Both technique and art, architecture is also a constructed expression of society. As technique bordering on engineering, it has experienced the impact of new materials and innovation in the areas of construction, structures, or installations, facing the historic challenge of sustainability. As public art, it has been a participant—and sometimes a protagonist—in the renewal of visual language and the aesthetic mutations of a period marked by the spectacle. Lastly, as constructed sociology, it has given form to the colossal transformation that has urbanized our planet, replacing traditional landscapes with sleepless megacities.

The classical treatises at the root of Western architecture already speak of these three complementary facets when theorizing on a discipline that overlaps so many others. Ever since Vitruvius, in Roman times, architecture has been assigned the task of reconciling technique and art with the social use of its spaces, and the motto, *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* (solidity, usefulness, beauty) has been shorthand for this approach. But those three facets are so impossibly intertwined in concrete works of architecture that it is difficult to consider them separately, and here we have sought out a different strategy.

Instead of describing technical, functional, and formal innovations that characterize architecture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have preferred to select ten episodes in different cities on the planet that offer both a sequence of significant achievements in the last two decades, and an illustration of tendencies or phenomena of a more general nature. Those episodes, which are presented in more-or-less chronological order—from Berlin following the Fall of the Wall, Bilbao and the Guggenheim, or New York and 9/11; to Olympic Beijing and the titanic works of the petroleum autocracies of the Persian Gulf or Russia—are also organized so that the their consideration herein resembles the stages of a trip around the world.

Ever westward, and always in the Northern hemisphere—which leaves an enormous amount of geography out of the picture—our journey begins in Europe at the close of the twentieth century and of the Cold War, marked by the demolition of an urban border. It then travels to the United States, which saw the destruction of the Twin Towers as the parting shot for its “War on Terror.” Next is Asia, which builds energetic signs of its economic force, and finally,
Russia, astride two continents. It, too, is using architecture to affirm something, namely its recovery following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. After ten stages, the circle closes with another political ice age that coincides with an economic cooling, and financial and social convulsions, in a cumulus of fractures and trembling that architecture registers with the exactitude of a seismograph needle.

**Berlin without the Wall: the architecture of memory in the face of ideological struggles**

Our journey begins in the city where architecture most faithfully reflects ideas, capital of a totalitarian empire defeated in 1945 and frontier for four decades between the democratic West and the Communist bloc. Since the demolition of the Wall in 1989, Berlin has continued to be an urban laboratory where architecture is subjected to the demanding filter of ideology and memory. Such is the case of the Jewish Museum by the United States architect of Polish origin Daniel Libeskind—a group of fractured and unstable volumes added to a baroque building—and the new Reichstag by British architect, Norman Foster, which is a critical restoration that transforms the character of a legendary headquarters; as well as the Holocaust Memorial by New Yorker, Peter Eisenman, an extension studded with concrete stellae that turn this monument into an urban landscape.

The Zigzag shape of the Jewish Museum alludes to German history's dramatic changes of direction and the tragic interruption of the Jewish presence in that city, but it is also of singular architectural importance. With the IBA of 1985—an exhibition whose objects were buildings made on a scale of 1:1 in different neighborhoods of the city—Berlin became the main stage for the postmodern movement that foreshadowed a return to classicist architecture in opposition to the abstractions of modernity. And with Libeskind's project, announced around the same time as the Fall of the Wall, Berlin was to construct an icon of deconstruction, a rival tendency launched with a show at MoMA in New York in the summer of 1988 that defended fractured and catastrophic architecture as an expression of a convulsed world.

No city can better personify convulsion than Berlin, the epicenter of two World Wars that left the ruins of its former parliament as a mute witness to the collapse of democracy and the Wagnerian defeat of German expansionism. When Gorbachov capitulated to Reagan and Thatcher at the end of the Cold War, allowing Germany to reunite and Berlin to recover its status as capital, Foster rehabilitated the old Reichstag, making it...
the new Parliament of a nation determined to impede the return of the specters of an ominous past. To do so, he crowned the massive Wilhelmine structure with a glass dome enlivened by spiral ramps. That dome serves as a place to observe the city and symbolically places its citizens above their political representatives, overseeing their assembly to prevent new historical derailments.

