

>> Hidden Places, Hidden Powers

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A contained urban

All social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially 'inscribed' – that is, concretely represented – in the social production of social space. Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing 'in' space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. There is no unspatialized social reality. There are no aspatial social processes. Even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension.¹

This paper looks at the idea of an emergent 'placeness' in our contemporary cities. Moving beyond modern urban design thinking, it takes up Henri Lefebvre's theoretical notion of *espace vécu* (lived space), to try to point to a relational understanding of urban place. It looks further towards an alternative design approach in Urbanism, affirmative of difference. An approach that focuses firstly on *inscribing* the urban with signs to be read, interpreted and appropriated by urban populations, and secondly on the designing of *affects* in the urban. Seeing the city as an urban field, an effect of flows and forces, it tries to find a way to a *sensible* urban form.

Modern thought held certain misconceptions concerning the designing of our urban life-worlds. It strived to create utopic worlds which held their inhabitants in the vise of an 'end of history', and was blind to the effects that advanced technologies would have on putting these contained urban realities under an unmanageable stress. In addition, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty said as early as 1945, modernist thinking has been "blind to the mode of existence and co-existence of perceived objects, to the life which steals across the visual field and secretly binds its parts together."² The ideal, yet naïve departure point of an object-based epistemology produced an urban composition and artifacts that have failed to accommodate the intensely complex urban dynamics emergent in contemporary transformation processes. Our contemporary metropolis overflows with the fragmented offspring of a modernist urban design ideology.

But the role of modern Urbanism in itself constructing the present problematic is complex, particularly when it is seen that the discipline appears schizophrenic. Urbanism works primarily through two fields; an *urban design* discipline, an extension perhaps of the architectural praxis, understands the urban aesthetically and functionally; and *urban planning*, a universalizing and regularizing ideology of control and containment that struggles to contain both the residual side-effects of its own intentions, and the effects of a technologically driven globalization. The intensification of this process of globalization has today magnified these side-effects, generating an all-encompassing reality that has engulfed, and generated unprecedented stresses on, human life-worlds and the economic, political, environmental and societal structures and beliefs that we inherited from previous urban and social realities. The truth

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of the matter is that our present day urban reality comprises a communicative tissue that has been astonishingly transformed by global mobilizations and migrations of humans and materials and information.

Modernism engaged with the urban in the belief that it could generate structures and activities that reflected its predetermined intentions. This belief may have been sustainable in geographically and functionally contained situations, but when the village became global, the effects of what was 'residual' to planning intent – the 'excess' it itself generated – became a global concern. Witnessing the realities that have emerged out of this new condition, we are surprised, but all too often revert to old habits to deal with new problems. Was it not Albert Einstein who as early as 1916 pointed out that for a foundation for any theory or relativity that "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." The urban problematic of today consists not only in the physical manifestation of these global processes, but also in how in fact the problem is perceived. Using modernistic understandings to deal with a post-modern (Bruno Latour would say non-modern) reality is in effect part of our 'blindness' when dealing with the urban. We persist in using modern instruments and thinking to understand a new condition; we struggle still to find answers to the emergent realities of a 'man made' city.³ And what do we know of the space of the city? We can extensively elaborate on its physical characteristics, but what of its virtual implications? How does the *relata* of the city manifest itself? What social affects does it produce, and what are its physical and psychological products. I propose that it has been the limited perspective that Urbanism has had on the notion of *space* that enabled space to be eluded in the multiplicity of forces that overlay (and underlay) the *realized* material fabric and mediate our *actual* urban life-worlds.

