

The New R E P U B L I C

ON ARCHITECTURE

Extra-Large

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A friend recently told me that his most important pedagogical tool as an architect is this maxim: the architect's primary ethical responsibility is to be the guardian of the public realm, in contrast to the myriad others who currently configure our built landscape--clients, politicians, contractors, developers, and NIMBY-driven "community action" committees. The public realm includes not only cultural institutions, but also arteries of movement; not only urban plazas and public parks, but also abandoned blocks, suburban playgrounds, and brownfields; not only shopping malls, but also parking lots. And it includes not only the voids between buildings, but also the buildings themselves, exterior and sometimes interior.

Training architects to be urban designers is common in modern architecture, and it has engendered some wonderful places, such as Bruno Taut's functional and beloved modernist housing estates of the late 1920s in Berlin. More notoriously, it has produced also some disastrous ones, such as the ever-collapsing Pruitt-Igoe project of the 1950s, in St. Louis. As a consequence of the disasters, the specter of architects designing urban (or suburban, or whatever) environments conjures up popular fears that singular, and singularly wrongheaded, visions will be visited upon precious and complicated social space. This certainly happens. Yet the alternative approach--confining the obligations of architects to a particular site's perimeter--is inordinately worse.

Architects often switch-hit between architecture and urban design. You might think, given their celebrity, that Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry are at the forefront of new thinking about the shape of today's and tomorrow's built public realm, but you'd be wrong. Rem Koolhaas is. Heart-stoppingly brilliant, Koolhaas owes his influence to his omnivorous curiosity about, and wide-angle lens on, the contemporary world; his extraordinary mix of nihilism, idealism, and wit; his institutional base at the Harvard Design School; his students' and apprentices' work; his facility for generating opaque and paradoxical aphorisms, many of which are mass-reproduced in his highly stylized publications; and, most importantly, his often prophetic ideas and buildings. From Koolhaas come some of contemporary architecture's most-reproduced forms and structures: the giraffe-legged Villa dall'Ava in suburban Paris, one of the greatest



CCTV Tower Station and Headquarters, Beijing

buildings of the late twentieth century, and the stupendous fishnet-steel-and-glass-covered Seattle Public Library, which opened in 2004. He has re-directed the architectural thought and practices of a generation.

To give a sense of the current multicontinental and multidisciplinary scope of Koolhaas's reach, here is a list of his current or recently completed projects: Prada's so-called Epicenters in New York, San Francisco, Beverly Hills, and Shanghai; a 228,055-square-foot "Congress Center" in Cordoba, Spain; an 830,000-square-foot retail, dining, and entertainment complex for the historic Mercati Generali section of downtown Rome; a six-million-plus-square-foot skyscraper housing offices, a hotel, and a cinema and theater

complex in Beijing. He has also prepared or is preparing master plans for Oslo; the so-called White City section of London; Oude Dokken in Ghent, Belgium; and Zeche Zollverein, the UNESCO World Heritage industrial site in Essen, Germany.

Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) runs largely on the fuel of energetic young architects, many of whom eventually leave the firm to start their own practices, the most recent example being the decamping of Joshua Prince-Ramus, with OMA's entire New York branch in tow, to create the independent firm REX. Koolhaas's dominion stretches into the work of any number of these younger firms, as well as into the practices whose principals have been smitten from afar. Beyond REX, this includes the Dutch MVRDV, the London-based Zaha Hadid Architects and Foreign Office Architects, the Tokyo-based SANAA, the Chicago-based Studio Gang, and the New York-based Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis. These and other firms constitute a cohort of rising or risen stars, a School of Koolhaas. They differ from each other in many respects, and some of them are more deft in their urbanism than the master; but OMA's theoretical positions and formal tropes reverberate in them all.

Yet influence--and Koolhaas's influence extends deep into the academy as well--does not a guardian of the public realm make. So what are the consequences of Koolhaas's reach? For years, he has played a double game: provocateur and organization man. He insists that his stance toward the contemporary world is pointedly, even brutally, critical, and that he has "always been interested in shocking people," even as he is the servant and icon-shaper of the empires of Prada, Thomas Krens's Guggenheims, and governments around the world. "To be an architect who builds in today's economy," he concedes, "means to a frighteningly large extent" accepting the status quo.

