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The Style of Choice

Bart Lootsma

Abstract

“The style of choice”, Rem Koolhaas writes in *Generic City*, “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 doctrine 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. Instead of consciousness, as its original inventors may have hoped, it creates a new unconscious. It is modernization’s little helper. Anyone can do it – a skyscraper based on the Chinese pagoda and/or a Tuscan hill town.” Koolhaas continues: “All resistance to postmodernism is anti-democratic. It creates a ‘stealth’ wrapping around architecture that makes it irresistible, like a Christmas present from a charity.”(Koolhaas 1995). In other words: Postmodernism has become the global vernacular in architecture an urbanism, our new folklore. How did this happen and how should we deal with it? Acceptance of the situation is only the first step in any therapy.



Fig. 1: WAM Architects, Intell Hotel, Zaandam, 2010

1. Whahappened & Whodunit

Thus indeed, postmodernism, as an architectural style consisting of collages and assemblages of building elements belonging to different historical styles, and including its derivative branch deconstructivism, has become the dominating style in the world in a similar move that made capitalism the dominant political and economical operating system. Wherever one goes, be it to the remoteness of the Inle Lake in Myanmar, a country that tries to resist globalization with almost all means, or anywhere else: one is certain to find postmodern buildings. The current state of architecture seems to be torn apart between rarely brilliant and exceptional designs that stand out in their context and this context, whereby it is completely unclear, to speak with Georges Canguilhem, what is “The Normal and the Pathological” (Canguilhem 1991). Do these aberrations teach us anything about what is normal, does the normal actually define these aberrations or should we understand them as a drug, cure or therapy (a kind of acupuncture or homeopathy then)? It has become impossible to say. The work of the artist Dionisio Gonzalez, images and videos consisting of crude Photoshop montages of postmodern structures amidst shantytowns or vernacular architecture in remote parts of the world, is therefore hardly a caricature or a vision: it just brings the global status quo in architecture to a point as quasi an illustration to The Generic City. In a world in which more than 50% of the people live in shantytowns – a percentage that is still increasing – it is clear that individual architectural interventions based on appearance – in whatever style – cannot really change anything to this situation and are doomed to appear desperately lost. Remarkable is the virtual non-appearance of the recent digital architecture inspired by Greg Lynn, Asymptote, KolMac and their more mannerist followers in this context. But when it appears, it appears in a similar manner as described above, as the Culture Village in Dubai proves. The real success of the digital age in terms of appearance until now is not to be found in the possibilities of generating new and unknown shapes, but in the worldwide presence and availability of images in the media, from printed media, film and television to Google Image Search, Flickr, Youtube and so on.

New developments in the media accompanied and supported postmodernism from the very beginning. First, at the end of the nineteen seventies, its success was boosted by the sudden drop in costs of colour printing. Overnight, architectural magazines changed their dull and grey appearance as full colour portfolios replaced grainy black and white illustrations of brutalist buildings and scenes of urban decay. In the midst of a severe economical crisis, architects previously unknown and with almost no built work at all were enabled to publish their painfully detailed and carefully coloured pencil drawings and paintings. With the new presence of architecture in the media something changed in its nature. Architecture's traditional association with building became less obvious. “Architects don't build, they design”, different architects and theoreticians like Robin Evans and Bernard Tschumi stated. However correct of course as an analysis of the division of labour, all of this had much further reaching consequences. Architecture became a communication medium itself in the first place. The question remaining only exactly what architecture communicates.

“For all their differences, the architects mentioned here, Moore, Venturi, Rossi, and Ungers, share a common goal. Not only do they want to present symbolic and typological forms in the foreground purely as a way of communicating content, they also want to use them as the material of fiction, allowing a building to become a work of art once again, a ‘fair illusion’.” Heinrich Klotz writes in an article that appeared in connection with “Die Revision der Moderne”, in 1984 the opening exhibition of the Deutsche Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt and meaningfully the largest retrospective of postmodern architecture at the time and maybe even to date. “They play an essential part in bringing about a structure not of function but of fiction. (....) The motto of postmodernism, directed against the ‘builders functionalism’ (...) can be summarized thus: Not just function, but fiction.” (Klotz 1988)

