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Urban architectural theory and the contemporary city: Tschumi and Koolhaas at the Parc de la Villette

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The decontextualized city

Cities, particularly since World War Two, have increasingly been described as incoherent and chaotic. For many, the problem of the contemporary city is its geographic size; for others it is the city's rapid decentralization. Both of these observations are undoubtedly true. However, since the 1960s, numerous observers in the fields of literature, city planning, cinematography and other disciplines, have revealed that the artifacts of the city (its architecture, landscapes, and objects of popular culture) can no longer be comprehended in relation to the structure of the city. And, for some, any structure of the city has largely ceased to exist.

Steven Marcus has recently analyzed the urban fiction of Saul Bellow and Thomas Pynchon as a means of revealing recent literary conceptions of the city.¹ In the novels of Saul Bellow, such as *Seize the Day* (1956) and in the later novels, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970) and *The Dean's December* (1982), the city has collapsed "away from meaning... into incognizability and chaos."² Thomas Pynchon, in *V* (1963) and in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), vividly expresses his doubts that the contemporary city, whether New York or Los Angeles, has any underlying structure at all. The city itself has become a fiction. "Both Bellow and Pynchon announce the death of the city as a signifying system, but for the former it is the collapse of civilization, while for the latter it is a kind of delirious entropy, an over-determined semiotic mesh endlessly indicating its own fictionality."³ Bellow's city is apocalyptic; Pynchon's is psychotic. They both reveal the contemporary city as problematic: the tradition of urban fiction and the traditional city, with its legible structure of downtown, neighborhood, street and dwelling, no longer exists; or, if it does exist, it can no longer be comprehended.

In the urban fiction of the 1980s, such as Tama Janowitz'

*Slaves of New York*⁴ and Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985),⁵ the city has become even more problematic.⁶ For Janowitz, the city has been reduced to a semiotic mush of the artifacts of popular culture. Daria, a central character in *Slaves of New York*, clearly expresses the contemporary condition when commenting on the gifts given at a birthday party — a Godzilla cigarette lighter, a statue of liberty hat, a bag of health food for dogs, etc.: "I know that this assortment of gifts means something specific and symbolic about people my age who live in New York and are involved in the arts. A list of gifts received by a flapper in the Jazz Age could tell you things about the period, and this stuff has significance as well. But what the gifts actually represent, I have no idea."⁷ By implication, the structure and architecture of Manhattan are similar; the all-night bar, the nightclub, the apartment and the taxi are decontextualized interior settings for the events of the city, unrelated to each other, existing only in a vague reference to the coordinates of the Manhattan grid of streets.

For Auster's detective in *City of Glass*, the structure of the city remains only on the coordinates of the street itself, and any meanings of the artifacts of city culture exist only in the discarded rubbish on the streets of the city. Exactly what the discarded items may mean, however, is unclear. As the suspect, Stillman, paces out T-O-W-E-R O-F B-A-B-E-L on the street grid of Manhattan, he collects the discarded artifacts of the city in order to rename them and, therefore, attempt to reconnect the meaning of words to the material world. His new words, however, are "top secret." Auster is observing the impossibility of the city's ability to communicate through its material form, just as he is observing the impossibility of human communication in the city. All that is left is a residual structure of street coordinates; the remainder is silent.

These examples of urban fiction are perhaps the most vivid portrayals of the difficulty of the contemporary city, even if they are primarily concerned with problems of language. However, observers in other disciplines have also recognized the incomprehensibility of the contemporary city. Melvin Webber, observing the city in the 1960s, criticized the continued fascination with the place-oriented "neighborhood" and "community" in the field of city planning and argued instead for the "non-place urban realm" and "community without propinquity"⁸ as more accurate descriptions of the spatial and temporal reality of the city. Frederic Jameson has referred to the contemporary

city by stating “we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself.”⁹ In the cinema, *Bladerunner* and *Brazil*, among others, offer their own apocalyptic projections of the city, whether through the lens of a future Los Angeles or of Bofil’s Les Théâtres d’Abraxis in the Marne-la-Vallée new town outside Paris.

The film *True Stories* is one of the few recent observations that views the current condition in positive rather than negative and apocalyptic terms. David Byrne, the director and narrator of the film, driving through the mythical town of Virgil, Texas, states: “I have something to say about the difference between American cities and European cities, but I forgot what it is. I’ve got it written down at home somewhere.” In the book of the same name, Byrne elaborates: “Americans have totally ignored or forgotten what, for Europeans, are the unwritten laws that govern what makes a city liveable. They’re proving that you can make a city work even if people can’t tell it’s working.”¹⁰

These observations from the past 25 years reveal the collapse of the intellectual constructions of both the pre-modern city of the 18th century and the great modern city of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The city, that was once understood as a complexly contextual phenomenon where the lives of its residents corresponded to a material reality, can now only be understood as decontextualized. The physical artifacts of the city (including architecture and the landscape), the social and human activities of the city, and the remaining structure of the city no longer correspond. The contextual weaving of the city has become unwoven.

Urban architectural theory and the contemporary city

In response to the emergence of this decontextualized contemporary city, urban architectural theory and practice have been largely silent. Two responses have been dominant:

- to disparage the existing circumstance of the city and to argue for reform; and,
- to disassociate architecture from the city and to retreat away from the city altogether.

● **The urban reform tradition** of architectural theory and practice has been a long one, encompassing much of the past 250 years of European and American urban thought. Architecture has been the remedy for a presumably confused city from Laugier to the City Beautiful, from CIAM to Urban Renewal.¹¹ Even with the elimination of architectural theory’s utopian underpinnings, whether from the Enlightenment or from Modernism, very recent positions are continuations of this reform tradition.

The work of Leon Krier,¹² Aldo Rossi,¹³ and Colin Rowe¹⁴ can be understood as essentially reformist in content and “re-contextualizing” in intent. The emphasis is not so much revealing and understanding the present city but rather criticizing modernism’s reform strategies and, through an examination of the history of the city, substituting a broad historical and spatial context for architecture in relationship to the city. Rossi’s *Architecture and the City*, for example, with his emphasis on the continuities of history and space in the city and the permanences of urban artifacts, can be understood as

a broad contextual argument. Rowe and Koetter’s strategy of “collage” is essentially an argument to exploit both modernism and the traditional city in order to spatially and figuratively produce a remedial context for the contemporary city.

