

Urban design as cultural politics

Koolhaas forgets that even completely fake historicist solutions may contribute to a sense of civic resurgence, something which is evident in cities like Birmingham where it is precisely the undoing of modernist brutality that creates the basis for a new civic appreciation of the value and possibilities of inner city areas. Nevertheless, this alone cannot be the basis for a new mission for urban design and planning. If we stick to the undoing of modernism, the debate on urban design might focus too much on a conventional agenda of redesigning familiar urban spaces: we think we already know what the solutions are. Perhaps we should try and look beyond that 19th Century agenda of recreating parks, streets and squares according to that all-too-familiar image. What is more, we might want to reconsider with what criteria we actually want to assess whether urban design interventions are successful.

What are the new public places? What meaning do these new public spaces have? Do they merely raise the value of property or do they also help to revitalize urbanism as a way of life? How can urban design contribute to revitalizing urbanism as a way of life? How can the means of creating physical spaces be used to create new social relationships, new psychological spaces? This is an enquiry into the meaning of urban design as cultural politics. On the one hand this is an analytical question inquiring what sort of society urban design helps to (re)produce with particular interventions. On the other hand this is a positive and programmatic one, investigating the way in which urban design can contribute to producing the sort of society we would like to live in.

Beyond Koolhaas

Here Koolhaas proves less helpful since his diagnosis and remedy reproduce three of the mistakes of earlier schools. First of all, Koolhaas concept of the generic city rests on teleological premises: he suggests that there is an identifiable path in history that leads to the inevitable development of generic cities. Secondly, his outlook is universalist: he suggests that we can see the future of the cities in the western world in what happens in the urban conglomerations in Eastern Asia. This suggests that the effort to identify differences between existing approaches to planning and design is simply irrelevant since none of them will be able to face up to their task. His third omission is that he has not found a way to relate his appreciation of the importance of coalitions of societal actors and forces to the description of a new urban form. The metaphor of the generic city is too much of a conceptual antithesis to Western historicism.

In his essay 'Whatever happened to urbanism?' Rem Koolhaas criticizes architecture and urban planning for focussing on a classical model of the city, for failing to understand contemporary challenges, and for the lack of ideas to deal with contemporary processes of urbanization. Koolhaas argues that the present commitment to the historical (European) city combines a determination to preserve the authenticity of the historical inner cities with a drive to modernize to guarantee the central role in various forms of social life. If this paradox remains unaddressed and unresolved, the result will be the development of a city without history, without identity, created on a surface. This "generic city" stands for everything urban planners or designers dislike: sprawl, sameness, repetition, lack of design.

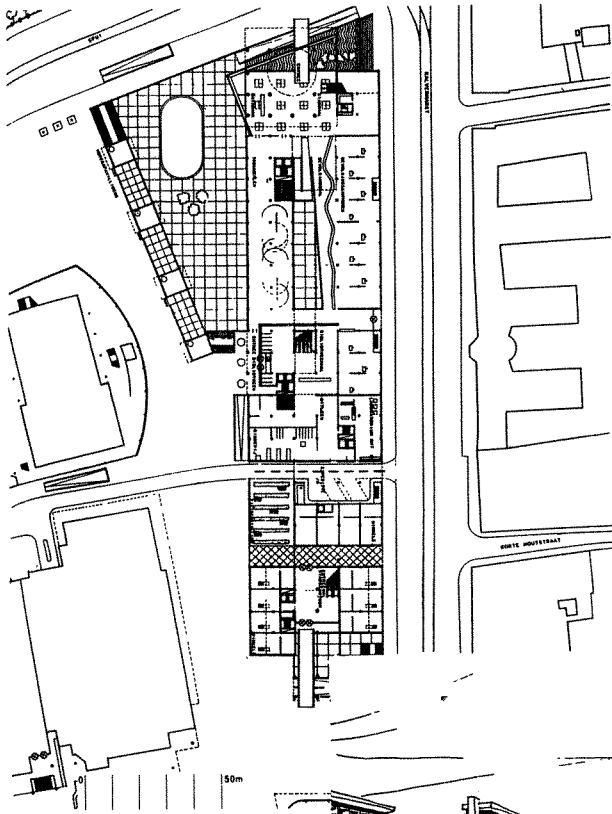
Koolhaas puts the 'parasitic security of architecture' with its emphasis on aesthetics against the search for a 'new urbanism': "If there is to be a 'new urbanism'... it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts and redistributions - the reinvention of psychological space ..."

