

Proceedings of the
6th International Conference of
Design History and Design Studies

**ANOTHER
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Words for Creation

ICDHS2008OSAKA



OSAKA UNIVERSITY



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**Proceedings of the 6th International Conference of
Design History and Design Studies**

**The ICDHS 2008 OSAKA Executive Committee
Edited by Haruhiko Fujita, Osaka University**

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The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science
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Re-visions of the Periphery:

Compared Writings of Three European Architects

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Three European Authors and Architects

The periphery is currently faced with several conceptual reinterpretations that create a new and positive approach ⁽²⁾. This debate generates different or partially contradictory *visions*, even if they are developed during the same period in relatively limited geographical areas. The references to the urban theories in the 1970's, especially those from Venturi-Scott Brown, are relevant, yet quite unexplored. The following contribution enlightens this topic by presenting the viewpoint from three European contemporary authors and architects, Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, and Mirko Zardini, through their most relevant writings published since the mid 1990's. These authors also collaborated together to create the catalogue of the renowned exposition *Mutations* in 2000-2001 ⁽³⁾. They form a coherent study group, but do they really have the same appreciation of the periphery? Their precise definitions and vocabulary about the periphery provides an impressive comparison.

Rem Koolhaas: Praise of Anomie?

Rem Koolhaas, in his famous text *The Generic City* ⁽⁴⁾, wrote about urban phenomena in the mid 1990's and urbanism in the era of globalization (related to the concept of *generic*). The issues related to the periphery of the urban centers were developed in a recursive manner, although the definitions of *generic city* and *periphery* were not completely identical. Indeed, urban extensions towards the periphery were central in Koolhaas's text, with excerpts related to urban centers equally integrated ⁽⁵⁾.

Firstly, Koolhaas targeted his reflection on the periphery principally towards its definitions and identity. According to Koolhaas, the recent interest in the periphery "is only a disguised insistence on the priority of and dependency on the center." ⁽⁶⁾ Conversely, the true qualities of the periphery were located in its absence of rules, or "its main attraction is its *anomy*" ⁽⁷⁾. The second aspect concerned the absence of repetition perceived as stimulation: "Variety cannot be boring. Boredom cannot be varied. But the infinite variety of the



FIGURE: "The Strip from the desert" ⁽¹⁾

generic city comes close, at least, to making variety normal: banalized, in a reversal of expectation, it is repetition that has become unusual, therefore, potentially, daring, exhilarating."⁽⁸⁾

This theme reoccurred in several of Koolhaas's texts since the end of the 1970's. For example, when describing the Bijlmermeer, a large scale housing complex in Amsterdam-South, Koolhaas conveyed, "In its monotony, harshness and even brutality, it is, ironically, refreshing."⁽⁹⁾

Within the discussions of monotony and variety, Koolhaas clearly expressed his own *vision*. On the other hand, determining whether this vision was either a cynical observation or a rhetoric-like provocation is difficult⁽¹⁰⁾. He mentioned *anomie*, or the lack of stable organization and the resulting disarray, as a positive element of the generic city's urbanization. In fact, his urban projects were informative strategies of intervention that were appreciably different, with the proposition for the Bijlmermeer (1986-87) providing a solid example. From the origin of the Bijlmermeer's *refreshing monotony*, the proposition not only recognized rules of the present situation, but also formulated new ones, since two *stripes* were used to redefine the large scale complex with aligned activities located along the two main streets. Koolhaas had wrote at the end of the 1970's that these roads and the buildings they lead into were actually a *Strip*, which was accordingly the reference of the introductory sentence of the *Bijlmermeer Strip* paper: "What Las Vegas is to late capitalism, the Bijlmermeer is to the Welfare State. Like Las Vegas, the *Bijlmer*⁽¹¹⁾ is essentially a *Strip*."⁽¹²⁾ Therefore, the *vision* of the periphery's context generated by modernity was made through an explicit reference to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, even though the example was of a European periphery. As a result, Koolhaas was supporting one of the postulates of *Learning from Las Vegas*⁽¹³⁾.

Stefano Boeri: Repetitive and Strict Regularities

The publication of *Italy - Cross Section of a Country* in 1998 documented the research completed for the Biennale of Venice in 1996 by Stefano Boeri and Gabriele Basilico, which revealed the tensions, repetitions, and recursive typologies found between urban centers, specifically in peripheries. The

book presented Basilico's pictures and was accompanied by a text from Boeri, which provided relevant insight on the topic.

