

Excerpt from the interview “HAPPY TOGETHER”

AC: First of all, can you define what ‘Open City’ means in the context of this year’s Biennale?

KC: It’s a very ambiguous term. When you Google it, you get about 40,000 hits – there is a coffee shop, there are organizations [using the name] etc. For me, [the theme] has to do with open society or a society that is receptive to cultural change, peaceful co-existence and economic innovation. We are ultimately looking for urban structures that stimulate a kind of urbanity where those concepts come to bloom.

AC: How did the concept come about?

KC: I must say that everything that I’m telling you and everything that we are working on is very strongly related to the writings of Jane Jacobs. The earliest observations on urbanism stems from books like *Life and Death of Great American Cities* or *The Economy of Cities*. Key ideas explored by contemporary writers such as Richard Florida and Henri Lefebvre originated with Jacobs who first brought up the concept of sustainable urban life back in 1959. The last book by Jacobs was a pessimistic one because she didn’t believe in the city anymore but I’m still optimistic about its possibilities!

AC: What does the format of the upcoming Biennale look like?

KC: The Biennale is conceived as a kind of forum in which all kinds of activities are allowed to happen, including exhibitions and various attractions related to the idea of an open city. There will also be screenings and multicultural food! In total, we will be looking at articulating six sub-themes - which we are calling ‘situations’ – that incorporate actual case studies conducted all over the globe: ‘Refuge’ is based on research undergone in the Middle East, ‘Community’ looks at America, ‘Collective’ at Russia while ‘Squat’ is based on findings in South America and ‘Reciprocity’ in Indonesia. Finally, we have the ‘Make-able Society’ or in Dutch, ‘De Maakbare Samenleving,’ here in the Netherlands.

AC: Can you tell me a little bit about the ‘Make-able Society’ and what it entails?

KC: The ‘Make-able Society’ was a naïve idea from the 1960s that failed. Back then, people in the Netherlands shared the idealistic assumption that multiculturalism was all about mixing everyone into one big happy ‘soup.’ Of course, when you are considering how the notion of co-existence actually functions in relation to social groups in large cities, the reality is that not everybody mixes. Communities generally form their own enclosed groups and establish their own respective identities and from this position, they find their own way of interacting with the city on a whole. This signals the beginnings of an innovative and creative co-existence.

AC: Looking at some of the other sub-themes you listed – was there a particular reason why you chose to focus on Indonesia?

KC: We chose Indonesia because we wanted to examine the phenomena of migration in relation to the urbanity of Asian cities which is very much based on public life in the street via informal interventions like vendor stalls etc. We also made a decision to look at Indonesia because up until now, the country has been vastly under-researched. In the past, there was been more of a tendency for academics to place emphasis on countries like Singapore, Hong Kong or China and focus on the Chinese-related aspects of Southeast Asia. In addition, Indonesia also has a historical connection to Holland which is also important to address.

AC: Can you briefly summarize the rest of the sub-themes?

KC: 'Community' looks at American urbanization and how communities are categorized according to class, race and lifestyle. In Manhattan, immigrant groups, Jewish neighborhoods or Arab neighborhoods can be thought of as archetypes of urban co-existence, on one hand. On the extreme end, the over-development of closed, gated or suburban communities is contributing to drastic segregation within the context of the urban landscape – I think the suburban dream is very counterproductive for co-existence. For me, the US is really the originator of all these differing urban forms. We wanted to call attention to the *favelas* or squatted communities in South America for 'Squat.' While such areas used to be considered illegitimate, *favelas* are now regarded as an official condition; cities are sending in sociologists, urban designers and architects to observe the situation in an effort to devise a reconciliation between the formal and the informal. With 'Collective,' we are looking at the transitioning from communist into capitalist society in Russia on the basis of collective city blocks. 'Refuge' is dealing with very extreme forms of co-existence and isolation ie. Palestinian camps situated next to rich neighborhoods and so on.

AC: Why is it particularly urgent to address these specific themes?

KC: There is an enormous urgency in the fact that we are continually confronted with cities that are becoming increasingly segregated. The city is being broken up into Lego - like pieces that eventually get connected by motorways and railways. I think that this process is affecting the communication between communities on a huge level. Spatial segregation is additionally reinforced by social segregation – I'm specifically referring to certain groups who block themselves off from the 'dangers' of society by way of various security devices. In the end, we wind up communicating more via cars and the Internet and less and less on the street and in the public realm. This poses a real threat to the life of the city and to the development of society and civilization in general so what we are attempting to do with *Open City* is to look for structures that are counteracting these trends that I'm talking about.

AC: Could you talk a bit about how the medium of design is able to effectively engage with the informal interventions that one finds in cities?

KC: Through design, we have the ability to generate formal structures that enable informal structures to settle in between them. In an area near Istanbul, we discovered that a whole village had been converted into gated communities. Conversely, there was an old part of the village which had been populated by these poor people who started small businesses like bakeries and car-repair shops. After a while, inhabitants from the gated communities stopped going to the big malls and started buying their groceries from the people who were running these independent businesses. This in turn, created a kind of complementary condition.

AC: What do you make of transcontinentality when it is treated in an exaggerated fashion? For instance, there are now Euro-style suburbs being built in China...

KC: I know – it's sick, isn't it? (*Laughs*) There are two Dutch suburbs in China which come complete with gable roofs and canals. There's also a German village. But style is really not the problem here. I'm more concerned with the urban typology. A closed suburb built to accommodate one type of family with its own community centre, school etc. equals a total lack of communication. That is the real problem.

AC: Finally, is there a set of criteria for an Open city?

KC: Yes, but it's important to acknowledge that an Open City is something which is constantly evolving over a period of time and not a pre-existing condition. According to Jacobs' book, *The Self-destruction of Diversity*, the condition of the Open city involves a dynamic balance which fluctuates from good to bad and vice versa. As for physical criteria, I would imagine a city with a good street network, buildings with different typologies, urban infrastructures that allow for smooth transitions between public and private life, the positioning of an area in relation to the city centre or other parts of town etc. But keep in mind that structural overlays cannot produce an Open City without a society being receptive to the notion of co-existence in the first place.

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