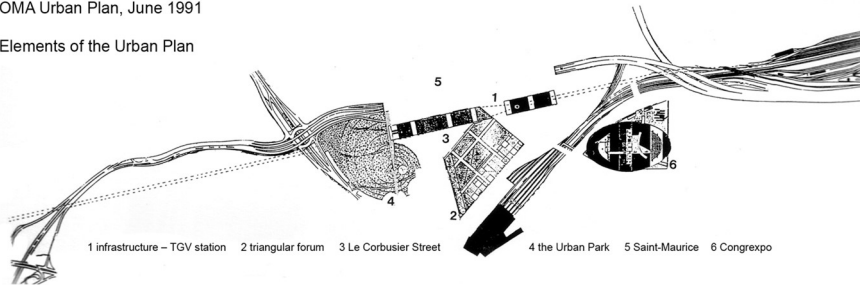


Aerial view



OMA Urban Plan, June 1991

Elements of the Urban Plan



Source: Levene (1998)

Figure 13. Euralille urban plan, and the six key features (below).

The OMA scheme had six key features (see Figure 13):

**1. Infrastructure (TGV hub)**

The first feature required the unravelling of the existing knot of roads and tracks and addressing the new TGV line. For Koolhaas the TGV was the fulcrum of the scheme, and a strategy of ‘superimposition’ was proposed to redefine its significance to the city. This proposed three buildings being built over the tracks to become a part of the TGV hub. He envisioned that “building and train would become different states of the same system” (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995).

**2. Triangular forum**

The triangular terrain between the two stations was the ‘connective tissue’, bringing together the two nodal infrastructure bases and connecting it to the city. It was imagined as a volume with two urban life modes, one public and the other commercial. The programme demanded a vast shopping centre, five tower blocks, an apartment block, and a hotel.

**3. Le Corbusier Street**

Le Corbusier Street was the most significant link between the city, the TGV hub, the business centre, and the edges of Saint Maurice (Levene, 1998). The viaduct was 172 m in length and was designed to be more architectural than a civil engineering structure (Menu et al., 1996).

**4. Urban Park**

At the northern side of the scheme was an urban park, and took the form of a circular vegetative mound. To the west it re-valued the significance of the wall ruins, while to the east it formed a connection to a nineteenth century cemetery (Levene, 1998).

**5. Edges (Saint Maurice)**

The scale of the scheme meant that the edge condition, ‘Saint Maurice’ in particular, was significant for the mediation with the rest of the urban fabric (Levene, 1998).

**6. The Congrexpo**

Koolhaas and the OMA designed the Congrexpo (see Figure 16 to 19), which he had described as ‘a conceptual saucer’ (in Meade, 1994), and contained three major components that can function autonomously or combine to ‘generate hybrids’ (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995).



*Figure 14. Euralille (above), and Euralille viewed from Lille (below).*

## Euralille and the Generic City

An optimistic critic would describe Euralille as an ‘instant city’, set down like an alien spacecraft with masses of greyness that suggests the arrival of a new urbanism (Meade, 1994). For the traditionalist however, it is a disconcerting contrast to Lille’s historic centre and represents the very imagery of ‘cheap modern junk’ (Menu et al., 1996). Such contrasting descriptions illustrate Euralille’s audacity in relation to its context and the urban morphology it has generated. The project as a result has managed to induce strong reactions to generate both interest and debate. This in return has directed much needed attention to Lille, and thereby demonstrated Euralille as having successfully addressed the project’s central aim.

Euralille today is a transitional city where people work, eat, and buy; while the old town of Lille is revitalised, renovated, and once again thriving (Balmond, 2003). Ian Buruma (in Patteeuw, 2003) sees the project’s success as a bold urban experiment that has managed to ‘shock the old’ to regenerate a fading city. The necessity for ‘shocking the old to revitalise’ is expressed in the Generic City. Koolhaas described the need for cities to be rejuvenated by shocking its urban fabric to address contemporary desires, without being constrained by nostalgic attachments. Lille is thus an example of such a city that has regained a sense of vitality by addressing its modern needs, without being restricted by its historical associations to form, scale, style, and organisation (see Figure 14).

