

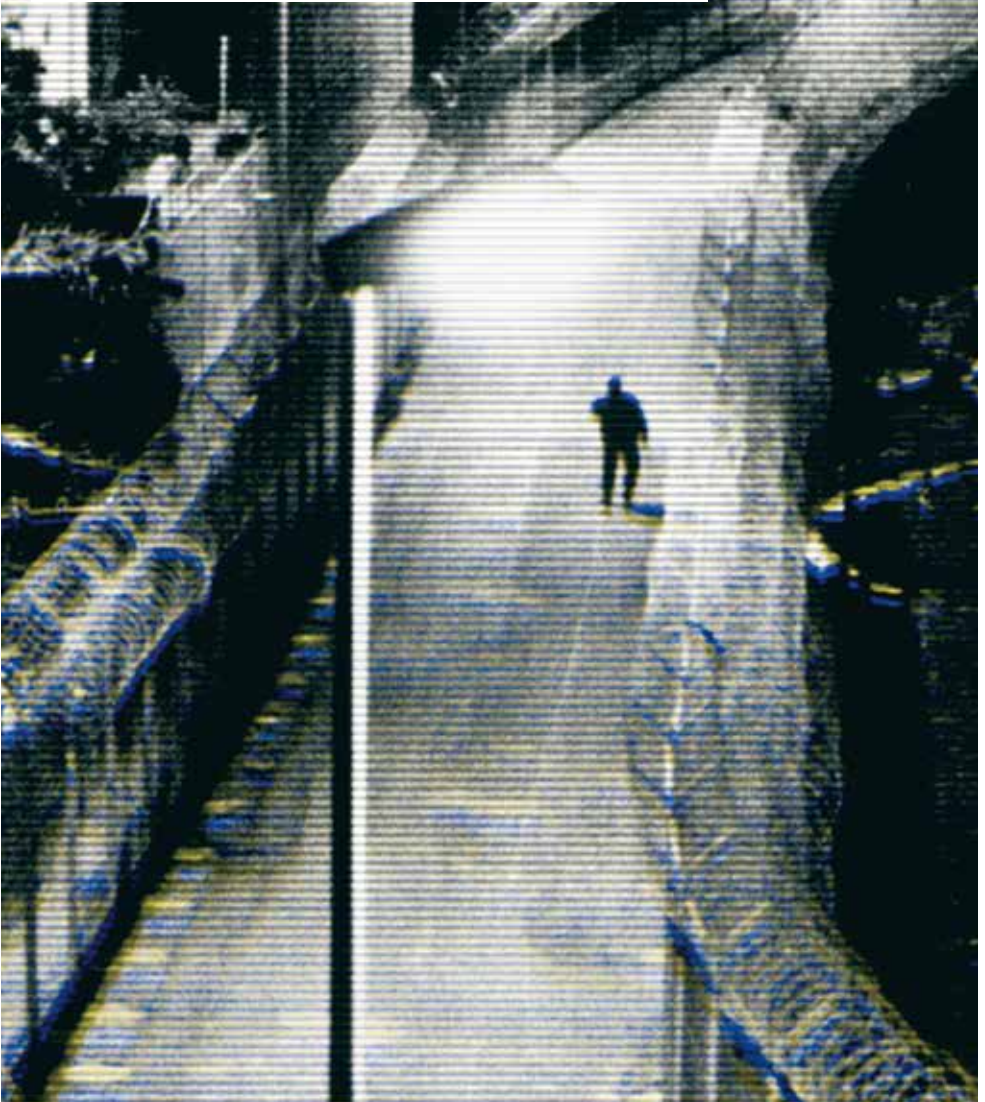
reflect #03

The Capsular Civilisation

On the City in the Age of Fear

Lieven De Cauter

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The Capsular Civilization

On the City in
the Age of Fear

Lieven De Cauter

Semira Adamu in memoriam

Cover: the wall of Ceuta by night

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For a Politics of the City

6

Preamble

What I had in mind when I started on this book, I called in an old note ‘a politics of the city’. This, however, proved to be a pleonasm. ‘Politics of the polis’ makes that immediately obvious. The city is always a political subject. Even when one takes, as do most writers, the aesthetics of the city as a starting point. Because the city must be designed, the politics of the city is always an aesthetic politics. I wanted to write a book with contributions to a political aesthetic of the contemporary city.

