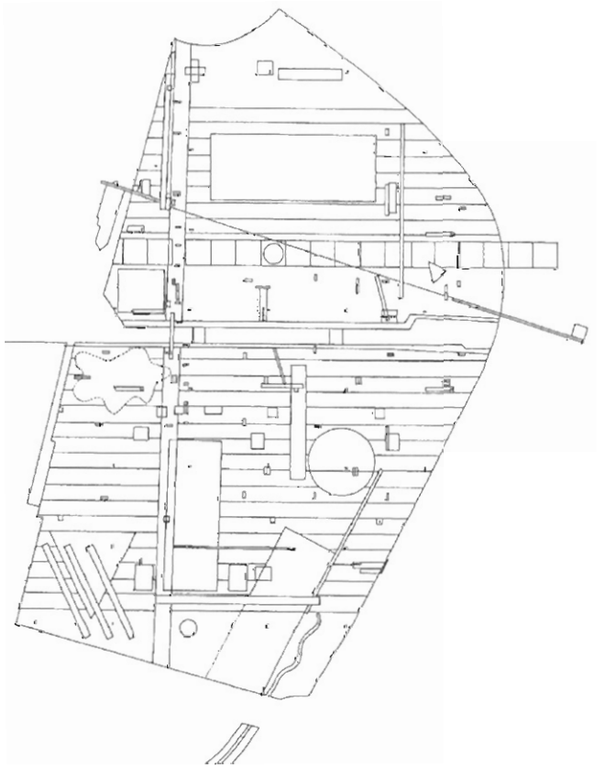
Rem Koolhaas "'Life in the Metropolis' or 'The Culture of Congestion'" *Architectural Design* 47, no. 5 (August 1977)

In the very midst of an antimodernism that vilified the utopian aspirations of architecture between the wars as a manifest will to power whose desire for a collective freedom had been converted into the totalizing formula of a steel and glass cage, there arose a sensibility altogether different, characterized by its ironic, parodic take on the psycho-aerobic exercises of modernism and its maintenance of what should still be seen as functionalist and programmatic concerns, but now directed toward almost surreal scenarios. Between 1975 and 1977, in projects like the Welfare Palace Hotel, The Hotel Sphinx, and the Floating Pool, Rem Koolhaas and his associates in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (an international firm founded in London in 1975) produced what could easily be mistaken for the paranoid hallucinations of a Georg Simmel, Charles Fourier, or Ludwig Hilberseimer—the sociological-elementarist apprehensions of capitalism's madness. In their research and design projects, Koolhaas and OMA looked to Manhattan's "culture of congestion" for a demonstration of a link between commercial architecture and an avant-garde program of accelerated technological effects. The new "ecstasy about architecture"—comprising almost equal parts

OMA and Rem Koolhaas, Parc de La Villette, Paris, 1982–1983



of constraint and elation, resignation and intoxication—is the essence of the ambivalent life in the metropolis, where the antinomies of modern utopianism are played out. It finds its most perfect object in Manhattan, the principal site of laissez-faire development, congestion, consumption, and all manner of worldliness.[1]

One of the primary examples of Manhattan's "techno-psychic" machines discovered by Koolhaas is the Downtown Athletic Club, in which the vast urban grid and the elevator couple horizontally and vertically to produce previously unimaginable experiential effects out of an economically engineered servomechanism. "Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the 9th floor" is but one of the surrealist programmatic promises of what is, in itself, an almost unrepresentable infrastructure, but one whose liberative potentials can be thwarted only by a failure of nerve. What is more, this machine (the grid-elevator-skyscraper combination) came into being without a single architect's intention. It is the almost automatic by-product of a collective metropolitan subject that refused to adopt a discourse at odds with the realities of actual practice—an avant-garde without a manifesto, which must then be written retroactively.

In 1978, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, the full study of Manhattan metropolitanism, was published. In 1982 the Downtown Athletic Club was rotated ninety degrees, from section into plan, to form the diagram of OMA's entry to the competition for the Parc de La Villette, which further explored the relationship between a rigid, nonarchitectural device and the contingent programmatic effects it can generate.

see 706

Note

1 "If Manhattan is still in search of a theory, then this theory, once identified, should yield a formula for an architecture that is at once ambitious *and* popular. Manhattan has generated a shameless architecture that has been loved in direct proportion to its defiant lack of self-hatred, respected exactly to the degree that it went too far. Manhattan has consistently inspired in its beholders *ecstasy about architecture*." Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 10.