Frampton’s “subversive strategy of the urban enclave”¹⁵ is an alternative to broad urban re-contextual strategies of Rossi, Krier, Rowe and others. Frampton’s focus is to establish “place” as a localizing strategy, isolating or ignoring any larger relationships between individual “places” and the city. However, the enclave strategy remains firmly in the tradition of architectural remediation for the city. One must assume that the “urban enclave” is an adjunct to more general enclave theories, where an action establishes itself and then subversively spreads to modify existing antithetical circumstances on its own terms. In the most recent edition of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*,¹⁶ Frampton seems to have departed from the narrowly conceived urban enclave as a possible model; however, his “critical regionalism” is still focused on localized place-making as a remedy for the presumed evil of a universal culture and technology.

● Urban architectural theory and practice also has a long history of **retreat from the city** particularly the numerous utopian schemes of the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁷ The city was something to be abandoned and to be replaced with an architectural scheme to remedy the lives of the residents. Ledoux’s ideal city of Chaux, the garden cities of Ebenezer Howard and, later, F.L. Wright’s Broadacre City, and the extremes of Soleri’s Arcosanti or the Superstudio propositions of the 1960s are only a few examples of a long tradition. With the collapse of the utopian underpinnings of architectural theory, fully developed schemes for the anti-city seemingly have collapsed: either architecture becomes silent, reflecting only upon itself, unable to engage the city even when operating within it, or the city becomes a location for commentaries as artistic enterprises, which may be evocative, but do not confront the decontextualized city in a way to become architectural projects. John Hejduk’s “Masque” projects are evocative commentaries on the contemporary city; however, they remain as commentaries rather than propositions for an architecture that actually intersects the city.¹⁸

Historically, architecture and landscapes have been mediated in the European city by an urban structure of streets, blocks, squares and monuments, in the American city by a structure of streets, property lines, street grids, boundaries, and the surfaces of the ground, and in cities in other parts of the world by other codes and conventions that are culturally derived and historically developed. The historical interrelations among these urban elements and between the city and architecture can be accurately described as having been contextual, a weaving together of independent pieces to form a legible material reality that was conjunctive with the social reality of city residents. Historical architectural theories attempting to reform or retreat from the city were intended largely to clarify, control or re-order those relationships based on formal, ideological or other motivations. The city of modernism can be understood, in part, as a substitution of a figurative context for a historically spatial one.

In the contemporary city — the decontextualized city — these historical relations are no longer clearly evident,

and the figurative basis of the modernist city, at least as it has been constructed, has only served to further dis-join the physical parts of the city. The social realities — activities, events and programs — of the contemporary city can easily re-occupy the architecture, landscapes and urban structure of the surviving historical cities that have largely resisted or survived modern physical disruptions. And urban architectural theory and practice can operate effectively within these historical cities utilizing contextual, typological, or, at times, figurative strategies. Recent urban architectural projects by Rossi, Stirling, Koetter/Kim, among numerous others, testify to this possibility.

In the dis-joined contemporary city, particularly in the American examples of Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix and Los Angeles, in the suburbs of every large city, or even in large urban projects in the historical city, urban architectural theory and practice cannot simply aim to reconstruct the context of the historical physical and social relationships of the city. The current challenge to urban architectural theory and practice is to provide strategies for architectural interventions in the decontextualized city, without attempting to reform the city and without retreating further from the city into even more tightly circumscribed limits of architecture.

This challenge demands that architects read the contemporary city and attempt to understand it as it exists, not as it once was or should be. This reading of the city must necessarily focus on urban morphologies; that is, the mediating structures that allow the dis-joined and discontinuous architecture, social realities and urban landscapes of the decontextualized city to be apprehended, if not comprehended. These mediating structures are the replacements for, or adjuncts to, the street, square, block and dwelling of the traditional city.

Architectural propositions for the decontextualized city — The Parc de la Villette

The Parc de la Villette competition was sponsored by the French government as one of the “grands projets” for Paris, together with the Bastille Opéra, Tête - Défense, and I.M. Pei’s pyramid at the Louvre. The site for the park is on the northwest edge of Paris on a 125-acre site historically occupied by the central slaughterhouse of Paris (fig. 1). The competition brief, “Urban Park for the 21st Century,” set out a highly complex program that attempted to redefine the public park as an urban cultural, entertainment, educational, sports, and social “field” for contemporary Paris.¹⁹ It was clear from the competition program that the 19th century Haussmann park, as a architectural or landscape model, was to be overturned. The park was to remain a park, but its role in the city was to be re-invented.

The La Villette competition was an open invitation for Tschumi’s and Koolhaas’ readings of the city to be extended into architectural projects for the park.

Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas²⁰ are of interest to urban architectural theory and practice because they have each attempted to read the contemporary city, not just as observers and not as commentators, but as participants in the intersections between architecture and the city. Tschumi’s reading of the city is contained primarily in the *Manhattan Transcripts*²¹ and in a companion article, “Illustrated index: Themes from the Manhattan Transcripts”²²; Koolhaas’ is contained in his book, *Delirious New York*.²³ Also, Tschumi and Koolhaas each submitted entries for the 1982 international competition for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, in which they explicitly

