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*From Alberti to Koolhaas:*

*Tracing an Urban Conception*

The Architectural Association School of Architecture
First Year History and Theory Studies
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Spring 2012
All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man’s relationship to the world, within and beyond the individual. The plastic Kunstwollen regulates man’s relationship to the sensibly perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped or coloured, just as the poetic Kunstwollen expresses the way man wants to imagine them. Man is not only a passive, sensory recipient, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another) that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires.¹

Alois Riegl


The 18th century Austrian art historian Alois Riegl coined the term Kunstwollen² to describe humanity’s will to shape the surrounding world to their desire. Throughout history and from the poetic and musical to the visual arts humans have projected images of the world that revealed their perception of it. These multifaceted images were idealizations, exaggerations, lamentations, eulogies and satires that filtered the exterior world only to reveal subjective understandings of it.

Mapping documents are such projections of the surrounding environment masked by the practical reason to extract information constructive to societal economic efficiency: routing. Nevertheless, the representational dimension of the resultant maps reveals not just an attempt at understanding urban spatial configurations, but also the manner in which the drawn settlements are perceived by the surveyor. In the 15th century Alberti invented a measurement instrument - the Horizon - and used the perspectival method to map the city of Rome as precisely as possible. The final map was a terrain containing the city wall and a collection of buildings with seemingly void areas in between. The represented voids in Rome’s map are in fact built and inhabited areas of the city which Alberti reduced to arid in-betweens. The collection of buildings, however, contains what Alberti perceived to be landmarks. The architect's map of Rome is in reality a map of the city's monuments.

Riegl’s conception of art as a means of expressing how man wants to see the world shaped explains Alberti’s map: the surveyor expects and perceives Rome to be a pure collection of monuments. Alberti depicted his own idealized version of Rome by eliminating the urban components that did not form part of his list of important monuments. For Alberti these landmarks stood for the city itself. The surveyor thus chose to eliminate the non-monumental parts that make up the largest urban surface area and produced the projection of a “city of negatives and positives (…) in which the experience of form as a composition of built and void spaces becomes the main architectural motif.”³

Another depiction of a city of negatives and positives is Rem Koolhaas’ 21st century collage of the world’s skyscrapers aggregated in the United Arab Emirates’ Desert. Koolhaas’ critical image functions through the dichotomy of void to solid and through the insertion of an absolute urban in the context of an absolute desert. According to Koolhaas’ collage the contemporary emerging cities of the U.A.E. are in fact collections of landmarks on a void surface. The city depicted by Koolhaas is thus purely composed of monuments alone with voids in-between.

² Wood, p. 94-95. Kunstwollen: a composite term formed by the words Kunst, meaning “art” and willen, meaning “to want.”
The total similarity to Alberti’s 15th century map of Rome can be contested by considering the very different purposes of the images and the long time span between their creations (roughly 500 years). While Alberti’s map scoped Rome out to expound the economic efficiency of the city, Koolhaas’ collage was conceived as an evaluation of an urban prototype. However, when closely comparing the two images, as far apart chronologically speaking as they be, one can extrapolate questions about the development of urban theory worth considering. If Alberti’s map is the perception of a city as a collection of landmarks on a void surface and if Koolhaas’ collage is a critique of contemporary cities of icons built in the desert, then has the human urban perception of a city been transformed into the city itself?

From the outset, an attempt at investigating the possibility of this conjecture needs to abide to the diachronic approach of understanding how an image has been recycled and transformed over time. Therefore, in the following I will trace a vision of the city as a monumental composition of volumes on a void topography from Alberti’s map of Rome in the 15th century to Rem Koolhaas’ collage of the contemporary city in the desert in an attempt to understand how a selective view and interpretation of the city has been transformed into a way of planning and building urban spaces. This will be achieved by sequencing historical moments of architectural relevance not chronologically, but thematically as they declare their appurtenance to the initial (re)actions – Alberti’s map of Rome and Koolhaas’ collage of world skyscrapers aggregated in the UAE.
The urban Horizon “plotted points by projecting rays from a centre to an edge, passing over anonymous places between. […] [Like the naval chart] the surveyor’s grid was a horizon that plotted positions by passing over places of tacit significance”⁴, infers the architectural historian and theorist David Leatherbarrow in his discussion of Alberti’s mathematical methodology used to map the city of Rome.

