

**Cezary Waś**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5163-9248>

*Institute of Art History*

*University of Wrocław*

*cezary.was@uwr.edu.pl*

## **DISCONTINUITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN CITIES IN REM KOOLHAAS' THEORIES**

**Abstract:** Cities played a major role in human civilization, but there have been major changes in their forms. Throughout their long history, they have exhibited characteristics that contradict each other. Historians, noticing the differences in the properties of cities, pointed to their many types. The decisive division assumed that "oriental" cities are ruled by autocratic regimes, while "western" cities are liberal and democratic. This kind of division was often questioned, especially because it seemed that liberal-democratic systems had finally dominated world politics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century showed that such predictions were not correct. Rem Koolhaas' theory of Generic Cities demonstrates that there has been an unexpected change and that city forms in which Western culture values are irrelevant are now gaining importance.

**Keywords:** architectural theories, contemporary town planning, Rem Koolhaas, generic city

### **Initial considerations**

A long history of cities in the world culture may lead one to believe that there is continuity in their development. However, such an assumption raises doubts. This is because the city is a reality that cannot be defined based on a closed and unambiguous group of distinguishing features. The diversity of cities, both ancient and modern ones, makes it impossible to create a strict definition. Examples can illustrate this insurmountable difficulty. If a large number of inhabitants were included among the basic features of a city, then the history of cities would make us notice that some densely populated human settlements

were not always cities. The neolithic agricultural settlement of Çatalhöyük, although possibly inhabited by as many as 10,000 people, cannot be considered the first known city in history because it lacked regularity, often considered an important feature of a city. On the other hand, large centers of a regular form, such as Göbekli Tepe (also dated around 10,000 BC), could have functioned as temple cities, but were probably not permanently inhabited by larger groups of residents. Although these are only assumptions, there were serious differences between the first urban centers. Examples of profound differences in character are also provided by modern cities, where features that have never been seen before dominate. Some of the cities that are being built today almost completely break with the basic distinguishing features of old cities, but they are still described by their traditional name. Consideration of the differences should, however, start with the beginnings of centers referred to as cities.

Works of old literature, such as the Akkadian epic on Gilgamesh (from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC), the *Sumerian King List* (possibly also from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC), the *Book of Genesis* (rooted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, according to an old tradition) and the *Iliad* (dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC), mention many places that can be considered the first cities in the world. The *Sumerian King List* mentions Eridu. Known since the time of archaeological discoveries, Uruk with the ziggurat god Anu was inhabited at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium. The city of Ur, which is sometimes associated with the biblical city of Abraham, also has layers reaching 5,000 B.C.E. (the Ubad period) in its archaeological trace. The *Book of Genesis* (4:17) states that the first city was built by Cain and "he named it after his son: Enoch". Later on, the *Book of Genesis* (10:8) states that Nimrod, son of Cush and grandson of Ham, reigned in Babylon and built Nineveh, Rehobot-Ir, Kalach and "Resan, the great city between Nineveh and Kalach." Archaeologists have not yet discovered many of the sites mentioned, but they know others, such as Habuba Kabira (from the Uruk period) built around 3500 BC, or Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, two cities from around 2600 BC, formed along the Indus River Valley. Many ancient cities still exist today, such as Jericho, where settlements dating to 9,000 years BC have been discovered, as well as Aleppo, Byblos, Damascus, Argos or Luxor. Discontinuities in the history of these cities, their long declines and renewals, are the clearest indication that cities can be defined differently depending on the historical period, but also on their destination (such as temple cities) or political systems (such as cities that are centers of royal power). Also today, the functions of cities or their political character can be considered deeply contradictory and prevent their inclusion in the overall definition of a city.

Ancient, medieval, modern, industrial, modernist and postmodernist cities encourage researchers to define their distinguishing features in such a way

that would answer questions about the metaphysical, moral and political values towards which their inhabitants leaned. The visibility of cities' character manifestations can be confronted with the philosophical sense of their existence. The most basic division assumes the existence of "oriental" cities associated with authoritarian cultures, and "western" cities whose inhabitants were endowed with personal freedom and many rights. According to researchers, the *Stadtluft macht frei* principle can only be applied to "European" cities.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, many contradictions in the concept of freedom. One of them is the fact that urban life is marked by numerous freedoms, which, however, are to a similar extent accompanied by restrictions and extensive spheres of prohibitions. Some of them are explicit and official, while other ones belong to the sphere of customs and regulate private life, creating a dense network of dependencies of individuals on the community. Limitations of freedom within society never decrease, but increase, both in an open and hidden way.