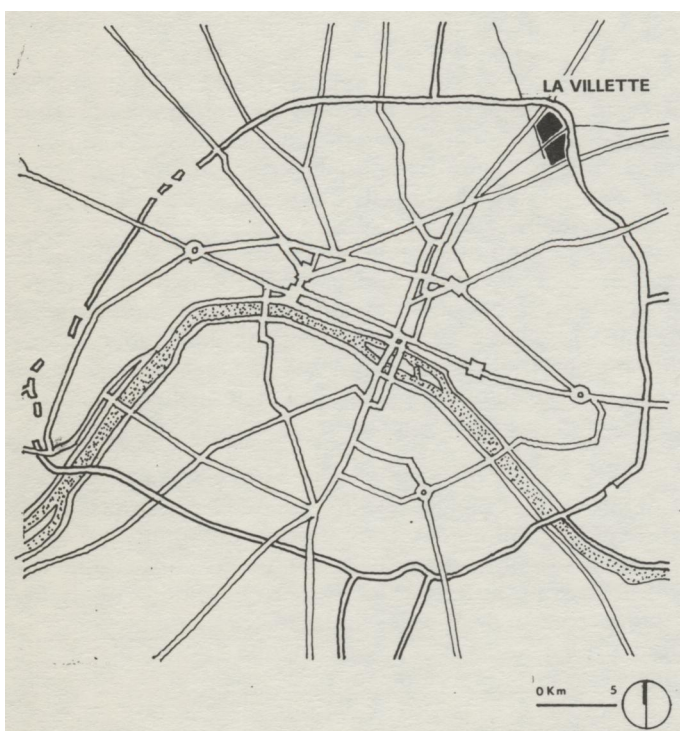
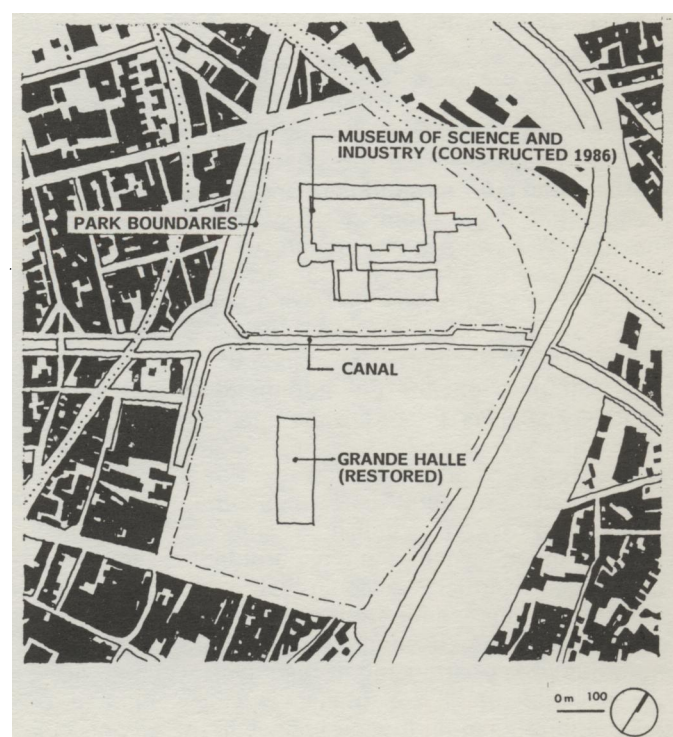


Fig. 1: The location of the Parc de la Villette site in Paris.



reference their previous readings of the city in the *Transcripts* and *Delirious New York*. One won the competition (Tschumi) and, in the view of some, the other (Koolhaas) should have.²⁴

Bernard Tschumi: The Manhattan Transcripts and the Parc de la Villette

● The **Manhattan Transcripts** were originally a 1982 gallery exhibition of drawings that explicitly transcribed realities that are “normally removed from conventional architectural representation, namely the complex relationship between spaces and use; between the (stage) set and the script; between ‘type’ and ‘program’; between objects and events ... their implicit purpose has to do with the twentieth-century city.”²⁵ The *Transcripts*, together with several preceding and parallel theoretical articles and projects, established an architectural position that was clearly critical of the “scenographic” directions of post-modernism as well as the formalist directions of “neo-rationalism,” a label applied to such architects as Aldo Rossi, Leon Krier, O.M. Ungers and others. A major concern of Tschumi has been the broad question of form and program in architectural theory, with the label “program” encompassing human experiential and social realities and the label “form” including both objects and spaces in architecture and the city. In both his writings and projects, Tschumi has argued against the unification of form and program or the reduction of one into the other. He has argued for strategies that accept the disjunctions of contemporary culture and expand the discipline of architecture in contemporary theory and practice. The basis of Tschumi’s writings in architectural theory clearly resides in the intersections of modern architecture with other movements in 20th century art, cinema, philosophy and linguistics.²⁶

The *Transcripts* were organized into four episodes, titled “The Park,” “The Street,” “The Tower,” and “The Block,” not as typological analyses of historic forms but rather as four spaces for investigation. The drawings themselves were primarily sequential, presented in a three-part organization of

- spaces/objects,
- movements, and,
- events,

comprising three disjunctive levels of reality confronting architecture and the city. Spaces/objects were represented by abstracted drawings taken from plans and photographs; movements were represented by notational diagrams (e.g. choreography, football, etc.); events were represented with fragments of newspaper photographs.

The *Transcripts* can also be understood, implicitly and explicitly, as an architectural reading of the disjunctive, non-coincidental, interchangeable, and contradictory contemporary city described by observers in recent urban fiction, the cinema and other fields. The *Transcripts*, however, go beyond reading the city, and beyond the boundaries of architectural theory, to establish a *structure* within which the architectural project of the *Transcripts* emerges. This structure has two separate but interdependent and conflicting parts:

- a formal structure of the frames of the drawings; and,
- the architectural transcriptions within the frames.²⁷

The structure in which the drawings are placed relates to their particular contents in a manner that is analogous

to the relationships between the structure of the city and the events, movements, etc. that are contained in the city. The sequence of frames permits the architectural transcriptions of space, movement and events to intersect, overlap and violate the frame without destroying its existence (fig. 2).

- In MT 1 — The Park, for example, the structure is formed by the numbered rows of three frames each. The architectural transcriptions within the frames are linear, with each set of frames determining the next through transformations and additions. This occurs entirely within structure of frames.
- In MT 2 — The Street, the underlying (and conventional) structure is a two-dimensional map of 42nd Street from the East River to the Hudson. The tri-partite scheme is contained within a single frame, establishing a boundary (for architecture) that is non-coincidental with the street.
- In MT 3 — The Tower, the structure is in two parts:
 - five variations of “an archetypal sequence of spaces (rooms along a corridor)” which are modified in four additional frames by the transgression of movement patterns; and,
 - a “zooming operation” enlarging a detail from each of the first five variations to a new frame moving from the scale of a room to the scale of a communal courtyard. These five new frames are then violated by spatial, movement and event transgressions.

