



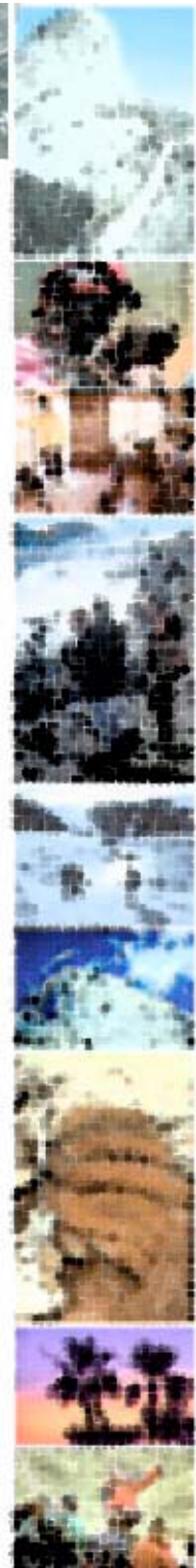
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## **Hybrid Highrises**

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This paper is drawn from some new research I am getting underway on the fortunes of the highrise. I should say that this paper is largely speculative and has benefited greatly from discussions with my co-researcher on this project, Stephen Cairns who is in architecture at The University of Edinburgh. I invite you today to speculate with me about the fortunes of the highrise in the contemporary city.

The 'city' is full of difference - indeed the presence of difference, far from compromising the coherence of 'the city', has come to be central to our concept of what makes the city city-like. Roland Barthes says that the city is "the place of our meeting with the other" (Barthes 1981, 96). While for Richard Sennett, to be in the modern city is to be always "in the presence of otherness" (Sennett 1990, 123). From the beginnings of the industrialised city, commentators have been captivated by this diversity - the array of identities, the unpredictable vectors of connection, the uncontrollable contagions, the mongrel outcomes. This is what Nietzsche referred to as the 'over-excited worldliness' of urban life, what we might in the context of this event prefer to think of as 'cosmopolitanism' (Nietzsche, *Samtliche Werke*. Kritische Studienausgabe, vol 7 p817, quoted in Frisby 1985, 32).

Cosmopolitanism - an openness to difference - has been a necessary part of the infrastructure of modernity, and indeed a central value within Enlightenment thought. Yet the stories we currently tell about the Enlightenment in action - those stories of imperialism, modernisation, development and, more recently, globalisation - often over-emphasise the non-recognition of difference, its displacement, its erasure. The story of modernity ends, some would have it, simply with a homogenous global culture. The recent attention being given to cosmopolitanism is not simply about the re-emergence of difference - of unrecognised and inaudible assemblages of ethnic diversity suddenly speaking up. Cosmopolitanism is about more than mere presence, it is also about a certain set of self-conscious attitudes to that presence - most evident in Australian cities through policies of multiculturalism. Ghassan Hage (1998, 201) tells us that the 'the cosmopolite is an essentially "mega-urban" figure', suggesting that the city both produces the conditions for cosmopolitanism and provides specific opportunities for its performance. Of course, Hage also makes some important specifications about his cosmopolites: they are urban figures who (equipped with various class and taste capacities) joyously perform their worldliness through the domain of refined consumption. Hage goes on to note the very significant political implications of who gets to consume whom in this feast of urban diversity.

To place the cosmopolite in the city is entirely consistent with earlier commentaries which stressed diversity within modern cities and urban life - to quote Nietzsche again, the European city of his time was 'the spice stop of the whole West and East, equipped for any taste' (from *Samtliche Werke* vol 7 p817, quoted in Frisby 1985, 32). Of course, a joyous cosmopolitanism based on taste and consumption was not always the stance taken towards urban difference. Nietzsche worried about the

'uncanny social insecurity' of his times. George Simmel, himself thinking about the city at the turn of the century, famously diagnosed an urban neurasthenia, an unnatural 'intensification of nervous stimulation' which in turn gave rise to a 'secret restlessness'. So for these early urban commentators *difference* did not engender a cosmopolitanism performed through what anthropologist Clifford Geertz characterises as 'enlarged capacities for adaptability and fellow feeling' (Geertz, quoted in Hage 1998, 201). Rather, it produced a range of unsettlements which were dealt with more anxiously than joyously. And it is here that a concept I have used in relation to another politics of difference may come in handy - this being Freud's concept of the uncanny which comes out of his contemplation of one's sense of place in a modern, changing world. Freud elaborates the uncanny by way of two German words whose meanings, which at first seem diametrically opposed, in fact circulate through each other. These two words are: *heimlich*, which Freud glosses as 'home', a familiar place, and *unheimlich*, which is unfamiliar, strange, unhomely. An 'uncanny' experience may occur when one's home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and 'out of place' simultaneously.