How detailed the drawings of many early postmodern architects were, in many cases it hardly seemed to matter whether the projects were actually built or not. In this sense, the movement was in many ways an immediate continuation of the speculative drawings of the radical architecture of the nineteen fifties and sixties. Indeed, this early multimedia variant of the architect, as someone who draws, lectures, publishes, exhibits, makes films and lives from teaching has become the standard idea of contemporary practice, to such a degree even that Mark Wigley can call one of the forerunners of radical architecture, Constant Nieuwenhuys, an artist who was indeed one of the first to build up an architectural oeuvre solely consisting of drawings, paintings, models, multimedia installations, texts and lectures, a “hyper-architect”, as “Indeed, he took on and exaggerated so many traits of the architect’s typical behavior that he became more architect than any architect.” (Wigley 1998)

But then, suddenly, at first almost unnoticed, the clones of the radical and postmodern architects, having seen the work of the earliest generation, started to build. Today, after the building boom of the last decades, they have sprawled all over the world. The results look as if they took the lessons from Las Vegas almost too seriously. Already at the end of the nineteen eighties, Dietmar Steiner could write in Baudrillardesque manner about the city on the occasion of the “Heavy Dress” project of Matteo Thun, an architect and designer, member of the Italian postmodern collective “Memphis” from the first hour, who in 1987 came out with a fashion collection for buildings and skyscrapers. “Real houses are no longer under discussion.” says Steiner. “All that we see are vague silhouettes. The over-fatigued eye has been conditioned by the vibrating quadrature of the screen, slow and meaningless images are eliminated without reflex. Only now and then does the eye stand still, interrupting its automatized speed, begins to see and stops for the beautiful dress. This is the situation when a skeleton risks its concealed skin. This is the Heavy Dress. That is our position today. This transformation, this suicide of houses has taken place with imperceptible speed. This is happening in a unique conjuncture or architecture which was previously not possible. Architecture is in! The best architects are like opera stars, juggling with engagements and the planning of their agendas. The cities are yearning for the great magicians of their image who can be used in the advertising strategies of the ‘intercommunal competition’. Everything everywhere must be more beautiful because nothing can be improved anymore.” Steiner continues. “Matteo Thun’s Heavy Dress Collection is the first realistic answer to the present day and future role of representations in the city. It argues strongly for fashion. Fashion, the manifestation of the surface, liber-

ates the representations of the buildings from their one-sided application and significance.” (Steiner 1988) Today, with ever cheaper and energy efficient solutions to turn complete buildings into video screens, the facades fashion may enter a next phase.

The consequences of these developments can be seen in many of the works in ‘Insiders’. Even in the buildings of Gramazio & Kohler and Hildundk, almost the most tectonic contributions to the show, we can see an emphasis on decoration and a certain pixilation in the facades – the pixels being replaced by bricks. But there is also a tendency in which buildings become more ephemeral containers for ideas. Anna Galtarossa & Daniel Gonzalez’ “Chili Moon Town Tour”, for example, is a floating installation in the form of a city block formed by skyscrapers. “Chili Moon Town is a utopian floating city of dreams that knows no boundaries.” Galtarossa & Gonzalez write. “It was born as a free city without frontiers. Its citizens do not migrate; the city itself migrates, carrying the dreams of its people.” Speaking about the ephemeral, here is a surprising return of inflatables, the icons of the nineteen seventies, in MMW’s “Kiss The Frog Gallery” and Raumlabor’s Küchenmonument. There are also teams like Interbreeding Field, who with projects like “Jello Maze” again realize psychedelic multimedia environments to train us in dealing with the bombardments coming in through our “extended faculties”, as Marshall McLuhan would say, in the tradition of Haus Rucker Co and Coop Himmelb(l)au (McLuhan 1964). Most certainly a next phase in architecture becoming a “fair illusion” are the parallel worlds in Second Life and the like. Stephan Doesinger’s “Bastard Space” and Speedism’s “Whitehouseparadise” are examples of projects that take these developments, including their superficiality and speed, as a starting point for further explorations.

From the nineteen nineties on, the increasing influence of new electronic media and the Internet, coinciding with the explosive growth of the world’s population and the concentration of it in cities produces endless seas of built stuff, in which difference and differentiation are only perceptible on the spot but on a larger scale disappear in an endless sea of houses and buildings. In an installation representing the 800.000 individual houses the Dutch government was foreseeing to build until the year 2005, Adriaan Geuze demonstrated already in 1995, that with such quantities any attempt at individualization would completely dissolve. We can see similar things happening in the photographs Kai Vöckler took in Prishtina and the documentations of the rooftop buildings and river boats in Belgrade by Dubravka Sekulić & Ivan Kucina. Orientation in the new cites and megalopolises that emerge today is only possible with the help of Google Earth and Google Maps or Tomtom. Very different from the nineteen sixties and seventies, when the architects’ man enemy laid in boredom and monotony created by the industrial housing production, today a similar boredom is produced on an even bigger scale by the desperate attempts of people – not necessarily architects any longer – to produce individual objects different from anything else. In his video “Thinking Hanoi” from 2009 Dionisio Gonzalez suggests the similarity between the sea with its waves and the city as a rolling back and forth in a constant movement.