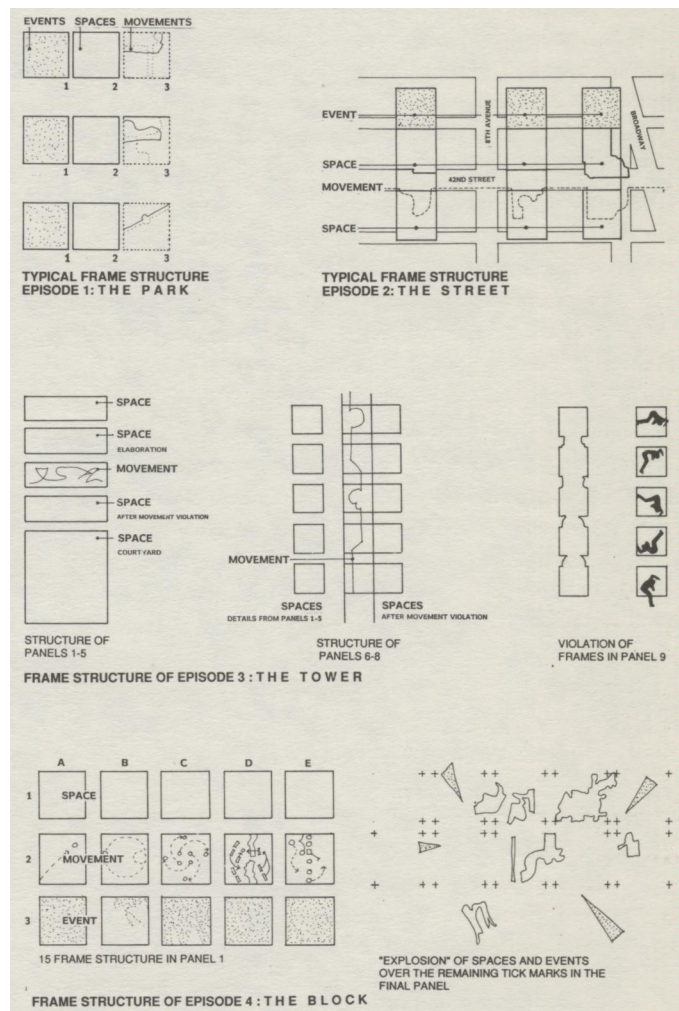


Fig. 2: The frame structure of the Manhattan Transcripts.⁴⁸

• In MT 4 — The Block, a 15-frame organization (5 architectural fragments, 5 movement diagrams, 5 events) is sequentially operated upon, until all are superimposed and then fragmented and exploded across all of the original frames. The tick marks, marking the corners of the original 15 frames, are the most minimal, but necessary, remaining structure for the architectural trajectory of The Block.

This final panel reveals Tschumi's reading of the city and its intersection with architecture. The tick marks from the 15 original frames provide an abstract mediating structure for the disjunctive, non-coincidental, interchangeable, and contradictory relationships among space, movement and events, reformulating the relationships between architecture and the city. The final page of the transcript:

eliminates all that is inessential to the architecture of the city. Spaces, movements, events are contracted into the fragments absolutely necessary to outline the overall structure. Since each frame is isolated from the next, architecture can begin to act as a series of surprises, a form of architectural jump cut, where space is carefully broken apart and then reassembled at the limits. Thus, space can follow space, not necessarily in the order normally expected, but in a series of dramatic revelations that can announce a new spatial structure.²⁸

● In Tschumi's *Parc de la Villette* project in Paris, the architectural apparatus of the points, lines and surfaces have been published so widely that it is well known²⁹

(fig. 3). The red follies of the point-grid and the cinematic promenade in the layer of lines have been the subjects of detailed explanation and criticism by Tschumi and others.³⁰ Since the completion of the first constructions at La Villette, the follies and gardens as architectural objects in themselves have received specific attention in the popular and architectural press. What has escaped analysis, however, is the relationships between the project at La Villette and the broader subject of the city.

The architecture/city relationships of the La Villette project are composed of two parts:

- the two-dimensional point-grid coordinate system, analogous to the frame structure of the *Transcripts*; and,
- a three-dimensional architectural construction of three superimposed autonomous systems, analogous to the transcriptions within the frames of the *Transcripts* (system of points — follies; system of lines — cinematic promenade and axes of circulation; and system of surfaces — the various landscape elements of the park).

The point, line, surface construction is the architectural projection for La Villette with these three autonomous layers transformed from the tri-partite space, movement, event reading of the *Transcripts*. It is the operation of superimposition, rather than composition, of the layers that allows the La Villette project to operate architecturally in a manner to accommodate the disjunctions

