

# Thirdspace: A Gaze into the Bigness

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**Abstract**—This study focuses on Koolhaas's concept of bigness within the framework of the thirdspace. It rereads contemporary urban condition, as in need of a new conceptual and instrumental perspective.

**Keywords**— Bigness: globalization: space: thirdspace.

## I. INTRODUCTION: BIGNESS AND THE URBAN CONDITION

According to the dictionary definition “bigness” means [1]:

- 1: quality or state of being big
- 2: size, whether great or small (a painful lump having the ~ of a pea)
- 3: broadness of outlook or scope; sometimes: POMPOSITY: self-assertive quality (the ~ of their bandied words)

“Bigness”, after having formulated by Rem Koolhaas [2], has become the very instrument of architecture. Different from the known, standard contents described above and in connection with certain anxieties of the discipline, the concept structured mainly onto the contemporary urban condition, of the global city. Saskia Sassen expresses this situation as follows [3]:

*“The globalization of economic activity entails a new type of organizational structure. To capture this theoretically and empirically requires, correspondingly, a new type of conceptual architecture.”*

Koolhaas gives a valuable part for Sassen's statements in his book *Mutations*. The book contains some of his projects and selected texts. For Koolhaas:

*“They attempt to document and understand the mutations of urban culture in order to develop a new conceptual framework and vocabulary for phenomena that can no longer be described within the traditional categories of architecture, landscape, and urban planning.”*

For him, all autonomies and architecture in particular within this new condition needs a new perspective and bigness seem to be a useful instrument with which we/architects can again operate, and get rid of our anxieties today. In Koolhaas's words [4]:

*“The absence of a theory of Bigness-what is the maximum architecture can do-is architecture's most debilitating weakness. Without a theory of Bigness, architects are in the position of Frankenstein's creators: instigators of a partly successful experiment whose results are running amok and therefore discredited. Because there is no theory of Bigness, we don't know what to do with it, we don't know where to put it, we don't know when to use it, we don't know how to plan it”*

Requirement of the reoperation has been arguing since it has been noticed that there is a new spatiality occurred within

the cities. The new spatiality that we couldn't touch, see, and swallow has embodied the bigness: gestalt of the new generic organism. Bart Lootsma, in his “*New Landscape*”, explores the new gestalt based on Marcel Duchamp's “Large Glass”. For Lootsma, like the Koolhaas's “generic city” bigness is also an operating concept on this phenomenon [5]:

*“No need to say that most of our environment is dross, 'like television set tuned to a dead channel'. In a way it comes close to what Rem Koolhaas calls the 'Generic City', or maybe it is the ultimate experience of 'Bigness'. We can also hear an echo of Guy Debord here, who talks in 'The Society of the Spectacle' of the unification and trivialization of space due to the capitalist mass-production system that shattered all legal and regional boundaries, dissipating the independence and quality of places.”*

Although theoretization of space and time, has a place not only in social theory but in broader realms of critical discourse on art, film, popular culture, and contemporary politics; this study will be limited to the framework of critical urban theories and architecture.

Science side of the issue also needs to be addressed in this context. Early twentieth century science has been discussing “space-time” and “field” as new entities [6]. Sanford Kwinter in his book deeply informs us about this new consciousness: the new gestalt [7]. Based on the “gestalt” [8], “field” and “field theory”, the concept bigness can be understood more precisely: Such a framework primarily addresses a four-dimensional continuum different than that of classical mechanics. From the perspective of this movement base complex ever-changing terrain called “field” Koolhaas's “five theorem of Bigness” might be understood [9]:

*“1. Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture, or even by any combination of architectural gestures. This impossibility triggers the autonomy of its parts, but that is not the same as fragmentation: the parts remain committed to the whole.”*

*2. The elevator--with its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections--and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture. Issues of composition, scale, proportion, detail are now moot. The "art" of architecture is useless in Bigness.*

*3. In Bigness, the distance between core and envelope increases to the point where the facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. The humanist expectation of "honesty" is doomed: interior and exterior architectures become separate projects, one dealing with the instability of programmatic and iconographic needs, the other--agent of disinformation--offering the city the apparent stability of an object. Where*

architecture reveals, *Bigness perplexes; Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get.*

4. *Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad. Their impact is independent of their quality.*

5. *Together, all these breaks--with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics--imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists."*

Different from the dictionaries, Koolhaas dwells upon bigness as a concept, with which we /architects may reach the very liveliness, worldliness of the life we living. He also aims to open up a new perspective oriented towards the instrumentality of architecture [10]:

*"By randomizing circulation, short-circuiting distance, artificializing interiors, reducing mass, stretching dimensions, and accelerating construction, the elevator, electricity, air-conditioning, steel, and finally the new infrastructures formed a cluster of mutations that induced another species of architecture. The combined effects of these inventions were structures taller and deeper-Bigger-than ever before conceived, with a parallel potential for the reorganization of the social world-a vastly richer programming."*

The idea behind the slogan is that understanding urban condition within the framework of different perspectives, i.e. from the outside of the disciplinary routines and boundaries, may provide us with new options in the solution of our contemporary spatial problems.