The modern world represents the age of information, cyberspace, and virtual worlds that are gradually making all sense of physical identity obsolete. Koolhaas considered this as a form of liberation from the constraints of ‘place’, ‘region’, and ‘character’, with opportunity for “Lille [to] redefine the idea of address” (in Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). His proposal as a result was purposefully anti-contextual, and encouraged inhabitants to vacate real space in favour of virtual space. The public spaces of the project were therefore intended as spaces of transition and movement (Dovey, 1998).



Source: Koolhaas and Mau (1995)

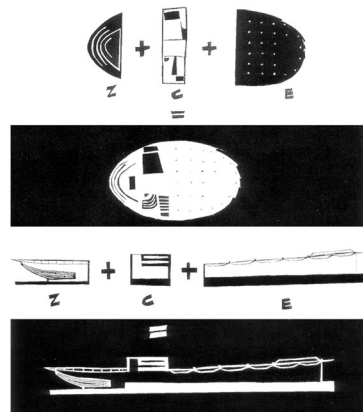
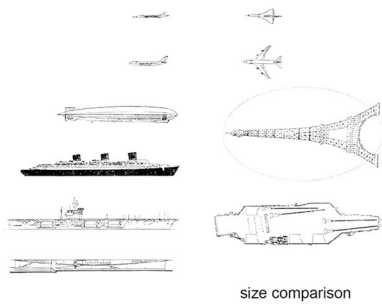
*Figure 15. Ennalsville figure-ground diagram.*

Essential to its success was the notion that sees Euralille as a city of movement. The central intent for the project as an urban development trigger was supported by the significance of its location; an hour from Paris and two from London. The project needed to exploit this significance of its siting to define itself as a European hub of movement. The TGV and its hub thus were essential components of the OMA's masterplan to present Euralille as a situation for transient urban habitation.

The significance of 'movement' is another concept that Koolhaas addressed in the Generic City. Transport infrastructure is considered an essential asset in the progress and expansion of the modern city. In the manifesto, he addressed this in relation to the significance of the 'airport'. He claimed that "they are like quarters of the Generic City, sometimes its reason for being (its centre?)" (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). Although Euralille was not a vision realised on the primacy of an airport but a railway hub, does not diminish its standing as a city for movement. For Euralille the TGV hub was its *raison d'être* (reason for being); the centre and node from which all following ventures have and will propagate.

Taking the above into consideration, Euralille as a programme could be said to have: (1) shocked the old urban fabric to generate new reactions and interests; (2) distanced itself from nostalgic attachments to 'identity'; and (3) capitalised on location and its significance. As far as these three points are concerned, it is evident that Euralille has significant associations to the ideas expressed in the Generic City. Although critics such as Kim Dovey (1998) have concurred with such associations, it must be noted that Koolhaas himself has yet to explicitly express so in his theoretical writings.

Congrexpo 1990-1994



Source: Levene (1998)

Figure 16. Vast scale of the Congrexpo in relation to Euralille.



## Euralille and Bigness

The authorities defining Euralille's development were aware from inception that it would be a 'big' project. From onset they knew that it could not be envisioned from a reductive architectural outline, but require a master urban vision to be developed. As a result, they had decided to select a masterplanner through a process of oral dialogue rather than a design competition, as it would give them the opportunity to discuss this vision. Koolhaas was finally elected as he "had [such] a vision of the city, not [just] a project" (Bertolini and Spit, 1998). He was thus appointed to be the director of many architectural actions and interests (clients, planners, architects, etc.). Koolhaas acknowledged this and understood that the brief for the project demanded considerable spatial and programmatic complexity.

The multiple architectural actions were delegated to many designers. Koolhaas had the privilege to prescribe these architectural actions in greater detail, instead he presented them with abstract blocks with their strategic links and adjacencies, and gave them the freedom to make their own contributions to this new city. He hoped that "as Michelangelo liberated masterpieces from inert blocks of marble, so will the different architects... liberate genius from our boring slabs" (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). The collaborations with other architects such as Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc, and Claude Vasconi were a testament to his assertion that Bigness requires more than just an individual architect's creativity.

