If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of the bourgeois model of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning is merely the formalisation of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities… until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture…

Adolfo Natalini, Superstudio

Introduction

All over the world, physical borders are bombarded with a diversity of questions, researches and debates. The contemporary world is governed by the following paradox: the more intensely the course of its development is analysed as a state of flux, a flowing network of goods, resources, thoughts and people, the louder the claims on the singularity of territories and the tougher the separation (through walls, passports, biometric scans) between its nations. Today the airport, a high-security enclave, is the new frontier. Looking the same almost everywhere, airports channel bodies and goods; and bring human beings into the same illusory state as evoked by contemporary theorist Paul Virilio citing the French writer Georges Rageot, who claimed in 1902: “Today’s traveller can say: I am an inhabitant of earth, just as if he were saying, I am an inhabitant of Asnières… There are travellers who no longer even know they’re travelling”.

At the same time, the surroundings of the airport create a new type/hype of city, aerotropolis: mostly single-use, one-dimensional and homogeneous areas where streets are not streets and its inhabitants are not inhabitants, but rather ‘employees’. The organisation of the contemporary world is no longer about space; it’s about time and cost. Accessibility has replaced location.

Architecture is the art of making frontiers and divisions, expressing inclusion and exclusion, reduction and expansion, liberty and oppression, protection and defence. It is almost impossible to define architecture without resorting to these or similar binaries.
All cities deal with the question of the ‘urban frontier’. Brussels, the capital of my country and of the European Union, is encircled by a massive ring road, creating a hard separation between the urban politics of the city and the ‘sprawl’ politics of its hinterland. This ring road transforms the city into an island where everything could be possible. When driving through the city, one is mesmerised by the eclectic image this everything is possible strategy, ideology or fantasy has produced. It is not uncommon to find in one street a cross-section of architectural history, from the classically postmodern to no-nonsense apartment buildings from the 1970s, to an Art Nouveau masterpiece built at the turn of the 19th century placed next to a tower in the high-tech international style of the 1990s...

The result is the ultimate clash of cultural imaginaries. The urban space of Brussels is constituted of frontiers, borders and clear edges. The city looks as if planners of different stamps and convictions were forced to work together, each independently decoding Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas’ famous prophecy in The City of the Captive Globe (1972): “So the city of the future, and in fact even the city of today, constitutes not a whole but an archipelago of different enclaves, where ideological values could be installed in limited, strong and specific places, but with no pretence at being universal”².

Today I live in Beijing, and confront the ongoing explosion of urban, human and architectural frontiers. My spatial experience is close to the state of hallucination Aldous Huxley recalls in The Doors of Perception:

The really important facts were that spatial relationships had ceased to matter very much and that my mind was perceiving the world in terms other than spatial categories. [...] Place and distance cease to be of much interest. The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern."³
The present, ever-evolving Chinese urban condition is the next frontier of urbanity, ruled by a non-linear paradigm established through maximising mobility, and through an intense and profound rearrangement of the culture of cities. Any attempt to define urbanity here implies being subject to a constant struggle with its etymology – the very word is linked to the Latin *urbs* (walled town). In Beijing, all walls have been torn down except the one surrounding the Forbidden City, and everything floats – a relentless whirlwind of people, money, buildings, infrastructure, food, thoughts and life. Walls were demolished in the first instance so as to create with their raw material new buildings; now other countries are lured to trade their resources to create new Chinese cities.

*Helicoids Project (Kisho Kurokawa, 1961)*

**Modernism Revisited**

*A world without frontiers, a world without borders, architecture without walls, life without buildings, architecture without architects...*

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Western and Japanese architectural avant-garde seriously speculated about projecting amazing structures throughout existing cities, with the intent of dissolving the borders between humans and nature, urbanism and architecture, development and supposed backwardness. At that time the West was fast-growing; and in this state of development – a state of deliberate instability, an ethos of transition, a climate of transformation – borders and frontiers disappeared. However, they only disappeared in order to appear again, this time arranged in a different order...
When in a state of completeness, real or imagined, society becomes exclusive – borders appear, humankind celebrates itself, and interaction is limited to what is encapsulated by this frontier. When a society is in transition, everything seems to be intertwined, full of potentialities dependent on and related to each other. When the future is bright, frontiers dissolve. After World War II, the future of rapidly evolving Western architecture seemed to embody the following fast-growing mantra:

[...] fast-growing industrialisation, a fast-growing population, and a fast-growing urbanisation. And one of the by-products of this world is that architecture is coming to be considered as just another product, able to be produced almost full-blown by the same processes that now make other things for human use. 4

As a product, architecture does not in and of itself pose the question of the border, but becomes a medium offering the seductive possibility for all things to flow into, hold and frame each other – culture, politics, construction, gravity, economy, materiality, spatiality, intellect, love, family, society and sociology (to name just a few). Within this open-ended logic, the parameters of contemporary urbanism and architecture are reworked by the designer: s/he discards the idea of the central city – the single crater around which the peripheral lava coagulates – as well as tabula rasa and related CIAM (Congrès International de l’Architecture Moderne) concepts relating to restoration and the survival of built heritage. Instead, urbanism is projected upon, through and under the existing matrix, as for instance in Yona Friedman’s Paris Spatial (1957) and Kenzo Tange’s Tokyo Bay Project (1960). These projects show a thrilling confidence in the ability of the designed system to digest all population growths and swings; technology offers a vision of a civilisation that is in a self-sustained state of change, luring our image and perception of what the city is into the permanent realm of metabolism. In an ideal world without borders, architects create spaces and situations for ongoing change, mobility, exchange, democracy and leisure, as one can see in the work of Yona Friedman, Fumihiko Maki, Archigram, Constant, Kisho Kurokawa and Cedric Price.

Intermezzo 1
If one area experiences a shrinking of populations and economy, then this means that in other regions there will be growth of the same factors. Basically, one could state that growth in one sector causes shrinkage in another. In today’s world of globalised capital and labour, everything is interconnected, so both shrinking and expanding are not phenomena completely separated from each other. One important mistake in the Shrinking Cities project, I believe, was the isolation of the shrinkage phenomenon; and by doing so we do not get to understand the full scope or extent of its relations with the dynamics of urban growths. That is why I pleaded not to look at our subject cities as shrinking or expanding, but rather as ‘moving’ cities.

Kyong Park, interview with the author, 9 April 2007, Beijing
Thoughts on the ‘Present’

Beijing is a metropolis without a clear border, without a frontier. Although one could state, innocently, that the present is the frontier, and that the speculation about the future is the driving force to push that frontier forward.

In this expanding city different modes of urban and architectural development are powerfully intertwined. Economies flow into each other and are juxtaposed in a terrifying and beautiful way. People literally breathe the state of transition. This city is on a headlong flight forward. This is more obvious in some parts than in others, but each reinforces the boundlessness of the whole. It is urbanity cut loose from its moorings and drifting on real-estate speculation, the memory of a disappearing history, the incomprehensibility of the audacious (and simultaneously disappointing) manifestation of the new. There is no clear distinction between what is being erased and what is being inscribed. It is not difficult to acknowledge what eventually will disappear – everything, except the forbidden void at the heart of the city. At the same time, it is impossible to think what will appear. No other city in the world currently deals so intensely with finding a new relation between emerging modern physical, human, economic, cultural and artistic dimensions, thereby creating an image of the time that is so far ahead and yet so immediate.

Or as Rilke (Virilio, 1991) suggests: “What happens is so far ahead of what we think, of our intentions, that we can never catch up with it and never really know its true appearance”.

Living in an urban condition that is driven by the fundamental need for rapid, conscious change in both social, collective, civil and individual life, it is impossible to discern whether we are heading towards a dead-end, taking a phantasmagoric shortcut in urban evolution, spinning continuously in the same loop or taking the same track that other, more ‘developed’ nations did in their own histories. Although China has more than a billion eyes, hands and minds, we might as well be blindfolded, handcuffed and hallucinating; and although we are creative, it is equally possible that we are saving it for better times. Life without frontiers then becomes the experience of an intimately linked series of situations, intentions and behavioural patterns whose modes of existence involve not just architecture and design, but also art, communications, criticism, philosophy and politics.

