

## Rem Koolhaas

*Imagining Nothingness*

1985

### Clowns

*Where there's nothing, everything is possible.*

*Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible.*

Who does not feel an acute nostalgia for the types who could, no more than 15 years ago, condemn (or was it liberate, after all?) whole areas of alleged urban desperation, change entire destinies, speculate seriously on the future with diagrams of untenable absurdity, leave entire auditoriums panting over doodles left on the blackboard, manipulate politicians with their savage statistics - bow ties the only external sign of their madness? For the time when there were still...thinkers?

Who does not long for that histrionic branch of the profession that leapt like clowns - pathetic yet courageous - off one cliff after another, hoping to fly, flapping with inadequate wings, but enjoying at least the free-fall of pure speculation? Maybe such nostalgia is not merely a longing for the former authority of this profession (no one can seriously believe that architecture has become less authoritarian) but simply *fantasy*.

It is ironic that in architecture, May '68 - « under the pavement, beach » - has been translated only *into more* pavement, less beach. Maybe architects' fanaticism - a myopia that has led them to believe that architecture is not only the vehicle for all that is good, but also the explanation for all that is bad - is not merely a professional deformation but a response to the horror of architecture's opposite, an instinctive recoil from the void, a fear of *nothingness*.

### Berlin

Berlin is a laboratory: its territory is forever defined; for political reasons it cannot shrink. Yet its population has declined continuously since the wall; it follows that fewer people inhabit the same metropolitan territory, but must maintain its physical substance. With boldness, it could be assumed that large areas of the city have ended up in ruin simply because they are no longer needed.

In these circumstances, the blanket application of urban reconstruction may be as futile as keeping brain-dead patients alive with medical apparatus. What is necessary instead is to imagine ways in which density can be maintained without recourse to substance, intensity without the encumbrance of architecture.

In 1976, during a design seminar/studio led by O. M. Ungers, a concept was launched with as yet unrecognized implications: « A Green Archipelago » proposed a theoretical Berlin whose future was conceived through two diametrically opposed actions - the reinforcement of those parts of the city that deserved it and the destruction of those parts that did not. This hypothesis contained the blueprint for a theory of the European metropolis; it addressed its central ambiguity: that many of its historic centers float in larger metropolitan fields, that the historic facades of the cities merely mask the pervasive reality of the un-city.

In such a model of urban solid and metropolitan void, the desire for stability and the need for instability are no longer incompatible. They

can be pursued as two separate enterprises with invisible connections. Through the parallel actions of reconstruction and deconstruction, such a city becomes an archipelago of architectural islands floating in a post-architectural landscape of erasure where what was once city is now a highly charged nothingness.

The kind of coherence that the metropolis can achieve is not that of a homogeneous, planned composition. At the most, it can be a system of fragments. In Europe, the remnant of the historic core may be one of multiple realities.

In this theoretical Berlin, the green interspaces form a system of modified, sometimes artificial nature: suburban zones, parks, woods, hunting preserves, family lots, agriculture. This "natural" grid would welcome the full panoply of the technological age: highways, supermarkets, drive-in theaters, landing strips, the ever-expanding video universe. Nothingness here would be a modified Caspar David Friedrich landscape - a Teutonic forest intersected by Arizona highways; in fact, a Switzerland.

### Nevada

It is a tragedy that planners only plan and architects only design more architecture. More important than the design of cities will be the design of their decay. Only through a revolutionary process of erasure and the establishment of « liberty zones; » conceptual Nevadas where all laws of architecture are suspended, will some of the inherent tortures of urban life - the friction between program and containment - be suspended.

The most recent additions to the slag heap of history landed there because their stylistic ugliness made their true contents invisible; the exploration and cultivation of nothingness would reveal a hidden tradition. Some hippies have been here before: the whole inarticulate horde of sixties Anglo-Saxon counterculture - the bubbles, domes, foams, the « birds » of Archigram, the philistine courage of Cedric Price. (How bitter to be rediscovered at the moment that amnesia has swallowed your own past!)

Imagining Nothingness is:

Pompeii - a city built with the absolute minimum of walls and roofs ...  
The Manhattan Grid - there a century before there was a "there" there ...

Central Park - a void that provoked the cliffs that now define it...

Broadacre City ...

The Guggenheim ...

Hi1berseimer's "Mid West" with its vast plains of zero-degree architecture ...

The Berlin Wall ...

They all reveal that emptiness in the metropolis is not empty, that each void can be used for programs whose insertion into the existing texture is a procrustean effort leading to mutilation of both activity and texture.