

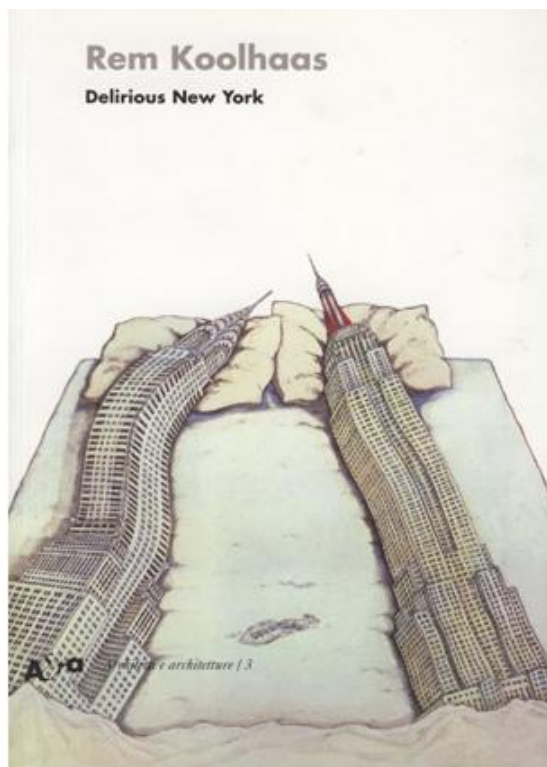
Delirious New York, by Rem Koolhaas

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To cite this article: LOPES, João Caria – Delirious New York, by Rem Koolhaas. **Estudo Prévio** 5-6. Lisboa: CEACTION/UAL – Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2014, p. 184-187. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprevio.net].

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*Delirious New York*¹ is a founding text of a new idea: Manhattanism, as a result of the culture of congestion, where the natural and the real ceased to exist in favour of the last stage of modern life, the artificial.



Rem Koolhaas, known to be one of most influential star architects of the twentieth and twenty-first century and often compared to Le Corbusier, takes up a *research methodology* in this book, which had already been tested by his predecessors Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*²: A historical, theoretical and critical review of an already constructed territory, anonymous and without a defined plan, which proposes a rewriting of the past, giving it new content and guidelines for new readings. It is precisely this new reading of the existing that Rem Koolhaas presents in *Delirious New York*.

Claiming to be the ghost-writer of Manhattan, Koolhaas rewrites the history of New York as the city that was born from the unconscious desire to live in an urban condition of hyperdensity – what he himself called *Congestion Culture* – where everything adds up and superposes, creating a city of unexpectedly successful events and catastrophic mistakes (Koolhaas, p.27).

To rewrite history, but now with another content, Koolhaas emphasises the ability of New York to be mythologised as an ideal and privileged city, where they experiment with new ways of living, like a laboratory of modern life. It can be said that New York today has that ability to dazzle and create myths, as if it were like the capital of the world, where everything emerges, evolves and is established first (or simply establishes greater intensity).

"In terms of structure, this book is a simulacrum of Manhattan's grid: a collection of blocks whose proximity and juxtaposition reinforce their separate meanings.

The first four blocks – 'Coney Island', 'The Skyscraper', 'Rockefeller Center' and 'Europeans' – chronicle the permutations of Manhattanism as an implied rather than an explicit doctrine. They show the progression (and subsequent decline) of Manhattan's determination to remove its territory as far from the natural as humanly possible.

The fifth part – the Appendix – is a sequence of architectural projects that solidifies Manhattanism into an explicit doctrine and negotiates the transition from Manhattanism's unconscious architectural production to a conscious phase" (Koolhaas, p.28).

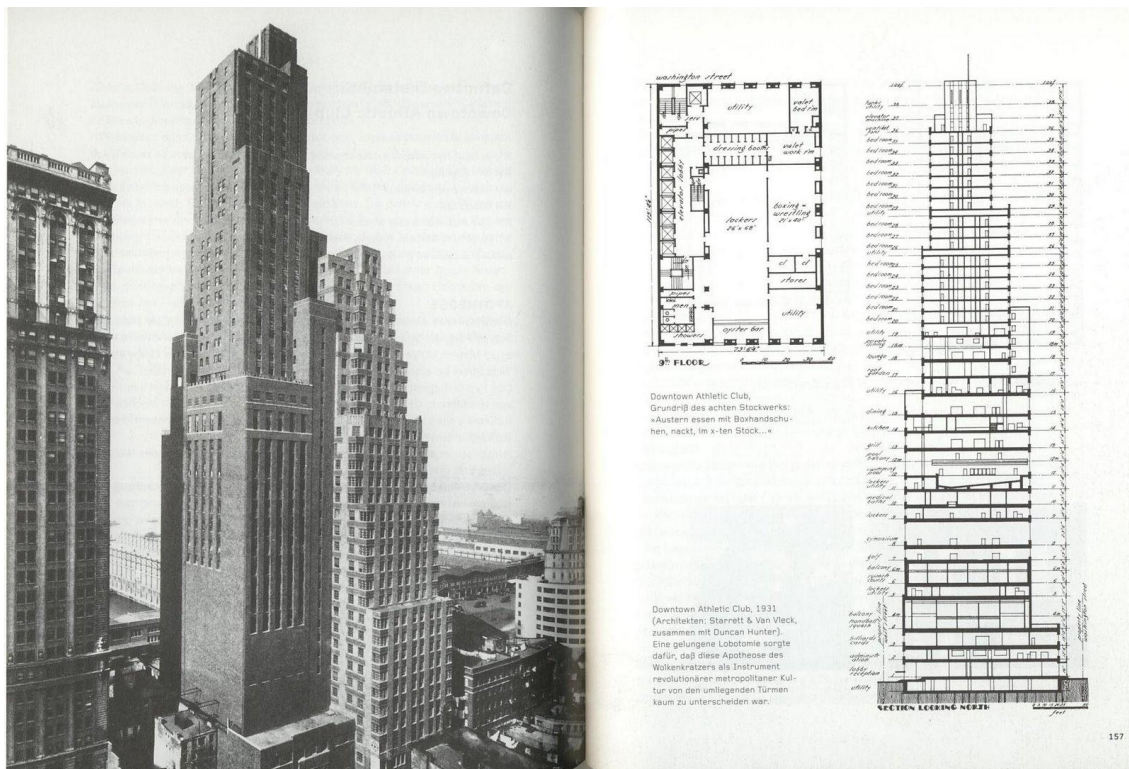
The first chapter tells several parallel stories about the evolution of the city and the constant transformation of the *resort of escape*, Coney Island. Koolhaas says that the island was transformed – in parallel with the increased densification of Manhattan – into an intensification of the urban experience, rather than maintaining natural spaces. There, New Yorkers could be more stunning than in the city, and gradually, what was an *island of escape* became an island theme park, far from being a natural space and also far from being a real space. On Coney Island, an artificiality became the main attraction and the dispute between theme parks (Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland) became the engine of the "new fantastic technology", making the island the "latest fragment of the world". According to Koolhaas, it was on Coney Island that the first towers of New York were tested, through the construction of ever higher and more attractive entertainments: "Dreamland is the laboratory of Manhattan" (Koolhaas, p.72).