The postulate of their work consisted of going beyond description of plans in order to surpass an abstract representation. Consequently, representation was directly confronted with the reality of the periphery by using image in an intelligible and sensitive way. Emphasis was also made on the multiplicity of viewpoints. This approach primarily induced various and disparate elements without any precise classification, a concept suggested by the notion of an *eclectic atlas*. The second phase analyzed collected elements within this atlas. The conclusions formulated by Boeri in this analysis commonly surpassed assumed principles and sketched a new comprehension of the periphery: "But it would be wrong to lay too much emphasis on the spontaneous, irregular nature of this city of distant relationships, to insist that the wave of new constructions is the chaotic result of uncontained energies producing an urban sphere devoid of rules, limits and evolutionary principles. On the contrary, if we are able to look at them according to a circumstantial paradigm, the images of this book will reveal to us the pronounced, repetitive and strict regularities that govern the evolution of these new contemporary urban landscapes."⁽¹⁴⁾

This citation provided an additional element to the question, developed transversally by the three authors, which concerned the paradoxes of heterogeneity and monotony, or more precisely heterogeneity and repetition. Boeri did not deny that the periphery could occasionally be irregular or chaotic, yet he pursued an inflexion in the irrevocability of this assertion. This formed the basis of his postulate that the periphery contained regularities. Furthermore, he perceived these *new contemporary urban landscapes* as an expression of the dialectic between variation and repetition⁽¹⁵⁾. In contrast to the views of Koolhaas, repetition did not appear more audacious or original than variation, although repetition was not negatively qualified.

The analogy between the method developed by Boeri and Basilico and the one developed thirty years earlier by Venturi-Scott Brown is pertinent. While the architects from Philadelphia executed a systematic location from Las Vegas's *Strip* and Levittown's suburb through the use of photography⁽¹⁶⁾, the Italian architects used this media beyond a simple

representation tool and employed the method as theoretical support. The repetitive elements highlighted by Basilico's pictures, with the precise conclusions drawn by Boeri, are even more noticeable.

Mirko Zardini: Order of a Different Type

Mirko Zardini signed as an author and co-author for numerous writings that observed the changes of perception about the periphery. His *vision* was constructed from a deep analytical knowledge of these urban landscapes, as Boeri, but also from his interest in theories of Contemporary Art: "André Corboz reminds us how the concept of harmony is unfashionable and how has been diffused a new sensibility based on the contrast, the tension, the discontinuity, the fragmentation."⁽¹⁷⁾ Consequently, his proposal contrasted strongly with the approaches previously illustrated. His publications adopted an enthusiastic form, which revealed a strong contrast, for instance, to the viewpoint expressed by Koolhaas. Secondly, while Boeri witnessed certain qualities and rules, Zardini developed the question in-depth and assumed a less radical appreciation: "Until recently, we have considered the heterogeneity and apparent disorder of contemporaneous cities through its negative aspects, without understanding that these are our prejudices leading us to perceive disorder, which is in reality an order of a different type. On the contrary, the heterogeneity is one of the unique and genetic qualities of contemporaneous cities which give us new means of action."⁽¹⁸⁾

Whereas Venturi-Scott Brown perceived a *non-obvious order* ⁽¹⁹⁾ within the chaos of the Strip, Zardini replaced the idea of disorder and chaos, usually attributed to the periphery, with the concept of *different type order*. This terminology emphasized the idea that new references were necessary to comprehend contemporary urbanization, following the theory of Corboz. Therefore, his *vision* neither stressed the absence of rules, nor remained in the perception of *regularities*. He nevertheless asserted that this was essentially a form of order. This postulate was made possible by a detailed and exhaustive knowledge of the *Approximately Perfect Periphery* accurately analyzed by Zardini with Mario Campi and Franz

Bucher in the homonymous book ⁽²⁰⁾. Moreover, a section of this book integrated the name of *atlas*, a reminder of terminology employed in Basilico and Boeri's work, but also cartographical data and the attention given to unseen elements in the work of Venturi-Scott Brown. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, elements typically neglected by the architectural discipline were observed, such as different typologies of parking lots, the disposition of street lamps, and the position and expression of electrical signs.