The past is too small to inhabit

The idea that the classical city should be seen in the context of a much more complex urban constellation is, of course, not new. The idea of an 'urban field' or a 'non-place urban realm' even dates back to the early 1960s. Koolhaas is very effective in relating observable urban developments to the lack of discourse that combines a critique of such developments to the development of a new strategic orientation.

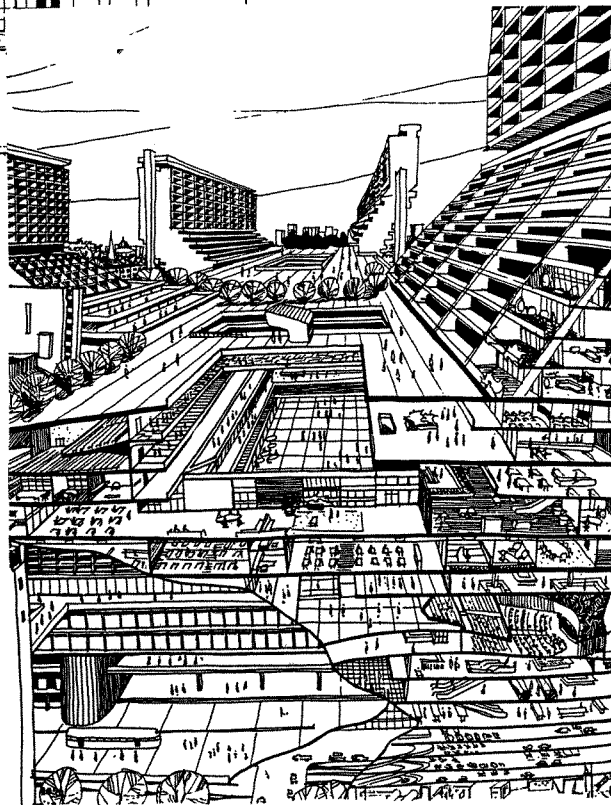
Today's debate on urbanity seems to lack a common project: a combination of a shared notion of the problems we face, a shared understanding of the goals to be achieved and of the means that would be instrumental for this purpose. Our shared commitment is much more about the undoing of previous mistakes. All too often this results in historicist solutions. Illustrative are the reemergence of the Parisian wrought iron rings around trees or the retro sign-posts. Koolhaas criticizes what he sees as the Western 'obsession' with history as a source of social identity. In urban design we can no longer rely on the crutches of history especially when 'history' does not so much disappear in the generic city as return as hypertext. This amounts to a fierce critique of a lack of imagination and of confidence in our capacity to create meaningful but post-traditional relationships.

Zero-Friction Society Maarten A Hajer



Left: Rem Koolhaas ground-floor plan for the Hague City Hall competition, 1986.

Right: Rem Koolhaas 'As an City of Tomorrow'.



In the end, Koolhaas does not have a vision that helps us resolve the paradox between conservation and modernisation.

Is there a vision of the future of the city that both avoids a populist historicism and a professional future for urban design that merely accommodates and aestheticizes the generic developments that take place anyway? Is there a possibility for a conscious cultural politics of urban design, an approach that would help revitalize urbanism as a way of life?

