New places and architectural representation: muf and Koolhaas meet in The Generic City

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Abstract

In his extended discussion of “the fate of place” Edward Casey differentiates between the architectural “disembodied site” and a more “embodied” and “densely qualified” notion of place (Casey, 1998, p.204). Architecture as a discipline has cultivated many modes of representation in order to make legible the locations or settings in which projects are formed. The contemporary city, however, is no longer coherent as a set of geographical, spatial and legal information, and ceases to be formally readable, being part of a destabilised global flow (of people, objects, capital, ideas, images). The task then, of making the place of architecture or architectural places visible in the contemporary city, becomes more complex, perhaps impossible. This paper discusses the theoretical and visual approaches to the representation of place by two practices (Koolhaas/OMA/AMO and muf), acknowledging that such discursive forms as image making are powerful and persuasive in the setting of agendas for the design of the city.
**Introduction**

This paper discusses the work of two architectural practices and asks why they employ specific and somewhat unique forms of representation. It examines how their chosen forms of representation (or images) are used as powerful discursive methods to articulate issues of place held central to their practices.

‘Place’, though frequently used, is a difficult and slippery term. As Casey says, “Although places are not things in any usual (e.g., material) sense, they are some kind of entity or occasion: they are not nothing” (Casey, 1998, p.3).

In an attempt to identify and re-habilitate a philosophical discussion of place, Casey traces its importance as a concept through western philosophy from Plato to the present. He points to the difficulty yet sustainability of the concept where,

… even if it is by no means univocal, ‘place’ is not an incoherent concept that falls apart on close analysis, nor is it flawed in some fundamental manner, easily reducible to some other term, or merely trivial in its consequences. (Casey, 1998, p.xii)

Place is variously identified and defined across disciplines and two views on place, one from geography and one from philosophy, will later be drawn upon in order to contextualise and consider place and representation in the practices of muf and Koolhaas/OMA/AMO.

The architectural theorist Diana Agrest asks the question, “what is the nature of the structures that are able to articulate the notion of place?” (Agrest, 1991, p.7) This then is the terrain for the next part of this paper.

*A few short notes on architectural representation*

How best to describe and convey the projected building or city has been a concern of the discipline of architecture throughout its history. Stan Allen points to the
“paradoxical” nature of the discipline of architecture in that it, “operates to organize and transform material reality, but must do so at a distance, and through highly abstract means” (Allen, 2000, p.xxi). This makes it clear then that an engagement with ‘abstract means’, the methods and mechanisms of design and representation, is central to the practising of architecture. On the one hand we have the things that the architect makes to design and represent the projected building; on the other we have the building itself.

To make this even more complex, the building itself is also endowed with a representational role. Colomina points to this multiple relation of representation and meaning. She says,

Architecture is not simply something represented, but is a way of representing. The building itself should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writings, films, advertisements, and so on, not only because these are the media in which we often encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right. It is a ‘construction’ in all senses of the word. This means, among other things, that the building is not simply represented in images but is a mechanism for producing images. (Colomina, 1994, p.214)

Buildings then, produce images, and, in our context here at this conference, we may think of buildings producing images of power; cultural, financial, political, religious and so on.

Historically the method of representation most used in architecture has been the many and various forms of drawing. (Over the last decade 3D digital modelling has begun to challenge drawing as the dominant method). From the genius sketch to the laborious production of the instrumental orthographic set, from the sketching of details to the slick ‘artist’s impression’ used for publicity purposes, the drawing has a central role in the transforming of material realities “at a distance” that Allen describes.
Edward Robbins discusses the nature of drawing in the practice of architecture and identifies it as having two roles (Robbins, 1994). In his analysis drawing is both a powerful conceptual tool and a social instrument. On the one hand drawing provides the ability for the designer to “conceive, test, and realize the best possible design” (Robbins, 1994, p.297), while on the other, in its role as a the “central instrument of communicative interaction” (Robbins, 1994, p.297), drawings can operate to exclude, manipulate and control, by setting limits, defining agendas and creating social hierarchies. It is therefore not just in the building that the operations of power (through the production of meaning) can take place. The abstract processes, the drawings and the discussions around the drawings that precede a building, can also be a location of power. In questioning the nature of these “highly abstract” documents and representational devices that precede a building, Agrest makes a useful point. She says,