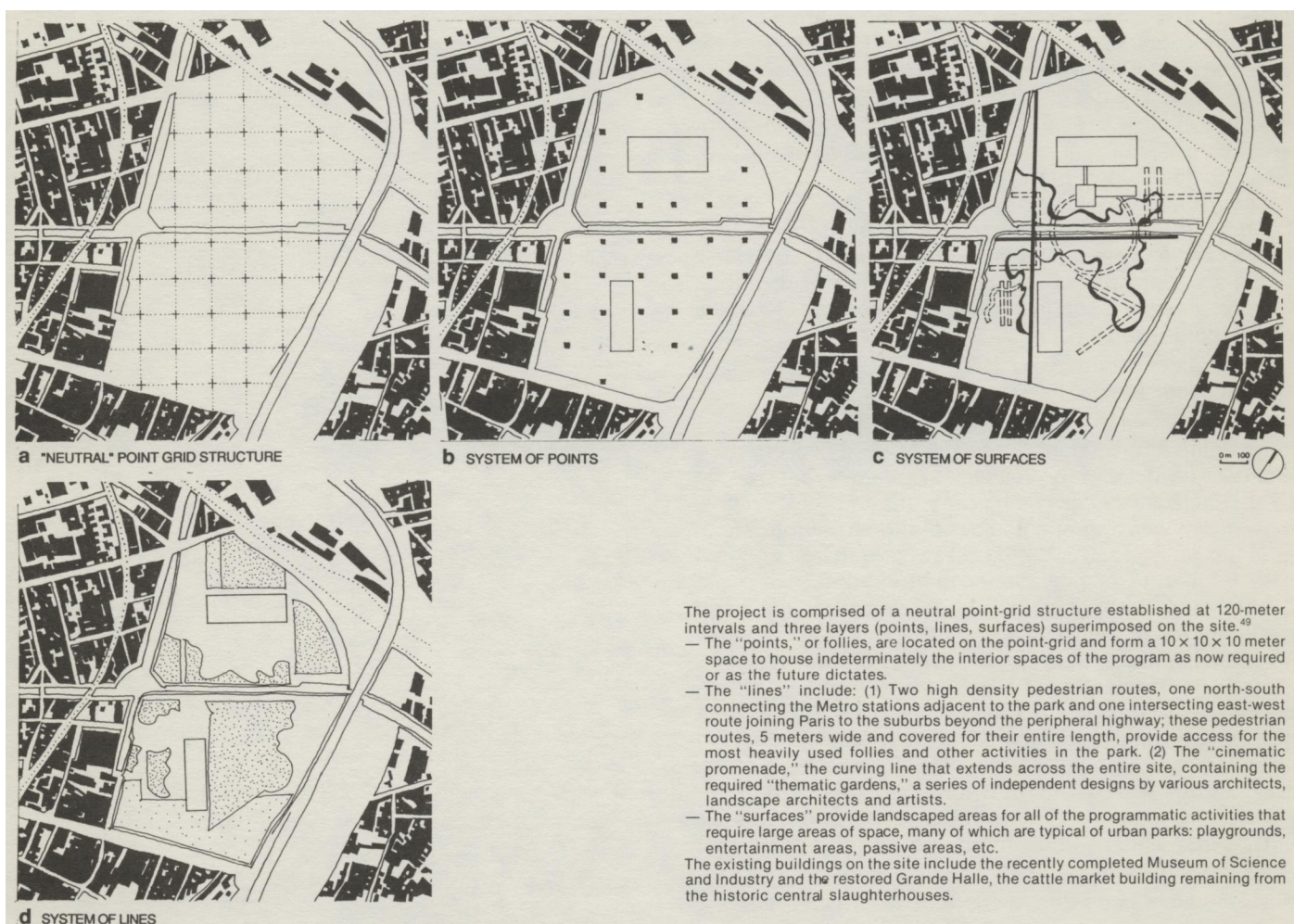


Fig. 3: Bernard Tschumi's project for La Villette.

and juxtapositions of form and program, space and event, etc., that were operated upon the *Transcripts*.

The point-grid coordinates, as structuring device of the La Villette project, has several possible sources, some obvious and some not. Tschumi confirms the relationship to his "Joyce's Garden" project of 1980, where the intersections of the London Ordnance Survey grid become the mediators between "program" and the architectural form. The grid also mediates the program to the city itself, as revealed in the title of the article publishing the project.³¹ Tschumi has also referenced the point-grid to Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* for Paris; but this reference is similar to his Constructivist reference to the red follies: it means nothing — form and meaning are not coincidental.³² It is possibly also linked to the "ground zero" status of the grid in avant garde art as an invisible, inverted anti-avant garde statement.

The most compelling source for the point-grid of La Villette, when considering the intersections of architecture and the city, is the "framing" structure of the *Transcripts*, particularly the final episode (MT4 — The Block), where in the final frame only the tick marks from the preceding frames remain to mediate the intersections of progressively fragmented and deconstructed spaces, movements and events. At La Villette, the point-grid, which determines the location of the follies, serves as the urban structure — the mediating structure — upon which the architecture and the program of the park operate. The red follies are the material construction of this mediation:

The approach behind La Villette suggests meeting points, anchoring points where fragments of dislocated reality can be apprehended. In this situation, the formation of the dissociation requires that a support be structured as a point of reassembly. The point of the folly becomes the focus of this dissociated space; it acts as a common denominator, constituting itself as a system of relations between objects, events and people.³³

The follies also become anchors of future constructions, allowing programmatic or other architects' violations, and revealing that the follies are not complete, finished architectural objects at all. If architectural objects exist at La Villette, they reside only in the individual constructions in the "thematic gardens." The point-grid and the follies form an urban structure as a reinvented morphology for the decontextualized city. "The point-grid is the strategic tool of the La Villette project ... it plays a political role, rejecting the ideological *a priori* of the master plans of the past."³⁴

Rem Koolhaas: Delirious New York and the Parc de la Villette

● Koolhaas' reading of Manhattan occurred while he was teaching at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and visiting Columbia University during the 1970s. *Delirious New York* addressed the problem of writing a manifesto on late 20th century urbanism understanding that "the fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence ... (while) ... Manhattan's problem is the opposite: it is a Mountain range of evidence without a manifesto."³⁵

That Koolhaas is reading the city is revealed by his self-description as a ghostwriter for Manhattan; his project is to write a retroactive manifesto. The city of Manhattan itself is the subject, as revealed both by its architec-

ture, unrealized projects, and the popular fantasies embedded in both: the Coney Island amusement park, Radio City Music Hall, the Rockefeller Center office complex, and the skyscraper. His reading of the city involves the discontinuities between the architecture of the city (skyscraper) and the activities of the city (program). Although the evidence is Manhattan's, one can substitute another city or the problem of architecture and the city in general and the issues remain the same: the relationships of city, architecture and program in a world where the unification of these ingredients of the city cannot be founded in any evidence.

Although *Delirious New York* is a specific analysis and reading, Koolhaas moves beyond observation, to an architectural projection including a manifesto, "Culture of Congestion," and an urbanistic project, "The City of the Captive Globe." This projection is based on a redefinition of Manhattan's urban morphology to include not only the Manhattan grid of blocks and the three-dimensional zoning envelope but also the architectural construction of the skyscraper, including its operative principles of disassociating form from program as well as exterior from interior architecture.

