Where We Live

PAOLO SOLERI ■ MIKE DAVIS ■ REM KOOLHAAS

FRANK GEHRY ■ ORHAN PAMUK

The megacities arising around the planet are like the Internet where many events are taking place simultaneously. The urban scape today is becoming more a space of flows—migrants, trade, capital, information, microbes—than a space of places rooted in an historical identity.

The megaurban condition today encompasses many realities, from the glittering generic city-state of Singapore to the slums climbing up the hillsides around Mexico City or Sao Paulo. In these spaces we work, love and live out the intimate moments of our lives. In these spaces we consume and spew out climate warming gases.

In this section, two of the world's "star architects"—Rem Koolhaas and Frank Gehry—the visionary "arcologist" Paolo Soleri and the Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate, Orhan Pamuk, grasp at chronicling the reality of where we live.

The Past Is Too Small to Inhabit

REM KOOLHAAS, *author of* Delirious New York *and* S,M,L,XL, *is the most exciting thinker today on cities. The architect's Rotterdam-based Office of Metropolitan Architecture's many projects include the gigantic Lille convention center, equidistant from Brussels, Paris and London (thanks to the Chunnel), as well as the CCTV tower in Beijing.*

I caught Rem on the run, literally, as he was commuting in May 1996 to Rotterdam, Los Angeles (where he is designing the new MCA headquarters at Universal Studios), Seoul, and London. In our conversation we covered a whole set of heavy subjects in the most generic of settings—the departure lounge of Los Angeles International Airport.

NPQ | Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet, rejects the term "post-modern." He believes we have broken completely with modernity and now live in a "time without measure, or pure time."

What he means is that modernism was about trading in traditions for the future. Yet, after the failure of Communism and Progress, we no longer have faith in the future either. That leaves us abandoned in the permanently temporary present. There are neither ruins, nor utopia. This pure time is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It is free. A tabula rasa.

Similarly, outside the center core of European cities, the rest of the cities on the planet are becoming a kind of "pure space" like Los Angeles, liberated from the captivity of the traditional center, and thus a centering identity. Their past history matters little as they become sprawling receptacles of overflowing humanity and global culture.

It is in this pure space of the present that what you call "the Generic City" arises. Singapore, the most successful Generic City, you call "an ecology of the contemporary."

In your buildings and your writings, aren't you saying "Let us embrace this tabula rasa and celebrate it. Regrets about history's absence is a tiresome reflex. History's presence is not desirable"?

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REM KOOLHAAS | No, I would never actively remove history. I like history. What I dislike is the way a collective, free-floating anxiety has been diagnosed as being about an absence of history, center and place while, at the same time, a large part of mankind seems happily capable of inhabiting the "newness" that has been built from scratch, on the tabula rasa.

The wallowing in anxiety over a lost past—even in America, which, at the moment, is really gorging on nostalgia at almost every level, from the populist to the elitist—blinds us to the incipient emergence of another world, another city, another

way of being happy. We somehow cannot imagine that anything contemporary—made by us—can contribute to identity. But the fact that human growth is exponential implies that the past will at some point become too small to inhabit and be shared by those who are alive.

Also, in a distressingly emotional and sentimental way, this "other way" is simply rejected as if it smells bad. It is never analyzed, described or investigated. Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport—all the same? Is it possible to theorize the convergence? And if so, to what ultimate configuration is it aspiring? 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?

Some continents like Asia aspire to the Generic city; others are ashamed by it. Because it tends towards the tropical—converging around the equator where most people live—a large proportion of the Generic Cities are Asian.

That is why for my book *S,M,L,XL* I made myself go and try to understand Singapore.

As I note in the book, I turned eight on a ship in the harbor of Singapore. We did not go ashore, but I remember the smell—sweetness and rot, both overwhelming.

Last year I went again. The smell was gone. In fact, Singapore was gone, scrapped, rebuilt. There was a completely new town there.

Almost all of Singapore is less than 30 years old; the city represents the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form, uncontaminated by surviving contextual remnants. It is managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness. Even its nature is entirely remade. It is pure intention; if there is chaos, it is authorized chaos; if it is ugly, its is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity.

By the way, I don't agree with Octavio Paz that we have broken with modernity. I see the present as a convulsive apotheosis of modernization. The postmodern vision is essentially a form of simplification that plays an important role in celebrating modernization. It removes qualms and resistance. It is lubrication for the modern.

