Urbanism vs Architecture
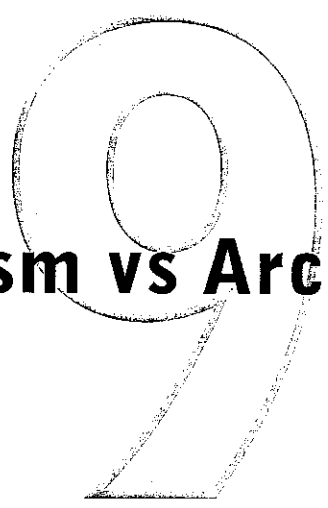
By now it is customary to engage the work of Rem Koolhaas in terms of its active alignment with processes of cultural transformation, its planned instabilities and flexible components – an architecture designed as a dynamic ingredient of perpetual social flux and reorganization. <u>Delirious</u> <u>New</u> <u>York</u> is frequently read as a manifesto outlining how architecture (and by implication other forms of cultural invention) could become immanent to a mutating field of modernization rather than function as static or enduring monuments exterior to it. And certainly Koolhaas's antireformist urbanist thought proposes collaborating with, if not emulating, uncontrolled forces of development rather than formulating anything self-consciously remedial that would attempt to rationalize or "solve" social disorder.

9.14

Jonathan Crary

JONATHAN CRARY teaches in the art history department at Columbia University. He is a founding editor of Zone Books and the author of Techniques of the Observer.

But given this recognizable profile of Koolhaas's work, it is also important to track the less conspicuous ways in which he is simultaneously working "against the grain" of modernization. For his apparent immersion in strategies of pushing or riding the logic of development (and playing the role of "developer") coincides with a rich understanding of the paradoxes and traps of modernization. In particular, what animates the thought of Koolhaas is how the obvious recognition of the obsolescence of the modern (as a style, strategy, affect, hope) is inseparable from an understanding of the overwhelming persistence and continuity of modernization (and of neo-capitalism). In other words, for him the vicissitudes of the city, of architecture, of experience in the past few decades are the sign not of a new era in which modernity has somehow been exceeded, but rather a phase characterized by a shifting and reorganization of ongoing currents of rationalization. These are processes that jettison and destroy whatever obstructs flux and circulation, that transform the singular into the exchangeable, that incessantly create new domains of commodification and consumption, that in Koolhaas's words transform identity into the generic. A few obvious contemporary examples would be the continuing implantation of global communications and information networks and the steady dissolution of national boundaries – NAFTA, GATT, and EEC are merely acronyms for the reconfiguring effects of modernization. But Koolhaas seems to understand that the drifts, uprootings, and migrations caused by the opening up of new streams of "free" trade or of images and data are not only indications of the emergence of an increasingly smooth planetary field of exchange but also of new distributions, demarcations, exclusions, and hierarchies, and, important for Koolhaas, new cultural vacancies and derelict spaces.

Since the 19th century a crucial dimension of the experience of modernization has been what Manfredo Tafuri called the coming to terms with "the anguish of urban dynamism" – the precarious psychic and social accommodation to the relentless processes of destruction and creation through which the city mutates according to the shifting requirements of capitalism. But while some might want to position Koolhaas and Delirious New York in the context of the "melting" vision of modernity (first sketched out by Marx), he is in fact staking out a very different relation to modernization and history. Baudelaire gave paradigmatic expression to two reciprocal poles of response to modernization that have had a curiously enduring half-life: on one hand, the exhilarating experience of new velocities, the apparent freedoms of sensations of new itineraries and perceptual frontiers (exemplified by today's cyberspace cheerleaders); on the other, lament at the immense richness of what modernization had eradicated forever (e.g., rain forests, tradition-based communities, epic poetry). Koolhaas's project is bound up in a deployment of historical memory that is neither paralyzed by the weight of nostalgia and loss nor dissipated in a celebratory abandonment to the kaleidoscopic momentum of technological innovation. Baudelaire's swan, doomed by the spirit of gravity, flapping its wings wretchedly in the dust of urban work sites and demolitions, has as its flip side the false lightness of the man of the crowd, surrendering to the latest rhythms and force lines of capitalist reorganization.

Working outside of this polarity, one of Koolhaas's achievements is allowing architecture to become involved in the practical elaboration of the composite lifeworlds of urban collectivities, letting his work operate as a medium between the volatile possibilities of modernization and a more enduring set of routines, patterns, and desires. If Koolhaas's work incarnates a certain cool-headed social optimism it is also anti-utopian and relentlessly demystifying about notions of progress. An unflinching engagement with the history of the 20th century, its layers of savagery, stupidity, and intellectual failure, pervades his writing. It is possible to speak of Koolhaas's thinking as "untimely," recalling that for Nietzsche untimeliness was not about forgetting but rather about creating a new kind of historical vision, the invention of new eyes and senses with which to survey the past, the difficult acquisition of new viewpoints on how to transform human experience and activity in "the perspective of life."