The tacit significance is nevertheless of relative nature and relates to the willing perception of the viewer: incidentally, what seems to be significant is also great in size. Leatherbarrow identifies the three players involved in Alberti’s mapping process: “Throughout this procedure three figures were brought into play: the architect’s eye, a point or object in the distance and the gap between”.⁵ The relationship between these players will constantly be discussed in the following to account for the transition from perception to practice. As stated above, the architect’s eye is a significant player in the process of surveying a territory. Alberti’s eye, as reflected in its 15th century vision over Rome, eliminated the non-monumental parts of the city and purely depicted an arid landscape punctuated by landmarks. “A reconstruction of Alberti’s map would leave large sections of the city blank, its waters undisturbed.”

Illustration 3 Map of Rome following Alberti’s method, Pietro del Massaio, 1469

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⁵ Leatherbarrow, p. 5.
From the perception of a tangible city as an arid land with dispersed monumental interventions we will now consider an interpretation of an imagined city that reflects in its representation an ideal urban project. In 1518, the German and Swiss artist Ambrosius Holbein created a woodcut for Thomas More’s book cover “Utopia”. There is a striking representational similarity between Alberti’s map of Rome and Holbein’s depiction of Utopia. On the cover, the island seems to be more abundant in diverse castles and towers than in agricultural land and modest and identical building which More obsessively describes in his book’s content: “[Utopians] “buildings are so uniform that a whole side of a street looks like one house.” Holbein seems to have represented the Utopian city as a large fortress ignoring the uniform nature of More’s textual town. In addition, all cities of Utopia look the same textually: “He that knows one of their towns knows them all – they are so like one another.” It is striking then that Holbein represented each town differently. The map of Utopia reveals a fairly subjective layer of perception that communicates a land composed of citadels with seemingly no cities to command. Moreover, at a representational level, the map seems to take the same perspective over the territory as Alberti’s. Holbein’s view which combines an aerial view with an attempt at perspective and elevation is all-inclusive: the territorial, architectural and economic dimensions of Utopia are all represented in this distorted perspective where the void territory is overweighed by the monumental fortresses of Holbein’s interpretation. But this void territory is in fact not void at all: [Utopians] “have built farm-houses over the whole country” and the whole country is in fact agriculturally productive land and not a functionless void. Non-monumental elements of Utopia's landscape are graphically eliminated and conceptually replaced by single auto-monuments that stand for entire cities.

Illustration 4  Utopia, cover of Thomas More’s book, by Ambrosius Holbein, 1516
Diagramming the city as a series of monumental buildings reveals a tendency to reduce the city to its perceived fundamental element: the monument itself. This perception of both tangible and imagined cities as empty planes punctuated by landmarks was in the 19th century developed as a planning model by Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel planned the Berlin as “an archipelago” and thus took the conception of the city as a landscape of monuments further: “Schinkel had envisioned the capital of Prussia as a fabric punctuated by singular architectural interventions, rather than as a city planned along the principles of cohesive spatial design typical of the baroque period”⁹, says Pier Vittorio Aureli. These “archipelagos” are in fact areas with a high monumental concentration and the spaces in between a homogenous layer of the city. In this conception of the city the non-monumental architecture becomes a ground over which landmarks celebrate themselves. Thus non-monumental areas are subdued in height to become a homogenous fabric pierced by monuments. But it was not until the 1970s when after the physical devastation of the Prussian capital, architects turned towards Schinkel’s urban practice and theorised and developed his planning conceptions.

Devastated by the Second World War and split in two by a wall, Berlin in the 1970s was a shrinking city in a tense social conflict. As a proposal to revitalize the city, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas developed a project entitled “The City within the City – Berlin as a Green Archipelago” by going back to Schinkel’s original conception of Berlin. One of the drawings they conceived for the development of this project is an intriguing map of Berlin where the city is shrunk to its significant and irreducible parts. Representationally the map resembles that of Alberti’s Rome: the outline of the city, the monuments and the void. However, while Alberti’s map attempts to be informative and precise Ungers’ map is analytical and propositional. Alberti perceives the city to understand it while Ungers analyses the city to change it. The two are looking at different cities with different purposes and in different times but have strikingly similar perceptions. They both homogenize the non-monumental into a void area in their images, both define the outline of the city and both are using the perspectival method to depict monuments. Ungers’ project in 1977 echoes Alberti’s perception of the city in the 15th century as a series of isolated points of urban density.