Despite his pixilated papering over of incompatibilities, Koolhaas and his work have always been rife with contradictions. Obviously aware of this, he insists that his architecture and his urban design re-conceptualize the public realm the better to fortify it. Assessing the validity of his claims requires digging beneath his posturings and contradictions, and looking backward toward his intellectual formation. Doing so not only illuminates his contributions to the progress--and the retardation--of contemporary

architecture and urban design, but also highlights some of the most critical questions facing architecture and urban design today.

Born in 1944, Koolhaas left Holland as a child with his left-leaning parents--his father was a journalist--to live in Indonesia, which had only recently cast off the mantle of Dutch colonial occupation. From age eight to twelve, he grew to the rhythms of Jakarta, a politically volatile, cacophonous, overcrowded, and vibrant conurbation of rich and (mainly) poor. His family returned to Holland in 1956. Imagine the predispositionally disaffected young Koolhaas, shocked by Dutch life in the typical Dutch city. Historically wealthy, small in scale, and lovingly maintained, the Netherlands seemed to him a living museum, all artificiality and cultivated tulips. He hated Holland. To this day the only Dutch city he finds tolerable is Rotterdam, where OMA is based--Rotterdam, which was flattened during World War II and reconstructed in the 1950s along then-contemporary principles of urban design. Indonesia's stark contrast to Holland engendered in Koolhaas an antipathy for homogeneous, tightly regulated urban configurations, especially those infatuated with their own history.

This antipathy grew when Koolhaas reached his twenties. Working as a film-maker and a journalist, he encountered the work of Constant Nieuwenhuys, a Dutch artist-architect and erstwhile member of the Surrealist-inspired group CoBrA, whose best-known member is Asger Jorn; Constant (as he is commonly known) was briefly associated also with the Marxist French Situationists. When Koolhaas and Constant met, the elder had already been working for years on his "New Babylon" series of paintings, sketches, texts, and architectural models describing the shape of a post-revolutionary society. Constant's New Babylon was to be a series of linked transformable structures, some of which themselves were the size of a small city--what architects call a megastructure. Perched above ground, Constant's megastructures would literally leave the bourgeois metropolis below and would be populated by *homo ludens*--man at play. (*Homo Ludens* is the title of a book by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga.) In the New Babylon, the bourgeois shackles of work, family life, and civic responsibility would be discarded. The post-revolutionary individual would wander from one leisure environment to another in search of new sensations. Beholden to no one, he would sleep, eat, recreate, and procreate where and when he wanted. Self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction were Constant's social goals. Deductive reasoning, goal-oriented production, the construction and betterment of a political community--all these were eschewed.

Koolhaas was drawn, though ambivalently, to this hedonistic vision. He found its utopianism and anti-capitalism distasteful, but he was captivated by the idea of an ever-transforming megastructural city where the modern subject could continually remake his psyche by ambling into some serious fun. And visually, the New Babylon was compellingly playful, with horizontal floor planes vertically pushed and pulled, and spaces defined by ephemeral constructions rather than solid walls, and entropic districts jostling within and against the existing city.

In the late 1960s, Koolhaas enrolled at the Architectural Association in London, at the time when celebrated British and American architects and theorists were advocating a historicizing, nostalgic, anti-modernist aesthetic of the sort that had so oppressed him in Holland. The Architectural Association set itself up as a bastion of anti-postmodernism, and Koolhaas loathed the "deep and fundamental hostility to modernity" in the architectural discourse of the day. Giving in to an infatuation with "asphalt, traffic, neon, crowds, tension," he cast about for a way to "recuperate" modernity and modernism, but not by reclaiming the sleek steel-and-glass or exposed-concrete monoliths under attack by the postmodernists. He mined a different--and itself repressed--strain of modernism: its ecstatic, surrealist side, which he liked for "its popularity, its vulgarity, its hedonism." His architecture and his urbanism would be based on "dissociation, disconnection, and complementarity, contrast, rupture." He wanted to "understand the city no longer as a tissue but more as a 'mere' coexistence."

