

# Carefully Reading the Generic City and Junkspace:

From an affirmative description of urbanity  
to an experiential pessimism of our built environment.

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## Introduction

Rem Koolhaas' intention has commonly been to analyze the present situation of urbanity; be that through retroactive manifestoes, elaborate metaphors or descriptive narratives. We could also say that Koolhaas tends to change tone quite easily (be that throughout his career, from essay to essay or within a single article). From a passive describer to a blatant pessimist, Koolhaas has undeniably utilized this and other mood-tone shifts throughout his writing career. In the end, this has probably occurred in order for this theorist to renew himself intellectually in the public's eye and to break with the accepted architectural status-quo (almost forcefully and sometimes for the sake of it). Yet nowhere is this more present in Koolhaas work than in two essays that he wrote seven years apart; *The Generic City* (1994) and *Junkspace* (2001). Both these works attempt to describe the contemporary city, yet even though they share a common object of study one can notice a clear change in the tone and in the descriptive method utilized. In the first, a descriptive almost affirmative approach to the contemporary city, and in the latter, a pessimistic and experiential appreciation. One cannot help but think of the reason a shift like this might occur, be that to change gears for the sake of changing or because of an actual re-understanding of the city he attempts to analyze. By comparing points of convergence and of clear contradiction this paper will attempt to highlight and understand Koolhaas approach to the contemporary city in both of these essays. Byproduct

To give a basic overview of both these written works we must first begin by understanding the scope of its analysis. In *The Generic City* it is quite clear that the examination into the contemporary metropolis is on an urban scale. Its observations are more in a broader macro-regional sense. While on the other hand, *Junkspace* mostly articulates on a much local, even interior level. If the GC insists on the importance of infrastructure as a

facilitator for growth and as a means for the creation of multiple city centers, JS is described as being a residue or a byproduct of the modernity which in turn produces the GC.

*As the sphere of influence expands, the area characterized by the center becomes larger and larger, hopelessly diluting both the strength and the authority of the core; inevitably the distance between center and circumference increases to the breaking point.* (*Generic City*)

*The built product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout.* (*Junkspace*)

Along these lines we could say that out of the progressive growth of the GC, as a byproduct, JS is produced. Even though this is a simplistic outlook on both terms it helps us to understand the intercrossing and the apparent dependence with each other that these two stipulations share.

## Identity

Another important point to be discussed in both these essays is the use of the term identity. In the GC identity is seen as the complete opposite of what the contemporary city produces in actuality. It is seen as retrograde and counterproductive, a forced action which goes against the nature of the new city and the elements which produce it. Koolhaas even compares identity to a straitjacket which imprisons and resists expansion.

*Identity is like a mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait, and which, on closer inspection, may have been empty for centuries. The stronger identity, the more it imprisons, the more it resists expansion, interpretation, renewal, contradiction. Identity becomes like a lighthouse – fixed, overdetermined: it can change its position or the pattern it emits only at the cost of destabilizing navigation.*

## (Generic City)

*However in JS identity is used in a different fashion. For Koolhaas the contemporary city thrives on identity, it claims to the authentic and depends on history as yet another tool for its growth.*

*“Identity” is the new junk food for the dispossessed, globalization’s fodder for the disenfranchised [...] (Junkspace)*

In the end, it is clear that Koolhaas shifts and redefines his understanding of the term identity. From a retrospective resuscitation of the traditional city in the GC (which in turns restrains and destroys the metropolis), to a tool for generating and at the same time validating the production of urbanity and its architecture in JS.

## The Subject

The presence of the subject is also a very important element in JS. The essay's tone and approach is very experiential, it thrives on the relationship of the subject to JS. Whereas in the GC the argumentation is more detached from the subject and relies more heavily on the elaboration of how the city operates and the forces that help push and shape it. This understanding could maybe explain partially why Koolhaas is more pessimistic in JS; potentially by adding the subject and his experience into the spaces of the city he discovered its failure or its weakness.

*The subject is stripped of privacy in return for access to credit nirvana. You are complicit in the tracing of the fingerprints each of your transactions leaves; they know everything about you, except who you are. Emissaries of Junkspace pursue you in the formerly impervious privacy of the bedroom: the minibar, private fax machines, pay TV offering compromised pornography, fresh plastic veils wrapping toilet seats, courtesy condoms: miniature profit centers coexist with your bedside bible... Junkspace pretends to unite, but it actually splinters.* (*Junkspace*)

While on the other hand, the GC opts to present the city's users as massing or as



demographics. Koolhaas dedicates a whole section of this essay to Statistics and to discussing the exponential growth of the city's residents through several decades. He then writes a section on Population and highlights its multiculturalism and racial configuration with numbers and percentages. It is quite clear that his outlook on the subject in the GC is more about large groups or sectors; homogeneous communities and users of the metropolis.

