

**1.1** Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport — “all the same”? Is it possible to theorize this convergence? And if so, to what ultimate configuration is it aspiring? 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? What if this seemingly accidental — and usually regretted — homogenization were an intentional process, a conscious movement away from difference toward similarity? What if we are witnessing a global liberation movement: “down with character!” What is left after identity is stripped? The Generic? **1.2** To the extent that identity is derived from physical substance, from the historical, from context, from the real, we somehow cannot imagine that anything contemporary — made by us — contributes to it. But the fact that human growth is exponential implies that the past will at some point become too “small” to be inhabited and shared by those alive. We ourselves exhaust it. To the extent that history finds its deposit in architecture, present human quantities will inevitably burst and deplete previous substance. Identity conceived as this form of sharing the past is a losing proposition: not only is there — in a stable model of continuous population expansion — proportionally less and less to share, but history also has an invidious half-life — as it is more abused, it becomes less significant — to the point where its diminishing hand-outs become insulting. This thinning is exacerbated by the constantly increasing mass of tourists, an avalanche that, in a perpetual quest for “character,” grinds successful identities down to meaningless dust. **1.3** Identity is like a mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait, and which, on closer inspection, may have been empty for centuries. The stronger identity, the more it imprisons, the more it resists expansion, interpretation, renewal, contradiction. Identity becomes like a lighthouse — fixed, overdetermined: it can change its position or the pattern it emits only at the cost of destabilizing navigation. (Paris can only become more Parisian — it is already on its way to becoming hyper-Paris, a polished caricature. There are exceptions: London — its only identity a lack of clear identity — is perpetually becoming even less London, more open, less static.) **1.4** Identity centralizes; it insists on an essence, a point. Its tragedy is given in simple geometric terms. As the sphere of influence expands, the area characterized by the center becomes larger and larger, hopelessly diluting both the strength and the authority of the core; inevitably the distance between center and circumference increases to the breaking point. In this perspective, the recent, belated discovery of the periphery as

a zone of potential value — a kind of pre-historical condition that might finally be worthy of architectural attention — is only a disguised insistence on the priority of and dependency on the center: without center, no periphery; the interest of the first presumably compensates for the emptiness of the latter. Conceptually orphaned, the condition of the periphery is made worse by the fact that its mother is still alive, stealing the show, emphasizing its offspring’s inadequacies. The last vibes emanating from the exhausted center preclude the reading of the periphery as a critical mass. Not only is the center by definition too small to perform its assigned obligations, it is also no longer the real center but an overblown mirage on its way to implosion; yet its illusory presence denies the rest of the city its legitimacy. (Manhattan denigrates as “bridge-and-tunnel people” those who need infrastructural support to enter the city, and makes them pay for it.) The persistence of the present concentric obsession makes us *all* bridge-and-tunnel people, second-class citizens in our own civilization, disenfranchised by the dumb coincidence of our collective exile from the center. **1.5** In our concentric programming (author spent part of his youth in Amsterdam, city of ultimate centrality) the insistence on the center as the core of value and meaning, font of all significance, is doubly destructive — not only is the ever-increasing volume of dependencies an ultimately intolerable strain, it also means that the center has to be constantly *maintained*, i.e., modernized. As “the most important place,” it paradoxically has to be, at the same time, the most old and the most new, the most fixed and the most dynamic; it undergoes the most intense and constant adaptation, which is then compromised and complicated by the fact that it has to be an unacknowledged transformation, invisible to the naked eye. (The city of Zurich has found the most radical, expensive solution in reverting to a kind of reverse archaeology: layer after layer of new modernities — shopping centers, parking, banks, vaults, laboratories — are constructed underneath the center. The center no longer expands outward or skyward, but inward toward the center of the earth itself.) From the grafting of more or less discreet traffic arteries, bypasses, underground tunnels, the construction of ever more *tangentiales*, to the routine transformation of housing into offices, warehouses into lofts, abandoned churches into nightclubs, from the serial bankruptcies and subsequent reopenings of specific units in more and more expensive shopping precincts to the relentless conversion of utilitarian space into “public” space, pedestrianization, the creation of new parks, planting, bridging, exposing, the systematic restoring of historic mediocrity, all authenticity is relentlessly evacuated. **1.6** The Generic City is the city liberated from the

captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity. The Generic City breaks with this destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting—or unexciting—everywhere. It is “superficial”—like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning. **2. Statistics**