An 'other' urban

During the era of modernity the feasibility, the *reality*, of a reality beyond the visually perceived – beyond an object-based reality – had completely escaped urban praxis. Driven by an insatiable capitalist machine, urban praxis relentlessly fabricated a surface urban scenery that established the setting for a disciplined and commoditized society. Yet, a disparity, a gap in understanding, was noted by numerous scholars throughout the 20th Century with regard to notions of space, time and place in the urban condition. One particular forewarning came in 1970 from Henri Lefebvre in his *La Révolution urbaine*.⁴ In this book (translated into English 30 years later) Lefebvre criticized the Parisian Project that had begun 10 years earlier, aimed at creating the first European metropolis.⁵ He revealed the growing contradictions within Urbanism generating what he referred to as an *urban* phenomenon, and suggested that urban praxis took place in what he called a 'black box', where urbanists "know what goes in, are amazed at what comes out, but have no idea what takes place inside."⁶ Disconnected from this reality by their preconceptions, urban practitioners operated within 'blind fields' which manifested themselves in both their *reading* and *writing* of the urban. Perhaps the consequences of this misconception is best illustrated as we bare witness to the actual urban revolution that emerged in the Paris Banlieus in November 2005; the urban residuals enact their discontent giving Lefebvre's book a prophetic character.

Lefebvre illustrated the process of urbanization in a time-line 'axis of urbanization' wherein the key transformation processes are depicted. Starting from the complete absence of urbanization (pure nature) up to the current phase, he elaborates four major shifts in the urban: first, the 'Political' city of priests, warriors and princes; second, the 'Mercantile' city of the 14th Century in which "commercial exchange became an urban *function*, which was embodied in a *form* (or forms, both architectural and urban) [which] gave urban space a new *structure*"⁷; third, the 'Industrial' city where industry, an operation that could locate itself anywhere, soon started to make

its way into existing cities or even created new cities; and on now to the 'Critical Zone' of the contemporary city. The process that *technological globality* initiated, namely the facilitating of unprecedented global migration and communication, intensified and complexified the traditional urban framework, in Lefebvre's analysis, to the current moment of 'implosion-explosion'.

Urban reality, simultaneously amplified and exploded, thus loses the features it inherited from the previous period: organic totality, belonging, an uplifting image, a sense of space that was measured and dominated by monumental splendor. It was populated with signs of the urban within the dissolution of urbanity; it became stipulative, repressive, marked by signals, summary codes for circulation (routes) and signage. It was sometimes read as a rough draft, sometimes an authoritarian message. It was imperious. But none of these descriptive terms completely describes the historical process of implosion-explosion (a metaphor borrowed from nuclear physics) that occurred: the tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space. This growth extends from simple barter to global market, from the simple exchange between two individuals all the way to the exchange of products, works of art, ideas, and human beings.... During this period of generalization, the effect of the process – namely the urban reality – becomes both cause and reason... the urban problematic becomes a global phenomenon.⁸

Four years later Lefebvre published his most original publication entitled *The Production of Space* in which he set the foundation for a novel way of understanding the built environment (translated into English in 1991).⁹ Initially portrayed as a 'social utopian' by many of his peers, even his own student, Manuel Castells and later David Harvey had their objections to his assessment. Shortly after *La Revolution urbaine*, Castells responded with his own book *La Question urbaine* in 1972 (translated into English only 5 years later),¹⁰ in which he raises three fundamental objections. Neil Smith in the introduction to the first English edition of *La Revolution urbaine (The Urban Revolution)*¹¹ carefully points out how at first Castells saw in Lefebvre a certain romanticism since for Lefebvre "urban propinquity created a unique quotidian environment available for future reconstructions of sociability and desire." Castells, Smith states, found that a "philosophical utopianism" underpinned Lefebvre's scheme. Secondly Castells challenged whether "the 'urban' represented any kind of coherent scientific object available for study" (this was a statement that he toned down in later years), and thirdly, Castells objected to that fact that Lefebvre displaced Marxist analyses of history, politics, and economy within the urban revolution. "Castells complained that Lefebvre moves from a Marxist analysis of the urban to an urbanist analysis of Marxism."¹²

David Harvey however, who acknowledged the importance of Lefebvre's work for his own, reflected in 1973 on Lefebvre in the conclusion to *Social Justice and the City*.¹³ He could not agree that the opposition between urbanism and the industrial capitalist machine were resolved in favor of the urban. While Castells attacked Lefebvre through a "structuralist critique fashioned over a blueprint of Marxism, Harvey came at Lefebvre with a political economic critique of the sort that typified Anglo-American Marxism after the 1960's."¹⁴ Harvey maintains that it is in fact industrial capitalism which continues to create the conditions for urbanization, rather than vice versa. As Smith states, "the surplus value produced by capital accumulation, and especially its mode of circulation, is the raw material out of which urban change crystallizes. Urbanization here is the excrescence of the circulation of capital."¹⁵ In other words, urbanization and urbanity are the products of the 'capital machine', as opposed to the 'urban machine' being the producer of its own attributes in a non-foundational dynamic of self-generation.

