Is the city architecture’s nemesis? Formless where architecture requires form, open where building projects require completion and closure, ceaseless in its development – growth and contraction – often simultaneously experiencing decay as well as expansion. Seeking to renegotiate the terms of architecture’s engagement with the city, Alexander Eisenschmidt turns to some of the most significant architectural precedents of the recent past that are squarely set within the metropolis.
The relationship between architecture and the city is neither tenuous nor straightforward. It is inherently driven by the differences in scale, complexity and, above all, intentionality. The latter foregrounds architecture’s inherent tendency towards form matched only by the city’s ability to avoid it. In other words, architecture as an urban practice is seemingly undermined by urban developments that at multiple scales negate its effectiveness: one is designed and fully intentional while the other is seemingly aimless and contradictory. Therefore, architecture by habit perceives urbanisation as its opposing force, fostering positions that tend either to categorically resist or radically embrace those conditions.

These attitudes towards urbanisation have developed particularly in the last two centuries as cities have grown exponentially. Beginning in the 16th century and accelerating during the revolutionary wave at the end of the 18th century, modern life was catapulted into existence and Western cities underwent a radical transformation that others soon followed. The industrial environment, with its factories, credit networks, institutional systems, and communication and information technologies created a new kind of city driven by what Ildefons Cerdà in 1867 would call ‘urbanisation’. For many, this city was no longer comprehensible via conventional means of analysis, nor was it possible to engage it through previous forms of design. The convergence of the desire to order the urban ground with the increasing rationalisation of the city and urban life and the subsequent aestheticisation of modern rational forms and life, marked not only the birthplace of the modern metropolis, but also the advent of new disciplines that searched for an understanding of this newly emancipated urban culture.

While in 1753 Marc-Antoine Laugier was still suggesting that ‘irregularity and disorder … suits great cities so well’, only a few decades later this attitude towards the existing urban environment was drastically altered, culminating in statements like ‘[the modern city is an] urban mess … and the result of a gigantic accident’. From this moment onwards, architects had little choice but to position themselves in relation to the urbanisation of the contemporary world. Many were critical of the current condition and wanted to resist it, while others sought to radicalise it. In the first category, we find projects such as Camillo Sitte’s urban enclosures (1889), Aldo Rossi’s urban artefacts (1966), and more recently Pier Vittorio Aureli’s absolute architectures (2011); whereas the second group could be illustrated by Otto Wagner’s expanding metropolis (1911), Ludwig Hilberseimer’s High-Rise City (1924), and Archizoom’s No-Stop City (1969). Both camps – practising acts of self-preservation by aligning their projects to either historical models or utopian ambitions – suspended the present and did everything to not take the city at face value.

But urbanisation also captures the current state of flux that the city is undergoing; it is the contemporary city, which comes with a multiplicity of circumstances that can hardly be controlled, nor can it be reduced to its capitalist origins. Therefore, if there is a possibility to renegotiate the terms of engagement with the city, then it is through projects that position themselves squarely within it. These projects might help us to productively confront our current fear of urbanisation – promoting an alternative attitude to the contemporary city, developing urban architectures closely related to the urbanised world, and expanding the definition of urbanism to include what is already there.

Urban Mentality

Over the course of the 20th century, architects who sought an operational engagement with the existing city had one characteristic in common: a mentality capable of rethinking even the most despised urban environments. Denise Scott Brown’s unexpected plaudit in favour of ‘Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Levittown, the swinging singles on the Westheimer Strip, golf resorts, boating communities, Co-op City, the residential backgrounds to soap operas, TV commercials and mass mag ads, billboards, and Route 66’ come to mind, when she declared them as ‘sources for a changing architectural sensibility’. For her, these new environments
In 1908, the philosopher-turned-architect August Endell declared in a seemingly naive statement: ‘The city is beautiful!’ The Berlin he was referring to was propelled into the metropolitan limelight in only two decades, and for its inhabitants the shock of living in a city they no longer recognised sat deep. Their verdict was that ‘[i]t had lost its form’ and, ultimately, had spiralled out of control.

rendered previous forms of urban space obsolete and superseded conventional aesthetic preferences, functional paradigms, formal typologies and space itself. While during the 1960s most architects were unsettled by the increasing suburbanisation and decentralisation of the existing city that was being propelled by new electronic technologies and mass media, for Scott Brown those conditions were almost all right and, after all, inescapable.