Koolhaas found a refuge in the designs and the theories of the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson, with whom he later admitted to being "in a one-way dialogue" for years. The Smithsons' work drew from the rhythms, practices, and energy of everyday urban, suburban, and even rural life. One of their projects proposed leaving most of postwar Berlin in rubble, with only roadways cleared to serve as the infrastructure for a new city, reachable by escalator one level up. This downtown-sized megastructure consisted of towers linked by elevated pedestrian walkways, haphazardly arranged. Widely discussed and altogether unsensible, such urban ideas also drove the Smithsons' (mostly unbuilt) architecture--self-conscious modesty; uncanny combinations of the detritus of postwar London; unfinished, low-cost materials; the optical vibrancy of contemporary advertising; and the grittiness of the East End slum. Their aesthetic was contrived to provoke, to force people to think about the condition of living in a perpetually modernizing society, to reflect upon their locations in that world.

Koolhaas, repelled on the one hand by the overly rationalized and nostalgically precious Holland and the prevalent anti-modernist discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and seduced on the other hand by the works of Constant and the Smithsons, became ever more infatuated with the metropolis as the locus of modernity and the place for the modern subject's self-actualization. Only the city, he believed, symbolizes and lays bare the psychic conditions of modernity; and only its urban forms embody modernity's rapid cycling through historical shifts. Not for nothing is his firm called the Office for *Metropolitan Architecture*.

Over decades, Koolhaas has developed a remarkably consistent social and architectural vision to create a constellation of innovative and consistently surprising small and mid-scale buildings. The Villa dall'Ava in Paris, completed in 1991, is flat-out brilliant: into a long, extremely narrow site in the sedate suburban enclave of St. Cloud, he introduced an urbane riff on Le Corbusier's famous Villa Savoye of 1929 (also outside Paris). The

husband wanted a transparent house into which no neighbor could see; the wife wanted a house with almost no kitchen to speak of (she didn't like to cook) and a swimming pool on the roof. Koolhaas, with few other projects in the office, luxuriated for several years in the multiple paradoxes of the commission: a couple with grand patronage aspirations but a modest budget; a home absent a hearth; a transparent dwelling opaque to the world; a heavy rooftop swimming pool supported by a fragile glass pavilion.



The Kunsthall, Rotterdam

Organizing the entire design of the house are oppositions of high-end leather and honky-tonk plastic, plywood, and exposed concrete; of transparency and opacity, lightness and heaviness, density and porosity, visibility and invisibility. One bedroom block, clad in corrugated aluminum, perches on improbably long, skinny concrete columns, raising the second floor up to give the clients a better view of the Eiffel Tower, which is on axis with the rooftop lap pool. Using skewed geometry, ramps, indoor and outdoor staircases, and a riot of materials, textures, and multicolored surfaces, Koolhaas created an enormous sense of restlessness in what is ultimately a small suburban house. The three members of the household--the couple and their daughter--can look voyeuristically in on one another, as if they were passersby on a crowded Parisian street.

In subsequent and larger buildings, such as the Kunsthall in Rotterdam (1992), the Educatorium of Utrecht University (1997), and the Seattle Public Library (2004), Koolhaas expanded upon principles first materialized in the Villa dall'Ava. To accentuate his developing sense of multi-directional dynamism, he began to carve, from neutral gridded containers, unusually shaped voids--as in the auditorium of the Educatorium, in which the ceiling plane gently slopes down as it inches toward the back of the room, then takes a tight U-turn dive to become the room's floor. Often surrounding such voids are the building's pathways, corridors, and rooms, which cut vertically, horizontally, and diagonally into or through the space. One routinely looks onto others heading somewhere else, each place a way station to the next epiphany in an ever-changing metropolis. When you enter a relatively small, somewhat sequestered exhibition gallery in the Rotterdam Kunsthall, you land atop a gridded steel plate of the kind covering below-grade drainage systems in many cities. Your gaze is caught not just by the art on the walls, but also by the art-gazers in a gallery below--who, unnervingly, are looking up at you. These buildings grab from Surrealism, popular culture, and in-crowd allusions to modernist landmarks and heroes, all wrapped in an actually or apparently pedestrian palette of unfinished plywood, raw concrete, exposed steel, corrugated metal and plastic, and unpainted gypsum board. Contemplative, restful spaces are rare.