Near this regenerated Reichstag—even the artist, Christo, exorcised it by covering it with canvas before the renovation began—Eisenman built a colossal and lyrical memorial to the murdered Jews: a screen of concrete prisms that is simultaneously the waving landscape of planted fields and a disquieting labyrinth running among exact tombs. Originally conceived with the sculptor, Richard Serra, this commemorative monument—so different in its jagged abstraction from most of the Holocaust museums that have sprung up in recent times—is a gesture of penitence in the heart of horror. At the same time, it is an effective example of architecture’s capacity to express ideas through form.

Rotterdam or Basel: new landscapes and old cities in an indecisive Europe

Following the exhaustion of the postmodern style—which had its showroom in Berlin, and its think tanks in Milan and New York—architecture’s debate did not move to Paris, where Mitterrand’s grand presidential projects combined geometric monumentality and the glamour of celebrities. Nor to Blair’s London, which feted the millennium with a technological and cool architectural third stream. Instead, the debate took hold in two medium-sized European cities: Rotterdam in Holland, and Basel in Switzerland. In the first, numerous young architects inspired by the abrasive talent of Rem Koolhaas—especially those who worked under the initials of MVRDV—exacerbated modern language with accents of Russian constructivist utopias from the nineteen twenties, applying them to the urban landscape. In the second, a new generation of German Swiss architects emerged. There, the creative energy of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron quickly stood out—with the permanent rural and essentialist counterpoint of Peter Zumthor—as they created a stronghold of constructive excellence, demanding art, and sensitivity to the material heritage of ancestral territories.

Dutch hypermodernity was fed by the tabula rasa of a city devastated by the war, on the artificial territory of a country of polders. But it was also fed by Koolhaas’ futurist fascination with the metropolitan crowding of a New York that was, for many years, his adopted
home, object of study, and intellectual laboratory, especially in the IAUS (Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies) directed by Peter Eisenman. Combining the formal grammar of Le Corbusier and audacious Russian diagonals with American pragmatism, those architects created an optimistic, playful school in the Netherlands. Soon, they were flirting with the fragmentation and droopiness of Anglo-Saxon deconstructivism—drawing largely on the extreme ductility offered by new systems of computer representation. But their finest manifestation was artificial landscaping in which a building is surreally penetrated by the topography of its surroundings, creating a “free section” that puts a new spin on the “open floor plants” of the historical avant-garde.

The Swiss Germans, on the other hand, developed a “degree zero” of architecture with elemental and exquisitely constructed prisms deeply rooted in the traditions and territory of their Alpine country, but also influenced by the rigorist teachings of Aldo Rossi, who was Herzog and De Meuron’s teacher at the ETH in Zurich. Defiantly archaic but tightly linked to the art scene—initially through Joseph Beuys, and later with multiple collaborators from the art world—the two partners in Basel became the leaders of their generation with a series of decorated boxes characterized by great material and tactile refinement, and a series of interventions in industrial buildings—especially their conversion of a power plant into the new home of Tate Gallery in London—that showed the relevance of an architecture of continuity.

In a Europe characterized by economic and political fatigue—hesitating between the modern messianism of building a contemporary city ex novo, and its cultural and emotional ties to its heterogeneous urban heritage—the Dutch and Swiss supplied opposing architectural and urban models, establishing a fertile disciplinary dialog between Rotterdam and Basel. In time, this resulted in a cautious convergence of the two schools.

