

DESTRUCTION CAN BE VERY INSPIRING 'Star architects' and the historic city

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Abstract. 'Star architects' are changing the face of historic cities all over the globe. To realize their plans they do not hesitate to destroy townscapes that have evolved over centuries. The will to destroy the past is at the heart of modernist architecture. The views of many modernist architects bear close resemblance to the totalitarian ideologies that were the bane of the 20th century, such as Soviet Communism and National Socialism, political movements who saw the concept of the tabula rasa, the clean slate, as a prerequisite for a brave new world.

Keywords: *star architects, modernity, totalitarianism, destruction, tabula rasa.*

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Received: 16 August 2022; **Accepted:** 11 September 2022; **Published:** 8 December 2022.

1. Introduction

The so-called Roche Towers by Herzog & De Meuron have changed the skyline of the Swiss city of Basel almost beyond recognition. In their wake other skyscrapers sprout up like mushrooms, obliterating a townscape that has evolved over centuries. The new replaces the old and no-one cries halt.

2. Rotterdam

In an interview with a German magazine, 'star architect' Rem Koolhaas said: "Destruction can be very inspiring." (Mattusek & Kronsbein, 2006). Koolhaas was born in Rotterdam in 1944. Four years earlier the German Air Force had destroyed the city almost completely. After the war Rotterdam was not rebuilt, but replaced by an entirely new city on the same site. Even the old pipes and cables were dug up so that building could start from scratch. Today, Rotterdam is a city to the liking of every true modernist, among them the German writer Norbert Hummelt: "I am in a new place, anywhere on the globe and in the near future, and it feels good." According to Hummelt even the locals do not miss the Rotterdam of old, the crooked structure of the historically grown city, and he claims his Dutch colleagues love "the absence of clogs, the spirit of progress and the liberating wind of modernity in Rotterdam." (Hummelt, 2014).

A new place, anywhere on the globe: Rotterdam is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Its identity is interchangeable. To Carl Fingerhut, the former planning commissioner of Basel, this is the signature of globalization: "The spirit of place is given

How to cite (APA):

Debrunner, A.M. (2022). Destruction can be very inspiring: 'Star architects' and the historic city. *New Design Ideas*, 6(3), 267-272.

up.” (Fingerhuth, 2014). In its stead an urban appearance is favoured that has nothing to do with the people who live in the new cities, is wholly disconnected with their culture, and, above all, is alien and even hostile to their history. The ideal modern city is place- and timeless. Its face is not determined by a sum of ideas, nor by the imaginations of many, but by the preconceived ideologies of the few who exert so much influence on the economic and political powers-that-be, so that they can do as they please without meeting delete with any resistance. The modern city is not a result of democratic processes, nor does it mirror the will of its inhabitants: it is an entirely ideological construct. It is the expression of a worldview in glass, steel, and concrete.



Figure 1. The Roche Towers in Basel. The city’s medieval cathedral can be seen in the background but has become almost invisible next to the modern symbols of cooperate power
(Photo: Albert M. Debrunner)

Asked why he had chosen his profession Koolhaas answered: “My reason to become an architect was [...] the appeal the green city of Soviet modernism and the utopian plans for the dissolution of Moscow held for me.” (Bideau, 2014). Thereby he openly acknowledged that at the beginning of his career stood a fascination with gigantic architectural projects which could only be realized if room was made for them through the destruction of existing buildings. The prerequisite for the realization of plans like the complete restructuring of Moscow the Soviet leaders dreamed of is the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate. Without the *tabula rasa*, the annihilation of the old, the new can’t be realized.

3. Addis Ababa

After the conquest of Addis Ababa in 1936 Le Corbusier offered Mussolini to turn the ancient capital of Ethiopia into a fascist colonial city. The Dutch historian of architecture Rix Woudstra points out that Le Corbusier’s surviving sketches show Addis

Ababa literally as a *tabula rasa*. On his plans all traces of human presence and centuries of urban culture have been erased. Le Corbusier wrote Mussolini his aim was to build a city that would create the impression “the colony was a space without time, and therefore, without history, and without any particular geographical meaning.” (Woudstra, 2014). Yes, and that’s what all modernist town planning (i.e. town-destruction) is all about.