Philosophers who contemplated the problem of the city also asked questions about the ultimate or the most basic destinies of the city and its inhabitants. Such questions were sometimes contained in the formula "Jerusalem or Athens?", where the latter could be "Babylon" or "Rome". It was a question whether the city should be religious or secular. For Jacques Ellul, the city is a reality where God joined people's lives to lead them to salvation. Every city in existence foreshadows the "Heavenly Jerusalem" which is God Himself.<sup>2</sup> On the other side of the dispute we can put Max Weber, whose views lead to the conclusion that, from their distant beginnings, cities have been elements of the road to rationality and a life free from religious addictions.<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, the city is a way of living together which ensures external and internal security, enabling prosperity and continuous development based on science. The adoption of such assumptions leads to a prediction of cities' expansion to the size of a planet completely occupied by urban life, as presented in the fantasy film about Coruscant - a globe covered with buildings.<sup>4</sup> Such an image, although supported by data indicating that already in 2008 the population of cities exceeded the number of people living outside cities, and by information that the number of cities with more than 10 million inhabitants is growing, does not take into account the simultaneous depletion of resources (the

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Baecker, "Stadtluft macht frei: Die Stadt in den Medienepochen der Gesellschaft," "Soziale Welt" 2009, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 259-283.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. D. Pardee, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1970.

<sup>3</sup> M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Die Stadt*, Verlag von J.C. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1922.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Rinzler, *The Making of Star Wars: The Definitive Story Behind the Original Film*, Ebury Press, London 2008, pp. 351-400.

so-called Malthusian catastrophe) and thus the possible collapse of cities and perhaps of human civilization as a whole.

Contemporary reflection on urban planning also leads to the observation that changes taking place in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have created a contradictory phenomenon: cities continue to develop, but have lost a significant number of their old distinguishing features. Urban theories of Rem Koolhaas from the time of his first publication (the book *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*) indicated that the already modern city had broken with its traditional character.<sup>5</sup> In his subsequent publications, the architect developed a view that progressive differences between former cities and cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries should lead to changes in defining the city. Faster than ever before, a new type of a city emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, contradicting both its old (Greco-Roman and medieval) and newer (modernist) traditions. The current dispersion of constitutive features of the city in relation to its classical-medieval or modernist formula may be a symptom of disappearance of many earlier traditions, whose atrophy occurs in contrast to the phenomenon of rapid development of a completely new city type. The city is disappearing (in the old version) and developing rapidly (in the new version). The thesis posed requires more detailed explanations. It can be initially assumed that nowadays there are four types of cities that are defined with the use of many terms. These are:

1. Traditional (classic) cities with a historical origin, using Greco-Roman and medieval traditions in spatial solutions, with strongly outlined distinctiveness (identity). In order to continue their existence, such cities must change their character – become their own copies – and change into urban open-air museums.

2. Modernist cities that used planning principles similar to the concept of Le Corbusier (*Ville Contemporaine, Plan Voisin, Ville Radieuse*) or the *Athens Charter*, and became a tool for solving important problems in the functioning of traditional cities. Characterized by increased functionality, they suffer from a lack of local identity, so can be described as cosmopolitan.

3. Postmodern cities that artificially maintain their history, revitalize old monuments and introduce new functions to them, or create places by establishing made-up links with the past. Architectural buildings of the modernist period are also being turned into monuments and the awareness that modernism played an important role in Western culture is being created. In this context, highly original neo-modernist works are at the same time secondary, imitative

---

<sup>5</sup> R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Oxford University Press, London 1978; new edition: The Monacelli Press, New York 1994.

and inevitably gain the rank of historic buildings from the moment they are created.

4. General (in Koolhaas' terminology: "generic") universal cities, developing mainly in Asia, deprived of historical roots and not caring about identity (awareness of their individuality).<sup>6</sup> Koolhaas also points out that these cities are devoid of the spirit of citizenship, unrelated to the ideas of freedom and democracy, and inhabited by biomass functioning as the subject of biopolitics. Most such cities were established in Asia, but they also appear on other continents due to the spreading crisis of democracy in the West.