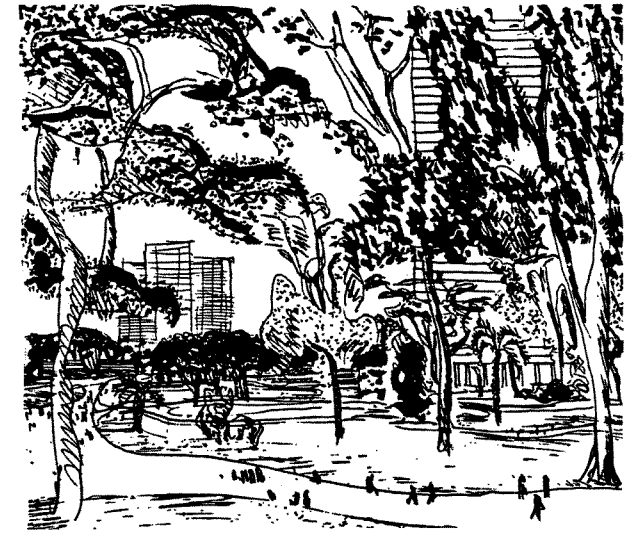
Urban design can indeed contribute to creating a new urbanism but this assumes a triple shift in our thinking: we need a discursive shift on the part of those participating in the discussion. We must create a new and shared way of looking at what the problems and challenges for urban design are to be. This is the challenge to formulate a general cultural political mission for planning and urban design: a more or less coherent statement to which people can adhere, a common focus that goes beyond the various disciplinary discourses.

Secondly, urban design has to be an institutional project in order to be successful: one needs to be able to identify the institutional forces that will help produce the desired outcomes. Here we think of the stakeholders that will have to make things work. The third element concerns the careful consideration of the non-human forces, such as particular technologies for communication or movement, the new principles of ordering space that will either support or break the project or mission.

Urban design at the 1939 Futurama

At the 1939 New York World Fair a stunning 25 million people lined up for hours to gaze at the utopia of an automobile society. The Futurama pavilion, constructed by car producer General Motors, portrayed a vision of the world as it might be in 1960. Insiders easily recognize Le Corbusiers Plan Voisin, or his radial city in the model that formed the core of the exhibition. The Fair should be analysed as a key moment in the constitution of modern planning as a cultural-political project. It illustrated the way in which the ideas of the CIAM had started to function as a cultural political brief: the strong humanist motive and the equally strong belief in the possibility that society could be reconstructed in order to function according to these planning ideals. With hindsight we recognise the modernist idea that an ideal society could be conceived and subsequently constructed according to strict rules of planning.

Futurama also indicated how the ideas had been taken up by other parties, most notably big industrial actors and stakeholders such as General Motors or Ford. The ideas of CIAM became a contributive part of a



Le Corbusier, Ville Radieuse, 1930.

modernist discourse-coalition of planners, politicians and industrialists. Of course General Motors had different intentions than the planners and designers that participated in the project. Yet it is the appreciation of this institutional alliance that is indispensable for our understanding of the success and failure of the ideals projected in Futurama.

Thirdly Futurama shows the way in which the ideal of a new urban form related to particular non-human forces. Apart from the household technologies that were shown (most of which came to be standard items in the American household by the late 1950s) most important was undoubtedly the central role of car traffic as organising principle for the city of the future. It was the technology of car traffic that in the end carried the utopia of the modern city. The Futurama example is instructive in showing the degree to which the modernist ideal was based on a technological backbone: automobility. Hardly a coincidence, then, that Futurama was on show in the General Motors pavilion.

After Futurama

Today we live in the utopia of the automobile society yet we struggle with the many unintended, unanticipated and unforeseen side effects of the realization of that dream: congestion, environmental degradation, the complete dominance of public space by motorized traffic, the scale of suburbanisation. Over the post war period we have achieved an astonishing increase in welfare and have seen patterns of social mobility that were previously unheard of. Increases in welfare and social mobility immediately translated themselves in new demands for mobility, so that the cities could

not cater for it. The very form and functioning of the city has changed to such an extent that one must wonder if it is still meaningful to continue talking about the city in the same way.

