My project is an exploration of Rot as a visual system.

Rot, as I define it, is the inability of governments to create and maintain environments that are safe, clean, environmentally friendly or “green”, equal, and just — these terms can all be summarized by the word “healthy”. In my opinion, we do not live in a healthy society in many ways. For instance, urban planning in the United States rarely includes provisions for walking, biking and public transit, and when our neoliberal governments try to make projects that address shortcomings in these areas, we are unable to do so in a timely, productive and cost-effective manner (Levy, Ensari and Goldwyn, 2023). A state of paralysis ensues wherein inaction results in a general decline in the quality of life experienced by the general public.

We are increasingly spending more and more on healthcare in the US, while in the UK, the NHS gets cut year after year. Petty, stupid crime and anti-social behaviour seem to be increasing, while the upper class continues to get richer whilst demanding to pay less taxes. There is a housing crisis in both countries, as well as in most other English-speaking countries. The words “cost of living” in tandem with “crisis” say it all. It seems that everyone and everything in the anglophone world has rotted to some degree – no one is truly happy to partake in this chaotic system, but everyone is too braindead to make an effort to change it. The state has lost the majority of its capacity to provide for its citizens, and the private sector does not respond to despondency and crisis. Market forces never include compassion, dignity, equality.

As a designer, it is tormenting to be alive in a time of so many crises, as your craft is not respected as a valid currency of solution. In times of crisis, there tends to be a devolution or de-escalation of the importance of art, design, and culture. Craft is degraded. For example, during the writers strikes of the 2000s in Hollywood, hundreds of unscripted reality TV shows launched as a response to the demand of the consumer, but forgoing intention, craft, and skill as presented in traditional television or film mediums. My project is a representation of how the dread of a designer faced with economic uncertainty copes. As the state fails to provide for you, what does your visual world look like? When you must be in a constant state of burnout to stay alive, what work will you produce? When reality is dismal and depressing, can you imagine anything more than what’s around you? How can you be idealistic in these conditions?

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Opposite me is Rem Koolhaas, who wrote the 1978 book *Delirious New York*, which is about how the chaos, spontaneity, and general disorganisation over the history of New York City is what makes the city itself into an experience and spectacle. Daily interactions, such as getting groceries, commuting, exercising, etc. are made into experiences every day—no two days are the same. If my position can be summarised as “a mourning of the lack of capacity by the state to plan, organise, and provide for its citizens” , Koolhaas’ belief can be summarised as “The chaos is what makes a place interesting to live in.”

Ironically, our approaches to what role the state should play in planning are diametrically opposed with the stereotypes of our nationalities; with me embracing a very Dutch desire for sensibility, safer streets, and more centralised urban planning, while Koolhaas examines pre-modernist and pre-state-sponsored urban planning Manhattan as a school of thought in urban planning. Koolhaas essentially says density, chaos, and congestion are all things we can and should celebrate.

Manhattanism, which Koolhaas defines as Culture of Congestion (density, vertical spaces, human congestion) are good urban planning further in the book, with the example of the Downtown Athletic Club—an early skyscraper that acts as “a machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse” (Koolhaas, 1994, p. 152). Koolhaas notes how the boxing ring, locker room, and the oyster bar are right next to each other on the 9th floor is “the 20th century in action” (Koolhaas, 1994, p. 155). The 1st-12th are all various gymnasiums whilst the next 5 floors of the building are all various bars, restaurants, lounges, and the 20th-35th floors are all apartments and bedrooms. The various usage of this building created an environment that felt dynamic, alive — the lack of consideration and planning for the traditional ways that society functions (ie, not putting an oyster bar next to a boxing ring) created new ways of experiencing life outside of dominant social structures. This can be a useful rhetorical tool we can use as graphic designers; can re-arranging the structures of our existing practices produce interesting outcomes? What can we learn by using Manhattan, and existing urban forms as inspiration for graphic design? Can the rapid construction and expansion of Manhattan be a vehicle for better graphic communication design?

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Manhattan, and Koolhaas’ exploration of it, has pushed me to identify a bit of modernist fascism within myself and my analysis of Rot. Koolhaas has explored the pre-Robert Moses, pre-urban-planning-as-a-school-of-thought as a more enlightened model of urban design and form, whereas when I speak about urban planning, I am coming from a metamodernist perspective. This reference pushes me to challenge and define my own position — helping me realise that I employ lots of both modernism and post modernism in my practice. My studio work this term is not a total rejection of modernism but also not a total endorsement of modernism or post-modernism. In a way, his sensibility made Koolhaas a pre-metamodernist; he doesn’t set out a vision for the city, or plan anything like a modernist would, but also doesn’t have nostalgia or calls to return to a pre-modernist urban form. Koolhaas merely acts as an investigator and journalist of the city.

My work thus far has dealt with the frustration with the lack of interest by the state in big infrastructure projects and social programmes. For instance, in my publication *Rot!,* I didn’t find myself particularly supportive of the often-Kafkaesque processes that governments usually take to set these projects in motion. I merely joke about the state of the world, which is my way of documenting of our time — using humour as archive. The contents include images that were made on Blender, including images of T-Shirts that could never be sold, Infrastructure projects that are impossible to re-create, and overall, the idea of how rot has a reflexive relationship with us and our psychology. The book is structured, but only loosely so. I mention these projects as evidence to my newfound position as a metamodernist; I’m taking a position that appears neutral on the surface; it aims to be grounded — not hysterical but not proud; not too cynical but not too idealistic.

Another project this term *I am not a photographer* is a photobook that was created to be a “bad quality” photobook. I used a $100 camera found in my grandma’s basement to attempt this, but in retrospect, my skill as a photographer and now amateur book maker was too high to transcend into something truly ironically awful. My goal was to make something that explored how skill is about intention, not outcome (but in feedback, the outcome was proved to be “nice”). A further publication *FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE* satirises the format and contents of a traditional press release but doesn’t shake the boat in terms of its physical form. It looks just like any other press release, but slowly descends into a madness. The blender images I’ve been making have not been trying to reach a modernist ideal of perfectionism, but rather are aiming for the middle between terrible uncanny weird graphics, and realism. In all these projects, I’ve chosen to create works that take both the destruction, irony and meaninglessness of postmodernism, and the structure, order, clarity, and optimism of modernism to combine them into something that is balanced, but critical analysis of the society we as designers and human beings inhabit.

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My position prior to reading *Delirious New York* was less balanced; it was approaching Rot with a sense of disgust and disdain. I made various projects that had a sense of humour and looked ironically at Rot. What changed with me after reading *Delirious New York* was to investigate more of the beauty of Rot; the chaos, and the disorganisation. To examine the things around us that are insane, dangerous, in a more investigative, innocent way, rather than to approach my topics with a jaded cynical eye. *Delirious New York* has challenged me to take the role of observer rather than activist, and to glean both sides of my investigation for material.

Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan” by Rem Koolhaas (1978).