**2.1** The Generic City has grown dramatically over the past few decades. Not only has its size increased, its numbers have too. In the early seventies it was inhabited by an average of 2.5 million official (and ±500,000 unofficial) residents; now it hovers around the 15 million mark. **2.2** Did the Generic City start in America? Is it so profoundly unoriginal that it can only be imported? In any case, the Generic City now also exists in Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa. The definitive move away from the countryside, from agriculture, to the city is not a move to the city as we knew it: it is a move to the Generic City, the city so pervasive that it has come to the country. **2.3** Some continents, like Asia, aspire to the Generic City; others are ashamed by it. Because it tends toward the tropical—converging around the equator—a large proportion of Generic Cities is Asian—seemingly a contradiction in terms: the over-familiar inhabited by the inscrutable. One day it will be absolutely exotic again, this discarded product of Western civilization, through the resemanticization that its very dissemination brings in its wake ... **2.4** Sometimes an old, singular city, like Barcelona, by oversimplifying its identity, turns Generic. It becomes transparent, like a logo. The reverse never happens ... at least not yet. **3. General**

**3.1** The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace. It is a place of weak and distended sensations, few and far between emotions, discreet and mysterious like a large space lit by a bed lamp. Compared to the classical city, the Generic City is *sedated*, usually perceived from a sedentary position. Instead of concentration—simultaneous presence—in the Generic City individual “moments” are spaced far apart to create a trance of almost unnoticeable aesthetic experiences: the color variations in the fluorescent lighting of an office building just before sunset, the subtleties of the slightly different whites of an illuminated sign at night. Like Japanese food, the sensations can be reconstituted and intensified in the mind, or not—they may simply be ignored. (There’s a choice.) This pervasive lack of urgency and insistence acts like a potent drug; it induces a *hallucination of the normal*. **3.2** In a drastic reversal of what is supposedly the major characteristic of the city—“business”—the dominant sensation

of the Generic City is an eerie calm: the calmer it is, the more it approximates the pure state. The Generic City addresses the “evils” that were ascribed to the traditional city before our love for it became unconditional. The serenity of the Generic City is achieved by the *evacuation* of the public realm, as in an emergency fire drill. The urban plane now only accommodates necessary movement, fundamentally the car; highways are a superior version of boulevards and plazas, taking more and more space; their design, seemingly aiming for automotive efficiency, is in fact surprisingly sensual, a utilitarian pretense entering the domain of *smooth* space. What is new about this locomotive public realm is that it cannot be measured in dimensions. The same (let’s say ten-mile) stretch yields a vast number of utterly different experiences: it can last five minutes or forty; it can be shared with almost nobody, or with the entire population; it can yield the absolute pleasure of pure, unadulterated speed—at which point the sensation of the Generic City may even become intense or at least acquire density—or utterly claustrophobic moments of stoppage—at which point the thinness of the Generic City is at its most noticeable. **3.3** The Generic City is fractal, an endless repetition of the same simple structural module; it is possible to reconstruct it from its smallest entity, a desktop computer, maybe even a diskette. **3.4** Golf courses are all that is left of otherness. **3.5** The Generic City has easy phone numbers, not the resistant ten-figure frontal-lobe crunchers of the traditional city but smoother versions, their middle numbers identical, for instance. **3.6** Its main attraction is its anomie. **4. Airport** **4.1** Once manifestations of ultimate neutrality, airports now are among the most singular, characteristic elements of the Generic City, its strongest vehicle of differentiation. They have to be, being all the average person tends to experience of a particular city. Like a drastic perfume demonstration, photomurals, vegetation, local costumes give a first concentrated blast of the local identity (sometimes it is also the last). Far away, comfortable, exotic, polar, regional, Eastern, rustic, new, even “undiscovered”: those are the emotional registers invoked. Thus conceptually charged, airports become emblematic signs imprinted on the global collective unconscious in savage manipulations of their non-aviatic attractors—tax-free shopping, spectacular spatial qualities, the frequency and reliability of their connections to other airports. In terms of its iconography/performance, the airport is a concentrate of both the hyper-local and hyper-global—hyper-global in the sense you can get goods there that are not available even in the city, hyper-local in the sense you can get things there that you get nowhere else. **4.2** The tendency in airport gestalt is toward ever-greater autonomy: sometimes

they're even practically unrelated to a specific Generic City. Becoming bigger and bigger, equipped with more and more facilities unconnected to travel, they are on the way to replacing the city. The in-transit condition is becoming universal. Together, airports contain populations of millions—plus the largest daily workforce. In the completeness of their facilities, they are like quarters of the Generic City, sometimes even its reason for being (its center?), with the added attraction of being hermetic systems from which there is no escape—except to another airport. **4.3** The date/age of the Generic City can be reconstructed from a close reading of its airport's geometry. Hexagonal plan (in unique cases penta- or heptagonal): sixties. Orthogonal plan and section: seventies. Collage City: eighties. A single curved section, endlessly extruded in a linear plan: probably nineties. (Its structure branching out like an oak tree: Germany.) **4.4** Airports come in two sizes: too big and too small. Yet their size has no influence on their performance. This suggests that the most intriguing aspect of all infrastructures is their essential elasticity. Calculated by the exact for the numbered—passengers per year—they are invaded by the countless and survive, stretched toward ultimate indeterminacy.