> Each critical work, irrespective of its content, implies a theoretical approach, which in turn is dependent on a particular representation of the world. On few occasions is this ideological split make explicit. Thus the real implication of the approach, or its essential differences from other approaches, is usually not made clear. (Agrest, 1991, p.8)

Architects use various representational means to both design and represent places. The choices architects make as to the images they produce, both preceding a building and through a building, always impart particular ideological approaches. In the two case studies that follow, in contrast to Agrest’s statement, the means of representing place are closely entwined with the theoretical approach to place; the agenda in making architectural images is explicit.

**Case studies:**

**muf**

muf is an art and architecture practice committed to working in public space. Established in 1996 and based in London, muf’s projects range across the practises of research, action, performance, public art, design, landscape architecture and building.
They describe their practice as engaged with the limits, edges and limitations of a brief (Ainley, 2001, p.9), and that these provide the clues and content for their urban place-making strategies.

Katherine Schonfield, a critic and muf collaborator, articulates the muf design methodology as that of moving from the particular to the general and back again. She identifies this method as emerging from a critique of the conundrum of the architect planner. In the muf manual she poses the questions,

> How do you develop a city-wide strategy when you are fascinated by the detail of things? And how can you make something small-scale in the here and now if you are driven by the urge to formulate strategic proposals for the future? (Schonfield, 2001, p.14)

muf reject conventional urban design methodologies, such as the master plan, in which (in their view) it is assumed that strategy and detail are “generically, qualitatively and aesthetically disjointed” (Schonfield, 2001, p. 20). They identify the social, and thus the formula for social space, as located in the place of the deeply personal and individual, and they express their formula in two ways; firstly as “detail/strategy=DETAIL” (Schonfield, 2001, p 14).and secondly as operating through the doctrine of “premature gratification” (Schonfield, 2001, p.15).

As an example, in muf’s Birmingham project for a playground\(^1\) the strategy of layering up a playground in strips emerged from the careful and up-close observation of the client’s reality, their specificity of place – the lack of funds, the lack of a playground and the lack of site in the normal sense of things. This detailed observation lead to a strategy of accreting a playground over time, a strip as can be afforded each year. As they describe it,

> … the modular playstrip is a diagram of intent where year one begins with the scent of roses, somewhere to sit and the first piece of play equipment. As equipment is added year by year,

\(^1\) Bromford Modular Playstrip
choices can be made as to what should come next. (Ainley, 2001, p.204)

In itself this is not an unusual strategy, however the tactical implementation of the project also needs to be considered, and this is where “premature gratification” comes into play. Instead of working from the ground up, first paving the site, then installing equipment as council budgets allow, the strategy of “premature gratification” requires that all stages of a project offer an experience of the pleasure of the place as a whole. As Schonfield describes it,

So while the norm under money restrictions would be to tarmac the designated area and get the play equipment as and when, (...) both the notion of the exemplar DETAIL and the doctrine of premature gratification mitigate against this approach. Using money to prepare the site for goodies to be supplied at a future date is revealed in the same light as making the mashed potato for a shepherd’s pie while waiting indefinitely for the mince. (Schonfield, 2001, p.19)

muf utilise this strategy to harness the energy and foresight required from all parties in order to push the design and construction of public projects through the complex and enduring negotiation that inevitably occur. In muf’s practice the first phase of any project must deliver the goods; it must generate and deliver a sense of what the whole place is so that the project will continue. The strategy of premature gratification allows the clients/occupants/users to experience the nature of the place as it will be although yet incomplete, and it is this experience that encourages them towards completion. As Schonfield says, “it makes you want to eat more because the hors d’oeuvres tasted so good” (Schonfield, 2001, p.18).