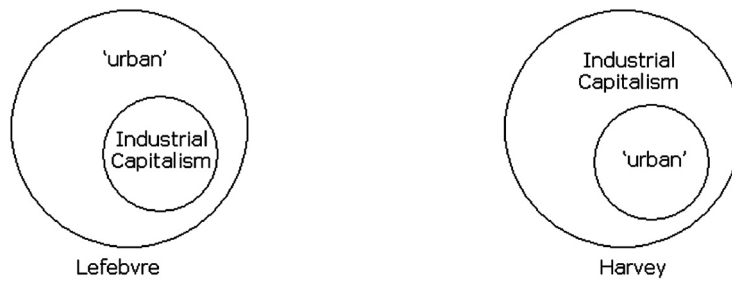


Diagram illustrating the opposed 'position' Lefebvre and Harvey took concerning the correlation between industrial capitalism and the urban condition.

Returning to *The Production of Space*, we see how Lefebvre introduces the notions of a *perceived*, *conceived* and *lived* space. Striving to bring light to 'blind fields', he lays out a straightforward division of urban space from which architects and urban designers – whose discipline is conducted in the *conceived* realm – can broaden their spatial horizon, and begin to understand both the limitations inherent in *perceived* realities (bordered, standardized, finite), and the infinite possibilities to be found in the *lived* realities of everyday urbanisms. Capitalizing on the concept of a *lived* reality, urban practitioners can equip themselves with a deeper understanding, working with a new layer of information while *informing* or *designing* the urban.

In his book *Thirdspace*,¹⁶ Edward Soja, re-introduces the lived space notion and sets the ground for his sequel, *Postmetropolis*.¹⁷ Dealing with the almost surreal effects witnessed during the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, he advances from his reading of Lefebvre in *Thirdspace* by raising the necessity of an advanced awareness of the *spatialities* of our politics. He writes: "... the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance that it is today. Whether we are attempting to deal with the increasing ways to act politically to deal with the growing problems of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation; or trying to understand the multiplying geopolitical conflicts around the globe.... Perhaps more than ever before, a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality and its social consequences has become a vital part of making both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary life-worlds at all scales, from the most intimate to the most global."¹⁸

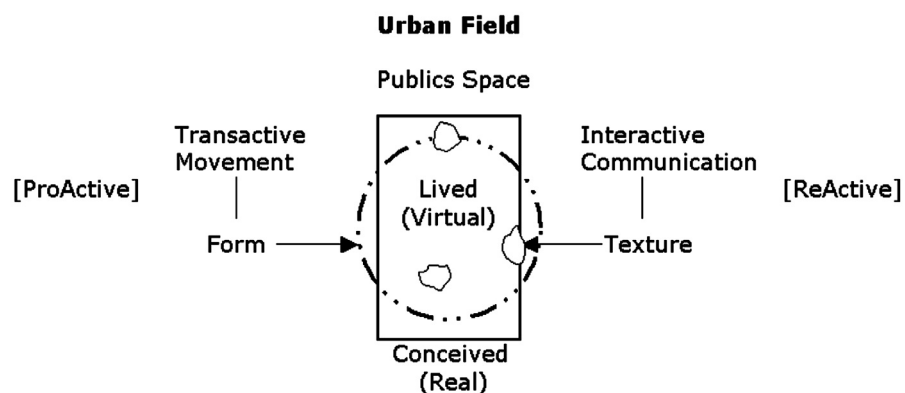
The limitations inherent in 'modernist' planning and policing had become more and more apparent with the outbreak of the riots, and Soja was calling for a whole rethink of the urban planning and design strategies that had been steering the Los Angeles megalopolis. The 'Hammer and the Rock' approach to urban policing¹⁹ as described by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz*²⁰ had reached its height (or nadir) as the 'spacewatchers' of LA found themselves at the mercy of a true urban revolution!²¹ The proposition that the urban populace can be contained and managed like human 'resources' proved not only to be naïve, but gravely misconceived.

