

Richard Lee Peragine*

MARCO BIRAGHI, *REM KOOLHAAS: L'ARCHITETTURA AL DI LÀ DEL BENE E DEL MALE*, GIULIO EINAUDI EDITORE, TORINO, 2024.

The most recent book by Italian architectural historian, Marco Biraghi, provides a timely take on the Koolhaasian “philosophy of praxis.” Rem Koolhaas, the book argues, can only be understood ambiguously and incoherently, or, as put by Biraghi, in contradiction.

Biraghi warns us from the start that the intention of examining Rem Koolhaas’ projects *and* theory, or his design projects as much as his projects of thought, is not to provide a model of “the architecture to come” (xi) but a “paradigmatic interpretation” of the architecture of the last fifty years. Koolhaas, Biraghi continues, has perhaps been the architect who most clearly rejected the ideological foundation of modern architecture: “that architecture must deal with *truth*—or, rather, with the (supposed) *moral* of truth,”¹ one to be created by way of the architect’s idea, self, and work. We might then look back at Koolhaas—who, following the author, we might indeed call *the Nietzschean architect*—precisely because his critical approach formulates an *ethics* that strives to break the confines of society’s dominant ideology, that is, the prevailing cultural values proper to liberal democratic capitalism, and touch down in a space beyond its supposed truth. If modern architecture sought to “make/transform reality *starting from* a vision of a world that differs from the existing, since Koolhaas an architect is someone able to use reality—or, that which is *as it is*—in order to *transform the world*.”² Koolhaas turns

¹ M. Biraghi, *Rem Koolhaas*, p. ix.

² *Ibid.*

* Richard Lee Peragine: Department of Architecture, University of Ferrara; prgrthr@unife.it.

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the paradigm of architectural modernity on its head and does so, Biraghi suggests, by seizing on reality's *contradictions*, moving toward a Nietzschean ethics beyond all moral judgement.

Koolhaas' drive to move "Beyond Ideology," as the title of the first chapter indicates, is a feature of the Dutch architect's very first work on the Berlin Wall in 1971. The unsettling objective of finding potential within the negativity of the linear ruin of the Wall, a space of technical-military order, is moreover an example of the distinctive Koolhaasian "design writing."³ Works like *The Berlin Wall as Architecture* and *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* subvert the ideology of utility and morality that undergird modern architecture, in order to ironically make room for an individualistic desire that lets loose all passions reined in by dominant morality.

Subversion in the early works of Koolhaas (the Zenghelises and Vriesendorp) proceeds by twisting Manhattan's orthogonal grid in *The City of the Captive Globe* (1972). If the Grid is "conceived as the coexistence of infinite difference's generative potential" that is because, for Koolhaas, as was for the Berlin Wall and for *Exodus*, "the most unpredictable potential is triggered from the loss of freedom."⁴ Paradoxically, Manhattan's capitalist "congestion" becomes an opportunity for the anonymous, autonomous and atomised development of infinite difference. This means "any building can affirm its own 'diversity'"⁵: architecture becomes the concrete rendering of a specific identity *qua* theory and ideology, while the unity of the metropolis is given by diversity.⁶ Here, Koolhaas' realist descent into the contradictions of society brings to the fore the possibility that "the conditions of capitalism are indispensable *pre-conditions* for the emergence of *another* 'possibility' of architecture,"⁷ beyond nostalgia, refusal or dread.

Indeed, New York's significance for Koolhaas' work cannot be understated. *Delirious New York* is a theory of a city "burdened by the guilt of having no ethical foundation"⁸; a speculative and theoretical gesture, rather than a historical examination, aimed at examining how the city

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

exposes “a sort of *ecstatic* condition”⁹ which coincides with “the *desire* drive, a *Lustprinzip*.”¹⁰ Manhattan and New York are traced back to a level of abstraction that allows Koolhaas to overturn notions used to describe the city and put them to work in design. Biraghi thus locates in Koolhaas a Deleuzian creation of concepts, a connection the book prologues thanks to the Dutch architect’s conceptualisation of New York’s skyscrapers as “desiring-machines” for the fantasies of metropolitan dwellers, whose socialised unconscious determines the libidinal economy of the metropolis itself. Architecture can only confront such machines by *accelerating* their mechanisms: a push toward an extra-moral architecture by insisting on the atomisation produced by the Grid, or by other Koolhaasian conceptual creations (such as lobotomy, schism). Koolhaas’ “Theorem of New York” thus corresponds to the city’s lack of community and continuity: a lack which Biraghi describes as “a supreme *indifference* towards all individuality (and ‘morality’) located within it, which is precisely that which allows them to coexist.”¹¹

