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Buying Generic: The Generic City in Dubai

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In March 2008 Rem Koolhaas's Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) unveiled a plan for a mini-city in Dubai—a dreamless city within a dream city. Koolhaas is internationally famous for esoteric buildings and pessimistic writings on urbanism. His observations on the state of the contemporary city are summarized in his concept of the generic city, formulated most succinctly in an essay that concludes *S,M,L,XL*, his “novel about architecture” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995). Part description of actual urban phenomena, part thought experiment, Koolhaas's “Generic City” announces the end of urbanism, the ideology that has shaped cities since the seventeenth century. “The city is no longer,” he writes in the essay's final lines. “We can leave the theater now” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1264). The name of the Dubai project, Waterfront City, is a sly reference to one of the sections of the generic city, and the design has many of the hallmarks of the



Waterfront City, Dubai. Image courtesy Office of Metropolitan Architecture

generic city. When complete, Waterfront City will occupy about 46 square kilometers on the western edge of Dubai. All of the culturally-specific elements of Waterfront City will be crammed into one district called Madinat Al Soor, while the city's four other districts will be known only by their functions: Resort, Marina, Boulevard, and Island. This last district is the centerpiece of the project: a perfectly square island made up of 25 identical blocks, upon which one and a half million people will live and work. The Island will be a Manhattan on the Persian Gulf, complete with a long rectangular park running through its center, and on its tip, taking the place of the World Trade Center, a gigantic eye known simply as The Sphere.

So what is the generic city, the last city, doing in the center of Dubai, the city of the future? During its decade-long building frenzy Dubai has commissioned several showy displays of starchitect whimsy, so it's surprising to see the city embrace the deliberately bland rationalism of Koolhaas's generic city. At stake in the Waterfront City project is nothing less than the possibility of creating, or recreating, a sense of uniqueness in urban space, of creating the impression that a particular city is like no other one in the world. What's interesting, or ironic, about the Waterfront City project is that its developers have hired an architect who has proclaimed, emphatically, that such a thing is no longer possible.

Generic cities are everywhere, on every continent, but they can be found most frequently in Asia. Like everything else that is optimistic and corrosive, Koolhaas suspects that the concept originated in the United States, but he can't be sure (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1250). If the paradigmatic object of the nineteenth-century city was the railroad station, the twenty-first century

generic city is modeled after the airport. Koolhaas asks, “Is the contemporary city like an airport—‘all the same?’” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1248). Like airports, which are modern in exactly the same way, the generic city is a city without an identity—no past, no future, no distinction, no character. The identities of most cities may be located in their centers, but paradoxically, instead of being a fixed essence, the center of the city is often the subject of fretful debate about preserving and developing a city's identity. Meanwhile, outer neighborhoods muddle along, existing as nothing but themselves, but also nothing particularly essential.

The generic city, by contrast, is nothingness writ large. It has the desultory blandness of outer boroughs. But this very anonymity means the generic city doesn't have to cling to an outmoded identity. The generic city is a city that's been

liberated from the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity. The generic city breaks with this destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting—or unexciting—everywhere. It is “superficial”—a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning. (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1249-1250)

The generic city, Koolhaas declares, is “a city without qualities,” a condition that even vividly individualistic cities tend towards. Paris, for instance, has turned itself into a self-parody in an effort to remain Parisian, while London changes constantly, only to become more and more like any other city (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1248). Eventually, Paris will turn into Las Vegas, and London will become Atlanta (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 836).¹

Atlanta itself will be packed up into skyscrapers, those stand-alone objects that kill off street life—the very essence of urban life. “The street is dead,” Koolhaas flatly declares (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1253). The lonely, beleaguered pedestrian of the generic city has come out the other end of a long historical process that began with Charles Baudelaire in mid-19th century Paris, a wounded romantic subject fighting off the shock experience of the newly industrialized city.² In contrast to the lively spectacle of the nineteenth-century city, when material abundance was new enough to move Balzac to call Paris “the great poem of the display of goods,” sensations in the generic city are like Japanese food: they “can be reconstituted and intensified in the mind, or not—they may simply be ignored. (There is a choice)” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1250). Among the historical detritus swept away by Koolhaas's generic

