

Proximity: The Unfolding of a Koolhaasian Hypothesis in Book Space and Architectural Space

Abstract

Proximity and contradiction, understood as strategic and productive devices analogous to cinematic montage, figure prominently in Rem Koolhaas's thinking, writing, and making. He expresses them in rhetoric (oxymora), in architecture (cross-programming), in graphic technique (collage), and in references (*cadavre exquis*). *S,M,L,XL* appropriates ordering systems, such as taxonomies and lists, and redirects these to produce new meaning through proximity and fertile contradiction between projects, hypotheses, essays, dictionary entries, and reference images. Antitheses are not resolved, but rather integrated into an all-inclusive book-world. *S,M,L,XL* strategically exploits proximity to expound on, as well as embody, Koolhaas's complex and original conception of context, woven from its physical, temporal, epistemological, and autobiographical dimensions.

...all facts, ingredients, phenomena, etc., of the world have been categorized and catalogued, the definitive stock of the world has been taken. Everything is known, including that which is still unknown. The PCM [Paranoid Critical Method] is both the product of and the remedy against that anxiety: it promises that, through conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium, and that ever-new generations of false facts and fabricated evidences can be generated simply through the act of interpretation. The PCM proposes to destroy, or at least upset, the definitive catalogue, to short-circuit all existing categorizations, to make a fresh start - as if the world can be reshuffled like a pack of cards whose original sequence is a disappointment.

Rem Koolhaas¹

Introduction

When *S,M,L,XL* finally materialized in bookstores in February 1996 as an uncomfortably sized, 1376 page tome weighing in at 2.7 kilograms, it had already been made available to critics for two years as “a ghost of the real book,” according to the publisher.² Advance reviews by Koolhaas’s critics and key allies appeared at the end of 1994 in a special issue of *Architecture New York*, entitled “Urbanism vs Architecture: The Bigness of Rem Koolhaas,” preparing the public for what was to be more than a book.³ Within the first year following its publication, commentators assigned *S,M,L,XL* to numerous contrasting or contradictory categories. Jean-Claude Garcias described it as “a kind of novel,” Hans van Dijk as “autobiography,” Terrence Riley as “a space in which the media creations of architecture collide,” and Toyo Ito as “a casebook of incidents [in which] no connections are provided.”⁴ In the years since, *S,M,L,XL* has continued to attract new imageries and interpretations, as in the case Gabriele Mastrigli, who called it a “cinematic magazine.”⁵ Twenty years after publication, these initial, feverish, and provocative debates have set the stage for needed historicizations and contextualizations of *S,M,L,XL*. The multiplicity of readings reflects on Koolhaas’ unsettlingly multivocal narratives and Bruce Mau’s evocatively multifocal layout, raising the issue of the mechanisms by which the book achieves consistency. That *S,M,L,XL* operates much like a work of architecture is implied in the title of Beatriz Colomina’s 2007 interview with Rem Koolhaas for *El Croquis*, “The Architecture of Publication.”⁶ She contextualizes *S,M,L,XL* within a timeline of Koolhaas’s publications from 1975-2006, and wraps up the interview with a “Rem Koolhaas A-Y” that mirrors *S,M,L,XL*’s well-known dictionary. While the “dictionary questionnaire” has been used by interviewers from Jennifer Sigler⁷ to Douglas Coupland,⁸ the *architecture* of *S,M,L,XL*, the organizational structure that allows multiple literary genres, voices and foci to coexist within a single book-world, has not yet received the critical attention it deserves.

Rem Koolhaas has described himself as “a maker of books,”⁹ who considers books as “things that are made in a certain way and that have physical characteristics that interfere with the message they convey.”¹⁰ A point of reference is a book dating from 1575, which he saw in Oswald Matias Ungers’ library. Its physical characteristics made it “unfathomably modern”: “The Latin text was accompanied by summaries, shortcuts, references and illustrations. It contained the same logic as today’s hypertext.”¹¹ While some have discussed *S,M,L,XL* as antithetical to hypertext,¹² and, more recently, architects and curators like Michael Kubo have positioned *S,M,L,XL* precisely at the point of emergence of the digital media that transformed the role of the book,¹³ Koolhaas’ massive tome is unequivocally corporeal. The precise nature of its “physical characteristics,” its extraordinary book-architecture are key to the book-world that it projects.