“The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace.” to quote Koolhaas again. “It is a place of weak and distended sensations, few and far between emotions, discreet and mysterious like a large space lit by a bed lamp. Compared to the classi-

cal city, the Generic City is sedated, usually perceived from a sedentary position. Instead of concentration – simultaneous presence – in the Generic City individual “moments” are spaced far apart to create a trance of almost unnoticeable aesthetic experiences: the color variations in the fluorescent lighting of an office building just before sunset, the subtleties of the slightly different whites of an illuminated sign at night. Like Japanese food, the sensations can be reconstituted and intensified in the mind, or not – they may be simply ignored. (There’s a choice.) This pervasive lack of urgency and insistence acts like a potent drug; it induces a hallucination of the normal.” (Koolhaas 1995)

2. Therapies & Strategies

The consequence of postmodernism being the worldwide default style is that it will never again be possible that any avant-garde will be able to reset the values in architecture and urbanism as a whole on a global scale in the way Modernism, and particularly modern architecture and urbanism, did. One may of course argue that even Modernism never managed to do so because, how successful it may have been, there were always and immediate counter reformations that favoured local and national interests, traditions and, not in the least, straightforward monumentality – modern architecture’s biggest enemy. Avant-gardes were replaced by stardom, merely in the service of the protagonists themselves.

Today however, after a period in which architecture had more resemblance with the culture industry than anything else and ‘starchitects’ could come to unprecedented fame, stars fade quicker and quicker. Students in architectural schools have forgotten the names of Pritzker Prize laureates from just a few years ago already. Probably the most fascinating contemporary publication on architecture at the moment, the BLDG BLOG, hardly deals with this kind of architecture and if it does, there is no difference in the way it is treated in comparison to other articles on the built environment. Basically, BLDG BLOG shows that the built environment is just as fascinating and spectacular without starchitects or an ‘architecture d’auteur’ (BLDG BLOG 2010). Roland Barthes’ demand for the “death of the author”, a position defended by the sword by many architects and theoreticians (who at the same time present themselves proudly on paparazzi-like snapshots casually folded into the highbrow ‘Log’ magazine), is happening just by itself in the sense that signature architecture is drowning in the sea of images that surrounds it (Barthes 1977). This architecture, the architecture that makes out Generic City, is therefore in many ways our new vernacular, our contemporary “Architecture without Architects”.

Thirty years after Laurids Ortner’s essay we seem to need again something like a new “Amnesty for constructed reality”. In 1978, after more than ten years of wild and fantastic experimentation with the Austrian collective Haus Rucker Co, of which he was a founding member, Ortner wrote: “The discussion about our constructed environment has become primarily a problem of aesthetic judgement. It is the visually perceptible criteria, far more than the factors of physical threat, which give us difficulty: what we can generally observe as our environment is characterized by adjectives which, according to their level of sophistication, vary from emotionally loaded words such as ‘ugly’, ‘dreary’ and chaotic to so-called objective terms as ‘inac-

cessible' and 'monotonous'." Basically, nothing has changed since then: architecture is still mainly judged on its visible appearance. The only thing is that the postmodern regime seeded some more colour. Ortner's manifesto-like conclusion that "it will be necessary to accept the totality of this unpleasant reality and to deal with further development with an unprejudiced state of mind" and that "the trivial potential present here is the raw material from which the culture of the new epoch will be made", still stands (Ortner 1986).

Koolhaas' "The Generic City" is a text written fifteen years ago as a detournement of Guy Debord's "The Society of the Spectacle" – including a treatment for a film at the end (Debord 1994). Instead of Debord's complaints and critique, communicated in a depressive voice-over in his film, Koolhaas suggests, to "switch off the sound (...) and reverse the film". People now stumble backward, leaving the chaotic market scene that they had originally built up, "probably complaining, but fortunately we don't hear them". "Silence is now reinforced by emptiness: the image shows empty stalls, some debris that was trampled underfoot." Koolhaas style of critique is known as hyperconfirmation, a "Fatal Strategy" in the words of Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1983). Still it is clear that for now Koolhaas wants us to forget about the market, capitalism and all artificial excitement that belongs to it and focus on essences that lay behind it and that may appear as a kind of temporary Pompeii – one of his all-time favourite references.