Bilbao and the Guggenheim: the spectacle of a museum as urban motor

In 1997, the inauguration of the Bilbao branch of the Guggenheim Museum—an undulating sculptural accumulation of titanium sheeting designed by the Californian, Frank Gehry—was a media event that changed the course of both architecture and museums. Of course, that New York institution already had original premises of great architectural singularity and beauty—the famous spiral ramp built by Frank Lloyd Wright on Fifth Avenue emblematic building beside the estuary in Bilbao had such significant iconic precedents as the Sydney Opera House, where the Dane, Jørn Utzon, designed concrete sails that made it the symbol of Australia, or—in terms of museums—the Pompidou Center in Paris, in which the Italian, Renzo Piano, and the Englishman, Richard Rogers, interpreted the countercultural spirit of Paris’ 1968 youth demonstrations with a joyful, colorist, and technological futurism.

Bilbao’s Guggenheim took one step further, because it entirely subordinated art to the spectacle of architecture, turning the latter into a gigantic sculpture with delicately matt reflections that is reckless in its detained stormy movement. A critical and popular success, the museum attracted numerous visitors to a rough city of obsolete industry that had, until then, been far removed from artistic and tourist circuits. It became a powerful motor for urban regeneration and showed the capacity of cultural infrastructures to contribute in the transition towards a service economy. What became known in Spain as the “Guggenheim effect,” and outside the country as the “Bilbao effect,” spread like wildfire, and mayors of every decaying city in decadence sought to obtain an emblematic building that would beckon to tourists and investors, improving self-esteem, and acting as the logo for a change of image.

This use of architecture for the modernization of identity and urban rebranding—which went so far as to affect cities of the dimensions and character of London or Rome—accentuated the discipline’s drift towards sculpture, as each new cultural center or sports stadium had to be unmistakable and surprising. That was the case with museums, of course, but also with libraries, auditoriums, and stadiums, all of which had to reconcile their specific functions with their symbolic role. Even buildings with such organizational demands as stations and airports—in Bilbao itself, the subway stations were designed by Norman Foster and the airport by Santiago Calatrava—became a part of urban identity, following a path blazed by large corporations that promote singular skyscrapers as the image of their brand on the city skyline.

In 1967, Guy Debord theorized The Society of the Spectacle, but four decades later, his intuition remains fully applicable. The absorption of architecture by show business has a bittersweet taste. On one hand, it brings greater visibility to those works, making them the object of social debate in the media, as can be seen in recent works by such demanding and secretive masters as Álvaro Siza or Rafael Moneo. On the other, it turns architects into glamorous, stylish celebrities. Gehry designs jewelry for Tiffany’s and Koolhaas or Herzog & de Meuron design stores for Prada, while the Anglo-Iraqi, Zaha Hadid, designs a sinuous portable
pavilion for Chanel. And all of them frequently appear in advertisements for luxury consumer items, as lofty representatives of discriminating aesthetics and avant-garde elegance.

New York after 9/11: the future of skyscrapers and the future of the empire

The fourth stage of our trip around the world takes us away from Europe, where so many expectations were raised by the end of the Cold War and the hedonistic enjoyment of the dividends of peace, across the Atlantic to New York, the setting for a titanic attack that produced a tragic massacre and turned the tides of contemporary history. The group of young, suicidal Islamic militants directed by architect and urban planner, Mohamed Atta, demolished two Manhattan towers designed by the American architect of Japanese origin, Minoru Yamasaki, that symbolized the financial power of that city and the global leadership of its nation. Their atrocious act provoked an unprecedented geopolitical crisis, and, in passing, it raised questions about the future of skyscrapers, the buildings that best represent the twentieth century's architectural challenges.

In effect, the destruction of the Twin Towers redrew the planetary borders of conflict, and the by-then extinct rivalry between capitalism and communism was replaced by the confrontation between the West and Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, the prestige of the superpower erratically led by George W. Bush suffered a devastating blow that was worsened by the errors of the posterior “wars on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its economy experienced the drag of military spending and financial baroquism, and New York suffered a wound that has yet to heal. The intellectual, aesthetic, and administrative fiasco of the architecture competitions launched to rebuild the ominous vacuum of Ground Zero is one more sign of a loss of touch that leads us to fear a foretold decadence.

