

FOREWORD

*How to explain the paradox that urbanism, as a profession, has disappeared at the moment when urbanization everywhere – after decades of constant acceleration – is on its way to establishing a definitive, global “triumph” of the urban scale?*¹

¹ Rem Koolhaas, “Whatever happened to urbanism?,” in Rem Koolhaas und Bruce Mau, *SMLXL*, (Monacelli Press 1995), p. 961.

The book you hold in your hands evolved from a debate-platform, the Holcim Forum for Sustainable Construction on *Urban Transformation*, which took place in 2007 at Tongji University in Shanghai, China. For three days more than 250 professionals from over 40 countries – architects, urban planners, engineers, scholars, representatives from business and governments – met in working groups and for panel sessions to discuss the challenges cities face today in respect to urban change. The Forum was the second international symposium for both academics and practitioners hosted by the Swiss-based Holcim Foundation for Sustainable Construction to encourage a dialog on the future of the built environment. The first Forum addressing the issue of *Basic Needs* took place at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich), Switzerland, in 2004. Continuing the three-year cycle, the next Forum will be held in 2010.

Dedicated to the topic of *Urban Transformation*, it seems only fitting that the book would also undergo a good deal of transformation in the process of its making. Thus, this publication does not reproduce the conference literally, but develops it further. In addition to a selection of the best papers and keynote lectures given at the Forum in Shanghai the book also features a number of additional contributions by experts whom we have specially invited to contribute to the publication. The structure of the book has evolved out of the Forum’s program, which was divided into five thematic working groups focusing on various phenotypes of urbanism today: green, touristic, informal,

temporary, normative. Finally, we added a sixth chapter dedicated to the topic of public and private, as it turned out to be one of the most pertinent themes of many contributions.

Indeed, if there was a recurrent theme running through it all, then it was the collective awareness of the need to elevate the discourse of urbanism to match and catch the myriad of expressions materialized in the city today. After the failure of the big urban narrative of Modernism – which had attempted to subject urban realities worldwide to the reductive model of the *contemporary city* in the wake of CIAM – and, likewise, after the failure of Postmodernism to retrodate the present city to a past that never existed by reverting to past urban typologies, we have finally come to understand that any urban discourse has to first and foremost embrace the city as a multitude of conditions that do not (and don’t have to) conform to one universal model. The end of the grand narrative has enabled us to go beyond the phantom pain of the disappearance of urbanism as a profession – as suggested by Rem Koolhaas – and embrace the city as it is experienced from outside the professional realm. For clearly, the very notion of *urban* is arguably one of the hot topics of contemporary culture; it has become the synonym of cool and serves as a Zeitgeist indicator of lifestyle, music, food, fashion, and design. Yet precisely what *urban* means in regard to urbanism and the city has become increasingly blurred. Depending on specific geographic, climatic, economic, and cultural conditions, there are many, and often radically conflicting implications of *urban* developments: the hyper-dense megalopolis coexists with endless sprawl; traditional street life exists side by side with massive web traffic; the hardware of architecture is augmented by the software of the event; high-speed urbanism in China happens simultaneously with the phenomenon of shrinking cities and the slow dying-out of small towns in the highly industrialized developed countries. Even the very idea of the city as the result of planning has been deeply questioned by the roaring surge of informal favela-style housing settlements, which represent the type of urban condition that more than half of the world’s population today calls their home. As opposed to the colonial era of the 19th century, the term *urban* today no