

Dubai and Manhattan

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If you want to be apocalyptic, you can construe Dubai as evidence of the-end-of-architecture-and-the-city-as-we-know-them; more optimistically, you could detect in the emergent substance of The Gulf - constructed and proposed - the beginning of the new architecture and of a new city.

Rem Koolhaas, Frontline¹

In the issue of Volume magazine, Al Manakh edition, Rem Koolhaas makes clear in a small essay, in the form of a statement, how the city of Dubai in the Gulf region currently appears. His language still appeals to the imagination. Unlike many contemporaries, he does not focus on positive or negative aspects of the city but makes clear how Dubai functions as a paradigm of the global city. Dubai is a city like many emerging, with enormous construction output underlying those places where population growth goes hand in hand with economic developments and progress. Cities in Asia, India, and South America can be compared with this. However, for Koolhaas, Dubai is the city with the architecture of our epoch.

¹ Koolhaas R. Al manakh, Frontline

The Gulf is the current frontline of rampant modernization:....

In this essay, I will find out why, for Koolhaas, Dubai means the end of the city as we know it by comparing it with Manhattan from his book *Delirious New York* from 1978. The book describes the movement of Manhattan that needed to be followed in architectural history. Modernism is a movement that showed a new direction at the beginning of the 20th century with significant future urban changes such as innovations in the field of health, social housing for the working classes, and fundamental transformation as a result of mobility. The period of modernism parallels the urban development of Manhattan in New York at the beginning of the 20th century.

There is no end to Dubai's production as a city. Dubai has a unique development because it was created relatively quickly. Secondly, the city was founded in the desert, where nomads still walked around in the 1970s. Dubai in the Gulf region has developed as a city thanks to the enormous capital accumulated on the oil reserves in this territory. The United Arab Emirates, including Dubai (Dubai also has to compete with other emirates), have discovered at the right time that these oil supplies do not remain available indefinitely. They're running out. It was then decided to invest in developments that could provide an alternative for generating income in the future. The elaboration of these costs already yields benefits in the short term. Dubai largely depends on tourism and the people who maintain that tourism.

The assembly consist of those who are attracted with various incentives - tourists, expats, and those who help to sustain its attraction - builders, cooks, masseurs. Cities are now inhabited by the pampered and the pamperers..²

The city consists of 80% immigrants. Essential products of the construction program are large shopping malls, skyscrapers as homes and hotels, palm beaches with private residences under the permanent desert sun, and a vast airport expansion. In addition, the city is developing as a place for the financial sector to increase capital from oil profits and tourism income. Even investments in access to knowledge in the future are being expanded. Harvard University has a branch there.

² Koolhaas R. Al manakh, Frontline

It is not surprising that Dubai currently has a fascination for Koolhaas. His mainly developed feeling for places where modernization is gaining momentum is from somewhere other than today or yesterday. His book *Delirious New York* from 1978 depicts a similar acceleration and construction development. The book describes the city in the manner of a retroactive manifesto. It provides a constructed ideal image in retrospect, a supposed New York. This city's modernization originated in the mid-19th century and culminated as a metropolis in the first half of the 20th century. Koolhaas uses words to characterize population growth, including multiplicity, congestion, islands, etc. In his book *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas tries to clarify that the Manhattanism model as a form of urbanity could also be used outside Manhattan. In addition, he shows that its ultimate success is rarely discussed in contrast to the many negative stories about the metropolis. According to him, a culture of urban congestion can fulfill the original promise of urban fitness. Yet Koolhaas always seems to have had an ambivalent relationship with the modernization of the urban environment. He has often announced the end of the city. Koolhaas' idea that Dubai marks the end of architecture and the city as we know it originates in the city of Manhattan.

One of the similarities between Dubai and Manhattan lies in the origins of these cities. Both were able to expand enormously due to the amount of immigrants. In New York, then still New Amsterdam, this was at the beginning of the 20th century when the place functioned as an old colony and an influx of immigrants. Dubai is still growing by tourists. One of the advantages of the successful development of an urban region is the lack of a dominant and influential history. Immigrants leave their old place of residence to look for a different economic future (Manhattan), and tourists are guests in a new city (Dubai).

