

Postcards and the Making of Architectural History: The Cases of Alvin Boyarsky and Rem Koolhaas

IGOR MARJANOVIC
Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the construction of urban history through collection of popular picture postcards and their appropriation by architectural culture. Official architectural history is seldom made of postcards; rather, it builds upon artistic photography and archival photographs as prime historical evidence. This should come as no surprise. Learning from postcards takes the writing of history outside of traditional institutions, such as museums or the academia, localizing the complex processes of historical interpretation within a 'booster' medium accessible to many audiences. I will argue here, that although popular postcards resist privileging forms of 'high architecture' visualizations, they still represent an active form of writing history, a complex process of picturing the urban past through careful organization of images into coherent collections. I will examine the postcard collection of Alvin Boyarsky (1928-1990), Chairman of the Architectural Association in London (1971-1990) and popular picture postcards used by his pupil, Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*. These two cases of postcard appropriation in architectural culture reveal many avenues for the construction of urban history by uncovering the city's economic foundations and suggesting some historical roles for architects in interpreting such layers. By traveling between the two collections, I would like to uncover the multiplicity of interpretations of popular imagery and their potential for the construction and critical reinterpretation of architectural history.

POSTCARDS AS SIGHTS OF HISTORY

The emergence of tourism in the nineteenth century introduced the concept of a time spent away from work and everyday life that is closely related to the postcard as a medium for recording sites of interest. Around the same time, the newly invented art of photography enabled mass reproduction of images used to record various sites/sights-images that could easily be dropped in the mail or pasted into scrapbooks. The art of the postcard

was fully defined in 1902 when regulations were changed to allow messages and addresses to occupy one side of the card, leaving the other side for a picture (Boyarsky, 1996, page 11). It is from this time that postcards and tourism form a tentative alliance, augmenting each other in an unusual symbiosis based on mass production (postcards) and mass consumption (tourism). Not to be overlooked are also the roots of postcards in fields other than tourism. In her book *Photomontage*, Dawn Ades refers to "patriotic postcards" as the earliest examples of (photo) montage, a uniquely modern medium based on the use of shocking and sometimes contrasting images displaced from their original context (Ades, 1976, page 7). These early postcards, produced mostly in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, collapsed images of kings, national flags, and famous buildings into a single medium. Through the representation of national or regional symbols, postcards contributed to the process of city, region or nation branding. By displaying regional pride and local particularities, postcards also established a link between regional identity and tourism, which heavily relied on the authenticity of a site. In his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dan MacCannell writes:

In the establishment of modern society, the individual act of sightseeing is probably less important than the ceremonial ratification of authentic attractions as objects of ultimate value, a ratification at once caused by and resulting in gathering of tourists around an attraction and measurable to a certain degree by the time and distance the tourists travel to reach it. The actual act of communion between tourist and attraction is less important than the *image* or the *idea* of society that the collective act generates. (MacCannell, 1999, pages 14 – 15)

Furthermore, Mike Crang writes that "We may perhaps note how the practices of picturing become more important than the qualities of the object itself" (Crang, 1996, page 438). As a contribution to the nineteenth century process of nation

building, postcards disseminated images that relied on the identity of a particular site. These postcards were careful assemblies of images of places, heroic infrastructural projects, famous people or animals. Early postcards of Switzerland, for example, display pastoral imagery of a countryside with recognizable Alpine landscape in the background and farmers with their cows in the foreground (Boyarsky, 1996, page 11). While the representation of Swiss landscape conforms to the figural representation of an actual site, the images of cows represent a more complex metaphor, a dialectic of nature embodied in a cow-site (milk production) and a cow-sight (national symbol). Mike Crang defines a process of transition from site to sight as a transformation of urban imagery in which the site itself becomes less important while the image (sight) of that location becomes a historical construct through which we perceive that history (Crang, 1996, page 439). This domination of images is in part based on postcards and their ability to transcend the actual processes that are taking place in a particular site into a representation of places and processes in it.

THEORIZING COLLECTIONS

Popular imagery of the postcard is not a medium with a universally accepted meaning. It is a medium that provides subjective evidence of history—through the creation of a culturally fluid space ready to be appropriated—a space whose ideological meaning is only acquired through its reading and dissemination. As a result, postcards can mean different things to different readers, supporting and illustrating different arguments leading to different conclusions within different cultural contexts. The first step in theorizing postcards is the process of their collection. Collecting here should not be mistaken for the process of apparently objective historical evidence. The collecting of postcards is both a conscious and an unconscious process, through which one's cultural identity and personal preferences are constructed and revealed. From there, a re-interpretation of history is constructed through externalization of those preferences, albeit within another kind of historical time. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes:

The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure, which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous with the collection's world. (Stewart, 1993, page 151)

The (re)construction of history as a new constellation of time/space (Benjamin, 1969, page 225) is only one of the processes that take place in the collection. The other processes include fetishization, the pleasure of possessing an object that is dependent upon others, and displacement, the removing of the objects of the collection from its original context and use value.