## **5. Population**

**5.1** The Generic City is seriously multiracial, on average 8% black, 12% white, 27% Hispanic, 37% Chinese/Asian, 6% indeterminate, 10% other. Not only multiracial, also multicultural. That's why it comes as no surprise to see temples between the slabs, dragons on the main boulevards, Buddhas in the CBD (central business district). **5.2** The Generic City is always founded by people on the move, poised to move on. This explains the insubstantiality of their foundations. Like the flakes that are suddenly formed in a clear liquid by joining two chemical substances, eventually to accumulate in an uncertain heap on the bottom, the collision or confluence of two migrations—Cuban emigrés going north and Jewish retirees going south, for instance, both ultimately on their way someplace else—establishes, out of the blue, a settlement. A Generic City is born.

## **6. Urbanism**

**6.1** The great originality of the Generic City is simply to abandon what doesn't work—what has outlived its use—to break up the blacktop of idealism with the jackhammers of realism and to accept whatever grows in its place. In that sense, the Generic City accommodates both the primordial and the futuristic—in fact, *only* these two. The Generic City is all that remains of what used to be the city. The Generic City is the post-city being prepared on the site of the ex-city. **6.2** The Generic City is held together, not by an over-demanding public realm—progressively debased in a surprisingly long sequence in which the Roman Forum is to the Greek agora what the shopping mall is to the high street—but by

the *residual*. In the original model of the moderns, the residual was merely green, its controlled neatness a moralistic assertion of good intentions, discouraging association, use. In the Generic City, because the crust of its civilization is so thin, and through its immanent tropicity, the vegetal is transformed into *Edenic Residue*, the main carrier of its identity: a hybrid of politics and landscape. At the same time refuge of the illegal, the uncontrollable, and subject of endless manipulation, it represents a simultaneous triumph of the manicured and the primeval. Its immoral lushness compensates for the Generic City's other poverties. Supremely inorganic, the organic is the Generic City's strongest myth. **6.3** The street is dead. That discovery has coincided with frantic attempts at its resuscitation. Public art is everywhere—as if two deaths make a life. Pedestrianization—intended to preserve—merely channels the flow of those doomed to destroy the object of their intended reverence with their feet. **6.4** The Generic City is on its way from horizontality to verticality. The skyscraper looks as if it will be the final, definitive typology. It has swallowed everything else. It can exist anywhere: in a rice field, or downtown—it makes no difference anymore. The towers no longer stand together; they are spaced so that they don't interact. Density in isolation is the ideal. **6.5** Housing is not a problem. It has either been completely solved or totally left to chance; in the first case it is legal, in the second “illegal”; in the first case, towers or, usually, slabs (at the most, 15 meters deep), in the second (in perfect complementarity) a crust of improvised hovels. One solution consumes the sky, the other the ground. It is strange that those with the least money inhabit the most expensive commodity—earth; those who pay, what is free—air. In either case, housing proves to be surprisingly accommodating—not only does the population double every so many years, but also, with the loosening grip of the various religions, the average number of occupants per unit halves—through divorce and other family-dividing phenomena—with the same frequency that the city's population doubles; as its numbers swell, the Generic City's density is perpetually on the decrease. **6.6** All Generic Cities issue from the tabula rasa; if there was nothing, now they are there; if there was something, they have replaced it. They must, otherwise they would be historic. **6.7** The Generic Cityscape is usually an amalgam of overly ordered sections—dating from near the beginning of its development, when “the power” was still undiluted—and increasingly free arrangements everywhere else. **6.8** The Generic City is the apotheosis of the multiple-choice concept: all boxes crossed, an anthology of *all* the options. Usually the Generic City has been “planned,” not in the usual sense of some bureaucratic organization