In this article I examine the mechanisms of the multiple, competing ordering systems that concatenate *S,M,L,XL*’s disparate contents. Koolhaas appropriates the conventions of list and taxonomy, drawing on and converting their rich associations and meanings. I argue that Koolhaas subverts the established usage of lists and taxonomies in order to willfully, as well as strategically, fabricate proximity between heterogeneous objects and ideas. He assembles *S,M,L,XL* without recourse to “connective tissue.”¹⁴

S,M,L,XL’s physical characteristics, the corporeality and visual appearance of the medium interfere with its messages. Bruce Mau’s approach to layout, when considered along the rich textual fabric occupying *S,M,L,XL*’s pages, requires a particular understanding of context, one that interacts with the varying positions on the topic while embracing contradictions and antitheses on multiple levels. Koolhaas purposefully leaves these contradictions unresolved, integrating them into an all-inclusive image. He drew on the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* that his mentor Oswald Matias Ungers developed in opposition to Colin Rowe’s contextualism.¹⁵ For Koolhaas, spatial setting represents only one aspect of context, alongside its temporal, epistemological, and autobiographical dimensions. Context is ultimately redefined as an intermediate object between reality and its interpretation. By asserting that “there is only one book, to which every writer contributes,” Koolhaas emphasizes the open-ended nature of a definition of context, which interweaves multiple dimensions and invites further invention. Taxonomies and lists are crucial to this understanding of context; this approach deciphers and evaluates the references within *S,M,L,XL*, as well as its putative discourses. In other words, it reveals a genealogy hidden within the contours of this otherwise unwieldy book.

S,M,L,XL constitutes Koolhaas’ final attempt to “achieve consistency by assembling the dimensions represented by our various activities,” and yet, it also initiates a series of publications and editorships that continue to draw on and destabilize the terms of list and taxonomy.¹⁶ This is especially the case with the most recent iteration in this series, “Elements of Architecture,” presented at the Venice Biennale in 2014, which attempts to absorb Gottfried Semper’s taxonomical model that posits a contrasting method of invention. Rather than juxtaposition of contraries and non-familial proximities, Semper draws on functional affiliation, employed as a productive strategy.

Taxonomy and List

Categorization is a theme present in Koolhaas's first writings on architecture. In *Delirious New York* (1978), Koolhaas proposed "to short-circuit all existing categorizations, to make a fresh start—as if the world can be reshuffled like a pack of cards whose original sequence is a disappointment."¹⁷ The pack of cards metaphor points to an enduring interest, one that draws on Koolhaas's personal experience and memory. While writing *Delirious New York*, he was a member of the "Metropolitan Postcard Collectors Club," a group where "everyone had a table, and you would circulate between the 'destinations' of those tables on which the postcards were arranged in shoeboxes. On each table all kinds of possible fetishisms were arranged and indexed."¹⁸ Commenting on this phase of Koolhaas's biography, Demetri Porphyrios recognized a burgeoning interest in "the species and classes of objects that comprised the metropolis ... their forms, their spatial arrangements, their number, size, and physical characteristics."¹⁹ Porphyrios's nod to Carl Linnaeus is apposite, as the apparent disarray of the metropolis obscures an underlying taxonomical order. He further argued that OMA "took upon itself the task of mapping, of transcribing [...] in an alphabetically ordered Metropolitan inventory, of preserving, confronting, and combining,"²⁰ thereby anticipating the titular theme of *S,M,L,XL*.

The title of *S,M,L,XL* has been interpreted as a provocation. According to Justin McGuirk it intends to divide "projects by size, like underpants."²² Read literally, the title merely declares an ordering principle, one that is taxonomical rather than typological, and therefore breaks with the customary organization of architects' monographs.²³ Whereas typology considers several *fundamenta divisionis* (criteria for division of a genus into species) jointly, resulting in a systematization familiar to architects, *taxonomy* considers fundamenta in succession, thereby generating a hierarchical, tree-like structure familiar from biology and the natural sciences. A diagrammatic analysis of *S,M,L,XL* (Figures 1, 2) reveals that, following the first fundamentum, "size," only one additional fundamentum, "location," is applied, but only to three projects located in Rotterdam (pp. 400-429), while the other chapter subheadings are arranged in lists. The principle of the list also infiltrates the table of contents. Additional chapters appended at the beginning and end, "Foreplay" and "P.S." suggest a chronological order that competes with the scalar order of *S,M,L,XL*.