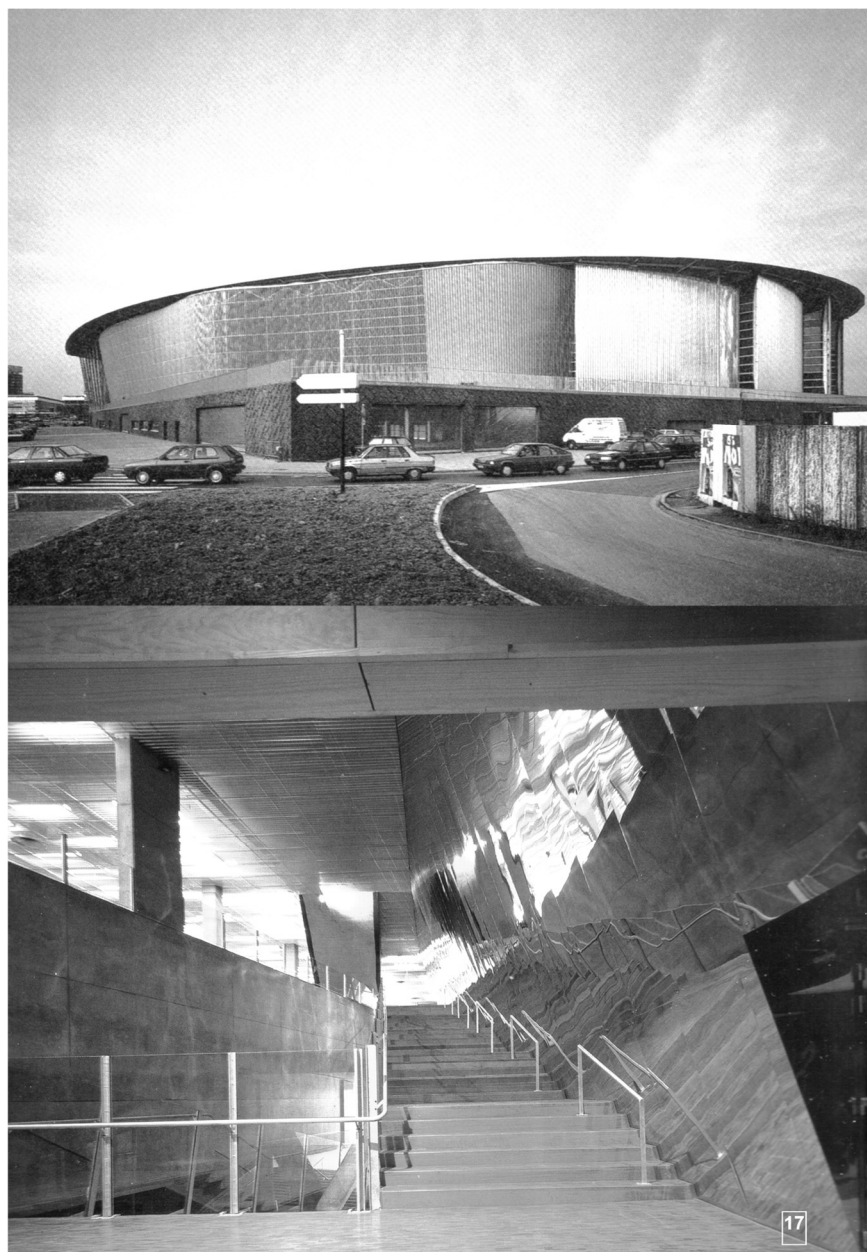
As the figure-ground study demonstrates (see Figure 15), Euralille asserts itself as vast footprints in striking contrast to the fabric of old Lille. The most definitive association to Bigness was represented by the large oblong 'egg' shaped structure, which was initially named as the 'Congrexpo'. Although the Congrexpo was somewhat detached from the TGV hub and the new centre, on its own it established its distinct dominance. Its 52,000 m<sup>2</sup> of multiple-use area and hybrid structure represented a Bigness that was tangible (Slessor, 1993). As its principal engineer Cecil Balmond (2003) claimed, "the Congrexpo acts like a city within a city" (see Figure

16). This vastness was even more pronounced in its internal experience. Meade (1994) validated this when he highlighted that on “entering Lille Grand Palais [the Congrexpo] does its massive scale and spatial complexity become evident” (see Figure 1). As Jean-Louis Cohen supposed (in Menu et al., 1996), “[the Congrexpo] obviously forms a part of the Bigness concept that Koolhaas has focused on for a while”.

