The rapid expansion of the cities in the 20th century introduced the notion of indeterminacy within architecture and the city as the urban fields morphed into vast and increasingly pluralistic territories. The ability of architecture to determine the product has become so complex and dubious under the pressure of ever-changing socio-political, financial, technological or cultural demands that the architectural program became indeterminate, and shifted the role of architecture in the urban territory. The study focuses on a new role and relevancy for the architect who is confronted with an increasingly unpredictable globe and contingent city, and examines Koolhaas’s Parc de La Villette and Downsview Tree City projects which attempt to find a template to design with determinism that simultaneously responds to the diversity of the public sphere and metropolis.
Throughout the history of architecture, the role of the architect has been to determine the lines to form the life on earth. In the past two centuries, however, it is inevitable to observe that as cities have rapidly expanded into vast urban territories that are increasingly pluralistic, the ability to determine such lines has become progressively more complex, as any architectural enterprise is subject to changing political, financial, technological and cultural demands. The influence of these ever-changing forces attempted to modify the initial program of the architectural product, in a way that, the notion of indeterminacy within architecture and the city not only halted the project of Modernism but also spawned several trajectories of design that embraced flexible, soft, dynamic and transforming systems to respond to the new needs of the expanding city and its pluralistic inhabitants. The project of contingency embedded within these various trajectories has both plagued and resituated the role of architecture in the urban territory. Defining the 20th century society’s demands and requirements uncertain, Rem Koolhaas addresses ‘indeterminacy’ in many of his projects by developing a design mechanism which answers the unstable conditions of the urban field. He formulates this concept into his works through strategic tools; and to cope with indeterminacy, instead of concentrating on the architectural object, Koolhaas focuses upon discovering the latent structure in the process of design, and how to manipulate this structure.\(^1\) As he states this approach: “A building was no longer an issue of architecture, but of strategy\(^2\). The strategy allows for change but still enables the uniformity of the design; it serves within an enormous envelope that can inhabit any kind of unplanned but varying activities. This envelope responds as a framework for the complex realities of programmatic needs while being a generic system that instigates the improvisation of users and enables the existence of cultural mutations.


Located in former post-industrial sites both in Parc de La Villette and Downsview Tree City, Rem Koolhaas/OMA attempts to respond to the increasingly complex city and heterogeneous public in a quest to discover a template through landscape design. He deploys strategic approaches to collaborate with the indeterminacy of the new city or society alongside the ecology by introducing a flexible and unified framework that is to be intervened by human activities or natural flows to absorb the ever-changing configurations. While in the earlier La Villette he develops the respond through the elements of metropolis and its congestion to allow mutation of culture; almost twenty years later with the Tree City, suburban context forms the park to explore the promises of low density metropolitan life as ecology is integrated within the design process. However, both projects seek an embedded template to both allow for permanence, organization and determinacy (the traditional characteristics of Architecture) while accounting for complexity, dynamism and contingency (the characteristics of the pluralistic public and metropolis).

Parc de la Villette (1983)

Inseparable from the concept of city, especially Manhattan, The Parc de la Villette for Paris is a research into the possibilities of ‘Culture of

3. An international architectural competition of Parc de La Villette took place for the rehabilitation of the former slaughterhouses of Paris. The competition program required the design of 50 hectare area including restaurants, workshops, pavilions, recreational facilities in addition to hard and soft landscaping.

4. In 1999, the Parc Downsview announced an International Design Competition in attempt to turn a former military base into an urban park in Toronto, Canada.


2.1 Parc de la Villete: Forms of Public, Superpositioning of layers.

Congestion’ in Europe and the viability of creating a ‘Social Condenser’ on an empty lot; it embodies the activities of the city through its search for the public space of the new society; it is a park designed as a “social condenser” to conceive dynamic coexistence of diverse activities. By forming an enormous envelope with the strips within the boundary, the project fulfills the maximum program through minimum architecture, loads the capacity of the void with an intense program and suggests a process that promise to adjust to programmatic instability according to external and internal forces.

Koolhaas questions how to design the 20th century’s park as “a social condenser” and defines social condenser as a “Layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic coexistence of activities and to generate through their interference, unprecedented events.” Appearing firstly as a Soviet constructivist theory with the notion that architecture has the ability to affect social behavior, social condenser as a term is used

7. During post-Revolutionary years, in 1920s, in order to “reorganize the life of the mass population according to the direction outlined in the Bolshevik party’s Marxist program,” Constructivist integrated social problems into architectural field to achieve the corporate and collective ways of living. Architectural profession seemed to be as a “social catalyst” or as a function of “social construction.” KOPP, Anatole. Constructivist Architecture in the USSR, Academy Editions, London, 1985, p. 71.