The architects exhibited in 'Insiders' accept the new conditions in which architects have to work and their much more humble role in it to a large degree. They work with the raw material of the city and its debris in many different ways. Their style of choice is a choice of style as in choosing from a catalogue, choosing in a shop or selecting a television channel or website. Alexander Brodsky builds his "Vodka Pavillion" completely out of used windows, for example, and Richard Greaves manic production of totems and houses – that appear as a mix between Buster Keaton's house in "One Week", Kurt Schwitters' "Kathedrale des erotischen Elends" and the architecture in the "Kabinett des Dr. Caligari" – seems to be completely built from waste and garbage. "Harbour me, Celia!", the conversion of a Bavarian farm house by Peter Haimlerl, takes up the Smithsonian's "As Found" principle by building the new house in the existing ruin.

The view the participants in 'Insiders' have on the city is largely defined by perception through the media. Even the authenticity of the old farmhouse "Harbour me, Celia!" is presented in ironical photographs remembering of lifestyle magazines, with a woman reading a book in an uncomfortable pose as if she is praying and walking through the door as if she is drunk with a vase on her head. Fujimori Terunobu's "Tagasugi-an" or "Too-High Tea house" reminds, how poetic and fairy-tale-like it may appear between the cherry blossoms, of the Efteling, the fairy tale park in a forest in the Netherlands designed by Anton Pieck in the early nineteen fifties, that was apparently the inspirational source for Disney to build Disneyland. Thereby, the position of the 'Insiders' is further and further removed from both the utopianism and the bitter criticality of the generations before them. Instead they display attitudes that range from euphoria and irony over therapeutic to a sheer acceptance or 'Gelassenheit'. Their work shows indeed in many ways a kind of amnesty for both constructed and virtual reality.

Understanding and accepting a situation is the best starting point to begin working and improving it. Still, beyond the reuse and transformation of the everyday and beyond a general amnesty there are other layers that could and should be addressed. There are other fields that define architecture in which changes and improvements are very well possible, desirable and necessary: politics, financing, distribution, organization, in short: everything that runs megapolitis behind the scenography the postmodernist city presents us with.

Architecture and urbanism are not just about aesthetics and experiences but, in the first place, organize stuff, people and material in hopefully intelligent ways. There are however few offices in this exhibition that show an active and further reaching ambition in this field. Gramazio Köhler organize building process using robots. Crimson seems the only practice with an interest in organizing the city on a larger scale and on a deeper level that involves urban planning, governance and everyday municipal politics. But Gramazio & Kohler use robots too much as a tool in the service of ideas or ideals of other architects – and often rather conservative ones – instead of really going to the bottom of what the computerization of the building process could mean in our society. Crimson's attitude remains too ad hoc and curatorial, choosing different architects (NL, FAT) and urban planners (MaxWan) to achieve their rather eclectic goals. They present their WIMBY! IBA project in Hoogvliet in a panorama that shows striking similarities with Dionisio Gonzalez' photomontages.

Many of the offices in 'Insiders' look at exemplary practices from the second half of the twentieth century, particularly the history of radical architecture from the nineteen sixties and seventies like Archigram, Archizoom, Ant Farm, Haus Rucker Co, early Coop Himmelb(l)au, the Whole Earth Catalogue, Global Tools, Memphis and Alchymia. In all their playfulness, it is not probable however that they have the same investigative goals as their predecessors. There is a 'retro' aspect in the countless quotes of radical architecture. They are drenched in irony and melancholy, the architects obviously realizing that radical architecture – whether it was carelessly positive or critically dark – appeared against the background of a period of naive optimism based on an unprecedented economical and technological growth that is forever gone. The first report of the Club of Rome from 1972 followed – and thus underlined – by the first oil crisis of 1973 put an end to it, thereby also largely ending the era of radical architecture. Today, we are even more aware of the environmental threats that were announced in that period. But with these quotes of radical architecture we can at least temporarily revive some of the hope of the period and withdraw in its comfort – or see if there are still hidden opportunities in it.