## II. BIGNESS AND THIRDSPACE

Since the issue of urbanization is a multilayered phenomenon, which enables us to combine multiple areas of knowledge, and because there have already strong impacts of some other disciplines [11] onto autonomy of architecture, framework of "thirdspace" together with the strategy of bigness may have a potential to achieve a more detailed understanding of urban condition today.

On the other hand, interest of the new urban landscape that we see in Koolhaas is not new. As Edward Soja has written [12]:

*"Since the beginning of the nineties, we have also undergone what I perceive as the first significant trans-disciplinary spatial turn-a turn to new ways of thinking in which space occupies a central position as a form of analysis, critical inquiry, practice, theory-building, politics"*

Lefebvre as in many other contemporary thinkers those who spent much effort on the issue of urban spatiality, has strong effects on Edward Soja. He designates the three different conceptions of space [13]: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space). And Soja as a geographer tries to apprehend "fully lived space" with the term "thirdspace". For him, thirdspace is both of the previous two and more.

Soja's "thirdspace" might be taken as a conceptual framework of what Koolhaas tried to discuss under the term bigness. Soja constructs a hybrid relationship with Lefebvrian

tripartite spatial mechanism, and try to explain "new landscape" in a field-like, topological way. He states that [14]:

*"Spatiality of human life "Perhaps more than ever before, we are becoming consciously aware of ourselves as intrinsically spatial beings, continuously engaged in the collective activity of producing spaces and places, territories and regions, environments and habitats. This process of producing spatiality or "making geographies" begins with the body, with the construction and performance of the self, the human subject, as a distinctively spatial entity involved in a complex relation with our surroundings. On the one hand, our actions, and thoughts shape the spaces around us, but at the same time the larger collectively or socially produced spaces and places within which we live also shape our actions and thoughts in ways that we are only beginning to understand.*

*Our performance as spatial beings takes place at many different scales from the body (the geography closest in) to whole earth. There is certain distance decay but every larger space must be considered as products of collective action therefore subject to being modified or changed"*

While not so explicit, Koolhaas' bigness strategy would also be seen as an attempt to think about and built on "fully lived space". It is seen that, the main framework behind the term bigness is not alien to the thirdspace when examined in this framework. With this in mind, the following is how Soja explained the thirdspace [15]:

*"In this alternative "third" perspective, the spatial specificity of urbanism is investigated as fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency. Understanding lived space can be compared to writing a biography, an interpretation of the lived time of an individual; or more generally to historiography, the attempt to describe and understand the lived time of human collectivities and societies. In all these "life stories", perfect or complete knowledge is impossible. There is too much that lies beneath the surface, unknown and perhaps unknowable, for a complete story be told. The best we can do is selectively explore, in the most insightful ways we can find, the infinite complexity of life through its intrinsic spatial, social, and historical dimensions, its interrelated spatiality, sociality, and historicity."*

## III. CONCLUSION

Grounding onto the idea that bigness may have the potential of exploring both conceived and lived spatiality as a surplus value of the global city, and may serve as long been desired instrument for new instrumentality of architecture within the utmost liveliness of the thirdspace, The task of this paper is to explore the interaction between "bigness" and "thirdspace" in a transdisciplinary way. While doing this, some additive and explanatory pathways followed such as: "field condition" and topological and geographical consumption of the space; "contemporary urban condition" "boundaries and autonomy" and "space-time". All of these spatial inspections and explanations with all implicit autonomy and periphery discussions are comparatively based particularly on the issue of orthodoxy of Architecture, and on the general belief of its impossibility of communicating with

the “new”. On that sense, in searching for contemporaneity of instrumentalization process of spatial design disciplines it is important to understand that there is a fundamental relationship between, globalization, and a critical consciousness of modernity.

