Piranesi, Koolhaas,
and the Subversion of the Concept of Place

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Among contemporary architectural theoreticians, Rem Koolhaas is certainly one of the most intriguing. He persistently challenges the modes of thinking architects and planners employ in the name of human scale, historic values, and the like. He denies that place and identity are necessarily dependent upon the past, whether this necessity is argued in terms of the Heideggerian sophistication or popular consensus. He embraces without reservation the forces that shape twentieth century urban civilization, embracing thereby what many consider the dark side of global modernization – an aspect of development that grows darker as the world approaches the next millennium. His strategy is to explore the remaining possibilities by accepting and even applauding much of what others regard as the failure of twentieth

century urban development: *tabula rasa* large-scale planning, and the consequent loss of character and identity of place. He has the ability to discern the sublime in the vulgar, hope in the terrifying, reason in the schizophrenic condition of late twentieth century cities. He searches for hidden laws in an overwhelming urban wilderness in an attempt to subvert the foundations of post-war architectural and urban discourse, to reverse its trajectory by raising questions, and to explore the potential in the perpetual transformation of the contemporary world.

Koolhaas' latest book, *S, M, L, XL*, unites his attempts to challenge assumptions and provoke discussion with clearly outlined alternative strategies. The book is a conglomeration of essays, fictions, diaries, travel logs, projects, drawings, models, photos,

cartoons, and newspaper ads, revealing not only the miscellaneous forms of Koolhaas' present practice as an architect but also the imprint of his earlier career as a journalist and screenwriter. The structure of the book is indicated by its title: architectural materials are organized by size, both in terms of the scope of building construction and the scope of the thinking involved – or rather the magnitude of the subject matter in question. However, as the author suggests, the book has no connective tissue binding one part to another. Many of the writings are embedded between projects as autonomous episodes rather than supportive mortar. Taken as a whole, Koolhaas declares, the book is a free fall in the space of the topographic imagination, and as such its outcome can be read and interpreted in an infinite variety of ways.[1]

Fig. 1: Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*, entry for *Casabella's* competition "The City as Meaningful Environment", 1972.

At this point one is necessarily reminded of the affirmative "nomad thought" exercised by modern thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Nomad thought operates in smooth, open-ended, flowing spaces where one can rise up from any point and move to any other. It is a striving for freedom from codification, whether ideological, institutional, or professional.[2] Nomad thought derives from the vagabond imagination of the savage heart on a constant inner and outer voyage, aspiring to transcend the limits of experience and thought.

Koolhaas' inner voyage parallels his outer voyage: the book can be read as a documentary of his tour of the world over the past decades, and of his inquiry into the condition of twentieth century architecture and cities under the impact of politics, economics, and globalization. Koolhaas first became known as the author of *Delirious New York*; however, the starting point of his journey and thus OMA's place of origin is, as Fritz Neumeyer has suggested, "not New York, as one might assume, but Berlin."[3] A student at the Architectural

Association in London, driven by "intuition, unhappiness with the accumulated innocence of the late sixties, and simple journalistic interest,"[4] Koolhaas chose "The Berlin Wall as Architecture" as the theme for his final thesis project.

One year later, in 1972, in an entry for the *Casabella* competition on the theme of "A City with a Significant Environment" on which he collaborated with Elia Zenghelis, the thread of the Berlin Wall as Architecture reappeared, but this time took the form of a fiction about the city of London. Entitled "Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture," the tale begins with a direct allusion to the Berlin Wall: "Once, a city was divided in two parts. One part became the Good Half, the other part the Bad Half. The inhabitants of the Bad Half began to flock to the good part of the divided city, [their flight] rapidly swelling into an urban exodus."[5] The story describes an "artificial paradise," a strip of land that runs through the center of London, "protected" from the existing city by two walls along its perimeter. Inside, the zone is subdi-

vided into a series of identical squares, each with its own program, ranging from private allotments to communal facilities. Together these squares are to restore the debased ideals of the metropolis "to a sparkling intensity that would tempt the inhabitants of the subconscious London to escape into the strip in an impulsive exodus – and to become its Voluntary Prisoners."[6]

Depicting a "paradise" which is "good" enough to attract the inhabitants of London and thus turn the physical structure of the old city into a pile of ruins, *Exodus* is certainly a utopian vision. As Demetrios Porphyrios observed early in the 1970s, though it is hardly the first urban utopia in history, Koolhaas' and Zenghelis' *Exodus* does not aim to expose the ills of contemporary cities, as its historical predecessors did, nor does it propose solutions to cure or redeem those ills.[7] The architectural aim of *Exodus* is to awaken the sleepwalking metropolis of London and to insert in its inarticulate organism a social condenser of "totally desirable alternatives;" and yet the tale exposes the dark side of such social perfection – that architecture

Fig. 2: Giovan Battista Piranesi, *Carceri*, plate VII (first state), etching.

can function as an instrument for imprisoning. At the same time as its "architectural warfare" stems from the "hedonistic science of designing collective facilities that fully accommodate individual desires," the tale presents scenarios as from a horror story, from the purgatory-like reception area to the totalitarian supervision of the allotments. Thus, unlike most urban utopian thinking, the idealized metropolitan prototype, the "Good Half" of London, promises nothing but relentless pictures from a doomed civilization, an *apocalipsis cum figuris*. Instead of a utopia conceived on the traditional basis of "goodness," *Exodus* is wrought with "dirty realism," revealing in its psychological confrontation with the Berlin Wall the delirium, miseries and duplicity of the twentieth century metropolis.

From the very beginning of his architectural career, then, Koolhaas abandoned the intellectual foundations of "polite" architecture. In its place one finds, in the words of the late Italian critic and historian Manfredo Tafuri, a "negative utopia"[8] which eliminates the distance between imagination and annihilation, between totality and nothingness, between utopia and anti-utopia. Only a few people throughout history have approached architecture in such a way. One was the eighteenth century Italian architect and etcher Giovan Battista Piranesi, whose plan of *Campo Marzio* is, significantly, one of only two pre-twentieth century architectural images in the more than one thousand pages of *S, M, L, XL*.

Piranesi and the "Archaeological Reconstruction" of the *Campo Marzio*

To my knowledge, Tafuri was the first to explore Piranesi's work in relation to the modern architecture of the twentieth century rather than the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He did so because of Piranesi's "predilection for melodrama and elemental fear, coupled with a taste for 'picturesque' ruins and rustic, bucolic landscape."[9] In *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, a study of the avant-garde and architecture, Tafuri starts with a chapter entitled "'The Wicked Architect:' G. B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage." To begin a detailed analysis of the relationship between the avant-garde and architecture with Piranesi, who preceded the twentieth century avant-garde by nearly two

hundred years, is, as Tafuri acknowledges, rather startling. What makes this historical analysis of the avant-garde possible are the frequent references to the works of Piranesi in the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the leading film makers of the modernist avant-garde. Tafuri cites Eisenstein's exceptional study of Piranesi's work *Le Carceri* as justification for establishing the birth of the avant-garde with Piranesi. Piranesi was interested in theatrical scenery,[10] and it is with his imaginary theater of the *Carceri*, Tafuri suggests, that the theme of imagination, with all its ideological significance, enters into the history of modern architecture. With *Le Carceri* the historical avant-garde enters the real world, and Tafuri logically continues his study with the theme "the stage as 'virtual city'" in which the field of the avant-garde expands from the cabaret to the metropolis.