Lastly, Zardini's theory reached his apex with his proposition to rethink urban centers through the qualities of the periphery: "For years we have lived in peripheries and suburbs (...) One beautiful morning, we drove our car back to the city. (...) We have returned to the city with new pictures, aspirations and ways of life, assimilated in living for years in urban areas. Now we find ourselves with this new information inside compact cities."⁽²¹⁾

This counter-proposal by Zardini could be considered theatrical. While the model of the historic compact city was often quoted as the only reference by the detractors of the periphery, the postulate here was clear: the periphery should not be submitted to the ideal image of the compact centre, but contrarily be perceived as a tool to rethink urban areas and their compactness. The postulate of Zardini succeeded in surpassing the subjection of the suburb to the centre. Consequently, a new dialectic perception was formed by highlighting the mutual qualities of these two urban environments.

Conclusion

The viewpoint of these three contemporaneous European architects through their most relevant writings published since the mid 1990's, Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri and Mirko Zardini, described the major reversal and re-visions of the actual perception and appreciation of the periphery. These theories referred to those developed in the 1970's without being always explicit, especially the theories from Venturi-Scott Brown, that left their influences through certain terminologies (Strip), methodologies (locations, iconographic work) and conceptual references (non-evident orders).

Despite these common references and the similar field of study of the three authors, they adopted particularly contrasted or partially contradictory *visions*. The compared approaches revealed fundamental differences in perceiving the periphery, such as chaos, regularities and order, which generate contrasted *visions*. Therefore, this diversity represented a testimony of intense debate, which is currently taking place about the periphery in order to understand this *revision* in constant evolution.

NOTES

- (1) Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown. & Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge, 1972) The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1977, p.48.
- (2) Essay from a PhD-Thesis in progress, at the EPFL, under supervision of Pr. Bruno Marchand, and financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Translated from French by Karl M. Littlejohn & Frédéric Frank.
- (3) Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri & al., *Mutations*, Actar, Bordeaux, 2000.
- (4) *The generic City* first published in *S,M,L,XL* (Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, 010Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995). Republished many times, among other in *Mutations*.
- (5) See the paragraph about Barcelona, including what is central or peripheral. Op.cit. Rem Koolhaas, 1995, p.1250.
- (6) Idem, p.1249.
- (7) Idem, p.1251.
- (8) Idem, p.1262.
- (9) Rem Koolhaas; "Bijlmermeer Strip" in *Werk-archithese*, No.5, Zurich, 1977. Republished in *S,M,L,XL* Op.cit. Rem Koolhaas, 1995, p.861-877.
- (10) About cynicism in the rhetoric of Koolhaas, see: Françoise Chaslin, Rem Koolhaas., "Face à la rupture" in Op.cit. Rem Koolhaas, 2000, p.759. Translated from French.
- (11) Bijlmermeer's colloquial nickname.
- (12) Op.cit. Rem Koolhaas, 1977, p.17.
- (13) "Such a study will help to define a new type of urban form emerging in America and Europe, radically different from that we have known ; one that we have been ill-equipped to deal with and that, from ignorance, we define today as urban sprawl". Op.cit. Robert Venturi, 1972/1977, p.XI.
- (14) Gabriele Basilico, Stefano Boeri, *Italy - Cross sections of a country*, Scalo, Zurich, 1998, p.14.
- (15) Idem, p.20.
- (16) For the special use of photography in Venturi-Scott Brown's work, see: Stanislaus von Moos, "Tableaux" in *Venturi, Scott Brown & associates*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1999, p.51-52.
- (17) Mirko Zardini & al., *Paesaggi ibridi*, (Milan, 1996) Skira, Milan, 1999, p.24. Translated from Italian.
- (18) Published for an architectural workshop at the EPFL. Mirko Zardini & al., *Back from the Burbs*, EPFL, Lausanne, 2000, p.7. Translated from French.
- (19) "The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious." Op.cit. Robert Venturi & al., 1972/1977, p.20.
- (20) Exact translation of the German-written book's title. Mario Campi, Franz Bucher & Mirko Zardini; *Annähernd perfekte Peripherie*, Birkhäuser ; Basel, 2001.
- (21) Op.cit. Mirko Zardini, 2000, p.3-4.