Why do we have a mind, if not to get our own way?

DOSTOEVSKY

Somewhere in the 19th century certain parts of the globe—negligible in terms of surface—developed an unprecedented condition: through the simultaneous explosion of modern technologies and human population on their limited territories, they found themselves supporting the mutant form of human coexistence that is known as Metropolis.

The Metropolis invalidates all the previous systems of articulation and differentiation that have traditionally guided the design of cities. The Metropolis annuls the previous history of architecture.

But if the Metropolis is a true mutation, it can be assumed that it has also generated its own Urbanism: an architecture that is exclusively concerned with the "splendeurs et misères" of the Metropolitan Condition; an architecture with its own theorems, laws, methods, breakthroughs and achievements that has remained largely outside the field of vision of official architecture and criticism, both unable to admit a fundamental rupture that would make their own existence precarious.

Manhattan

By an unspoken consensus, Manhattan is considered the archetype of the Metropolitan Condition, to the point where the two are often interchangeable. Manhattan's spectacular growth coincided exactly with the definition of the concept of Metropolis itself. Manhattan represents the apotheosis of the ideal of density per se, both of population and of infrastructures; its architecture promotes a state of congestion on all possible levels, and exploits this congestion to inspire and support particular forms of social intercourse that together form a unique *culture of congestion*.

The following episodes of Manhattan's history circumscribe such an Urbanism that is specifically Metropolitan.

Coney Island

Coney Island is a clitoral appendage at the mouth of New York harbor, discovered one day before Manhattan itself.

From 1600 to 1800 the shape of the peninsula changed under the combined impact of natural forces—(shifting sands)—and human intervention—(the cutting of a canal that turned Coney actually into an island). These modifications together followed a "design" that turned the Island more and more into a miniature of Manhattan.

From the mid-19th century, the obstacles of geography that had so far ensured relative inaccessibility to the island were one by one transcended by new transportation technologies.

In 1883 the Brooklyn Bridge removed the last obstruction that had kept Manhattan's inhabitants in place. From then on they escaped to the Atlantic beach in a weekly Exodus that concentrated more than 1 million people on the minuscule island on a good day.

The virgin nature that is the destination of this frantic migration disappeared under the onslaught of the unprecedented hyper-density. As compensation for this loss of nature, a battery of new technologies was developed to provide equivalent conditions on a scale that was commensurate with the new Metropolitan numbers.

Coney Island became a laboratory of the collective unconscious; the themes and tactics of its experimentation were later to reappear in Manhattan.

Cow

The first natural element to be converted was the cow. Since no amount of real cows could deal with the insatiable thirst of the million, a machine was designed and built: the Inexhaustible Cow. Its milk is superior to the natural product in terms of quantity, regularity of flow, hygiene, and controllable temperature.

Bathing

Similar conversions follow in rapid succession. Since the total surface of the beaches and the total length of the surfline were finite and given, it followed with mathematical certainty that not each of the hundreds of thousands of visitors could find a place to spread out in the sand, let alone succeed in reaching the water within the limit of a single day.

Toward 1890, the introduction of electricity in this impasse made it possible to create a second daytime—intense electric lights were placed at regular intervals along the surfline, so that the sea could be enjoyed in a truly Metropolitan shift system. Those unable to reach the water in the day were given a 12-hour extension. What is unique in Coney Island—and this syndrome of the irresistible Synthetic sets the tone for later events in Manhattan—is that this illumination was not seen as a second-rate experience, but that its very artificiality was advertised as an attraction in itself: Electric Bathing.

Horses

The preferred activity of the happy few who had enjoyed the island in its virgin state had been horseback riding. Of course, that experience was unthinkable on the scale of the new masses. Real horses in adequate numbers would require a separate infrastructure as big as the island itself.

Also, the ability to ride a horse was a form of "knowledge" not available to the proletariat that had made the island its playground.

In the mid-1890s George Tilyou laid out a mechanical track that leads through Coney's natural landscapes, along the oceanfront and across a number of man-made obstacles. He named it "Steeplechase" . . . "an automatic racetrack with gravitation as its motive power. . . . Its horses resemble in size and model the trackracer. Staunchly built, they are to a certain extent under the control of the rider, who can accelerate the speed by the manner in which he utilizes his weight and his position on the ascending and descending grades."

Steeplechase combined in a single attraction the provision of entertainment with a form of emancipation through machinery—the elite experience of horseback riding democratized through technology.