Postcard collections remove objects from their original context of consumer tourism into a world of subjective spatial and temporal narrative, replacing everyday consumption with the production of history.

The collector abstracts everyday processes first through the miniature ready-made format of postcards, and secondly through the de- and re-contextualizing processes of new visual, spatial and temporal relationships of the collection as a whole. This reduces the complexities of the worlds around us—the public, the private, the architectural, the urban, the political, the economic—into a single two-dimensional sight. Finally, collections acquire their value only if compared to other collections and others' desires to possess things. Comparing collections to other collections is what generates their value. This value is in part economic, rational, measurable, and institutionalized through the art and antique market; but it is also derived from the less measurable world of personal fantasies. The collection therefore has a double function, extending the idea of value, or use value even, into a much more subjective world of desires. Traditional collections are privatized worlds based on desires to possess things and to enclose them (and close them, so to speak) within the privacy of a domestic environment. This closeness and enclosure overshadows the use value of the object, especially in the case of inexpensive everyday objects, such as postcards or souvenirs.

Not to be overlooked here is the fact the appropriation of postcards comes after the act of their collection. Unlike the single postcard, postcard collections represent a privatized view of an individual subject. If later externalized into the world of architectural culture, the appropriation process changes the value of the collection yet again. Authenticating distant traveling experiences, vintage postcards are also souvenirs that shockingly "*discredit* the present" (Stewart, 1993, page 139). They embody an idea of a different past, something forgotten and more intimate; something to which we compare our alienated present.

This critique of the present condition represents the beginning of Boyarsky's appropriation of postcards. Rem Koolhaas's appropriation of postcards also departs from a similar point, aimed at discrediting the present. Although using different strategies of appropriation, and ultimately different goals, both authors recognize the *postcard* as a valued site for the construction and circulation of popular meanings of the built environment, transforming it into professionally signifying evidence.

THE BOYARSKY COLLECTION

Alvin Boyarsky's postcard collection was developed over a long period of time, and centered on the collector's passion for postcards and collecting. Bought at airports, antique stores, and

bookstores, the Boyarsky postcards are stored in several boxes in the domestic environment of the Boyarsky home in London. Most of them are vintage postcards, but some are 1960's and 1970's postcards of large infrastructural networks. Alvin Boyarsky collected and disseminated vintage industrial postcards of Chicago, Iowa, Oklahoma, and other regions in the US. Most of them represent the heroic imagery of the industrial revolution: grain elevators, slaughterhouses, bridges and canals, airports, etc. Such industrial and agricultural imagery was well depicted in the writings of other scholars and practitioners – most notably Siegfried Giedion in *Mechanization Takes Command* and Le Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture*. Similar to popular postcards, such industrial imagery originated in fields other than architecture, leaving endless possibilities for its architectural (re)presentation and interpretation. Alvin Boyarsky collected postcards systematically and made conscious decisions about what types of postcards were appropriate for the collection. Like Giedion before him, Boyarsky was particularly interested in those postcards that represented anonymous and unrecognized histories. An absence of any kind of high art or high architecture objects is therefore evident in his collection. There are no postcards of heroic buildings designed by master architects. Instead, the collection is mostly composed of nineteenth century and twenty century postcards of Chicago representing the city's most famous sites of labor, such as grain elevators, steel mills, slaughterhouses, highways, and airports.

Figure 1 represents a 1964 postcard of the South Side of Chicago, with the city depicted in a frontal perspective view. What is interesting here is that the only thing we see is an endless 19th century landscape of Union Stock Yards, with blocks of fenced cattle framed by the elevated train. The early postcards of Chicago stockyards are therefore very sincere in their depiction of the South Side of the city, showing endless blocks of cattle in the dark landscape of the stockyards. The stockyards are seen as a site of labor that transcends into a sight of Chicago, a sight that immigrant workers could use to send messages to their countries of origin and invite even more workers to join them. Housing and social spaces of workers were normally adjacent to the sites of their labor, so that in a way these images represented the world they lived in. Furthermore, in these depictions Chicago was seen as a symbol of change and progress – a Benjaminian “wish-image” which stood in sharp contrast to the pre-industrial past. Very soon this comfort with *change* would be questioned and Chicago would become the site of major political unrests of the nineteenth century. The fear of change spread from the production line to the social spaces of the city, in turn impacting the representation of the city; the images of sites of labor were abandoned. But, it was not only the representation that posed a threat; workers' pubs were removed from those corners close to the factories in order to prevent workers from gathering, striking or rioting. By collecting these images of labor and production, Boyarsky wanted to act as a social critic and was well aware that the postcard itself does not (or cannot directly) speak of these

conflicts. In his essay *Chicago a la Carte*, he therefore decided to juxtapose postcards of stockyards with images of 1960s political riots.