These unintended consequences of Futurama show that the enthusiasm of the planners hindered their appreciation of the power that non-human forces would bring to bear on the project. With hindsight, we appreciate that technologies are not to be considered neutral forces that support particular ideals of planning or design. They come with their own cultural political force too. This is a striking contradiction in modern planning. The technologies of automobility (the highway, the car, the petrol station, street lights, parking spaces) created the possibility of getting away fast, of moving through space. In Le Corbusier's La Ville Radieuse as well as in Futurama there is a prevailing image of unproblematic flows between places based on the differentiation of different sorts of traffic. Yet the fact that this design of a "space of flows" could come out to be a tremendously destructive force for a "space of places" (Castells) was overlooked at the time. The technological creation of frictionless speed eroded the conception of the initial idea of the skyscraper in the park and produced the suburbs instead. The examination of Futurama begs the question to what extent we appreciate the way in which non-human forces will affect our attempts to revitalize the city today

The emerging zero-friction society

In the conventional perception of urban form the concentric and densely built city is interpreted as the functional morphology for a prospering industrial society; proximity as key to economic and social well being. The cultural-political brief for urban design was seen in terms of staging the city as a domain of aristocracy (Vienna) of prosperity (Liverpool's harbour front) or as a meeting place, a domain of exchanges and inspiration. Yet this idea has been replaced by a new brief in which urban design gets a role to achieve precisely the reverse: to help to manage and avoid the unknown. In this regard the ways in which urban design techniques are drawn upon reflects a broader shift in the way in which we conceive of the urban realm.

Since the 1980s we witness the development of a new culture of enclaves of controlled mono-cultural spaces. The cul-the-sac, the privatopias, the commuter villages, the office and science parks, the regional shopping malls, the theme parks are all component parts of zero-friction society. If we share space with others, we tend to do so under conditions that make sure we all behave in a single-minded and uniform way

So far new concepts of urbanity are nearly all based on the spatial shift away from the historical conception of the city: the Hundred-Mile City (distance), the urban field (beyond the city), the edge city (on the nodes on the ringroad around the cities). In such cases analysts take the geographical development from a clearly defined city to a much larger urban realm as its defining characteristic. The new urban form stretches out in space and connectivity and controllability is what counts.

Similarly, we can analyse how the new urban form is the product of the changing social context within which planning and design take place. The great success of modern society in enhancing the emancipation of its citizenry has resulted in dramatic changes in our socio-spatial behaviour.

These basic sociological trends pose a tremendous challenge to planning. For instance, double-income earners form households in which workers have to organise their movements in space to a new degree. Bringing kids to school and to day care centres, organising shopping and getting to work are all combined in daily mobility patterns. Yet because of the combination of places that one needs to visit, public transport is often not a real solution and car dependency grows.

Space à la Carte

We too often think about these changes in purely spatial terms whereas there is good reason to examine them from a cultural-political point of view. We pick very carefully the spaces in which we want to be and the people with whom we want to share space. Zero-friction society should be understood as a concept that means to describe a tendency. People have now got the means to use space à la Carte thanks to the automobile.

In zero-friction society being modern is being on the move without sacrificing any communicative connectivity. We now design spaces that are meant to help us avoid intermingling with the archetypal other. Today's big commissions are often utility buildings: terminals, airports, stations, transport-intersections. Yet although everybody recognizes the central role of the new intersections of mobility technologies, we still have no conscious cultural-political brief that would help make these spaces truly urban. Designers work with briefs that are dominated by (functional) considerations of crowd handling, avoidance of congestion, or indeed, zero-friction spaces. This trend in design goes hand in hand with a celebration of movement and speed that replaces the urban agenda of trying to design places for meaningful human interaction. It is not as if the airport terminals or shopping malls do

not function as places in their own right. The point is that the behaviour of people is carefully monitored and that spaces are governed by strong disciplinary systems. Hence, rather than seeing them as non-places one could better interpret them as well disciplined mono-cultural zero-friction enclaves.