In contrast to taxonomies, which imply a scientific, universalist worldview, lists are ad hoc collections or inventories in random sequence that seek to be exhaustive while remaining open-ended. Under the innocuous heading "Animals," *S,M,L,XL*'s dictionary refers to Michel Foucault's critique of taxonomy and list: "Foucault quotes Borges quoting a certain Chinese encyclopedia in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.'"²⁴ Borges prefaced this fictional encyclopedia with an account of the English natural philosopher John Wilkins's proposal for a

universal language that simultaneously acts as a taxonomy, wherein successive syllables denote class, difference and species of the named.²⁵ By contrast, the fictional Chinese encyclopedia is redolent with narrative and inventive possibilities. Foucault invoked the term “convenientia” to describe the adjacency of dissimilar things that “come sufficiently close to each other to achieve juxtaposition,”²⁶ producing new similarities and meaning.

Borges’s progression from Wilkins’ taxonomy to the fictional list resonates with the French novelist Georges Perec’s shift from the taxonomies of his novel *Espèces d’espaces* (1974) (translated as *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*) to the inventories or lists of *La Vie mode d’emploi* (1978) (translated as *Life A User’s Manual*).²⁷ Koolhaas has acknowledged Perec as a reference.²⁸ Perec’s imaginative inventory of objects in the Parisian apartment building where the later novel is set is marked by non-familial adjacency, in contrast to the adjacencies produced by taxonomy. Non-familial adjacency triggers associations that stimulate narratives, subvert conventional expectations and counteract the logic of classification. In his essay “Think/Classify,” under the heading “U: The World as Puzzle,” Perec critiqued the futility of the project of classification: “So very tempting to want to distribute the entire world in terms of a single code. [...] Unfortunately this doesn’t work, has never even begun to work, will never work.”²⁹ Borges and Perec harnessed the creative energy released by the collapse of taxonomy to stimulate imaginative storylines.

In *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas and Mau deploy a twofold maneuver that paraphrases Borges and Perec’s exploitation of *convenientia*. At first, they use conventions of taxonomy and classification to organise the book in such a way that items can be found and retrieved. Next, they undermine and repurpose classification as a device that fabricates unexpected proximities. In this subverting of classification, proximity serves as a tool of invention, akin to a favorite Koolhaasian reference, the *cadavre exquis*, denoting a Surrealist technique in which a series of authors successively add sentences to a story. In Koolhaas’s interpretation, “fragments are grafted onto an organism in deliberate ignorance of its further anatomy.”³⁰ Another, equally resonant Surrealist parable recounts “the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table”³¹ where mere proximity elicits new meanings.

S,M,L,XL’s “dictionary” constitutes Koolhaas’ most conspicuous repurposing of classification. Dictionary entries introduce and define terms, explain ideas and concepts, quote from other authors, or cite personal anecdotes. Its alphabetical order prompts incongruous and therefore productive adjacencies between its disparate entries and narrative genres. A further layer of juxtaposition arises as the dictionary is woven through the pages of *S,M,L,XL*, and printed on the margins of pages devoted to architectural or urban projects. None of Koolhaas’s subsequent books have elaborated, to the same level of complexity, the multivocality of narration and the multifocality of graphic devices that engage heterogeneous objects and concepts in random as well as orchestrated proximity. In this sense, *S,M,L,XL* stands alone as a model of a book-world that encapsulates Koolhaas’s own use of cross-programming in architectural and urban projects. Akin to a building, *S,M,L,XL* evokes space through

its corporeal presence. While differing publication formats, literary genres, and types of information share the space on its pages, the book is a singular artefact. It can, however, evoke contradictory interpretations of its physicality in the reader's mind. More explicitly, such interpretations play out over the discrete stages of *S,M,L,XL*'s early publication history. Initially taking its inspiration from telephone directories,³² *S,M,L,XL* was conceived as a 21.5 x 27.9 cm tome upon Koolhaas' signing of the first contract with Rizzoli in 1987, albeit significantly thinner than most phone books at 288 pages. Reduced in size to 18.1 x 23.9 x 7.1 cm (and with a steep £ 100 price tag), the first printed edition of 1995 called to mind an expensive hardcover dictionary. After the first edition ran out of print within months, a second edition, sold at a much lower price, again shifted the identity of *S,M,L,XL* as a physical object.