This countered not only Modernist utopian thinking; it also flew in the face of contemporary architectural theory. While the Modernists commonly sought to overturn current conditions in order to remake the world, the later discourse (exemplified by the Italian Tendenza movement and the academic discourse in the US) sought to resist them through an architecture of autonomy. Most architects were not able to accept the dramatic urban shifts as given – a commitment that Scott Brown and Robert Venturi were more than willing to make.

Learning from Las Vegas (1972) studies the most extreme form of automobile-oriented, billboard-based and entertainment-driven environment that urbanisation had yet produced, and hints at how other cities would subsequently develop.

Analysing the city through a kind of ‘dead-panning’ did not leave intentionality out, but proposed to suspend judgement in order to invent ways of looking at what was commonly regarded as taboo. While, unlike their stylistic discussions, the proposed mentality towards the city fell on deaf ears in architecture, it echoed the spatial politics of contemporary protagonists in other disciplines. To paraphrase John Cage’s call to ‘wake up to the very life we’re living’, Learning from Las Vegas can be understood as an affirmation of...
the contemporary city — no longer analytically viewing the city as a problem, but instead entering and soliciting options and possibilities from within.5

But shifting the relationship between architecture and the city to an attitude that sees opportunities in the existing and abets these conditions was by no means a fascination confined to the 1970s. Confronting a very different city, more than half a century earlier, would lead some to strikingly similar conclusions. In 1908, the philosopher-turned-architect August Endell declared in a seemingly naive statement: 'The city is beautiful!' The Berlin he was referring to was propelled into the metropolitan limelight in only two decades, and for its inhabitants the shock of living in a city they no longer recognised sat deep. Their verdict was that '[t]he city ha[d] lost its form,' and, ultimately, had spiralled out of control. This was a condition that the German discourse on Städtebau (literally translated as city-building) was eager to solve, while for Endell it was more than worth exploring.

Typical of his contrarian position, Endell declared that there was actually little wrong with the city; instead, it was the conventional way of looking at it that needed revision, a scenario that countered the well-intended urban problem-solving with an outspoken optimism. For his book The Beauty of the Metropolis, Endell chose only locations that were commonly associated with the chaos of the city. Looking at moments like the infrastructural node of Gleisdreieck, he reworked common notions of urban analysis by fully embracing the complexities of space and form, ultimately arguing: '[The metropolis] despite all its ugliness … [presents] limitless sources for imagination.'6 Endell set an unconditional openness to what was there against the conventional reading of the city. Determined to find potentials in whatever the city had to offer, he subverted the existing discourse by questioning architecture’s ability to solve problems, and instead attempted to recalibrate the discipline’s attitude towards the city.

This buoyant mentality caused Endell to be ostracised during his time, and rendered him unproductive for critical theories of the more recent past. For our purpose here, however, his offers an alternative position towards the city that relies on its capacities rather than on what it is lacking — a mentality that Modernists such as Mies van der Rohe would later echo. Observing a new territorial urbanisation in 1955, Mies noted: ‘We have to live in a jungle, and maybe we do well by that.’7 Traits of the city that urban and architectural thinking, then and now, viewed as inadmissible, became here for a short moment drivers of possible new lifestyles – a directional, if not behavioural shift in the architectural psyche, where inventions of the contemporary city act as provocations and disciplinary stimuli. As such, they are not to be mistaken for outright acceptance of what is there, but rather as a kind of operational twist that frees disciplinary habits. Doubtful of the prospects and abilities for architecture to resist or escape urbanisation, the question becomes rather what to do when ‘stuck’ with it.