The four city types do not function side by side, but interpenetrate each other, which makes it difficult to describe their characteristics. Hybridization deprives them of much of their specificity and their characteristics are uncertain. The study of such phenomena prompted Koolhaas to use methods and language different from scientific objectivism, but these tools produced important cognitive effects. However, his keen and accurate observations require translation into scientific terms. The current development of cities is not based on historiography assuming a rational or logical course of historical events, but on the principle of breaking the continuity of development and exceeding logical forecasts. This situation is supplemented by the fact that scientific language metaphors are inadequate in characterizing phenomena that violate ordinary rationality and logic. Moreover, when distinguishing features interpenetrate or combinations of contradictory features are created, this contributes to difficulties in making their neutral descriptions. Interpretations of new phenomena are possible when attention is paid to their specificity based on new types of rationality, especially those that emphasize the existence of intermediate states between opposing features.

The first research goal in the described situation will be to present the characteristics of new urban solutions outlined by Koolhaas as historical phenomena, however unusual and problematic in relation to the rationality so far. It is thus necessary to express Koolhaas's views in specialized art history language. The problem that makes it difficult is the existence of many competing methods in art history, ranging from analyses of form and style, through iconological studies and hermeneutics, anthropological and post-structural analyzes (taking into account social and political issues), to visual studies of cultural phenomena. Secondly, in line with traditions of researching form, it is possible to identify urban phenomena and architectural works that are particularly characteristic of new situations, and to create formal terms used to present

---

<sup>6</sup> R. Koolhaas, *The Generic City*, in: *idem, S,M,L,XL*, The Monacelli Press, Rotterdam-NewYork 1995, pp. 1248-1264.

them. Even a simple recognition of empirical reality makes it possible to identify cities and architectural creations that confirm the accuracy of Koolhaas' views in terms of manifestation of new city types. Such focusing of attention ignores doubts that arise when attempts are made to adapt this author's ideas to reflection and scientific research. Critical analysis is necessary because some statements are not amenable to verification or falsification methods. Moreover, newer art history methods, including Visual Culture Studies, lead to attempts to pay attention to phenomena that are not only material and rationally knowable, but also experienced (sensually as well) and lived. An initial attempt will be made to describe sensations and experiences that new cities evoke. For the full realization of such a goal, a wider global field research is necessary, however. Furthermore, research on new phenomena based solely on one group of observations may be unreliable and require confrontation with statements of other authors. In a brief outline, a list of concepts analogous to Koolhaas's ideas, but also polemical views on the nature of contemporary urban planning will be presented. As one should strive to describe phenomena not yet covered by forms of reflection, the most important thing is to consider what remains beyond the scope of existing views and has not yet been known.

### **1. Traditional cities**

Traditional cities are not the subject of Koolhaas's considerations, but they are a reference point for an analysis of discontinuities in their historical development. Presenting an outline of their history, description of the basic forms and symbolic content makes it possible to notice deep differences that appeared during the manifestation of their subsequent formulas, especially the newest ones. A particularly noteworthy component of old cities' character is their relationship with the ideas of freedom and shared responsibility of inhabitants. Many cities from different historical periods are similar in terms of spatial organization, but should not be considered manifestations of the "traditional city" type. The adoption of such an assumption may be questioned, but it is difficult to deny that cities can be assigned not only specific shapes, but also social and political traditions.

The most integral shape of the traditional city dates back to the European Middle Ages (from the mid-12<sup>th</sup> to late 15<sup>th</sup> century) when about 5,000 new cities were founded. Some of them were developed from suburban centers, such as seats of secular or church authorities, or monasteries, but a vast majority were created as completely new places of settlement. Granting many rights to settlers (known as *hospites*) was an incentive to live there, applicable both to individuals and entire communities. Inhabitants were endowed with personal freedom or the right to inherit allocated pieces of urban land, but also with

economic privileges, such as the right to brew beer or trade in alcohol. With the development of late medieval cities, it was revealed that their permanent inhabitants were a separate social group, different from other groups of the feudal society. The fact that cities acquired additional political rights also distinguished them as centers separate to some extent from princely or royal power. Such distinctiveness also gained an architectural dimension in the form of extensive city walls or town halls resembling ducal castles. Also other components of the city's shape may be associated with ideological values and lead to treating them as symbolic representations of the city's characteristic features. Buildings are not direct representations of ideological content, but can be recognized by researchers as their visual distinguishing marks. Great churches founded by townspeople were artistic documents of their development in history of medieval towns. A reduction in the number of similar foundations proves a significant slowdown in their expansion processes. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, cities mainly preserved their specific existence, also by strengthening their fortifications. However, several rapidly developing centuries left urban works that were endowed with a set of recurring features: layout regularity based on a grid of intersecting streets, among which two axes of communicative and symbolic importance stood out, a large central square with a town hall, a separate market square with a church, bourgeois houses around the market and, in the case of large cities, also a block with a town hall in the middle of the market. Churches, church towers and town halls testified to the importance of the city, whose character was also confirmed in the following centuries by fountains, tower ornaments and public monuments. Between the Middle Ages and the modern period, the role of cities as places of organized education increased, which involved the founding of universities and commissioning of larger and larger buildings for their use.