NPQ | Did the Generic City start in America?

KOOLHAAS | Is it so profoundly unoriginal that it can only be imported? The Generic City now also exists in Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa. The definitive move away from the countryside, from agriculture, to the city is not a move to the city as we knew it: It is a move to the Generic City, the city so pervasive that it has come to the country.

Some continents like Asia aspire to the Generic city; others are ashamed by it. Because it tends towards the tropical—converging around the equator where most people live—a large proportion of the Generic Cities are Asian. One day this discarded product of Western civilization will be absolutely exotic again, through the resemanticization that its very dissemination brings in its wake.

NPQ | Your attitude towards Singapore seems ambivalent.

You have written that Singapore "is a city without qualities," a "Potemkin metropolis." Yet, you speak with begrudging admiration about "the new norm being synthesized is Singapore—a hard-core Confucian shamelessness, a kind of ultimate power of efficiency that will fuel Asian modernization."

The rest of Asia, where there will be 50 megacities with more than 20 million inhabitants each, wants to emulate Singapore, leading you to remark that "two billion people can't be wrong."

The impression one gets is that there are only two alternatives for Asia: ordered Singapore or chaotic *Bladerunner*-type cities which can already be glimpsed in Calcutta or even Shanghai. Isn't Singapore the most prepared of any Asian city to enter the twenty-first century?

KOOLHAAS | Another way to look at Singapore is that it is (a corporate) *Bladerunner.* I also don't think Singapore is the place most prepared to enter the twenty-first century. It is at the same time entirely new and incredibly old-fashioned in the sense that it has been completely planned. It is the opposite of flexible. It is a "real" city where absolutes have become vulnerable; by definition on-its-way-to-obsolescence. It is built to last, and thus will age. It will be viable as long as everybody knows their place, but that will not be forever.

Recently, I was on an island in Thailand and found an even more compelling model: a minimum of electronics and a minimum of substance—bamboo, palm leaves, corrugated iron. The fluorescent tube is the minimum increment of modernity. Sometimes two restaurants share a single light through switches on palm trees that suddenly illuminate a clearing in the jungle.

Another way to look at Singapore is that it is (a corporate) **Bladerunner.**

That kind of "liteness" seems supremely capable of dealing with anything bound to come along in the twenty-first century.

NPQ | What, then, might the Asian city look like?

KOOLHAAS | It has been precisely in order to find answers to this question that I am working on Harvard's "Project On The City" where each year we research clusters of interrelated theses on a different subject.

The subject this year is the Pearl River Delta, a region that includes an extreme diversity of cities, some of which are well known: Hong Kong, Macao, Guangzhou; some of them less known, such as Shenzen, Zuhai, and DongGuang.

We are trying to extract from our research—which incorporates subjects such as architecture, infrastructure, landscape, ideology, demographics—a new conceptual apparatus to discuss new urban phenomenon.

This cluster of cities in the Pearl River Delta is destined to become one of the world's megacities. The area already has more than 25 million inhabitants.

But what do we call this first unrelated group of cities, each with its own history? We suggest the name of "City of Exacerbated Differences." It is undeniably a future metropolis, but each component defines itself in terms of maximum difference from all the others. We also call it "bastard metropolis©" because one component is overly dense, one is a garden city, one is expensive and therefore another cheap.

It is therefore likely that the Asian City of the future will have all the conditions within its space—lite and heavy, intense and sparse, lively and sedate—rather than one overriding characteristic. If there is an advantage to being a megacity, with "impossible" demographics like 20-30 million inhabitants—then that multiplicity has to be one of them.

Another concept that will help us define the supercites of tomorrow is "Scape©." "Scape©: is neither city nor landscape, but a post-urban condition. It is obvious that the world of 2050, with its 10 billion people, will be covered by a lot of Scape© This will be pervasive, generic conditions, punctuated by an event here or there, possibly architecture.

NPQ | You have said "the street is dead." What do you mean?

KOOLHAAS | The street is dead mostly because it appears that all the new cities are less and less dense and more and more sprawling and sparse. But the vitality of the street depends on density.

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From time to time it seems that people like density. They feel the apparent need for something eventful. But not too much. Not everyday.