controlling its development, but as if various echoes, spores, tropes, seeds fell on the ground randomly as in nature, took hold—exploiting the natural fertility of the terrain—and now form an ensemble: an arbitrary gene pool that sometimes produces amazing results. **6.9** The writing of the city may be indecipherable, flawed, but that does not mean that there *is* no writing; it may simply be that *we* developed a new illiteracy, a new blindness. Patient detection reveals the themes, particles, strands that can be isolated from the seeming murkiness of this Wagnerian *ur*-soup: notes left on a blackboard by a visiting genius 50 years ago, stenciled UN reports disintegrating in their Manhattan glass silo, discoveries by former colonial thinkers with a keen eye for the climate, unpredictable ricochets of design education gathering strength as a global laundering process. **6.10** The best definition of the aesthetic of the Generic City is “free style.” How to describe it? Imagine an open space, a clearing in the forest, a leveled city. There are three elements: roads, buildings, and nature; they coexist in flexible relationships, seemingly without reason, in spectacular organizational diversity. Any one of the three may dominate: sometimes the “road” is lost—to be found meandering on an incomprehensible detour; sometimes *you see no building*, only nature; then, equally unpredictably, you are surrounded only by building. In certain frightening spots, all three are simultaneously absent. On these “sites” (actually, what is the opposite of a site? They are like holes bored through the concept of city) public art emerges like the Loch Ness Monster, equal parts figurative and abstract, usually self-cleaning. **6.11** Specific cities still seriously debate the mistakes of architects—for instance, their proposals to create raised pedestrian networks with tentacles leading from one block to the next as a solution to congestion—but the Generic City simply enjoys the benefits of their inventions: *decks, bridges, tunnels, motorways*—a huge proliferation of the paraphernalia of connection—frequently draped with ferns and flowers as if to ward off original sin, creating a vegetal congestion more severe than a fifties science-fiction movie. **6.12** The roads are only for cars. People (pedestrians) are led on rides (as in an amusement park), on “promenades” that lift them off the ground, then subject them to a catalog of exaggerated conditions—wind, heat, steepness, cold, interior, exterior, smells, fumes—in a sequence that is a grotesque caricature of life in the historic city. **6.13** There *is* horizontality in the Generic City, but it is on the way out. It consists either of history that is not yet erased or of Tudor-like enclaves that multiply around the center as newly minted emblems of preservation. **6.14** Ironically, though itself new, the Generic City is encircled by a constellation of New Towns: New

Towns are like year-rings. Somehow, New Towns age very quickly, the way a five-year-old child develops wrinkles and arthritis through the disease called progeria. **6.15** The Generic City presents the final death of planning. Why? Not because it is not planned—in fact, huge complementary universes of bureaucrats and developers funnel unimaginable flows of energy and money into its completion; for the same money, its plains can be fertilized by diamonds, its mud fields paved in gold bricks... But its most dangerous *and* most exhilarating discovery is that planning makes no difference whatsoever. Buildings may be placed well (a tower near a metro station) or badly (whole centers miles away from any road). They flourish/perish unpredictably. Networks become overstretched, age, rot, become obsolescent; populations double, triple, quadruple, suddenly disappear. The surface of the city explodes, the economy accelerates, slows down, bursts, collapses. Like ancient mothers that still nourish titanic embryos, whole cities are built on colonial infrastructures of which the oppressors took the blueprints back home. Nobody knows where, how, since when the sewers run, the exact location of the telephone lines, what the reason was for the position of the center, where monumental axes end. All it proves is that there are infinite hidden margins, colossal reservoirs of slack, a perpetual, organic process of adjustment, standards, behavior; expectations change with the biological intelligence of the most alert animal. In this apotheosis of multiple choice it will never be possible again to reconstruct cause and effect. They work—that is all. **6.16** The Generic City’s aspiration toward tropicality automatically implies the rejection of any lingering reference to the city as fortress, as citadel; it is open and accommodating like a mangrove forest. **7. Politics** **7.1** The Generic City has a (sometimes distant) relationship with a more or less authoritarian regime—local or national. Usually the cronies of the “leader”—whoever that was—decided to develop a piece of “downtown” or the periphery, or even to start a new city in the middle of nowhere, and so triggered the boom that put the city on the map. **7.2** Very often, the regime has evolved to a surprising degree of invisibility, as if, through its very permissiveness, the Generic City resists the dictatorial. **8. Sociology** **8.1** It is very surprising that the triumph of the Generic City has not coincided with the triumph of sociology—a discipline whose “field” has been extended by the Generic City beyond its wildest imagination. The Generic City *is* sociology, happening. Each Generic City is a petri dish—or an infinitely patient blackboard on which almost any hypothesis can be “proven” and then erased, never again to reverberate in the minds of its authors or its audience. **8.2** Clearly, there is a proliferation

of communities—a sociological zapping—that resists a single overriding interpretation. The Generic City is loosening every structure that made anything coalesce in the past.

