

The Digital City Will Lead To “Total Conformity”

REM KOOLHAAS, one of the world’s most influential architects, is also a leading author on urbanism with such books as *Delirious New York* and *S,M,L,XL*. He was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2000. He spoke in 2018 with NPQ editor Nathan Gardels about globalization, identity and the future of cities in the digital age.

NPQ | Back in the 1990s, you often spoke about the “generic city” that was emerging out of homogenizing globalization. In one of our conversations, you said: “Convergence is possible only at the price of shedding identity. That is usually seen as a loss. But at the scale at which it occurs, it must mean something. What are the disadvantages of identity, and conversely, what are the advantages of blankness? What is left after identity is stripped? The generic?”

How do you see it all now with the backlash against globalization and the reassertion of identity, whether Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” or Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s nostalgic turn, for example with his plan to rebuild the old Ottoman barracks in Gezi Park?

REM KOOLHAAS | To the extent there was a global aesthetic developing in architecture, which would have been an international style, already in the 1980s people were critical of its inability to establish distinct identities. That is the reason postmodernism emerged. It both embraced a global aesthetic yet resisted it by mixing it with vernacular styles.

That is why I said postmodernism would be the style of the generic city. We can see that this sensibility anticipated and preceded today’s fuller reassertion of

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identity but still in the global context. Xi, as you mention, represents this discrepancy. He remains more open to globalization than President Trump but at the same time is emphasizing “Chinese characteristics” in all things, from socialism to architecture.

NPQ | When Xi came to power, he criticized the “weird architecture” he saw around Beijing. With your iconic CCTV building apparently in mind, he said buildings in China ought instead to “disseminate contemporary Chinese values, embody traditional Chinese culture and reflect Chinese people’s aesthetic pursuit.”

Would you have been able to build your CCTV building today?

KOOLHAAS | Probably not. There are regulations now in Beijing that would limit new buildings to a third of the height of the CCTV tower. So I couldn’t build it in Beijing but could elsewhere in China—perhaps Shenzhen.

For the record, by the way, Xi never explicitly tied his criticism to CCTV. Also for the record, I agree with him: there are many weird buildings in Beijing.

NPQ | Will this retreat from globalization and the resurgence of identity affect cities differently in the East and the West, in democracies and autocracies?

KOOLHAAS | It is ironic that just as people want to see a built environment that reflects who they are, what we are seeing in much of the world is that urban planning is scarcely possible because market economies are not generating the necessary funds for it. Any major project of public interest, including even precautions against hurricanes in coastal regions of America, can’t get done.

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For me, the issue is not about the inefficiency of democracies versus efficient autocracies but how and where a society wants to allocate its resources. It is really a matter of ideology, of whether the interests of the market or the society as a whole are the priority.

NPQ | The Chinese science fiction writer Hao Jingfang, who wrote “Folding Beijing,” talks about cities in the age of cyberspace and smart

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technology like self-driving cars and the Internet of Things becoming large neural networks that will develop their own mind and consciousness. Do you agree with that? How will it impact urban life?

KOOLHAAS | If we simply let cyberspace run its course to a future determined by Silicon Valley, those libertarian-minded engineers will paradoxically lead us to cities shackled by algorithmic conformity. It would be a neural network, yes, but one that operates in lock step.

Like many of my friends, I am a car fanatic. So we have been looking very closely at the development of self-driving cars. What we know without hesitation is that self-driving cars will only work at the price of total conformity of every member of society. Such a system of mobility will depend on everyone behaving with no exceptions. As exemplified by self-driving cars, there is a built-in authoritarianism in this managed space of flows we call cyberspace.

More and more people are becoming uncomfortable with such a future.

NPQ | **The late “arcologist” Paolo Soleri believed that the intense feedback loops of spatial density are the condition for intelligence, as in the tight coils of the brain. As wired cities become dense neural networks, will they evolve into ecological, efficient, intelligent organisms—even at the price of the conformity you fear—or will the “delirious” chaos of diversity upset it all and resist such efficiency?**

KOOLHAAS | Density may be the condition for intelligence, but efficiency certainly isn't. Intelligent life flourishes most in the diversity of those unmanaged spaces that are, by definition, outside efficiency. That has been the history of the development of diverse life forms, and that has been the history of the culture of cities.

NPQ | **You've traveled the world many times over and built all over. In your view, what cities are most prepared to face the future?**

KOOLHAAS | I have lived for 30 years in either New York and London, but now I'm living in Randstad [a metropolis consisting of the four largest Dutch cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht]. It is a bit bizarre for me. There are no dominant cities but together the whole area is connected in a kind of metropolitan field. All the facilities and amenities you'd find in a city are here but decentralized across the whole zone. It is kind of an

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extended city not dependent on coherence or adjustment of each of the parts to each other. Yet it is able to sustain itself as a connected entity—kind of like a collage.

So I would say cities like this that are more open and not so complex to operate are best prepared for whatever the future throws at them. Los Angeles is the prototype of this kind of habitat for the future.



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