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## Surfing the Wave of Neoliberalism: Rem Koolhaas in Lille

Valéry Didelon

In the mid-1980s, the English geographer David Harvey correlated in real time the ongoing shift in urbanization processes tied into the new macroeconomic policies championed by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. In *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985), Harvey described the transition from an urban growth molded by the principles of Fordism and Keynesianism to one that follows a new ideology that favors supply over demand and hails the deregulation of markets and the privatization of public bodies, among other things. In particular, Harvey pointed to the globalized competition developing among cities to attract and accumulate mobile capital. He listed four different—but nonexclusive—strategies available to cities: (1) they can benefit more efficiently from the redistribution of wealth from the national level; (2) they can improve their position in the international division of labor by increasing productivity and fostering innovation; (3) they can take advantage of globalized consumption through real estate and tourism; and (4) they can become centers of control and decision-making in the service economy and the financial sector. This last strategy presupposed that city managers promote major urban planning and construction projects. Indeed, Harvey states that "efficiency and centrality within a worldwide network of transport and communications is vital, and that means heavy public investments in airports, rapid transit, communications systems, and the like. The provision of adequate office space and linkages depend upon a public-private coalition of property developers, financiers, and public interests capable of responding to and anticipating needs."<sup>1</sup>

Even though Reagan's United States and Thatcher's Great Britain are often portrayed as pioneering contexts for such a strategy, in France too—which had a socialist government under

François Mitterrand at the time—we can find a paradigmatic example of its implementation. This is Euralille, a major urban development project in the northern French city of Lille. Designed by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the project exemplified the way some European cities took advantage of the era's new economic conditions. This chapter provides a microhistorical analysis of Euralille's production and reception in order to reveal how the process of neoliberalization shaped the "new urbanism" proposed by Koolhaas and vice versa. It highlights a new role for the professional architect in the making of contemporary cities.

### **The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

In the early 1980s, Lille, located close to France's northern border, had an older economic policy that seemed to have run its course. The region's industrial sector, concentrated on coal mining, steel, and textile production, was obsolete, and the state's final attempts to rescue it failed. The rate of unemployment peaked higher than in any other part of the country. However, two major political events paved the way for the revival of the city. First was the passage of the so-called decentralization laws by the French parliament in 1982 and 1983. These laws awarded cities greater autonomy from the centralized state and included giving them greater responsibility in urban planning. Second was the signing of the Single European Act in February 1986, which liberalized the movement of people, goods, and services within the borders of the European Union. In this context, two years later the state agency in charge of land planning and regional development (DATAR) highlighted the stakes in the forthcoming competition between European cities.<sup>2</sup>Pierre Mauroy, the mayor of Lille and former prime minister under President Mitterrand, was determined to transform the constraints into opportunities. In order to boost jobs creation, he committed himself to turning the city away from its industrial past and transforming it into a node in the international service economy. To this end, he implemented the "strategy of infrastructural provision"<sup>3</sup> that David Harvey describes. After contributing to the Channel Tunnel project connecting France and Britain, Pierre Mauroy had ensured that the northern European

high-speed rail network would pass through Lille, close to the city center. With this accomplished, he commissioned a study on a project to build a "European business center" near the future high-speed train station.

Surprisingly, Pierre Mauroy did not entrust this task to a public body but to a privately funded consultancy headed by a banker—one close to the Socialist Party—and run by an energetic civil engineer, Jean-Paul Baïetto. In the context of economic crisis, both men agreed to favor a responsive and flexible project management rather than the linear and hierarchical planning method that was prevalent in France. Fifteen years before the public-private partnerships were truly implemented in the country, Euralille thus inaugurated a sophisticated approach interweaving public interest and private steering and financing. The project was not limited to creating a central business district, such as La Défense in Paris or the La Part Dieu in Lyon, but would comprise 600,000 to 800,000 square meters of floor area for a mixed program including office space, convention and exhibition facilities, a commercial center, and, to a lesser extent, collective housing, all at a budget of €2.35 billion. The intention was to achieve an autonomous "chunk of city" that looked to the future, instead of the then still dominant approach of building monofunctional extensions to the existing city. Baïetto emphasized this ambition at the time: "I consider the urban component to be quite fundamental. We would probably have struggled to provide that extra something, compared to what is being done around the European community, had we neglected the urban dimension. Clearly, it is through this dimension that the Lille metropolitan area will succeed in holding its own in the war between cities that is set to intensify by 1993, date of the effectiveness of the European Single Market."<sup>4</sup> In this way, by virtue of an ambitious urban project yet to be entirely defined in its form, the provincial town of Lille would take advantage of the redistribution of powers at different political levels—municipal, metropolitan, regional, national, and European. And through Euralille, local

politicians and business leaders hoped that the city would get its share of the economic growth promised by the era's radical economic and political transformation.