The process of dissolving borders and frontiers, which could also be termed the fleeing frontier, can be understood as a form of radical urban acculturation. Beijing constitutes not a whole but a patchwork of different zones where the past and the present meet and clash. Driving and walking around the city, observing it, thinking about it, reminds me of Superstudio’s assertion: “It is in these zones that one witnesses the annihilation of a culture and its more or less painful replacement by another: one often comes across abandoned farmhouses whose owners seem to have suddenly disappeared”5. In Beijing one witnesses a similar destruction and substitution, but spectrally, from behind the mirror: one often comes across abandoned office towers whose owners seem to have suddenly disappeared. This disappearance is a postponed appearance, as nobody really knows when
these towers will be operational, or serve any purpose beyond being a spatial marker in the urban scene. Rumour goes that at least 40% of the office buildings in Beijing are empty.

**Intermezzo 2**

In the present, and in the future, we will be less concerned about the so-called fundamentals of architecture and urban planning, but constantly seek instead to evaluate each other’s movements. We will rather be looking at what the plans, the infosthetics, the diagrams, the mapping, will be telling us about how people, crowds, masses and individuals behave in the city each day, each minute, each second. Get an accurate picture of where the crowd is moving and you jump on for the ride – uphill or downhill – it doesn’t matter.6

**Floating between Urban and Rural**

We have been looking for the city in the wrong places. In the course of its historical ‘development’ humankind has crossed a crucial frontier, the divide between the urban and rural. Today supposedly more people live in urban than in rural conditions, and it is expected that this will inevitably escalate. However, it is not a clean, classic split: the world is mixed with rural-urban sites, peri-urban environments, in-between zones subject to migratory movement, temporary shelters and havens for the massive floating population of migrants who are not *inhabitants* but *employees* of the city. Their access to the labour required by the city counts more than their location within the city. That location is transient and ephemeral. We could consider this analysis neat and convincing, as it places the migrant population on the treadmill of migratory movement from overdeveloped, high-priced land to comparatively raw and unoccupied land. The difference between the policies governing the countryside and those governing the city created in the 1980s a generation of ‘floating migrants’ that roam through China today. The effects of these migrants on the growth and reorganisation of the cities reciprocally influences the urbanisation of the countryside:

Among China’s huge “floating population” of rural-to-urban migrants were not a few who moved in order to give birth to more children. Unrestricted by urban work units or residence officials, peasant communities in the cities sometimes served as “safe heavens” where couples could have births without fear of being fined – to the great frustration of local birth planning officials. (…) Meanwhile, the youngest generation, having grown up in a media-saturated culture and in many cases having experienced city life firsthand, were living in imagined worlds that were urban rather than rural. Carrying modern urban culture, these returned migrants, now roughly one-third of all rural-to-urban migrants, are major forces for reproductive change in the villages.7

**‘Moving’ Cities: Life on the New Frontier**

In order to research, discuss and formulate the future of architecture and urbanism, and to determine the agenda for life on the new frontier of emerging urban situations, some of us are
exploring the concept of moving cities. For us, studio studies are less challenging than work in the open urban air, where from minute to minute the energies of people, space, architecture and society vibrate, transform, coalesce and disperse, reconfigure and recalibrate.

For us, Rilke still makes sense – even if situations are so far ahead of what we think, of our intentions, one day we will surely catch up with their true appearance...

In line with the Futurist agenda of poet and propagandist Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, we inscribe ourselves in the old tradition where people are described as the ‘primitives’ of a new and completely transformed sensibility. What we have inherited from the Futurists is the intense concern with materiality in flux. In our own way we want to prolong, extend and connect with the manner in which this radical artistic movement threatened hitherto received ideas about space and time – more generally still, about all such principles of order in the world.