Another important period in the development of cities was related to industrialization processes. Some cities have expanded their area to include factory districts, although many cities have also been established that were associated with new industrial centers. Revival of some cities, change in their economic character and strengthening of their political importance have been documented not only by the construction of factory buildings, but also expansion of transport connections, construction of railway stations and sometimes also theater buildings, museums and libraries. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, historical cities repeated similar initiatives to maintain their rank, and built museums and music halls, even in the case of poor cultural life in the area. Just as forms of production changed after the Middle Ages and modern times, and industry replaced craftsmanship, now the relationship of cities with industry has seriously weakened, and they have mainly become centers for providing financial, but also tourist and cultural services. Some of these former European

cities try to maintain their importance by building large sports arenas, but their cultural centers are mainly: shopping malls taking over the role of art galleries, city squares with cafes and entertainment centers. They mainly increase their attractiveness by caring a lot for their historic character and basing their prestige on outstanding works of architecture from the past. In these efforts to maintain economic and cultural importance, a significant role is played by attempts to change the purpose of historical buildings (also from the industrial era) and to include railway stations or even factories in city attractions. In Europe, many churches have been turned into museums, factory buildings rebuilt into department stores, and reconstruction of buildings that were completely destroyed in the past was also undertaken. Cities where production ceased to exist survived only when they developed the domain of services, hiding their present parasitic nature.

Therefore, traditional cities continue to exist, although their existence is based on providing services. Shaping their current visual character aims to emphasize differences in the periods of their development and to create a belief in their historical continuity, while they are artificially alive open-air museums in which numerous hotels confirm that tourism is an important part of their economic character. It is not common for shopping malls or hotels (with conference spaces) to take on particularly spectacular forms, as it used to be in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they undoubtedly play an important role in maintaining the economic position of old cities. Including buildings with such functions in the fabric of central districts is done with respect for old buildings, so that the service character of the former does not interfere with the advantages of a traditional city.

## **2. Modernist cities**

The most expressive examples of modernist cities were theoretical projects radically breaking continuity in the development of traditional cities. In a specific political, social and economic situation, their utopian assumptions began to be partially implemented and they demonstrated their usefulness for several decades, before new social conditions revealed their glaring shortcomings. Criticism of modernist cities, however, did not contribute to complete abandonment of their principles, and a lot of them continue as a well-established form of urban life organization.

The starting point for developing the concept of a modernist city were the technological and industrial development processes that led to economic development and expansion of former cities. With the introduction of industry to cities, increase in the number of inhabitants and in car traffic, urban life was burdened with a large number of nuisances. Moderate change projects



did not bring sufficient results and more radical ones appeared in the 1920s. In particular, they included the concept of Nikolai Milutin's linear city and Le Corbusier's "modern city" (*Ville Contemporaine*, 1922) with a group of twenty-four sixty-story skyscrapers among the green. The most important concepts of radical changes in the reconstruction of existing cities or construction of new ones were summarized in the *Athens Charter* (1933) and the *General Plan* of London by architects from the MARS group in 1942. A related issue was the construction of large industrial cities in the USSR and the activities of Ernst May and his associates there.<sup>7</sup>

Koolhaas presented his own version of the rise of the modernist city, describing the history of the rise of Manhattan, resulting from spontaneous entrepreneurial activities of capitalists and talented pragmatic architects. In this situation, theory arose only after the work was created, which prompted the author to title his book *Retroactive Manifesto*. His vision of the modernist city contrasted with the thesis that it is a complement to rationalist tendencies in the development of Western civilization. He presented the belief that Manhattan and its buildings satisfy various types of its users' subconscious needs. Manhattan would therefore not be rational, but delirious and irrational. This disturbing contrast between the two modernisms needs to be explored in more detail.

