

# Does Size Matter?

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Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

—Sir Francis Bacon<sup>1</sup>

Published twenty years after the founding of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), *S,M,L,XL* contains fewer than twenty built projects in the almost 1,350-page text. “Essays, manifestoes, diaries, fairy tales, travelogues, and a cycle of meditations on the contemporary city” surround images of built work. A few essays stand out—the Generic City, the Typical Plan, Theory of Bigness, and the Vierendeel Concept—but much of the text seems to be more personal musing than description, explanation, theory, or criticism. My first thought was that the book would be remembered as much for its sheer size as for the moxie that it took to produce. *S,M,L,XL* was published at a moment when it was not typical to have a Web site, or a blog, or Instagram, or Snapchat; we were not all LinkedIn to our Facebook friends, nor were we posting random thoughts in 140 characters, or images of what we were about to eat. The space of the Internet does not force us to edit our expression. The format and much of the content of this book seems to prefigure how we collect and display our lives, twenty years on. More is indeed more.

I bought *S,M,L,XL* a few years after it was first published. At that time, I was still in school and the price was more “XL” than “S.” Once I did buy it, I wasn’t exactly sure how to read it. In fact, the design—that

very important graphic design by Bruce Mau—works against a traditional reading. It is too big to comfortably hold; the discontinuous and multiformatted text makes a linear reading not possible; the organization (by scale, not chapter) brings together various projects and writings that produce, at best, happy accidents and, at worst, confusion. I tried to figure out the relationship between the running dictionary and the content of the book but could (and have) not. And I still don’t understand the inclusion of random pornography. In short, I felt like I wasn’t in on the joke, or even the punch line.

I do know how to read *Delirious New York*. In that text, Koolhaas studied something—New York—and made observations, interpretations, and even fictional conclusions that were as playful as they were critical. Koolhaas described it as a “retroactive manifesto” for New York, and in doing so, he understood the city as a Rosetta Stone, awaiting translation. It is this engagement with something outside of himself that, I believe, is why reading *Delirious New York* was, and is, so appealing. I saw New York differently after reading the text. Koolhaas is a very good student of architecture. He has stated clearly and often the importance of Leonidov to his work. The influence of Superstudio—in terms of both representation and program—is clear as early as his thesis project. Koolhaas’s study of the Barcelona Pavilion for the 1986 Milan Triennale certainly influences a number of villas and at least one bus station in Groningen. While Leon Krier was collaging bits of antiquity, OMA was mining the work of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, sometimes literally (the “chromium plated

column” in the aforementioned bus stop, the ribbon windows at the Villa dall’Ava) and in other instances much more as an act of translation at the building and urban scale. And this has continued in work since *S,M,L,XL*. Maison à Bordeaux, for example, bears more than a programmatic resemblance to Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye. Both driveways are determined by a car’s turning radius; at the core of each is an architectural promenade that cuts through the section (as a ramp or elevator); both float above the landscape—one on pilotis and the other hung from above; the coloring of surfaces is important to both, as is the relationship between interior and exterior; and the framing of views all seems more intentional than coincidental.

While there is not enough space in this current format for a more detailed exploration of this book, I would propose that the value of the work presented in *S,M,L,XL* is not in the novelty of design. Rather, it is the translation of existing architectural work and discourse that may warrant a closer reading. As evidenced by the content of the book itself, twenty years is not a lot of time in the life of an architectural office. It is difficult to predict the legacy of a text only twenty years after it was published, and I am not in a position to argue for its relevance. That said, OMA has continued to produce big books and a lot of architecture in the last twenty years. Only time will tell how this work will be tasted, chewed, swallowed, and digested.

## Note

1. Sir Francis Bacon, “Of Studies,” in *Francis Bacon: The Essays*, ed. J. Pitcher (London: Penguin, 1985).