Love

Two years later, even the most intimate processes of human nature were converted.

It is often alleged that the Metropolis creates loneliness and alienation. Coney Island responded to this problem with the "Barrels of Love."

Two horizontal cylinders—mounted in line—revolve in opposite directions. At either end a narrow staircase leads up to the entrance; one feeds men into the apparatus, the other women. It is impossible to remain standing in the machine; men and women are thrown on top of each other. The unrelenting rotation then creates synthetic intimacy between couples who would never have met without its assistance.

If necessary, this intimacy could be further processed in the "Tunnels of Love," an artificial mountain next to the couple-forming machine. The freshly formed pairs would board a small boat that disappears inside a system of dark tunnels where complete obscurity ensues—or at least—visual privacy.

The rocking movement of the boats on the shallow water was supposed to increase sensuality.

Conclusion: 1

With the sequence of: Cow, Electric Bathing, Steeplechase and Barrels of Love, all the natural elements that had once defined the attraction of the Island, were systematically replaced by a new kind of machinery that converted the original nature into an intricate simulacrum of nature, a compensatory technical service.

This technology is not the agent of objective and quantifiable improvements—such as raising the levels of illumination, controlling temperature, etc.—it is a superior substitute for the "natural" reality that is being depleted by the sheer density of human consumers.

Together, this apparatus constitutes an alternative reality that is invented and designed, instead of accidental and arbitrary.

Since this "instrumentarium" of true modernity creates states and situations that have never existed before, it can never escape its aspect of fabrication—of being the result of human fantasy.

The Metropolis is irrevocably the resultant of such identifiable mental constructions, and that is the source of its fundamental "otherness" from all previous Urbanisms.

Elevator

In 1853, at Manhattan's first World's Fair, the invention that would, more than any other, become the "sign" of the Metropolitan Condition, was introduced to the public in a singularly theatrical format.

Elisha Otis, the inventor of the elevator, mounts a platform. The platform ascends. When it has reached its highest level, an assistant presents Otis with a dagger on a velvet cushion. The inventor takes the knife and attacks what appears the crucial component of his invention: the cable that has hoisted the platform upward and that now prevents its fall. Otis cuts the cable; nothing happens to platform or inventor.

Invisible safety-catches prevent the platform from rejoining the surface of the earth. They represent the essence of Otis's invention: the ability to prevent the elevator from crashing.

Like the elevator, each technical invention is pregnant with a double image: the spectre of its possible failure. The way to avert that phantom disaster is as important as the original invention itself.

Otis introduced a theme which would become a *leitmotiv* in the performance of the Metropolis: a spectacle that features a neck and neck race between an astronomical increase in the potential for disaster that is only just exceeded by a still more astronomical increase in the potential to avert disaster.

Elevator 2

From the 1870s, the elevator became the great emancipator of all the floors above the ground floor. Otis's apparatus recovered the innumerable planes that had so far been purely speculative, and revealed their superiority in the first Metropolitan paradox: the greater the distance from the earth—the more unnatural the location—the closer the communication with what remains of nature (i.e., light, air, views, etc.).

The elevator is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophesy: the further it travels upward, the more undesirable the circumstances it leaves behind.

Through the mutual reinforcement of the elevator and the steelframe (the latter with its uncanny ability to support the newly identified territories without itself taking any space), any given site in the Metropolis could now be multiplied ad infinitum, a proliferation of floorspace that was called Skyscraper, prime instrument of the architecture of density.

Theorem

In 1909 the "layering" of the world's surface through the action of the elevator was posited in the form of a visual theorem that appeared in the popular press.

A slender steel structure supports 84 horizontal planes, all the size of the original plot. Each of these artificial levels is treated as a *virgin site* to establish a private domain around a single countryhouse and its attendant facilities such as stables, servants' cottages, gazebos, etc., all implanted in an airborne meadow.

Emphatic permutations of the styles of the villas suggested that each of the elevator stops corresponded to a different lifestyle—an implied ideological variation—all of them supported with complete neutrality by the steelframe rack.

Life inside this building is fractured to the extent that it could not conceivably be part of a single scenario: on the 82nd floor a donkey shrinks back from the void, on the 81st a cosmopolitan couple hail a plane.

The privacy and isolation of each of the aerial plots seemingly conflicts with the fact that, together, they form a single building. In fact, the diagram implies that the structure is successful exactly to the extent that the individuality of each plot is respected. The structure "frames" their coexistence without interfering with their contents.