The underlying structure of Manhattan, for Koolhaas, has two parts (fig. 4). The first is the Commissioners' plan of 1811 that established a "city of $13 \times 156 = 2028$ blocks (excluding topographical accidents): a matrix that captures, at the same time, all remaining territory and all future activity for the island."³⁶ Dismissing the history of criticism of the grid, Koolhaas describes it as "the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization: the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, non-existent."³⁷ The grid itself, as an abstract two-dimensional medium, eliminates most of the morphological circumstances that serve as traditional, contextual generators of architectural form. The block becomes an autonomous architectural and programmatic territory within the city, interrelated to the

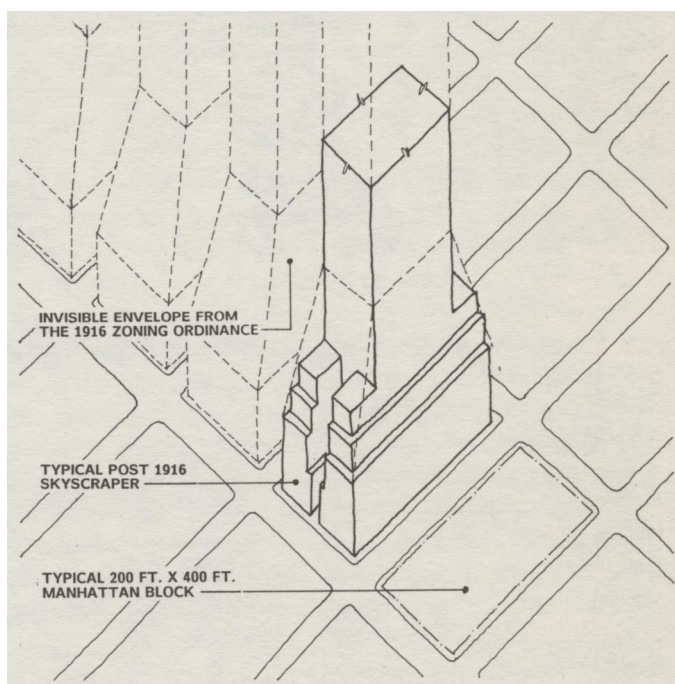


Fig. 4: Diagram of the morphology of the Manhattan grid.

rest of the city only through the coordinates of the two-dimensional grid.

The second part of Manhattan's underlying structure is three-dimensional. The 1916 New York zoning ordinance defined an envelope of maximum construction bulk for each block combining allowable heights of construction and setbacks to allow light to the street below. The effect of the ordinance was to establish the block as the desirable unit of construction in order to attain the maximum height of the building and, consequently, the maximum profit. "In fact, the 1916 Zoning Law is a back-dated birth certificate that lends retroactive legitimacy to the Skyscraper."³⁸

Rather than being understood as an architectural form or style, the skyscraper reveals an expansion of Manhattan's grid morphology. The skyscraper operates with two fundamental principles: *lobotomy* and *schism*.

- **Lobotomy** is the complete separation of the interior and exterior architecture, severing the traditional architectural desire to seek a correspondence between the two. In the skyscraper, the exterior is independent of the interior, allowing the exterior of the building to focus its attention on differentiating itself from the surrounding blocks, all of which are morphologically identical, while the interior focuses its attention on the precise fulfillment of diverse programmatic needs and architectural expressions.
- **Schism** is the complete disconnection between floors of the building, severing any formal connection and allowing arbitrary distribution of the program and activities within the building and within the city.

Koolhaas cites the Downtown Athletic Club building in Manhattan as the exemplar of lobotomy and schism. The lobotomized exterior of the building is almost indistinguishable from the surrounding office towers,

although the Athletic Club housed 17 different athletic and entertainment functions on 17 of its 38 floors, the remainder being bachelor apartments. The 9th floor is schism in action:

Emerging from the elevator on the 9th floor, the visitor finds himself in a dark vestibule that leads directly into a locker room that occupies the center of the platform, where there is no daylight. There he undresses, puts on boxing gloves and enters an adjoining space equipped with a multitude of punching bags. On the southern side, the same locker room is also serviced by an oyster bar with a view over the Hudson River. Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the nth floor — such is the plot of the 9th story, or: the 20th Century in action.³⁹

In the final pages of *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas projects Manhattan's grid and zoning envelope and the architectural construction of the skyscraper into the "City of the Captive Globe." "If the essence of metropolitan culture is change ... and the essence of the concept of 'city' is a legible sequence of various permanences, then only the three fundamental axioms on which the City of the Captive Globe is based — Grid, lobotomy, and schism — can regain the terrain of the Metropolis for architecture."⁴⁰ Grid, lobotomy and schism combine to produce a mediating structure for Manhattan and "resolve forever the conflict between form and function, but create a city where permanent monoliths celebrate metropolitan instability."⁴¹

● The **Parc de la Villette** competition scheme by Koolhaas and its relationship with *Delirious New York* is deliberate.⁴² The project embodies Manhattan's "culture of congestion," re-forming it to produce a "metropolitan density without architecture: a culture of invisible congestion."⁴³ The project has two parts:

- zonal strips as a specific layer of urban structure; and,
- four additional superimposed layers: confetti, access