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Koolhaas's deep-seated conviction that architecture and urban design are of a piece is altogether correct. From Constant's New Babylon, and from the Smithsons, he found his way to a new kind of architecture; and from them he also constructed an urban model that he hopes, in the Smithsons' words, will "drag a rough poetry" out of the contemporary city. But it hasn't. There is a problem here, or at least a paradox. Koolhaas's urban-inspired approach to design makes for exhilarating architecture, but for desolating cities. The problem lies in the nature of his urban visions themselves, and in how he has evolved them. His urban public spaces are relentlessly urban. But they are not very public.

This failing may be seen in his wrongheaded assumption that he can conceptualize the problems of the built environment along the single dimension of scale, from S to M to L to XL (one of his most famous books, published by Monacelli Press, is titled *S, M, L, XL*). This ignores the reality that urban design requires the architect to address a range of considerations fundamentally different from those of building a building. If the architect is to be guardian of the public realm, he needs to recognize that architecture and urban design are both interdependent and distinct, with the critical distinction lying precisely in the urban designer's need to conceptualize the possibilities not just of private revelations but also, and more importantly, of the public world, and of the relationship between these overlapping but distinct domains.

Koolhaas's urban designs, like his buildings, do amplify the city's discordant rhythms, its dissonances, disjunctures, oppositions, ambiguities. Even for the small and delicately balanced city of Oslo, even for the sprawling suburban Almere (a rapidly growing suburb of Amsterdam), he maintains that today's built environment "must incarnate uncertainty," and include forms with "no architectural relation whatsoever to one another." OMA's urban designs, he asserts, replace "hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition," so as to fuse "high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed." (Such fatuousness goes very far among the architectural *cognoscenti*.)

One would like to overlook such oracular nonsense, except that OMA has been doing urban work for close to three decades, and its executed projects do not make it easy to do so. The office's first full-scale master plan to be completed, in 1994, was for Euralille, a transportation hub and urban complex in Lille, France. The French government hired Koolhaas in 1988 to create a hub around the TGV at the new high-speed train line's first European stop out of the Chunnel. OMA's master plan includes a convention center, a train station, business offices, retail shops, public services, parking, and housing, some designed by other well-known architects whom Koolhaas helped to select and, in some cases, with whom he collaborated.

Koolhaas's own convention center, set apart from the rest of the development, creatively re-interprets a familiar (and usually monstrous) architectural type, marshalling low-cost materials into a sophisticated, artful composition. Yet in the Euralille master plan itself one is hard-pressed to find anything good. Its architectural centerpiece, a collaboration

between Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel (officially designed by Nouvel), is an enormous polygonal shopping mall, the Carrefour, punctuated with four residential towers. Forming the site's opposite edge is the train station and, straddling the train tracks, a perfectly unremarkable office building by Christian Portzamparc. An apparently accidental, or at least barely designed, void between these buildings and the mall offers the only conceivable moment of outdoor public space. The Carrefour's scale, the design, and the overall detailing deliberately flouts medieval Lille, which begins across the street. The mall is a flat, monotonous, interiorized steel-and-glass beached whale, stretched along 1,100 feet of a multi-lane road.

Explaining OMA's master plan, Koolhaas disdains Lille's residents and the existing fabric of the place. Euralille's scale or lack of it, its public space or lack of it, does not matter, because the project takes its cues not from pedestrians but from the train and auto travelers speeding by. "What is important about this place," he has declared, "is not where it is, but where it leads, and at what pace--in other words, to what extent it belongs to the rest of the world." Pedestrian public space matters less because, like it or not, everyday life in a contemporary city is an entirely privatized and private affair--a shopping expedition, perhaps a meal at a restaurant.

Today, in all manner of buildings and master plans, on an ever-increasing scale, Koolhaas is reprising Euralille's principles. His master plan for Almere offers a concrete view of his current urban design practices, since some parts of it are finished and others are nearing completion. Almere was created in 1976 as a Dutch version of an early postwar American suburb, serving those wanting to escape the extreme density of Dutch urban living. Yet in eighteen years only one shopping strip had opened, so in 1994 city officials hired OMA to create a master plan for a new town center containing a business district, high-rise residential towers, retail space, and cultural amenities.

