The Reinvention of the City

REM KOOLHAAS *is a leading urban theorist and a Pritzker Prize-winning architect who is engaged in building projects around the world. He co-founded the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), which is receiving international attention for its recent completion of an enigmatic new headquarters for China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing. In an interview with Paul Fraioli for the spring/summer 2012 issue of Columbia University's* Journal of International Affairs, *Koolhaas discusses how the economic and cultural changes of the 21st century are transforming world cities as well as the practice of architecture. (The full interview can be found at www.jiacolumbia.org.)*

NPQ | Do cities around the world, whether they are well established or just emerging, share common challenges? Are they finding common solutions?

REM KOOLHAAS | What I see more than anything is the inability of almost every political system to anticipate, mobilize and take precautions for the future, even when it is obvious that cities will grow or shrink rapidly. It doesn't take particular expertise to deal with these challenges. However, this inability to plan ahead is widespread and it is always shocking when it happens in individual cases. It seems as if our ability to respond to advance warnings has eroded. In Europe there used to be politicians who were able to think 20 years or 50 years ahead, but now the political horizon is four years, if that. This is a global phenomenon, and as the issues become bigger, perspectives become shorter.

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NPQ | Many architects are designing and building "green" structures around the world. What impact will this have on the sustainability of cities?

KOOLHAAS | What is now called "green architecture" is an opportunistic caricature of a much deeper consideration of the issues related to sustainability that architecture has been engaged with for many years. It was one of the first professions that was deeply concerned with these issues and that had an intellectual response to them. The "Spaceship Earth" concept that emerged in the 1960s had a visionary awareness of the interdependency of things, and also of the need to be systematically frugal. I have more affinity with this tradition than with the current "greenness." At the same time, there is now strong pressure on buildings to function better, and there are finally

clients willing to pay for it and the engineering needed to realize it. The exciting thing is not green buildings, it is that buildings are built better.

NPQ | Has the future, so to speak, already arrived in today's modern cities? Will the biggest change in the coming century be the diffusion of modernity to new places in the world rather than the reinvention of modernity?

KOOLHAAS | I am incredibly bad at predicting the future; I am only smart enough to observe the present and listen to my intuition about tendencies. But this question makes me think: Since global economics is the dominant influence on the well-being or degeneration of cities, one can make predictions about where urban development will take place. My limited prediction is that great expansion will take place in some parts of the world. I see this happening not only in China, but also in places like Iran or Turkey, where cities of the future will be made in great quantity.

NPQ | Do you think about the future when you design particular projects? So many things can change from design to completion to the end of a building's life cycle, including politics, economics, culture and architecture itself.

KOOLHAAS | Architects work in two ways. One is to respond precisely to a client's needs or demands. Another is to look at what the client asks and reinterpret it. You must make a judgment about whether the client's project will create value for society because you must always answer that demand through your work. There is something in every project we do that goes beyond how it was initially defined. We try to discover potentials that the client did not or would not realize. For example, with the Rothschild Bank building we just completed London, we discovered that if we lifted the building of the ground, it would reveal quite a bit about London's past. The developer was adamant against it, but we were able to do it.

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This creative flexibility allows us to design buildings that are more versatile, which can be successful in new economies and in new contexts. At OMA we try to build in the greatest possible tolerance and the least amount of rigidity in terms if embodying one particular moment. We want our buildings to evolve. However, if you look back in history, you also see that almost any building is able to accommodate almost any kind of activity. Something that was built as a home becomes an office building and then becomes a housing block. A building has at least two lives—the one imagined by its maker and the life it lives afterward—and they are never the same.

NPQ | There has been a shift in your client base in the last 20 or 30 years: Fewer architectural commissions come from city governments and public agencies, and more come from multinational corporations and developers. How is this changing the field of architecture and cities that become home to these projects?

KOOLHAAS | This has been an enormous shift, and it has been very bad for

architecture. At OMA we have tried to resist this trend, so only about a third or a quarter of our projects are developers. The rest are for public clients. I have been dealing with this problem in my writing more than in my architectural practice. The fact is that architecture is losing sight of the collective good by cutting off its connection to the public sector. To put it differently, the public sector has become so weak that it cannot afford to take the initiative on these projects. It is surrendering to private forces.

My newest book, "Project Japan," is an oral history about a Japanese avant-garde movement called "metabolism" that emphasized public projects and preserving a traditional style that rejected the uniformity of modernism. My conversation with the pioneers of metabolism reaffirmed this point again and again: The public client is an inspiring definer of what architecture should be.

The biggest difference between working for private clients and public clients—although it is becoming less and less pronounced—is that private developers are extraordinarily good at maximizing profits. They see everything that does not contribute to those profits as incidental, as a sacrifice that preferably should be avoided. The public sector is able to understand why a certain generosity is important.

NPQ | Globalization is making it easier for corporations and developers to do business in cities around the globe. Is this having an effect on the practice of architecture in cities or on the kinds of projects that cities are demanding?

