**Welcome back to Junkspace! : Performing Infinity while Confined to Lockdown.**

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For months we have been locked out of Junkspace. –*So, who’s complaining*? Confined to domestic spaces, #stayhome has given many of us a forced opportunity to rethink the type of spaces that are not only functional and useful but that make us feel comfortable. Our own residential arena may have felt restrictive and even, for some, oppressive at times, but who would say that they truly missed their daily passage through the endlessly stale air of check-in desks, departure gates and duty frees at the airport; the epic journeys through low ceiling’d corridors and passageways of railway terminals and subway stations; and the blinding hallucinatory proliferation of brands and franchises in malls..?

Yet, is our critique, our disdain for these places and our reluctance to engage with them really anything new? Perhaps the reluctance has grown in strength in the period of pandemical desuetude, and through our disengagement from these places as a necessary component in our daily business. At any rate, it is not as if we are discovering a disaffection with these corporate non-places for the first time. The term ‘Junkspace’ itself was coined almost two decades ago by architect Rem Koolhaas in an article first widely published in the journal *October* (and since republished in various formats -notably in book form with an accompanying essay from Hal Foster).[[1]](#endnote-1) The theme of that issue of *October* was ‘obsolescence’, but as lockdown loosens and our feet itch to get out the door again and into the big city perhaps it is a time now for considering a *recrudescence.*A re-reading of Koolhaas’s influential article through post-pandemic lenses may offer us new, unexpected and insightful critical understandings that were not so apparent, or of such significance before Covid.

Critical works written by architects tend not to obtain a widespread public readership, but there is also a tradition of notable exceptions to that rule stretching across millennia, from Vitruvius’s set of 1st century BCE books to Le Corbusier’s writings in the 1920s and beyond. If one thing does mark Koolhaas’s ‘Junkspace’ out from those other influential texts, however, it may well be its architectural pessimism. Most architects’ books have been written to explain, or even to boast of the scope of architecture - Vitruvius wrote of what vital architectural contribution could be made to the administration of the rapidly expanding first Roman Empire under Augustus, and Le Corbusier made the (somewhat fascistic) case in the 1920s that architecture was the only positive alternative to the social disaster of ‘revolution’.[[2]](#endnote-2) In ‘Junkspace’ however, Koolhaas seems to be despairing of the unavoidable dystopia currently being prepared for humanity by his profession.

Beyond that purely architectural context however, a review of the environment of Koolhaas’s concept of Junkspace shows us that his dystopian vision of contemporary culture is in no wise unique. Similar nightmarish visions and analyses are shared by many writers and critics around the same time and across numerous different fields. These would include Paul B. Preciado’s vision in *Testo Junkie* ( 2008) of a pharmacopornographic regime where our bodies are regulated by manipulations and control simultaneously by both big pharmaceutical companies and the porn industry[[3]](#endnote-3): Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009) which sees society trapped in an endlessly oppressive capitalist system which condemns us to repetition, precariety in our lives and employments and to no prospect of authenticity as individuals[[4]](#endnote-4): and more recently, Shoshana Zuboff’s outlining of *Surveillance Capitalism*  (2019) which details how the big media giants trap and control our lives for commercial gain through manipulation of our information trawled from social media.[[5]](#endnote-5) The general picture, and what all these visions and analyses have in common, is a pervasive depiction of the dystopian nature of a suffocating entrapment in the webs of faceless corporate manipulations. A type of Foucauldian blueprint, that is to say, comes together through these various particular understandings and analyses, each of specific value and strength within that general picture.

Yet despite its apparent resonance, the Junkspace critique does not even seem to have a great originality in its contribution of a specific dystopian vision in the field of space, architecture and the built environment. Some three years previous to the publication of Junkspace in *October*, French anthropological theorist Marc Augé published a book with the English language title *Non-Places.[[6]](#endnote-6)* Augé’s text takes for its subject and examines a territory almost exactly co-extensive with Koolhaas’s –namely the commercial and corporate structures and environment of the likes of the international airport, the vast metropolitan railway station and the shopping mall. Where Koolhaas-come-lately appears to consign such places to the garbage bin of history as ‘Junk’, the analysis of Augé’s equally seminal text had already denied that these are even real places at all, inasmuch as they are not relational to, or historical vis-a-vis, or concerned with the identity of, their users. If Augé sees these ‘non-places’ as products of ‘supermodernity’ whose function is to enable quick and efficient movement of people and capital ( hence demonstrating the legacy of the Corbusian models for new Paris in the 1920s) then the epigrammatic quality of Koolhaas’s text, in its series of punchy, short jingles could seem like a parody of that scholarly work, almost like a pop song played over the public address system in these non-places, to get all the users/clients/passersby into the rhythm and up to the necessary speed. The question that really presents itself to us here, though, regards the conundrum of Junkspace as a profile and an influence across numerous fields and disciplines –architecture, creative arts, design, urbanism, social sciences etc …- a profile sustained even to the extent of being reproduced several times as a short essay published on its own in book form. How has it managed that if it is neither original in its content –its subject having been already dealt with at length and in a more comprehensively critical and equally accessible manner - nor in its apparent judgement either on the phenomenon itself or its relevance to our era?