Predictably, OMA opted for high density, leaving empty half the downtown sites available for development. Office towers line the commuter-rail tracks in what Koolhaas prophesied would be "an instant skyline." A theater, a library, and a museum, segregated from the business district, again offer an architectural petting zoo designed by high-profile architects, including Kazuyo Sejima of SANAA and the Briton Will Alsop. "The plan is an attack on everything that Almere is," OMA writes. "Almere is low, the plan is high; Almere is a grid, the plan is full of diagonals; Almere is low density; the plan is high density." As city officials and OMA were refining the master plan, municipal authorities implored Koolhaas to orient the new downtown toward the large artificial lake at the town's existing center. Koolhaas resisted. Why, he asked, "should a view over water be more interesting than a view over the city?"

For its own architectural contribution, OMA chose to design a nearly 258,000-square-foot cineplex and shopping mall, smaller than Lille's Carrefour but equally monumental and interiorized, with the exception of its ground-level corner entrance. Block 6 (as the building is called), like Lille's Carrefour, is the pivotal moment in the new downtown. Koolhaas predicts that Block 6 will create a "congestive combination of all urban

activities." The design relies on the usual Koolhaasian tropes, sectional diagonals and multi-level voids cut through and linking stacked floor planes.

In these and other master plans, Koolhaas trenchantly articulates a critique of prevailing theories of urban and suburban design that continue to dominate discussions of the contemporary city. Before he came on the scene, urban theory was bifurcated into two equally unsatisfying alternatives. On one side was the highly touted and extremely popular New Urbanism, currently coursing through the debates about the reconstruction of New Orleans. On the other side was the original target of New Urbanism, mainstream modernism's parklands striated with mid-rise residential and high-rise business buildings. Koolhaas openly scorns the New Urbanism's re-packaging of late nineteenth-century suburban visions and its tendency to spawn nostalgically historicist architecture. Neither does he have much truck with the mainstream modernist urbanism, which is fundamentally anti-urban as well.

When Koolhaas began Euralille in 1988, in other words, he strode solo into a gaping conceptual void in discussions of the future of the built environment. Rightly, Koolhaas insists that architects and urban designers, in their refusal to confront contemporary urban and ex-urban landscapes as they exist and as they are developing, have abdicated their professional duty to shape--to be guardians of--the public realm. Rightly, he demands that his colleagues pragmatically acknowledge that the public will no longer largely defer to the "expert" judgments of urban planners and designers, and architects and urban designers will never again control that many of the forces shaping the built environment. Rightly, he acknowledges the unlikelihood that single designers or firms will be handed the political power to construct a Great Society on ten or twenty square blocks of urban land.

Koolhaas has forced a polarized discussion to give way to a suppler array of approaches. Recently, and partly under his influence, a more promising urban design philosophy has emerged that advocates high- and medium-density, and above all mixed-use, neighborhoods. Contemporary architects and urban designers also now concede that they must work with the landscapes of late modernity that many would prefer to ignore, such as edge cities, brownfields, the non-residential parts of urban and suburban sprawl (including the cavernous anonymity of "big-box" buildings), and the almost phantasmal megalopolitan growth taking place in developing parts of the world, especially in Asia.

However prescient, however correct Koolhaas's criticisms of contemporary architecture and urbanism have been, there is little wisdom to be found in his own proposed solutions. Dividing the S and M of his houses and small- and medium-sized institutional or cultural buildings from the L and XL of his megastructures and urban designs is an unrecognized gulf along three dimensions: economic, experiential, and social. This gulf makes OMA's vision for contemporary urbanism a highly imprudent guide for urban designers wrestling with the twenty-first-century built landscape.

Taking the economic dimension first, consider Koolhaas's current infatuation with the Very Large Building. Perhaps some of these OMA-designed or -inspired buildings will

become striking urban landmarks. But many of them, including Almere's Block 6, will likely encounter the same unhappy fortunes as the Carrefour in Lille. Shopping malls are, as Koolhaas himself puts it, autistic--they are difficult to connect to the surrounding landscape. And gathering too many urban elements into one very big building puts control over too much physical space in too few hands. If these hands happen to be private, as is usually the case, maximizing investment bulldozes over civic interests. Exacerbating this is the possibility that the economic fortunes of the building's proprietor, private or public, might plummet. Then maintenance will be deferred, businesses might fail, and the whole complex will begin to look downtrodden. Every city encounters variability in growth and decline. In highly visible, prominently located structures, even small downturns can be amplified into disasters. You do not have to embrace Jane Jacobs's largely anti-modern critique of postwar urban redevelopment to recognize that the kernel of truth in her thinking applies to Koolhaas's cities as well.

