



THE NORDIC ART REVIEW XIII NO. 2 SUMMER 1998

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Houses in motion





One of the current projects by Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) is to remodel the center of the Dutch city of Almere. Top: A projected view of the skyline. Left: The accessibility of the city center. Right: Satellite view of the town center in 1996.

What used to be called a city

Rem Koolhaas has been preoccupied with sending any system or any institution into major malfunction. This includes the idea of what we call—the city. He wants to develop a new urbanistic canon that removes the need of control and intent from urbanistic practice.

by Matthijs Bouw

Driving together through the city of Rotterdam a few years ago, an enthusiastic Rem Koolhaas exclaimed: “What a city!”, before shifting the topic of conversation to a picnic he’d had with Michel Foucault back in the seventies. Looking back, *S,M,L,XL*, Rem Koolhaas’ massive architectural thesaurus¹, in spite of its visual and intellectual exuberance, converges at exactly this point: Rem’s S&M relationship with the Large and Extra-Large. As delicious as the contemporary city may be, the essays on it are, more often than not, riddled with pain and angst.

Critics have had their difficulties with many of the texts in the book, especially with its apotheosis: *The Generic City*, in which Koolhaas describes the contemporary city after its own death. With no identity and no history, and thus no morality, the afterlife of “what used to be called the city” reads like a hardcore ‘60s sci-fi epic:

“11.1 Close your eyes and imagine an explosion of beige. At its epicenter splashes the color of vaginal folds (unaroused), metallic-matte aubergine, khaki-tobacco, dusty pumpkin; all cars on their way to bridal whiteness.”

Its fiction is ultimately exposed in the concluding paragraph:

“17. End. Relief, it’s over. That is the story of the city. The city is no longer. We can leave the theater now.”

Criticality gone. Koolhaas, already a Houdini of the verbal escape clause, pulls his tour-de-force in this essay: although clearly excited about its concept and the theorizing of it ad infinitum, Koolhaas shuns the taking of a position vis-à-vis this *Stadt ohne Eigenschaften*.²

And it habitually reappears in other writings. In *What Ever Happened to Urbanism?* Koolhaas describes how “Modernism’s alchemistic promise to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition has been a failure, a hoax: magic that didn’t work”:

“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.”

Then why indeed bother?

Much more than a book in which many of the texts theorize our contemporary condition, *S,M,L,XL* is the Koolhaas 1995 ‘How-To’ Manual. It is far more refined and worked-out and all encompass-



Staatsliedenwijk

Waddendreef

Stedenwijk

Olstgracht

Spoordreef

Spoordreef

CENTRAAL-STATION

Landdrostdreef

STADHUIS

Hospitaalweg

FLEVO-ZIEKENHUIS

Weerwater

Landdrostdreef

Randstaddreef

Cinemadreef

Film

Stadswetering

Rands

ing than his 1978 book *Delirious New York* could ever have been. Contrary to many other artists and architects, Koolhaas' writings and designs are functionally interchangeable.

Like many of the May '68 generation, his generation—supremely intelligent, well informed, acutely paranoid—Koolhaas has been preoccupied with sending any system or any institution, into major malfunction. First and foremost: Urbanism.

It was in architecture and urbanism that the 'Good Intentions' of the Modern Movement had their most devastating effect. State-enforced humanism and the persistent myth of the architect as its loyal friend had, ever since the Twenties, resulted in a platonic city with excruciating boredom as its bottom-line.

(The film *La Haine*, for instance, shows that radical boredom is fertile ground for exciting programs, such as rioting, crime etc.)

That 'How-To-Overcome-This' was first explained in *Delirious New York*, where Koolhaas described Manhattan as a self-transcending project by means of the paranoid-critical method, adding, in his words, a "false fact" to reality. This "false fact" injection was intended to destroy an existing reality in the hope of attaining a new, unnatural reality, liberated from the rules and orders with which the previous reality had relegated the false fact to being false.³

When masquerading as normal, the false fact is easily added to the normal facts so as to destroy the system of normality. Afterwards, everything still looks normal, but with no system for mediating normality anymore.

In this respect though, it is quite important to recognize that, in his analysis, Rem spoke about a 'fact' and not about ideas. *Delirious New York* is one of the few books on architecture that talks fact,

not idea. Contrary to an idea, a fact is never new. Such a fact, Rem says, looks quite normal and, the more normal it looks, the better it succeeds in destroying the reality that held it to be false.