Proximity and Contradiction

S,M,L,XL exploits classification systems to pursue two opposing aims: reference and invention. Content is positioned according to alphabetical, chronological or scalar serialization, allowing information to be found as if in an archive or library. Yet the simultaneous subversion and intersection of multiple systems of classification creates arbitrary proximities that elicit new meanings. Koolhaas's double strategy invites comparison to his built work. Here, the paradigm is inverted. *S,M,L,XL*'s title prominently advertises categorization, and yet the book rededicates the conventions of taxonomy and list to the fabrication of non-familial proximity. Conversely, in describing OMA's architecture Koolhaas advertises cross-programming, drawn from his idea of a "culture of congestion," which forges together seemingly unrelated or even conflicting activities to stimulate new scenarios. In any Koolhaasian building, however, the majority of activities and spaces are organized according to functional and logical relationships, that is, according to expedient proximities. The Seattle Public Library is case in point. Its administrative offices, its entry sequence, its book stacks and reading rooms form networks of expedient proximities, arranged to facilitate routine activities. The privileging of logical contiguity over potentially fertile juxtaposition extends to the "Dewey spirals," which arrange books in a logical, continuous sequence unbroken by the common disconnect between floor levels.³³ Interestingly, such architectural effort is expended on a library classification system, organizing books according to thematic affiliation while seeking to minimize non-familial adjacencies (which nevertheless occur due to the alphabetical order that is used locally). During the planning stages of the Seattle library Koolhaas proposed to include a clinic for the homeless, a prominent manifestation of cross-programming that was ultimately not implemented. In writing about architecture, Koolhaas almost completely suppresses any mention of the role that expedient proximities play in his work.³⁴ Instead, his frequent references to Surrealist tropes serve to emphasize and disproportionately advertise the relatively infrequent occurrences of cross-programming and staging of unlikely juxtapositions. While Koolhaas the polemicist advertises juxtaposition, Koolhaas the architect pragmatically and judiciously addresses complex sets of requirements through classification.

Koolhaas the book-maker, meanwhile, skillfully manipulates ordering systems to create a book-world sewn together by *convenientia*, by adjacencies that create new meaning.

Koolhaas's oeuvre underscores the pivotal role of proximity through three analogous tropes drawing on cinematic montage.³⁵ These tropes are: cross-programming (in architecture); oxymoron (in rhetoric); and collage (in visual communication). This parallelism of tropes is deployed in the essays, projects, exhibits and citations assembled in *S,M,L,XL*, but it is also manifest in the book's layout and visual identity. The programming of *S,M,L,XL* calls to mind the cross-section of the Downtown Athletic Club, which Koolhaas first examined in *Delirious New York* and that subsequently has become the preeminent emblem for his design strategies that make use of proximity and cross-programming. In translating cross-programming to writing, Koolhaas's book-world arises from opposing and heterogeneous arrays of media and genres.³⁶ The "crossed" programs include: literary fragments ranging from a practice monograph that conveys projects and buildings; architectural drawings and photographs; autobiographical text fragments; freely associated images that evoke architectural, visual or political themes (Figures 5, 6); and finally a dictionary that is itself "cross-programmed" with entries in disparate genres ranging from definitions to quotes and anecdotes. "Oxymora," defined in the dictionary (p. 978) as "a combination of contradictory or incongruous words," are extensively deployed in titles, terms and texts ranging from "Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture," to the "Paranoid Critical Method," to "The Terrifying Beauty of the 20th Century." Collage, finally, operates on four levels: as a principle governing organization of the book, at the level of page layout, at the level of images, and at architectural scale. All three devices, cross-programming, oxymora and collage serve a common purpose—they elicit themes from proximities that appear arbitrary, but are deliberately fabricated.