Previous studies on modernist urban planning claim that, although proposals of avant-garde architects regarding the new character of cities were excessively radical, when many European cities were destroyed as a result of World War II, it became necessary for their quick reconstruction to at least partially adopt principles described in the *Athens Charter*. Proposals contained in this document focused on separating residential and production functions in the city, building routes intended for car traffic outside city centers, and basing residential and office construction on skyscrapers. The most controversial proposal was to increase the role of skyscrapers in the development of cities, but economic considerations prompted the adoption of this recommendation advocated by Le Corbusier. As a result, city centers were not demolished as planned and old buildings were reconstructed in destroyed districts. However, housing estates consisting of high-rise buildings were built on the outskirts of traditional cities. The most famous example was the Pruitt-Igoe estate in St. Louis, built in 1952-1955 by Minoru Yamasaki. Criticism of numerous nuisances of this estate does not consider the fact that many of them were

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Nędza-Sikonowska, *Nowoczesne. O syberyjskich miastach okresu radzieckiego - przypadek Nowokuźniecka i Magnitogorska*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2021, pp. 98-106.

the result of savings applied during construction and not in accordance with the creator's intentions. Currently, however, there are no reasons to criticize such proposals of modernist urban planning as moving motorways outside city limits or building office skyscrapers near old city centers. Koolhaas' contribution to modernist urban planning was the proposal to divide skyscrapers into several parts, which was to some extent inspired by research on New York buildings. The book on Manhattan was an attempt to build not only a retrospective theory of an already existing city, but also a prospective theory of one's own creativity. Such an observation prompts us to perceive Koolhaas' compendium as a record of the city's psychoanalytic session, but also of our own intentions.<sup>8</sup>

New York buildings do not completely break with the tradition of a historic city, but they are not a simple implementation of the modernist city, either. Koolhaas wrote that the basis of a city's development was its division into quarters using a network of intersecting streets. Such a system was known in the oldest cities of the world, e.g. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, as well as those of ancient Egypt and Greece, and medieval Europe. The decision to use it in Manhattan was made in 1811 and, after long preparations, it was done in an exceptionally consistent manner. From the beginning of the so-called *Commissioners' Plan*, the used street scheme was criticized for its depressing monotony. The only advantage of the plan was the ease of selling individual fragments, which accelerated the construction of Manhattan. Koolhaas pointed out that the applied solution made it possible to treat each block of streets individually and differently from the neighboring one. Each part became a "city within a city" and fulfilled the specific needs of potential users or investors. Compared to old cities, the difference was based on the fact that in the past dominance in cities was gained by public buildings: town halls, churches and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, railway stations, museums and theaters. What turned out to be decisive for New York's character were objects that met needs which only a psychoanalyst could comment on in a professional way, e.g. the *Downtown Athletic Club* skyscraper.<sup>9</sup> Narcissistic bachelors were given a great edifice to satisfy their male fantasies regarding physical appearance and fitness. Inside, they could feel free from the insistence of women striving to create family life. Like the schematic system of the city division, this perfectly organized building performed deeply irrational tasks. It changed the biological nature of man into completely artificial, suppressing all nature like the whole Manhattan and replacing it with cultural creations. In the New York City plan, nature only regained its rights

---

<sup>8</sup> M. Stierli, *Montage and the Metropolis. Architecture, Modernity, and the Representation of Space*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2018, pp. 228-267.

<sup>9</sup> Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, pp. 152-158.

in the Central Park area with its planted trees, man-made lakes and attractions for residents and tourists. The same thing happened on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the Downtown Athletic Club: a golf course with hills, a river and trees was set up. The entire reality of Manhattan existed mainly as a fantasy, sometimes sexual in nature.

New York may be considered a modernist city, but different from the principles of European modernism. Koolhaas described the difference by recalling Salvador Dali's and Le Corbusier's visits to New York. Salvador Dali did not make a great impression with his extravagance and surreal ideas, because New York was already surreal. On the other hand, Le Corbusier, with his concepts of building geometrical skyscrapers among green areas, ignored the already existing urban scheme and high value of places where parks were to be established. The idea of demolishing Manhattan for evenly spaced buildings was an unremarkable aberration for New York City's architectural communities. The concept was completely ignored. Le Corbusier's puritan rationalism was an ideology devoid of value for people who designed architecture through long discussions on the utility and decorative values of planned buildings. Koolhaas wrote that this is how the "Rockefeller Center" was built. Le Corbusier's individualism was coupled with his personal paranoia hidden behind extreme rationality, while New York was a manifestation of teamwork and pragmatic architecture.