What is interesting about City Walk *[a contrived main street of shops where people gather and stroll—ed.]* at Universal City in Los Angeles is that it creates density in a city of sprawl. And it is a success! This suggests that only the dead can be resuscitated.

NPQ | What about the widely heralded hope that cyberspace will be the new street, the piazza in our sprawling cities of connected isolation; that cyberflaneurs will promenade around the Net like Baudelaire taking a stroll around Paris?

KOOLHAAS | It is true that the Net has established an incredible, seething community, connected and bubbling. It is true that you can be a flaneur in cyberspace. But can you be more than a flaneur? Since people exist as bodies, they have to be "parked" somewhere.

Maybe the tumultuous richness of cyberspace reveals something about the apparent paucity, the minimalism of the new urban condition. Maybe the Generic City triumphs because cyberspace provides the complementary excess? The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life have crossed over to cyberspace. It is a place of weak and distended sensations, few and far between emotions.

But I am, and remain, an architect. I continue to bet, so to speak, on the continuing

desire for intercourse of whatever kind. The point now is whether we can imagine hybrids of real and cyberspace.

NPQ | **Won't Generic Cities be redundant with the same global culture? Mickey Mouse, Madonna, and Baywatch will be seen everywhere?**

As Maxim Gorky once said of Coney Island, cities of "varied boredom"?

Yet, at the same time, these tabula rasa Generic Cities will be the home of *La Raza Cosmica*—the cosmic race, a multicultural mosaic—anything but homogeneous.

KOOLHAAS | In each time zone, there are at least three performances of the musical *Cats.* The world seems surrounded by a Saturn's ring of meowing.

Yet, I think the "threat" of homogeneity is grotesquely exaggerated. For those with eyes, it is becoming very clear that globalization implies, also, an explosion of difference.

The Generic City is, as you suggest, seriously multiracial, on average 8 percent black, 12 percent white, 27 percent Hispanic, 37 percent Chinese/Asian, 6 percent indeterminate and 10 percent other.

Mass culture is the dirty secret of the European intellectual. They abhor the hordes that go there, but EuroDisney is the only institution that can receive them with a minimum of dignity.

NPQ | **Great odes to trade and finance are rising to the skies in Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai, taking the lead as the world's tallest buildings; in Arab Islam mosques and monuments are still built to faith and martyrdom. Yet, the most interesting architects in the West today are building cathedrals of the great entertainment empires. You are building for Universal Studios, and Frank Gehry, Michael Graves, and Arata Isozaki for Disney.**

What is going on?

KOOLHAAS | What makes Universal Studios different than Disneyland is that it is a place of authentic production. Films and television are made there. There is also a place of consumption, the theme park. City Walk is strange, a place of simulation that has almost become authentic.

So we are definitely not involved in making cathedrals. We have to organize and exploit for maximum social benefit the coexistence on a single site of so many conditions and realities, of which landscape is only one.

NPQ | **EuroDisney was said by one French critic to be a "cultural Chernobyl." Can a Disney park be a Chernobyl in Europe, but not in America?**

KOOLHAAS | EuroDisney can only be considered a cultural Chernobyl because the Europeans themselves are in massive denial. They have refused to take the issue of mass culture seriously, in spite of the overwhelming evidence that Beaujolais, cappuccino, or the Roman Colosseum have been unable to ward it off. Mass culture is the dirty secret of the European intellectual. They abhor the hordes that go there, but EuroDisney is the only institution that can receive them with a minimum of dignity.

NPQ | **Arata Isozaki says he wants to build "architecture without irony." He likes to build in America, he says, because there is no irony, no distance or conflict with ancestral territory. "Ruins are the pathetic sentiment about what was lost."**

Is your Universal Studios project architecture without irony?

KOOLHAAS | Can anyone outrun irony today?

There are large ironies in America, one of them is that a culture which was about newness has abandoned its role in its further definition and development.

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What concerns me, and what may be the result of a collective "flight backwards," is that New York, which, if anything, used to be a real city, a city without selection, without exclusive morality, is now expelling, as in some kind of Biblical farce, the entire sector of sin. A cabal of well-meaning people has caused the death of 42nd street. A last domain of randomness, possibility and, most importantly, urbanity—the Metropolitan—is eliminated in the name of rehabilitation and Disney.

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