This kind of visual or theatrical affiliation between Piranesi and modern architecture leads finally to a "historicity of the avant-garde." However, Tafuri's introduction to the *Carceri* is particularly interesting for his assertion that "what must be made clear from the start is that all this breaking up, distorting, multiplying, and disarranging, apart from the emotional reactions it can elicit, is nothing more than a systematic criticism of the *concept of place*, carried out by using the instruments of visual communication."[11] At first there seem to be no further explorations of this "systematic criticism" of the concept of place in Tafuri's study – in fact, nowhere in the book did he mention this issue again. Nevertheless, given the discourse

on the concept of place in recent decades, it is not difficult to see the significance of his point: if the concept of place is inherently associated with the center, then the *Carceri*, with its constant metamorphosis of space, is a "systematic criticism of the concept of 'center.'" And if the concern for the concept of place has resulted in the need for a concise language of architecture, then the ecstatic intertwining of superstructures, the undermining of the laws of perspective and thus the potential liberation of form – or rather liberation *from* form – of the *Carceri* present an "unequivocal attack on the 'language insofar as it is a mode of acting upon the world.'" And if the legitimacy of the concept of place is justified in terms of the subject's dependence on history and nature, then, in the "negative utopia" of the *Carceri*, "History and Nature become *detached* from the subject, not to open up a new universe of values, but rather to present this radical divergence as the only possible value."[12]

Much of Tafuri's analysis of the *Carceri* holds true for another of Piranesi's works, *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma*, which he published in 1761-62, shortly after reworking and elaborating of the *Invenzioni Capricciose di Carceri*. There are, however, some unmistakable fundamental differences between the two works. Whereas the "systematic criticism" of the concept of place in the *Carceri* appears as a message from nowhere, the *Campo Marzio* brings us directly to Rome, sovereign among cities. Unlike the *Carceri*, the *Campo Marzio* is a more or less historic gesture, carrying on the archaeological investigation

of Roman architectural and engineering achievement Piranesi had begun with the *Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive* and continued with *Opere Varie di Architettura, Prospettiva, Groteschi, Antichità* and the four volumes of *Le Antichità Romane*.[13] Unlike the frenzy, or to use Eisenstein's word, the "madness" of the *Carceri*,[14] the archaeological approach to the *Campo Marzio* seems a rather rational, "scientific" investigation of the history of Rome, "supported by a sound scholarly method, appropriate to the Enlightenment and its concern with the phenomena of historical change."[15]

However, as Stanley Allen has noted, in a project ostensibly devoted to the archaeological reconstruction of ancient Rome, Piranesi clearly ignored the historic, monumental center of Rome, where the existing ruins were concentrated and stood more or less free of contemporary building.[16] Instead he turned to the Campus Martius, a marginal zone which remained outside the boundary of Rome – the Severan Wall – until the Aurelian Wall was built in the second half of the third century. The choice of the site is not without significance: for Piranesi, the *Campo Marzio* had always been associated with the training of the young and with military exercises, but during the empire it was open to other uses – to pleasure and spectacle, to funerals and burials. In other words, the *Campo Marzio* is characterized not only by its marginality, but also by its *otherness*, by its incongruity with the city proper of ancient Rome.[17]

In his "archaeological reconstruction," Piranesi presented more of the *otherness* of the *Campo Marzio* than

his predecessors had. On this open marshland the historically developed language of specifically Roman building types is affirmed; the combination of individual building types, however, appears by and large disorderly. Monuments are massively presented but arbitrarily disposed. Building types vary intensively, but artificially, and for their own sake. Streets have vanished, as has the entire domestic fabric of the city: there is no spatial continuity, no structural integration. Instead, a hodgepodge of individual wills is at work, resulting in a heterogeneous void, a chaotic, senseless heap of building objects that have little to do with one another. Even in the areas composed with geometric and hierarchic structures, such as the double bend of the river which seems in terms of plans and bird's eye views to represent the center of the area, the extravagant diversity of building types undermines the principles of urban organization. A language of urban form is thus first exaggerated and then transgressed. Taken as a whole, the Campus Martius also violates the very notion of city walls as urban boundaries. Abandoning the walled city of ancient Rome, Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* appears to have no boundaries, as though able to expand endlessly in all directions.

Inasmuch as Piranesi grounded his reconstruction on topographical investigations of the site as well as evidence provided by the fragments of the Severan Marble Plan,[18] the *Campo Marzio* cannot be regarded as purely the product of his imagination. Piranesi himself stressed this point in a letter to the Scottish designer Robert Adam, when he wrote that, in combining his on-site
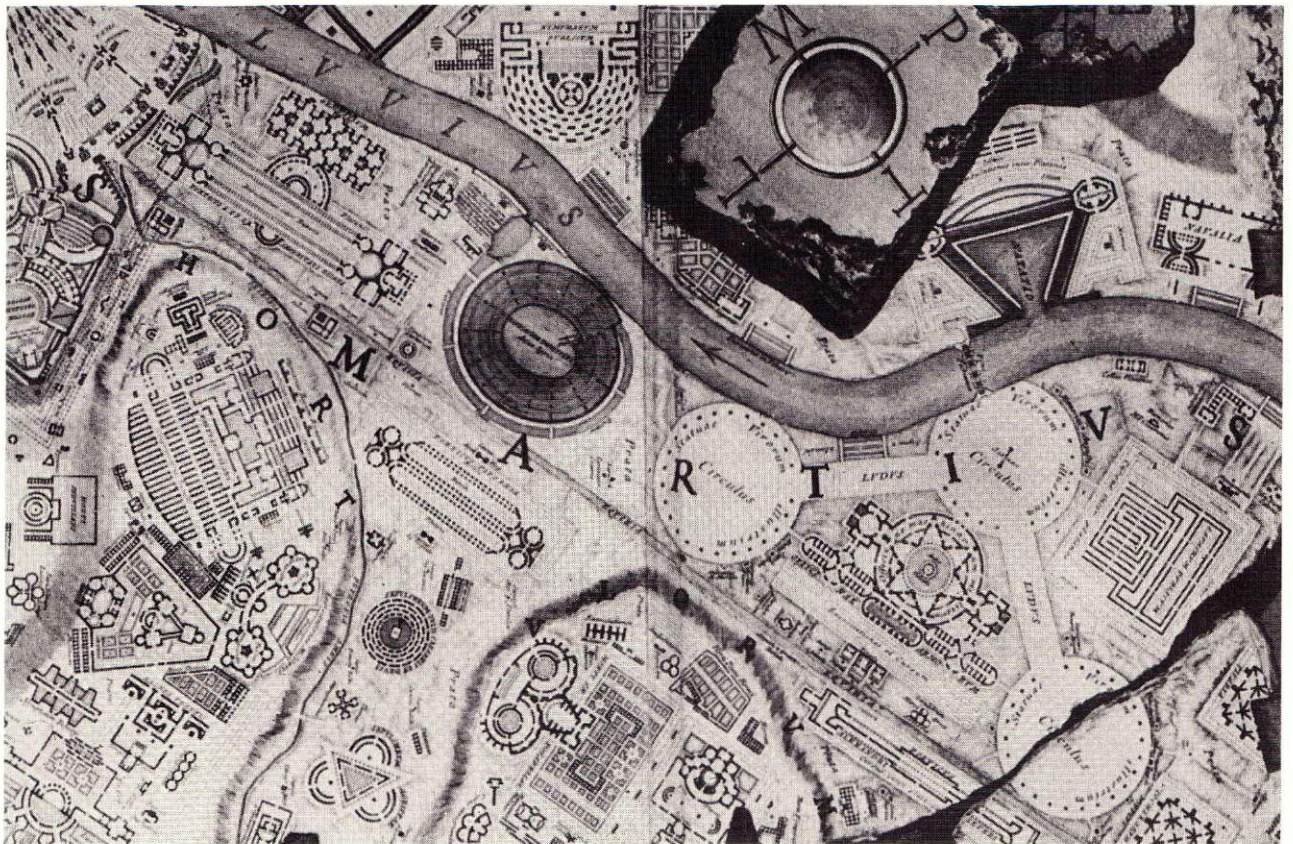
Fig. 3: Giovan Battista Piranesi, ground plan of the northern area of the Campus Martius, 1762.

investigations with a careful study of the old plan of the city in the Capitol and the knowledge of the best historians of the time, he hoped that "no one would claim that I had followed my own whim rather than…any evidence." At the same time, Piranesi makes clear in the same letter his aspiration to transcend the established language of architecture:

> But before anyone accuses me of falsehood, he should, I beg, examine the ancient plan of the city which I have just mentioned, he should examine the villas of Latium and that of Hadrian at Tivoli, the baths, the tombs and other ruins, especially those beyond the Porta Capena, and he will find that the ancients transgressed the strict rules of architecture just as much as the moderns. Perhaps it is inevitable and a great rule that the arts on reaching a peak should then decline, or perhaps it is part of man's nature to demand some license in creative expression as in other things, but we should not be surprised to see that ancient architects have done the very things which we sometimes criticize in buildings of our own times.[19]