Koolhaas himself in an interview gave a rare description of the thinking behind the Congrexpo: “I realised that the potential of this project was related to ideas advocated in *Delirious New York*”. When directly questioned on whether the Congrexpo was a description of Bigness, he replied in equal directness as, “yes, absolutely... I wanted to emphasise the possibility of creating whole things... Euralille is a fine example of such an effort” (in Menu et al., 1996). This reflective acceptance of the associations between his theory of Bigness and that of the built example of the Congrexpo, clarified the conscious objective to utilise his theories to inform his practice. The project consequently cemented Bigness as a theory put to the ultimate test of construction.

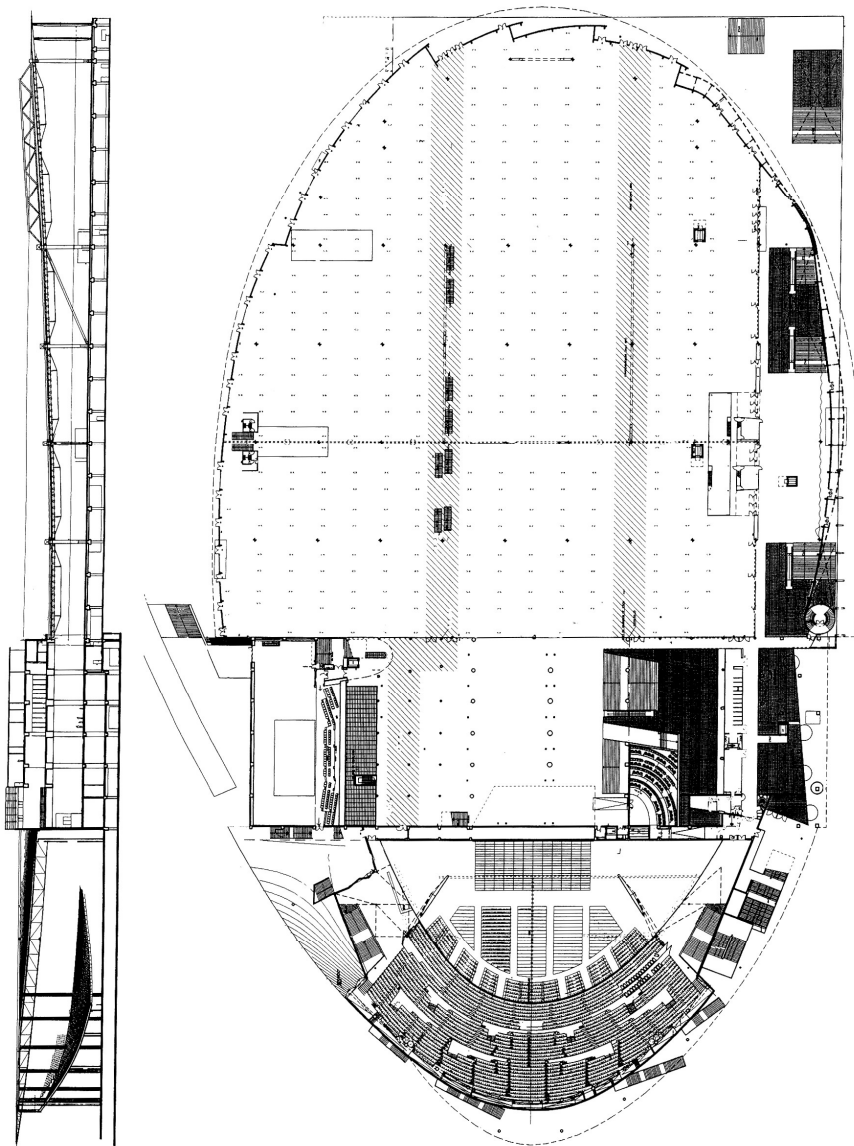
## Euralille and aesthetics

As Jean-Louis Cohen suggested (in Menu et al., 1996), the countless drawings and models produced for the scheme depicting slender highways and suspended footbridges, indicated a strong desire to imbue a certain imagery at Euralille. As with most of Koolhaas’ work, these aesthetic aspects are considered consequential and not worthy of explicit acknowledgement. Considering this imagery, the visual appeal evident seemed somewhat unrealised in the constructions at Euralille. Even the Congrexpo with its contrasting materials seemed incomprehensible to those that inhabit its spaces. For Cohen (in Menu et al., 1996), Koolhaas’ “undeniable ability to create graphical extravaganza falls flat in the finished constructions”; an unforgiving criticism that gives credibility to the interpretation that Euralille represented the very reality of ‘cheap modern junk’.