*The Generic City is seriously multiracial, on average 8% black, 12% white, 27% Hispanic, 37% Chinese/Asian, 6% indeterminate, 10% other. Not only multiracial, also multicultural. That's why it comes as no surprise to see temples between the slabs, dragons on the main boulevards, Buddhas in the CBD (central business district). (Generic City)*

This in turn produces a dry and objective view on the subject of the contemporary city, a clear opposite to the more experiential and subjective outlook on JS.

### Public Space

Public space is treated in both essays as something that is rethought in the contemporary metropolis. In the GC the public realm has disappeared, instead an apparent calmness is preferred. Circulation and movement is limited to what is necessary.

*The Generic City addresses the "evils" that were ascribed to the traditional city before our love for it became unconditional. The serenity of the Generic City is achieved by the evacuation of the public realm, as in an emergency fire drill. The urban plane now only accommodates necessary movement, fundamentally the car; highways are a superior version of boulevards and plazas, taking more and more space; their design, seemingly aiming for automotive efficiency, is in fact surprisingly sensual, a utilitarian pretense entering the domain of smooth space. (Generic City)*

Whereas in JS Koolhaas rethinks the term and understands that the contemporary city rescues from the traditional one certain modes of urbanity. Public life is reduced to public space, a notion that mimics a certain type of urbanism, yet still rejects its chaotic nature for a more predictable communality.

*The more indeterminate the city, the*

*more specific its Junkspace; all Junkspace's prototypes are urban – the Roman Forum, the Metropolis; it is only their reverse synergy that makes them suburban, simultaneously swollen and shrunk. Junkspace reduces what is urban to urbanity... Instead of public life, Public Space: what remains of the city once the unpredictable has been removed [...] (Junkspace)*

So even though both essays share a common root, that of the smoothing down of public life, JS understands that public space is not being rejected, it is instead being reutilized in a very controlled and sterile manner. Needless to say, it is also quite obvious that in the GC Koolhaas is discussing this topic in a much more broader and from an infrastructural viewpoint of circulating through the urban realm, while in JS it is clear that he is highlighting the city's reinterpretation of public space in a much more local and architectural scale. Koolhaas even emphasizes the fact that public space, as understood in JS, intended for the interior of buildings is now spreading to the outside; the World as public space, with pedestrianized paved walks and exclusive sectors with vigilance.

### History

History is seen in the GC as a drawback for the growth and existence of the new metropolis. Closely related to the way Koolhaas defines the term identity; history is seen in urban terms, as a search for a center or a core and as a limit to the natural processes that feed into the massive growth of the city.

*Regret about history's absence is a tiresome reflex. It exposes an unspoken consensus that history's presence is desirable. But who says that is the case? A city is a plane inhabited in the most efficient way by people and processes, and in most cases the presence of history only drags down its performance [...] (Generic City)*

Even though he recognizes in the GC that history as a false thematization is present in the city's architecture and even helps fuel its creation process, (like postmodernism does for the GC) in JS he adds the notion of historical restoration as a producer of Junkspace; hence illustrating the idea that Koolhaas understands Junkspace as something negative, something to be avoided.

*There is zero loyalty - and zero tolerance*

*– toward configuration, no "original" condition; architecture has turned into a time lapse sequence to reveal a "permanent evolution"... The only certainty is conversion -continuous- followed, in rare cases, by "restoration," the process that claims ever new sections of history as extensions of Junkspace. History corrupts, absolute history corrupts absolutely. (Junkspace)*

While in the case of the GC, history is seen as something that drives down the city's ever-expansive growth, JS is described as something that can absorb history and by doing so exacerbate its presence in the built landscape.

### Airport

The airport for Rem Koolhaas has become an important element in the understanding of the contemporary city. In the GC he emphasizes on the programmatic offerings and the architectural and spatial characteristics the airport provides. Duty-free shopping and an ever expansive system provide with just a few of the tools for creating what Koolhaas calls the most singular elements of the city, which at times even becomes autonomous and unrelated to it and with the strength to even replace it.

*Once manifestations of ultimate neutrality, airports now are among the most singular, characteristic elements of the Generic City, its strongest vehicle of differentiation. [...] Thus conceptually charged, airports become emblematic signs imprinted on the global collective unconscious in savage manipulations of their non-aviatic attractors – tax-free shopping, spectacular spatial qualities, the frequency and reliability of their connections to other airports. (Generic City)*

In JS he shares these same thoughts, yet elaborates on the notion that airports are becoming more complicated in terms of circulation and building techniques. An endless construction site where corridors have become destinations instead of connectors and where transparency has disappeared in favor of the cluttered and the provisional.