Simmel saw such unsettlements pathologically, they were problems that city dwellers had to keep at bay by developing specific tactics of restraint - namely, punctuality, specialisation, and most interestingly, indifference. And of course, this indifference to difference may or may not be a passive state. We might imagine, in contrast, that contemporary cosmopolites would see these unsettlements joyously, offering, among other things (and most cynically) new opportunities for consumption. These two stances that may be taken up in relation to the unsettlements of difference are by no means mutually exclusive. Nor are they set in some neat teleology, that might conveniently see the closed indifference Simmel found in the *fin de siècle* city transform itself into the open cosmopolitanism of the millennial city. At any one time, the diversity of the city might be loathed - blamed for the loss of community, the rise of alienation as well as a plethora of other urban dysfunctions - and might be loved - praised for the beguiling energy it brings to everyday urban life. Indeed in the contemporary cosmopolis joyous celebration of difference often enough coincides with, and can often explicitly give rise to, a sense of not belonging, a sense that things once familiar - one's neighbourhood, one's city, one's train journey, one's local shops - are becoming unfamiliar. And as I (and others) have noted, this sense of loss can lead to a range of resentments, including of course certain racisms and exclusionary reterritorialisations (think of the new racism in Australia or, in a more clearly urban form, the gated suburbs of Mike Davis's Los Angeles). Both of these revanchist tendencies respond not simply to the presence of difference, but are explicit reactions to the sorts of inclusionary manoeuvres cosmopolites might imagine their ideal city to be built around.

Freud's consideration of the uncanny came out of his contemplation of how moderns may come to feel at home. This matter of finding a home or feeling 'at home' in the contemporary city has long exercised the imaginations of architects and urban planners, not to mention the budgets of various bureaucracies. One of the most recent contributions to this field of urban imagining is Leonie Sandercock's aptly titled book, *Towards Cosmopolis*. In the introductory pages Sandercock returns to the sort of tensions that I have sketched thus far. By page three of *Towards Cosmopolis*, Sandercock is gazing into a 'crystal globe' at a 'rainbow city, a multicultural city', although not necessarily the cosmopolitan city. She does not know whether to rejoice or despair about what she sees - is it 'carnival' or is it 'inferno'? And her anxiety about

how to read this 'multicultural city' brings her to the driving question of the book, a question that invokes the precise contours of the uncanny: 'Who belongs where?' (p3) Sandercock asks. The goal of Sandercock's book is to lay out an intellectual framework for the bringing into being of a 'normative cosmopolis', a city which kindly, justly accommodates difference. It is, among other things, a call for the planning profession to cosmopolise its practices, to listen to 'others', to be alert to minority interests, to gesture - through both procedure and plan- to the vast array of identities which constitute the contemporary city. Avoiding the central risk taken by many of the utopian urbanists that precede her, Sandercock does not put plan to paper. Her cosmopolis cannot be fixed in a single space; wisely, it cannot be condensed into one design solution. To do so would simply replicate the central enemy of her project, 'the modernist planning paradigm', a form of planning which has, in Sandercock's view, done nothing but wreck damage on the environment, the community, cultural diversity and the human spirit. So it is with a 'certain exhilaration' that Sandercock scripts the 'death of the "Rational City"', the death of 'modernist notions of technical rationality providing order, coherence, regulation, homogeneity' (4).

I want to visit briefly the way in which Sandercock scripts the life and death of the monster of modernist planning. Aspects of this story may well be familiar to many of you here, because despite Sandercock's insistence that modernist planning is hegemonic, it is also true that it has a presence in the popular cosmopolite imaginary as something to be bemoaned whenever possible. As cosmopolites ourselves, we should not, then, be surprised to see Le Corbusier positioned as the inaugural figure of this story of modernist planning. His vision brought to urban design and planning (and here I include architecture) a tendency to 'decontextualis[e]', to deny 'history and everyday life rhythms', to place mind over body, resulting as one might imagine in 'shock' and 'defamiliarization' (23). For Sandercock (drawing on the work of Barbara Hooper (1998)), Le Corbusier works only to the 'manifesto of the straight line' and indulges in a 'masculinist fantasy of control', a critique which of course brings us to that widespread coding of the highrise as a phallus. Within this scripting of the rational modernist city (including of course the highrise), all that the cosmopolite planner should cherish and nurture - diversity, spontaneity, otherness - is damaged and displaced.