Source: Levene (1998)

*Figure 17. The Congresspo in Euralille (1990-94).*



Source: Levene (1998)

Figure 18. The Congresspo in plan and section.

## 5

### Conclusions

The principal aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, by examining the example of the contemporary architect-theorist Rem Koolhaas and his oeuvre. From the analysis of his exemplar project Euralille, it was established that he does make a conscious effort to translate his theory into practice, albeit in an indirect and fragmented manner. The hypothesis that ‘the practice of an architect-theorist is analogous to his theorising’, is therefore valid in relation to Koolhaas and his present situation.

Though the study specifically focused on the theories and built projects of Koolhaas, his identities of representation were an inseparable presence from this body of work. Numerous such identities were recognised, where he presented himself as an urbanist, data-collector, anthropologist, ethnographer, image-manipulator, novelist, journalist, and filmmaker..., to mention but a few. As these identities collided and overlapped, new insights into the architect and his practice were revealed.

### Associations

From examining Euralille, it was established that Koolhaas does attempt to translate his theories into built practice. However, the transparency of these translations was dissimilar to Tschumi’s. While Tschumi described his theoretical preconditions unequivocally in *Architecture and Disjunction* (1997), in *S, M, L, XL* (1995) Koolhaas presented Bigness, the Generic City, and nearly every other theory as distinct episodes not directly associated to a particular architectural project, or his practical work in general.



Source: Chaslin (2004)

Figure 19. The Dutch Embassy in Berlin (1997-2004).

Euralille's association to the theory of Bigness was clarified in informal discussion (in Menu et al., 1996), and not in any of Koolhaas' published theoretical works. Unlike Tschumi's unequivocal account of Parc de la Villette, he has offered little clarification of his projects in any of his authored material to date. The associations between his specific theories and practical works are thus left to the interpretation of the reader. When specifically queried on whether his theories (Bigness in particular) had relation to Euralille, he responded as: "in some ways yes, and in some ways no", and elaborated further by stating that "...several stances must be adopted at the same time" (in Menu et al., 1996). This suggests that no specific theory informs his practical work. Euralille was therefore not predetermined specifically by Bigness, but an expression of the many theories he has hitherto developed from his studies of architecture and urbanism.

If there is a common theme that can be identified in Koolhaas' oeuvre, it would have to be his constant faith in the primacy of the city. Both Bigness and the Generic City considered a particular architecture that defined a particular urbanism. Since his student days, he has embarked on a quest to understand the architectures that define a city. The Congrexpo's relationship to Euralille was an example of such an exploration. He claimed that "it is not a building that defines a clear architectural identity, but a building that creates and triggers potential, almost in an urbanistic sense" (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). The building was thus intended to trigger a new definition for the city, and the city it inhabits to define its significance.

Even with a modest project like the Dutch Embassy in Berlin (see Figure 19), Koolhaas sought to realise a building that would allow the reader to 'understand Berlin better' (Chaslin, 2004). Every project must therefore be representative of its urban situation, and meaningful to its inhabitants. As the section titled 'theory and practice' in Chapter 1 suggested, this deep awareness of the city is the 'charge' or 'presence' that represents the life-long values, attitudes, and actions that he aspires to communicate through his practice. As Aaron Betsky identified (in Patteeuw, 2003), Koolhaas has

the potent belief that an architect has to condense and celebrate urbanism in the architecture that he creates. The Dutch Embassy in Berlin is thus not just a functional object, but a thesis on Berlin and its everchanging situation. Similarly, the Congrexpo can be interpreted as a thesis on the audacity of the new city of Euralille.