⁹ Aureli, p. 178.
The planning of the city as a platform for unfolding monumental interventions reached its peak in the conceptual basis for the current Brazilian capital. In the 1960s Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer worked together to plan and develop the city of Brasília as the new capital of Brazil. Approached as tabula rasa, the city is marked by vast empty spaces articulated by autonomous monumental edifices. Along the Monumental Axis the city’s Cathedral, Cultural Complex and Ministries stand only to lead into the Square of Three Powers with the Brazilian Parliament, Government and Supreme Federal Court culminating and triangulating the Axis. These buildings punctuate the arid landscape. Its vastness, defined by green areas, exists only to isolate to liberate each landmark from another. Another element in the Brazilian landscape is the Super Quadra, a massive block designed as an autonomous entity with its own housing program, schools, play grounds and commercial areas. The inhabitants of Super Quadras do not need to leave their living complex to fulfill their basic needs. These complexes become monumental elements in the cityscape complementing the institutional landmarks. In an interview Oscar Niemeyer stated: “Our architecture is created using reinforced concrete, and there are only a few supports touching the ground. As a result, the structure becomes lighter and more audacious, [...] more ample.” In tandem with Niemeyer’s description, the few supports to the ground and the lightness of the monumental solids detaches these from the site thus leaving a seemingly untouched topographical platform that only accentuates the monumental solids simply floating and at times jabbing the landscape. Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer redefined the city as an arid landscape with distantly spaced monuments detached from the ground: the built city no longer needs a site, overbearing in its own monumentality.

From the applied urban Utopia of Brasilia we move to an artist’s urban dream that overlaps the past, the present and the future urbanity of a city into a timeless map of a monumental self-sufficient cluster. In the 18th century the Italian artist Giovani Battista Piranesi collaged fragments of Rome in an irrational and timeless map of the city: a palimpsest. The selective and fragmented representation of the city reveals a desire to control the urban environment with no seeming underlying structure. As opposed to Alberti’s and Holbein’s maps, Piranesi formally admits there was no intention of depicting a real map of the Campo Marzio in Rome: the collage acts as the city’s alternative urban history. The many ovals, circles, triangulations and rectangles and their varying and large-scale permutations suggest a Rome whose urban history purely favours the construction and reconstruction of landmarks. Rem Koolhaas’ collage gains relevance in relation to Piranesi’s montage when considering the two works’ particular and universal values: while Koolhaas’ gathers world iconic buildings in the Emirate Desert, Piranesi collects city fragments from different times into an urban intermittency. As a result, the perception of the city oscillates between a local accumulation of monuments over time and a universal reproduction of architectural icons across space.

Furthermore, Piranesi develops his perception of the city as a monumental archive in his 1756 frontispiece of “The Roman Antiquity” which depicts the famous Via Appia which connected Rome to the South of Italy. In Piranesi’s perspectival etching the Roman Road is a host for a large collection of monumental objects - temples, towers, columns, pedestals, pediments, busts, figurative sculptures, musical instruments – which are piled one over the other in an exterior Wunderkammer. This depiction of the Roman road shows a selective interpretation of a very diverse urban element that spanned from Rome to Brindisi. Piranesi’s use of perspective is also aiming to create a seemingly never-ending collection of such monumental elements, from figurative statuettes to collective temples. In Piranesi’s images of Rome non-monumental areas are consciously replaced by an exaggerated overlap of monumental collections to suggest a desire for control over the city’s form.
In 1848, anticipating Koolhaas’ collage, the British architect Charles Robert Cockerell painted a watercolour diagram entitled “The Professor’s Dream” to illustrate 4000 years of layered architectural history. The selection of monumental architecture and its placement on an arid surface leave no space for an in-between. The use of overlaid elevations as opposed to the perspectival method of drawing is appropriate for establishing comparisons and not suggesting an architectural hierarchy across history. The resultant organized amalgamation of edifices creates an exclusive collection of monuments. Representationally one can start to recognize a strong link to Koolhaas’ evaluation of the city in the desert: the insertion of iconic buildings into a void context in an elevation projected frontally. Strikingly Koolhaas’ collage functions as a critique of Cockerell’s dream ironizing monumental accumulations in sheer nothingness. It is in the period following Cockerell’s drawing that urban spaces with monumental concentrations will have been formed. Cockerell’s painting thus concentrates monuments while neglecting non-monumental architecture.