**Metropolitan Architecture**

Endell’s book reversed the horrors of the formless city into a collection of potent experiences, similar to George Simmel’s reading of the metropolis as a ‘unique place, pregnant with inestimable meanings’.8 Aided by visual
theories of the late 19th century, it promoted a newly acquired naiveté through which to see the city anew; only this time with an eye for its formless potentials. Formlessness (the city without form or order) was here linked to a certain degree of creative freedom that enabled a new understanding of the city. Or as Karl Scheffler, one of Endell’s allies, noted in 1910: ‘especially because of [the city’s] urban formlessness, there has been Spielraum (margin/leeway/scope/room to play) for unlimited possibilities’. Here, the idea of the city shifted from negative to potent, and engagement with the city moved from oppositionary to opportunistic. The forces of the metropolis, previously only seen as frightening, now also held the possibility for a new metropolitan space.

In the vein of Louis Sullivan and Otto Wagner, Scheffler argued that a modern architecture can only emerge from within the culture of the metropolis. New building types, such as warehouses, apartment buildings and department stores, were essentially produced by new trading systems, population surge, urban density and the spatialisation of commodity culture – simultaneously approximating the formless city and the formative capacities of architecture. The forces of the modern city had brought about (and literally shaped) new spatial and organisational conditions that Scheffler discovered as emergent architectural paradigms that architects had failed to recognise. For Scheffler, one had no choice but to engage the modern city, for it presented the only effective position within modernity. To reject or resist it would mean to overlook its ‘unlimited possibilities’ and, more specifically, the emergence of a new kind of architecture: Großstadtarchitektur, or ‘metropolitan architecture’.

Later Modernists such as Ludwig Hilberseimer defined metropolitan architecture as driven by the ‘economy of the moment and its matter-of-factness, material conditions, and construction techniques’, whereas in the discourse around 1910, metropolitan architecture was more intimately linked with the modern city. It proposed an engagement with the urban realm as a source for architectural imagination, a theoretical opportunism that rejected the conventional either/or discourse around the city and can be seen as a tactical device instructive for architects to come.

While the term ‘metropolitan architecture’ was used differently during the years of high-modernism, and was defunct in the postwar era, it reappeared in the 1970s with its earlier characteristics in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and the publication Delirious New York (1978). The latter examines the city of flux and extrapolates lessons as a retroactive manifesto of ‘Manhattanism’ that OMA, in turn, aims back at the city. More precisely, selective episodes within Manhattan and Coney Island (between 1890 and 1940) were viewed as generators of architectural experiments that remained unnoticed, waiting to be theorised. Koolhaas here drew attention to the divide between the unconscious building of metropolitan architecture through the constraints of the city (as in New York) and the conscious construction of theories without limitations that remain unbuilt (as in the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s).

New York’s commitment to technology, its relentless implementation of the grid, a zoning law that encouraged territorial conquests, and the ever-increasing urban density of population and architectural forms ('the culture of congestion') had unintentionally created an urban architecture of the metropolis that in its ‘exuberance’ and ‘shamelessness’ produced unexpected spatial inventions and climatic effects. The now famous example of Starrett & Van Vleck’s Downtown Athletic Club of 1931, and its layered environments of metropolitan spectacle (from swimming pool via oyster bar to golf course), is assessed as a by-product of collective urban forces (grid, elevator and climatic control) coupled with the desires of metropolitan life, and culminating in a ‘techno-psychic apparatus’ that choreographs an inventory of stories.