For the philosopher Michel de Certeau, place is constituted by a system of signs, while space is constituted by the “tactical” engagement with the system of signs, what he terms the “practiced place” (de Certeau, 1988, p.117). de Certeau likens the practising of place to the speaking of language, with the act of walking operating within, and disrupting, the urban system as the practise of speaking operates within and disrupts linguistic systems. muf’s formula “detail/strategy=DETAIL” enacts such
a tactical engagement with the “system of signs.” By allowing a project to emerge from the detail they acknowledge that social space occurs through the intersection of the detail with the whole; place, while being generic in terms of the system of identification or signs (this place/that place), is specific and embodied, or “practiced” in terms of experience.

muf operate with an awareness of the powerful role images play in the design process. In their drawings muf gather together a range of ideas for a project, from the imaginary or even “weird” (Ainley, 2001 p.91) to the technical, in effect giving this wide range of ideas a formal representation, a place. In describing a drawing made for the project *Shared Ground* (1996-2001), where Southwark Street (south east London), was imagined and imaged as a beach, muf articulate the way in which images can operate as a generator of the place in advance of its construction. The image, they explain,

> … served to show that changes to the environment come from both the imagination and the technical, it also shows that the drawing or representation is a thing in itself. In advance of construction, the image is the only tangible manifestation of the idea and is the means by which the idea is bought into being. (Ainley, 2001, p.91)

The making of images in the practice of muf could be seen as a political device whereby all parties in the project can have their needs and desires for the project articulated and represented with equal weight. For muf,

> … making images that acknowledge the imaginary, the unexpected and the unofficial is an attempt to value the kind of knowledge that is often marginalised or ignored; it is an attempt to say to the people who are the larger client body, ‘your most weird thoughts are socially relevant’. (Ainley, 2001, p.91)

One representational device muf frequently use is that of mapping. Most forms of mapping fail to register the experiential qualities of place. muf employ mapping in order to identify and crystallise not only the spatial aspects of a project but also to identify the social aspects, the detail, which will then, as we have seen, inform the overall strategy. As an example, the maps made by muf for their *Car-free London*
project (an exhibition project 1999) mimic the analytical mapping carried out in city planning disciplines and agencies but locate sites of security, mobility, pleasure and desire rather than the more usual positioning of infrastructure, traffic flow etc. In the muf maps surprising connections are sought, connections based on the “practicing” of the city rather then the placement of things within a larger system.

In the geographer J. Nicholas Entrikin’s discussion of place and region he recommends that place is best viewed from points in-between two extremes of discursive method: on the one hand the epistemological (objective, de-centred universalising) view and on the other the ontological (subjective, centred, particularising) view (Entrikin, 1991). For Entrikin, this balancing of place between these two ends is a critical issue for human geography and can be afforded through what he terms a narrative-like synthesis where, “narrative offers a means of mediating the particular-universal and the subjective-objective axes” (Entrikin, 1991, p.6).

muf’s formula, their practise in the detail/strategy or the particular/general nexus, their engagement with the detailed narrative of a place, such as the actualities of the client and the mapping of embodied aspects of place such as pleasure and desire, and the location of that narrative in informing a wider strategic view, is a practising of this narrative-like synthesis that Entrikin describes.

Koolhaas OMA/AMO

In 1975 Rem Koolhaas founded, with three partners, OMA, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Based in Rotterdam, Koolhaas leads the architecture and urbanism work of OMA as well as that of AMO, the conceptual research branch of OMA. Koolhaas is a professor at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, where he conducts the Project on the City.

Koolhaas’s practice as an architect includes writing and publishing on architecture and urbanism. His books, such as Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for
Manhattan, (originally published 1978, re-published 1994) and the exceedingly fat Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large (or S,M,L,XL, with Bruce Mau, 1995) are widely read and referenced. The Harvard Project on the City also produces books (Mutations 2001, Great Leap Forward, 2002) in which a series of issues related to the urban condition are examined. The Harvard project is a response to a perceived “academic and professional bewilderment with urban conditions that seem to defy traditional description” (Harvard, “Courses, Project on the City”, 2008) or, we could say, with new types of places.