### **The Culture of Congestion**

Rem Koolhaas was chosen in November 1988 to conceive the master plan for Euralille. He was not appointed through a competition or on the basis of a preliminary design but after an oral presentation to the jury in which he successfully demonstrated his ability to take into account not only the spatial but also the political and economic issues at stake, that is, the city's prospects in the European market. Koolhaas immediately organized two interdisciplinary seminars in Rotterdam. His firm, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), worked closely with the engineers of Ove Arup's firm and integrated the transport infrastructure into their analysis. More importantly, the overall brief devised by Baietto became the main focus of reflection. Thus, Koolhaas's team didn't design a two-dimensional composition or "collage of forms," as was the practice at the time for the many followers of Colin Rowe. To Koolhaas, the customary search for the continuity of urban fabric and cohesiveness of architecture was beside the point. In fact it was quite the opposite, as transport infrastructures were dramatized and large topological building masses were scattered throughout the site. Often through multiple sections, sketches, and by way of one particularly striking diagram, OMA actually worked on a "montage" of the program, insofar as its given elements collided and combined. As in a film, situations with no direct relation in time and space are sometimes connected. The idea was that the confrontation and hybridization of functions would trigger an intensity of uses, which was supposed to increase the attractiveness of Euralille. Apart from the implicit reference to the "culture of congestion" described a decade earlier in his book *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas was often referring in public appearances to the creative chaos of Japanese cities, which enjoyed great economic success at the time, until the collapse of the real estate market and the stock market bubble.

Through a continuous dialogue with Baietto, the master plan quickly took shape by the winter 1990 (plate 25). It was then submitted for public comment by way of an exhibition at the city hall and several public meetings. Despite harsh criticism, the project emerged unchanged thanks first of all to the support of Pierre Mauroy but also to the backing of the Cercle de qualité urbaine et architecturale. This ad hoc body with no decision-making power but strong expertise regularly provided arguments in defense of OMA's proposals. Meanwhile, Baietto pulled together public and private investors by pooling infrastructure works and parking facilities. He also worked tirelessly on the financial and technical issues, adjusting the program while the construction of the train station was under way. The master plan was delivered in April 1990 after only eighteen months of studies. The operational phase started immediately, and few major adjustments to the design were done during the years that followed. The construction went on, and the target area was quickly transformed. The project proceeded as a self-fulfilling prophecy in that it fueled an intensive city branding campaign—not as an accessory to the project but as an integral part of it—for the first time in France at this level of professionalism. The goal was to secure the completion of Euralille by continually attracting new institutional investors from around the world.

### **The Image of the City**

Indeed, Rem Koolhaas proposed a radical break with the traditional urban fabric, thus announcing a new direction for the future of Lille. He placed the high-rise office buildings on the infrastructural base to proclaim the modernity of the city, while distinguishing them from the modernist *grands ensembles* of the previous decades that the inhabitants of Lille hated so much. These "nice, strange towers, towers that were not towers," belonged to a "seductive urbanism," as Koolhaas put it.<sup>5</sup> The vast esplanade, which extended down to the lower level of the rail tracks, transformed the passage of the high-speed trains into a spectacle of mobility and, conversely, offered travelers on passing trains a striking vision of the new business district. As in

many harbor and old industrial cities at this time, the huge shopping center and the congress-cum-exhibition center brought emblematic consumer and leisure activities close to the city's core, whereas they were usually relegated to the periphery (plate 26).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to what was happening in other cities in search of a postindustrial future, such as Bilbao, Lille's change of image was occurring less through the creation and highlighting of a singular cultural amenity than through the enhancement of a broad urban landscape. The various buildings that gradually emerged on the site were all designed by famous architects—Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc, Rem Koolhaas, and others—but it was Euralille as a whole that dominated as a brand. From the middle of the decade, the city had set up a completely new skyline and had therefore, one could say, acquired a powerful new "imageability" in the sense intended by Kevin Lynch.<sup>7</sup> Local residents and passersby—among them investors, entrepreneurs, and visiting shoppers—were now able to mentally grasp the city profile easily and positively. This imageability fostered a new identity that was not based on the authenticity of the historic center but on the truly generic artificiality of Euralille, which from this point forward paradoxically distinguished Lille from other European cities. Its unconventional cityscape proclaimed and somehow prompted a dramatic shift to the global service-oriented economy.