Koolhaas seems to believe that by integrating the roles of the architect and urbanist, the resultant authority will possess the capabilities to produce an architecture that is truly sensitive to the urban situation. The construction of a building should therefore not seek to deliver an introverted object, but an evolving entity sympathetic to its urban realities. This interpretation however is by no means a novel approach, as Sert et al. (1943) observed in their manifesto titled as *'Nine points on monumentality'*:

*"Today modern architects know that buildings cannot be conceived as isolated units, that they have to be incorporated into the vaster urban schemes. There are no frontiers between architecture and town planning, just as there are no frontiers between the city and the region."*

Sert et al. (1943)

## Imagery of distraction

Koolhaas seeks to adapt to best address the needs of the many in an ever-changing world (Patteeuw, 2003). He therefore seeks no static representation, but a dynamic addressing multiple agendas. The author in this association has an ever-diminishing identity. As the realised project comes into its own, the author can be forgotten to become a ghostly presence only perceivable to those who dare to be analytical. When he received the Maaskant Prize in 1986, he declared that he has "only written the word 'I' once, and that was in the sentence 'I am a ghost-writer' (Koolhaas, 1994).

*...A ghost-writer is someone who does not appear on stage himself, but remains in the background and speaks in the name of someone else..."*

Koolhaas, in Patteeuw (2003)



As a ghost-writer, he gains the privilege of detaching his ego from his work to transform it as the work of a collective. The OMA is now the façade of this ‘objective’ collective, which at times he interchanges with his association with the Harvard School of Design. Both these collectives guard him from the criticism of subjectivity, but more significantly from ad hominem critique. This carefully constructed anonymity has generated a potent, yet discreet platform from which he disseminates his influence.

The visual imagery that Koolhaas publishes is misdirection that preserves this anonymity. As Neil Leach recognised (in Patteeuw, 2003), the purpose of his imagery is unrelated to his discourse. Furthermore, the complete lack of acknowledgment of its relevance highlights conscious avoidance. The imagery could thus be seen as a ruse to evade unashamed authorship, with any external criticism of his theorising absorbed by the collective(s).

When the ideas of an individual also becomes the efforts of others, they are perceived as transcending to a degree of objectivity. The collective idea gains authority, thereby making such theorising more agreeable to the multitudes and difficult to discredit by the external critic. The architect in such light appears not as an authoritarian narcissist, but more of a guiding presence pursuing the ‘noble quest’ for meaningful change and progress. It is thus a strategy to popularise his declarations, i.e., to make the ‘I’, a ‘we’.

## Data-collector

An example of Koolhaas’ preoccupation with data was demonstrated by the prologue to *S, M, L, XL* (1995), where the history of the OMA was represented as an analysis of its data. Data is considered as the means for understanding and conveying the contemporary situation, the analysis of which is a precondition for the theorising that follows. He sees the obsessive gathering of data as an essential part of the architect’s task, with intention to ground architecture and urbanism not in abstract ideas, but by the analysis outcomes of such data (Patteeuw, 2003).

The persistent reliance on data is seen by Betsky as an innate trait originating from Koolhaas' Dutch roots. The Dutch practice of data collection was introduced by a group of architects who sought to progress the Bauhaus tradition to the next phase, following a similar obsession that existed in post-war Germany. Another possible source of influence was his early practice as a journalist, where the need to base a report on reliable facts is a prerequisite to ensure objective grounding and authority (Patteeuw, 2003). Regardless of the definitive origin of interest, the obsession with data collection indicates a strong desire to introduce scientific objectivity to an art form. Irrational emotion has thus been condemned to be an improper source for determining the progress of a modern urban existence.

Koolhaas' practice is distinguished from others not only for this data driven methodology, but also in the presentation of such data analyses. Elaborate with an emphasis on the visually appealing, all his research publications are designed with intent to captivate. If the data alone takes primacy, it must be questioned as to why there is a need for such graphical indulgence. This criticism in turn has encouraged his research output to be condemned as simply pseudo-scientific.

## Data-manipulator

From his earliest practice, Koolhaas' work has been highly visual and presented as polished objects. Neil Leach considered this emphasis on visual presentation as a strength, as well as a weakness. While the approach does help to present a sense of relatability to the complex social mechanisms he typically examines, for critics this confines him to a purely visual world that exposes him to allegations of data manipulation. Leach's criticism of his methodology was focused on this 'aestheticisation' of data, and was particularly concerned with his project on Lagos. The OMA's output presents an optimistic image that Leach believed to be non-existent in the reality of Lagos. "The problem" he claimed, "lies in the very packaging of the project, the elegant design and conscious presentation of Lagos in a Bruce Mau inspired product" (Leach in Patteeuw, 2003).