Edward Soja calls for a reconfiguring of what constitutes our 'being' in an urban world, with the addition of a *spatial* realm of concern, to compliment the social and historical realms that are employed in current urban analysis. He sees the three realms interweaving and informing one another as they together represent and constitute our being. Soja calls for "... the deconstruction and strategic reconstitution of conventional modernist epistemologies – in other words, the radical restructuring of long-established modes of knowledge formation, of how we assure that the knowledge we obtain of the world can be confidently presumed to be accurate and useful."²²

He then proceeds to argue and illustrate the necessity to reconfigure our understanding of space with a second 'trigram' of concern. Our understanding of space has thus far, according to him, and borrowing from Lefebvre, been created primarily by our *perception* of space, and a *conception* of space (space as conceived in our urban praxis). It is without a concept of *lived* space. The necessity to include an awareness of *actualized* spatialities in our urban understanding and praxis is vital, Soja argues, to our struggle to create sustainable and equitable urban environments. This 'thirdspace' serves as a guideline to help us obtain practical knowledge of our 'existential spatiality', Soja explains how it helps us break away from our two former epistemologies, our two distinctive modes of producing urban knowledge, in order to offer a third alternative: an 'other' way of making practical sense of the spatiality of our life.

An urban becoming

We are operating at a moment in time where an emergent urban reality, intensely produced and animated by new space-times of movement and communication, have exponentially complexified and reconfigured the urban field. An urban praxis that tries to engage in the city without an attuned sensibility to this urban reality quickly becomes ineffectual. The city, in this new account, must be understood as process *and* product. Layers of processes, with both intrinsic and extrinsic relationships, produce inter-related and co-produced hybrid products that no binary epistemology will ever be able to fully grasp. To visualize the urban as a field and as a 'becoming' allows for the development of an understanding and eventually for intervention in the contemporary city.



An 'urban field' diagram illustrates the relation between a conceived and lived urban. While a conceived reality is *formed* by the spatial practitioners, a virtual reality is lived out in our everyday generating an urban *formation* through engagement. The emergent form of the city is thus generated through our *every day* movements, while the texture, or *placeness* in the city, is generated through our *everyday* appropriations.

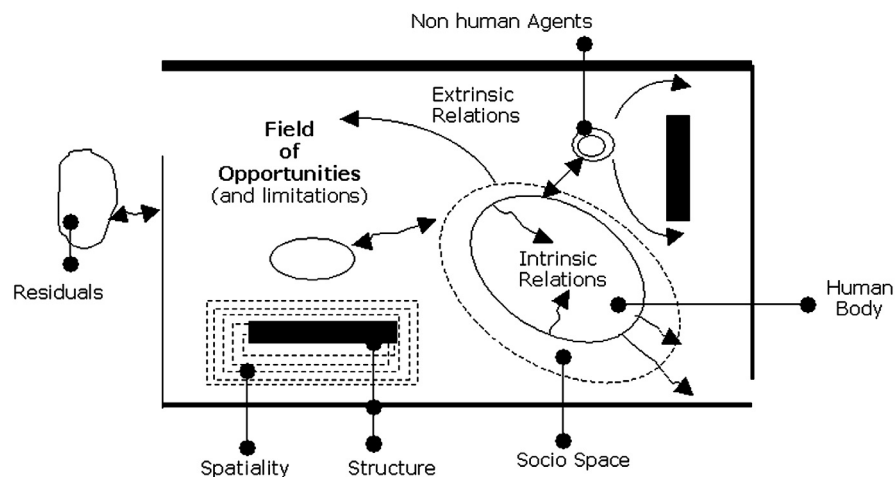
The vectors and flows of movement and communication are steered by (mostly) hidden socio-spatial and socio-*technical* (*infra*)structures which in turn generate 'hidden' places. *Placeness* in this perspective, is thus not inserted by way of program or defined by conceived borders *made* perceived in a closed and dependant system, but is ephemeral, mutable, open; a temporal, fluid and dynamic actualization generated by an extensive inter-active flux. As such, the actual *form* of the city is not the configuration of buildings and infrastructure, but is generated by relations and communications *in the midst* of the urban, converging to generate transient crystallizations of placeness. Our movements as human agents, as well as the movements of images, goods, information, finance, ideas, constitute the true *texture* and weave of the city. Form is not the materialization of the urban fabric, nor is it generated