### **The Surfer**

In the context of decentralization and privatization of urban planning in Europe, what role did Rem Koolhaas intend to play? From one public statement to the next, he alternately seemed to want to resist, reform, support, or exacerbate the political and economic forces shaping the contemporary city. He certainly rejected the usual analogies between the work of the architect and urban planner and that of the doctor or conductor—two characters of good intentions. Rather than the figure of the ghostwriter emphasized in *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas adopted that of the surfer in the late 1980s. In an interview given just before his selection as the master planner of Euralille, Koolhaas stated that he was like "a surfer riding on waves—he didn't control them,

but he recognized them and knew how to move with them, and even to turn back, against the wave."<sup>8</sup> What seemed to interest Koolhaas in the figure of the surfer was not only the movement and confrontation with untamed and liquid elements but also the vulnerability that could turn into strength. In identifying with this figure, he sought to set himself apart from the rigidity, from the willpower and control that could be associated with most modernist as well as postmodern neotraditionalist architects. In a way, he was harking back to the positions of the American architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who in *Learning from Las Vegas* denounce the architect king as naked and identify themselves as jesters, who, because they are not taken seriously, have real influence.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Koolhaas explained the meaning of the metaphor of the surfer when arguing that the ideas of the postmodern architects and planners were "conceived in a sort of unconscious utopia, as if the powers that be, the decision mechanisms, and the means that are really available might be enchanted by the beauty or interest they portray." For his part, he preferred to ponder "which way the forces that contribute to defining space are heading."<sup>10</sup> Concerning his work in Lille, Koolhaas stated that "for us the aim is less to propose a plan than to find a way to master what needs to be mastered and to combine passing forces to create an image. Being contemporary means trying to play around with that."<sup>11</sup>

In France, such statements were interpreted less as an acknowledgment of weakness than as a sneaky endorsement of or even an apology for the free play of forces that everyone imagined to be typical of late capitalism. When Euralille was inaugurated in 1995, French critics, many of them with Marxist backgrounds, violently attacked Koolhaas on this topic. For example, Jean-Pierre Le Dantec commented that the "modernism of the forms and materials hides a servile submission to the reality of the spectacle alone" and that the designer of Euralille was in this respect the "contemporary champion of architectural nihilism."<sup>12</sup> The historian Jean-Louis Cohen opined along similar lines, expressing disappointment with the project, which he saw as a "figure of resignation," concluding drily that one must unfortunately point to "a certain disenchantment,



a realism bordering on cynicism."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many other critics also commented on Koolhaas's "cynicism," a label that stuck for a long time. Summing up the theme, *Le Monde* in a review of Euralille in early 1996 blamed "the aestheticization of chaos and urban violence inseparable from unfettered liberalism and social inequality."<sup>14</sup>

In this cascade of criticism, Rem Koolhaas deserved no mercy, it seemed; critics appeared to be more concerned with his analogy of surfing the forces of capitalism than with the actual outcomes of the design process. It can be argued, however, that it was not the architect but Baïetto – as the all-powerful project developer – and Mauroy—as the commissioning authority—who actually went with the flow of neoliberalism. The first one had fully implemented the methods of neo-management that have been so fashionable in the 1980s and steered the project by means of networking. Like many French mayors, by the mid-1980s the second one had endorsed entrepreneurialism in the realm of urban development. This entailed the devolution of a traditionally public responsibility to the private sector. Through the priority he gave to the Euralille project, Mauroy favored business growth over social expenditures in the underprivileged neighborhoods. Surprisingly, however, he was nevertheless spared by the critics, who perhaps held back out of respect for his record as the prime minister who in 1981 led the ultimate Keynesian intervention in France.<sup>15</sup> As a historic figure of the Socialist Party in France, Mauroy was obviously less suspected of compromise than a Dutch architect.