Pursuing a study on Ivan Leonidov at the beginning of his career, it is obvious that Koolhaas referred and exploited Leonidov’s discussion of social program and its manifestation as architecture in his particular projects, namely Exodus, Meloun Senart, and Parc de La Villette.


to “determine architectural or urban structures of any scale that are estimated to play great importance in the transition of the society.”

The condensers (projects) of this idea are substantially loaded with programs that aim to reconstruct the society through condensing the tools and to lead the collectivization of public activities and a collective way of living. Inspired by the Russian constructivists, Koolhaas focuses on this “socially interactive, programmatically condensed” architecture to describe a collective and flexible organic process with active contribution of the user. As a result, the social condenser is the collective, adjustable, cultural, multiple, flexible program. While its openness to active contribution and improvisation responds to the anticipatory, it continues remaining the strategies with the enormous envelope in which the further changes can be implemented. For La Villette’s case, the mechanism for this strategic design that Koolhaas suggests is the ‘strips’.

As an overall framework of the project, the strip can have multiple readings. One prominent reading can be led through Koolhaas’s inspiration of Berlin wall as the strip and the void. The Berlin Wall as a strip of no man’s land and as a continuous urban void is an exploration for Koolhaas “to imagine nothingness”. He describes the wall as “not an object but an erasure, a freshly created absence,” and the void as “nothingness -to ‘function’ with more efficiency, subtlety, and flexibility”- where “absence would always win in a contest with presence.” Triggered from this point, he questions the relation between the meaning and the architectural form, and he eventually finds none; he believes a maximum program and a minimum of architecture or as Koolhaas states “Where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible”.

The overall scheme of the La Villette when read through the Berlin Wall, is both the strip and the void in which many activities can be inserted. It is the strip as it initiates varying negotiations on each side;

10. Ibid. pp. 11-73.
13. Ibid. p. 228.
and it is the void as it eliminates the dependency of form to allow anything to happen.

The other reading of the strip explicitly is through Manhattan. According to Koolhaas, La Villette indicates “the moment of extreme intensification in quantity and quality of metropolitan congestion”.15 As the result of programmatic indeterminacy of business and unprecedented combinations and demands of human activities, Manhattan generates a new form of urbanism which is the culture of congestion. The infinite demands of entertainment or changing requirements of the new technology and economic formations conceive the unstable culture of the 20th century; and for Koolhaas, Manhattan had the strategies and tactical tools to respond the indeterminacy of the century. Through deploying the Paranoid-Critical-Method16 of Dali as an analytic and interpretive tool, he renders himself as the Paranoid, and rereads the history of Manhattan discovering the irrational unconscious in its delirious development. He finds out the subliminal strategies of Manhattan through conspirational theories or the fabrications of his overheated imaginations, transforms them into undeniable realities by presenting them as “the objectifying facts” of Manhattan,17 and imports two of these facts- The Grid and The Skyscraper- to La Villette to cope with congestion of the 20th century in Europe.

The generic grid framework of Manhattan allows for congestion while it guarantees the uniformity of the overall structure; it enables the permeability of the program between the blocks and their maximum interaction. In a way, beside its rigid formation, the grid becomes the flexible framework that any program can occur in, but remains as the strategic framework to inhabit the programs similar to the rows of strips in La Villette. Within this framework the generator of the activity is the skyscraper that assures the endless programmatic changes. The section of a Manhattan skyscraper for Koolhaas, especially of Downtown Athletic Club, is “a stacking of metropolitan life in ever-changing configurations”, and a machine whose “interiors accommodate composition of program and activity that change.”18 The skyscraper provides detached non-programmed levels which can be modified, reprogrammed, manipulated easily according to the users’ requirements without altering the overall framework. Within the grid, each skyscraper conceives its own programmatic indeterminacy; and as a consequence, the coexistence of these independent indeterminacies

16. “At its origin, the Paranoid-Critical-Method was Salvador Dali’s means of production for the complex, hallucinogenic images that wilted across his visual landscapes... (Dali) waged a constant and active war on visual reality, substituting his own delusional images for the object word in order to “systematize confusion and thus help to discredit completely the world of reality”. Paranoia, in Dali’s version, is not wild irrationality or psychosis, it is a style of systematic interpretation that produces reality.” MARCUS, George E. “Paranoia Within Reason”: “A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation”, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p. 21.
transforms the culture of congestion. In La Villette, the programs of each strip shift as the user activates the negotiation between them. They move within the strip or to the other strips, they respond the ever-changing and unforeseen demands of the new society, yet maintain the general strategic framework. All in all, the strip is the void, that generates a base for upcoming programs; a border, that allows programmatic transformations through dividing the program zones in maximum length; it is flexible, to organize a process of indeterminate circumstances; autonomous, that functions locally without compromising from the unity; it is a repetitive structure which not only generates space for various programs but conceives the park itself; and an infrastructure that serves for the unpredictable activities with its stable points. The strip as a whole is the tool to create social condenser “that combines architectural specificity with programmatic indeterminacy”.\(^{19}\)