One can productively contrast *S,M,L,XL* against another book Mau designed two years later: Rosalind Krauss's and Yves-Alain Bois's *Formless*.³⁷ At first sight, *Formless*'s table of contents (Figures 3, 4) closely resembles that of *S,M,L,XL* (Figures 1, 2). However, whereas the latter elicits themes from juxtaposition of opposites, *Formless* consolidates discussion of groups of related works of art within a series of twenty-six thematically defined essays that are cunningly assigned to four superordinate headings without breaking their alphabetical sequence. While *S,M,L,XL* relishes in the idiosyncrasies extracted from alphabetical juxtaposition, *Formless*, in a reverse operation, translates the anarchic sequence of entries in Georges Bataille's *Dictionnaire critique* into an artfully conceived hierarchical and logical structure.

Context and Intertextuality

Amongst the theoretical commentaries on context assembled in *S,M,L,XL*, "The Terrifying Beauty of the 20th Century" (1985) and "Bigness, or the Problem of Large" (1994) mark polar opposites. In the former text, Koolhaas argues for a "method of systematic idealization, an automatic overestimation of

what exists, a bombardment of speculation that invests even the most mediocre aspects with retroactive conceptual and ideological charge.”³⁸ “To each bastard” he allocates “a genealogical tree; the faintest hint of an idea is tracked with the obstinacy of a detective on a juicy case of adultery.”³⁹ “Bigness,” written nine years later, inverts this irrationally exuberant position by declaring: “Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is fuck context.”⁴⁰ “Bigness,” which first appeared in the 1994 issue of *ANY* that announced *S,M,L,XL*, defined the “vehemently anti-contextualist label” that has remained attached to Koolhaas.⁴¹ While exploiting the attention that his controversial position attracted, Koolhaas has since tried to qualify its relevance. In 1998 he linked “Bigness” to OMA’s project for the Très Grande Bibliothèque in Paris, drawing back from positing it as a universal paradigm applicable to all large buildings.⁴² In 2002 he pulled back even further, arguing, “You have to take ‘fuck context’ in context in order to understand it. I was saying that in some cases there is simply no relationship between the new and what is already there. Moreover, what is already here does not always have any quality.”⁴³ Even in the book context of *S,M,L,XL*, a parade of projects inserted between “Bigness” and the Très Grande Bibliothèque soften its apocalyptic tone and message. These projects are introduced through reflections on site and history (Boompjes TowerSlab), masquerade as only seemingly anti-contextual (The Hague City Hall, through the withdrawal of the “Nolli Plan” that had accompanied it in earlier publications), or discover infrastructure as a locus of a new, subterranean contextualism (The Spui in The Hague). Koolhaas further undermined the authority of “Bigness” in his comments in 2007 on “literary” writing that uses “different genres, different tones, clinical ... or hysterical;” he described “the fun of writing as if you are somebody else,” and bemoans that in the architectural domain “the most elementary knowledge of what writing represents is absent, every text is taken literally. There is no sense of manipulation, inflection, of tone, of irony.”⁴⁴ The series of qualifications that Koolhaas appends to “Bigness” do not aim to resolve contradictions; they only begin to explain how apparent contradictions are embraced and absorbed by a multi-layered, complex definition of context, which calls for further scrutiny.

Koolhaas acquired the fundamental constituents of his conception of context and contradiction during his studies with Oswald Matias Ungers at Cornell University, where he was also exposed to Colin Rowe’s emerging ideas on urbanism. In *Collage City*, Rowe explained a model of urbanism constituted by a contradiction between “ideal types” and “empirical context,” that is, between “archetype and accident,” between “‘perfect’ buildings in ... pristine integrity” that need to be “‘compromised’ for use in a less than ‘perfect’ site.”⁴⁵ This contradiction is resolved through *poché*, an interstitial layer of connective tissue that deforms under the opposing pressures of ideal type and site. Hence, the original opposition is resolved, but also permanently registered in space and form.⁴⁶ In response to Rowe, Koolhaas was able to develop his rejection of such demonstrative resolution of contradiction and hone his argumentation.⁴⁷ In 1980 he formulated an acute rebuttal, deriding Rowe’s “contextualist epiphany,” and criticizing the fact that “the modern contextualist is forced to telescope vicissitudes of centuries into a single moment of conception.” Koolhaas argued that “since the

contextualist simulates the aesthetics of history single-handed, [Rowe] has to impersonate—hopefully with equal conviction—both sides in his re-enactment of the eternal battle between Ideal and Real, the Platonic and the Circumstantial.”⁴⁸