In the summer of 1940 Pétain proclaimed a “national revolution” in France to make his countrymen forget the terrible defeat suffered at the hands of the German army. What he meant by this was an adaption of France to the policies of the victors. Le Corbusier welcomed the proposed measures as a necessary “renewal, clearing up, cleansing” (Zitzmann, 2015). He saw the collapse of the Third Republic as a chance to get rid of the past and to start anew. Faced with the destruction of Berlin by allied bombers Adolf Hitler said to Albert Speer in 1945 that this had its advantages for fewer houses would have to be pulled down later to make room for the construction of the new capital “Germania”. Albert Speer had already formed a “Team for the Reconstruction of Cities Destroyed by Bombing” in 1943 whose modernist plans were the blueprint of the factual new construction of many German cities after the war. Nobody minded the fact that these plans of National Socialist architects were based on the concept of the *tabula rasa*. “Renewal, clearing up, cleansing” remained the catchphrase.

What the Fascist Le Corbusier, the Nazi Speer and ‘star architect’ Koolhaas have in common is the conviction that what has grown naturally and organically over the centuries cannot satisfy the demands of a new age, as this age is radically different from the past, or, to quote Koolhaas: “The past is too small to live in it.” (Vergangenheit, 2018). The new needs space. Once this is available, be it through bombing, as in the case of Rotterdam, or through demolition through planning mechanisms, developments can be built on completely differently, ignoring the past, and indeed the very *genius loci* itself.

The architectural fantasies of Le Corbusier and Speer went far beyond all traditional standards. Asked what was specifically National Socialist about his architecture, Speer acknowledged its megalomaniacal scale. In the 1990s Koolhaas developed the concept of “XL-architecture”. To illustrate what he meant by this he drew a plan for a gigantic multifunctional skyscraper which he termed a “vertical city”: eventually realized, and called “De Rotterdam”, it has dwarfed every building in The Netherlands since its construction in 2013. This new vertical city replaces the old horizontal one. “Rotterdam” becomes “De Rotterdam”. The definite article makes it clear that the aim was homogeneity, not heterogeneity. What rises into the sky in Rotterdam is the will of an individual making the rest of the city lie flat.

4. Basel

In Basel, one of the cities Rotterdam is twinned with, the highest building is the second of the so-called Roche Towers, erections dominating Basel that have left as much a mark on the hometown of their architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron as “De Rotterdam” did on Koolhaas’s birthplace. They manifest the economic power of F. Hofmann-La Roche AG as much as the wish to be seen that has been at the root of almost every building by Herzog & De Meuron. While “De Rotterdam” replaces the city around it, the Roche Towers ignore it. They are in no way connected to their surroundings. They stand on their own like the headquarters of the ECB in Frankfurt-am-Main, another gigantic building, which, according to its architect Wolf D. Prix, is “a three dimensional

sign” that “gives identity to the European Union”. (Stephan, 2015). This, then, is the unattractive face of the new Europe.

After the inauguration of the ECB’s new headquarters, the journalist Corinne Elsesser wrote that the building overwhelmed “every scale of its surroundings. One looks in vain for formal connections. ... The sign that was meant to be set here only refers to itself in the end.” (Elsesser, 2015). The same can be said about “De Rotterdam” and the Roche Towers. In their overweening dominance, these structures, however, lack any characteristics that might anchor them to where they are in terms of locality or anything else. They could, to quote Norbert Hummelt once more, stand “anywhere on the globe”: they do not respect, as Carl Fingerhuth put it, “the spirit of place”, yet some commentators applaud this lack of respect as positive, for such large, alien intruders are perceived as representatives of a globalism they welcome. But to others they are manifestations of a cultural imperialism that does not even need the backing of some totalitarian movement like National Socialism or Soviet Communism. And yet the adulation of the always new, of eternal spring, that is encapsulated in the grand narratives of modern architecture, moves it closer to the afore-mentioned ideologies than most modern architects either acknowledge or of which they are even aware.