However, newspaper reports in the summer of 1998 about the use of walls of barbed wire in Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves on Moroccan soil that separate Europe from Africa in a physical, almost obscene way, pushed the book in a different direction. My essays had to incorporate a theoretical reflection on a society that built these walls of barbed wire and seemed to need them. Although the book proceeds from the city and has architecture and urbanism as subjects (Part I), it soon deals with a picture of society, the capsular civilization (Part II), which is subsequently placed in a macro-perspective: the permanent catastrophe (Part III) and the new imperial world order (Part IV). It ends by questioning the place of Utopia in an age of globalization, and thus with the question of politics as the art of ‘the good life’ within the community of the polis (Part V). Because ‘the age of fear’ has since dawned, quite palpably, the issues raised in this book have become increasingly urgent with the passage of time.

All of this precipitates a shift in meanings: the book begins with the city as a built environment but ends with the city as a community of people, as a ‘human city’, as a name for society. The double meaning of *urbs* and *civitas*, of the stone city and the human city, cannot be summed up fully – not in the Dutch word *stad* or in the English word *city* (whereas they are the two primary meanings of the Greek word *polis* and the French word *cit *). The ‘city’ in the subtitle therefore must be expressly read in this broad sense of ‘polis’. The texts are – gradually more explicit – attempts to comprehend human society in the age of fear. They are also experiments in intellectual protest, calls for resistance against this empire of fear. It is in this sense that ‘the politics of the city’ is the true subject of this book.



The Rise of the Generic City

Or Rem Koolhaas's
Flight Forward

The city is in the throes of a gigantic transformation process. Modernization keeps on driving us into the future, without any time for us to prepare or say goodbye, almost without time to understand what is happening. The end of the city is constantly being announced; the doomsayers bring out their dire warnings, but the prophets of a new *urbanness* also proclaim their happy message: Halleluiah for the network city. In the distance the rumble can be heard of the demographic explosion, of waves of migration from imploding societies in the South and East, of ecological doom scenarios. Yet, in the meantime, life goes on. Above our heads and behind our backs the city as we knew it is disappearing, and a new sort of city and a new sort of urban character are emerging.

There are many overlapping labels for the ongoing phenomenon: urban sprawl, network city, carpet metropolis, edge city, non-compact city, cyburbia. In his book *S,M,L,XL*,¹ Rem Koolhaas famously speaks about the new city as the generic city. This is a city without characteristics, the city as a blank product – like an airport, everywhere the same: a city without a centre, without identity and without history. Michael Sorkin, in his now classic introduction to *Variations on a Theme Park*, characterizes the new city as ageographic (placeless); it is predicated on simulation – the city as theme park – and an obsession with security reigns.² A comparison of the two characterizations reveals a significant concordance: a city without a centre is placeless; a city without identity and without history abounds in simulations of identity, of history. The only thing we do not find in Koolhaas is the obsession with security.

Because the text is already a classic, I propose a close reading of ‘The Generic City’, which fans out to include the rest of the book, in order to get a picture of Koolhaas’s vision of the city, and hence of the new urbanness.

Rem Koolhaas opens his essay, ‘The Generic City’, the final piece of *S,M,L,XL*, by asking what the city looks like when it begins more and more to resemble an airport. Like international airports, the new cities are the same everywhere. In contrast to the identity and character of the old cities, the new city has no identity: it is a city without a past, without individuality or particularity – a generic city. Identity, Koolhaas says, is linked to a city centre, but the centre is too small. The centre is destructive. It is dependent on a periphery and relegates that periphery to a

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The spread of capsular civilization is a worst-case scenario that is taking shape before our very eyes, unaware of it though we may be. Faced with the breakneck pace of technology, the uburbanization of our daily lives and the extreme but poignant polarization of our society, we are compelled to return to the capsules of our vehicles, our architectural cocoons and our urban enclaves, as exemplified by malls, gated communities and amusement parks. The process of capsularization is playing out against a threatening background of demographic-environmental catastrophe and of a militarization of the planet.

In this book, cultural philosopher Lieven De Cauter paints a picture of a society dominated by fear, exclusion and simulation, while studying the changing significance of the city in this 'derailed' and 'untenable' world.

Lieven De Cauter teaches at the Department of Architecture and Urban Design (ASRO) of the University of Leuven, at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam and, in Brussels, at the P.A.R.T.S school of dance and the RITS school for media studies. He has written books on contemporary art, architecture, experience and modernity and on Walter Benjamin. Some of the essays in this book were published in international anthologies such as *Hieroglyphs of Space* (2002) and *Cybercities* (2004).

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