

# On Rem Koolhaas

## Antonio Negri

Of the writings collected together in the book *Junk-space*, 'Bigness' (1994) is for me the most important. Rem Koolhaas's other essays, 'The Generic City' (1994) and 'Junkspace' (2001), are partly coherent, partly paradoxical complements to it. But I agree with what is argued in 'Bigness'. Indeed I would go even further and say that 'Bigness' and *Delirious New York* (1978) are basic texts for reading and critiquing architecture today.

Bigness is where architecture becomes both most and least architectural: most because of the enormity of the object; least through the loss of autonomy – it becomes an instrument of other forces, it *depends*. Bigness is impersonal: the architect is no longer condemned to stardom.<sup>2</sup>

Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city; it pre-empted the city; or, better still, it *is* the city. If urbanism generates potential and architecture exploits it, Bigness enlists the generosity of urbanism against the meanness of architecture. Bigness = urbanism vs architecture.<sup>3</sup>

Here we have overcome the poetry and history of the city. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, between Simmel and Weber, Burckhardt and Braudel, the city had become *polis* again, the imperial centre. Now space and time destroy this utopian centrality. The complexity of the world market reconfigures the shape of the city: the 'over half of the world population' that inhabits the urban affirms a real centrality. Bigness, the dis-measure of the metropolis, is what we find. What, then is the *metropolitan body*?

The essay titled 'The Generic City' is complementary to 'Bigness' and illustrates and deepens its reflections. Yet I can only partially accept what is argued in this text. Of the seventeen paragraphs that make it up, I agree with more than half of the first section, where new notions of metropolitan identity, the history of the city, and public space, are de-structured by a demonstration of the manner in which the metropolis becomes fractal, anomic, enormous and multinational. But I agree with less than half of the rest of this text: the last sections in particular, where the metropolis is presented as a machine that empties the city of reality, a sociological field where the horizon is disappearing and where each moment of stabilization is hypocritical

and fleeting; the city as empty spaces, panic, insecurity, screams and rags, infrastructural parasitism, and so on. The postmodern, a fundamental category in regard to Koolhaas, which he had already inaugurated in his retroactive manifesto for Manhattan, *Delirious New York*, is here defined as an irreversible category and as a way of seeing the present. But it is also given as what is perverse and corrupted, and thus becomes the main characteristic of his description of metropolitan space.

I disagree with this. But, first, let us look at 'Junk-space'. Modernization here reaches its highest point, the apotheosis of modernity with no way out:

Fascism minus dictator. From the sudden dead end where you were dropped by a monumental, granite staircase, an escalator takes you to an invisible destination, facing a provisional vista of plaster, inspired by forgettable sources. ... [Y]ou always inhabit a sandwich ... In this standoff between the redundant and the inevitable, a plan would actually make matters worse, drive you to instant despair.<sup>4</sup>

Bland, anonymous, repetitive, empty, dispersive, vacuous, risible, 'post-existential', and so on. We are here in a Rabelaisian situation, often full of sarcasm and intense irony, but with no smile. The metropolis we inhabit is a huge grotesque theatre with no exit routes, and effectively hopeless. The architect is tired. The same urbanism that was meant to defeat architecture and demystify the architect only survives as the non-planning of an indefinite and perverse metropolitan landscape. The architect, demystified, continues to exist as a worldly and bitter witness, a disenchanting accuser.

Yet, still something happens here, a spark, an event. It could just be 'literature', but the text here displaces Rem Koolhaas's argument. In fact, a paradox becomes manifest in 'Junkspace', and it is very real, and this is the point. The greater the critique of the city and its fading horizon, the more the metropolis becomes an endless horizon, the more this junkspace loses the mathematical and plastic semblances of traditional architecture and takes on an extraordinary physicality, shifting its analysis from a surrealism reminiscent of De Chirico to the dreamy hyper-corporeality of Bacon. Junkspace is biopolitical.

Like the Renaissance scientist who has grown up surrounded by compasses and straight lines, who wanders around the city to see the butchers dismember the calf and sell her the meat, and with it an opportunity to study the anatomy of the body, Koolhaas similarly criss-crosses the metropolis in search of its body and anatomy. The first anatomical theatres always had clandestine escape routes for the foul-smelling leftovers of the work of anatomy – normally a pond or a path to the river. This is where Rem Koolhaas's analysis takes place in 'Junkspace', and there it begins to discover the body of the metropolis.