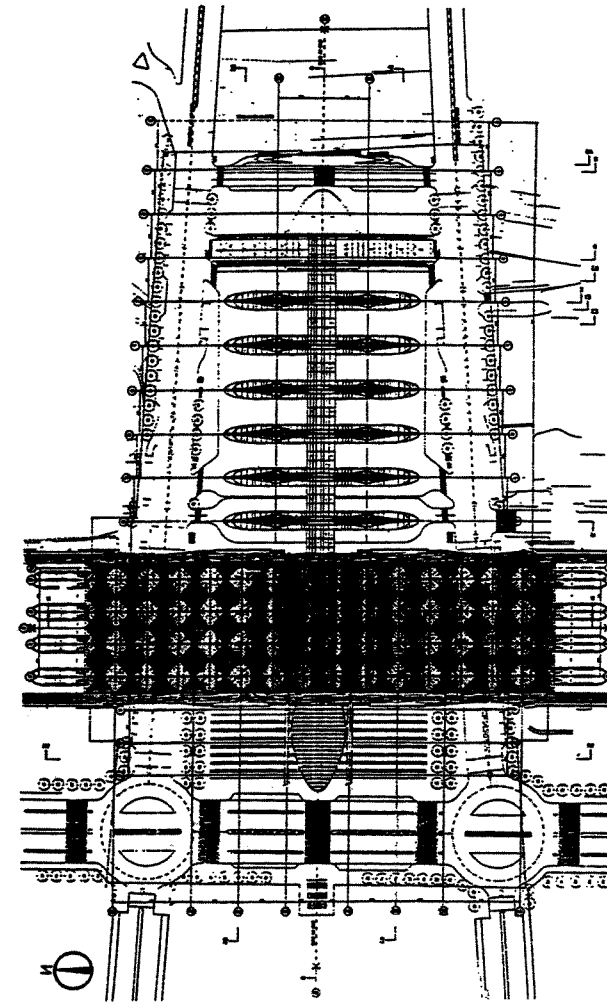
From public space to public domain

Where does urban design contribute to the development of a zero-friction society and where has it shown to have effective tools to provide spaces which people from many different enclaves can and will use? At this point it is useful to differentiate between public space - strictly speaking public in the sense that everybody is allowed to use it - and public domain - reserved for those places in which social interaction across different cultural segments of society indeed takes place

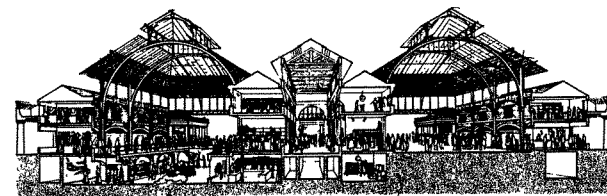
The creation of an extended public domain could be a meaningful cultural-political mission for urban design. How much do we really know about how to make public spaces function as public domain? How can we employ the techniques of urban design to this purpose and where do we need to conceive of new instruments? How important is it, for instance, that these spaces look good? And how does this relate to the programme of a particular place? Furthermore, the above has made clear that we need to think about the realisation of this public domain on a far broader spatial basis than simply in the context of the traditional city. What does such an enlarged brief amount to?

If we examine the evidence of recent experience we can see how urban design sometimes contributes to the creation of zero-friction society and has been instrumental for a development of a public domain in other cases. An exemplary case of this would be Calatrava's station for Lisbon. Despite the density of the programme, the design has managed to give it a very light feel while at the same time exposing obvious sculptural qualities. What is disturbing is the spasmodic technological optimism. Calatrava's multi-modal station celebrates the new technology and even pays lip service to the need to start to reconnect various forms of transport. Yet what is the meaning of the mobility that is being celebrated? Where do people go? Where do they come from? What is the meaning of their movement? In more general terms we can discern how spaces are often designed with one big functional idea in mind: crowd handling

A second way in which urban design can be seen to create zero-friction society is in the development of new feel good environments.



