

*Forewords: This essay is the draft of a brief proposal for my bachelor thesis, whose word count will be 5000 - 7500. I'm still preparing for my thesis, which will be submitted by next summer. I can't present the full text for the application of the conference. This is what I've come up with so far.*

## Unlearning the LA school's model: The Randstad as a Mutation of Californian Postmodernity

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This essay is not going to address a particular urban problem such as energy or mobility. Instead, it aims to provide a new model or perspective as an alternative to the existing LA school's. However, I'm not going to arbitrarily determine a specific model. Instead, I wish to inspire reflections and criticism over the Randstad as a metropolitan ethos.

The LA school emerged at the end of the last century, challenging the concentric circle model proposed by the Chicago school. The Chicago school could be understood as the modernist in the realm of urban planning, while the LA school the postmodernists. The LA school criticized the concept of CBD by the Chicago school, providing a more diversified typology of urban spaces, such as exopolis, dual city, hybrid city, ect. (Dear, 2002). The LA school exposed the messy, dystopian post-capitalist scene of Los Angeles and its surrounding areas in Southern California. LA as an urban phenomenon seldom fails to touch the antennas of the Europeans, especially in the Netherlands that is famous for its 'sustainable, comfortable planning.' Rather, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas had felt different long before: 'I have had the feeling that the major Dutch cities (with Amsterdam in the lead) deny out of sentimental considerations the fact that they are part of a larger whole (an area as large and diffuse as Los Angeles) and as such completely ignore a dimension of an entirely different order from the one which they traditionally know.' (Rem Koolhaas, in *Amsterdam: An Architectural Lesson*, 1988: 112). The dwellers of the low land haven't been aware that they are living in the mirage that mutated from the Californian postmodernity.

First, the Randstad demonstrated a mutated geographic structure of LA. Edward Soja pointed out that Amsterdam could not be seen solitarily. Instead, it should be analyzed in the context of its surroundings, which sprawls into an area as large as LA. This idea originally came from Koolhaas, who stated in his chapter *Unlearning Holland* from his book *S, M, L, XL* that the Randstad forms a centrifugal, decentralized structure, with the four major cities on the periphery and the nature, known as the 'Green Heart', in the center. Periphery development is an important characteristic of LA school's urban structure. With the relentless sprawl and capitalization, areas like Santa Monica formed a space heterogenous to the center - ironically, the actual center could not be identified, which, intuitionistically, does not exist. The Randstad demonstrates a more extreme scene of peripheral development. The spaces at the peripheries has developed into several of the biggest metropolises in Europe. However, hindered by the border, the sea, and the Sierra Nevada, LA can't continue its geographical sprawl anymore (in a

globalist sense it does). While the Randstad leaves its shadow on the south of the country, leaving the north with barrenness. This is what Koolhaas called the 'southern cities' and the 'point cities.' The Randstad gathers the point cities as flourishing anomalies, while the south gathers the southern cities, which are incorporated to a larger economic agglomeration around the Rhine valley.

Like Los Angeles, the Randstad has produced the 'interdictory spaces' as well. As migration increases, the racial tension gradually arises in the metropolises. Meanwhile, inequality and housing crisis have also excluded some people from the most basic need: living. In 1992, squatting was still legal and IDs were even not enforced. The absence of ID enforcement enabled more people to access the city, such as taking a free ride of public transportation. However, as the metropolises are more gentrified, privatized, and commercialized, the rights to city are threatened to be deprived again. Squatting is made illegal, while the ticket price of NS is among the highest in western Europe. In addition, the welfare system seems not to outplay the capitalistic approach. Koolhaas ironically described Bijlmer as the Las Vegas of welfare. The government provided all the remedies to the migrant-hub in a short time, resulting in an aesthetically undesirable place somewhat similar to Soja's 'Plain of ID,' a space without identity, a space with extreme homogeneity. Although everything's here, everything seemed to remain unsolved.

While discussing the characteristics of the LA urban structure, Michael Dear also proposed three other terms, globalization, post-Fordist regime of accumulation, and politics of nature. The post-Fordist regime refers to the small-scale production incorporated into the economic cluster. In LA, it was mainly labor-intensive manufacturing and high-tech corporations. There are a considerable number of tech companies in the Netherlands as well. Nevertheless, being the global businessman for centuries, the Netherlands gathers a lot of companies for business, finance, outsourcing, consulting, ect. A lot of alumni of my college went to those firms and they jokingly refer to their work as 'vagueness and nonsense.' As you drive along the A4 highway, from the periphery to the heart of the Randstad, you could see such corporations spreading over the land, just like the factories outside LA. Here, globalization and post-Fordist regime of accumulation are intertwined. People from everywhere gather in the Dutch suburbs, working for clients all over the world remotely. Dear also mentioned social control when it comes to the post-Fordist regime of accumulation. In Dutch metropolises, certain communities are founded on a big company, with which the dwellers bargain for services. The corporate culture, which secures employment, together with the gentrification as mentioned before, leads to a tender surrender. Koolhaas would love to categorize the Randstad as *generic cities* as well, where urbanism moves toward 'tropicality'. The confusing term, in my opinion, was elaborated later in the same chapter: the reality that it's always climatically 'sunny' in generic cities, the only cloud being people's anxiety. The Netherlands is notorious for its weather conditions, while it is common to see relentless parties along the streets after work in a murky, depressing day. Yet the anxiety due to increasing working hours and other factors is always left behind and overlooked.

The politics of nature can't be any real here. Just a year ago, angry farmers invaded the urban Randstad on tractors. Different from the air pollution in LA, the nitrogen crisis is not merely an ecological problem anymore. It entails a more complex problem of equity and responsibility -

not so simple as justice vs. injustice, ecology vs. production, or left vs. right. The left struggled in finding a balance between the environment and the less privileged farmers (well, some could be agricultural firms.), leaving opportunities for the populist BBB. Meanwhile, 'human-engineered' nature has always been a controversy on nature in the Netherlands. If the human-engineered nature could not be counted as nature, the 'Green Heart' might degrade into the 'sites' (mentioned by Koolhaas on generic cities) without all three aesthetic elements: building, road, and nature.

To argue that the Randstad is a mutation of the Californian postmodern space, I could list much more aspects by referring to the works of other LA-school scholars. It is not practical for me to depict the entire picture of the mutation in a short time, and it remains controversial whether the mutation is valid. I genuinely welcome thought-provoking discussions, where we can discover other paradigms for the messy Randstad.

*So here's my suggestion for the workshop*

Workshop: a Think Tank to frame the Randstad

1. Sharing your experience in the Randstad if you've ever lived/been to
2. Reading Michael Dear's paper *Los Angeles and the Chicago School: Invitation to a Debate*
3. Rethinking your experience after the reading.
4. Preparing a short presentation around 5 mins for the three questions: a) Do you think my argument is valid? Motivate your answers. b) What else model/paradigm could you come up with for Randstad? c) Will the Randstad be the next LA for academic research: a prototype, a hub, and a landmark in the history of urban planning?
5. Presentation, Q&A session

#### References

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