But it is not until one of Modernism’s founders took on the urban conception of the 19th century that a similar dream of a monumental city is concretised in an urban proposal creating a transition from visual representations of such perceptions to design and construction documents. Le Corbusier’s 1922 *La Ville Radieuse* was a proposed plan for the transformation of Paris based entirely on the street. As the images of the models show, Le Corbusier envisaged a central area with high-rise cross-shaped buildings, where the monumentality is generated by height, mass and shape, and a peripheral area with low-rise edifices. In this case the low-rise residence areas could almost be mistaken with the high-rise buildings’ topography and are the equivalent of the “voids” in Alberti’s map of Rome. *La Ville Radieuse* promoted a conception of planning based on urban segregation: monuments versus non-monuments. In this case the neglect of non-monumental architectures in representation has evolved to the separation between monumental and non-monumental architecture and to the marginalization of the latter.
Paradoxically, the most absorbing moment in the reproduction of the city’s image as a collection of monuments is the detachment from it as expressed in Koolhaas’ collage. Almost appropriating Alberti’s map and adapting it to current times, Rem Koolhaas created awareness about what the contemporary modern city has become: a collection of sky-scrapers surrounded by a desert, as exaggeratedly reflected in the skylines of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. By observing the unfolding historical examples discussed above a pattern emerges: the city as an urban entity has constantly been defined and redefined by a tension between the monumental and the gap as understood by the human eye. The French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss suggests that the human mind creates situational meaning by identifying “binary opposites”\(^1\). This would then explain why humanity has reduced the definition of the city to a struggle between the massive and triumphant solid and the derelict void in its attempt to diagram and thus reduce, select and categorize urban space. The diagram admits its prejudice to communicate what the creator wants it to show in its own definition. In the conception of urban diagrams the city enters a process of selection and reduction by which humanity has been able to make sense of its inevitable multiplicities.

Art is a recyclable body of knowledge whereby every artistic conception is present in some form or another in all historical eras across societies. The products of this body of knowledge - artistic images – function as paradigms as they are always particular to a time and a place, yet embody fundamental principles of a larger conception reinvented timelessly. Deductively, the perception of the city as a desert plane punctuated by monuments has constantly been present in human history in different forms. From seemingly rationalized surveying to academic painting to contemporary city planning where “every building is a monument”\(^\text{12}\), the image of the city as a flat plane with immediate contour changes has acted as a floating signifier for what a city is, was and could be, throughout history. “We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier”\(^\text{13}\) notes the French epistemologist Jacques Lacan suggesting the difference between an object and its perception. Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* explains this perception as an expression of the will to change what is given. Alberti’s map acts as the surveyor’s *Kunstwollen* - a signifier of the city that has been passed down and reproduced to become the city itself. Nevertheless, Koolhaas’ critique of the city in the desert is inherently a questioning of an urban conception since Alberti’s map and onward. In a 2007 lecture entitled “Urgency” at the Canadian Centre for Architecture Koolhaas discussed the current state of the iconic building: “I would say that any accumulation is counterproductive, to the point that each new addition reduces the sum’s value.”\(^\text{14}\)

Is the monument losing its meaning in the emerging urban monumental accumulations? Are we experiencing a paradigm shift that will redefine our vision of what the city is? Is Alberti’s perception of the city becoming outdated?

By way of a response, we might defer to another comment made by Rem Koolhaas:

“It’s too early, perhaps, to throw the icon away.”\(^\text{15}\)

Rem Koolhaas, 2007

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\(^{12}\) Leatherbarrow, p. 31.  
Bibliography


Webography


List of Illustrations