And yet, the predicted end to skyscrapers—to whose complexity and cost was now added an extreme vulnerability—has never arrived, and towers continue to spring up everywhere. Safety measures have been revised and budgets have inevitably increased, but major public and private protagonists of power continue to build skyscrapers that manifest their strength in the form of height. Many corporations have turned their eyes to office parks, and towers over 200 meters high are hardly justifiable in economic terms, yet the drive to break planetary or regional records continues to feed competition among cities or countries, garnering media attention and awakening popular curiosity.

Even New York, which directly suffered 9/11, has not renounced its traditional designation as “the city of skyscrapers.” It continues to build and design new towers, often linked to its persistent cultural and artistic heritage, such as the headquarters of the Hearst and New York Times news groups (designed by Norman Foster and Renzo Piano, respectively), the small stacking of the New Museum (by the Japanese architects, Sejima and Nishizawa), or the residential skyscraper designed by French creator, Jean Nouvel, alongside the MoMA. That sector—luxury living spaces designed by great architects—has certainly prospered in New York. And in Chicago—birthplace of the skyscraper and home to legendary buildings by Sullivan, Wright and Mies van der Rohe—it has led to a spectacular project by Santiago Calatrava, the same Spanish architect who is constructing the only relevant work in Manhattan’s afflicted Ground Zero, a monumental subway station.

Las Vegas as a paradigm: the urban design of leisure and the world as a theme park

America gave birth to the skyscraper, which takes urban density to its most hyperbolic extreme; but it also paved the way for the most scattered urban sprawl. With the help of the automobile, it rolled out the city’s territory like a thin carpet of houses and gardens. Such unanimous suburbanization, wasting space, time, materials, water, energy, and land—not to mention the transit infrastructure—has very successfully spread around the world. In that setting, the collective domain is relegated to large commercial agglomerations that are often presented with the trappings of traditional urbanity, figurally interpreted with the same scenographic resources as Disney’s amusement parks or the thematic casinos of Las Vegas—so admired by Warhol’s Pop-art gaze, and Venturi and Scott-Brown’s approach to architecture.

Las Vegas, Nevada, the fastest-growing city in the United States, is also a fine paradigm of postmodern city planning, whose tendencies it exacerbates to the point of paroxysm. This city is an effective metaphor for the contemporary rise of “casino capitalism”—as brilliant, noisy, and massive as the gaming rooms that stretch unbroken from the lobbies of endless hotels offering the illusion of leisure in this neon city. The Egyptian or Venetian motives of casinos in Las Vegas—like the Wild-West towns or Snow White’s castles in countless Disneyslands scattered around the world—return like stubborn echoes in malls throughout the United States and the world, and the urban design of consumerism clumsily apes the traces of a long-gone urbanity.
The central role of commerce in these new ways of occupying territory—admirably analyzed by Koolhaas in his description of contemporary *Junkspace*—is unarguable, and the morphology of the shopping center—enormous sales areas with built-in food courts—has infiltrated the remaining infrastructures of transportation, leisure, sports, culture, health, and work whose activity nodes articulate the indiscriminate spread of residential construction. Airports and stations, amusement parks, stadiums, museums, and even hospitals, college campuses, research and business compounds—all suffer the invasive penetration of the mall, whose stores and restaurants end up as the protagonists of meeting and social areas in the theme-park suburbanization of the world.

Even compact cities from the European tradition, extended with anonymous and indistinct low-density peripheries, reformulate their historic centers to include leisure and tourist spaces, capacious, open-air shopping centers where boutiques, fashion stores, bars, and cafés rub elbows with the occasional palace, church, or museum. Thus, cities like Bohigas and Miralles’ Barcelona—a showcase for the 1992 Olympic Games and an exemplary model of urban transformation, equally concerned to “clean up the central district” and to “monumentalize the periphery”—illustrate this contemporary drift that creates an urban setting to service occasional visitors, far removed from the modern, avant-garde, and even utopian fundamentals of the initial project.

