

LITERATURE,
URBANISM,
AND THE
VISUAL ARTS,
1890-1940

CHRISTOPH
LINDNER



IMAGINING

NEW YORK CITY

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This book is dedicated to Becky, Joseph, and Hannah for our time together in Brooklyn.

Christoph Lindner
Berkeley, 2014

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Imagining New York City

{ INTRODUCTION }

The Mutable City

A hundred times I have thought: New York is a catastrophe, and fifty times: it is a beautiful catastrophe.

—Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*¹

The Metropolis is an addictive machine from which there is no escape.

—Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*²

Archive City

This book is the result of another book that was never written. Some years ago, I spent a sabbatical researching in the urban-related archives of the New-York Historical Society and New York Public Library as part of a planned book titled *Urban Narrative from Dickens to Film Noir*. By the time I emerged from the archives at the end of the research stay, however, my interests had shifted radically and irrevocably to focus on New York City—on its interrelating histories, spaces, practices, and lived experiences. The book initially conceived as *Urban Narrative from Dickens to Film Noir* had turned into *Imagining New York City*.

What happened inside the archives was, of course, something people have been experiencing for centuries in their everyday encounters with the city. As a place, but also as an idea, New York City had hijacked my imagination. This study is both an expression of and an investigation into that process as it has occurred in critical thinking about urban phenomena, as well as in cultural production and creative practice concerned with New York. So although its genesis resides in an immersive, seductive encounter with the city's archival memory of itself, the project completed here is much wider in

scope and seeks to intervene in broader, ongoing discussions about how and why we study New York City, particularly in relation to literature, urbanism, and the visual arts.

Changing New York

In this respect, *Imagining New York City* belongs to an extended critical tradition of outsider writing about the city. This claim is not meant apologetically. Rather, I wish to acknowledge here the way in which commentators frequently construct subject positions in relation to New York along insider/outsider lines, even if the city itself frequently blurs and complicates such distinctions. Indeed, New York changes so constantly—so relentlessly—that even insiders frequently find themselves in outsider positions, as the novelist Henry James famously discovered in the early 1900s when returning home to New York after traveling in Europe only to find himself a disoriented stranger in a once-familiar city undergoing rapid architectural transformation.³ For entirely different reasons related to ethnicity and socioeconomic inequality rather than architecture and urban design, many ethnic minority writers similarly portray New York as a place that can make its inhabitants experience profound and paradoxical feelings of unbelonging, such as in Ralph Ellison's parable of black nationalism in *Invisible Man* (1952) or Piri Thomas's gangster memoir of Spanish Harlem in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967).⁴ Given the city's origins as a European colonial outpost, it can even be claimed that New York has always been framed to some degree by outsider views.

Within the existing body of outsider writing about New York one particular critical text is important to cite here, partly because of what it has contributed to our understanding of the city, but mostly because of its background influence on this book. Although not discussed at length in the following sections, *Delirious New York*, by Dutch architect and urbanist Rem Koolhaas, is an essential reference point. First published in 1978 at a time of crisis and introspection in American urbanism when the city itself was struggling to reverse its slide into urban decay, *Delirious New York* offers a playful, upbeat counterpoint to the gloomy vision of the postindustrial city as a broken space of garbage and crime, which, as Stanley Corkin has

written about in relation to urban cinema, dominates popular representations of New York in the long 1970s.⁵ Rather than being drained, fatigued, or nauseated by New York, Koolhaas derives energy, pleasure, and creativity from the city, including from its provocations, contradictions, and excesses.

Billed as a “retroactive manifesto” for Manhattan, *Delirious New York* revisits the city’s modernist experiment in architecture and planning, which Koolhaas sees as inaugurating an entire “culture of congestion,” and which he reads as an extension of the ludic transgressions that produce spectacular spaces of amusement and diversion like Coney Island.⁶ For Koolhaas, New York is thus a delirious playground, the dreamlike product of a collective hallucination:

Not only are large parts of its surface occupied by architectural mutations (Central Park, the Skyscraper), utopian fragments (Rockefeller, UN Building) and irrational phenomena (Radio City Music Hall), but in addition each block is covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past occurrences, aborted projects and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the New York that exists.

Especially between 1890 and 1940 a new culture (the Machine Age?) selected Manhattan as a laboratory: a mythical island where the invention and testing of a metropolitan lifestyle and its attendant architecture could be pursued as a collective experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist.⁷

Koolhaas understands New York in terms that recognize—even embrace—the messy, chaotic, blurry, overlapping, derealized conditions of being that prevail in his experience of the city, seeing its spaces and structures as something resembling an urban palimpsest—that is, as Andreas Huyssen defines the concept in *Present Pasts*, “lived spaces that shape collective imaginaries” and that can be “read historically, intertextually, constructively, and deconstructively” and are “at the same time woven into our understanding of urban spaces.”⁸ This book shares this palimpsestic sensibility toward New York City and, in particular, the openness of such an approach to the city’s jumbling of memory, space, and meaning and the multiple, shifting valences of these layerings.

Also significant is Koolhaas’s argument in *Delirious New York* that that the period between 1890 and 1940 corresponds to a transformative moment in the cultural history and architectural development of

the city. As I will discuss at length, this period marks the distinctive and dynamic moment when “Old New York” was dramatically transformed into an iconic modern metropolis. Working loosely within the historical bracket of 1890 and 1940, I focus on precisely this transformative moment, and do so in order to examine the place and significance of the modern city in the urban imaginary.

Modern City, Urban Imaginary

It is therefore important to articulate what I mean by the terms “modern” and “urban imaginary.” By “modern” I specifically refer to the city produced during the modernist moment in art and urbanism, and under the capitalist condition of urban modernity, which so profoundly shaped aesthetic sensibilities from the 1890s through the first half of the twentieth century. It is a period in New York’s cultural history in which, as William Scott and Peter Rutkoff suggest in *New York Modern*, the city and the arts developed a particularly intimate bond:

Frequently expressed abstractly and at times radically so, the subject of New York Modern remained urban life, in all its elusive complexity and variety.

In the modern arts... New York artists reflected, analyzed, and helped to construct their city. The locales and details of New York, with its bustling economy, diverse peoples, and incipient egalitarianism, offered a vast array of subjects, which its artists depicted from a variety of perspectives—narrative and expressionist, factual and mythical, rhythmical and dissonant, formal and improvisational. Across styles and mediums, New York artists addressed modern urban life. They listened and responded to the cacophony of voices that echoed through the city’s bars and cafés, tenements and town houses, and skyscrapers and docks. They deemed New York the quintessential modern city, a microcosm of the contemporary world.⁹

In developing the concept of “New York Modern” Scott and Rutkoff have in mind a longer historical span than the term might first appear to suggest, and are referring to what they see as a continuous—if eclectic and diverse—artistic culture stretching from the late 1880s to