Above: Calatrava's Oriente multi-modal station in Lisbon.
Below: Covent garden Market, a meaningful urban space.



This is the case in the New Urbanism US-style: in the "privatopias of our sort of people" the neighbours talk over their 19th century fences. For themselves they will have a sense of community yet their new public domain is one with clear rules of exclusion.

A third element is the contemporary development of our historical inner cities. They are fully mobilised for tourist consumption and also designed as zero-friction tourist environments, where those elements of ordinary urban life that could hinder the optimal consumption by the flocks of tourists is progressively taken out of the cityscape.

On the other hand we can see how urban design has over the last ten years contributed to the creation of new public domains: first in creating meaningful urban spaces in inner cities (Birmingham or Covent Garden area). A second contribution are those cases where new transportation nodes have been used to create the possibility for meaningful interaction. A wonderful example is the underground station Königsplatz in Munich where passengers on the escalator look through the glass facade of a modern art gallery while the visitors to the gallery play with the sight of the stream of passengers going down. Rather than bringing life to the suburbs I would argue that this conscious development of nodes in the infrastructure as new urban spaces with a strong public domain should become a key concern in our thinking. The difference between the two approaches can be seen on Table 1.

If this is to work urban design must rethink its toolbox. We cannot argue that we prefer people to live in cities; people will not allow others to tell them what to do. But we can create the meaningful and interesting urban environments that would make the city into a winning proposition.

Urban design and modernity

Characteristic for modernity is the constant mobilization of resources, talents, ideas but also concrete physical spaces for economic innovation. The ever changing aesthetics of every day life are among the predictable dimensions of the modern age. The modern, capitalist society never is, but always becomes. This implies that people will have to find ways to cope with these processes of modernisation and change. A public domain should help people to position themselves in this process and allow for an enhanced capacity to express conscious preferences.

In this context the public domain would have the function of producing what the sociologists Evers and Nowotny have called orientational knowledge, knowledge about

what is going on in society. According to the French sociologist Touraine the city still is not merely seen as a physical structure but also as a mentality, a way of life or a social quality that relates to cultural pluriformity. In designing for a public domain urban design could help make this work.

Conclusion

The development of a public domain as a realm within which an exchange of ideas, cultural preference and political arguments takes place, opinions change and preferences are formed might be a new brief for urban design. In order to be meaningful, urban design will have to find ways of working on this mission on a larger scale, beyond the parameters of the historical city. In order to be successful urban design must connect its mission to an institutional alliance of forces. This requires a conscious effort to get into discussion with others than those present in the existing Urban Design Alliance. Moreover, there is a need to very carefully consider the way in which a possible project relates to existing non-human forces.

Transport in the future will require a great deal more changing of vehicles. It is precisely on the interchanges that the public domain could emerge. We see how the development of all the buildings and infrastructure at these nodes is dominated by zero-friction discourses. Yet it is at such places that a meaningful interaction might be catered for. General Motors were quick to spot the potential of the modernist thinking about the city in the 1930s. It is a pity that professional discourses have little to offer to correct their ideas about the ideal shaping of such strategic places. Here might be a historical task for a new urban design. #

Zero-friction public space	Public domain
Aesthetic	Socio-cultural
Optimal flow congestion	Positive
Enhancing physical mobility	Enhancing cultural mobility
Single-minded	Open-minded, tilting
Conformist	Confronting
Style	Intriguing
Form	Programme
Sectoral	Post-sectoral
Traffic	Mobility
Confirming opinions	Presenting new options

Table 1
Between public space and public domain

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