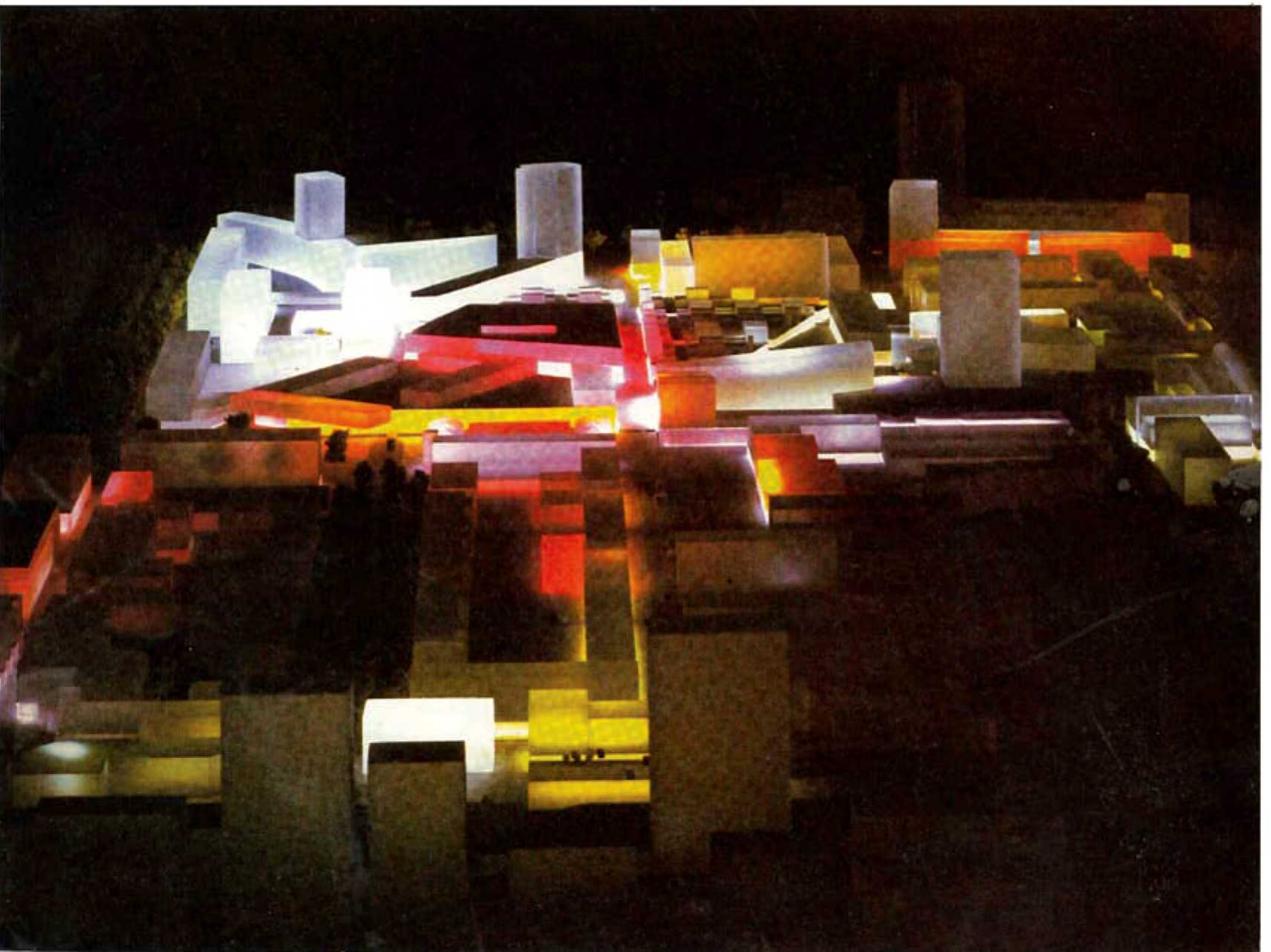
As such, a fact in no way represents the reality it adds to, nor does it represent the reality that results from adding the fact. Rather, the interesting question is: How do we detect this 'fact' when it is camouflaged and does not contain anything new?

In his essay, *The Terrifying Beauty of the Twentieth Century*, (S,M,L,XL), not so coincidentally, on Rotterdam, Koolhaas elaborates quite clearly:

"If there is a method to this work, it is a method of systematic idealization—a systematic overestimation of what exists, a bombardment of speculation that invests even the most mediocre aspects with retroactive conceptual and ideological charge. [...] The mirror image of this action is the most clinical inventory of the actual conditions of each site, no matter how uninspiring, the most calculating exploitation of its objective potential. This combines with a temperamental insistence on an almost defiant—literally unbelievable—simplicity that belies the complexity of the contextual interpretation and at the same time does justice to even its most delicate aspects."