Another similarity lies in pragmatics. Manhattan is another idea of a visionary city, an anti-Paris and an anti-London in response to the colonialism of their former oppressors. For example, an action of the 1811 Commissioners Plan, which developed the grid structure of Manhattan, was justified with purely pragmatic arguments. In Manhattan, the grid symbolizes the subjugation of nature and the emerging democracy. In Dubai, pragmatics appears in the absent plan:

The city is no longer generated by a plan; it has become a patchwork of developers' increments..... the aesthetics of rigour - the grid - has been defeated by the aesthetics of the organic; the geometrical by the approximate.³

The difference between the two cities is due to time and transformation.

In *Delirious New York*, for example, Koolhaas describes the important 'commissioners plan' from 1811 that placed an urban grid division over the pristine landscape of Manhattan. The grid had a vital property: it balanced control and non-control. A fixed plot size in the grid could freely increase in height with a shape that had different meanings. The grid made the city both ordered and chaotic.



Grid van mahattan



organisch dubai

Dubai is, therefore, the opposite of Manhattan: organic and equal to nature, unpredictable and without control. The form of government, however, is not democratic but authoritarian, with predictability and control.

In Koolhaas's *Manhattan*, multiplication: the cultivation of the plot in height and the illusion of transcending gravity as an image of the limitless, is the theme of the future promise of a new fantastic world. In Dubai, multiplication is still the gravity of a building, but it is more global. Icon competes with another high-rise building in another city in the world.

³ Koolhaas R., *Al manakh*, Frontline 2007

In Manhattan, the symbolic meanings of the past, such as the church tower and lighthouse, have been transferred to the new skyscraper. In Dubai, the symbolism is further reduced to nothing (only height) or organic structure.

The sun in Dubai and Manhattan.

The sun is the boundary for Manhattan's skyscrapers. The skyscraper attempts to overcome gravity due to its height but must slope at the highest point to allow daylight to enter. The sun should shine as much as possible at the bottom of the foot. The sun in Dubai, on the other hand, appears limitless. Not only does the available space give the sun free rein to shine everywhere, but it is also immediately available to tourists. The sun always shines, and its energy directly produces electricity. Electricity freezes the water, and snow is made for the indoor ski slope.



The emergent content and the end of Dubai

The illusion of limitlessness in Dubai can be found in the manufacturability and cultivation of the land and water. Land and water have become information files because they can be transformed freely and without limitations. Dredgers create land in the water for an individual resort. The water is added in a landscaped park, frozen on the indoor ski slope, and as desert irrigation. Malleability and, thus, the harmonization (information files) is the emerging content of Dubai and the new global city, but Dubai as a place itself, like Manhattan, will not provide a new model of urban life for the future of architecture.

Both the urban and architecture of the Gulf are clearly unsustainable: sustainability will be the new regime that will impose radical change and revision a brand-new model of urban life.

For that very reason – call it historical inevitability or sheer coincidences of timing – The Gulf will also be the terrain where the current crisis of the metropolis will be confronted. The limitations of the current architectural repertoire are so comprehensive and destructive that it has become unthinkable to rely on them as a toolbox for the future..⁴

The end of Dubai

The illusion of infinite malleability prevails in tourism, where there is a belief in the power of the consumer as part of the global communications community. The tourist is trapped in a crystal palace. Mega shopping malls, theme parks, iconic hotels. This must be maintained.

Although Dubai is currently undergoing the most significant urban transformation in the world in the vast desert, this will ultimately be limited by the illusion of limitlessness. This illusion is heavenly. From an evolutionary perspective, this can only become more paradisiacal. An economic niche is similar to 'the peacock's feathers,' more extensive and more colorful. Dubai itself will remain the same as Manhattan: no new model of urban living for the future of architecture.

⁴ Koolhaas R. Al manakh, Frontline 2007



The new model of urban life will emerge from the limits of the limited habitable earth with its pollution, climate changes, and available energy,

The word community is strange. It leans towards the human community. The commonality with what is not human disappears from view. The Cartesian illusion of man as ruler over nature is not alien to this. However, people derive their community from the communally cultivated nature - the communal lands. While the human community can live with the illusion of limitlessness, this is impossible concerning the community with nature. The earth is only habitable to a limited extent for humans. The finiteness of community lands threatens the semantics of the limitless communication community. The word of the community keeps me from realizing this..⁵

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⁵ Th.W. Oudemans, Omerta, 2007, uitgever Bert Bakker