*Say an airport needs more space. In the past new terminals were added, each more or less characteristic of its own age, leaving the old ones as a readable record, evidence*











*of progress. Since passengers have definitely demonstrated their infinite malleability, the idea of rebuilding on the spot has gained currency. Travelators are thrown in reverse, signs taped, potted palms (or very large corpses) covered in body bags. (Junkspace)*

Koolhaas emphasizes on what the subject has to encounter throughout his movement through the airport. These dense and complicated circulations now require the expertise of graphic designers with their easily reproduced signage instead of architects with strict floor plans. If in the GC Koolhaas admires and avails the socio-programmatic possibilities that are packed into the airport, in JS he does just that but adds to the discussion the turmoil and chaos that arises from the constant reconfiguration and expansion (a thing admired in the GC) that occurs in these structures and the loss of a clear sequence and the submersion instead into the grotesque.

## Landscape

Landscape is yet another category which Koolhaas describes in his written work. Seen as a residue of the mega-growth patterns of the new metropolis, these spaces are also charged with strong connotations of nature, of the virginal untouched. In the end, a powerful tool for validating and justifying the expansive repetition of clusters throughout the built environment. By providing with this formal logic a merging of city and country, wilderness and order occurs in a single marketable package.

*The Generic City is held together, not by an over-demanding public realm [...] but by the residual. In the original model of the moderns, the residual was merely green, its controlled neatness a moralistic assertion of good intentions, discouraging association, use. In the Generic City, because the crust of its civilization is so thin, and through its immanent tropicality, the vegetal is transformed into Edenic residue, the main carrier of its identity: a hybrid of politics and landscape. At the same time refuge of the illegal, the uncontrollable, and subject of endless manipulation, it represents a simultaneous triumph of the manicured and the primeval. Its immoral lushness compensates for the Generic City's other poverities. Supremely inorganic, the organic is the Generic City's strongest myth. (Generic City)*

In JS Koolhaas reemphasizes and expands on the logic of landscape as a commodity. He categorizes this characteristic as ecolomy; the merging of economy with ecology, underdevelopment that in the end produces hyper-development. This in turn justifies the apparition of huge circulatory infrastructures and also produces the most significant ecological Junkspace; the golf course, a landscaped tabula rasa that perpetuates the desire for the leisured Faustian.

*Air, water, wood: all are enhanced to produce Hyperecology, a parallel Walden, a new rainforest. Landscape has become Junkspace, foliage as spoilage: trees are tortured, lawns cover human manipulations like thick pelts even toupees, sprinklers water according to mathematical timetables...Seemingly at the opposite end of Junkspace, the golf course is in fact its conceptual double; empty, serene, free of commercial debris. (Junkspace)*

## Architecture

In Rem Koolhaas understanding of architecture he has always talked about the use of the postmodernist language as a method, not a historical language, for creating the architecture of the contemporary city at the rate of growth in which this new urbanity operates. In the GC he describes this importance of employing an architectural style that does not need a strong theoretical framework and which at the same time pleases the GC's dwellers.

*The style of choice is postmodern, and will always remain so. Postmodernism is the only movement that has succeeded in connecting the practice of architecture with the practice of panic. Postmodernism is not a practice based on a highly civilized reading of architectural history but a method, a mutation in professional architecture that produces results fast enough to keep pace with the Generic City's development. (Generic City)*

In JS he also describes the presence of this architectural style as an agent of the new metropolis, yet he grows a bit weary about the use of this model and separates himself from his former compliance. Instead he warns about the loss of a strong architectural discourse that occurs by

succumbing blindly into market forces that are driven by inculcated tastes and needs.

*We do not leave pyramids. According to a new gospel of ugliness, there is already more Junkspace under construction in the 21st century than survived from the 20th [...] Architecture disappeared in the 20th century; we have been reading a footnote under a microscope hoping it would turn into a novel; our concern for the masses has blinded us to People's Architecture. (Junkspace)*

Koolhaas also emphasizes on the new construction techniques that are employed in contemporary buildings. In his quasi-passive tone, present throughout most of the GC, he describes these new building techniques as a natural outcome of the speed in which most of these structures are erected and from a general loss of the core design values that have instead been substituted by external market forces and heterogeneous thematizations;

*The use of silicone – “we are stretching the façade as far as it will go” – has flattened all facades, glued glass to stone to steel to concrete in a space-age impurity. These connections give the appearance of intellectual rigor through the liberal application of a transparent spermy compound that keeps everything together by intention rather than design – a triumph of glue over the integrity of materials. (Generic City)*