It is with this agenda that essays such as *Singapore Songlines—Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis* or *Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa* and *The Generic City* are written, and with which the research on the Pearl River Delta—the subject of Rem's presentation at the last *documenta x*—was carried out.

From books to research projects. Mostly conducted at Harvard University—which Koolhaas calls "the Institute for What Used to



be Called the City”—Rem has revived Dutch Imperialism by launching urban investigations into the global ‘others’ (in very much the same way Delirious New York opened with New Amsterdam). The first year focused on massive urban developments in Asia (Pearl River Delta), the second on shopping, and the next on Africa.

The Pearl River Delta, subject of an extensive lecture tour, is presented by Koolhaas with a dumbfounding sense of excitement. Showing a slide of the Shenzhen skyline, which has a massivity comparable to New York’s, spare the articulation, he states: “Nothing in this picture is older than six years.”

Subsequently, he presents Southern China in terms of pure

of its location, is in a state of arrested development. Turning something negative into an asset, Zhuhai presents itself (or is presented by Koolhaas) as a “Green” city, where the lack of land development is rerouted into beautiful boulevards and public parks.

From this, Koolhaas describes what is probably the most precise technique for destroying a bullish, systematic “a-symmetry: all phenomena that restore, maintain or intensify the inequalities that define COED.”

In order not to fall into the nostalgia trap, even Zhuhai has to succumb to a typical Koolhaasian reversal. If Zhuhai seems to be in a relatively stable state now, it will not be in the future: a bridge is being built across the bay. While the first phase of the construction of the bridge is already underway, Koolhaas claims that it is still not known where it will reach land: depending on the economic developments of the coming years, it might be either Shenzhen or Hong Kong.

Enthusiasm habitually takes over. Predicting an even more staggering quantum leap, the lecture concludes with a slide of the map of the Pearl River Delta with lines connecting all the islands to each other. Obviously the map of the local ferry system, Koolhaas introduces it as a blueprint for further developments, in which every rock will be connected to every other by means of extensive tunneled highways. Here, analysis becomes design.

By adding “false facts” to the Pearl River Delta reality, it becomes possible to develop a new urbanistic canon that removes the possibility of control and intent from urbanistic practice. While this might inflict extreme pain upon Koolhaas as a professional city planner, it will no doubt afford the unbridled pleasure of new possibilities.

Perhaps Koolhaas’ suspicious attitude to urbanism functions as a moral checklist of the megalomaniac tendencies that the profession seems to be filled with.

There is, however, a problematic side-effect of the permanent negations that form part of their work, resulting in a latent Catch-22 situation.