Two polemical texts, Whatever happened to urbanism? and The Generic City (both published in 1995 as part of S,M,L,XL), demonstrate Koolhaas’s distinctly post-modern approach to the place of the contemporary city. In the former, Koolhaas interrogates the failure of the discipline of urbanism in keeping up with and remaining relevant to the rapid processes of global urban expansion. He argues that the singular city no longer exists. Koolhaas says,

Pervasive urbanization has modified the urban condition itself beyond recognition. ‘The’ city no longer exists. As the concept of city is distorted and stretched beyond precedent, each insistence on its primordial condition – in terms of images, rules, fabrication – irrevocably leads via nostalgia to irrelevance. (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.963)

In this text Koolhaas introduces the conditions of a new typology of the city he later names The Generic City. The new city has all of the attributes of the post-modern; it will be a place for the “staging of uncertainty” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.969), it will reject permanence in all forms and will instead be a “territory with potential … expanding notions, denying boundaries … discovering unnameable hybrids” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.969).

In The Generic City, this pan-global, post-modern city, is described in detail, almost lovingly, under the part-encyclopaedia, part-travel guide topics; Statistics, General, Airport, Population, Urbanism, Politics, Sociology, Quarters, Program, Architecture, Geography, Identity, History, Infrastructure and Culture. According to Koolhaas, The
Generic City emerges through convergence. This move effects the loss of a particular or specific place-based identity. Koolhaas says,

> Convergence is possible only at the price of shedding identity. That is usually seen as a loss. But at the scale at which it occurs, it must mean something. What are the disadvantages of identity, and conversely, what are the advantages of blankness? (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1248)

In this text Koolhaas is effectively looking for meaning in the post-modern, centre-less urban cores that populate the globe. The Generic City, in losing all identity, is “the city without history” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1250); Hollywood-like it can “produce a new identity every Monday morning” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1250). It is the city “liberated from the captivity of centre, from the straitjacket of identity” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1250).

To Koolhaas, even historic traditional centres, such as Paris and Barcelona, have become generic cities, through processes of “oversimplification”. This emptying out of meaning and identity from such cities occurs through marketing and branding; these cities become transparent “like a logo” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1250). History and memory in The Generic City is “an elaborate mythic operation: it celebrates the past as only the recently conceived can. “It is a machine” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1256). Generic Cities mobilise “general memories, memories of memories” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1257), nostalgia packaged for tourists who grow in numbers “in direct proportion to the erasure of the past” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.1256).

Koolhaas seems to positively celebrate the possibilities that might emerge from such Generic Cities, a point not lost on the critic Michael Benedikt who coined the term “place machismo”, in order to define Koolhaas’s approach (Benedikt, 2002). Place machismo refers to an attitude where the grim realities of tough urbanism are not just endured but relished. Place machismo, “demands that we actually welcome the unpleasant, not to ameliorate it, but rather to flaunt our toughness” (Benedikt, 2002, p.21). Benedikt sees Koolhaas’s position as a, “widely admired avant-garde position,
one which asserts that better than inadvertent banality is deliberate and exaggerated banality, grander, more Nietszhian, more refined for being less refined …” (Benedikt, 2002, p.22). He likens Koolhaas’s celebration of vast urbanised landscapes to that of Kant’s sublime but he also warns that Koolhaas’s “amplification of infrastructural and industrial typologies” (Benedikt, 2002, p.22), acts as a kind of bravado, a dare to his discipline to embrace, “the shamefully wasteful landscape of American consumerism on the one hand and the brutally pragmatic modernism of Asia or impoverished Africa on the other” (Benedikt, 2002, p.26).

Koolhaas’s view on the demise of the place-bound singular city and the rise of the generic city is further emphasised through the images and design of S,M,L,XL. This is a book with an agenda. It is literally stuffed full of images, from a wide variety of uncredited and non-specific sources; diagrams, maps, collages and photographs jostle alongside and between the texts. Some of the visual material relates directly to OMA/AMO projects while other images seem intended to create a kind of disruption to the text. Monographs published on star architects (or starchitects as they are now known) tend to operate within an enclosed frame, presenting the work of the practice within a limited, rarefied and self-referential context. S,M,L,XL uses images to effect a kind of channel surfing; like flicking from station to station, turning the pages of S,M,L,XL is unpredictable, with high culture (the building projects undertaken by OMA such as The Netherlands Dance Theatre, 1987) spliced by pop culture, (ads for 0900 sex phone-chat lines interrupt the text of The Generic City). These images operate as a kind of visual chatter, the hum of a Generic City getting on with the manufacture of itself oblivious to its theorisation.