What we have in Sandercock's account of modernist planning (and by implication architecture) is a story wherein the creative dialectic of modernity is diminished into something known as modernism and modernisation. And while Le Corbusier is positioned as the author of this vision, so his highrise building form becomes something of the 'mass ornament' of its materialisation. I take this sense of mass ornament from Siegfried Kracauer, another key commentator on the early modern city. Kracauer felt that the mass ornament was symptomatic of the times, and the exemplary instance he drew upon was the American popular culture form, the Tiller Girls, a group of women who danced in strict formation. Their performance was a spectacle based on the indissoluble constellation of their bodies in movement, on rationality, regularity and the patterning of bodies in precise geometrics. It was a performance in which the agent of the ornament was the mass itself. The women (as Frisby (1985, 148) notes), operated merely as "building blocks" in the whole: they were without history, without sex, without personalities, without human relationships. The product was so rigorously linear that it looked like nothing more than 'aerial pictures of cities', as Kracauer was to observe.

In Sandercock's own book a commissioned collaged photograph gives a version of this idea explicit expression, and in so doing elaborates a very insistent

binary around which her and other critiques of modernist planning are built. In this image the *terra firma* of modernisation belongs to the straight-lined rationalist highrise (tended by its white coated experts), while tradition, real ornament, sacredness, the organic appear only as a shimmering reflection in the nearby waterway. It would appear that this modern form - and all that it stands for - had successfully had its way with the city of diversity. That it had displaced otherness, difference, the feminine, bodies, personalities, local contingency. A building type that was inaugurated as an invitation for the masses to inhabit the city as fully housed urban citizens, has come to be understood as a malevolent monster which offers nothing more than uninhabitable spaces from which tradition, real ornament, and community are banished.

Sandercock, of course, is not alone in this view. The highrise was put to similar use by Prince Charles (The Prince of Wales) in the late 1980s when he proposed his *Vision of Britain* - those last two slides are in fact from his book. Here an entire revisioning of British architecture and planning (both rural and urban) is rhetorically grounded upon the failure of the highrise modernist form. With a rather more global reach, architectural commentators like Charles Jencks referred to the planned demolition of Pruitt-Igoe (1972) and to the unplanned collapse of Ronan Point (1968) as symbolic markers of the death of modernism and the beginnings of postmodernism (that post which (in architectural terms) brought back history, tradition, locality, and wiggly bits).

But let me shift tone here, lest this begins to sound like a defence of the highrise itself, as a form of post postmodern advocacy which positions the highrise as something to be nostalgic about as something now marginal which needs re-recognition. Not that this is an unavailable position in relation to the highrise. This is certainly how English Heritage have begun to approach at least some of the residual stock of English highrises. In Sheffield, for example, they have controversially intervened with the plans of the local authority to do away with its post war highrise stock and have listed one of the estates as part of the nation's architectural heritage.

I have turned to the highrise not out of nostalgia nor in the spirit of some sort of thorough inclusiveness, but because it is one of the 'mass ornaments' of modernity. Furthermore it is an ornament that is routinely used as a rhetorical starting point for at least one strand of contemporary cosmopolite discourse: therein positioned as something that stands against diversity, for the will of power, for homogeneity. And so my turn to the highrise is in order to bring it back into view as something other to itself - to develop a slightly different - perhaps a more productive - deconstructive stance in relation to it. What if we were to follow this mass ornament around the world and to connect it within the contingencies of its making? What if we were to begin to see its varied positionings in the imaginaries of its makers - the state, the developer? What if we were to look past the taut skin of the highrise exterior and into its interiors? What if we were to think inside the mass ornament, to see its internal metabolic flows? What if we were to see it as part of a broader set of time-space geographies which puncture the taught skin of the highrise - as geographers Lily Phua and Brenda Yeoh have done, or the architect Rem Koolhaas has done? And what if we were to think about the spiritual life of the highrise, to locate, as Kon Wajiro does here, the gods around the living room? Or to peel away the repetitive exteriors of these buildings and begin to contemplate the ornament within, what politics might be contained in these other, more irregular surfaces? Once we begin to think about the highrise as contingency, then its place in the binarised rhetoric of cosmopolite planning and design may well begin to crumble.