Within the formulated territory where Koolhaas defines the limits of control by establishing a spatial relation between inside and outside, he introduces the stable elements to begin activating the strips. While the adjacency of the strips and their mutual interference create a chain reaction of new events,\(^ {20}\) and this strategy of mediation brings density, congestion, and modification, to trigger these sets of modifications for the park to perform, be used, reused, transformed in each phase of its life span; by superimposing other layers of elements that would encourage user improvisation, Koolhaas initiates the unforeseen programs that can occur in the strips. According to him, the inclusion of these stable elements orchestrates shift, modification, replacement of instable program. Firstly, he integrates the existing entities (The Museum and The Grand Halle + Science Museum, Baths, Ariane) in the park to the framework of strips by deciding the directionality of the strips and he also considers them as the major elements that forces the capacity of the system in the means of subtraction, addition or integration that deforms the homogeneity of the strips to start creating specific moments on the scheme. Similar to the major elements’ aim, to render the design process non-linear and interactive, the project proposes distributed fragments as another catalyst of the system.


He develops a grid of kiosks, playgrounds, and barbecue spots in a mathematical frequency based on the required area for the programs on each strip to construct a mutual relationship amongst them, and therefore, in the entire system of the framework.

For the establishment of the system and the negotiation of the program to be shifted or modified, Koolhaas also proposes connection routes: the boulevard and the promenade. While intersecting all, these networks nourish the strips, organize movements, allow flow and exchange by improvisations of its users. Inspired by the skyscraper elevator, the boulevard carries activators (users) to each level of strips as the promenade acts as a circulation element that organizes the focus, speed or the direction of the movement by passing through strips in various ways. At the connection points where the boulevard and the promenade meet, Koolhaas -again to deform the homogeneity of the strips- suggests plazas which create focus and gathering points to fluctuate the flow and generate transition while connecting the promenade to the Boulevard.

As another layer in the framework, the natural elements are combined into the system as major architectural components. They both utilize geometry in a way to remain the form of the strips by defining their boundaries to determine the territory of actions and dynamics, and create the ‘image of nature’ with varying densities according to the angle of view while calling for interchange through these differing densities that would allow permeability.

The proposal appears as a system of separated and superimposed programmatic layers to obtain flexibility with a complex fabric which has no center or hierarchical organizing principle, but the strips as the ground. It suggests a non-linear process in which the envelope and the elements are integrated, function mutually, and reciprocal influence in between during the process. This reciprocal conversation in the system creates infinite mutations and variations, while simultaneously offering the uniformity of the elements and the framework; in other words, meanwhile the framework forms a base for the variations of the elements, it also reconfigures itself constantly with the feedbacks from the elements and the users.

**Downsview Tree City (2000)**

Although embracing the similar concepts from Parc de la Villette as indeterminacy, strategical design, or the role of architectural form in relation to program, seventeen years later the proposal for Downsview Park indicates a shift in the approach as ecology becomes fundamental for urbanism; also as Koolhaas states “architecture is no longer the primary element of urban order, increasingly urban order is given by a thin horizontal vegetal plane, increasingly landscape is the primary element of urban order.”

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from Rem Koolhaas/OMA, yet this time with the collaboration of an interdisciplinary group of graphic designers, landscape architects, biologists, geologists and infrastructural experts. Located in the middle of Toronto’s “suburban intensification areas”, Downsview Tree City sits on a former air force base which is actually a high point between two rivers of Toronto and its close watersheds; in that sense the site has the potential to enhance the water flows, wildlife and the habitat. As a self-sustaining park proposal, the project represents a research for an open, adjustable and self-organizing system, however, this time through the suburban context and the inclusion of ecologic indeterminacy as another ever-changing factor. The aim of the park is integrating the Downsview’s ecology with the city’s to achieve reciprocity between the nature and the city by proposing ‘the tree’ as the infrastructural element. It explores a conceptual envelop which structures the land as it also co-exists and evolves along with ecological processes.