Tokyo in cartoons: tradition and modernity in Japanese density

The mid point of our trip is actually the meridian that marks the dateline. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the seventh stage of this journey brings us to Tokyo, a metropolis whose form has lost all memory, where surviving traditional habits coexist with a futurist urban landscape, packed with multicolored signs and the spasmodic animation of cartoons. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fascination with an exotic “Japan-ism” tinted the language of the artistic avant-garde, while, for architectural modernity, the “Empire of the Sun” was the source of the extreme rationality of wooden construction, the modular lightness of houses divided with tatamis and rice paper, and the laconic and ceremonious refinement of objects. From Frank Lloyd Wright and his Viennese disciples in California, to Berlin architect Bruno Taut’s round trip, or the discovery of the Far East by Alvar Aalto and his colleagues from the school of Scandinavian organicism, Japan and modernity have been architectural synonyms.

Nowadays, though, Japanese hyper-urbanity offers a model far removed from the shaded introversion of the ageless home. Were Tanizaki to rewrite *In Praise of Shadows*—a fundamental text for the Zen sensibility of Western minimalism—he would now be writing *In Praise of Neon*, the emblematic exponent of a juvenile, ultracommercial pop culture as jangling as that of Las Vegas, although here it is adorned with the infantilism of *manga* and the cybernetic autism of the *otaku*, and fully given over to the worship of luxury labels that dot the urban landscape with their exquisite and hermetic shops.

Beyond immaculate gardens and geometrically-exact museums—many of concrete and glass, in which Tadao Ando successfully combined the formal languages of Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn—it is fashion stores that best reflect Japan’s current social climate. Some are made by foreign architects—the extraordinary faceted crystal designed for Prada by Herzog & de Meuron, or the lyrical translucent prism erected for Hermès by Renzo Piano—but more often they are examples of the most refined local architecture. Sejima and Nishizawa’s aleatory overlapping for Dior or Toyo Ito’s arborecent blinds for Tod’s, and the branches of luxury firms in Omotesando or Ginza—Tokyo’s two fashion districts—bear witness to a hyperbolic exacerbation of luxury consumerism that surpasses its forebears in Europe or the United States.

The great transportation infrastructure in the rest of the country is overshadowed by this innocent ostentation, nevertheless, it has such outstanding examples as the colossal airport at Osaka, built by Piano on an artificial island, or the delicate maritime terminal in Yokohama, designed by Zaha and Moussavi with undulating wooden platforms. There are also quite singular cultural works, such as the media center in Sendai, which Ito holds up with tangled strands of metal pillars; or the museum of Kanazawa, whose contours were delimited by Sejima and Nishizawa with an evanescent circular perimeter. And all of these are set in a light, fluid public domain that is reflective and streamlined, as limpid as it is frigid. In any case, it lacks the magnetic and centripetal magic of the private and exclusive strongholds of the most sophisticated, empty luxury in the heart of the “Empire of Signs” that is Tokyo.

Olympic Beijing: the central role of China’s icons in the rise of Asia

If Tokyo is fashion, Beijing is spectacle. The inauguration and unfolding of the Olympic Games in the summer of 2008 allowed China to be proud of its economic and social achievements, offering the world a formidable
example of its organizational capacity with an event in which architecture was rather more than a mere mute stage for the ceremonies and competitions. The new airport terminal where athletes, spectators, and journalists arrived, the television headquarters where the Games were transmitted, and at the top of the list, the stadium and swimming pools—all these great works carried out for the occasion—spoke of China’s quest for excellence. Even though they were almost all designed by foreign architects, they bore witness to the ground that has been covered by the “Middle Kingdom” over the thirty years that have passed since the political changes of 1978, when the chaotic Maoism of the Cultural Revolution was replaced by the single-party capitalism propelled by Deng Xiaoping.