3. Conclusion

Das There are also new tasks and challenges for architecture and urbanism. The need for more sustainable lifestyles presents some of those. The others arise as consequences of the postcolonial era. Globalization does not just consist of increasing flows of people, data, money and goods all over the world. It also means that we cannot blend out the increasing percentage of settlements in the world that consist of shantytowns any longer. They are part – and with over 50% of the world population living in them a large an ever increasing part it most certainly is –

of the context of architecture. Therefore it is unavoidable that architecture and urbanism will have to rethink their roles in the world, putting themselves in the service of the people who live there. Large-scale modernist housing programs, like they were still successful in Hong Kong and Singapore in the nineteen fifties and sixties, are not possible any more today because the immense investments needed. Looking at the increasing amount of quasi temporary camps in our cities – the refugee centres, the homeless sleeping in tents in Paris and in the United States, the Roma in Italian cities, the victims of earthquakes in Italy and Turkey, the victims of Katrina in New Orleans; or looking at the explosive increase of informal settlements in Turkey and in the former Yugoslavian countries, etc., etc. – this context inevitably comes closer and closer. Retroactive legalisation of illegal and informal extensions of cities, as largely financed by institutions like the World Bank and the European Union, is an unavoidable task. It is however only the first step in the direction of another form of mental amnesty that will allow us to start working on them in proactive ways.

More than any other historical example, today Otto Neurath and the Viennese Settlement Movement from the period immediately after the First World War might help us to find new perspectives for dealing with this situation. In 1919, Vienna was in a desperate state and hundreds of thousands of families, both from outside the city and from the city itself, sought refuge around allotment gardens and in the periphery to avoid starvation by growing their own food. “For many observers of the city, these Zigeunersiedler or ‘gypsy settlers’ were the ideal citizen-planners in that they relied on know-how and instinct, utilizing everything around them, from urban refuse to trees and captured prey, in order to assure their survival. They illustrated the power of community as an agent of urban reform, and as a force that had the potential for improving life in the metropolis more broadly.”(Vossoughian & Neurath 2008). The governing Social Democratic Party accepted and supported this movement from the beginning, as it knew it could never afford any collective infrastructure. As a key player in the Austrian Settlement and Allotment Garden Association, the Public Utility Settlement and Building Material Corporation (GESIBA), the Settlement, Housing and Construction Guild of Austria and later on the Research Institute for Gemeinwirtschaft, Neurath looked for a “Converse Taylor System”, in which he tried to combine ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ strategies borrowed from industry (Vossoughian & Neurath 2008). As long as Neurath could, he maintained an economy in kind, in which people paid for their houses by performing collective duties, for example building roads. Architects like Adolf Loos, Margarethe Schütte-Lihotzky and many others were also involved in this ambitious and successful undertaking, which unfortunately disappeared into oblivion after the nineteen thirties, when Neurath and his friends were obliged to seek refuge outside of Austria.

Information and communication, in the form of newspapers and exhibitions were a crucial aspect of Neurath’s approach. Together with the artist and graphic designer Gerd Arntz he developed Isotype, a sign language that allowed communicating statistical data about the city – and later on about the world- in a simple and striking way, in order to make the citizens understand the complex organization of their city.

In this exhibition, EqA's study of the PREVI Experimental Housing Project in Lima, Peru, one of the most ambitious housing projects ever realized, with the participation of famous architects like Aldo van Eyck, Charles Correa, James Stirling, Christopher Alexander, and Atelier 5, Candilis, Josic and Woods, among others, is the only project that consciously deals with such themes. EqA show how, similar to the projects by Candilis, Woods and others in Casablanca in Morocco, the inhabitants continue building and expanding their property in the course of time once they have been provided with the basic house as a starting capital.

Communication may also be a key issue today. Whoever has visited shantytowns, has been struck by the immense amount of satellite dishes. Mobile telephones and mobile computing are, even if often still unaffordable for many, opportunities for the inhabitants these cities, as they demand far less investments in infrastructure than traditional communication systems. In these almost inevitably chaotic cities, GPS offers the next potential for orientation.

Innovations in production are still possible and necessary, if not necessarily only in the form of CAD CAM processes which, replacing mass production by mass customization, has retained too many of the values and goals of the industrial society. The improvised structures of textile industry in Turkey, with their just-in-time organization, seem to offer serious alternative for mass production in Asia.

All of his has not immediately to do with either the appearance of buildings and city quarters or with building styles. "There is a choice," Koolhaas remarks almost between the lines of "Generic City" (Koolhaas 1995). Our style of choice should be a different lifestyle. It will hardly be a choice, by the way.

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