Koolhaas' research on Manhattan history found stark contrast between modernism with the tradition of European cities (but also that of "Manhattanism") and avant-garde Le Corbusier-style modernism. Manhattanism, with its interest in the Gothic, was closer to the inclinations of European expressionists than to avant-garde aspirations to forms based on simple stereometric shapes. It fulfilled the ideas of individual freedom, hedonism and a new kind of pleasure derived from living in dense areas, while "corbusierism" expressed pursuit of rigorous order, a secret tendency to authoritarianism and individual paranoia. Although both formulas were modernist and broke with many well-established principles of urban life, Koolhaas' research focused on modernism with liberal values, which was not popular in Europe in the same way as in New York. Although liberalism is infamous for its tendency to create strongly ideologized communities, the "culture of congestion" distinguished by Koolhaas in Manhattan was a formula for a modernist community of antagonistic individuals. The discoveries he made initiated his later fascination with manifestations of spontaneity in the development of cities, even when their nature contradicted the principles of freedom.

### 3. Postmodern cities

Postmodern cities were not just an episode in the discontinuous history of cities. Although there has been no permanent return to the past from before the modernist era, tradition has become one of new cities' services. Postmodern architecture and urban planning were part of an attempt to return to social existence in which symbols of tradition, especially sacred buildings, played an important role. Such an attempt at deep regression could not be successful, although the past, based on the so-called Permanent Values, became part of numerous authoritarianisms of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. New authoritarian regimes, however, only seemingly resemble old (especially fascist) ones, being rather a manifestation of biopolitical orders. Current political systems only imitate old ways of governing, but their real legitimization is based on satisfying the basic existential needs of the masses.

Postmodern architecture made use of narrative values and used decorative elements of ancient styles to enhance visual enjoyment of buildings. Nostalgia and history have likewise become new services included in attractions that cities of the future should offer. Therefore, cities restored their monuments and also turned the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries into monuments. Renovations and new monuments were sometimes kitschy, but their tacky beauty was widely appreciated. Museums and concert halls were built, and attempts were made to save cities by maintaining their rank as cultural centers. In the new system of city functioning, however, even high culture was only part of the pleasure world. A large group of cities, where tourism has become an important part of the economy, developed on the basis of such principles. While postmodernism, proclaimed as a new epoch in all areas, turned out to be an impermanent fragment of the history of Western civilization, it was a transitional state in a slowly emerging new civilization. The fear of a future that would destroy the fundamental values of Western civilization manifested itself in postmodernism. This fear turned out to be right, but the defense of the most important values of the old culture was effective only in terms of imitation or preserving remains similar to museum exhibits. Democracy and the idea of freedom have passed into the sphere of appearances, leading to the development of cities with contradictory characteristics: devoid of the spirit of individual freedom, but useful at the level of biological needs.

### 4. Generic city

In order to describe the generic city defined by Koolhaas, one has to abandon the basics of logic, especially the principle of contradiction defined by Leibniz. For the purposes of communication between people and building

communities, it has been assumed so far that one out of two sentences with contradictory content cannot be true. Not long after Leibniz, a change took place in this matter, manifesting itself in Kant's philosophy. Kant's antinomies of pure reason showed that many basic metaphysical problems are unsolvable. The generic city constitutes a being that both is and is not, whose contradictory features are not mutually exclusive. Many of these characteristics are governed by the principle that they are both this and that. Thus, there are many examples of the generic city and it does not exist at the same time, or is at least invisible. It's possible that we all already live there. It is impossible to decide whether a generic city can be properly described, because in all its reality it does not have clear properties – it is bland and thus resistant to observation, reflection and criticism.

The generic city is neither a historical, nor a modernist or postmodern city. A generic city is not a city at all. However, taking advantage of the fact that "it is and is not at the same time" in the system, it is possible to focus attention on its existence and worth trying to describe some of its properties. A lack of clear features does not prevent the existence of indistinct features, including generic city atopy. Such a city resembles the most famous atopic environment today, i.e. the airport. Contacts between people are temporary and superficial there, everyone is on the way, but no one has a goal for the moment. Nobody lives there, but everyone just stays there. Already at this stage of creating the characteristics of the city, the problem is: does it have visual distinguishing features? It seems that the look of the interior of an airport hall with large inscriptions and information billboards may be one of them.