Ungers, Rowe’s protégé-turned-adversary at Cornell—and Koolhaas’s mentor—formulated an alternative stance on contradiction that referred to the medieval scholastic concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which denotes a “coincidence of antitheses and not their overcoming,” but rather their integration “into an *all-inclusive image*.”⁴⁹ It is this concept that *S,M,L,XL*’s dictionary entry on “Proximity²” fuses with the Foucauldian notion of *convenientia*,⁵⁰ declaring:

As long as two buildings share the same space or are in each other’s proximity, whether the architect wants it or not, or whether anybody cares, they do have a relationship. It is an enormous farce to believe that to create a relationship, one thing has to be like another thing, or one thing has to adjust to another thing. As anybody who shares the world with anybody else knows, the simple proximity—the simple juxtaposition of things—creates a relationship that is there, almost independent of the mutual will of the people who created these objects.⁵¹

Ungers advocated for architecture to “integrate itself into that which already exists, to accentuate and amplify its surroundings.”⁵² He endeavored to achieve such integration by distilling “themes” from context. Ungers’s choice of five such themes for his 1982 publication *Architecture as Theme* provides some clues as to how themes can emanate from contextual analysis and simultaneously constitute a proposition. These themes include: transformation or the morphology of the Gestalt; assemblage or the coincidence of opposites; incorporation or “the doll within the doll;” assimilation or the adaptation to the “genius loci”; and finally, imagination or “the world as idea.”⁵³ Unlike Koolhaas, Ungers shares Rowe’s belief in typologies as the origin of design—his excogitation of “themes” sidesteps identifying possible contradictions between type and context and instead allows for diagnosis and prognosis to merge. A case in point is the 1977 summer school, called “Berlin, A Green Archipelago,” where Koolhaas collaborated with Ungers.⁵⁴ The archipelago theme derives from the “theme of incorporation,” as urban islands, which incorporate buildings, are turn incorporated into the city. In one way or another, however, it can also be related to the other four foundational Ungerian themes. Ungers and Koolhaas sought out analogies between city, city fragments, and buildings, and allowed for contradictions at each level to be absorbed into the “all-inclusive image” of the archipelago.

The merger of analysis with creation forms a key prerequisite to the Ungerian notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which Koolhaas extends and transforms. Hence, an autobiographical dictionary entry in *S,M,L,XL* states, under the heading “Surrealism”: “I have had a longstanding interest in surrealism, but more for its analytical powers than for its exploitation of the subconscious or for its aesthetics ... I was most impressed by its ‘paranoid’ methods, which I consider one of the genuine inventions of this century, a rational method which does not pretend to be objective, through which analysis becomes

identical to creation.”⁵⁵ The other key lesson Koolhaas learned from Surrealism relates to allegory. An allegorical painting represents abstract ideas within the space of the canvas, and translates affiliations between ideas into spatial relationships. Koolhaas’s reading of urban space attributes significance to buildings by associating them with abstract ideas. Allegorical operations allow the space of the existing city to merge with the imaginary space of allegorical meanings and unbuilt proposals, such as in the drawings for OMA’s Friedrichstadt project, which embrace unbuilt projects by Mendelsohn, Hilberseimer, and Mies van der Rohe and exemplify Koolhaas’s augmented notion of context.⁵⁶ The reportage in “Atlanta (1987/1994)” demonstrates Koolhaas’s use of proximity to enmesh urban context within its allegorical and ideational dimensions. He reports: “In 1987, somewhere near here, two skyscrapers were built facing each other, one hyper-modern (i.e., clad in mirror-glass), the other almost Stalinist (covered in prefabricated concrete). They were built by the same firm for different corporate entities, each searching for its own elusive identity. Two buildings, so close together, built by a single firm in opposite languages.”⁵⁷ Koolhaas observes that “a new aesthetic operates in Atlanta: the random juxtaposition of entities that have nothing in common except their coexistence, or favorite formulation of the surrealists— ‘the accidental encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.’”⁵⁸