*Junkspace*: we inhabit junk. In a discussion of the metropolis Agamben recently referred to Foucault's definition of two disciplinary models that defined a shift from the territorial power of the *ancien régime* to modern biopower: these are the treatment of leprosy and the control of the plague. The paradigm of leprosy is one of exclusion: lepers must be moved outside the city and a neat division between outside and inside needs to be established. A completely different paradigm emerges with the plague: those afflicted by it cannot be excluded and the city is divided into areas; each area, street and home is then placed under strict surveillance and control. Everything is recorded. According to Foucault, says Agamben, modern political power arises from the convergence and superposition of these two paradigms. The lepers must be treated like plague victims and vice versa. As a result, strategies and dispositifs based on binary oppositions such as healthy/diseased, inclusion/exclusion and normal/abnormal, which aimed at disciplinary subjectivation and/or controlling subjects begin to overlap.

If we apply this double paradigm to urban space we find a first way of understanding the new metropolitan space of the West. This framework entails the coexistence of simple dispositifs of exclusion and vision – leprosy – and a complex articulation of spaces and their inhabitants – the plague – in order to produce a global government of men and things.

Agamben then goes on to discuss the control of urban space in Genoa July 2001 during the G8; and, we might add, the government of public space around Rostock in 2007.<sup>5</sup>

What does this all mean? Like the capitalist process of production in general, junkspace is a space of disjunctive inclusion. Capital would cease to exist if it included labour-power and could not be productive unless it bled its value dry. Nonetheless, it also needs to separate itself from the labour force and to disjoin it from its very existence so as to dominate it. In the productive metropolis, disjunctive exclusion includes

all the population in the metropolis as a productive space, and then distributes it to mobile flexible and essentially precarious functions in the creation of value – that is, in the creation of wealth and the extraction of profit.

Let us subjectify this postmodern condition of the metropolis. When from a purely analytical, disenchanted and objective phenomenological reflection we move on to a consideration of the biopolitical, the emergent picture is extraordinarily complex and shows that the production of subjectivity is coextensive with the metropolis. The picture is one of a circulation of commodities, webs of information, continuous movements, and radical nomadism of labour, and the ferocious exploitation of these dynamics... but also of constant and inexhaustible *excess*, of the biopolitical power of the multitude and of its excess with regard to the structural controlling ability of dominant institutions. All of the available energies are put to work, society is put to work: junkspace equals the society of labour. Within this exploited totality and injunction to work lies an intransitive freedom that is irreducible to the control that tries to subdue it. Even though this freedom can run against itself, and the function of domination is in some ways absorbed by consciousnesses (and this is called fascism), lines of flight still open up in this ambivalence: suffering is often productive but never revolutionary; what is revolutionary is excess, overflow, and power.

This is junkspace seen from outside: a disequilibrium and rupture multiplied on the indefinite space of the metropolis. But this is also where the multiplication of obstacles, borders, lines of fracture and walls can no longer be regarded as simply blocks dropped down by power or as swamps that one gets stuck in: they are interfaces that polarize relations. An interface is a membrane that alternately pulsates under the rhythm of two different worlds and two different beats of life. The interface is a place of entry and exit, conversion and translation of languages, transformation of what comes and goes. In the postmodern metropolis there is always a fracture of throbs and rights, a *décalage* that is both the blockage and the power of productive forces. Perhaps, in order to understand the junkspace that lives in the Bigness we need to see the centrality of the link between forces and relations of production again, as dissolved in the form of biopolitics.

Can these be reconstructed in a revolutionary form? I have two brief comments to make to contemporary urban planners in this regard. Urban reformism always lies alongside Rem Koolhaas's postmodernism. It has always followed the transformations of the metropolis

and recognized them, whilst often mystifying or making them utopian. This is its greatest effort: *hypermodern reformism* still tries to correct the metropolis from within, ruled by the ideology of transparency (light materials, linear figures, predominance of glass, and so on). It is a case of bending the complex substance of the metropolis onto an axis that is at once plastic and formalist. Here the industry of architecture reveals its close relationship to the fashion and film industries. This project involves all sectors of architectural production; it decomposes and recomposes them according to a logic that, in fact, hides the desire to disarticulate any possible antagonism of subjects and knowledges, flooding all the spaces where exploitation and pain cannot be shown with artificial lights. Rationalism and functionalism have become *soft*, but they are still effective in their mystifying activity.