Basel is a city in Switzerland, a country whose citizens have more political rights than anybody else in the world. And yet there is no democratic debate these days about town planning at all. The international corporations meet with hardly any resistance when planning to alter the skyline of Basel for generations to come. It seems people are afraid to oppose the change that has come over their city because they do not want to be seen as backward-thinking reactionaries who do not welcome a supposedly brave new world emerging on the banks of the Rhine. What is more, large multi-national corporations guarantee a high level of public welfare, and nobody dares to question this dependency. Thus questions concerning aesthetics do not figure in the day-to-day running of politics in Basel. When architects Morger Delego Marques wanted to build a skyscraper only three out of 128 politicians in the town council voted against the project. A referendum against another skyscraper by Morger + Dettli was not successful. The democratic weapons in the hands of the citizens proved impotent against the power of big business. To cut a long story short: if you want to erect a tall building in Basel you can, and the public will be too cowed to resist.

4. Conclusion

One difficulty remains: space. Situated between Germany and France, Basel cannot expand its limits. What is more, Basel, being a Swiss city, was not damaged during the war, therefore a radical modernism that shaped post-war Rotterdam would have been impossible. But on a smaller scale something could be done to prepare projects like the Roche Towers. What the German Air Force did to Rotterdam, demolition firms did to Basel. Jacques Herzog put it in a nutshell: “Switzerland has bombed itself in the 60s and 70s.” Back then whole streets of mediæval buildings could be pulled down, much to the delight of modernists. Today this is not possible anymore, but the destruction of the historic fabric of the city continues on a different level. In Rotterdam the German bombers cleared 2.6 square kilometres in 14 minutes: in Basel modernist architects are happy with 72 square metres to realize their plans. All they need is the *tabula rasa*.



Figure 2. The new house by Buchner Bründler filling a gap created by the willful destruction of an historic building
(Photo: Albert M. Debrunner)

Basel architects Buchner Bründler, whose work Jacques Herzog counts among “the most interesting of the younger positions in Switzerland”, built a new house in Lower Kleinbasel, a 19th century part of town. The house was hailed as a gem by the architectural press. On their website Buchner Bründler claim it was built on the site of a former family home between two other houses from the 1870s. What the website does not say is that this home, which was in a perfectly good state, was pulled down to make room for Buchner Bründler’s project. One of the last witnesses of the beginnings of this part of town was destroyed so a concrete tower could be built. There were massive protests against this. More than a thousand people signed a petition to save the house, but to no avail. The Swiss architectural review *Hochparterre* sneered at the two surviving old houses and said they looked anachronistic next to the new building. And indeed with their romantic back gardens and the patina of one and a half centuries of life that has taken place in them they look decidedly different. They seem out of place next to the concrete tower on whose roof there would be room for an anti-aircraft gun. However, this will not be necessary. Basel has no need to fear squadrons of bombers, for destruction proceeds under modernist architect and town planners unimpeded by supine elected representatives.

In John Schlesinger’s movie classic *Billy Liar*, released in 1963, the protagonist, Billy Fisher, fantasizes about speaking to the masses as the dictator of an imaginary state. The dictator promises the crowd that his government will replace the houses of the past by high-rise buildings: “We will build towers. Towers! No less”, he shouts and his audience of thousands cheers loudly. The city state of Basel is a democracy but there are

people who imagine they have the right to alter the face of their hometown beyond recognition. Their peers around the globe are legion. What is to be done? We have to counterbalance the fascist fantasies of these people with our visions, using our own imagination but also referring to tradition. Let us replace an aesthetic nightmare with a dream of beauty.

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