There are yet other contexts in which we may be able to assess that question. Examination of the content or subject matter may fail to reassure us as to the enduring public interest in the piece, but both the form and the style of the text of Junkspace are immediately more striking.

As regards the form Koolhaas employs here, Junkspace can be read in relation to a very particular critical tradition which posits an architectural typology as a performative model of cultural and socio-political organisation. The most well-known and easily accessible such model of recent exposition is the Panopticon of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham as used by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* to demonstrate the workings of the ‘disciplinary society’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Foucault describes how the institutions central to that society -schools, factories, barracks, courthouses etc – can be understood in terms of the full surveillance operations of the Panopticon prison, whereby the single cells of the individual prisoners are arranged in circular plan around the all-seeing eye of the central control tower. In the disciplinary society the bodies of the population are controlled via this surveillance, and indeed the individuals ultimately absorb the surveillance principal, take it upon themselves, and ‘normalise’ their own behaviour accordingly (just as does a prisoner conscious of being under permanent surveillance in the Panopticon model). The architectural model in Junkspace is paradoxically at once more diffuse, more all-pervasive and more concentrated. The whole text creates the architectural model, and when it presents Junkspace as ‘always interior’, an interior which is described by reference to spatial metaphors and images which are always central to western culture - i.e. as ‘Dantesque’ ‘Byzantine’, ‘Babel’, ‘Parthenon’, ‘Sisyphus’, ‘Big Brother’, ‘Disney’, ‘Manifest Destiny’ …- then we understand the portrayal of a society imprisoned in its own colonial mentality. A society which wants everything on its own terms, seeks to co-opt the whole world on these terms, refuses the existence of anything outside or beyond, and denies the existence of difference. It makes no attempt to decolonise. In effect a Eurocentric society, unaffected in its desire to dominate and control by all the post-colonial critique of the ultimate several decades -it is as if Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and all the literature of postcolonial studies had never been written.[[8]](#endnote-8)

But the model is not simply one-dimensional. Repeated use of the word ‘Babel’ in the text naturally invokes one of the oldest and most culturally ubiquitous versions of this form of architectural model. The Tower of Babel myth is narrated in the book of Genesis, hence is common culture to all the religions of the Book, but versions are also found in the lore of peoples diversely distributed across the globe from Central America, Africa, Sumeria and Nepal. In the biblical version, human beings decide to collaborate on building a tower which will reach up to Heaven (hence must be figured as of infinite scale) – God observes them and to confound their hubristic project, introduces many different mutually incomprehensible languages amongst the different peoples of the earth. The myth is often explained in its aetiological sense as accounting for the existence of different languages. What is significant for us in the context of Junkspace, however, is that this ancient myth sets up a relationship between the possibility of existence or creation of a construction of infinite extent and the actual endless babble of language. Equally, in Junkspace, it becomes apparent that the real topic is the relationship between space and language (in its wider, i.e. not just verbal or literal sense). Even when Koolhaas appears to be discussing the endlessly ongoing new type of construction of Junkspace, he refers not to ‘*techniques* unknown’ for physical construction of Junkspace, but to ‘*Verbs* unknown and unthinkable in architectural history – clamp, stick, fold, dump, glue, shoot, double, fuse – (that) have become indispensable.’ (my italic)

This brings us in turn to the question of the style in which Junkspace is written. (Although is style actually separable and distinct from form and content here?) Largely composed as a series of aphorisms, it opens with one: ‘Rabbit is the new beef…’ and cuts out with another: ‘The cosmetic is the new cosmic …’. Indeed, Junkspace, the article, cannot be said to have a beginning and an end as such, for the whole piece is presented rather as an excerpt from a potentially endless reality to which we cut in and out at arbitrary points. The modern aphorism, as made notorious in the work of Nietzsche, is eminently powerful in this type of format: expressly non-aetiological, the pithy density of the wording specifically leaves open to the reader’s interpretation the questions of meaning, significance and tendency, with no fixed, final or definitive reading. Each aphorism as a phrase, as a signifying unit, as per those two cited here above, is thus self-standing, finite, complete and delimited in its punctuated isolation. The presentation of the article as a long, potentially endless series of such self-standing units unavoidably poses the formal question –again reinforcing the tendency of the Babel type myth – of the relationship between a potentially endless series of finite units and the existence of infinity itself. i.e. between God and the numberless builders of the endless real tower…