An even more insurmountable problem is how people will relate to Koolhaas's XL buildings. He deems considerations of composition, scale, proportion, materials, and details irrelevant, insisting that "the *art* [my italics] of architecture is useless" today, since the "world is more and more dominated by quantity." Yet the tools that Koolhaas dismissively consigns to architecture's art are precisely the tools by which the designer shapes a person's experience of the built world. Does this building make me feel big or small? Does it seem cold or warm, forbidding or inviting? Does it contain things I want to touch, sit on, think about, or explore? In his S and M buildings, Koolhaas lavishly attends to such experiential considerations, but in his L and XL projects he does not. He fails to recognize that even if one could design a megastructure through the "art of architecture," its execution would be unlikely, because the economic conditions under which such projects are developed and leased would probably prohibit the architect from executing these more subtle design elements.

And more disturbing still in OMA's "new urban paradigm" are the social problems that it fails to address. Koolhaas has demonstrated that in the art of high architecture, a blunt acceptance of contemporary economic, social, and cultural conditions can be thrilling. In the art of urban design, however, deference to these same conditions amounts to political complacency. No matter what Koolhaas claims, in his XL buildings and urban designs he abdicates his ethical responsibility to be the guardian of the public realm, because, in his view, "demarcations [such as public and private] no longer exist." He writes that "I think we are still stuck with this idea of the street and the plaza as a public domain, but the public domain is radically changing ... with television and the media and a whole series of other inventions, you could say that the public domain is lost. But you could also say it's now so pervasive it does not need physical articulation any more." In Almere's city center, like Euralille before it, the principal public act is to shop. For Almere's master plan, OMA brags that it abided by "Alberti's ancient exhortation to view the 'state' [public] and the 'house' [private] as interchangeable."

Predictions of the demise of the public realm have a long history in urbanist discourse. Thankfully, they are plainly untrue. Today's public realm is neither the Greek agora nor an economic or ethnic elite's privileged domain. Today's publics--the plural is significant--

-do lack an adequate conceptual paradigm to facilitate their spatial realization, but whatever the outcome of our need for a new paradigm of "publicness," neither globalization, nor digital media, nor high-speed international trains, nor a culture of consumption, renders moot the fundamental fact that publics are made by people, living with and bumping into one another, mostly on the ground.

No longer just the steps in front of city hall, today's public realm is indoor and outdoor, political, social, commercial, leisure, institutional. Today's public realms need to offer an overlapping as well as a colliding complex of heterogeneous environments, and to facilitate unexpected encounters with unfamiliar classes and communities of people pursuing ends that might differ greatly from one's own. Only in such places might we recognize our plurality and our commonality, and interact with others in ways that encourage us to see ourselves through their eyes, and to see ourselves as members of multiple communities, chosen, inherited, and constructed. Such places might include shopping malls, but they cannot be only shopping malls, even if malls were somehow not designed to channel a targeted and usually homogeneous group of consumers.

In Koolhaas's hands, architecture and urban design are not just intermeshed, they are also conflated. His current work is giving physical form to an urban vision that has haunted him, in his mind's eye, for decades. But is it wise? Is it right? Is it socio-critical, as he maintains? If we consider his stated aims for his architecture, his abiding interest in Surrealism, and his accession to extravagant proclamations about the death of the public realm, OMA's occasional insistence upon the publicness of its master plans ("Let Almere be a place of maximum public interaction!") seems less than sincere. OMA proudly describes as Piranesian the Carrefour's spaces, intimating that they create the same sense of alienating solitude that the eighteenth-century Italian architect captured in his famous *Carcerci* engravings. But they depicted prisons! This and other such comments, Almere and other such urban designs, demonstrate the deep and unfortunate affinity of Koolhaas's architecture with his urban designs.

Even in the most public spaces, Koolhaas's true subject is the modern subject's inner musings. His urban universe asks no more of public spaces than that they stimulate private epiphanies, moments of philosophical reverie in which the alienated individual in the city might contemplate his finitude and his irrelevance among the teeming spectacle of urban life. This vision has issued in some show-stopping buildings, where the celebration of private truths is appropriate. Yet to apply it to today's panoply of conurbations is disastrously to conflate public with private, to make the public private and the private public. In the Koolhaasian city people are never really alone, but neither are they ever really together.

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