KOOLHAAS | The question is so pertinent that it is almost unanswerable. Things are changing enormously in almost every sense. The effects of globalization have been positive and negative. My generation of architects is the first that could work almost anywhere in the world. We had the option to repeat the same building and the local culture. This has been incredible for OMA because we have had a deep encounter in China creating the CTV building and another in Qatar. It is a three-dimensional anthropology lesson, and I think our office has been transformed by these encounters. If you take architecture seriously and assume your responsibilities, exchanges can be a very rich thing. The downside is that profit-driven repetition is so common.

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NPQ | How do major urban architectural projects impact the national and cultural identity?

KOOLHAAS | This repetition I just mentioned causes anxiety about identity. There is a natural reaction from citizens and from governments when their cultures are not reflected in urban building projects. This often comes up in the Middle East. SO many international architects make it their business to be contextual; as a result, their projects will feature doves, camels, falcons and other first-degree symbols of local history.

This issue is fascinating because if you look back a hundred years, you find that

there was still such a thing as an Indian architecture, a Thai architecture, a Chinese architecture, an African architecture, a Dutch architecture, a Russian architecture. But now, almost all of these languages have disappeared and are subsumed in a larger and seemingly universal style. The process has been like the disappearance of a spoken language.

Remnants of these differences still exist. For example, a high-rise in Singapore is inhabited in a very different way from a high-rise in the suburbs of Paris or a high-rise in China. Each of these cultures, which once had its own form of speaking, is not trying to resurrect old language, but is interested in defining and asserting its uniqueness again.

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On the other hand, some cultures have managed to maintain their distinctiveness. It still is meaningful to say that someone is a Japanese architect, but relatively meaningless to say that someone is an American or a Dutch architect. The Dutch happily subsumed their identity into international modernism and found international resonances and connections. In Japan, however, there has always been an insistence that even a modern thing should respect tradition. Japanese forms are still particularly careful, particularly well made, particularly intricate; they do not surrender to a large or brutal scale.

It is actually a paradox that Japan has maintained its style. I discovered in Project Japan that the Japanese have a philosophy of impermanence. They rebuild the sacred Ise Grand Shrine every 20 years. They do not hang onto things. They have a totally different attitude toward preservation than we do in the West and yet have preserved a lot more.

NPQ | Where in the world is urban transformation happening most intensely? Is it in China?

KOOLHAAS | Two experiences come immediately to mind. One was in Largos, Nigeria, in the mid or late 1990s. The city was in a deep state of urban regression. It was going backwards, not forward. But this regression imposed a form of creative, self-organization improvisation on the population. This gave me the feeling that the city was being reinvented in front of my eyes. Elements of the city were being used in completely unfamiliar ways that I never could have imagined. For instance, clover-leaf highway interceptions moved so slowly that the whole thing became a slow-moving drive-through market.

You also see the city being reinvented in China—or maybe not reinvented but reproduced at an enormous scale and speed. You also notice that things are changing by default. It is similar to the Roman system in which the elements and topology of a city are replicated in a new place and adapted around local conditions. I have seen

cities there begin from scratch. Shenzhen, north of Hong Kong, was a fishing village in the 1980s and is now a city of over 10 million people. Shenzhen has become a unique city even though there is nothing physically unique about it. It is unique because it is next to Hong Kong; it acts a counterpart, since it is also in a special economic zone with special emigration statues. Therefore, it attracts a lot of Chinese companies hoping to access a more reliable legal system.

NPQ | In your first book, *Delirious New York,* you write that "Manhattan is the 20th century's Rosetta Stone." What city is playing that role for the 21st century? Is it a city in the Middle East or in Asia?

KOOLHAAS | It is too early to tell. During its rise in the 20th century, Manhattan was incredibly preoccupied with its own uniqueness, and very few cities right now are focusing on that. I am not even sure that the 21st century will have an equally pertinent or key city. I don't think that anything is happening in Lagos or China that rivals the importance of Manhattan's rise in the last century. I am now working in Doha, in Qatar, which is a city-state reinventing itself on every level—education, politics, culture, entertainment and sports—and somehow our office, OMA, is participating in this transformation in a particularly active way. For instance, we are working on the national library, on the transformation of the country through sports, on all kinds of things that gave us an opportunity to help formulate what the future there can be.

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The reinvention and the reimagining of cities is taking place all over the world. The energy that inspires reinvention either comes from pressure—when negative forces lead to a breakthrough, which is what I noticed in Lagos—or cities get this energy from striving. Cities are machines for emancipation. When the striving for emancipation is at its most intense, when there is the clearest promise of success, change is at its most intense. That is why cities in the West are so morose. We can strive until we're blue in the face, but we have nothing to change, at least not in the way that other parts of the world will change. In these places—particularly in the Middle East and Africa—real change is happening now.

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