This exploration of a nexus of relationships between the inside and outside, the finite and infinite, and the qualitative and the quantitative is not – despite the unusual appearance of Koolhaas’s text – something which is new to theoretical discourse in architecture. The mid-20th century architectural theorist Siegfried Giedeon, for example, seemed to have a similar notion of the relationship between technical aspects of construction and both the cultural understanding and use of space as that implied by Koolhaas. Hence Giedion conceived of the major architectural problem of the current epoch as consisting in a probing of the relationship between the interior and the exterior, their interpenetration, and the communication between them. In Giedeon’s broader historical vision, he saw the architectonic concerns of any epoch as programmed by technological progress, and in particular this concern with the interior/exterior problem came into play after the 19th century resolution of the interior vaulting problem via the development of reinforced concrete and shell technology in general.[[9]](#endnote-9) That disciplinary background in itself may help us in understanding something of the provenance of Koolhaas’s work in Junkspace, but could it also lead us to a more comprehensive cultural context? Can Giedeon’s critical formulation be seen as only a localised disciplinary expression of a wider existential problematic facing humanity in this period? It is arguable, that is to say, that notwithstanding Giedeon’s synoptic thesis of architectural history as a series of epochs driven by particular technical problems, his highlighting of the modern concern with the interior/exterior question was much influenced by the analytical work on time and space of his contemporary, the philosopher Henri Bergson. For Bergson the durational intensities of our inner world of consciousness can only be externalised as social expression by making them extensive, countable, subject to sequence and homogeneity. In effect this means by spatializing the heterogenous intensities of our inner world; by treating of them as a series of simultaneous, discrete, juxtaposed objects, rather than an ongoing, endless and interpenetrating set of processes –such as is the individual uncountable authentic content of consciousness.[[10]](#endnote-10)

As quantitative additions to Junkspace are continually made in all modes, in all directions and by all means, then ultimately as an interiority it seems to tend, in Koolhaas’s description of it, towards infinity: the effect of its incessant expansion is no longer simply quantitative, no longer countable and rational, but it is an interpenetration of endless multiplicity: a mood (-with its ‘verbs unknown and unthinkable in theory’ - ) rather than a measure. It is then a multiplicity like the states of consciousness in the mind, which are not the same as the ordered multiplicity of the units of number, and it seems to belong not to a rational or measureable space, discrete and countable, but to an irrepressible qualitative order which we feel from Koolhaas’s text to be at once exhilarating and terrifying –like the intensities of Bergson’s consciousness, or indeed the boundlessness of Freud’s Unconscious.

Alternatively, we could put it like this: the mode of Junkspace, as noted above, is the verb; it is always a ‘doing’, and thus has the continuity and indivisibility of an act, as opposed to the divisibility, discreteness and countability of an object. And the fact that those aphorisms of which the text is composed are so short and punchy only emphasises what is, in the final analysis, the most telling quality of this piece of writing, namely its performativity. One of the most noticeable aspects to the reader of this text is that if one’s attention is diverted, or if you have to put the text down for some reason, when you pick it up again it is extraordinarily difficult to refind the place. This is partly because in the unending series of aphorisms each with their own form and truth - there is no organising narrative or argument running through the whole piece. Each sentence more or less stands complete on its own with its own system of meaning, yet piled up as Junkspace with all the other sentences. Hence we have a text which is an example itself of the very phenomenon it seeks to define. That is to say that with the text as with Junkspace itself, Koolhaas ‘replaces hierarchy with accumulation’, and again like Junkspace itself, the text is ‘additive, layered, lightweight’, and is not articulated by an overall understanding and an organising principle of the whole. As noted above, again, the text, like Junkspace is potentially endless and tends, in its accumulation of idiosyncratic, self-standing additions towards the infinite with its proliferation of aphoristic truths bringing the world gradually inside itself. The text performs Junkspace itself. Thus this text is important not for what it says, but for what it does, though with J L Austin, godfather of the performative, maybe we cannot say that ultimately these are different things.[[11]](#endnote-11) So actually, while we have been locked away in our houses as the pandemic raged, we could easily pick up an online copy of the article and reassure ourselves that Junkspace kept on performing infinity.

1. Rem Koolhaas, ‘Junkspace’, *October*, Spring 2002 (100), pp. 175-190. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Architectural Press, London, 1946, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Paul Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?*, Zero Books, London, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of* *Surveillance Capitalism,* Profile Books, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Marc Auge, *Non-Places,* Verso, London, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Penguin, London, 1991. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Siegfried Gideion, *Space, Time and Architecture,* Harvard U P, Boston, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, Martino Fine Books, Eastford CT, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)