¹ Koolhaas observes that Atlanta grew so quickly that “the center/edge opposition is no longer the point. There is no center, therefore no periphery. Atlanta is now a centerless city, or a city with a potentially infinite number of centers.” (Koolhaas and Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, 836)

² Walter Benjamin argues that the source of Baudelaire's poetry is the confrontation with the “metropolitan masses.” Benjamin writes, “The mass was the agitated veil; through it Baudelaire saw Paris.” (Benjamin, 1968)

city is urban experience itself. Public space is so general, so nonspecific, that there's nothing to pay attention to except stoplights. The paradigmatic urbanite is no longer a latte-sipping hipster. Instead, it's the weary sales rep who never completely unpacks his suitcase.

The generic city is “unshapable.” It resists urban planning, beautification projects, and empowerment zones. No one will make a public television documentary about its history. No one gets nostalgic about it. It's ruthlessly practical and eternally up-to-date. Generic cities simply “work—that is all” (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1255).

This sort of pragmatic absolutism extends to the generic city's government as well. Koolhaas notes with forlorn vagueness that generic cities are apolitical, even a bit authoritarian (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1255). The



Waterfront City, Dubai. Image courtesy Office of Metropolitan Architecture

rule of law and the rationality of the democratic process are replaced by pure exchange. Everyone and everything will be a commodity and suffer under the vagaries of the marketplace. In short, the generic city is the physical embodiment of the principle of exchange value in the global economy.

Which makes it

perfect for Dubai. The city's wealth comes from oil, a commodity that is at once from the earth and placeless. Its authorities are anonymous, benevolent princelings trying to build a new cultural capital of the Arab world. It's telling, however, that the forward-looking Waterfront City is separated from any cultural or social reality of an actual Arab state by feudal moat. The city Koolhaas has designed resembles less a miniature Manhattan—the Coney Island of *Delirious New York*—than an old Pentium Pro chip. There's only one vestige of old humanism, and that's the macabre eye on a corner of the island. The dour functionalism of the Waterfront City has a collateral effect of tearing the old human subject apart, atomizing it into sensory apparatuses entirely dependent on the circuitry of the generic city to function.

Not surprisingly, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture never refers to Waterfront City as a generic city, but there are uncanny similarities everywhere. The Madinat Al Soor district, the designated vernacular precinct, is “both a popular destination and a unique place to live in. Designed to provide for a traditional Arabic setting, the masterplan attempts to revitalize the valuable qualities of historical settlements without forgetting the immediate presence of one of Dubai's most prestigious urban centres.” (Office of Metropolitan Architecture 2008). In “The Generic City” this district is known as “Lipservice, where a minimum of the past is preserved.” The Lipservice section of the generic city, along with its companion districts—Afterthought, Waterfront, Too Late, 42nd Street, and the Village—

represent an “elaborate mythic operation” where history appears as a “service,” as just another commodity (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1256-1257).

The similarities between the generic city and Waterfront City, however deliberate they may be on Koolhaas’s part, raise some questions. Is Waterfront City merely an experiment, funded by petrodollars, to see if a generic city can be constructed from scratch as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art? Or does the project represent Koolhaas’s attempt to escape from the apparently inevitable drift toward sameness in a globalized culture?

Nicolai Ouroussoff sees Koolhaas’s Dubai project as a provocative, if flawed experiment in a new kind of urban space. He calls Waterfront City “a hybrid of the generic and the fantastic” that offers “a carefully considered critique not just of the generic city but of a potentially greater evil: the growing use of high-end architecture as a tool for self-promotion.” (Ouroussoff 2008). Ouroussoff has doubts about the design: some elements of the design are unimaginative, the scale of the island development doesn’t seem quite right, and the exclusivity of the properties within the Waterfront City would seem to preclude the social frisson that Koolhaas hopes the island will generate. Despite these shortcomings, Ouroussoff asserts that Koolhaas is directly confronting the challenges of urbanism in the early twenty-first century.

Mr. Koolhaas’s design proves once again that he is one of the few architects willing to face the crisis of the contemporary city — from its growing superficiality to its deadening sterility — without flinching.

If he fails he at least will have raised questions that most architects would prefer to leave safely unexplored. If he succeeds he could bring us closer to a model of a city that is not only formally complex, but genuinely open to the impure. (Ouroussoff 2008).

