

Junkspace

This piece is a supreme example of mimetic text, taking a form that is descriptive of its subject. A seamless stream of pure Koolhaas, it is an anti-manifesto of responses to contemporary building practice, whether the product of nameless companies or star architects. The principles and thinking that might lie behind OMA's Dutch Embassy in Berlin (2003) can only be inferred from the string of what read like journal entries bound together as a whole by Koolhaas's consistently intertwined humour and disconsolate rage.

Rabbit is the new beef.... Because we abhor the utilitarian, we have condemned ourselves to a life-long immersion in the arbitrary.... LAX: welcoming – possibly flesh-eating – orchids at the check-in counter.... Identity is the new junk food for the dispossessed, globalization's fodder for the disenfranchised.... **If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.** The built (more about that later) product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace. **Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout.** Modernization had a rational program: to share the blessings of science, universally. Junkspace is its apotheosis, or meltdown.... Although its individual parts are the outcome of brilliant inventions, lucidly planned by human intelligence, boosted by infinite computation, their sum spells the end of Enlightenment, its resurrection as farce, a low-grade purgatory.... Junkspace is the sum total of our current achievement; we have built more than all previous generations together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales. We do not leave pyramids. **According to a new gospel of ugliness, there is already more Junkspace under construction in the 21st century than survived from the 20th....** It was a mistake to invent modern architecture for the 20th century. **Architecture disappeared in the 20th century; we have been reading a footnote under a microscope hoping it would turn into a novel; our concern for the masses has blinded us to People's Architecture.** Junkspace seems an aberration, but **it is essence, the main thing ... product of the encounter between escalator and air conditioning, conceived in an incubator of sheetrock (all three missing from the history books).** **Continuity is the essence of Junkspace; it exploits any invention that enables expansion, deploys the infrastructure of seamlessness: escalator, air conditioning, sprinkler, fire shutter, hot-air curtain....** It is always interior, so extensive that you

rarely perceive limits; it promotes disorientation by any means (mirror, polish, echo).... Junkspace is sealed, held together not by structure, but by skin, like a bubble. Gravity has remained constant, resisted by the same arsenal since the beginning of time; but air conditioning – invisible medium, therefore unnoticed – has truly revolutionized architecture. Air conditioning has launched the endless building. If architecture separates buildings, air conditioning unites them. Air conditioning has dictated mutant regimes of organization and coexistence that leave architecture behind. A single shopping center now is the work of generations of space planners, repairmen and fixers, like in the Middle Ages; air conditioning sustains our cathedrals. (Unwittingly, all architects may be working on the same building, so far separate, but with hidden receptors that will eventually make it cohere.) Because it costs money, is no longer free, conditioned space inevitably becomes conditional space; sooner or later all conditional space turns into Junkspace.... When we think about space, we have only looked at its containers. As if space itself is invisible, all theory for the production of space is based on an obsessive preoccupation with its opposite: substance and objects, i.e., architecture. Architects could never explain space; Junkspace is our punishment for their mystifications. OK, let's talk about space then. The beauty of airports, especially after each upgrade. The luster of renovations. The subtlety of the shopping center. Let's explore public space, discover casinos, spend time in theme parks.... Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda triangle of concepts, a petri dish abandoned: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more. Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of care.... Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends.... A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed. Seemingly an apotheosis, spatially grandiose, the effect of its richness is a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody of ambition that systematically erodes the credibility of building, possibly forever ... [pp 162–3]

... Architects thought of Junkspace first and named it Megastructure, the final solution to transcend their huge impasse. Like multiple Babels, huge superstructures would last through eternity, teeming with impermanent subsystems that would mutate over time, beyond their control. In Junkspace, the tables are turned: it is subsystems only, without superstructure, orphaned particles in search of framework or pattern. All materialization is provisional: cutting, bending, tearing, coating:

construction has acquired a new softness, like tailoring.... The joint is no longer a problem, an intellectual issue: transitional moments are defined by stapling and taping, wrinkly brown bands barely maintain the illusion of an unbroken surface; verbs unknown and unthinkable in architectural history – clamp, stick, fold, dump, glue, shoot, double, fuse – have become indispensable. Each element performs its task in negotiated isolation. Where once detailing suggested the coming together, possibly forever, of disparate materials, it is now a transient coupling, waiting to be undone, unscrewed, a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation; no longer the orchestrated encounter of difference, but the abrupt end of a system, a stalemate. Only the blind, reading its fault lines with their fingertips, will ever understand Junkspace's histories ... [p 164]

... Junkspace is post-existential; it makes you uncertain where you are, obscures where you go, undoes where you were. Who do you think you are? Who do you want to be? (Note to architects: you thought that you could ignore Junkspace, visit it surreptitiously, treat it with condescending contempt or enjoy it vicariously ... because you could not understand it, you've thrown away the keys.... But now your own architecture is infected, has become equally smooth, all-inclusive, continuous, warped, busy, atrium-ridden....) JunkSignature™ is the new architecture: the former megalomania of a profession contracted to manageable size, Junkspace minus its saving vulgarity. Anything stretched – limousines, body parts, planes – turns into Junkspace, its original concept abused. Restore, rearrange, reassemble, revamp, renovate, revise, recover, redesign, return – the Parthenon marbles – redo, respect, rent: verbs that start with re- produce Junkspace.... Junkspace will be our tomb. Half of mankind pollutes to produce, the other pollutes to consume. The combined pollution of all Third World cars, motorbikes, trucks, buses, sweatshops pales into insignificance compared to the heat generated by Junkspace. Junkspace is political: it depends on the central removal of the critical faculty in the name of comfort and pleasure. Politics has become manifesto by Photoshop, seamless blueprints of the mutually exclusive, arbitrated by opaque NGOs. Comfort is the new Justice. Entire miniature states now adopt Junkspace as political program, establish regimes of engineered disorientation, instigate a politics of systematic disarray. Not exactly “anything goes”; in fact, the secret of Junkspace is that it is both promiscuous and repressive: as the formless proliferates, the formal withers, and with it all rules, regulations, recourse.... [p 167]

Extracts. Source: Rem Koolhaas, Brendan McGetrick (eds), *Content*, Taschen GmbH (Köln), 2004.
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