The Building is an accumulation of privacies.

Only 5 of the 84 floors are visible on the drawing. Hidden in the clouds other activities occupy other plots; the use of each platform can never be known in advance of its construction. Villas go up and collapse, other facilities replace them, but that does not affect the framework.

100-Story Building

In 1911 a project for a "100-Story Building" was unveiled that incorporated many of the breakthroughs which, only two years earlier, seemed entirely theoretical. The Building was a straightforward extrusion of the block it occupies multiplied by 100.

The lower third of the Building is devoted to industry, the middle part to business, the upper part to living. On every 20th story is a public plaza that occupies a whole floor and articulates the demarcation between the different functional sectors: a "general market" on the 20th, a cluster of theatres on the 40th, a "shopping district" on the 60th, a hotel on the 80th, and an "amusement park, roof garden and swimming pool" on the roof.

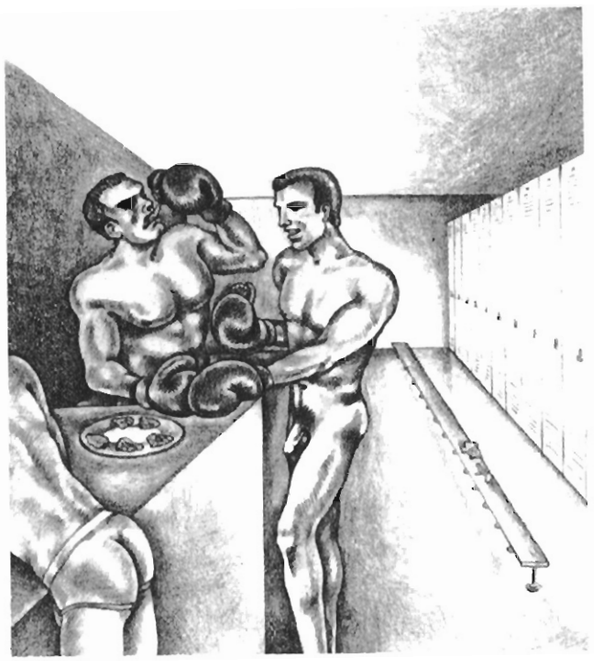
At first sight, the rooms inside this structure are conventional, equipped with fireplaces and wood panelling. But they are also equipped with 7 outlets for "temperature and atmosphere regulating tubes" which demonstrate once more the antipragmatic, in fact, poetic usage of the Metropolitan infrastructure: "A = salt air, B = fresh air, C = dry salt air, D = dry fresh air, E = medicated air (to suit disease), F = temperature switch, GHI = perfumes."

The outlets of this techno-psychic battery are the keys to a scale of synthetic experiences that ranges from the hedonistic to the hyper-medical. Some rooms can be "set" on Florida, others on the Canadian Rocky Mountains The perfumes and the medicinal air suggest even more abstract destinations. In the 100-story Building each cubicle is equipped to pursue its private existential journey.

The building has become a laboratory for emotional and intellectual adventure; the fact that it is implanted in Manhattan has become—almost—immaterial.

Downtown Athletic Club

Within 20 years, the promise of the 100-story Building—that of a skyscraper fully conquered by higher forms of social intercourse than mere business—was realized in 1931 with the Downtown Athletic Club.



Rem Koolhaas, *A Machine for Metropolitan Bachelors . . .*, painting by Madelon Vriesendorp, from *Delirious New York*, 1978.

All the latent potential of the skyscraper as a type is exploited in a masterpiece of the Culture of Congestion, a Constructivist Social Condenser materialized in Manhattan.

It is one of the rare 20th century buildings that is truly revolutionary: it offers a full inventory of the fundamental modifications—technical and psychological—that are caused by life in the Metropolis, and that separate this century from all previous ones. Its existence allows a spectrum of experiences on a single place that was previously unthinkable.

The Club—externally indistinguishable from the other skyscrapers in the Wall Street area—is located on the Hudson near Battery Park on a lot 23 meters wide and 54 meters deep.

The Club is the 1909 theorem made concrete: a sequence of superimposed platforms that each repeat the original rectangle of the site, connected by a battery of 13 elevators concentrated along the north wall of the structure.

"The plan is of primary importance, because on the floor are performed all the activities of the human occupants"; that is how Raymond Hood (the most theoretical of Manhattan's architects) defined Manhattan's interpretation of functionalism: each plan as a collage of functions that describes on the synthetic platforms an episode of Metropolitan ritual. Each of the rectangles of the Downtown Athletic Club is such a scenario with a highly suggestive—if abstract—plot.