In addition to its spatial and epistemological settings, Koolhaas also conceives of context as having a temporal dimension. Therefore, when he speaks about his ambition “to establish a heavily contextual framework” in *S,M,L,XL*, he aims “to reveal the exact moment within globalization that [projects] were produced, to which pressures they responded, by which political moments they were triggered.”⁵⁹ Since the publication of *S,M,L,XL*, the use of the timeline as a means to visually represent a building’s temporal context has gained further prominence. For example, in *Content* (2003) and in *Post-Occupancy* (2006), Koolhaas introduced buildings along a compilation of news items that appeared on the day of its inauguration.⁶⁰ The skillful manipulation of proximity on and between all three levels on which *S,M,L,XL* defines context allows Koolhaas to present multiple, contradictory viewpoints that remain unresolved and therefore retain their productive potential. The Latin verb *contextere*, meaning “weaving together” can be applied in space as well as time; the noun *contextus*, defined as “ordered scheme, series,”⁶¹ refers to the idea of succession, sequence and concatenation. Pierre Chabard therefore points out that, “to be contextual, therefore, means forging relations in time as well as in space,”⁶² and that “Koolhaas makes full use of this critical definition of the context as an interior horizon, as an intermediate object between reality and its interpretation” and, finally, that he “consequently always includes each of his projects in his autobiographical writings, a scenario through which his architecture retrospectively invents its own context.”⁶³

A maker of book space as well as architectural space, Rem Koolhaas operates in two domains. Both domains rely on collaboration: book space involves author and reader, and architectural or urban space engages the architect, inhabitant, and visitor. Context—defined as an intermediate object between

reality and its interpretation—is brought into being in each space by interweaving its spatial, temporal, epistemological and autobiographical dimensions. It might be argued that architecture is bound to its spatial setting, whereas a book permits its author to invent its context, and to manipulate its dimensions. In that sense, architects might be thought of as interlopers in a given setting and passing contributors to a continuous sequence of transformations, and their buildings as always a fragment of something greater.

Such continuity, however, is exactly what Koolhaas claims for book space, explaining that “actually one never reads only one book, but rather several books at a time. Each individual book represents all other, past and future, books. Books exist in a state of permanent contamination. Actually there is only one book, to which every writer contributes. The typology of the book is so brilliant that, by definition, it is always a fragment of something greater.”⁶⁴ This statement aligns Koolhaas with the French Structuralist philosophers Roland Barthes’s and Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, which considers all texts to be “built as a mosaic of quotations ... as the absorption and transformation of another text.”⁶⁵ Barthes distinguishes between work and text, the former constituted by “a co-existence of meaning” that can be interpreted, whereas the latter “is always paradoxical,” a methodological field “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (...), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony,”⁶⁶ which cannot be interpreted but only exploded or disseminated. Within Barthes’s definition of text, Koolhaas employs *S,M,L,XL*’s lists, montages, oxymora, and collages not to designate and affiliate, but rather to force associations between antithetical concepts, to intertwine multiple dimensions of context, and to form an “all-inclusive image” without recourse to either connective tissue or the resolution of contradiction.

The legacy of *S,M,L,XL*

As part of his research on publishing practices, Michael Kubo conducted a survey where respondents identified the five “most read” architectural books.⁶⁷ The results are familiar and yet poignant. Familiar, for the five most read books include: Le Corbusier’s *Vers une Architecture*, Robert Venturi’s and Denise Scott Brown’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, and Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York*, and *S,M,L,XL*. Poignant, for as Kubo observed, this chronology was terminated by the emergence of other, competing forms of media in the digital era. Echoing this theme of closure, Koolhaas has positioned *S,M,L,XL* at the conclusion of a phase in which “we felt an obligation to be our own commentators,” and “tried to achieve consistency by assembling the dimensions represented by our various activities.”⁶⁸ Released from this commitment to consistency and methodological autobiography, Koolhaas professed to now “emphasize the gap, the formal divorce” between research and architectural work, the former carried out through AMO and the Harvard Project on the City.⁶⁹ Koolhaas feels that OMA’s work greatly benefits from the research

projects, despite the fact that there is no link between the two. The theme of parallelism and disconnect resonates with an architectural technique, “Lobotomy,” which Koolhaas defined in *Delirious New York* as the surgical severance of continuity between interior and exterior, and subsequently incorporated into OMA’s architectural and urban practice. Paradoxically, the notion of lobotomy or formal divorce constitutes a continuous thread weaving through almost half a century of research and architectural work. *S,M,L,XL* bridges that divide, but by association through proximity, rather than explanatory links.

