

1995 MONDRIAN LECTURE  
THE CHANGING CITY

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REM KOOLHAAS

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In the summary of the Mondrian Lecture, Koolhaas gives the landscape as the answer to failing urbanization and manages to connect two prizewinners in this respect – Adriaan Geuze and the Paris cleaning department (Propreté de Paris). For this lecture, the Sikkens Foundation published another text by Rem Koolhaas about the city: The Generic City, taken from his own publication S, M, L, XL, which had not yet been published at that time.

In his lecture he described the process of urbanization in eastern Asian countries, where the city rises up vertically from the jungle, without a past, without a memory, in one go. At the moment, the phenomenon of the city is going through convulsive changes all over the world. It is mutating before our eyes and being rediscovered. The city is no longer the result of demonstrable rational acts, no longer the result of a plan by an urban planner. The city is subordinate to natural laws, no longer to cultural laws. The pain you feel from an amputated limb which no longer exists is known as “phantom pain”. In this way, urban planning is concerned with the examination of a condition which no longer exists. What will replace urban planning? A form of supervising a process. Koolhaas described that he sometimes had the feeling that this profession already existed and that it was called landscape or landcity. Landscape is a much better answer to this process than architecture or urban planning. Landscape links things that cannot be connected without any problems, covers what is indigestible, and changes what is vulgar and consumptive into an oasis. Landscape is quick, simple, cheap, efficient, free of controversy, flexible. Landscape can be on the left or the right, critical or uncritical, frivolous or serious, Disney or churchyard.

Building cities – this is no longer necessary, in fact it is not even desirable and only complicates matters. Building cities has come to an end. The former third world – now a metropolitan laboratory – has solved our problem. The sidewalk, the doorstep, the land, the surface – this is the only link which connects everything together.

This “meditation” as Koolhaas calls it, is not a result of envy, on the contrary. His respect and even his love of the landscape goes so far that we want to join it. By seeing the city/urban planning/architecture partly as landscape, we can also claim to be innocent.

Experiencing the city as a landscape is the only thing to do. It developed but was not created. It was a process, not a design. It was not stable, it just happens. The family tree of the landscape undoubtedly goes back to paradise; that of architecture goes back to the Fall. Therefore landscape architects have a direct line back to paradise – and street sweepers have the honor, again and again, to sweep and wash away sin – which is why this prize was awarded and the link is justified.