In JS he also describes this characteristic of these new construction methods, yet he adds that most of these building techniques are employed in this way because of the temporary and evolutionary nature of current architectural spaces. Most of these buildings are thought out initially with a pre-destined notion of change in mind, where the building's interior is seen as an application of an iconography, a thematization, a branding or a historical faux;

*The joint is no longer a problem, an intellectual issue: transitional moments are defined by stapling and taping, wrinkly brown bands barely maintain the illusion of an unbroken surface; verbs unknown and unthinkable in architectural history – clamp, stick, fold, dump, glue, shoot, double, fuse – have become indispensable. Each element performs its task in negotiated isolation. Where once detailing suggested the coming together, possibly forever, of*



*disparate materials, it is now a transient coupling, waiting to be undone, unscrewed, a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation [...] (Junkspace)*

Another important aspect present in the propagation of contemporary building practice is the use of the air conditioner. Koolhaas has always expressed the importance that mechanical innovation has played in the shaping of architecture during the 20th century. Inventions such as the escalator and the elevator propitiated new building typologies such as the department store, the shopping mall and the skyscraper. The air conditioner, on the other hand, while still helping to shape most of these innovative structures, also mimicked and controlled the climate of the new urbanity of the interior;

*Because the Generic City is largely Asian, its architecture is generally air-conditioned; this is where the paradox of the recent paradigm shift – the city no longer represents maximum development but borderline underdevelopment – becomes acute: the brutal means by which universal conditioning is achieved mimic inside the building the climatic conditions that once “happened” outside [...] (Generic City)*

In JS, in addition, Koolhaas brings into awareness the organizational capacity that the air conditioner brought to the building, generating huge mega structures with little need for design, light or natural air. In the end, the A.C. substituted the architect as a space provider and instead made the subject the sole decider of his un-meditated journey

*Gravity has remained constant, resisted by the same arsenal since the beginning of time; but air conditioning – invisible medium, therefore unnoticed – has truly revolutionized architecture. Air conditioning has launched the endless building. If architecture separates buildings, air conditioning unites them. Air conditioning has dictated mutant regimes of organization and coexistence that leave architecture behind. (Junkspace)*

End

In the end, it is quite clear that throughout these accounts we can witness the paradigm-tone shift that Koolhaas experiences in both these essays. On the one hand, The Generic City is a descriptive testament to the way the city operates and

is being shaped. A sort of warning sign to architects, to get with the times and to abandon the past and the grip it has on the deadening of the contemporary urban realm. On the other hand, Junkspace is a reaction to this city, emphasizing the role of the subject throughout this process and throughout his encounter and movement in these places. With more of an experiential, rather than strictly descriptive tone, we get to understand these Junkspaces; a clear outcome and byproduct of the Generic City and the modernity that produces it. One of the best ways to grasp this change in tenor is by reading carefully the way Koolhaas concludes both essays. On one side, the GC is finished off with a sort of explanatory mock up of a potential Hollywood movie. In it a sort of chaos and havoc occurs, but then suddenly it is muted, and a sheer calm and tranquility appears. This emptiness provided by this silence serves Koolhaas with a metaphor for explaining the new built environment; where the isolated, the predictable, the necessary and the serene are preferred over the city.

*Priests pray for calm. Children run amok in an undergrowth of legs and robes. Animals bark. Statues topple. Women shriek – threatened? Ecstatic? The churning mass becomes oceanic. Waves break. Now switch off the sound – silence, a welcome relief – and reverse the film [...] Silence is now reinforced by emptiness: the image shows empty stalls, some debris that was trampled underfoot. Relief...it's over. That is the story of the city. The city is no longer. We can leave the theater now... (Generic City)*

On the other side, JS ends with a series of unanswered questions which position the role of the subject in the center of the argumentation. It reacts by recognizing the human body as yet another example of Junkspace, an invaded species altered by cosmetics, surgery and advertisements.

*Mankind is always going on about architecture. What if space is looking at mankind? Will Junkspace invade the body? Through the vibes of the cell phone? Has it already? Botox injections? Collagen? Silicone implants? Liposuction? Penis enlargements? Does gene therapy announce a total reengineering according to Junkspace? In each of us a mini construction site? Mankind the sum of 3 to 5 billion individual upgrades? Is it a repertoire reconfiguration that facilitates*

*the intromission of a new species into its self-made Junksphere? The cosmetic is the new cosmic... (Junkspace)*

Is this shifting from passive describer, and even potential optimist, to an experiential pessimist just another manipulation tool by Koolhaas to bombard us with blatant contradictions and altered viewpoints? Or are Koolhaas written works just a work in progress which can be forever revisited and altered, renegotiated and kept up to date, just as the ever changing city and the architecture which he exposes with great detail and wit? We may just have to wait seven more years to find out...