Concept of modernity is based on the idea of relating to present and recent time. Being modern is just contingent upon a critical awareness of contemporaneity, the “just now”. As Soja splendidly put [16]:

*“As such critical awareness, what can be defined as modernity in general is driven by two key questions. What difference does today, what is going on just now, in this world and this period of time, make with respect to yesterday? Assuming that some significant differences exist, how might we use this knowledge of what is new and different to change our thinking and our practices to make for better world? In other words, what is significantly new and what is to be done about is right here and now?”*

In this framework, it would be said that, Koolhaas’s debate on bigness operates onto a very modernist conception of the problem solving. It is based on the idea that urban condition must be understood and become operational only if designers find tools and achieve progress simultaneously. The idea of progress is then embraces newness and an unbounded understanding of space and therefore excludes context [17][18]. In this context, it is understandable that while Koolhaas formulizing bigness he stressed that, it includes the living urban condition/the generic city and yet excludes the traditional way of doing and thinking architecture. He thus criticizes the old world architectural habits and embraces the new worlds without which it is possible to grasp the “generic city” [19].

*“Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city, it preempts the city; or better still, it is the city. If urbanism generates potential and architecture exploits it, Bigness enlists the generosity of urbanism against the meanness of architecture.*

*Bigness=urbanism vs. architecture”*

By following Koolhaas and Soja, the study discussed that within a globalized world understanding spatial design problems needs a special consciousness. In the arguments that stand out in this context, we see that as conjectures of the spatial kind, bigness and thirdspace occur by their polymorphy and diffuseness, they escape from predetermined identifying seizure and they are so resistance against their practice/architecture. Architecture in this respect cannot be a point of departure, unless it is reconsidered both theoretically and practically.

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#### REFERENCES

[1] *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, Kōnemann, Springfield, Mass., USA, 1993.

[2] As Hal Foster put it, Bigness emerged in “Delirious New York” first, as the main denominator of “culture of congestion” in Manhattan, secondly it progress while passing through the “S, M, L, XL” in connection with OMA’s practice of Bigness. Lastly Foster refers Koolhaas as arguing about bigness more programmatically in his “Harvard Shopping Guide” H. Foster, “Bigness”, 18.04.2003. Internet WWW: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n23/print/fost01.html>

[3] For Sassen, the issue of global city as different from “world city”, “superville”, or “informational city” is structured in the contemporary period. S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, Oxford, 2001.

[4] R. Koolhaas, “Bigness or the Problem of Large”, in *S, M, L, XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995.

[5] B. Lootsma, “The New Landscape,” in *Mutations*, published by. Actar, Bordeaux, 2001, pp. 460-471.

[6] In his 1905 paper “On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies”, Einstein first presented his Special Theory of Relativity.

[7] S. Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Towards a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001. E. P.

[8] K. Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, Brace and Company, New York, 1935.

[9] R. Koolhaas, “Bigness or the Problem of Large”, in *S, M, L, XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995, pp. 495-516.

[10] R. Koolhaas, “Bigness or the Problem of Large”, in *S, M, L, XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995, pp. 495-516.

[11] For architecture, especially complex and big scaled issues need to be more and more interrelated relationships with social sciences and applied sciences such as: history, sociology; psychology, economics; and mathematic, statistic, geography.

[12] E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Blackwell, Oxford, Mass., 1996.

[13] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford U.K., Cambridge U.S.A., 1994.  
*“1. Perceived Space (spatial Practice): which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society’s relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance. 2. Conceived Space (representations of space): which are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations. 3. Lived Space (representational spaces): embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art.” p:33*

[14] E. W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell Publications, Oxford, U.K, 2000, pp. 6-7.

[15] E. W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell Publications, Oxford, U.K, 2000, pp. 12.

[16] E. W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell Publications, Oxford, U.K, 2000.

[17] U. Ozten & H. Anay, “Bağlamsalçılığın İki Yüzü: Tepeleri ve Vadileri Pahlamış bir Dünyada Bağlamsalçılık Hususuna Yeniden bir Bakış”, *Megaron*, 2017-12-1.

[18] U. Ozten & H. Anay, “Contextualism as a basis for an environmental architectural design in a globalized world,” *International Journal of Advances in Mechanical and Civil Engineering*, vol. 4, issue 4, 2017.

[19] Some situations on which the idea of the generic city was constructed:  
*“In generic city all authenticity relentlessly evacuated, The generic city is the city liberated from the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity. It is the city without history The Generic city breaks with this destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability.”*  
R. Koolhaas, “Generic City”, in *S, M, L, XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995.  
Sasen highlights the need for theoretical and methodological innovations pushed up by globalization. She states that:  
*“Globalization has brought with a change in the scales at which strategic economic and political processes territorialize. Global cities have emerged as major new scales in this dynamic of territorialization. Key features of this rescaling entail an overriding of older categories for*



*analysis and other hierarchies of scale. This has brought with it the need for theoretical and methodological innovations”*

- [20] S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, Oxford, 2001, pp. 344.