The new terminal, which is also the largest building on Earth, was designed by Norman Foster, who also designed Hong Kong airport—on an artificial island, like that of Osaka. With characteristically British technological refinement, he knew how to interpret the red columns and floating roofs of traditional construction, using the steel and glass of advanced engineering to create an endless and luminous enclosure that protects passengers from the airplanes under a roof as light as a festival dragon or a paper kite. The installation was inaugurated a year before the Games, as was another great work promoted for the event: the National Theater erected by French architect, Paul Andreu—curiously, he is also known for his airports—beside Tiananmen Square. It is a gigantic titanium dome that emerges from the quiet water of a vast pond.

The sports events had a liquid protagonist in the indoor pools. Designed by the Australian team PTW, what soon came to be called the “Water Cube” was a large prism whose bubbling façade is made with pillows of translucent ETFE (ethyltetrafluorethylene) plastic. Most of all, though, the games enjoyed a formidable setting in the Olympic Stadium, a titanic steel tangle thought up by the Swiss architects, Herzog & de Meuron, with the aid of the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei. This, too, received a fond nickname from the public—“The Bird’s Nest”—and its extraordinary formal singularity has made it an icon of the Games and a symbol of China’s drive, which reached its zenith when its spectral and trilling nocturnal appearance was complemented by the spectacular opening and closing ceremonies, replete with choreography and fireworks.

Inevitably, the television headquarters—two towers linked at the top to create the bent frame of a colossal urban gate, designed by the Dutchman, Rem Koolhaas—was the most polemical building. This was not so much because it was not finished in time for the Games as because the governmental character of information is one of the most polemical aspects of this country, which combines economic success with a stricter state control than in the West.

**Astana on the steppes: a new capital in the land of the Great Game**

Our eighth stop is undoubtedly the most exotic because we associate the steppes of central Asia less with architectural achievements than with the music of Borodin or Kipling’s writing about the geostrategic Great Game of the Eurasian empires. In this land of crossroads and nomads, it wasn’t long ago that many would have listed the yurt—a circular tent of exquisitely defined construction—as the steppes’ most original contribution to the history of human lodgings. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, however, a new actor appeared on the international stage: Kazakhstan. With oil reserves, its charismatic president decided to leave his mark on architecture with a new capital: the existing Almaty—the legendary Alma Ata—was to be replaced by Astana, a city created ex novo on the trans-Siberian railway line, and many of the world’s most important architects would be called to design it.

In the tradition of Pandit Nehru’s Chandigarh or Juscelino Kubitschek’s Brasilia (developed by Le Corbusier, and Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, respectively), the Astana of Kazak president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was laid out by the Japanese architect, Kisho Kurokawa. Its most significant buildings are by the Englishman, Norman Foster. Thus, Kazakhstan is no longer just the country associated with the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen—the polemical Borat—and Astana is no longer just the name of a...
cycling team. The country and its new capital have become a new and audacious chapter in the story of contemporary architecture.

Of course Foster is not the only Westerner with important commissions in Kazakhstan. Despite the administrative transfer of the capital, petroleum income continues to foster a singular building boom in old Almaty, where many US and European studios—including Rem Koolhaas’ OMA, which is building a large technology campus on the outskirts of the city—express the country’s economic vigor in that territory. In Astana, though, Foster’s London firm is the absolute protagonist of emblematic architecture. It has already finished a colossal pyramid and is raising an enormous transparent tent-like structure that will be the city’s ceiling when finished.

The pyramid or “Palace of Peace and Reconciliation”—inevitably called the “Pyramid of Peace” by public and media alike—is home to periodic interfaith conferences and seeks to reconcile the country’s different races, cultures, and religions with its archaic and exact geometry, crowned with a translucent vertex of innocent stained glass with doves. The “tent,” which houses 100,000 square meters of leisure space under a surface of ETFE held by masts and cables, is well over twice as tall as the pyramid and is practically its symbolic opposite. Establishing an unexpected dialog between the steel points of the ideological temple, and the plastic warps of the titanic tent dedicated to spectacles and consumerism, it links old tribal and religious identities with the new sense of belonging to a global tribe that worships only prosperity and entertainment.