### **Which New Urbanism for Neoliberalism?**

Given the design, construction, and reception of OMA's project, how might one retrospectively frame its role in the neoliberalization of urban development in Europe? At the very moment Rem Koolhaas was completing Euralille, he was also publishing *S.M.L.XL*, which notably includes the essay "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?" The practical experience of this large-scale urban planning project was therefore accompanied by a polemical stance or at the very least an unorthodox theory of urban design. In this text, Koolhaas argues the case for a "new

urbanism"—which he also refers to as "Lite Urbanism"—that deals with "the staging of uncertainty" and the "irrigation of territories with potential."<sup>16</sup> In the same text, he denounces the "new urbanism" of the neotraditionalist American and European architects whose positions, according to Koolhaas, were stuck in rearguard actions and nostalgia.<sup>17</sup> In particular, he mocks their desire for control and power over city development and calls for more modesty and humility before the vitality of urban phenomena.

Koolhaas's "new urbanism," of which Euralille may certainly be considered a striking manifestation—if not *the* manifestation—could quite logically be associated with the advent of neoliberalism insofar as it embraces the values of freedom, spontaneity, movement, competition, and so on. The project does not really stem from a liberal, laissez-faire ideology, because it follows ordinary planning regulation, but its rejection of rigid compositions and programs echoes in retrospect the "non-plan" theory that was formulated in England by Reyner Banham et al. in the late 1960s and that denounced the overregulated planning of the built environment.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, twenty years later this liberal-libertarian approach to urban design was implemented not so much in Lille as in, for example, the coeval development of the London Docklands business district, where the dismantling of planning regulations was combined with tax concessions. Paradoxically, it was Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's design, based on a large urban composition and pastiche architecture, that accommodated the neoliberal policy of Margaret Thatcher in London while, as Catherine Slessor has pointed out, Euralille avoided the "blinkered reliance on the machinations of the commercial property market."<sup>19</sup> One could also mention The Hague's De Resident, another major European business district designed from 1988 onward by Rob Krier according to the principles of neotraditional urbanism and a place that became one of the favorite playgrounds of real estate speculators in the Netherlands.

Conversely, the new urbanism of Koolhaas did not turn out to be as well adapted to the new economic order. In the context of the property crisis that struck in 1992, the project might have discouraged some investors due to the culture of risk, uncertainty, and instability of which it sought to make a virtue; only two of the six planned office towers were ultimately built. Koolhaas's new urbanism was indeed process oriented, with the form being an unpredictable outcome. The neotraditionalists' new urbanism, however, was results oriented, with the form being a predictable starting point. Based on social interactions rather than on material stability, Euralille lacked the spatial determinism that would have paved the way for secure property investments. After the end of the contract with the Dutch architect in 1996, Euralille's multiple extensions were steered toward a much more fixed and conventional urbanism, which might have reassured the different players. In this way, Koolhaas's design did not establish a formal template for Lille or any other place in France, where rigid urban compositions now easily combine with the free play of market forces. Regarding this unexpected alliance between neoliberal economics and conservative aesthetics, Koolhaas has confided his feeling of having "both lost and won" a major intellectual battle at the time he was working on Euralille, a project that he came to regard as an "eccentric parenthesis" in his career.<sup>20</sup>

### **Twenty Years After**

Conceived and built in just seven years, OMA's Euralille project was less the product of a generic neoliberal strategy than of a quite particular political, economic, and cultural constellation. On the one hand, it had the benefit of a highly determined client—the Mauroy-Baïetto duo—in line with the still existing French tradition of the all-powerful planner state. On the other, it had at its helm an architect concerned with the limitation of means but eager to accompany the "quantum leap" of a European city into the twenty-first century. Euralille stands then as a paradoxical project, inevitably shaped by private interests but made possible only by the resolution, optimism, and interventionism of elected representatives and civil servants. In

retrospect, Euralille exemplifies the "necessary hybridity" of urban development characterized by processes of neoliberalization.<sup>21</sup>