Each floor is a separate installment of a complex intrigue—their sequence as random as only the elevator man can make them—this form of architecture is a form of Modernistic writing: the planning of choreography of mankind through experimental techno-psychic apparatus designed by themselves to celebrate their own redesign.

The lower 15 floors of the building are accessible only to men. Their sequence from the ground to the top corresponds to an increasing refinement and artifice. From the 17th to the 18–1/2th floor, the men, perfected in the lower floors, are allowed to communicate with the opposite sex in the dining room, the roof terrace and the dance floor. The final 20 floors are devoted to Hotel accommodation.

Floors 7, 9, 11 and 12 deserve special analysis for their extreme daring: Emerging from the elevator on the 9th floor, the visitor—probably a Wall Street stockbroker—finds himself in a vestibule that leads directly to a locker-room at the center of the floor (where there is no daylight). There he undresses, puts on gloves and enters an adjoining space that is equipped for boxing and wrestling. But on the southern side, the locker-room is also served by a small oyster bar.

Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the 9th floor—such is the plot of this floor—the 20th century in action.

The 10th floor is devoted to preventive medicine. On one side of a large dressing room and lounge an array of body manipulations—sections for massage and rubbing, an 8-bed station for artificial sunbathing (open to the river), a 10-bed rest area—is arranged around a Turkish bath. The south-east corner of the floor is a medical facility capable of treating five patients at once. A doctor is charged with the process of "colonic irrigation," the literal invasion of the human body with cultivated bacteria that modify and accelerate the natural metabolism of the human body.

This final step completes the sequence of radical intervention and voluntary self-experimentation initiated by such apparently innocent attractions as Coney Island's "Barrels of Love."

On the 12th floor, a swimming pool occupies almost the full rectangle. At night, it is illuminated by an underwater lighting system, so that the entire slab of water with its frenetic swimmers appears to float in space, between the electric scintillation of the Wall Street skyline.

Of all the floors, the Interior Golfcourse is perhaps the most significant enterprise: an interior English garden landscape of small hills and valleys, a little river that curls across the rectangle, green grass (real), a bridge. . . . A mural extends the landscape toward a nebulous horizon, but the regular punctuation of the lighting fixtures on the ceiling reminds, irrevocably, of fabrication.

The presence of the Golfcourse argues that nature, obliterated by all the Metropolitan structures, will now be resurrected as merely one of the layers of the Metropolis. After its total eclipse, nature returns as one of the services of the Culture of Congestion.

Conclusion: 2

Through the medium of the Skyscraper, each site in the Metropolis accommodates—in theory at least—an unstable and unforeseeable combination of superimposed and simultaneous activities whose configuration is fundamentally beyond the control of architect or planner.

As a vehicle of Urbanism, the indeterminacy of the Skyscraper suggests that—in the Metropolis—no single specific function can be matched with a single place.

Through this destabilization it is possible to absorb the "change that is life" by continuously rearranging functions on the individual platforms in an incessant process of adaptation that does not affect the framework of the building itself.

Exteriors and interiors of such structures belong to two different kinds of architectures. The first—external—is only concerned with the appearance of the building as a more or less serene sculptural object, while the interior is in a constant state of flux—of themes, programs, iconographies—in which the volatile metropolitan citizens, with their overstimulated nervous systems, combat the perpetual threat of ennui.

Radio City Music Hall

The application of technology at the service of metaphor occurs at a still more explicit level and on a larger scale than the Athletic Club in Radio City Music Hall, a theater for 6200.

Rem Koolhaas with Zoe Zenghelis, *The City of the Captive Globe*, painting by Madelon Vriesendorp, from *Delirious New York*, 1978

It is a prototype of a strictly interior architecture inserted in the neutral envelope of Rockefeller Center. Its cosmogony was not invented by its official architects, but by their client, the impresario Samuel Rothafel, known as Roxy.

In the early 1930s a group of architects—among them Wallace Harrison—took Roxy on a European tour—all the way to Moscow—in an attempt to convert him to Modern Architecture.

But Roxy remained indifferent to the antiseptic accommodations which modern architects had designed for the fundamentally irrational culture of the theater. On his return to New York, he had a revelation when he watched a mid-Atlantic sunset. "I didn't conceive of the idea. I dreamed it. I believe in creative dreams. The picture of Radio City Music Hall was complete and practically perfect in my mind before architects and artists put pen on drawing paper." His theater is to be a simulation of the spectacle he beheld from the railing of the ship: a sunset.