Dubai and the Gulf: oil cities and the challenge of sustainability

Our next stop takes us to another real-estate boom driven by petroleum, but in this case the dimensions and speed are such that theoreticians of the contemporary city such as Rem Koolhaas have no qualms in calling it “a new urbanity,” an until-now unknown way of producing urban tissue. Bordering on science fiction, construction in the Emirates of the Persian Gulf was fed initially by the exploitation of oil wells, but is increasingly linked to financial and tourist flows. It extends from a surreal landscape of skyscrapers that emerge from the desert sands like a rosary of artificial islands in the form of continents or palm trees, including innumerable educational and cultural infrastructures that house franchises from the United States and Europe’s leading museums and universities.

In many ways, Dubai was the pioneer. With far less petroleum than the other emirates, it quickly redefined itself as a regional financial center for the Middle East—capable of replacing Beirut, which was devastated by war and political conflicts—and as a destination for luxury tourism for new millionaires from Russian and Europe. Built with the expertise of Anglo-Saxon project managers and the effort of an army of immigrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia, who have almost no civil or labor rights, this forest of skyscrapers with a ribbon of thematic islands boasts the most luxurious hotel in the world—Burj al Arab, by the British firm, Atkins—and the highest building on the planet—Burj Dubai, by the US firm, SOM. These are economic and technological records, and they are undoubtedly social indicators, but sadly they say little about the quality of the architecture, in which the accumulation of important names has not yet generated any masterpieces.

Qatar has a different strategy. It seeks to become an intellectual center, with an ambitious city of education designed by global architects such as the Japanese,
Arata Isozaki, the Mexican, Ricardo Legorreta, the North American of Argentinean origin, César Pelli, and the Dutchmen of OMA. And two other emirates also have different political and urban objectives. Ras al Khaimah seeks to promote sustainable tourism in a setting of superb natural beauty, while Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, has begun work on a spectacular cultural district, with branches of the Guggenheim and the Louvre.

The most visionary projects in Ras al Khaimah—including a dreamlike tourist center high in the mountains and an ecological city on the coast, with an emblematic spherical convention center—are all by Koolhaas, the selfsame theoretician of the Gulf’s urban boom. In Abu Dhabi, though, the participation of great names is more choral: Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, and Tadao Ando handle the museums and theater in the cultural district, while the powerful studio of the ubiquitous Norman Foster carries out everything from an exemplary sustainable city (carbon neutral) with collective transit and energetic self-sufficiency, to a lyrical interpretation of the traditional bazaar, in the city’s new Central Market. Unexpectedly, the place in the world with the greatest energy reserves does not simply promote ostentation and consumerism. As Koolhaas and Foster’s eco-cities demonstrate, abundance does not exclude testing future forms of austerity or scarcity.

From Moscow to Saint Petersburg: the titanic works of the Russian autocracy

Our final stop is quite close to where we began, in the same Russia that placed the physical and symbolic border of the Cold War in Berlin. Stimulated by its control of the oil and gas needed by much of Europe, it has recovered the imperial pride of the Czarist autocracy and the implacable self-esteem of Soviet Stalinism. In tune with the Eastern authoritarianism of Beijing, Astana or Dubai and enjoying the same impulsive throb of sudden prosperity, Moscow has unleashed a whirlwind of megaprojects, employing the eloquence of architecture to define the renewed ambitions of the Eurasian colossus. Inevitably, this building boom is centered in the capital, but it touches many other cities, especially historic Saint Petersburg.

Both cities have a very significant presence of British architects, but in Moscow we must underline the material and media presence of the same Foster who designed Beijing Airport, the “Pyramid of Peace” in Astana and the sustainable city in Abu Dhabi. With both the Russia Tower, whose 612 meters make it the highest skyscraper in Europe, and the Crystal Island on the banks of the Moscova River—a true city under a gigantic spiral roof that not only improves its climate but also makes it the largest construction on the planet, surpassing Foster’s own record-holding...
Terminal 3 in Beijing—this British architect adequately represents the regenerated vigor of this country. A nation that, as the Georgia crisis showed, will no longer allow itself to be treated with the commiserative disdain that followed the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the subsequent decline of Russian power.