Clearly Koolhaas has no hesitation in exploiting new technological arrangements. Some of his projects, such as the Center for Art and Media Technology at Karlsruhe, would be unthinkable without them. But his work, for all its impressive utilization of cutting-edge technique, is not driven by the breathless "futurism" exhibited by some of his contemporaries who believe, a priori, that telecommunications and data manipulation will be the primary components of new social environments. In his encounter with technological modernity he seems strongly opposed to the sedentary model of the individual and cellular model of the social that cyberspace modernization implies. For Koolhaas, though, it is not a question of choosing the material over the dematerialized or the tectonic over the electronic. His pragmatic strategies allow him to move fluidly between these options, based on local conditions and requirements, even if his priorities are, finally, to facilitate the creative activity of human collectivities within urban assemblages.

Delirious New York was published in 1978 just when the Western city, as a theater of modernization, began to cede its primacy to another more pervasive and placeless arena of transformation and rationalization: the digital circuitry of telematics and informatics. Obviously the city, whether in the West or the Third World, has not and will not cease to be a space of instability and mutation. But as the physical map of the city is being overlaid by another radically different set of cognitive and sensory coordinates, the cultural effects of the city's dynamism have atrophied and deteriorated in comparison with the fermentation of the first 70 years of the 20th century (for example, as the models of theme park and movie set increasingly redefine key experiences of urban texture).

One of the many achievements of the Bibliothèque de France project is how it sustains a resonant coexistence of two incommensurable realms – the atopic (and sublime) domain of data storage and, nested in unmappable proximity, spaces that affirm the potency of human aggregates and flows. The inclusions of features such as communal screening rooms could seem to some an antimodernizing archaism, but it is a willful repudiation of the contention that, given a global film archive, the standard method of film viewing will be isolated individuals ordering them over modems or cable systems for home consumption. Even simply the notion of a library with a great hall to accommodate 10,000 people is an indication of how the "rationalizing" logic of miniaturization and dematerialization is interpreted with a diagramming of the library-archive form as a powerful social and communal apparatus.

The library, like his other public projects, allows a polyphony of unforeseen zones and temporalities to emerge within the unstable mechanosphere we still call the city. They produce changing configurations and meetings. Collisions, not in the sense of shock or defamiliarization but of a montage of openings of the imagination onto other possible social ecologies. To say that Koolhaas works against the sedentarization now being imposed by modernization (i.e., the remodeling of the body into an electronic consumer) implies that he is committed to a certain general model of the human nervous system – the body as an integrating spatiotemporal system, whose perceptual and cognitive structures are decisively linked to motor patterns. In other words, an individual both shapes and is shaped by an environment in terms of an evolving relation between memory and sensorimotor activity. (New forms like virtual reality pose a very different model of the nervous system in which there is an indiscriminate mix of sensory and the locomotor on a flattened-out surface of digital information.) Some of Koolhaas's most provocative projects, like Yokohama, Lille, and Zeebrugge, amplify the importance of a locomotor experience of movements, trajectories, and intersections of many kinds. In spite of all we have heard about the annihilation of distance and absolute speed, these projects (involving harbors, train stations, highways, ferry boats) affirm the persistence of "outmoded" vectors and vehicles, of other relations of motion and stasis, acceleration and slowness, that coexist with hyperspeeds and instantaneity. The 19th-century model of the journey, as Paul Virilio well shows, has long been shattered, but for Koolhaas the routines of everyday life are still composed of unrepresentable transitive moments, of the enigmatic passages that once linked arrivals and departures, which so fascinated thinkers like de Chirico, Einstein, and Duchamp. But even if some of Koolhaas's projects, like Zeebrugge, are "terminals," they are effectively intermediary elements of larger social machines, defined by the adjacencies and intermixings that occur through them, by their effective permeability.

Koolhaas's work inhabits this hybrid field in which diverse and historically distinct forces of modernization both interact and operate autonomously, and his notion of the "culture of congestion" comes into play here in crucial ways. For modernization continues to generate many different and even incompatible notions of congestion – some of which hold forth the possibility of livable and workable human environments even as others are producing experiences of social segmentation and separation, such as those Toni Negri has described in terms of the consequences of Reaganism and Thatcherism in the last decade. At the same time, Koolhaas is not privileging the congestion of an image- and data-saturated environment, which is also founded on the cellurization and productive separation of human beings. One of the valuable features of Emile Durkheim's analysis of anomie was the insistence that social cohesiveness depended on the richness and flexibility of the contacts between individuals in a given society, rather than the sheer number of contacts. The computer terminal seems to open onto an abyss of potential points of contact and linkage but it is a site on which communication and sensation are reduced to a single plane of affect and energy, to impoverished modalities of exchange and interface, and to anomic forms of redundancy. Koolhaas seeks to produce congestion in which a palpable heterogeneity of social/environmental contact, psychical and sensory feedback, and kinesthetic stimulation launch the individual out of the isolation that is the lot of the modernized "interactive" and amnesiac inhabitant of the Generic City.

9.15