In a radically new type of a city, features that were once important are disappearing, and features that until recently were considered worthless are emphasized. The general city has no identity, which means that users do not identify with ideas that would make them a community. Diverse groups of people who once lived in cities were held together by religious, ethnic, moral and political values. New cities are intended for racially and ethnically diverse communities, not susceptible to the influence of religion, neglecting to create family ties, and also indifferent to liberal and democratic values. Generic cities have ties to all sorts of authoritarianisms that embrace nationalist or communist costumes, while in reality they are a new form of populism.

In generic cities, the ideological character of their population was reflected. Such cities do not have a center or hierarchy, but are a chaotic collection of modules. The modules visually reflect differences between communities inhabiting them, but at the same time are similar to each other. Parts of the city have different functions, but are dominated by strong similarities of the architectural works with which they are built. The architecture, although created by well-educated and inventive architects, is artistically worthless,

even cheesy. Western patterns are reproduced cheaply in Asian cities, so there is no visual difference in the appearance of generic cities on different continents. Generic cities quickly adapt their buildings to specific needs, which means that redundant objects are removed, so that new ones can be built. In an unnoticeable way, cities of a new type are temporary, superficial and subject to frequent modification. Unstable spiritual values of the inhabitants mean that no object in cities has any values that would protect it from dismantling and being replaced with another object. New cities neither care about their history, nor create layers that could interest historians in the future, but are not guided by any vision of the future, either.

The usability of new cities is decisive for their character, which means that great importance is attached to infrastructure and speed of movement. Transport of goods and their delivery to stores, and travel between cities play an important role in their functioning, but traffic routes and airports are imperceptible. Due to their neutrality, airports are the essence of a general city.<sup>10</sup> Although they serve millions of users, they are almost invisible because their aesthetic qualities have no bearing on their use. An equally important function is played by commercial facilities which, until recently, due to their size, were built on the outskirts of cities. Their outer shell rarely stood out from other similar objects, while the interiors were filled with an increasing number of service functions. Just like airports, shopping centers are also "cities within a city" and have a certain autonomy. Garages and parking lots at airports, shopping malls and roads are connected with the necessity of fast movement of inhabitants, but at the same time they are among the least visible works of architecture. Invisibility is important, although it only shows up in scientific analysis. It is part of utility that makes what is most useful impossible to be visually identified, e.g. underground railways, cellular and computer networks, and radio and television stations. Residents' control systems represented by visual monitoring devices are particularly invisible. No computer network user has ever seen huge server rooms.

Traveling has become a pleasure and the ability to quickly change location contributes to a lack of a feeling of being rooted in the inhabitants of general cities. The lack of roots intensifies the feeling of being everywhere and nowhere in the world. Similar feelings are generated by the use of the Internet and access to global television programs. Immediate flow of information and images available over ICT networks, especially wireless ones, have turned any local city into a global one. Former cities had borders, while the current need for

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Koolhaas, B. Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, The Monacelli Press, Rotterdam-NewYork 1995, pp. 1251-1252.

frequent travel and information exchange means that the modern city has no borders. Cities are also not defined by the identity of their inhabitants, as a large number of people residing in them do not live there permanently. There are no permanent connections between specific ideas related to specific cities and the awareness of people staying in them. In the past, they could be described as citizens, later inhabitants, while now they are mentally all tourists. Imaginary boundaries of the modern city are created by the outline of the density of connections by means of a cellular telephone network or computer networks. However, such an outline is not needed by anyone, so it is not created or displayed to the public.

ICT networks use many devices whose visibility is hardly noticeable. Such devices are commonplace, but neither their presence, nor the fact that they create an oppressive society is recognized. Tracking devices allow modern societies to be much more organized than earlier, but this does not raise any objections. As orderly conditions favorable to everyday existence improve, part of the need for freedom which distinguished Western culture disappears. Reflections on the relationship between universal surveillance, which characterizes contemporary life but also contributes to its saturation with comforts, and diminishing freedom and democracy, do not arouse wider interest. Cell phone towers, which can be associated with prison towers, as well as surveillance cameras replacing prison guards, are an overlooked part of the amenities that are valued above other needs.

However, will religious values, group identity or high culture fade away? Generic cities have turned them into service values and they remain widely available. Ecumenical chapels are found at airports and in shopping centers, symbols of different cultures distinguish individual residential districts, each organized activity uses an artistically designed visual sign (logo), and access to cultural events is extremely simple. The difference is that high culture, including architecture, uses only repetitions of its old achievements. The lifestyle of generic cities is based on the use of historical phenomena, while history has ceased to serve as the foundation of great political and moral values, and has become a reservoir of utility forms.