Manhattan’s urbanisation acts here as a form of Surrealist automatism where the city’s existing condition exposes a subconscious architecture, ‘fundamentally beyond the control of architect or planner’. Rather than understanding the architect as a sole creator of ideal form, the city’s field of influences steer architecture. With an unwavering belief in what the city has to offer, architecture’s place within it is renegotiated – facilitating a process of discovery where even the most commercial architectures of the capitalist city hold spatial, material and organisational intelligences, secretly revolutionary and blatantly non-utopian. As such, metropolitan architecture is able to conflate the seemingly contradictory realms of the Constructivist social condenser with the commercial skyscrapers of Manhattan, reverting the most devastating conditions into accelerations of metropolitan forces filled with potential. The architectural mutations that the city provoked and Koolhaas excavates, are later reassembled through a kind of constructive surgery in the
labouratories of OMA – the cabinet of Dr Caligari. What begins as ‘exquisite corpses’ in true Surrealist fashion develop into specialised/heightened architectures of and for the metropolis by internalising its delirium. In the Sea Terminal of Zeebrugge, for example, one would have looked down from the casino, past the hotel and lobby, into the traffic of the parking garage. The city here sponsors architecture, not through a mimicking of images, but through an inhalation of the city’s pulsations and effects.

Island Urbanism

Delirious New York and the reissuing of metropolitan architecture were timely as they responded tactically to the existing fascination with the historical city as promoted by Aldo Rossi’s Architecture of the City (1966), the traditional city of Rob Krier’s Stadtraum (1975) and the popular city of Venturi and Scott Brown (1972). While sharing their fascination with the city, Koolhaas found a new kind of architecture in the ultimate modern realm of expansion – the grid. Characteristic of urbanisation, each block is simultaneously limiting and accelerating; it confines the building(s) and offers a focused test-bed for the elaboration of particularities, not simply as a location, but as a site of a story where a whole world is taken captive. As such, metropolitan architecture invites all forms of urban life and becomes a ‘city-within-the-city’.

This phrase gained importance through a study led by Oswald Mathias Ungers at Cornell University in collaboration with Peter Riemann, Hans Kolhoff, Arthur Ovaska and Koolhaas before he departed for New York. City in the City: Berlin the Green Archipelago (1977) examines West Berlin’s postwar urban situation. The city, itself an urban island

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and inspiration for projects such as *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* (1972), faced a crisis in stark contrast to its metropolitan past of the teens and twenties. After the destructions of war and the subsequent division of the city, large sections remained empty, a condition only heightened by economic difficulties and a declining population. What commonly was addressed with proposals for rebuilding Berlin’s large perimeter blocks was turned on its head when Ungers extrapolated the urban crisis of the existing city. In a counter-intuitive response, *Green Archipelago* did not resist de-urbanisation, but experimented with its potentials as a way forward. It envisioned an accelerated urban shrinkage, which in turn produced a city of individual urban islands drifting in an enlarged post-urban landscape.

The project foresees that only the strongest architectural ensembles remain, while the rest of the city is demolished and slowly replaced by forest, gardens and wildlife. The different shades of nature would directly contrast the urban forms and heighten their clarity or, as the authors put it, ‘intensify the metropolitan experience’ – an observation that by now sounds familiar. What Ungers in 1966 described as ‘Grossform’ (large form) for their scale, as well as their historic, programmatic and formal capacity, was here reconsidered as cities within the city and, in turn, acted as a precursor to Koolhaas’ concept of ‘bigness’ (1994). Each island is a formally distinct and functionally autonomous miniature city, not contributing to a coherent whole, but carrying an urbanism of its own. As such, these ‘unique’ and ‘antithetical islands’ become part of Michel Foucault’s city of ‘heterotopias’, which are ‘real and effective spaces … [that] constitute a sort of counterarrangement of effectively realized utopias’. In tandem, the authors of *Green Archipelago* noted: ‘There is no need for new utopias, rather to create a better reality.’ And, indeed, the realities of the city were paramount for the envisioning of a new urbanity. The notion of the city as laboratory finds here a new meaning: no longer is it simply the territory for architectural tests, but instead it becomes the very driver of urban invention – urbanisation propels urbanism. Neither utopian speculation nor superimposed planning was to guide the development of the city; instead, the development of the city guided a new urbanism.