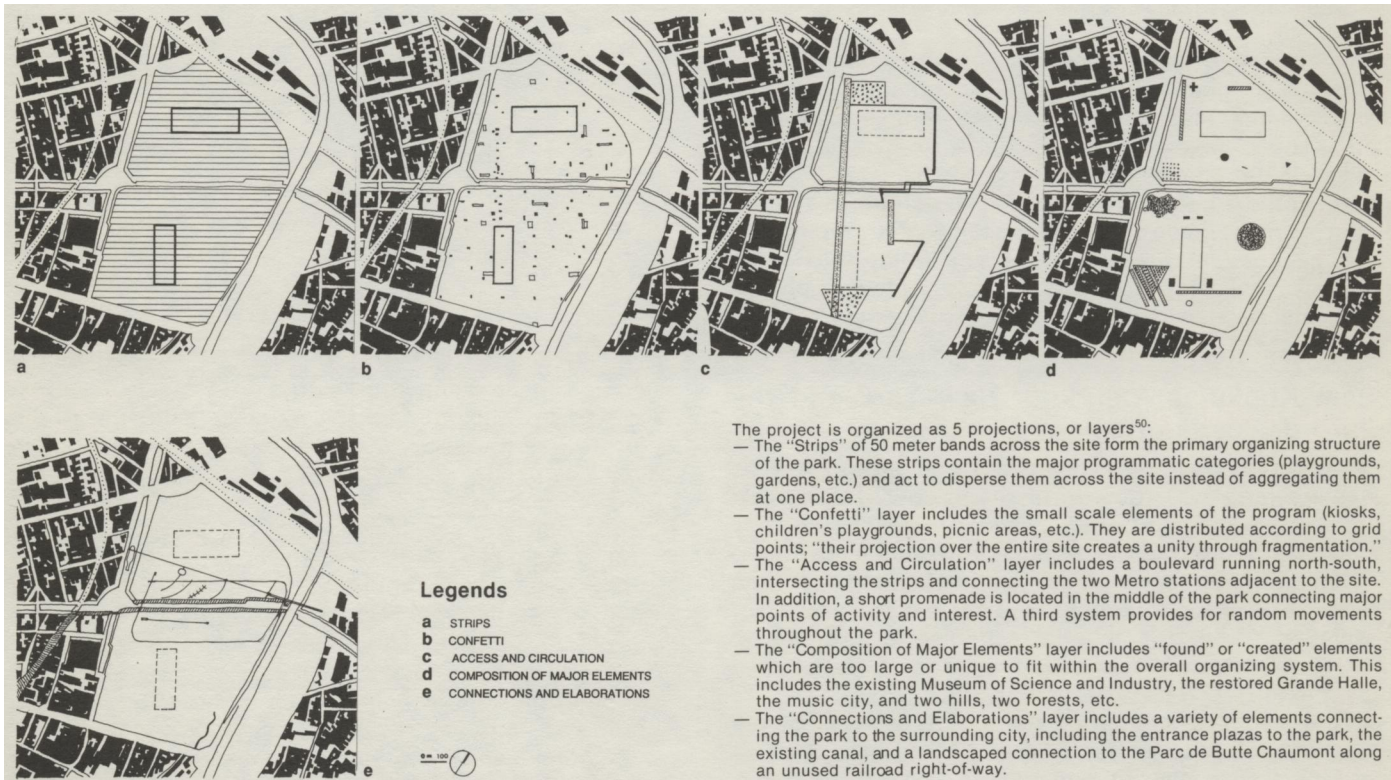


Fig. 5: Rem Koolhaas' project for La Villette.

and circulation, the composition of major elements, and connections and elaborations (fig. 5).

The first layer of the urban structure of the project is composed of 50-meter wide strips, zoning the multiple land uses in the park's program. In a 1985 interview, Koolhaas described these strips as being similar to the floors of a Manhattan skyscraper⁴⁴; however, a more complete description of the relation might be that the strips are the equivalent of the Manhattan grid and the architectural operations within these strips are the equivalent of the skyscraper. In the "City of the Captive Globe," Koolhaas was careful to specify either the grid "or any other subdivision of the metropolitan territory into maximum increments of control."⁴⁵ The zonal strips, whether based on Dutch tulip gardens or not, satisfy this subdivision requirement as necessary layer of urban structure.

The design of the strips themselves conforms to the necessities of lobotomy and schism. Schism allows each strip to accommodate a different program, yet be designed specifically to accommodate that program; it resolves the form-function conflict just as does the Manhattan skyscraper. It also allows the ultimate flexibility in accommodating the complex program of La Villette because there is no necessary relationship between one strip and another. Lobotomy then occurs with the "screens of trees parallel to the strips ... (with) a sequential juxtaposition of species for dialectical as well as aesthetic purposes."⁴⁶ These screens of trees operate similarly to the skyscraper where the exterior is concerned with formalism and the interiors with functionalism.

The primary elements for the "culture of congestion" that are directly derivative of Manhattan are contained within the organization of the strips and the design of the strips themselves. The other layers are:

- programmatic reinforcements for fragmentation (the confetti layer);
- references to the city of Paris and the internal and external context of the park (access and circulation layer and the connections and elaborations layer); and,
- the existing major buildings complimented by major landscape constructions (composition of major elements layer).

These other layers contribute to the congestion, but are not the major generators.

Koolhaas' scheme for La Villette clearly establishes a mediating structure that is derived from the city, and specifically from Manhattan. However, it is a re-invented morphology that extends beyond abstract organizations of territory to link directly with architectural operations. The axioms of the "culture of invisible congestions" at La Villette (strips, lobotomy and schism) operate to mediate among the discontinuous realities of form, program and the city, resolving for the Urban Park for the 21st Century what "the culture of congestion" resolved for Manhattan: the creation of permanences within the continuous change and instability of the contemporary city.

Urban architectural theory and practice in the late 20th century

Through their readings of the city, with Manhattan as the exemplar, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas ex-

pose the possible intersections of architecture and the city in the late 20th century. The fragmented, disjunctive, contradictory urban landscape is fully revealed in their readings of the city. Recent urban architectural theories are also overturned or at least placed firmly within a contextual or local perspective, rather than a universal one. Their readings of the city and their findings from other sources than architecture correspond with and overlap the readings of other disciplines, including literature, urban theory, critical theory, the cinema, philosophy and others.

The readings of these architects, however, go another step to include the "writing" of the city, an activity that seems at present impossible or improbable in other disciplines, particularly and unfortunately, urban fiction. Tschumi and Koolhaas seek to find possibilities open to architecture in the present city, and in their La Villette projects they seek to construct an architecture and landscape that make sense in the context of contemporary culture. Tschumi's and Koolhaas' readings of the city and their schemes for La Villette provide an analytical and conceptual means for architectural interventions in the decontextualized city. Their readings of the city are an attempt to reveal not only the disjunctions and discontinuities of the contemporary city, but also to establish a *medial apparatus* which allows the city to be apprehended, if not comprehended. Their projects for La Villette attempt to produce a material construction of this apparatus which mediates among the city, the site, the program and the architectural figure. For Tschumi, this apparatus is the point-grid and the folly, overlaid by the cinematic promenade, the surfaces of the park and other operations. For Koolhaas, the medial apparatus is the strip organization of the site and the elaborations of this structure with a completely artificial landscape, that reconstitutes an architecture of both architectural objects and territories. The medial apparatus of these projects can, perhaps, be understood as an urban morphology, reinvented as a replacement for the once universal, traditional and contextual matrix of the street, neighborhood, block and dwelling.