Perhaps, more than an investigation of ancient Rome, Piranesi's reconstruction of the *Campo Marzio* ought to be regarded as a contravention of the city and its rules. Tafuri reveals the book's true nature: "the archaeological mask of Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* fools no one: this is an experimental design and the city, therefore, remains an unknown."[20] It is the *Campo Marzio*'s singularly unfamiliar character that makes it a colossal non-place, the antithesis of the place known as Rome. It is this unknown aspect of the city too that makes Piranesi's project another "systematic criticism" of the concept of place, this time on the urban plane, calling into question the very concept of the city. To be sure, given the condition of late twentieth century cities,

Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* no longer appears merely an ominously fore-shadowing "negative utopia," but a realistic description of urban conditions around the globe today, where key aspects of traditional cities such as order, integration, centrality, and urban boundaries are disappearing. Alex Krieger made the connection between Piranesi and present-day North American cities, suggesting that

> If we look, say, at greater Toronto or Atlanta or the outskirts of historic Boston, or at the most infamous of edge cities, Tyson's Corner in northern Virginia, do we not see environments as boundless and multi-centered, as conspicuously wasteful, redundant, and eccentric, as "un-master-planned," and just potentially chaotic, as Piranesi's Rome? [21]

It seems, however, that the whole discussion of the concept of place, and many other architectural and urban issues of the past decades, are more often than not motivated by an unwillingness to accept this new reality. The point of departure for these discussions is generally the historic community, and the lamentation over the loss and devaluation of traditional cities has resulted in a state of mind that, in Koolhaas' words, is "fixed on what we have lost, wrecked with phantom pain."[22] But do we believe that in a world of change the goal of our intellectual discourse is either to determine how things were in the past or how they should be on the basis of how they used to be? Should not our aim be to understand the way things actually are? What role can critical architectural and urban theory play

today if current thinking is unable to operate without the past as its frame of reference? Without a contemporary frame of reference, any assessment of the present becomes no more than a prosecution list of what has gone lost. Even though the past is the source of identity and place, can we not take the loss of that past, the erosion of historic identity and the eclipse of "character," as the point of departure for our comprehension of the present and the future? Koolhaas' urban discourse addresses these and other similar questions.

Koolhaas and the "Paranoiac-Critical Tourism" of the Generic City

In an essay on Surrealism, Hal Foster describes the experiences of André Breton as an assistant in a psychiatric clinic at Saint-Dizier in 1916. He treated a soldier who believed that the war was a fake, with the wounded made up cosmetically and the dead on loan from medical schools. The soldier intrigued the young Breton: here was a figure shocked into a paranoid alternative reality that was also somehow a critique of this reality.[23] To what extent this experience at Saint-Dizier impacted Breton's later life as a surrealist is impossible to know precisely, but the significance of the phenomenon of paranoia on Surrealism can hardly be overstated. For not only Breton but many other surrealists as well, from Giorgio de Chirico to Max Ernst, tried to capture and explore the anatomization of paranoia in their art. In particular, as Breton stated, "an instrument of primary importance," called the *paranoiac-critical method*, was injected into

Surrealism by Salvador Dalí.[24] According to Dalí himself, the method is a form of "irrational knowledge" based upon the "interpretative-critical association of delirious phenomena." The method thus enables the subject to pass from the "world of delirium" to the "plane of reality" through the discovery of new and objective "significance in the irrational."[25] In other words, what is given is irrational, delirious, and insane, and paranoiac-critical activity transforms the "delirium of interpretation" from the "pathological phenomenon" of paranoia into an adventure of poetic discovery which leads finally to a conquest of the irrational.

A sort of paranoiac-critical approach appears in the work of Koolhaas as early as the *Exodus*. Here, as Fritz Neumeyer noted, one is presented with a psychological terrain, a "Freudian tableau" of the bizarre forms of life and the split reality of the metropolis. Here, by virtue of a surreal mode of perception and representation, "the hunger for reality could find abundant, exotic nourishment and the desire for contradiction could discover sudden surfaces of friction to lay bare the secret poetic content of this reality."[26] It is, however, in *Delirious New York* that Koolhaas clearly refers to Dalí's paranoiac-critical method. For Koolhaas, paranoiac-critical method is a sequence of two consecutive but discrete operations:

> 1. the synthetic reproduction of the paranoiac's way of seeing the world in a new light – with its rich harvest of unsuspected correspondences, analogies and patterns; and 2. the compression of these gaseous speculations to a critical point where they achieve
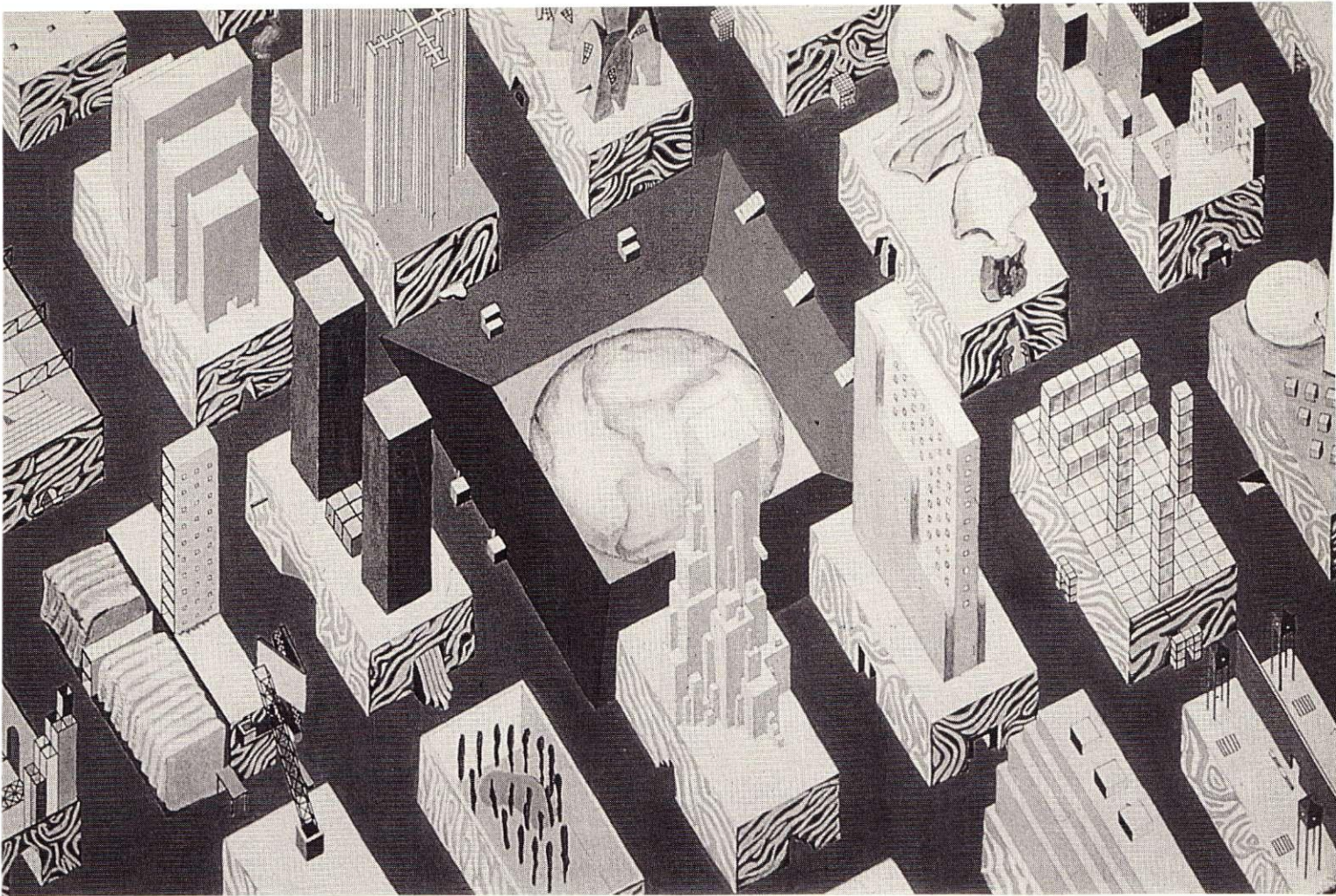
Fig. 4: Rem Koolhaas with Zoe Zenghelis, *City of the Captive Globe*, 1972.