While the private sector has significantly expanded its grip on urbanism today, neoliberalism has arguably lost its momentum. As a result, one may observe some reorientations of urban strategies in Europe, for instance in Lille. In the context where Euralille is aging and in need of renovation, Martine Aubry, who became mayor of Lille in 2001 and was a preeminent figure of the left wing of the Socialist Party, expressed an intention to take action.<sup>22</sup> Her goals were to pedestrianize, humanize, and pacify the district. Believing that "it is the quality of life in a city that makes it economically attractive, not the other way around," she defends a kind of city planning that seeks to implement the "ethics of care," which she once promoted when she was a high-ranking minister of the French government.<sup>23</sup> In this way, Aubry somehow turns around the strategy of Mauroy, whose aim was to save the city by changing its image, as well as its spaces, even at the risk of brutalizing it. Despite a true success in revitalizing the local economy, his entrepreneurialism didn't change the lives of most of the inhabitants, that is, it did not significantly improve the employment rate. Mauroy's brand is now succeeded in Lille by a kind of compassionate conservatism intended to heal the wounds of the neoliberalization process.

Supervised by a property development company that is now entirely publicly funded, the renovation project has been entrusted to the architect and urban planner Isabelle Menu, who worked on Euralille as part of the OMA team in the 1990s. Striving to remain faithful to the original project, she has proposed to intensify uses in the district—on the one hand by adding 250,000 square meters of new construction and, on the other, by regenerating underused outdoor public spaces. Her good intentions are nevertheless undermined by the owners of the shopping center, who have already initiated its renovation without really consulting the public authorities. They have spent €48 million—four times what the city proposed to invest—to revamp the interior of the shopping center and lay down 12,000 square meters of exotic wood flooring to

make its spaces "cozier" and more attractive than those outside. After three decades of shrinking public finances at every level, the relation between public and private sector is less balanced than ever before. The ones with the formal authority over planning have very little leverage over those with the means to implement it. In this context, the "new urbanism" proposed by Koolhaas is particularly challenged and will have to show its capacity for resilience in the coming years.

- 1 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 49.
- 2 "Les fonctions internationales des villes européennes," *Le Monde*, March 4, 1988.
- 3 Harvey, *Urbanization*, 49.
- 4 Quoted in Patrice Drouin, "La naissance d'une Part-Dieu lilloise," *Le Moniteur des Travaux Publics et du Bâtiment*, April 14, 1989.
- 5 Rem Koolhaas, *O.M.A. Rem Koolhaas: Lille* (Paris: Institut Français d'Architecture, 1990), 103.
- 6 In this way, Euralille could be related to the so-called "Rousification" process, named for the real estate developer James Rouse, who first had introduced the festival marketplaces in derelict American city centers in the 1970s.
- 7 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).
- 8 Rem Koolhaas, "Sur la crête de la vague moderne," *Techniques et Architecture* 380 (1988):77.
- 9 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 108.
- 10 Rem Koolhaas, "La grande ville," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 262 (1989): 91.
- 11 Koolhaas, "La grande ville," 93.
- 12 Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, "Le spectacle continu," *Techniques et Architecture* 418 (1995): 6–7.
- 13 Jean-Louis Cohen, "Bigness and the Test of the Construction Site," *Lotus* 86 (1995): 59.
- 14 Emmanuel de Roux, "Réparer, rénover, recoudre, densifier ou . . . dynamiter," *Le Monde*, January 18, 1996.
- 15 Pierre Mauroy was prime minister from May 1981 to July 1984. At first he followed Keynesian principles in policy making, but in March 1983 he acquiesced to the shift to neoliberal economics spearheaded by Jacques Delors, who was then the minister of economy and finance. Delors later became president of the European commission that supervised the liberalization of markets between 1985 and 1995.
- 16 Rem Koolhaas, "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?," in *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995), 969.

17 The rise of the American new urbanism movement is very contemporaneous with Euralille. The Charter of New Urbanism was published in 1993 on the occasion of its first congress, held in Alexandria, Virginia.

18 Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall, and Cedric Price, "Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom," *New Society* 338 (1969).

19 Catherine Slessor, "Lille Revival," *Architectural Review* 1159 (1993): 73.

20 Rem Koolhaas, interview by author in Rotterdam, October 2015.

21 Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner, "Neoliberal Urbanism: Models, Moments, Mutations," *SAIS Review* 29, no. 1 (2009): 52.

22 Martine Aubry happens to be the daughter of Jacques Delors.

23 *Le projet urbain de Lille* (Lille: Editions Ville de Lille, 2005), 7. The concept "ethics of care" is one that Martine Aubry borrowed from the American feminist Carol Gilligan.