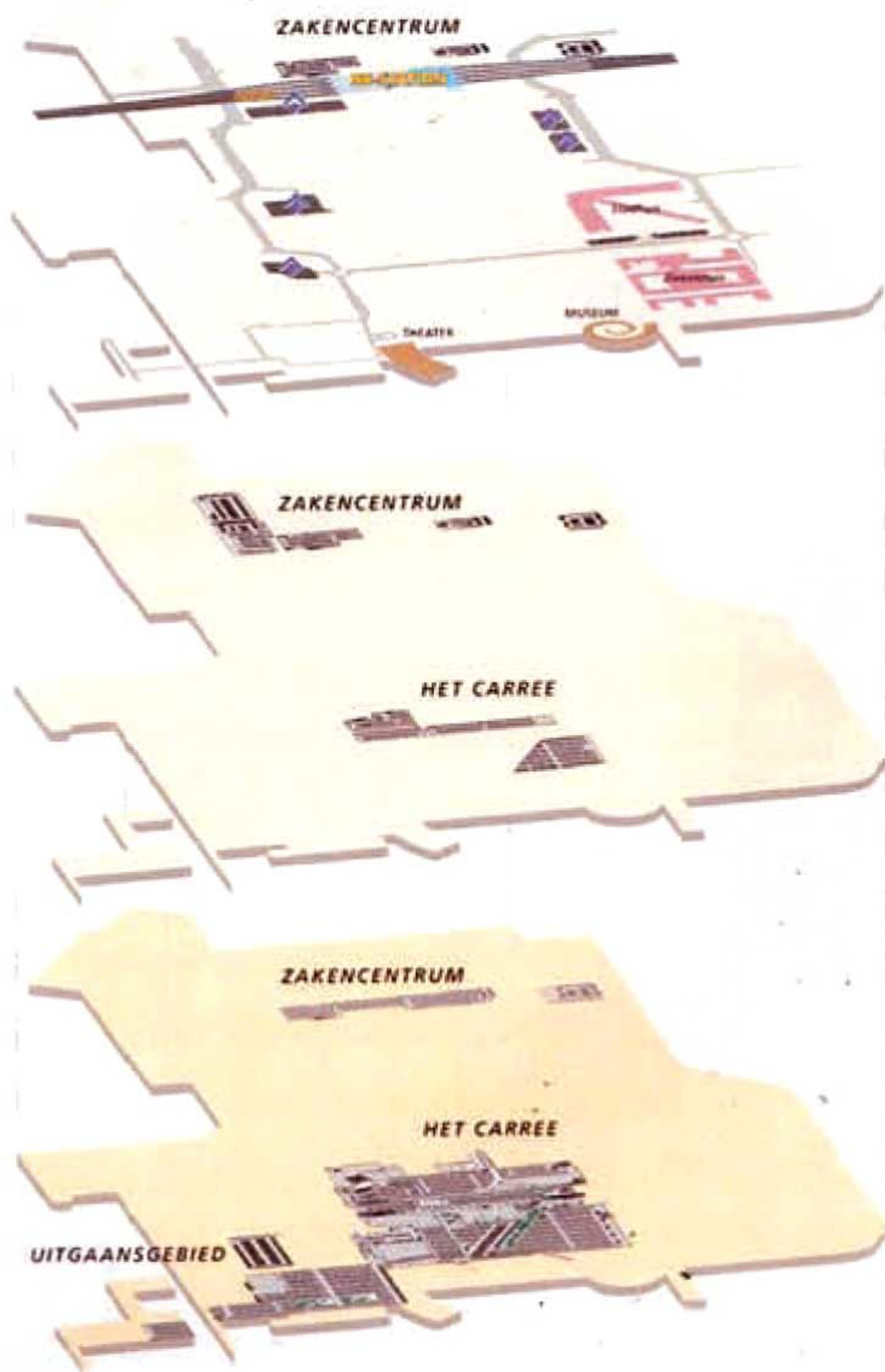
If we look at the urban projects of Koolhaas’ Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the negation of urbanistic “Good Intentions” has, as can be seen in these pages, resulted in a rather technical form of planning, which does, however, distinguish itself from the common practice by offering possibilities not solutions.

It might be argued that removing the paranoid and the critical from Rem’s 1978 method, acknowledging that they were the result of having had one too many picnics with Michel Foucault, discussing “Discipline and Punish” as a general disposition of institutions that produce false facts, then, perhaps, a more positively formulated architectural pragmatism might be developed.

If we were to consider any fact to be a false fact, the problem of recognizing the falseness of a fact would be solved very easily and smoothly. Formulating positive and impossible goals outside of urbanism could help develop this architectural pragmatism which can transcend and break the frame of existing design techniques, thus breaking the frame of what now seems possible, and developing new ones. At a time when the future of architecture and urbanism resides in an object-oriented design, with no predetermined systems and no overall structures, it is specifically the generative power of a ‘false’ empiricism that is vital. ✨

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1. Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, edited by Jennifer Sigler, photography by Hans Werlemann, 010 Publishers, 1995.
2. For an extensive critique of Koolhaas’ attitude towards history, see Wouter Vanstiphout, *Stop History*, unpublished manuscript, 1996
3. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Thames and Hudson, 1978, 200–204.



Top: The new layers of parking spaces, showing the mix with infrastructural and logistical elements. Left: A model view from office window in the business center.

quantity: the booming economy, the staggering population growth, the incredible real-estate prices, the swiftness of new developments, the implausible architectural productivity. It all sounds like a decade of the Far East Economic Review on a cocktail of Speed and Acid.

As if to tease his audience even more with his uncompromising amorality, Koolhaas concludes the first half of a lecture by showing a picture of Deng, which he subtitles: “Nothing will change”.

Suddenly leaving the uncertainty as to whether anything he said is actually true, Koolhaas swiftly moves to the other side of the bay, describing the Pearl River Delta as a “City of Exacerbated Difference (COED)”. Whereas Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou might present themselves as an urbanistic quantum leap, Zhuhai, because