the density of fact: the critical part of the method consists of the fabrication of objectifying "souvenirs" of the paranoid tourism, of concrete evidence that brings the "discoveries" of those excursions back to the rest of mankind, ideally in forms as obvious and undeniable as snapshots.[27]

This interpretation of the paranoiac-critical method reveals one of the surgical scalpels Koolhaas uses as his journey around the world continues from Berlin to New York and from

Atlanta to Singapore to cut with precision at the "delirium" of the metropolis and its new condition in late twentieth century – often on a deep subconscious level. Not surprisingly, while Manhattan is used in *Delirious New York* as "a model to outline fundamental attributes of high-density, high-rise urbanity," embodied in the Downtown Athletic Club,[28] what is called the Culture of Congestion is hardly to be understood as physical congestion alone. It is above all a *programmatic* density which can be most precisely

illustrated by the "exaggerated extrapolation of an essentially unconscious Metropolitan landscape," [29] known as the "City of Captive Globe," which he conceived before writing *Delirious New York*. "Devoted to the artificial conception and accelerated birth of theories, interpretations, mental constructions, proposals and their infliction on the world," Koolhaas wrote, the City of the Captive Globe is the capital of Ego, "where science, art, poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent,
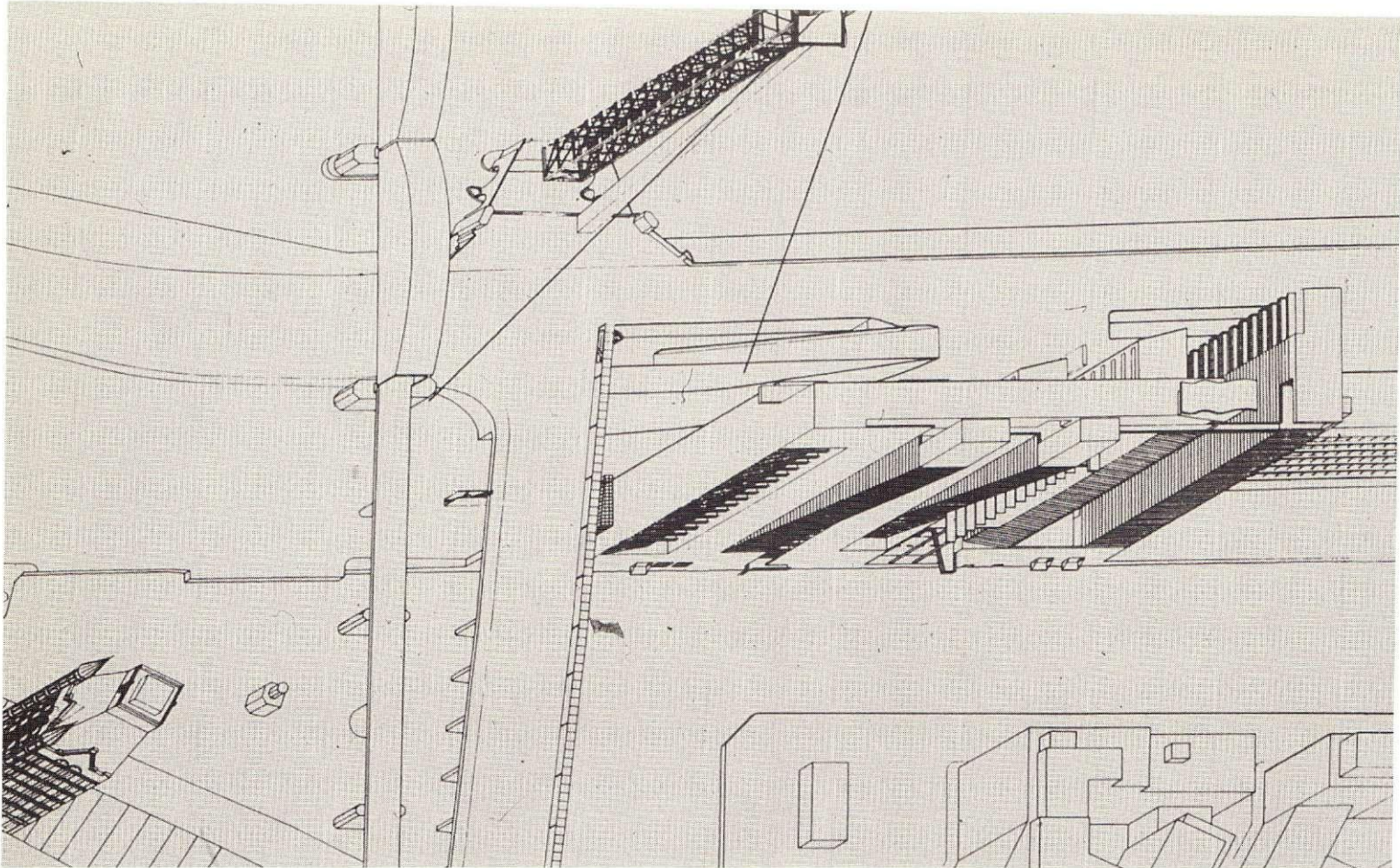
Fig. 5: OMA, Boompjes Tower Slab, project, 1979–82.

destroy and restore the world of pheno-menal Reality."[30] Here the metropolis, or the Culture of Congestion, is a rigid chaos in the form of the Manhattan grid in which each block represents an independent island with unique laws, a maximum agglomeration of different values – architecturally as well as ideo-logically.

Koolhaas returned to Europe in the late 1970s to teach at the AA in London. His return was not without dilemmas: "USA: post-modernism triumphant. Europe: historicism on the rise – the 'new' superseded, maybe forever? USA: freedom from context. Europe: context

is everything. USA: everything big. Europe: everything small." Then in 1979 an event intervened which put aside the dilemmas altogether: Kool-haas was invited to do a project in Rotterdam.[31] Similar to OMA's Berlin, Rotterdam was once a historic center and was known for its own specific modernity between the wars. Then everything had been suddenly destroyed by the war. The city was rebuilt, but never regained its pre-war urbanism. In fact it was considered a model city in the late '50s and early '60s because of its open center and perhaps above all the Lijnbaan, a linear

shopping center by Bakema. Rotterdam later became a "gigantic problem," its open center was filled in with closed blocks in the name of urban renewal – as the IBA wrote on its banners, to make the city more "urban." In this regard Rotterdam manifests the situa-tion in Europe in the age of the "Recon-struction of the European City."

Koolhaas' view of Rotterdam at the time was quite different. For Koolhaas, not only did the city's unique quality depend precisely on the openness of its center, but, as in the case of Berlin, its richness stemmed from the proto-typical sequence of its mutation and

destruction. His view is hardly surprising considering the difference between Koolhaas' strategy of operating in the present and the protagonists for the reconstruction of European cities based on pre-twentieth century history. Whereas the "Reconstruction of the European City" in the name of history sets out to erase the most significant fact of history (the destruction of the world wars), twentieth century Europe is, in Koolhaas' eyes, ridiculously beautiful "for those who can forget – for a fleeting moment – the arbitrary delusions of order, taste and integrity." Of course this is no easy task: when order, taste and integrity are gone, "the resulting landscape needs the combined interpretative ability of Champoleon, Schliemann, Darwin and Freud to disentangle it." And when returning to the past is dismissed for practical reasons, the unfortunate alternative is often "the most clinical inventory of the actual conditions of each site, no matter how mediocre, the most calculating exploitation of its objective potential." But Koolhaas found inspiration in such a dry, factual analysis of the site. In the case of Rotterdam, "it was the banal conditions of water and traffic, together with the reductive inventory of modern typologies, that triggered the imagination." [32]

This position was expressed in architectural form in OMA's project for the Boompjes Tower Slab and the projects for Kochstrasse and Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, which were designed at about the same time. With these projects, postmodern "historicism," the first of the three dilemmas that Koolhaas faced in the late '70s, is transcended.[33] Meanwhile, the second

dilemma, that of context and non-context, seems unresolved. For even in the "terrifying beauty of the twentieth century," where "each architectural doctrine contradicts and undoes the essence of the previous one as surely as day follows night," there is a context to explore by which "each bastard gets his own genealogical tree; the faintest hint of an idea is tracked with the obstinacy of a detective on a juicy case of adultery."[34] Certainly this context is no longer that of figure-ground contextualism. Nor does the clinical inventory of the actual conditions of each site have the same objective as contextualism.