With the use of diagrams and other statistical representations, Koolhaas attempts to explore, understand, and convey the variables that exist in contemporary society. Behind this methodology however lies his unacknowledged tactics of representation. The diagrams are therefore not only communication devices, but objects with agency. This agenda is repressed in his discourse. The collaborative efforts with the likes of Bruce Mau however suggests that it is clearly the result of some degree of conscious planning (Leach, in Patteeuw, 2003).

In addition to the polished nature of his visual material, they are also distinguished from others for their distorted depictions of reality. He had claimed that he has "... had a longstanding interest in surrealism, but more for its analytical powers than... for its aesthetic" (in Levene, 1998). Considering his publications, it is difficult to concur with this modest acknowledgment. Close inspection reveals influence from the visual manipulation practices of not only the Surrealists, but also the Situationist and Dadaists. The images and representations are thus not only intentionally designed but abstracted to arouse the hidden mechanisms of the reader's psyche; a manipulation of data on a level that is not readily obvious, or scientific.

The tasks of the data collector, projector, and manipulator he adopts in his pursuits to 'explore and understand' could be interpreted either as a process by which he represents the world as a designer augmented reality, or as simply a process that acknowledges and succumbs to the highly visual world we inhabit. Either way, it opens his publications to allegations of manipulation and superficiality.

## Succumbing to trends

*"The force and the direction of the wave are uncontrollable, it breaks, and the surfer can only, in exploiting it, 'master' it by choosing his route"*

Koolhaas (in Patteeuw, 2003)

Koolhaas' work so far has demonstrated potent curiosity to comprehend socioeconomic trends and their role in defining cities and its architecture. He believes that he is very much an integral component of such change, and that his role should adapt to address his surroundings. The question here is whether he manages to stay 'on top' of such 'waves of change', or whether he himself becomes entangled and corrupted by the very things he attempts to unravel and comprehend.

Globalisation has been the subject of many of his theorising attempts to date. In the Generic City for example, he warns of how globalised consumerism leads to the gradual breakdown of identity. Notwithstanding this critique, considering his approach to publicising his name and practice reveals that he utilises such strategies to his expedience without much reservation. The OMA thus is now a global 'brand', and has expanded well-beyond the bounds of architectural influence. Hundreds assemble to purchase his/their picture-books, and travel the world to see the exhibitions and projects. His masterful self-promotion as the enigmatic architect-theorist behind an avant-garde think-tank, has gained global attention and an appetite for consuming his 'product'. As some critics have highlighted particularly since his lucrative venture with the fashion designer 'Prada', Koolhaas is now himself an agent of the corruptions presented by globalisation and its capitalist agenda (Enwezor, 2003).

It is evident from his oeuvre that he had long succumbed to the visual obsessions of the globalised media. Visual distraction is thus an accepted strategy of survival in the search for attention. This however has not gone unnoticed, with the most unforgiving of critics describing his research efforts as a superficial enterprise masquerading as intellectual substance.

## Summary

Finally, to summarise what this study has revealed:

- It has achieved a significant understanding of how Koolhaas, a contemporary architect-theorist, has addressed the association between his theorising and implemented practice.
- With the project Euralille it became apparent that he has made conscious effort to translate certain theories into built practice.
- In his published work however, he has considered theory as distinct episodes to his practice, and has claimed that an amalgam of several such theories contributes to his practical works.
- Finally, his theorising has not been defined as condition precedent to any of his real-world projects to date.

The study also presents two significant perspectives:

- Architecture should not seek to create abstract fragments, but address the changing needs of the city, i.e., ‘to condense and celebrate urbanism’.
- The role of an architect is not conclusively defined, and must evolve to deal with the needs of the changing world.

The study also revealed Koolhaas’ survival strategies:

- By functioning as a collective, he seeks to present greater objectivity to his thinking and theorising; thereby giving his works a greater degree of resistance to negative ad hominem criticism.

The limits of the study:

- The study has only considered a significant yet limited sample of Koolhaas’ oeuvre (Bigness, the Generic City, and Euralille). Given that his oeuvre will continue to expand and evolve, the study is representative of the prevailing state at the time of writing.
- The study also does not aim to validate nor judge Koolhaas’ theorising or practice. That judgement is reserved to the reader.