### **Conclusions**

Koolhaas' insights into Manhattanism complemented our understanding of the differences between American and European modernism in building new cities. According to this author, the buildings of Manhattan, despite being included in a rigorous scheme, met various needs of their users, the essence of which was to provide pleasure. The pragmatism of building creators in particular quarters of Manhattan was essentially opposed to the strivings for

extreme rationalization represented in Le Corbusier's doctrines. With the passage of time, the pursuit of comfort and pleasure has dominated the character of world urbanism and contributed to depreciation of the fundamental values of Western civilization, especially the ideas of freedom and democracy. Therefore, what distinguishes contemporary urban planning is a lack of connections between goals that go beyond practical utility and implementation of these goals through skilful organization of city space. Cities were once assigned lofty goals of uniting their inhabitants with God (Jacques Ellul), while present ones can only be related to meeting strictly biological needs. Koolhaas' books and essays turned out to be an important breakthrough in recognizing fundamental differences between old and modern town planning. Their summary is a call to abandon illusions and recognize that "The city no longer exists."<sup>11</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baecker, Dirk (2009) *Stadtluft macht frei: Die Stadt in den Medienepochen der Gesellschaft* "Soziale Welt", vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 259-283.

Ellul, Jacques (1970) *The Meaning of the City*. Translated by Dennis Pardee, Grand Rapids (Michigan): Eerdmans.

Koolhaas, Rem, Mau, Bruce, (1995) *S,M,L,XL*, Rotterdam-NewYork: The Monacelli Press.

Koolhaas, Rem (1994) *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York: The Monacelli Press.

Nędza-Sikoniewska, Kinga (2021) *Nowoczesne. O syberyjskich miastach okresu radzieckiego - przypadek Nowokuźniecka i Magnitogorska*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Rinzler, Jonathan W. (2008) *The Making of Star Wars: The Definitive Story Behind the Original Film*. London: Ebury Press.

Stierli, Martino (2018) *Montage and the Metropolis. Architecture, Modernity, and the Representation of Space*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Weber, Max (1922) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Die Stadt*. Tübingen: Verlag von J.C. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

---

<sup>11</sup> Koolhaas, *Generic*, p. 1264.



## NIECIĄGŁOŚĆ ROZWOJU WSPÓŁCZESNYCH MIAST W TEORIACH REMA KOOLHAASA (streszczenie)

Miasta odgrywały główną rolę w cywilizacji ludzkiej, lecz w ich formach zachodziły duże zmiany. W swej długiej historii przejawiały cechy, które były ze sobą sprzeczne. Historycy dostrzegając różnice we właściwościach miast wskazywali na ich wiele typów. Decydujący podział zakładał, że miasta „orientalne” rządzone są przez reżimy autokratyczne, natomiast miasta „zachodnie” są liberalne i demokratyczne. Podział tego rodzaju bywał często kwestionowany, zwłaszcza, że u schyłku XX wieku wydawało się, że systemy liberalno-demokratyczne zdominowały ostatecznie politykę światową. Przełom XX i XXI wieku pokazał, że przewidywania tego rodzaju nie były słuszne. Teoria Rema Koolhaasa dotycząca „miast ogólnych” (*Generic Cities*) wskazuje, że doszło do niespodziewanej zmiany i obecnie zyskują na znaczeniu formy miast, w których wartości zachodniej kultury nie mają znaczenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teorie architektoniczne, urbanistyka współczesna, Rem Koolhaas, miasto ogólne (generic city)

**Cezary Wąs** – Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art History, University of Wrocław. Curator of the Museum of Architecture (1986-2021). His main research interest is contemporary architecture. Author of the books: *Antynomie współczesnej architektury sakralnej (Antinomies of Contemporary Sacred Architecture, 2008)*, *Architektura a dekonstrukcja. Przypadek Petera Eisenmana i Bernarda Tschumiego (Architecture and Deconstruction. The Case of Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi, 2015)*, *Cień Boga w ogrodzie filozofa. Parc de La Villette w Paryżu w kontekście filozofii chóru (The Shadow of God in the Philosopher's Garden. The Parc de La Villette in Paris in the context of the philosophy of chōra, 2021)* and numerous articles on ancient and modern culture phenomena.