While *S,M,L,XL* marks the end of an era, it simultaneously constitutes a link within a continuous chain of Koolhaasian publications exploring and utilizing inventories as a tool of analytical invention or inventive analysis, that begins with Koolhaas’s conjecture on reshuffling the world as if it were a pack of cards, and Porphyrios description of OMA’s metropolitan taxonomy. The continuous strand of analysis and invention through use and diversion of inventories, which runs from there to *S,M,L,XL* has never been abandoned, and resurfaces in a series of publications from 2003 to 2014. This new series begins with the compilation of “30 types of spaces” in the format of a Georges Perec list in *Wired* (2003), it continues with the projects collected in *Content* (2004), which are assembled in a geographical sequence running from West to East; and then shifts towards a demonstrative approach of “brute force serialization” in the *Aquis Commutaire* (2004), which is a 80,000 page collection of European laws and regulations.⁷⁰ In *Volume* (2005) Koolhaas reverts to a Perec-inspired list of “14 Beyond’s,” with the *OMA Book Machine* (2010), a 40,000-page compendium of OMA publications to date he returns to chronological serialization.⁷¹ What appears in retrospect to be a rigorous series of works systematically exploring the inventive potential of inventories almost certainly was not conceived of as such. On other occasions, Koolhaas has reacted with alarm to critics identifying “uniform formulas” and “conceptual rigor” in his work, expressing his concern that these “have a disadvantage in that they paralyze me” and “prevent me from offering a discourse that is truly my own.”⁷² The remarkable consistency that exists nevertheless in Koolhaas’s subversive usages of lists and inventories as strategic tools in absorbing references and appropriating influences might have its roots in a particular Koolhaasian anxiety. In a 1994 interview with John Rajchman, he recalls starting to read Deleuze and almost immediately closing the books “out of a fear of becoming Deleuzian and a sense that maybe it already was too late.”⁷³ In a similar vein, he has described reading *Learning from Las Vegas* as “both inspiration and threat.”⁷⁴ Despite exhaustive discourse on *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas has never commented in depth on the techniques and strategies that underpin the organization of the book. This apparent blind spot may explain why *Elements of Architecture* flounders in its attempt to incorporate Semperian taxonomy.

Conclusion

The chain of publications that succeeded *S,M,L,XL* has continued its use of inventory and list. No qualitative shift came about until Koolhaas readmitted taxonomy in *Elements of Architecture* at the 2014 Venice Biennale.⁷⁵ While the selection of 14 elements has reminded Hans-Ulrich Obrist of a Perec list,⁷⁶ four of its categories, namely fireplace, roof, wall, and floor, map directly onto the *Four Elements of Architecture* in Gottfried Semper's eponymous book of 1851.⁷⁷ Both Semper and Koolhaas use classification to invite invention, but their methods could not be more different. Semper sought to comprehend and emulate "the natural process of invention" by which species differentiate as they adapt to their environment; his "genealogical" classification of architectural elements results in familial adjacencies. Semper and Koolhaas stand on either side of Barthes's distinction between *work* and *text*. While Semper's *work* follows "an organic progress of maturation," Koolhaas's *text* is realized "according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations."⁸¹ In *Elements of Architecture*, fragments of Semperian "work" and Koolhaasian "text" coexist uneasily.

It is against this uneasy coexistence that the paradoxical coherence of *S,M,L,XL* is thrown into sharp relief. The heterogeneity of *S,M,L,XL* resides in its content, in its divergent literary genres and media creations of architecture. *S,M,L,XL*'s structure, however, draws on a set of influences, which range from the Foucauldian notion of *convenientia*, to Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, to Perec's inventories and lists, to Ungers's conception of *coincidentia oppositorum*, to Surrealist tropes, and which are, despite their disparate origins, deeply resonant in their meanings and sensibilities. This set of references, drawn from literature as well as architecture, underpins *S,M,L,XL*'s foundational hypothesis on the productive potential of proximity. This hypothesis informs Koolhaas's writing and book-making as well as his architecture; it is nowhere as persuasively argued for and palpably embodied as in the book-world of *S,M,L,XL*. Its physicality, Structuralist complexity, and literary sensibility distinguish it from digital actualizations of proximity such as hyperlinks or the adjacency of windows on a digital screen. *S,M,L,XL*, like Semper's books, represents a method of invention, but also embodies the cultural sensibilities of an epoch that has become historical.

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