by the overlaid program inserted to activate the city; it emerges by way of our co-engagements within the city through the appropriation and performance of space (and technological infrastructures) through relations. These performed relations between subjects and objects constitute the substance and matter of city—the urban *materia*—and the interplay of human and non-human agents in the city produce the urban reality of the contemporary metropolis. The enabling or disabling *surface* or *structure* in which this complex operation takes place lies in the hands of the urban practitioners; political, economical, social and spatial.

A 'new' urbanism

In his paper “Deleuze and the Open-ended Becoming of the World”, Manuel De Landa explains how Deleuze’s neorealist approach involves a “theory of genesis of form that does away with essences, as well as a theory of epistemology that does not rely on a view of truth as a faithful reflection of a static world of beings.” He searches for a connection between human knowledge and the open-ended evolution of the world, and elaborates how the latter depends on “divergent actualizations, combinatorial productivity, and the synthesis of novel structures out of heterogeneous components.” He proposes that these define the essentially problematic structure of the world, and that “truth cannot be a correspondence relation between representations and a static, fixed set of beings, but an open-ended relation of isomorphism between problems as actualized in reality and problems as actualized in our bodies and minds.”²³

He points out how, “unlike social constructivism, which achieves openness by making the world depend on human interpretation, Deleuze achieves it by making the world into a creative, complexifying and problematizing cauldron of becoming.” Drawing our attention to the fact that the world has been enriched by a multiplicity of human *and* non-human agencies. De Landa goes on: “in contrast with other realist or materialist philosophies of the past, the key non-human agency in Deleuzian philosophy has nothing to do with the negative, with oppositions and contradictions, but with productive, positive difference. It is ultimately this positive difference, and its affirmation in thought, that insures the openness of the world.”



(Spatial) Relations Diagram

A 'spatial relations' diagram illustrates how an open-ended structure can organise a multiplicity of set actions and limitations, while facilitating and generating opportunities between agents and agencies.

So what to do in a world, in itself open, but governed and spatialized by ‘ministers of knowledge’ who try to create closed systems of control *totalizing* a partial understanding? We have constructed a machine devoted to the endless capitalization of the world and, as Foucault illustrated with the Panopticon, toward the regulation and standardization of thought and action. We attempt to secure complete commoditization through a space that serves, and is fully dependant on a logic of global domination. The unknown, the uncertain, change and difference are deviant concepts to our ‘ministers’ – and our own ways of living, and livelihoods are condemned to exist in a society of fear, maintained in control through a paralysis of thought and action.

What role can Urbanism play in this seemingly pessimistic worldview? If we understand that the urban entails more than the planned or manifested fabric, the urban disciplines may engage what one could refer to as the urban *membrane*; an interface which synthesizes the three layers of reality our becoming unfolds: the spatial, the social and the realms of time – speed and the historical. Within what (in a highly vectorized and regulated global space) is still a highly contingent reality of the dynamic urban field, we may also *generate* and accommodate and even embrace uncertainty and hybrid becomings. Problems can become potentials if we *allow* ourselves to perceive the city as a field of *opportunities* for accommodating and facilitating this open interface of differences. Positing open urban structures delivering open-ended outcomes is a starting point for delivering a truly ‘new’ urbanism.