So *postmodern cynicism* rightly opposes hypermodern reformism: it keeps an eye on Bigness whilst perversely glancing onto junkspace. Postmodernism attacks history whilst historicizing; it attacks the Holy Trinity of 'rent, profit, wages' as an archaeological stratification, but it knows that it cannot destroy it, and, in fact, by inheriting it will end up reproducing it. The postmodern manages to show cruelty in an exemplary way: that is, the recognition that man – the citizen – the worker – the nomad – *anyone* is immersed in the world of commodities, in an exploitative metropolis. Is postmodernism, then, another declaration of the inability to withdraw from this situation? Is 'Bigness' ruled by a sense of impotence? And does the recognition of junkspace end up coming to the asthmatic conclusion that it is impossible to act?

All of this lies before us. The sciences of the urban bow to biopower. That is it. This situation can no longer last: we need to overthrow it. I am sure that forms of life never really withdrew from domination and that, at a superficial glance, they might even seem to be increasingly subordinated to capitalist command. From this standpoint, the metropolis is horrible. I am also sure that there is no longer any hope of grasping a use-value beyond the circulation of exchange value, that there is no possibility of digging up a nature, a *zoe*, beyond the heavy weight of power on *bios*. However, the more the cities and metropolis have become places of production, the more they cannot but be places of resistance. Traversing a metropolis today means going through an immaterial factory. In the Fordist factories, the hardship of production and the joy of the encounter, of being together, and of being a class, coexisted just like solitude and multitude now coexist in the metropolis. The metropolis is constant capital in action, a

mad expropriation of labour-power; but also the place where the multitude reappropriates intellectual capital and the common produced by labour. Therefore, the metropolis is at once a place of exploitation and a terrain of exodus. As the hegemony of the factory worker was built on the communist project, so the hegemony of immaterial labour and the cognitive multitude of the metropolis can be built inside and against the project of production, in the common. From this realization everything can and must start again.

I really do not know what the architects trapped in the grip of the crisis of modernity can do. It seems to me that they need to decide how to interpret the relation between inclusion and disjuncture, the productive relation that extends between metropolis and multitude. Will it be possible to open up the chance for encounter and struggles in the metropolis? Certainly enclosures of resistance and of spaces for utopia are not desirable. Beyond the hypocritical transparency of the hypermodern, beyond the illusion that urban spaces can be gentrified by Tony Blair's 'creative classes' (here *Junkspace* really does become a weapon of demystification and struggle), we need to free new forms of life and search for new structures of community that tend towards exodus. I almost laugh when my closest comrades talk about alternatives in terms of communes, self-managed gardens and city allotments, multifunctional squats, cultural and political ateliers, enterprises of a common *Bildung*. The cynical realism of the postmodern has earned my criticism but, starting from its realism and under no illusion that the city is entrusted to the exercise of biopower, I ask myself what it would mean to return the metropolis to biopolitical production. In the framework of Bigness, not of craftsmanship, but of the General Intellect, perhaps we only need to start talking about communism and democracy again.

**Translated by Arianna Bove**

## Notes

1. Negri is referring here to the Italian collection *Junkspace* (Quodlibet, Macerata, 2006), which comprises the three essays discussed in this piece. Quotations from Koolhaas in what follows are to the original English editions.
2. Rem Koolhaas, 'Bigness, or the Problem of Large', in Rem Koolhaas/OMA and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, Taschen, Cologne, 1997, p. 513.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
4. Rem Koolhaas, 'Junkspace', in Rem Koolhaas/OMA, eds, *Content*, Taschen, Cologne, 2004, pp. 166–7.
5. Giorgio Agamben, 'Metropolis', trans. Arianna Bove, *Generation-Online*, November 2006, [www.generation-online.org/p/fpagamben4.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpagamben4.htm).