Biraghi claims the ambiguous relation Koolhaas entertains with modern architecture is precisely that which pushes him to overcome ideology and turn the crisis of the city into an opportunity. His aim is to denude modern architecture of its ideological-political dimension and retrieve its features: “a second chance” that rests on “a work of *de-ideologisation*.”¹² Such an objective plays out in Koolhaas/OMA’s projects of the late 1970s and early ‘80s: a “return of the *different*”¹³ that according to Biraghi describes architecture’s (including Koolhaas’) troubled relation to modernity. In this sense, Koolhaas/OMA’s 1982 design proposal for Parc de la Villette in Paris retrieves the logic of “congestion” proper to New York from its skyscraper substance.¹⁴ Such a design move is the result of careful theoretical work which, together with the skyscraper, uncovered the centrality played by the architectural plan in Western modernity for the end of capitalist accumulation. From Rotterdam’s Kunsthal to the Jussieu campuses in Paris, Koolhaas’ attention for the plan paradoxically “exploits” the capitalist logic of congestion as a means for design.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Congestion foregrounds Koolhaas' notorious concept of "bigness." Inspired by quantum physics, bigness brings to the fore how the shift from the architectural object to urbanism that characterises Koolhaas/OMA's work (from the project for Euralille to Congrexpo), rather than just a fact or "effective dimension of contemporaneity,"¹⁵ is grounded on the recognition of "size—the purely quantitative—as a design tool."¹⁶ Biraghi moreover suggests that, against the ideological quantitative logic and metrics of metropolitan production, Koolhaas thinks the house—a "(bachelor) machine for living" that exceeds the modernist *machine à habiter*—as the site of a quasi-Batailleian *dépense*, a machine for pure desire, starkly opposed to the skyscraper *qua* desiring-machine. The house/bachelor machine "does not produce anything—it is socially unproductive—and precisely because of this it is the source of *free, limitless pleasure*, without 'consequence', that is, free from all legacy, 'offspring'."¹⁷

Biraghi thus reads Koolhaas/OMA's work considering the historical developments of capitalism since the 1970s. Indeed, Biraghi understands Koolhaas' critical theory and practice as a polemic to Manfredo Tafuri's prognosis regarding the inevitable equation between reality and ideology. The question of globalisation, in this sense, is an opportunity for Koolhaas to act on the contradictory, unpacified (or indeed *unpacifiable*) relationship between architecture and capital, while jettisoning Tafuri's architectural critique. If architecture cannot but be an *affirmation*: "its 'assertions' *must* correspond to its efficacy, without a way out,"¹⁸ the challenge is that of being an architect "in spite of it all: *in spite of* architecture, and *in spite of* architects"¹⁹ or, as Biraghi writes (with tinges of Italian *op-erismo*) "*within* architecture and *against* architecture."²⁰

The state of generalised interconnection that characterises globalised capitalism frames Koolhaas/OMA's work on preservation, epitomised by the firm's collaboration with Prada. Again, Koolhaas seizes on reality—in this case, on the consolidation of global operations of capital in the early 2000s—in order to extract a theory and practice that re-elaborates political and economic conditions to radically disrupt architectural work. Globalisation is paradoxically praised for what the accumulation of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the diversity and multiplicity it entails is able to produce: “a heterogeneity, dissonance that, as such, beyond any simple ‘will to congregate,’ brings about an *aesthetic pleasure*” of the Nietzschean order, “an authentically Dionysian character.”²¹ Such an extra-moral aesthetics questions dominant canons of beauty and its spaces rupture any attempt to create the kind of homogeneity that might be gathered from the architectural exteriority of Prada’s buildings.²²

If capitalism is the reality and fact of architecture and urbanism, Koolhaas, as Biraghi rightly insists throughout the book, has the merit of having brought this contradiction into focus, thanks to the “questioning affirmations”²³ which constitute his critical approach to theory and practice. Koolhaas’s *oeuvre* allows Biraghi to resume crucial questions he has been foregrounding over the years on architectural theory and practice in a capitalist society. Indeed, Koolhaas exposes capitalism’s contradictions: “the market economy—within which architecture works and to which most of its products are destined—is fundamentally antithetical to the *idea* of architecture as it could (or even *should*) be.”²⁴ It is precisely Koolhaas/OMA’s (self-)critical “transparent disposition toward the *real* conditions of contemporary architecture” that constitute the other side of Koolhaas’s crisp extra-moral architectural ethics.²⁵ Contradictions, Biraghi writes again with workerist echoes, cannot be solved but only exacerbated. In this sense, Koolhaas paves the way toward confronting “*analytically* and *critically*” the “*many* issues” of architecture today.²⁶ Like Koolhaas, an architect can only be Nietzschean: both builder and destroyer, servile and revolutionary, realist and sceptic. Koolhaas puts forward “a superior ethics, located *beyond good and evil*”²⁷ that begins from reality’s crises and complexity, without assuming architecture should “build *to hide, to remove, to homogenise*”²⁸ contradictions as if they did not exist.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 107–110.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.