At the same time that Ungers and his co-authors promoted the city’s ‘reality’ as an indicator for urban trends, another exploration into the notion of the real made itself heard. Bernard Tschumi’s postcard-size *Advertisements for Architecture* (1975) read as manifestos for particular conditions or moods; or, to use advertisement jargon, to trigger desire. While architectural drawings can only approximate the real, Tschumi’s *Advertisements* sought to go beyond the page by forcing life experience and architectural space to come together. The ‘found’ image is here resituated through the text (*détournement*), triggering an alternative reality saturated with real events. What Tschumi was searching for in architecture, the city had plenty of. Transcribing the city’s events as they relate to architectural space must therefore have come naturally.

Tschumi’s cinematic study of Manhattan is a scripting through reassembling of what is there by taking references from Guy Debord and Asger Jorn’s psycho-geographical remapping of Paris – a different kind of archipelago.
Guy Debord and Asger Jorn’s psycho-geographical remapping of Paris – a different kind of archipelago. It records and translates what the city had in abundance but was commonly neglected in architectural discourse: erotics, violence, desires. The architect traces and takes note rather than creating anew, so Tschumi suggests; and yet a new city seems to emerge. The Manhattan Transcripts (1976–81) are composed of four episodes linking particular urban locations (programme + form) with events (performance); so does Central Park, for example, become the site of a murder mystery and 42nd Street the route of an urban drift. The city is here mined with the help of Situationist techniques, Constructivist visuals and Surrealist mentalities, leading Tschumi to conclude that just as there is no architecture without events, there is also ‘no architecture without the city, no city without architecture’.²¹ Or, to put it differently, architecture only exists because of the city. It brings out the best and worst in architecture, both equally important and both full of uncharted possibilities.

The contemporary city is the true inventor of cross-, trans- and dis-programming and, therefore, remains the constant point of reference. What we might call the ‘city of emergent events’ is not just the recasting of whatever exists, but a different kind of city that rethinks its buildings as they are constructed by events. Manhattan Transcript 4, the story of the block, for example, seems to assemble pieces of architecture into a kaleidoscopic urbanism of zoned fields of energy. More than recasting what the city is, it suggests what the city could be. Green Archipelago and The Manhattan Transcripts posit an urbanism that accelerates the existing city.

From the stubborn optimism of Venturi & Scott Brown, and Endell, via the radical contextualism of Scheffler and Koolhaas, to the emergent urbanisms of Ungers and Tschumi, what these projects have in common is a view of the contemporary environment as a terrain saturated with potential. The first set of projects cultivates an analytical hunger to find opportunities in the most unlikely of places; the second instrumentalises the forms of the here and now; and the third obsessively follows episodes linking particular urban locations (programme + form) – so Tschumi suggests; and yet a new city seems to emerge. Green Archipelago and The Manhattan Transcripts posit an urbanism that accelerates the existing city.

Berman describes the shift from the 19th-century commitment to wrestle with the tensions within modernity to the 20th-century polarisation between the embrace and rejection of the modern condition. He portrays this as a transition from ‘Both/And’ to ‘Either/Or’ (p 24).

6. August Endell, Die Schönheit der Großen Stadt, Stecker & Schröder (Stuttgart), 1908, p 23.
10. Ibid, p 19. See also: Karl Scheffler, Die Architektur der Großstadt, B Cassier (Berlin), 1913.
11. Ludwig Hilberseimer, Großstadtabarchitektur, Julius Hoffmann (Stuttgart), 1927, p 94.
12. In All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, Simon and Schuster (New York), 1982, Marshall Berman describes the shift from the 19th-century commitment to wrestle with the tensions within modernity to the 20th-century polarisation between the embrace and rejection of the modern condition. He portrays this as a transition from ‘Both/And’ to ‘Either/Or’ (p 24).
13. OMA was founded in 1975 by Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis and Zoe Zenghelis. Three years later, Koolhaas published Delirious New York.
17. The argument for perimeter block reconstruction was a key contribution by Robert and Leon Krier. This would influence tendencies within Berlin’s International Building Exhibition (IBA) during the 1980s, and ultimately spoke to popular ambitions for the reconversion of Berlin.
20. Ungers et al, op cit, p 43.