"In 50 years, the Tower has accumulated the meanings of: catalyst of consciousness, symbol of technological progress, marker of pleasure zones, subversive short-circuiter of convention and finally *self-contained universe*" (Koolhaas, p.117).

It is in the second chapter that the author presents the first skyscrapers as the natural result of hyperdensification that lived in New York in the early twentieth century. Now, New Yorkers could bring to the city the will of exuberance and build an artificial environment, as they did on the island, leaving natural far from the idea of modern life that was lived on the upper floors.

Combining several contemporary circumstances, such as the invention of the elevator, steel structures, urban congestion and its intrinsic exuberance, New York could now maximise the value of land, multiplying the area of each block towards the sky without limit, adding the ability to create different worlds on each floor of each building. The latter possibility opens a new urban category, where each building can be seen not as a systematic multiplication of equals, but as a container of multiple floors of different urbanities, turning Manhattan into an archipelago of urban islands where each island is able to contain the complexity of a city – "the city within a city".

As one example of this new capacity of skyscrapers and congestion culture of apotheosis, Rem Koolhaas describes and illustrates the Downtown Athletic Club of Starrett & Van Vleck, a small rectangle inserted in the grid of Manhattan with 38 floors, which is "almost indistinguishable from conventional skyscrapers around it". This building contains its own realities, diverse enough to have Squash on the 4th floor, an interior golf course on the 7th floor, a massage and barber's shop on the 9th floor, pools in rooms with triple-height ceilings from floors 11 to 13, Restaurants on the 15th and 18th floors and on the floors 20-35, with the Club still having 15 floors of rooms remaining. "The skyscraper transformed Nature into Super-Nature" (Koolhaas, p.185), where the life of the twentieth century finds its ideal territory to develop and intensify.



"The Rockefeller Center is the most mature demonstration of Manhattanism's unspoken theory of the simultaneous existence of different programs on a single site, connected only by the common data of elevators, core services, columns and external envelope" (Koolhaas, p.226).

The third chapter appears as a deepening of what had already been discovered through various buildings that Koolhaas illustrates and analyses, adding the idea of "congestion by congestion" and the new programmatic character of the Rockefeller Center, through the Radio Corporation of America and later NBC, "issuing" to, and also containing, the world itself through the spectacles of the Radio City Music Hall.

It is also in this chapter that the author pays tribute to Raymond Hood as the great architect mentor of the new city of towers and introduces in small ironies in the next chapter: *Europeans*. "He [Raymond Hood] buys Le Corbusier's first book, *Towards a New Architecture*; the next ones he only borrows" (Koolhaas, p.192).

In *Europeans*, Salvador Dalí and Le Corbusier visit New York for the first time in 1930 and try to claim it, but failed. Both tried to shock, through performances and projects, a city that was born from exuberance and, as it was about a banal reality, the city naturally incorporates the eccentric and the artificial.

Le Corbusier is portrayed in this book as a ruthless architect who did not understand New York or that the world is made of places with different characteristics and people failing miserably to implement his aseptic Radiant City in a city that was already made of towers, congestion, superimposing programs and different scenarios, full of life and therefore content.

Finally, Rem Koolhaas adds an "Appendix", where some projects and texts that embody the ideology of Manhattanism are publishes that "should be regarded as a fictional conclusion, an interpretation of the same material, not through words, but in a series of architectural projects" (Koolhaas, p.330).

Through this historical and architectural survey, Koolhaas renews the possibilities of architecture vis-à-vis the crossroads that modernism built. From the evocation of New York as the unconscious paradigm of a new urban and architectural typology, in *metropolitan architecture* Koolhaas defines a set of principles that will be present in all his works – freedom between the outer box and the interior, the interaction between floors, crossing programs, positive congestion, the extrapolated scale, the constant evolution of cities – both in his studio, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and the centre of studies and publications, the alter ego of the atelier.

¹ KOOLHAAS, Rem. (2008) *Nova York Delirante: Um manifesto retroativo para Manhattan*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, trad. Denise Bottmann

² VENTURI, R.; IZENOUR, S.; BROWN, D.S. (1971), *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge MA.