Yet "context" remains an architectural issue, perhaps because of the simple fact that any building is located on a specific site. Site conditions can be understood in terms of a formal or spatial matrix, but also in terms of the configuration of service and supply on the site or the flow of human and capital forces through it. Regardless of those conditions, and whether a building's surroundings are traditional or modern, the site will one way or another have an impact on the building. The assertion of context in this sense suggests both an unreserved acceptance and an imaginative approach to reality in all it messiness and unpredictability – an attitude which seems to be part of Koolhaas' strategy in many cases. On the other hand, as Jacques Lucan has noted, any obligation to context is, in the end, a reformist position which assumes that in the world we inhabit conditions are fixed and there is therefore no longer a need for territories that are still undetermined, free, conquerable only by new orders *ex nihilo*.[35]

Koolhaas' position is surely never that of a reformist. In the heart of urban chaos he aspires to imagine nothingness, claiming that "where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible."[36] In a sense, it is this longing for nothingness that leads him to transcend the dilemma of context or non-context simultaneous to, or rather as a result of, surpassing the dilemma of the big and the small. Beyond a certain scale, Koolhaas declares, architecture acquires the properties of Bigness which jettisons the "art" as well as the "morality" of architecture. Bigness transforms the organizational, structural and interior/exterior relationships of architecture. Bigness renders what traditionally can be controlled by architects or planners uncontrollable. Bigness discards urban contexts. Bigness breaks "with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, and with ethics – the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is *fuck* context."[37]

In his manifesto of Bigness, Koolhaas focuses on the issue of large-scale buildings and the architectural and urban consequences of such buildings. This issue has haunted architectural and urban discourse in recent decades, resulting in a contextual mode of thinking, the notion of human scale, and the like. These strategies aim to criticize, break down, or simply avoid the Big. Koolhaas goes in the opposite direction. He fully accepts the architectural and urban consequences of the Big, treats it as a theoretical domain (as indicated by the capital B), and
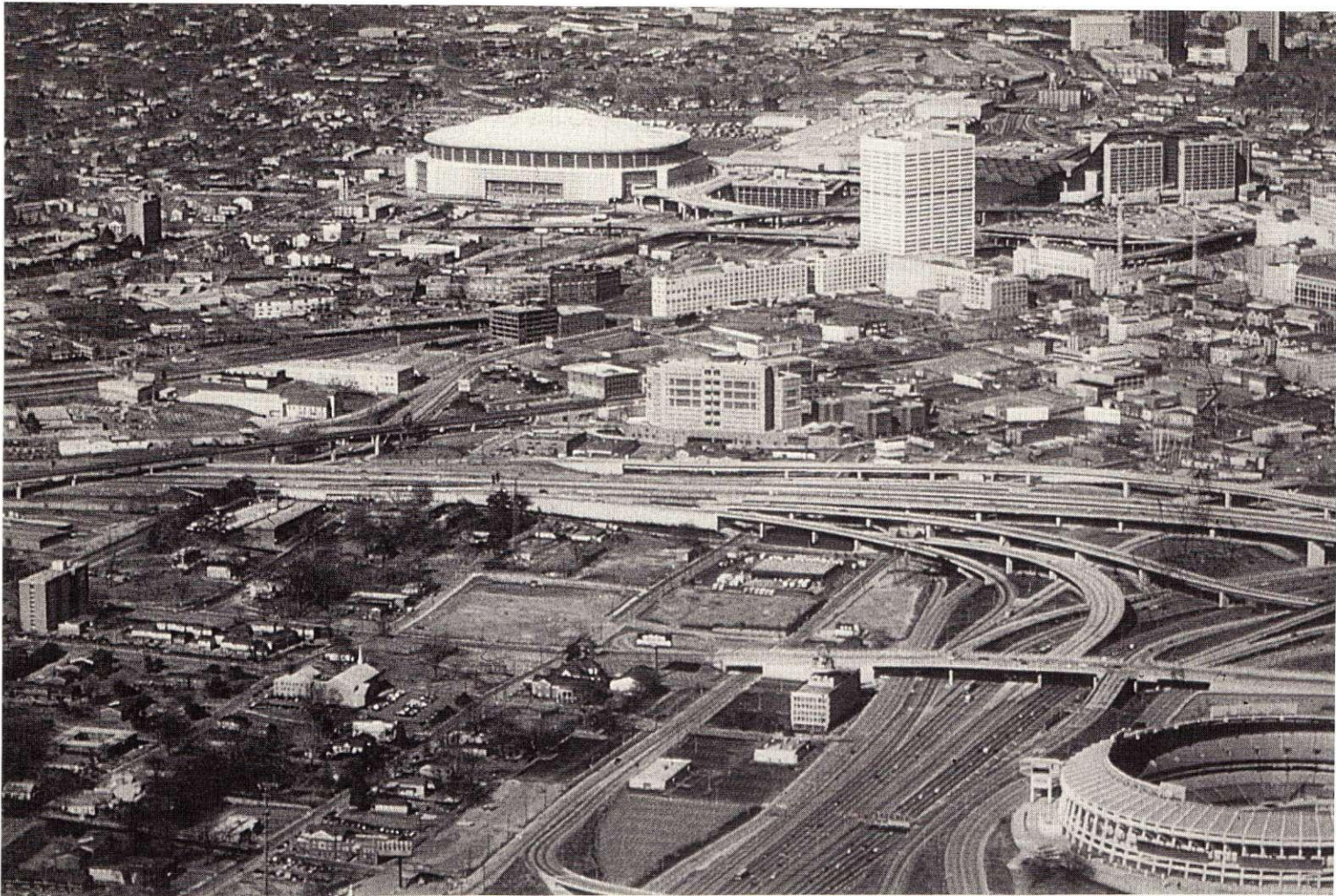
Fig. 6: Atlanta.

explores its potential. In so doing, however, he is concerned not merely with the size or scale of building projects, which range from the small Villa dall'Ava to the extra large at Euralille. Nor is his interest primarily the dilemma of context or non-context as such. Beyond breaking with urban contexts, Bigness has urban implications which can only be comprehended in terms of the concept of the city itself.

If Bigness transforms architecture, its accumulation generates a new kind of city. The exterior of the city is no longer a collective theater where "it" happens; there's no collective "it" left. The street has become residue, organizational device, mere segment of the continuous metropolitan plane where the remnants of the past face the equipment of the new in an uneasy stand-off.... Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city; it pre-empts the city; or better still, it *is* the city.[38]

Unmistakably, Koolhaas has left the traditional concept of the city far behind. What the city was is no longer the primary concern; nor is what the city should be. Dismissing these two questions, he tries instead to discover what the city actually is. Again he went to America to find possible answers. "Sometimes it is important to find what the city is – instead of what it was, or what is should be. This is what drove me to Atlanta – an intuition that the real city at the end of the 20th century could be found there...." So begins Koolhaas' writing on Atlanta, an outstanding example of the American city which, in Koolhaas' view,

"reveals some of the most critical shifts in architecture/urbanism of the past 15 years."[39]

Like many other American cities, Atlanta is actually more a vast region than a city; and like almost all American cities it once had, and in a sense still has, a downtown. But in the 1960s and '70s, while the downtown area of many other great American cities lay in a deep state of despair, downtown Atlanta was being revived and in fact thoroughly rebuilt. For Koolhaas, this rebuilding of the downtown area was not urban renewal in the usual sense; it was "a virgin rebirth: *a city of clone*" characterized by an accelerating redevelopment catalyzed by architect/developer John Portman. He started by rebuilding one block at a time to form a comprehensive urban system in which buildings are connected to one another by bridges and skywalks. One essential element of this new urban system was the architectural device, reinvented by Portman, which he called the "atrium." Portman's atrium is a huge glass-roofed interior space surrounded by hotel rooms, office cubicles, restaurants, and all sorts of facilities. Each atrium becomes "a replica as inclusive as downtown itself, an *ersatz* downtown." The cumulative result of all the atrium buildings is that "downtown disintegrates into multiple downtowns, a cluster of autonomies."[40] Consequently, what seemed to help rehabilitate and stabilize Atlanta's downtown actually accelerated its demise in two ways. First, the traditional concept of the street as an outdoor space no longer makes sense: even when the street space remains, the actual life of the city now occurs within the buildings. Second,

the downtown having been atomized, its autonomous particles could go anywhere: "now *all* is city, a new persuasiveness that includes landscape, park, industry, rust belt, parking lot, housing tract, single-family house, desert, airport, beach, river, ski slope, even downtown." Or, conversely, "Atlanta is not a city; it is a landscape."[41]