It’s not entirely clear what kind of impurity Koolhaas allows into Waterfront City. Arguably, there’s no such thing as a purely generic city, not even one that’s designed to be so from its inception. Contemporary economic forces may scatter Kentucky Fried Chickens across the globe, but the same economic logic also allows for unexpected departures from the general and the fully expected. Say you find yourself in an unfamiliar North American city and you have a craving for Chinese or Indian food. Economist Tyler Cowen suggests you head right for the beating heart of the generic city: the strip mall. “It is common to see good ethnic restaurants grouped with mid-level or junky retail,” Cowen tells us (Cowen 2007: 152). Strip malls charge low rents, thus allowing restaurant owners to experiment with new recipes and retain less popular but more authentic dishes on the menu. A wide variety of good food is the only way a strip mall ethnic restaurant can attract sophisticated diners more inclined to seek out urban ethnic enclaves, downtown nightspots, and high-end shopping malls—all of which are burdened with higher rents, making them more concerned with table turnover than quality cuisine.

Of course, no one emigrates from Mumbai or Guangzhou just to feed the hungry people of Irving, Texas. Guangzhou (population 15,000,000, or the exact number of people who live in the typical generic city, according to Koolhaas) and Mumbai (population 13,000,000) have urban problems more serious than too many Starbucks (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 1252). The problem of the teeming, overcrowded city in a developing country is perhaps the most pressing challenge city planners and architects now face. The urgency of the issue seems to have shaken Koolhaas out of the *fin de siècle* melancholy that informed *S,M,L,XL* and his musings on the generic city. He's now involved with the Harvard Project on the City, cheekily described in *Mutations* as the project "formerly known as 'The Project For What Used to be the City'" (Koolhaas, City, et al 2001: 19). Where *S,M,L,XL* opens with a photo montage of OMA's messy Rotterdam headquarters—evidence of the mighty labors involved in preserving the hysterical particularity of architecture against the deadening influence of the generic city—*Mutations* begins with a series of stark declarations of the immensity of the problems facing developing world cities. On one page we're warned, "In 2025, the number of city-dwellers could reach 5 billion individuals (two-thirds of them in poor countries)" (Koolhaas, City, et al 2001: 2). Another points out that Tokyo will soon be the only wealthy city among the world's top ten most populous. But if the city now has new problems, the culprit is still the same: the United States. *Mutations* has page after page of panoramic shots of American generic cities, each of them evincing some sinister homogeneity. Sometimes the photographs are presented without comment, their meanings self-evident. Sometimes the photographs are accompanied by scolding captions. For instance, a photograph of a stadium in the foreground of some anonymous American skyline prompts the authors to denounce the revival of American downtowns, regarded domestically as a triumph of Jane Jacobs-style humanist urbanism, as "no more than an opportunistic police-developer collaboration" (Koolhaas, City, et al 2001: 543).

Which brings us back to Dubai. Despite its immense wealth and small native population, the city isn't immune to the problems of the urban hypermasses. The city's building boom has created vast slums on its dusty margins where immigrant workers are crammed into squatter's camps with little or no sanitation (Held, Cummings and Held 2005: 131). There have been periodic worker riots, to which the UAE government has responded by tightening police control over the slums and the developers who employ—and often exploit—immigrant workers (Oxford Business Group 2007: 156). For all the aggressive postmodernism of Dubai's architecture, the city remains structured along the lines of a European city in the early capitalist age: a wealthy, cultured core surrounded by a festering mass of laborers. In the case of Dubai, built largely by South Asian construction workers, the laboring classes are an undifferentiated foreign other.

Waterfront City will only reinforce this social and geographical structure. Ironically, the problem isn't that it's too generic, but that it's not generic enough. Although it isn't democratic in the traditional sense, the generic city functions smoothly because it's self-governed by millions of contented nobodies. Its constantly morphing sprawl resists the designs of control freak urban planners and literal-minded authoritarians alike. Waterfront City,

however, will hardly be a beacon of democratic freedom inside a medieval principality. Internally, Waterfront City's population will be limited by the dimensions of the perfectly square island: 1310 meters by 1310 meters. Externally, access from the mainland can be easily severed, should the princelings and their friends get nervous.