Roxy's architect dutifully executed the metaphorical theme. A vast ovoid space is covered with plaster "rays" that extend across the ceiling of the entire theatre, embracing the audience like a firmament. The curtain is made of an especially developed synthetic fiber—so glittering that it outshines the real sun. When the lights are slowly dimmed, the impression of a sunset is inescapable.

But the lights have to go on again. And off again. There are three or four such cycles for each complete performance. If the metaphor is taken seriously, the audience lives through three or four accelerated days.

Then Roxy discovered that the air-conditioning system could be used for more creative purposes than simple cooling and heating—i.e., to increase the density of metaphor in the auditorium. First he considered adding laughing gas to its atmosphere, so that his 6200 clients would be transported to "another world" where they would be more receptive to the impact of the movies. However, he desisted after urgent pleading by his lawyers, but only after substituting health-giving Ozone for the N2O. Now his theater combines "Supertime" with "Superhealth," a union that is caught perfectly in his advertisement: "A visit to Radio City Music Hall is as good as a month in the country."

Conclusion: 3

As in the example of Radio City Music Hall, planning in Manhattan consists of the imposition on the explosive substance of the Metropolis of metaphoric models—at once primitive and efficient—that replace literal organization—impossible in any case—with a form of conceptual control.

Such hermetic, self-contained enclaves offer emotional shelter to the disinherited Metropolitan masses, ideal worlds removed in time and space, protected against the corrosion of everyday reality in their interior locations. These sub-Utopian fragments are all the more convincing for having no territorial ambitions beyond occupying their interior allotments through a private hyperdensity of symbolism and localized paroxysms of the particular. Together, such moments form a matrix of frivolity, a system of poetic formulas that replaces traditional quantifiable planning in favor of metaphoric planning.

Movement in the Metropolis becomes ideological navigation between the conflicting claims and promises of "islands" of a metaphoric archipelago.

Postscript

The three episodes above present a provisional triangulation of a truly Metropolitan architecture. If they appear extravagant, or even unreal, that is only a sign of the narrowness of our architectural focus and of our refusal to admit that a fundamental break has occurred between traditional and modern Urbanisms.

These "stories" describe a tradition of modernity that insists on systematically exploiting all available apparatus and all the fresh infrastructures of the age to establish fantasies as realities in the world. The cumulative effect of such scattered episodes—and no doubt the cause of the anxieties they inspire—is that they discredit the idea of Reality as an immutable and indestructible presence—of reality as an ultimate safety net under our flawed acrobatic performances.

Instead, the "hysterical" structures of the Metropolis represent a free fall in the space of human imagination, a fall with unpredictable outcome, not even the certainty that it will end on the ground.

The true ambition of the Metropolis is to create a world totally fabricated by man, i.e., to live *inside* fantasy. The responsibilities of a specifically Metropolitan architecture have increased correspondingly: to design those hermetic enclaves—bloated private realms—that comprise the Metropolis. Such an architecture not only creates the "sets" of everyday life, but it also defines its contents with all possible means and disciplines such as literature, psychology, etc. Through the magical arrangement of human activities on all possible levels, it writes a scenario for the scriptless Metropolitan extras.

If that appears a form of megalomania, such a megalomania is tempered by the fact that its expressions are always localized, since they address, by definition, only a part of the total audience, never the whole. Metropolitan architecture is megalomaniac on a modest scale.

Metropolitan architecture thus defined implies a 2-fold polemic: against those who believe that they can undo the damage of the Modern Age—i.e., the Metropolis itself—through the artificial respiration and resuscitation of "traditional" architecture of streets, plazas, boulevards, etc.; empty spaces for dignified and decent forms of social intercourse, to be enforced in the name of a stoic good taste . . . and against that Modern architecture which—with its implacable aversion to metaphor—has tried to exorcise its fear of chaos through a fetish for the objective and to regain control over the volatility of the Metropolis by dispersing its bulk, isolating its components, and quantifying its functions, and render it predictable once more. . . . Both squander the potential of the Culture of Congestion.

The Urbanism of the 3 episodes was subconscious and spontaneous, not the result of an explicit doctrine. It was followed by an interval in which the architecture of the Metropolis has regressed, or at least fallen under the domination of official architecture.