Atlanta's new urban – or rather, as Koolhaas puts it, "post-urban" – landscape is a case of Bigness *par excellence.* Koolhaas himself makes no secret of the significance of this case in OMA's history, stating that it was the shock of the Bigness of the New World(s) that made what was already implicit in *Delirious New York* explicit, especially against the background of Europe.[42] It need hardly be mentioned that its most explicit expression comes with the "Manifesto of Bigness." And as far as the concept of place is concerned, it is clear that Koolhaas' endorsement of the new urban reality in Atlanta discards concepts derived from traditional cities, and traditional European cities in particular. As Sanford Kwinter notes, nothing in Koolhaas' intellectual production better verifies this elaboration from New York to Atlanta:

> In Koolhaas, the concept of "America" has always loomed large. It has served not only enormous aesthetic ends, but has played a major role in generating both the novelty and the radicality in OMA's work (especially in the primarily European context with which they have dealt).... For Koolhaas, America, although deeply studied and assimilated into his work, has always strategically been kept at a "dangerous" – and therefore creative

– distance: it has been constituted and skillfully maintained as the necessarily ragged, mythical gateway to the destabilizing, novelty-introducing outside.[43]

Kwinter's observation is perfectly accurate insofar as Koolhaas' world journey is restricted to Europe and America. But beyond the New World, the development of modern Asia provides another new territory (thus his use of the plural "New Worlds") through which Koolhaas comes to explore the condition of Bigness, this time along with the volatile process of global modernization. The outcome is his writing on Singapore, an Asian city which in just thirty years has developed from a traditional village into a modern, late twentieth century city.

In what sense is Singapore a test-bed of Bigness for Koolhaas? Certainly not in the sense of its physical size or population; rather in the sense of the Bigness implicit in the global process of modernization: "Bigness, through its very independence of context, is the one architecture that can survive, even exploit, the now-global condition of the *tabula rasa.*"[44] Historically speaking, *tabula rasa*, or beginning anew from a clean slate, is not a new phenomenon of modernization. It first happened, in fact, in Europe. Haussmann's boulevards, Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin*, and Ludwig Hiberseimer's housing project for downtown Berlin all exemplified the *tabula rasa* approach in various ways. This attitude soon came to be regarded as the worst sin of modernism, a sin to be eradicated at all costs. Thus, as Koolhaas describes it, "the city of Zurich has found the most radical, expensive solution in
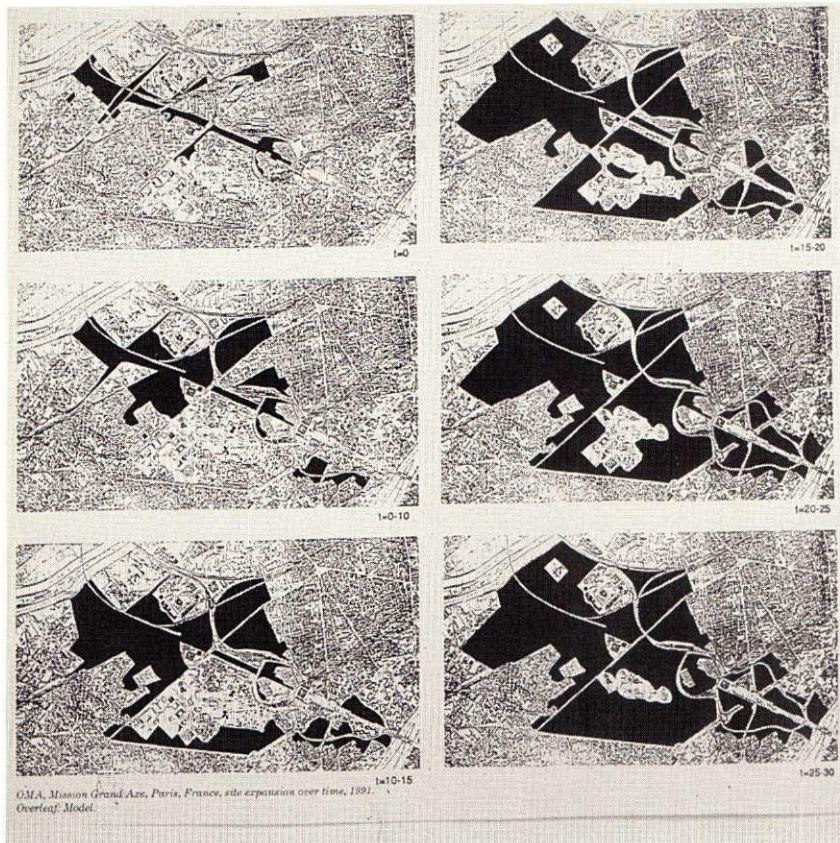
Fig. 7: OMA, "Tabula Rasa Revisited", Misson Grand Axe, Paris, site expanssion over time, 1991.

reverting to a kind of reverse archaeology: layer and layer of new modernists – shopping centers, parking, banks, vaults, laboratories – are constructed underneath the center."[45]

Even for Koolhaas, respect for urban context is legitimate in many cases.[46] Nonetheless, the desire to envision nothingness led him to employ an interpretation of the *tabula rasa* approach in OMA's project for the redevelopment of La Défense in Paris. In the European context, however, this project will remain entirely theoretical, based as it is on a not very realistic premise: "what would happen if, even in Europe – especially in Europe – we declared every building in the entire zone that is older than 25 years worthless – null and void – or at least potentially removable?"[47] But in southeast Asia, where cities leap from the nineteenth century straight into the twenty-first, the shortage of building space exacerbated by the exponential growth of urban population and living standards, has the *tabula rasa* approach to urban planning been practiced in reality to an historically unprecedented extent. Is what we see happening in Asia an unexpected product of a Pandora's box first opened in Europe, or will Asian

modernization mature in its own right to transcend the dilemmas between tradition and modernization that seem to have been so painful for Europeans?

The contributions of non-western sources to the post-war architectural and urban discourse have been numerous. More often than not, however, these contributions have tended to form an anthropology of the past. Koolhaas' writing on Singapore is fundamentally different: it is, perhaps for the first time in the history of architectural and urban planning theory, an attempt to introduce a non-western source, in Koolhaas' words, in an "ecology of the contemporary."[48] He writes that "Singapore is incredibly 'Western' for an Asian city, the apparent victim of an out-of-control process of modernization. The temptation is to leave it one of those conundrums doomed, in a last polite little spasm of colonialism, to remain so, simply because they are *Asian*, or Chinese." However, he argues,

this perception is a Eurocentric misreading. The "Western" is no longer our exclusive domain. Except perhaps in the regions of its origins, it now represents a condition of universal aspiration. It is no longer something "we" have unleashed, no longer something whose consequences we therefore have the right to deplore; it is a self-administered process that we do not have the right to deny – in the name of various sentimentalities – to those "others" who have long since made it their own.[49]

Paul Ricoeur has pointed to the conflict between the emerging universal civilization and our established natio-

nal cultures, suggesting that in our modern world, "mankind as a whole is on the brink of a single world civilization representing at once a gigantic progress for everyone and an overwhelming task of survival and adapting our cultural heritage to this new setting."[50] Thirty years' *tabula rasa* has almost entirely erased Singapore's cultural past, the original village now but a wreck floating in an ocean of hygienic newness. The road to continued modernization seems to make the Ricoeurian paradox either even more overwhelming, in that the task of survival and adapting a well-established cultural heritage to new conditions was entirely ignored in the rush to modernization in Singapore and many other places in Asia, or completely irrelevant, in that since the "cleaning of the slate" almost nothing has survived to be adapted to the new setting. However, it is worthwhile to note that the wholesale *tabula rasa* planning that was the basic strategy in Singapore's modernization would have been impossible to implement if it had not been supported by aspects of the local cultural heritage, such as "a hard-core Confucian shamelessness, a kind of ultimate power of efficiency" for "taking care" of its people and bringing "help to the multitude,"[51] the willingness to pay the price required to catch up to the leading industrial countries and become a player in global markets. In this sense, one might consider Singapore a case of modernization based on cultural heritage despite physical appearances to the contrary. Or is it?