An urban spatial politics passes from the Agora through various structures or forms of community facilitated by urban relational dynamics through urban history – to the point where we stand today. And today we will have to learn to embrace a geopolitics of space, an understanding of the way global issues become manifest and negotiated and fought out *in* local place – through the way place in fact can begin to be understood as a ‘wholeness’, a situated assembly or ‘society’,²⁴ gathered to that place through layers of relational actor-networks. We will need to learn how to both analyze and synthesize *appropriateable* global-local urban realities, and learn – as we see groups like Stalker in Rome and Stefano Boeri and Multiplicity in USE,²⁵ and many others around the world doing – to *perform* a politics of contemporary space. Perceiving the city as an open, generative and self-differentiating *urban body* in its own right may aid us in understanding the *organization* opening up its productivities.

If knowledge is power, then the more we know of these things, the more we can do; the more we can facilitate *trans*-formations in contemporary formational processes integrating real, virtual and digital *productivities* in our urban praxis.

- 1 Edward W. Soja (1997), *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Blackwell Publishers, pg 46
- 2 Maurice Mearleau-Ponty (2004), *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, pg 40
- 3 Aldo Rossi used these words to describe the city in *Architettura della Città* in 1966 as did Alfonso Vegara, President of ISoCaRP (International Society of City and Regional Planners) in his opening speech for the IsoCaRP conference on “Spaces for the Creative Economy” held in Bilbao, Spain in 2005. After 40 years, we still perceive the city and all its emergent properties as being ‘man made’! The architect and the urbanist may claim responsibility for the organization and artifacts that *realize* the city, but they are only indirectly responsible for the human and extra-human ‘life forms’ that are *actualized* in the urban.
- 4 Henri Lefebvre (2003), *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. (Originally published as *Le Révolution urbaine*, Editions Gallimard, 1970)
- 5 See *40 ans en Ile-de-France: Rétrospective 1960 – 2000*, a research carried out by the IAURIF in 2001 in which a retrospective of the Parisian Project as an ideology is elaborated by denoting the planning and design decisions made during a 40 year span.
- 6 *The Urban Revolution*, pgs 27-28
- 7 *The Urban Revolution*, pg 10
- 8 *The Urban Revolution*, pg 14
- 9 Henri Lefebvre (2001), *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell Publishers (Originally published as *La production de l’espace*, Editions Anthropos 1974)
- 10 Manuel Castells (1979), *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, The MIT Press. (Originally published as *La Revolution urbaine*, F. Maspero, 1977)
- 11 *The Urban Revolution*, Foreword
- 12 *The Urban Revolution*, Foreword
- 13 David Harvey (1973), *Social Justice and the City*, The John Hopkins University Press
- 14 *The Urban Revolution*, Foreword
- 15 Idem
- 16 See *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*
- 17 Edward W. Soja (2000), *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Blackwell Publishers
- 18 *Thirdspace*, pg 1
- 19 The ‘Hammer and Rock’ refers to the strategy introduced by Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates. ‘Operation HAMMER’ initiated in 1988 over a ten square mile area of Southcentral Los Angeles was intended to annihilate the ‘rock’ (crack) trade. The operation entailed the arresting of more Black youth than at any time since the Watts Rebellion of 1965. See also the *Ecology of Fear* also by Mike Davis (1998), *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Metropolitan Books
- 20 Mike Davis (1990) *City of Quarts: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Verso
- 21 Mike Davis reflects how when interviewing a Mexican farmer who refused to live too close to Los Angeles, regardless of the financial prospects, he was told that Los Angeles was perceived to be a volcano, and was told that, “One should never live too close to a volcano!”
- 22 *Thirdspace*, pg. 3
- 23 Manuel De Landa (1998) *Deleuze and the Open-Ended Becoming of the World*, Essay presented at University of Bielefeld, Germany
- 24 Bruno Latour (2005), *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford University Press Latour, B., *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005)
- 25 See Uncertain States of Europe project by Stefano Boeri and Multiplicity published in *Mutations*, Rem Koolhaas R., et al (2001) Actar