One section of the book on Singapore can be examined to tease out the visual representation of place and to elucidate the discursive forms employed by Koolhaas to represent The Generic City. The section is 80 pages in length, from the book total of 1344 pages. As with other parts of the book, the text is spliced with an array of visual

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2 I should point out here that the collaborator on this book is the graphic designer Bruce Mau, and the book’s visual design is very much part of its appeal.

3 “Singapore, portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis, Songlines … or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa” S,M,L,XL pages 1009-1089.
material. Mapping of various features – geographical, industrial, historical, touristic – intersects with photographs, some found, (these usually formally framed such as official portraits and aerial views of the city), some snapshots, blurry and oblique, presumably taken by Koolhaas. A cartoon of Confucius sits next to a TV still of a family, a bar chart showing the number of flats built each year 1960-1989 and a bubble diagram of some organisational proposition. The cover of a 1963 UN report titled ‘Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore’ is followed on the next page by a full frontal image of a naked Asian woman; with no caption we can only assume her ethnicity. A large section of the text on Singapore’s urbanisation describes and makes an analogy with Fumihiko Maki’s master planning of post-war Tokyo. This section, illustrated with historical architectural plans and drawings from Maki’s office, is interrupted by the double-page spread of a large pinky-orange blob covered in accumulations of smaller grey blobs. The image is clearly microscopic, perhaps of cellular or bacterial activity. It is certainly ambiguous, perhaps cancer, perhaps cure, perhaps both.

*S,M,L,XL* operates through aggregation. At the beginning of *What ever happened to urbanism?* Koolhaas states that, “as the concept of city is distorted and stretched beyond precedent, each insistence on its primordial condition – in terms of images, rules, fabrication – irrevocably leads via nostalgia to irrelevance” (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.963). In *S,M,L,XL* Koolhaas seems to be seeking some form of representation, some image proper to the Generic City that he describes. If identity is lost and blankness is a positive attribute how does representation work? What is there to show? Allen calls for new forms of notation in order to engage with the contemporary city. He says,

… traditional representations presume stable objects and fixed subjects. But the contemporary city is not reducible to an artefact. The city today is a place where visible and invisible streams of information, capital and subjects interact in complex formations. They form a dispersed field, a network of flows. In order to describe or to intervene in this new field architects need representational techniques that engage time and change, shifting scales, mobile points of view, and multiple programs. (Allen, 2000, p.40)
In line with this request, S,M,L,XL indicates that OMA/AMO as a practice seeks to find new forms of representation suitable to the constantly shifting scales, multiple programs and mobile points of view of The Generic City.

**Conclusion**

muf and OMA/AMO are very different practices. OMA employs over 300 staff and has offices in Europe, North America, Asia and the Middle East. Recent OMA projects include the Al-Rai masterplan for a large-scale multipurpose development in Kuwait and the Television Cultural Centre in Beijing. muf is a practice of 14 staff with an office in London. A recent muf project was the design of a town square in Barking, for which they won the 5th European Prize for Urban Public Space.

However, both muf and OMA/AMO employ specific forms of representation in order to contest with ‘place’ as they see it. In both instances their ideology is made explicit, the modes of representation they use are chosen specifically to interact with and promote their design agendas, different though they might be. While muf use images to engage the details of a place and of a project, Koolhaas uses images to contextualise OMA/AMO’s work within post-modern conditions, that of voids or blackness filled with a multitude of competing images. What both practices share is an understanding that places, of all scales, are complex, and that this complexity must be acknowledged through architectural imagery if that image is to be at all powerful in terms of the realisation of a project.

Allen observes that, “representation is not something added onto building, but that which makes it possible in the first place. But technique is never neutral, and the means of representation always leave a trace in the construction” (Allen, 2000, p.36).

For Allen architecture requires a continual shuttling “between the abstraction of architecture’s graphic instruments and the unyielding concreteness of the building” (Allen, 2000, p.36), and it is this shuttling that, “makes it possible for architecture to work within the complexity of the real, and to engage the shifting field of the
contemporary city” (Allen, 2000, p.36). For both muf and Koolhaas this shuttling occurs across and between the actualities of places and their representation. Both practices understand and utilise the powerful nature of architectural representation in formulating images in the abstract design process, the built material project and the meaning derived from the built.

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