Even during the past thirty years of pursuing *tabula rasa* development in its pure form, the hunt for identity and character in Singapore has never ceased. As Koolhaas observed, "the manipulation of identities, through which the respect given to each specific culture – its ethnic, religious heritage – is an alibi for avoiding the serious demands – for more and more freedoms – of modern culture."[52] What is more, in the age of consumerism, when global consumer culture strives for not only the consumption of goods but also the consumption of identity and history, the manipulation of identity indeed has far-reaching physical consequences. It engenders cultural subversions like the stylized "Asian" villages, Chinese gardens, the reconstruction of various kinds of temples, tower buildings with "Chinese" roofs,
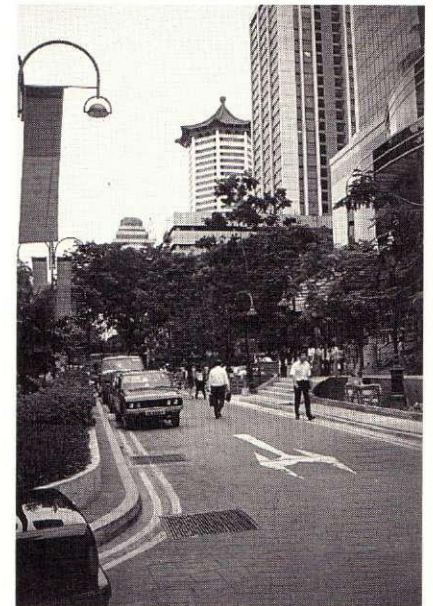

Fig. 8, 9, 10:
Singapore.

and the shopping centers in post-modern Confucian style that have popped up throughout Singapore. It is by no means inconceivable that one day the original village will be entirely reconstructed somewhere, if not on its original site. In Singapore, the physical appearance of cultural heritage and ethnic identity is sooner overwhelming than absent, though what remains of the past is no more than historical kitsch.

From Singapore – and in fact from Atlanta as well – there is only one step left to the Generic City, the synthetic reproduction and compression of urban facts or "souvenirs" into an urban form that is ideal from the point of view of the paranoiac-critical method, and as obvious and undeniable as snapshots to the rest of mankind. The Generic City is by definition multi-racial as well as multi-cultural; it is located in a tropical climate; its business is clearly manifested in the form of downtown towers; its urban life is concentrated

to shopping centers; airports are its city gates, where both hyper-local and hyper-global commodities are available; it is New Towns in an endless repetition of the same simple structural module; the Generic City is formless, a "free-style" assemblage of three elements – roads, buildings, and nature. It is the final death of planning. What is more, in this the city of *tabula rasa*, the cycle of interdependence between history and identity is completely severed:

> it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting – or unexciting – everywhere. It is "superficial" – like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.[53]

Here again the issue of identity arises in regard to the Generic City, which by definition is supposed to be devoid of identity. Perhaps it is true that what is called identity, character, and sense of place is, in Ian Nairn's words, "not a fine art extra, it is something that we cannot afford to do without."[54] This placelessness, this loss of character and identity, is perceived as an ever-increasing worldwide phenomenon today, and thus identity is more sorely needed than ever. In the Generic City, it is no surprise that as soon as a hint of identity is discovered, it is utilized to the maximum:

> If it is water-facing, then water-based symbols are distributed over its entire territory. If it is a port, then ships and cranes will appear far inland. If it is Asian, then "delicate" (sensual, inscrutable) women appear in elastic poses, suggesting (religious, sexual) submission everywhere. If it has a mountain, each brochure, menu, ticket, billboard will insist on the hill, as if nothing less then a seamless tautology will convince.[55]

What Koolhaas conceives as the paranoiac-critical tourism of the Generic City is obviously a parody of modern man's desperate need for identity, character, and sense of place in the society of consumption. This parody suggests that what Ricoeur called the "lowest degree of creative culture" is an inevitable consequence of consumer culture in a universal civilization. But it should also be noted that in the same essay Ricoeur stresses the "tragic law of the creation of a culture" which diametrically opposes the "false consciousness" of identity and the steady
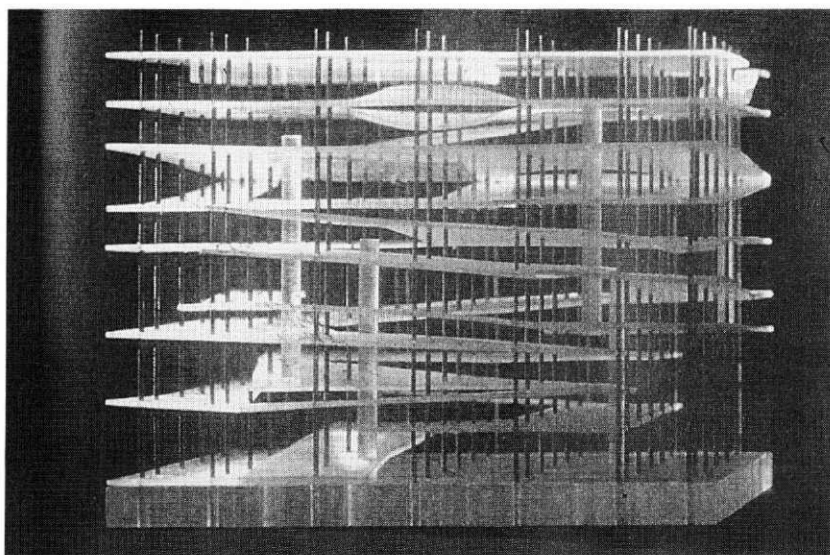

Fig. 11: OMA, 2 Bibliothèques Jussieu, Paris, competition entry, 1993

accumulation of the tools that make up a civilization. Creativity, Ricoeur asserts, eludes all definitions.[56] In light of Ricoeur's tragic law of creativity, is not disregard for the identity of a place ("Down with character!" as Koolhaas puts it) not merely a hypothetical issue for the Generic City, but in fact a necessity if we are to approach what remains to be explored after the Generic has taken over?

Conclusion

There are two grounds for the concept of place: what a place was in the past and what it should become in the future. Piranesi's archaeological reconstruction of the *Campo Marzio* seemed to be a reference to the past, yet behind the mask of archaeology his desire for creative expression resulted in an experimental design that challenged the rules of architecture and cities, and subverted the concept of place in terms of past and future simultaneously. The paranoiac-critical tourism of Koolhaas' Generic City constitutes the "archaeologue of the 20th century," utilizing unlimited plane tickets rather than the shovel of the traditional archaeologist,[57] and disregarding questions of what places have been or should be. Koolhaas, simply by focusing on the present, by looking into what places or cities actually are in a rapidly changing world, launches a discourse in which the foundations for the concept of place are criticized, transgressed, and finally subverted.

But there ends the parallel between Piranesi and Koolhaas. Piranesi subjected the city to an experimental design in which the epic tone is, according to Tafuri, the struggle "between

the demand for order and the will to formlessness."[58] For Koolhaas, the new conditions of architecture and urbanism in the late twentieth century have not only changed the very concept of the city, they have rendered urbanism as a profession in its traditional sense impracticable, and thus made the struggle between order and chaos meaningless. In other words, inasmuch as the city is the creation of designers and planners, practical demands and creative will are both of vital importance, whether the result is order or formlessness. But to Koolhaas, today's cities are anything but products of the design profession. If our cities are formless rather than formally ordered, chaotic rather geometrically structured, it is not because they are designed to be so but because they are the outcome of real forces in operation – flows of capital, flows of human beings, flows of work. If the essence of the supermodern city is its loss of a sense of place, this loss is not pre-designed but a consequence of late-capitalist modernization.

If Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* as a subversion of the concept of place is to be understood against the background of an architectural ideology based on the Enlightenment concept of Reason and its criticism,[59] then the subversion of the concept of place in Koolhaas must be seen in relation to the epistemological and economic changes since the nineteenth century with which the experience of modernization can be summed up. Jonathan Crary has suggested that one is brought to "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."[60] Perhaps nowhere is this "anguish of urban dynamism" more overwhelming than in the leading figures of the Modern Movement. Some of them, from William Morris and Ebeneezer Howard to Frank Lloyd Wright, tried to conquer this "anguish of urban dynamism" by suggesting a direct opposition or alternatives to it; others, such as Otto Wagner, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Le Corbusier, were fascinated by the dynamics of modern cities, and yet that fascination was accompanied by a persistent fear of chaos and a continual effort to bring the metropolis under control, either from an architectural or a socio-ideological point of view. Hence the urban utopias of the twentieth century: for Howard it is "a peaceful path to real reform;" for Le Corbusier, "revolution can be avoided" when the chaos and injustice of nineteenth-century cities are conquered by the harmony and beauty of the Contemporary City.[61] The urban utopias of Modernism are never fully realized, and the anguish of urban dynamism is never fully overcome. The gap between the modern spirit and the modernized environment was becoming clearer in the late 1950s, the result, according to Jane Jacobs, of "the principles and aims that had shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding," referring in particular to Howard and Le Corbusier.[62] Early Modernism's urban ideas and the modern environments created in accordance with them have been a new

source of anguish ever since. This holds true for Europe as well as America. In his essay on the experience of modernity, Marshall Berman wrote that "So often the price of ongoing and expanding modernity is the destruction not merely of 'traditional' and 'pre-modern' institutions and environments but – and here is the real tragedy – of everything most vital and beautiful in the modern world itself."[63] Here, Berman's themes of the 1960s "shout in the street" and the attempt at "bringing it all back home" in the '70s are but two examples of how the post-war architectural and urban discourse has been haunted by anguish over the loss of urban vitality.

What then is the relationship between Koolhaas' architectural and urban thinking and the Modern Movement? On the one hand he is known for paying persistent homage to the modernist *tabula rasa* strategy and to the paradigmatic dimension of the *Siedlungen* and Broadacre City. Yet this homage is never overshadowed by the fear of chaos or the uncontrollable forces of development. Koolhaas' is a die-hard Modernism that embraces the consequences of late-capitalist modernization, spectacular as well as relentless, and entirely free from anguish. Faced with new conditions, he is exalted rather than traumatized, maintaining that unprecedented, unanticipated, and thus potentially liberating possibilities could revitalize an exhausted profession. Koolhaas accepts the new conditions *de facto*. Change continues with or without our consent; change is a pure "given," and thus in itself is value-free. If we are to understand the new urban

condition, we must first do away with all preconceptions – architectural as well as urban, ideological as well as moral. What is left to explore is not a matter of what things *were* or *should be* but what things actually *are*. To Koolhaas' exhilaration, urban development now tends to run its own course, putting planners in a position of powerlessness. And yet "since it is out of control, the urban is about to become a major vector of the imagination. Redefined, urbanism will not only, or mostly, be a profession, but a way of thinking, an ideology: to accept what exists."[64]

The crisis of the ideological and utopian aspirations of modern architecture has been rigorously analyzed since Tafuri. According to Tafuri, this crisis, resulting in the demise of the architect as social ideologue, is only the final testimony of some "impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic 'hopes of design.'"[65] Whether or not he sympathizes with the political position of Tafuri's analysis, Koolhaas' call for a new ideology seems to have consolidated a post-Tafurian position – though absent Tafuri's pessimism, for the fire of modernity that Koolhaas' work embraces is fueled by far-reaching optimism. Nor should this post-Tafurian position be confused with the kind of "autonomous architecture" which in post-war architectural and urban discourse took the entirely linguistic course of typology or deconstruction, because this kind of autonomy has long since been dismissed by Koolhaas. Instead, Koolhaas declares a new ideology which is transposable, capable of accepting

what exists, and yet in a sense implies the abandonment of all ideologies. His position is, as Alejando Zaera has suggested, "a strategic retreat, the cessation of ideological resistance to the development of contemporary civilization."[66] Inasmuch as the development of contemporary civilization is not unequivocal, and inasmuch as our understanding and treatment of reality remains necessarily value-laden, Koolhaas' strategy of non-resistance will itself undoubtedly meet with opposition. It is proof of Koolhaas' intellectual strength that in rendering urbanism a "Gay Science" aiming at "perfectly rational answers to perfectly insane questions,"[67] he remains so intriguing that, as Nick Land said of Georges Bataille, one feels that "to accept his writings is an impossibility, to resist them an irrelevance. One is excited abnormally, appalled, but without refuge."[68]

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Notes

1. OMA, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (The Monacelli Press, 1995) xix.
2. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See also Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Dell, 1977).
3. Fritz Neumeyer, "OMA's Berlin: The Polemic Island in the City," *Assemblage* 11: 38.
4. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 216.
5. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 5.
6. "Exodus/1972," *Architectural Design* 47.5 (1977) 328.
7. Demetrios Porphyrios, "Pandora's Box," *Architectural Design* 47.5 (1977) 357.
8. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (London: MIT Press, 1987) 29.
9. See Miranda Harvey, *Piranesi: The Imaginary Views* (London: Academy Editions, 1979) 7.
11. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* 27.
12. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* 27, 34, 38. For the concept of place in terms of center, history and nature, and the language of architecture, see Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*; Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space & Architecture* (London: Studio Vista, 1971); and Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985).
13. In fact the *Campo Marzio* was done as the fourth and final volume of *Le Antichità Romane*.
14. Sergei Eisenstein, "Piranesi, or the Fluidity of Forms," appendix, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, by Tafuri (London: MIT Press, 1987).
15. Wilton-Ely, *Piranesi as Architect and Designer* 40.
16. Stanley Allen, "Piranesi's *Campo Marzio*: An Experimental Design," *Assemblage* 10: 72.
17. Allen, "Piranesi's *Campo Marzio*" 75.

18. Wilton-Ely, *Piranesi as Architect and Designer* 40.
19. Jonathan Scott, *Piranesi* (London: Academy Editions and St. Martins Press, 1975) 166–167.
20. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, (London: MIT Press, 1973) 15.
21. Alex Krieger, "Conflicting Ideals for the City," *GSD News* Winter/Spring 1995: 16.
22. Koolhaas, "Understanding the New Urban Condition," *GSD News* Winter/Spring 1996: 13.
23. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (London: MIT Press, 1993) xii.
24. Franklin Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, by André Breton (New York: Monad, 1978) 136.
25. Dawn Ades, *Dalí* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982) 119–126.
26. Neumeyer, "OMA's Berlin" 46, 38.
27. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994) 238.
28. "*Architectural Design* 47.5 (1977) 319.
29. "*Architectural Design* 47.5 (1977)" 331.
30. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* 294.
31. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 518.
32. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 206–8.
33. For an discussion of the struggle with "historicism" in this sense, see Manfredo Tafuri, "Modern Architecture and the Eclipse of History," *Theories and History of Architecture* (London: 1980). See also Neumeyer, "OMA's Berlin".
34. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 206, 208.
35. Jacques Lucan, "Contextualism and Universality," *Lotus International* 1974.
36. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 199.
37. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 495–502.
38. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 514–15.
39. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 835.
40. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 839–43.
41. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 850.
42. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 503.
43. Sanford Kwinter, "Flying the Bullet, or When Did the Future Begin?" *ARCH +* 132 June 1996.

44. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 515.
45. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1249.
46. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1099.
47. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1105.
48. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1011.
49. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1013.
50. Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," *History and Truth* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1965) 271.
51. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1017, 1037.
52. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1039.
53. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1250.
54. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976) 32.
55. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1263.
56. Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" 281.
57. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 1263.
58. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 16.
59. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 14–16.
60. Jonathan Crary, "Notes on Koolhaas + Modernization," *Any* 9 (1994).
61. For the architectural as well as ideological dimensions of these urban utopias, see Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century – Ebeneezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (London: MIT Press, 1982).
62. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*; New York: Peregrine Books, 1984) 13–35.
63. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Verso, 1989) 295.
64. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 969, 971.
65. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 181–182.
66. Alejandro Zaera, "OMA 1986–1991. Notes for a Topographic Survey," *OMA/Koolhaas 1987–1993* (Madrid: El Croquis, 1994).
67. Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* 971 and Koolhaas, "Understanding the New Urban Condition" 13.
68. Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation – Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992) xii.