One sign of a shift in the positioning of the highrise in contemporary urban discourse was recently provided by that most public of cosmopolites, Mackenzie Wark. Unlike Leonie Sandercock, who explicitly reminds us that she once (unsuccessfully) opposed the construction of public housing highrises in Melbourne, MacKenzie Wark, it seems, is happy to occupy an inner city highrise (probably not a public highrise). This abode featured as a kind of residential aside in one of his recent columns. The column was a meditation on the joys of postmodern eating in inner city Sydney. Wark here tells a story of shopping around, of making the move from one ethnic-style grocery store - a Greek owned shop - to another Asian grocery store, and how difficult it was at first to appreciate all it had to offer. This is a story about the unfamiliar becoming - with the aid of a useful guidebook for Asian food shopping and cooking - familiar. It is, of course, a story of cosmopolite consumption, a testimony to those 'enlarged capacities for adaptability and fellow feeling' that Geertz talked about. And in the background of this story, acting as a kind of necessary context, was the fact that this cosmopolite was living high, he had turned his back on the suburbs, turned away from the gentrified terraces, and was living out a sort of Asianised Manhattanism, right here in Sydney.

The highrise has certainly transgressed that architectonic of East and West at more worldly scales than this local example suggests. The historian Adolf Vogt, for example, has recently shown (in his book *Le Corbusier, The Noble Savage* 1998), that Corb's radiant city was infected at its very inception by the forms of 'primitive' dwellings in the Asia-Pacific region. Such retrospective reworkings suggest the highrise was always already a hybrid product of that zone of contact between East and West. Similarly, if we were to think more carefully about the varied circumstances of its global journey, then its transgressive tendencies may become visible. As we have seen, in 'the west' there is a popular and professional commonsense view that highrise - especially as a public housing form - is seriously flawed. Yet if we turn to cities like Singapore and Hong Kong then we see the highrise form flourishing in a way that tall buildings have not since the airminded days of the early Manhattan skyscrapers. In an 'Eastern' context it would appear that a building form has been enlivened well after the universal (western) proclamation that it is past its 'use-by' date (see Castells et al. 1990 for a political economic explanation of this paradox). Furthermore, it would appear that local cultures have not been obliterated by the arrival of these global architectures, but sustain themselves in such a way that they give this 'obsolete' form new vitality.

Of course, there are many ways in which the vitality of the residential highrise in Asia - and particularly in Singapore and Hong Kong - might be understood. A political economic perspective might point to the commitment to housing within post-independence, state-led nationalisms. A development studies perspective might say that this yet another example of an obsolete western technology finding a home in nations committed to modernisation. Yet others might hold this up as evidence of globalisation within a process of capitalist expansion so uniform, so predictable, so thorough, that it only requires 'a single urban discourse' to explain it (Rimmer and Dick 1998, 1). Certainly this last point of view taps into quite a different worldliness to that implied by cosmopolitanism - this is the single-minded worldliness of, say, Wallerstein's world systems theory. It is a worldliness which works to reduce everything to the same, rather than to expand everything towards difference. Rey Chow (1993, 486) has argued that there is a need to think about the 'continuous confrontation' between 'these two impossible ends of totality and difference'. Chow's term 'continuous confrontation' refers to the range of productive possibilities which

might occur in a zone of contact like the residential highrise: at once antagonistic and anxious, but also inventive and creative (see also Appadurai 1990 and Knox 1995). Such a possibility was recently hinted at by Rem Koolhaas when he placed his own innovative ideas on highrise urbanism (what he calls *Manhattanism*, Koolhaas 1974) in touch with the Asian city of Singapore. To call the highrise city of Singapore 'western' is, he says, Eurocentric. :

*The "Western" is no longer our exclusive domain...It is no longer something that 'we' have unleashed, no longer something whose consequences we therefore have the right to 'deplore'; it is a self-administered process that we do not have the right to deny - in the name of various sentimentalities - to those 'others' who have long since made it their own (Koolhaas 1995, 1013).*

Koolhaas is suggesting then that in 'the east' things western, like the highrise, are something other to themselves. That the highrise has worked in Singapore so confounds Koolhaas that his explanatory powers are left suspended between totality and difference, between, to quote him, 'the assumption of greater authoritarianism and the inscrutable nature of the Asian mentality' (p 1037). But even this most dedicated fan of the highrise retreats to an analysis with which we 'westerners' are only too familiar - an analysis which has otherness (Asian-ness) succumbing to the force of civilisation (the west) gone awry:

*If the transition from the English slum to the estate was traumatic, the leap from Chinese shophouse ... to Singapore's high-rise containers is even more merciless, not only in terms of material difference - from the Asian to the Western - but because the new inhabitants, cut off from connective networks of family relationships, traditions, habits, are abruptly forced into another civilization: the slab as time machine. (Koolhaas 1995, 1021)*

It would seem that even the transformations of 'the east' are not enough to undo the west's investment in the highrise as urban bete noir.