Progressing the study:

- Though the study focused on a single case study (reasons for which were described in the methodology), the hypothesis implicates Koolhaas' oeuvre. Consequently, there are several other projects to be assessed. Of significant interest to this extension would be the commission for the fashion designer Prada (in Koolhaas, 2001b, Koolhaas et al., 2001). Further research into this is likely to reveal new insight into his evolving identity, and its relationship to the architecture and urbanism he intends to influence.

# I

## Appendix

### Short biography of Rem Koolhaas

Koolhaas was born in 1944 in Rotterdam, Netherlands. At eight years of age he moved to Indonesia, where he spent four years growing up as his father who was a writer, theatre critic, and director of a film school, held the post of Cultural Director. After completing his studies in the Netherlands, he began his career as a journalist with *Haagse Post* in The Hague, and later tried his hand at screenwriting in both the Netherlands and Hollywood. He eventually had a script produced by Dutch director Rene Daalder, which he described as an allegorical montage of B-movie images representing the state of modern Europe (Syracuse University, 2005).

After transferring his interests to urban studies and architecture, Koolhaas joined the Architectural Association School in London in 1968. In 1972, he received the Harkness Fellowship for research in the US, and as a result studied at Cornell University for a year, and then became a visiting Fellow at the 'Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies' in New York. It was while in New York that he penned *'Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan'* (Koolhaas, 1994). The work was first published in 1978 and was welcomed by critics as a commendable volume on modern society and architecture. Koolhaas himself described it as "an exploration of the culture of congestion". The activities and conditions that coexist in the city, he considered as "density with choice and potential". The title was re-released in 1994 to coincide with an exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, titled as 'Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture' (Levene, 1998).

In 1995, Koolhaas published in collaboration with the Canadian graphic designer Bruce Mau his second volume, *S, M, L, XL* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995). Described as a novel about architecture, the volume combines photographs, plans, fiction, cartoons, essays, and arbitrary thoughts with work produced by Koolhaas' 'Office for Metropolitan Architecture' (OMA). The volume's title is incidentally its structure, with projects and essays ordered according to their physical scale.

In 1995, Koolhaas was appointed a professor at Harvard University (Syracuse University, 2005). At the Harvard Graduate School of Design, he leads a student-based research group studying different issues that affect the urban condition. The projects considered include studies on: five cities in the Pearl River Delta in China; the Roman System, focusing on the ancient Roman city; Shopping, an analysis of the role of retail consumption in the contemporary city; and the controversial study of the African city focusing specifically on Lagos in Nigeria, later published in the volume titled as *Mutations* (Koolhaas, 2001a).

### Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Koolhaas, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis, and Madelon Vriesendorp founded the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) in 1975 as a collaborative office practicing architecture and urbanism. The office gained its reputation through a succession of notable entries at major competitions that included the Parc de la Villette in Paris, France (1982), ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany (1989), and Tres Grande Bibliotheque and Two Libraries for Jussieu University in Paris, France (1993). During these formative years, the practice also realised several ambitious projects ranging from private residences to large-scale urban plans such as the Villa dallâ Ava in Paris, France (1991), Nexus Housing in Fukuoka, Japan (1991), the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (1992), and the House in Bordeaux, France (1998). In 1994, the office completed Euralille, a seventy-hectare business and civic centre in northern France including the European TGV hub.



Since 2001, the OMA have completed numerous prestigious projects including the Prada Epicentre in New York (2001), the Netherlands Embassy in Berlin (2003), the Prada Epicentre in Los Angeles (2004), the Seattle Public Library (2004), the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul (2004), and the Casa da Musica in Porto (2005) to name but a few. The office has also engaged with several museum projects including the Whitney Museum in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and two Guggenheim Museums in Las Vegas (2001). The work of Koolhaas and the OMA have won several international awards over the years, including the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2000 (OMA, 2005).

Koolhaas also founded the AMO, the research division of the OMA. His laboratory in Rotterdam considers projects across various disciplines such as media, politics, sociology, fashion, shopping, etc. Typically such projects stand alone as research commissions, while a few have been progressed to support real-world projects of architecture and urban development (OMA, 2005).

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