It appears unlikely that Waterfront City will do much to address the problem of swelling urban populations, a cause now dear to Koolhaas. Nor does it offer an immediately recognizable breakthrough in the struggle against a generalized global culture. Does the ambiguous nature of Waterfront City mean that Koolhaas is just another architect willing to do the bidding of an authoritarian government in order to land a lucrative commission? (Or she—the Iraqi-born Zaha Hadid, along with Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, and Tadao Ando have been criticized for working with the undemocratic UAE government; Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron have faced similar criticism for designing an Olympic stadium for Chinese communists.) Is Koolhaas just another cynical starchitect?

Maybe. Or maybe Koolhaas has succumbed to an instinct even more primal than the lust for money. Koolhaas has described modern architecture as an otherworldly profession with apocalyptic dreams. In *Delirious New York* Koolhaas writes half-sympathetically, half-mockingly of Le Corbusier's grandiloquent plans for Manhattan. Koolhaas calls Le Corbusier's stubborn insistence on leveling Manhattan and turning it into a Cartesian paradise a "Paranoid-Critical" impulse. However, Koolhaas knows this impulse infects all architects, including the designer of the Waterfront City.

Modern architecture is invariably presented as a last minute opportunity for redemption, an urgent invitation to share the paranoid thesis that a calamity will wipe out that unwise part of mankind that clings to old forms of habitation and urban coexistence.

"While everybody else foolishly pretends that nothing is wrong, we construct our Arks so that mankind can survive the coming flood . . ." (ellipses in original). (Koolhaas 1994: 246).

The Waterfront City keeps an unblinking and wary eye on the Persian Gulf as it guards the inland sea of oil. But the former rises as the latter depletes. In this way Waterfront City stands poised between two potential catastrophes.

Waterfront City, which grew out of the generic city and in many ways supersedes it, is an urbanism for an edgy time. The generic city is no longer a clever thought experiment, a symptom of American cultural dominance. In the twenty-first century the generic city has become the third world problem city by threatening to overwhelm the planet's finite resources. The citizens of the generic city are no longer so copacetic.

The design of the Waterfront City is an act of violence and accommodation. Koolhaas has ruthlessly circumscribed the generic city into a square patch of landfill and starved it of the means to proliferate indefinitely, as it is wont to do. He's also permitted the outdated ideology of urbanism to

return: Walking has reclaimed its integrity; the creative energies fostered by density have been allowed to flourish again.

Finally, Waterfront City reminds us that the generic city describes a way of seeing as much as it describes a set of objects. Anyone who flies regularly has experienced the mild despair one feels when riding in a taxi through a sprawling nowhere. But live in one place long enough and subtle but distinct differences start to emerge. On that block over there the houses are just a little bit nicer than on this block; the differences between shopping malls can be sufficient to drive an extra five or six miles. No one really lives in a true generic city, which may be why Koolhaas is so reluctant to provide specific examples of them. A generic city is the humid boomtown you visit on business. It's a transient space that can't be fully inhabited.

Genericization can be seen as either a bad side effect of industrialization, or what everyone wanted all along. Migrants to the great nineteenth-century factory towns were attracted by the sheer abundance of goods available in urban stores. Mass produced goods meant one was no longer dependent on the natural cycle of feast or famine. Besides, a quick glance down a rowhouse lane in a mill town in New England or the north of England reveals that standardized architecture isn't a twentieth-century invention. The construction of the great Parisian boulevards by Baron Haussmann probably would have qualified as generic when they were first built: the city's warren of narrow medieval lanes was cleared out and replaced by block after block of nearly identical apartment houses. Now Haussmann's boulevards strike us as the very essence of the Parisian.

Waterfront City is Haussmannization for the twenty-first century. Just as Haussmann's boulevards and parks became a place for the urban bourgeoisie to display itself, Waterfront City will be a stage on which the urban will be played out in the 100-degree heat. Koolhaas's crude architectural models are a kind of minimalist theater set upon which residents will project their own meanings. The generic quality of Waterfront City means that it won't be burdened with the ersatz cultural identities the builders of Dubai are trying to impose on other, more spectacular projects. The theater is still open after all. The only question remaining is if the construction workers on the edges of Dubai will be allowed to participate.

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