If one were to linger a little longer around the lobbies, corridors, and undercrofts, the parks, roof-tops and apartments of the highrise would this experience simply confirm the homogenising vitality of a global architectural form? Or might it open out a space in which to contemplate the vital contours of a local zone of contact, a space in which it would be possible to see the radical hybridisations of the form, the creation of a mongrel highrise, carved out of the contingencies of local governance and the tactics of everyday living? Could such close encounters with the highrise monster offer us ways of productively 'deregulating' our thinking about the highrise form?

A good example of such careful lingering in the highrise is provided by the Singaporean sociologist Beng-Huat Chua (1997). His detailed accounts of life in the highrise, draw us close to the nuanced tactics by which residents inventively re-negotiate this building form and the state structures and global flows in which they are embedded. He provides destabilising accounts of how residents transform their public housing interiors into work spaces, religious spaces, cyber spaces, and explains how they make additions and innovations - prosthetic links between body and building, east and west, tradition and modernity. In a quite different, but equally suggestive way, Ackbar Abbas, (drawing on Paul Virilio's notion of the over-exposed city) explores the way the highrise form of Hong Kong is thoroughly and multiply mediated — through television, film and other visual media. So intensive is this



process that one comes to know Hong Kong's highrises not simply through an encounter with their materiality but also through exposure to their various 'scopic regimes' (1994, 444). This scopic logic shows them to be both real and 'dematerialised', both solid forms but also mediated 'interfaces' (443). Both Beng-Huat Chua and Ackbar Abbas offer us a way of productively 'deregulating' our thinking about the highrise form.

There is certainly evidence that the highrise is itself deregulating and I'd like to finish with two Australian examples. Think firstly of the 'Grollo tower', developer Bruno Grollo's dream to have the tallest building in the world built in the Melbourne Docklands. The discourse that this development proposal has generated rehearses much that is familiar: it is a phallus, it is simply the will to power, it is authoritarian. It is the unwelcome manifestation of a globalised idea in a local place - a violence that is given a certain amplification by it being the product of a race for the tallest building in the world (a race, I might add, that Kuala Lumpur is currently winning). Yet the certainty of this criticism has been unsettled by the fact that this developer is one Bruno Grollo, a migrant Australian, a representative case of a multicultural Australian success story. His place in the ideal of multicultural Australia is regularly confirmed in press reports which make mention of what migrant generation he belongs to, feature his extended family-ness, and refer to this rich man's unusual residential loyalty to the once migrant suburb of Thornbury. The Grollo tower is one of those cases which bring the limits of cosmopolitanism into clear view. Grollo-the-migrant-developer and his world's tallest building confound cosmopolitanism intentions. It has drawn some of the most cosmopolite of critics into a position which has to deny one vector of difference (Grollo's position as the migrant success story) in order to protect another (the diversity of the urban fabric). And circulating throughout is the residual anxiety delivered by the amateur migrant architect whose efforts to make a home here are often read as being inconsistent with other more legitimate architectural and townscape aesthetics. It is an anxiety that this immigrant has settled in an excessive way.

A comparable set of complexities emerged in a recent highrise controversy in relation to the Draft City Plan for Sydney. The site for this controversy was no other than the Chinatown / Haymarket area, the sort of place a cosmopolite might go as they live out a life which is open to otherness. This area has, relative to the nearby CBD, restrictions on its floor space ratio (6-9) as well as a height restriction of 50 metres. The restrictions exist in order to help preserve the character of this area, designated 'special' under the Local Environmental Plan, partly for its existing townscape character and partly for what is referred to as its 'social character', that is, its Chinese-ness. But this restriction, in the view of the members of the Haymarket Property Owners and Management Association, is so inappropriately restrictive that they felt compelled to claim it to be discriminatory. So here we have a group of Chinese property owners - in Chinatown - arguing that this area being treated differently on the basis of preserving, among other things its Chinese-ness, is a form of racism. In this instance the highrise does not erase difference but is fully inhabited by the unpredictable politics of difference. Here a gesture which we might readily associate with the open cosmopolite city - the planning for a Chinatown - has produced a plea from those whose identities we seek to recognise to be given the same development rights as other property owners in the central city.

It would seem that time is up for our favourite urban horror story, the one that scripts the highrise as simplistic rule of the father, an artefact of an authoritarian,

rationalist, globalism that displaces difference. Perhaps it is time to think of the highrise not as an artefact of sameness but as a mass ornament of difference, something which has been radically hybridised in its global journey. To speak of the highrise as a hybrid form is not simply to imply some joyous co-existence between sameness and difference - as might have been implied in Mackenzie Wark's positioning of the highrise as the natural home of the cosmopolite. Rather, this proposition to think about the highrise as a hybrid space is to open it out as a contentious zone of contact through which it is possible to chart the uncertain expanse of contemporary cosmopolitanism.

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