

What Ever Happened to Urbanism? **Rem Koolhaas**

This century has been a losing battle with the issue of quantity.

In spite of its early promise, its frequent bravery, urbanism has been unable to invent and implement at the scale demanded by its apocalyptic demographics. In 20 years, Lagos has grown from 2 to 7 to 12 to 15 million; Istanbul has doubled from 6 to 12. China prepares for even more staggering multiplications.

How to explain the paradox that urbanism, as a profession, has disappeared at the moment when urbanization everywhere – after decades of constant acceleration – is on its way to establishing a definitive, global “triumph” of the urban condition?

Modernism’s alchemistic promise – to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition – has been a failure, a hoax: magic that didn’t work. Its ideas, aesthetics, strategies are finished. Together, all attempts to make a new beginning have only discredited the idea of a new beginning. A collective shame in the wake of this fiasco has left a massive crater in our understanding of modernity and modernization.

What makes this experience disconcerting and (for architects) humiliating is the city’s defiant persistence and apparent vigor, in spite of the collective failure of all agencies that act on it or try to influence it – creatively, logistically, politically.

The professionals of the city are like chess players who lose to computers. A perverse automatic pilot constantly outwits all attempts at capturing the city, exhausts all ambitions of its definition, ridicules the most passionate assertions of its present failure and future impossibility, steers it implacably further on its flight forward. Each disaster foretold is somehow absorbed under the infinite blanketing of the urban.

Even as the apotheosis of urbanization is glaringly obvious and mathematically inevitable, a chain of rear-guard, escapist actions and positions postpones the final moment of reckoning for the two professions formerly most implicated in making cities – architecture and urbanism. Pervasive urbanization has modified the urban condition itself beyond recognition. “The” city no longer exists. As the concept of city is distorted and stretched beyond precedent, each insistence on its primordial condition – in terms of images, rules, fabrication – irrevocably leads via nostalgia to irrelevance.

For urbanists, the belated rediscovery of the virtues of the classical city at the moment of their definitive impossibility may have been the point of no return, fatal moment of disconnection, disqualification. They are now specialists in phantom pain: doctors discussing the medical intricacies of an amputated limb.

The transition from a former position of power to a reduced station of relative humility is hard to perform. Dissatisfaction with the contemporary city has not led to the development of a credible alternative; it has, on the contrary, inspired only more refined ways of articulating dissatisfaction. A profession persists in its fantasies, its ideology, its pretension, its illusions of involvement and control, and is therefore incapable of conceiving new modesties, partial interventions, strategic realignments, compromised positions that might influence, redirect, succeed in limited terms, regroup, begin from scratch even, but will never reestablish control.

Because the generation of May ‘68 – the largest generation ever, caught in the “collective narcissism of a demographic bubble” – is now finally in power, it is tempting to think that it is responsible for the demise of urbanism – the state of affairs in which cities can no longer be made – paradoxically because it rediscovered and reinvented the city.

Sous le pavé, la plage (under the pavement, beach): initially, May ‘68 launched the idea of a new beginning for the city. Since then, we have been engaged in two parallel operations: documenting our overwhelming awe for the existing city, developing philosophies, projects, prototypes for a preserved and reconstituted city and, at the same time, laughing the professional field of urbanism out of existence, dismantling it in our contempt for those who planned (and made huge mistakes in planning) airports, New Towns, satellite cities, highways, high-rise buildings, infrastructures, and all the other fallout from modernization. After sabotaging urbanism, we have ridiculed it to the point where entire university departments are closed, offices bankrupted, bureaucracies fired or privatized.

Our “sophistication” hides major symptoms of cowardice centered on the simple question of taking positions – maybe the most basic action in making the city. We are simultaneously dogmatic and evasive. Our amalgamated wisdom can be easily caricatured: according to Derrida we cannot be Whole, according to Baudrillard we cannot be Real, according to Virilio we cannot be There.

“Exiled to the Virtual World”: plot for a horror movie. Our present relationship with the “crisis” of the city is deeply ambiguous: we still blame others for a situation for which both our incurable utopianism and our contempt are responsible. Through our hypocritical relationship with power – contemptuous yet covetous – we dismantled an entire discipline, cut ourselves off from the operational, and condemned whole populations to the impossibility of encoding civilizations on their territory – the subject of urbanism.

Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture. The neatness of architecture is its seduction; it defines, excludes, limits, separates from the “rest” – but it also consumes. It exploits and exhausts the potentials that can be generated finally only by urbanism, and that only the specific imagination of urbanism can invent and renew.

The death of urbanism – our refuge in the parasitic security of architecture – creates an immanent disaster: more and more substance is grafted on starving roots. In our more permissive moments, we have surrendered to the aesthetics of chaos – “our” chaos. But in the technical sense chaos is what happens when nothing happens, not something that can be engineered or embraced; it is something that infiltrates; it cannot be fabricated. The only legitimate relationship that architects can have with the subject of chaos is to take their rightful place in the army of those devoted to resist it, and fail.

If there is to be a “new urbanism” it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form; it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids; 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. Since the urban is now pervasive, urbanism will never again be about the new only about the “more” and the “modified.” It will not be about the civilized, but about underdevelopment.

Since it is out of control, the urban is about to become a major vector of the imagination. Redefined, urbanism will not only, or mostly, be a profession, but a way of thinking, an ideology: to accept what exists. We were making sand castles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away.

To survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness. Liberated from its atavistic duties, urbanism redefined as a way of operating on the inevitable will attack architecture, invade its trenches, drive it from its bastions, undermine its certainties, explode its limits, ridicule its preoccupations with matter and substance, destroy its traditions, smoke out its practitioners.

The seeming failure of the urban offers an exceptional opportunity, a pretext for Nietzschean frivolity. We have to imagine 1,001 other concepts of city; we have to take insane risks; we have to dare to be utterly uncritical; we have to swallow deeply and bestow forgiveness left and right. The certainty of failure has to be our laughing gas/oxygen; modernization our most potent drug. Since we are not responsible, we have to become irresponsible. In a landscape of increasing expediency and impermanence, urbanism no longer is or has to be the most solemn of our decisions; urbanism can lighten up, become a Gay Science – Lite Urbanism.

What if we simply declare that there is no crisis – redefine our relationship with the city not as its makers but as its mere subjects, as its supporters?

More than ever, the city is all we have.