Saint Petersburg deserves separate mention. It is Russia’s cultural capital and the birthplace of Vladimir Putin, who made it the headquarters of Gazprom, the Russian energy giant. Following a polemical contest in which the leading lights of international architecture were invited to compete—the Scottish studio of RMJM will build a colossal skyscraper that will dwarf Smolny Cathedral, on the other side of the Neva, eloquently manifesting the role of fossil fuels in Russia’s rebirth. This country, which intimidates the governments of Eastern Europe with its gas pipelines, permits itself the luxury of having a former chancellor of Germany on the payroll of its energy company. As we end our journey here, we do not know whether the Cold War really ended two decades ago, but we are certain that architecture will continue to express the ambitions and conflicts, achievements, and disappointments of countries and regimes, companies, and people.

Closing what is more a vicious than virtuous circle, the emblematic architecture that today expresses the power of Russia, China, and the Arab Emirates is by the London architectural studio whose remodeling of the Reichstag retained obscene graffiti written in Cyrillic characters by the Russian soldiers who took Berlin. It is no coincidence that this firm is mentioned in seven of the ten sections of this text, for it is undoubtedly the most aggressively global of them all. A historical cycle has been completed and the end of the bipolar world that allowed the reunification of Germany following the Fall of the Wall in 1989 has given way—after a brief interval in which the only remaining superpower has failed in its efforts at global government—to a multi-polar scenario that architecture emphasizes with a proliferation of concentration points.

A provisional epilog: the dawn or dusk of a mutating discipline

In this ever-westward journey, it is difficult to avoid a melancholy tone as our story ends. The itinerary of architecture over the last two decades has transformed a modest craft based on technical knowledge, functional pragmatism, and aesthetic discrimination into an activity bordering on the clamor of publicity, the avidity of consumerism, and the whirlwind of fashion. The humility, perseverance, and silence that used to characterize it has been replaced by boasting self-confidence, capricious invention, and a loquacious justification of nonsensical proposals that can only be explained by the insatiable appetite for novelty of pupils and palates fatigued by an overly-prosperous society.

The great challenges for a species that is now mostly urban—from climate change and sustainable construction to the material orchestration of life in megacities like Mexico, São Paulo, Lagos, or Calcutta—seem to be outside the realm of this introspective practice so capable of creating emblematic or iconic works and tragically incapable of significantly improving the habitability and beauty of contemporary cities. As has so often been said, these are fine times for architecture (in the restrictive sense of erecting singular buildings) but bad times for cities, that is, for that setting that belongs to all of us and represents all of us.

Never in recent history have architects been so famous, but they may never have been so incapable of shaping the environment we live in, either. Just half a century ago, anonymous architects—known only to their colleagues and other specialists—worked in their studios, laying out urban plans and large collective housing projects that decisively affected everyday life for the majority. Today, media-star architects have become arbiters of fashion and dictators of taste, but they hardly have the capacity to participate in major decisions that shape cities and land. Those decisions are now made almost exclusively by economic forces and movement flows crystallized in transport infrastructures.

At any rate, architecture is an archaic and tenacious discipline that may have suffered a disconcerting process of change to fit into the society of the spectacle, but it has never abandoned its essential core of technical-constructive intelligence, orchestration of changing social needs, and symbolic expression of the times: the venerable firmitas, utilitas and venustas of Vitruvius. That is why the elegiac tone of these conclusions may be mistaken—incompatible with the headstrong confidence needed to carry out this demanding profession that so expertly reconciles the pessimism of intelligence with the optimism of willfulness. By traveling west, we gain a day along the way, and perhaps that uncertain light we take for dusk is actually a dawning for this useful, worldly art.