



Mutations

By Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist

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The continuously accelerating phenomenon of urbanization continues to be one of the great challenges of our time, surfacing repeatedly as an issue in different areas of the world for two hundred years. In a world that has been redefined by a proliferation of communication networks and by a progressive erasure of borders, *Mutations* reflects on the transformations that these accelerating processes inflict on our environment, and on the spaces in which architecture can still operate. Organized as a heavily illustrated atlas/survey of contemporary urban landscapes, the first section of this exhaustive and essential book begins with revealing data on global urbanization, juxtaposed with a series of essays on the changing environment and economy of today's metropolis. The rest of the book is devoted to a selection of groundbreaking studies by some of the central figures in contemporary architectural urbanism, including the Pearl River Delta in Southeast Asia, a project of the Harvard Project on the City, directed by Rem Koolhaas; "Uncertain States of Europe," a project by Stefano Boeri and Multiplicity; a survey of American cities by Sanford Kwinter and Daniela Fabricius; and a study of Lagos, Nigeria--one of Africa's largest cities--by the Harvard Project.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"A city is a plane of tarmac with some red hot spots of intensity," Rem Koolhaas, the pathbreaking architect and author of such semiotically seminal books as *Delirious New York* and the more recent *S, M, L, XL*, remarked in 1969. More than 30 years later, there are more of those hot spots around the world than ever, and they're getting hotter every day. Globalization, standardization, and the high-speed innovations of our current information age are transforming urban centers from London to Los Angeles to Lagos, and more places are becoming more urban, and at a faster pace, than ever before.

Mutations is an eye-popping atlas-cum-analysis of this new urbanization, and much of it is composed of essays and meditations (from a variety of contributors) on the 21st-century international City (often un-)Beautiful. Most of them are written in language that will be familiar to readers of Koolhaas's past books: in other words, dense, abstract, and chock-full of references to Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari. If you like that sort of deconstructivist yammering, great; if not, the major small-type essays are best sampled (or, better, skimmed) one at a time, interspersed with the many other more accessible elements of the book that truly do add up to a vivid and fascinating mosaic of postmodern urbanism.

From Koolhaas and Harvard Design School's Project on the City come two engrossing and wholly straightforward explorations: one of the Pearl River Delta, which China has designated as a zone of unrestricted capitalist experimentation, and whose five major urban centers have consequently exploded overnight in all sorts of instructive and often frightening ways; and another of the chaotic, congested and *Blade Runner*esque megalopolis of Lagos, Nigeria, whose patterns of growth, housing, and commerce defy all conventional wisdom on how cities should develop. There's also a bounty of excellent (and often astonishing) statistics on all aspects of urban growth; a "snapshots" section of phenomena from cities all over the globe; a completely spot-on (and unintentionally funny) analysis of the evolution of shopping as the last truly unifying urban public activity (and the subject of Koolhaas's next full-scale book); and a trenchant look at Kosovo as ground zero in the first major war of the Internet age. (It should be noted that there's a separate section on the U.S., which with all its soulless, tacky consumerist excess gets the drubbing it usually can expect from the European intelligentsia, although the irony here is that more and more of newly urban Europe is starting to look like newly urban America.)

The exhibit-quality photography throughout is great, and, as you could expect from this unofficial successor to *S, M, L, XL*, the design is satisfyingly outré, right down to its post-Warholian plastic yellow easy-wipe cover with glued-on mousepad. But for all of *Mutations*'s rich trove of facts and insights, and the impression that its high-tech design gives of an ironic embrace of the new urbanization, its deeper tone is one of disappointment and loss. The spirit of Jane Jacobs resides here, with all its yearning for the quirky, quaint beauty of human-scaled townhouses and shops, sidewalks and byways, and for the precorporatized glamour of grand old towns like New York, London, Paris, and Shanghai, before such metallic nouveau hubs as Atlanta and Kuala Lumpur were ever on the world-commerce map. *Mutations* was written and compiled largely by architects, after all, who hate ugliness as much as the next guy, whatever they may claim otherwise; its precisely for that reason that this densely absorbing new compendium betrays its wistfulness as often as it promotes its own air of cool, ethnographic bemusement. --*Timothy Murphy*

From Library Journal

This time working with a host of collaborators, architect Koolhaas, whose *S, M, L, XL* was that rare thing, a

crossover architecture best seller, has returned with another bricklike tome. Mutations was developed in connection with Harvard Design School's Project on the City, an ongoing graduate-level analysis of "issues related to the urban condition." Year-long investigations have tackled such subjects as the impact of shopping on the city; Lagos, a massive, sprawling West African city that is highly functional despite a lack of infrastructure; and systematizing the structures and relationships in the prototypical Roman city. Results from these projects are gathered here along with a couple photo essays and short profiles of specific places from Pristina to Benelux. Interspersed throughout are a multitude of statistics about the current state and future of the city, presented in a captivating, highly graphical format. The whole does not cohere, and the reader will quickly turn to whatever is of greatest personal interest. But at the end of the day, the various views do coalesce into a portrait of powerful forces of our making but beyond our control: the modern city. As a result, this book is highly recommended for general cultural studies collections as well as all architecture/urban planning collections. Eric Bryant, "Library Journal"

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Review

720 pages of tough urban hiking, but you ll come out seeing the city like a pro. --New York Magazine

A crossover architecture best seller... Highly recommended. --Library Journal

A vivid and fascinating mosaic of postmodern urbanism. --Amazon.com Annual Best

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sanjuana Day:

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