The project consists of phases that aim to gradually transform the site in three terms: site and soil preparation, pathway construction, and cluster

landscaping.\textsuperscript{24} It foresees a development of the area over a fifteen-year period with new plantings and growth of the existing vegetation while allowing the natural flows of the site to form the park and designate the evolution of its designed and non-designed elements. In this sense, the project particularly concentrates on the medium that carries the dialogue between human and natural processes; it becomes “a hinge that connects culture and nature, allowing humans to adapt and integrate nature’s processes with human creations.”\textsuperscript{25} It is an adaptive ecological project which takes landscape as the basis of design and develops design strategies that can adjust and grow not just as the culture or the city change but also as the nature evolves.

Unlike the condensed strips of La Villette, to achieve low density OMA develops a distributed framework with the dots using their individuality to diffuse, and overlays the open-ended 1000 paths to enable extending the park with no boundary grows into the city. The dots as the organizational pattern of the design form the landscape by representing both the designed and un-designed elements\textsuperscript{26} that are a composition of curated cultural programming which maintains park’s survival and manufactured natural features which conceive ecologic civic nodes. The dots display the designed areas such as cultural campus buildings, parking, deciduous forest, security, information centers, housings, recreational water, gardens, meadow lots, sports fields, wetlands and outdoor theatre.\textsuperscript{27} Connecting these nodes and the city, another system ‘pathways’ is superimposed on the indeterminate dots serving both to collect from the city and disperse to the city. As a composition of various types of paths such as “hard and fast paths for recreation”, “soft wide

\textsuperscript{24} OMA. “Tree City” in Case Downsview Park Toronto. CZERNIAK, Julia. Ed. Prestel, Cambridge; Massachusetts, 2001, p. 80.


\textsuperscript{26} OMA. “Tree City” in Case Downsview Park Toronto. CZERNIAK, Julia. Ed. Prestel, Cambridge; Massachusetts, 2001, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. p. 81.
paths for strolling” and “ornamental paths for peaceful contemplation”\textsuperscript{28}, which would occur according to the relationship with the city streets, interior passages or unforeseen natural elements that might grow in the site, this layer of connection is also designed as indeterminate and would occur as the systems starts negotiating.

As a ‘process-driven’ design approach, the project does not aim a definitive plan; it understands the complexity of the large park systems as dynamic, unforeseen, and adaptive but with the ability to self-organize; thus, it focuses on open-ended, flexible and diverse approaches to improve the project’s long-term adjustment to change in order to respond cultural, economic and ecological viability. Recognizing the impacts of ecological processes, the design copes with the ‘time’ through understanding that the ecological processes in their continuous transformation and their certain periods to occur; therefore, the design changes and grows as the nature constantly shapes it. The project uses the reciprocity of processes to respond any unknown particularity of future by allowing elements to emerge in a non-linear and adaptable manner as also the city diffuses in the park; this strategy of the framework pushes the term flexibility’ to ‘un-decidability’\textsuperscript{29} as the order or the location of the emerging elements do not change the overall scheme.

Structuring development rather than symbolizing culture and nature, both projects generate design mechanisms which responds to indeterminate conditions of urban contexts by emphasizing the indeterminacy of either the 20th century’s cities/societies or ecology through proposing adaptive frameworks which are open to change, accommodate time and have a sense of place. While la Villette introduces landscape with a significance of embodying the city’s congestion and its activities, Downsview considers ecological aspects by presenting that the landscape is capable of being ecological, even in the middle of the city with the city. They both propose a new way of life by introducing collective program as a consequence of reciprocal superimposed layers, the common concerns in the projects are allowing flexible development; anticipating active participation of the user and ecology; conceiving continuous and legible spatial organization for more interaction; considering the significance of open spaces as public spaces; and addressing these issues in multiple program scenarios in the process of new culture.

The effects which lead instabilities could be radical cultural shifts -similar to the post-revolutionary Soviet Union- or sociopolitical segregations -similar to Berlin- or infinite demands of public pleasure and unavoidable effect of economy -similar to Manhattan’s- or coexistence of various activities -as in Parc de La Villette- or integration of ecology into architectural layers -as in Downsview. The tools and the strategies regulate these indeterminacies while allowing the shifts and the modifications they might require. Reassigning of the program as a


catalyst to improve interaction and improvisation, at some point stands more than only fulfilling the demands of urban life but introduces the ability of transforming the urban conditions itself; and to achieve that the projects offer that the cities can be constructed as landscapes and the landscape can be the infrastructure of the city as it is performed as urban models to respond to the ever-changing conditions. The assumed task here is to create links and let new realities emerge through establishment of connections, allowing the ground to be activated by new channels and networks between people. In the light of such understanding of the strategy of contingency; architecture of public space will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form; it will be no longer obsessed with the identifying entities, but about discovering the manipulations of infrastructural framework for endless intensifications, diversifications, and redistributions.
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