The *OASE* issue *Re: Generic City* (no. 54) is a compilation of articles based on papers presented at the symposium 'The Generic City and the Old Metropolis' held at the Catholic University of Louvain in 2000. Needless to say, the symposium title referred to Rem Koolhaas's 1994 essay *The Generic City*.

The Generic City was a polemic on contemporary architecture and urbanism and what Koolhaas sees as their moralistic and 'elitist view' of the urban condition. This view sees ancient centres as models for the ideal city, with the agora epitomizing the ideal public space. The public space as we knew it (or as we thought we knew it) has disappeared from the generic city. The city of 'places' has been replaced by a 'non-urban-realm'. This new urban condition is irreversible and inevitable, according to Koolhaas. But what the 'elitist view' of the city, which harks back to the restoration of the *agora*, and Koolhaas's 'realism' have in common is that both are based on the contradiction between the private and the public domains.

The sociologist Jeff Weintraub has described this contradiction as 'one of the grand dichotomies of Western thought'. This persistent dichotomy has led to an impasse in thought about the city and society. The conceptual framework of this dichotomy allows only two possible responses to the 'non-urban-realm' and the 'loss of place': either we strive for the 'restoration' of THE public domain, or we accept the loss of the public domain and embrace the urban space as a neutral, undefined (as well as dangerous) zone, in which we can only feature as autonomous individuals. In the first instance, THE public domain must be accessible to everyone. It implies major consensus on the moral values within the public domain. In the second, co-habiting within the urban space is out of the question. Because the urban space is neither owned by nor designated for any individual, it is *potentially* – and paradoxically – for everyone and therefore uninhabitable.

Thought on the public domain requires a more nuanced conceptual framework.

The addition of a third domain, the collective, allows for a more complex analysis of the urban condition. In his contribution to *Re: Generic City* Kristiaan Borret offers a starting point for a possible definition of the collective domain. He does so by drawing on Weintraub's illuminating overview of the various definitions of the distinction between the public and private. With hindsight we see that the collective domain has become much more prominent in debates on the city and the practice of building.

At the same time, both the Netherlands and other Western European countries are having a fierce social debate on moral values in the public domain. The collective domain plays a negligible role in this debate. The emphasis here is on the definition of THE public domain, on questions about what binds US, on 'universal' values and (or?) on national identity. The dichotomy between the public and private domains – between the generic and the specific – is thus intensified. 'We' must play a role, as Paul Scheffer notes. But we certainly cannot work with an absolute definition of the concept of 'we'. The professional discourse on the definition of new boundaries and the relationships between private, collective and public domains will have to be linked to the broader social debate on the public domain. Without this more nuanced approach, the debate may once fail to move beyond the restoration of THE public domain. This would bring us back to square one.

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