**8.3** While infinitely patient, the Generic City is also persistently resistant to speculation: it proves that sociology may be the worst system to capture sociology in the making. It outwits each established critique. It contributes huge amounts of evidence for and—in even more impressive quantities—against each hypothesis. In *A* tower blocks lead to suicide, in *B* to happiness ever after. In *C* they are seen as a first stepping stone toward emancipation (presumably under some kind of invisible “duress,” however), in *D* simply as passé. Constructed in unimaginable numbers in *K*, they are being exploded in *L*. Creativity is inexplicably high in *E*, nonexistent in *F*. *G* is a seamless ethnic mosaic, *H* perpetually at the mercy of separatism, if not on the verge of civil war. Model *Y* will never last because of its tampering with family structure, but *Z* flourishes—a word no academic would ever apply to any activity in the Generic City—because of it. Religion is eroded in *V*, surviving in *W*, transmuted in *X*. **8.4** Strangely, nobody has thought that cumulatively the endless contradictions of these interpretations prove the richness of the Generic City; that is the one hypothesis that has been eliminated in advance. **9. Quarters**

**9.1** There is always a quarter called Lipservice, where a minimum of the past is preserved: usually it has an old train/tramway or double-decker bus driving through it, ringing ominous bells—domesticated versions of the Flying Dutchman’s phantom vessel. Its phone booths are either red and transplanted from London, or equipped with small Chinese roofs. Lipservice—also called Afterthought, Waterfront, Too Late, 42nd Street, simply the Village, or even Underground—is an elaborate mythic operation: it celebrates the past as only the recently conceived can. It is a machine. **9.2** The Generic City had a past, once. In its drive for prominence, large sections of it somehow disappeared, first unlamented—the past apparently was surprisingly unsanitary, even dangerous—then, without warning, relief turned into regret. Certain prophets—long white hair, gray socks, sandals—had always been warning that the past was necessary—a resource. Slowly, the destruction machine grinds to a halt; some random hovels on the laundered Euclidean plane are saved, restored to a splendor they never had... **9.3** In spite of its absence, history is the major preoccupation, even industry, of the Generic City. On the liberated grounds, around the restored hovels, still more hotels are constructed to receive additional tourists in direct proportion to the erasure of the past. Its disappearance has no influence on their numbers, or maybe it is just a last-minute rush. Tourism is now

independent of destination... **9.4** Instead of specific memories, the associations the Generic City mobilizes are general memories, memories of memories: if not all memories at the same time, then at least an abstract, token memory, a déjà vu that never ends, generic memory. **9.5** In spite of its modest physical presence (Lipservice is never more than three stories high: homage to/revenge of Jane Jacobs?) it condenses the entire past in a single complex. History returns not as farce here, but as *service*: costumed merchants (funny hats, bare midriffs, veils) voluntarily enact the conditions (slavery, tyranny, disease, poverty, colony)—that their nation once went to war to abolish. Like a replicating virus, worldwide, the colonial seems the only inexhaustible source of the authentic. **9.6** 42nd Street: ostensibly the places where the past is preserved, they are actually the places where the past has changed the most, is the most distant—as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope—or even completely eliminated. **9.7** Only the memory of former excess is strong enough to charge the bland. As if they try to warm themselves at the heat of an extinguished volcano, the most popular sites (with tourists, and in the Generic City that includes everyone) are the ones once most intensely associated with sex and misconduct. Innocents invade the former haunts of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, transvestites, and to a lesser degree, artists. Paradoxically, at the same moment that the information highway is about to deliver pornography by the truckload to their living rooms, it is as if the experience of walking on these warmed-over embers of transgression and sin makes them feel special, alive. In an age that does not generate new aura, the value of established aura skyrockets. Is walking on these ashes the nearest they will get to guilt? Existentialism diluted to the intensity of a Perrier? **9.8** Each Generic City has a waterfront, not necessarily with water—it can also be with desert, for instance—but at least an edge where it meets another condition, as if a position of near escape is the best guarantee for its enjoyment. Here tourists congregate in droves around a cluster of stalls. Hordes of “hawkers” try to sell them the “unique” aspects of the city. The unique parts of all Generic Cities together have created a universal souvenir, scientific cross between Eiffel Tower, Sacre Coeur, and Statue of Liberty: a tall building (usually between 200 and 300 meters) drowned in a small ball of water with snow or, if close to the equator, gold flakes; diaries with pockmarked leather covers; hippie sandals—even if real hippies are quickly repatriated. Tourists fondle these—nobody has ever witnessed a sale—and then sit down in exotic eateries that line the waterfront: they run the full gamut of food today: *spicy*: first and ultimately maybe most reliable indication of being elsewhere; *patty*: beef or