When and where do cities start ‘moving’? Can we see, feel, smell or even understand this? The movement of cultures, of communities, seems to follow a strange path. The primitive cultures adopted a certain form of nomadism – these days embraced by a group of highly mobile people, “travellers who no longer even know they’re travelling”, struggling with the technological constraints this world has put on their effort to be nomadic. We, i.e., industrialised and ‘developed’ cultures, follow the path of progress, along lines of infrastructures, moving from hub to hub. These are mostly located in already existing cities. We don’t pioneer anymore, we don’t theorise nor centralise anymore. We despise intensity, and what we like to do is to move everything through division, segmentation, categorisation, separate this from that – centres from suburbs, high-rise from houses, people from places. New movement provides the opportunity for the creation of new places, ‘occupied territories’ that will attract new flows of people, goods, consumers and resources. These flows, that experience different levels of restrictions within urban space, are only to be halted at borders.

The concept of ‘moving’ cities does not connect to conditions of transition as such, but rather to processes of intensification, circulation, accumulation, formation and standardisation provoked by this time of transition.

Thinking beyond the Borders: Maximum Mobility

What we witness and are mesmerised by, almost to the point that we don’t, or can’t, understand its functioning, its modus operandi that now dominates large areas of the world, is maximum mobility, a term coined by economic historian Fernand Braudel.

As artist/philosopher Manuel De Landa explains in A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History, maximum mobility is “the layer where large amounts of financial capital, for example, flowed continuously from one highly profitable area to another, defying frontiers and accelerating many historical processes”.

The two other layers, that together with maximum mobility form the three separate flows moving at different speeds through the history of the past millenium, are what Braudel terms “material life” and “accelerators of all historical time”. As defined by De Landa:
[...]“material life”, the know-how and traditional tools, the inherited recipes and customs, with which human beings interact with plants to generate the flow of biomass that sustains villages and towns. This body of knowledge resists innovations and hence changes very slowly, as if history barely flowed through it. (...) Next comes the world of markets and commercial life, where the flow of history becomes less viscous. Braudel calls market towns “accelerators of all historical time”.

The socioeconomic contours of developing countries are still determined by these three flows today. Urban and architectural development in these nations is inevitably and unavoidably intertwined with these flows. Along with the flow of financial capital, halting to circulate in some cities, or infiltrating one country after another, comes the flow of people, ideas, knowledge and styles. They halt only temporarily, as if briefly touching the ground and then taking the next leap to a different site. Today's problem could be that we don't understand this temporality, and that we have not been able to get a grip on an ephemeral that lasts for a hundred years. In vain, it seems, we search for concepts and tools to deal with this; desperately we implement methods that have proven their use in the past; painfully we watch reality come into being, history unfolding, the future nervously knocking on new doors of perception.

Meanwhile the three flows move along at different speeds, forcing different trajectories and modes of ‘development’. Is there a beauty, or a method, in the madness of this inevitable movement?

**Space, the Final Frontier...**

Increased mobility has put pressure on our understanding of the concepts of frontiers and borders. Increased movement has made it very difficult for us to recognise how the new contemporary cities manifest. Like Beijing, the new cities, the ones in the making, the ones transforming, meet none of our preconceptions of what constitutes a city.

“First there was downtown. Then there were suburbs. Then there were malls. Then Americans launched the most sweeping change in a hundred years in how they live, work, and play”10. Twenty years later, we should seriously ask ourselves if our minds will even be able to perceive a new reality, as Huxley did, in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern. A lot has changed; and we need to urgently formulate alternatives in discourse, design, education and human organisation. In all our frenetic mobility and anxious construction of a new sequence of fluctuating and contingent borders, we have lost the sense of what the city is really about.

We are disturbingly out of alignment with the so-called fundamentals of architecture and urban planning: *space, space, space.*
Editors’ Note:

Kyong Park is a curator and artist, and a founding member of the International Centre for Urban Ecology in Detroit, as well as Centrala Stichting voor Toekomstige Steden in Rotterdam. He co-curated the international exhibition *Shrinking Cities* (2005). Artists, architects, filmmakers, graphic artists, journalists and cultural/social scientists developed over 60 works for the project. Themes ranged from the neglect and appropriation of spaces, through changed practices of daily life, survival strategies, and new forms of work, to the development of innovative subcultures and criticism of existing planning cultures.


Reader 06 online text: http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader_06.html

Notes

9. Ibid.
ALT/OPTION