These La Villette projects do not negate the importance of setting architectural artifacts within a larger urban morphology, which is itself an object of architecture in the broadest sense. They may, in fact, operate within a global morphology in an opposite manner to the structural conception of the city where an "underlying" physical structure sits in deterministic correspondence to the "surface" structure of spatial location and consequent architectural form. In the decontextualized city, the program — events and activities of the city — may be the indeterminant "underlying arrangement," perhaps in accordance with Melvin Webber's "non-place urban realm" or Thomas Pynchon's "semiotic mesh." The "surface arrangement" of the contemporary city may require a precise material construction of visible structures, as medial apparatus, of which Tschumi's and Koolhaas' projects for La Villette are only two current possibilities. The decontextualized city, like the "structural" city that preceded it, must have an urban structure, although the relationship among urban structure, program and architecture are profoundly different.

Tschumi's and Koolhaas' schemes for La Villette are not global morphological structures, nor are they enclaves seeking to establish themselves in one place to expand

later to reform the existing city. The medial apparatus together with its architectural projection seeks only to make the current city apprehendable again on a specific site in Paris with a specific program for a park for the 21st century. The schemes are not paradigms for replication either in Paris or elsewhere; but they do provide evidence concerning the possibility of architecture's contribution to the contemporary city, without attempting to reform or retreat once again. The work of Tschumi and Koolhaas in urban architectural theory and practice recalls Sharpe and Wallock's reminder in their preface to their book *Visions of the Modern City*: "...learning how to read the city is a necessary part of learning how to change it."⁴⁷

References

1. Steven Marcus (1983), "Reading the illegible: Some modern representations of urban experience," in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock (eds.), *Visions of the Modern City* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
3. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "From 'great town' to 'non-place urban realm': Reading the modern city," in Sharpe and Wallock, *op. cit.*, p. 24, commenting on the essay by Steven Marcus referenced above.
4. Tama Janowitz, *Slaves of New York* (New York, Washington Square Press, 1987).
5. Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (New York, Sun and Moon Press, 1985).
6. Sharpe and Wallock, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-28. Their analysis of Janowitz' and Auster's books are similar but not identical to mine.
7. Janowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
8. Melvin Webber, "The urban place and the non-place urban realm," in Melvin Webber (ed.), *Explorations in Urban Structure* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).
9. Frederic Jameson, "The cultural logic of late capitalism," *New Left Review* (July 1984), p. 80.
10. David Byrne, *True Stories* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986), p. 15.
11. For full descriptions of this reform tradition, see: (1) Anthony Vidler, "Scenes of the street: Transformation in ideal and reality, 1750-1871," in Stanford Anderson (ed.), *On Streets* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1978); (2) Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1978), particularly "Utopia: Decline and fall" and "After the millennium."
12. The most complete collection of Leon Krier's writings and projects is in Leon Krier, *Houses, Palaces, Cities*, an Architectural Design monograph edited by D. Porphyrios (London, Academy Editions, 1984).
13. See particularly Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1982). This comment does not apply to the phenomenological dimension of Rossi's work which is most clearly evident in *The Scientific Autobiography* and in many of his architectural projects.
14. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1978).
15. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1980).
16. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 2nd ed. (London, Thames and Hudson, 1985).
17. See Vidler and Rowe sources in Note 11 for a more complete description.
18. John Hejduk, *Masque of Medusa* (New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1985).
19. Francoise Choay, "Critique," *Princeton Architectural Journal*, no. 2 (1984). Choay provides a clear description and analysis of the program for La Villette as part of her criticism of the jury's decision awarding first prize to Bernard Tschumi.
20. Bernard Tschumi, Dean of the Columbia University School of Architecture, practices as Bernard Tschumi and Associates. Rem Koolhaas practices with OMA, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture. In both cases, my reference to the individuals named is for convenience and does not lessen the importance of other individuals who participated in the projects.
21. Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (London, Academy Editions/St. Martin's Press, 1981).
22. Bernard Tschumi, "Illustrated index: Themes from the Manhattan Transcripts," *Architectural Association (AA) Files*, no. 4 (1983), pp. 65-74.
23. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978).
24. Choay, *op. cit.*
25. Tschumi (1981), *op. cit.*, p. 7.
26. Anthony Vidler, "The pleasure of the architect," *Architecture and Urbanism* (September 1988). Vidler provides a brief but thorough examination of the broad themes and sources of Tschumi's architectural positions in this article.
27. Tschumi (1983), *op. cit.*, p. 11: "... the *Transcripts* always display at least two conflicting fields: first, the framing device — square, healthy, conformist, normal and predictable, regular and comforting, correct. Second, the framed material, a place that only questions, distorts, compresses, displaces. Both are necessary. Neither is inherently special; neither communicates by itself. It is the play between them that does — their distance and its occasional transgression, when the frame itself becomes the object of distortions."
28. Tschumi (1981), *op. cit.*, p. 11.
29. See *Architecture and Urbanism's* special issue on Tschumi (September 1988).
30. See particularly Vidler (1988), *op. cit.*; Anthony Vidler, "Trick-Track" in *La Case Vide — La Villette* (London, Architectural Association, 1985); Jacques Derrida, "Point de folie — Maintenant l'architecture," in *AA Files*, no. 12.
31. Bernard Tschumi, "'Joyce's Garden' in London: A polemic on the written word and the city," *Architectural Design Profile* 31, pp. 22 and 95. See also *A + U* (July 1988), pp. 38-41.
32. Vidler (1988), *op. cit.*, pp. 17-23.
33. Bernard Tschumi, "The La Villette Park competition," *Princeton Architectural Review*, no. 2 (1983), p. 208.
34. Tschumi (1981), *op. cit.*, p. 152.
35. Koolhaas (1978), *op. cit.*, p. 6.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
37. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
41. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*
42. Rem Koolhaas, "La deuxième chance de l'architecture moderne," *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 238 (1985), p. LXX (interview translated into English).
43. *Ibid.*, p. LXXI.
44. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*
45. Koolhaas (1978), p. 244.
46. Koolhaas (1984) in "The park and the peak — Two international competitions," *AA Files*, no. 6, p. 78.
47. Sharpe and Wallock, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
48. These analytical diagrams are based on the drawings in the *Transcripts*; one must examine the *Transcripts* in their entirety to follow Tschumi's reading of the city in detail.
49. The brief description of the park is summarized from Bernard Tschumi (1987), pp. 7-8.
50. The description of the project is summarized from "The peak and the park — Two international competitions," *AA Files*, no. 6 (1984).