Through his collection, Boyarsky acted both as a tourist and as an architectural critic. Through his interest in industrial imagery he extended Siegfried Giedion's and Frederick L. Olmsted's tradition of touring industrial sights and appropriating them for architectural discourse. These architectural tourists were conscious about the potential of a new (industrial) world that was being born right before their eyes; a world where humankind was being fully drawn into the industrial race of producing ever more commodities, with ever growing speed and efficiency. In his book, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, William Cronon writes:

‘Great as this wonderful city is in everything,’ wrote a British traveler, ‘it seems that the first place among its strong points must be given to the celerity and comprehensiveness of the Chicago style of killing hogs.’ A New Zealand tourist told of having shown an American visitor one of his nation's great natural wonders, the geysers at Rotorua, only to have the American, unimpressed, remark, ‘Well, I guess, stranger, you would reckon it a grander sight to see a man standing to his waist in blood sticking pigs. We do that in my country.’ Although the New Zealander had been taken aback by this remark, which appeared ‘at the time a leap from the sublime to the ridiculous,’ he decided after finally visiting the Chicago stockyards for himself that the American ‘was quite right. It was a wonderful sight, and almost true to the letter.’ (Cronon, 1991, page 208)

Boyarsky was thus not the only one who saw these images as beautiful. The shocking depictions of slaughter seemed to have pleased multiple audiences – from everyday tourists to architectural tourists. Vintage postcards of Chicago depicting Union Stock Yards were produced in the era of modern excitement with progress, the production line, and new sites of labor. Chicago was a site of numerous technological inventions, and many postcards displayed such inventions with great pride. Another postcard from Boyarsky's collection represents a hog-killing device used in the slaughterhouses of the South Side of Chicago (figure 4). What is interesting here is that the only reference to the site is the word “Chicago,” while the location of the stockyards as a site of labor is fully abstracted into a sight of mechanized animal death. Boyarsky, like many other scholars, saw a great potential in these images of industrial reality – a potential for an ideological offensive. While Giedion aimed at a mass audience and its conversion to modern architecture, Boyarsky was more concerned with the crisis of modernism and its failed social ideals.

Although the shocking potential of such images of slaughter is unquestionable, for Boyarsky their social potential was still very

weak. These postcards do not have the impact of XIX century activist documentary photography, such as the work of Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. With the latter's images of slums and congested cities, it was easy to openly argue for public health, urban regulations, and social reform in the modern metropolis. Aware of this weakness in postcards, Boyarsky disseminated elements of his collection in juxtaposition with images of social riots and newspaper clips from the Chicago Tribune announcing the construction of the Sears Tower and casualties at political riots on the same page (Boyarsky, 1996, pages 46–48).

The historical moment in which Alvin Boyarsky's published his essay *Chicago a la Carte* (1970) was quite different from that of Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* and in many ways represented a very turbulent time in Chicago's architectural and political history. Working in Chicago in the late 1960s, Boyarsky felt isolated and squeezed in-between two poles – political riots and the civil rights movement on the one hand and the world of the architectural elite on the other hand. Resorting to the heroic imagery of industrial revolution depicted in Chicago postcards, Boyarsky tried to revive some of the original social ideals of the modern movement. His use of popular postcards can be read as an opposition to the official architectural imagery of high art photography, so well exemplified by the work of the famous Chicago firm Hedrich-Blessing. A passionate participant of the sit ins for Cambodia and active participant of the political debate of the 1960s, Boyarsky created an architectural history of Chicago based on postcards, an history of labor and politics, denying the autonomy of architectural profession and defying the abstraction of labor processes and its separation from the production of urban spaces.

THE KOOLHAAS COLLECTION

Rem Koolhaas, a pupil of Alvin Boyarsky at the Architectural Association, also published postcards, particularly vintage postcards of Coney Island, in his influential manifesto *Delirious New York*. Koolhaas was well aware of his teacher's use of postcards in *Chicago a la Carte*. However, unlike Boyarsky's images of large infrastructural works, Koolhaas's 'collection' focused on the entertainment industry of Coney Island. His book begins, somewhat disingenuously, with a claim that Manhattan is a mountain range of evidence, and that unlike other manifestos, *Delirious New York* is not based on grand claims without proper evidence (Koolhaas, 1994, page 9). Koolhaas did not acknowledge that the mere act of collection of evidence must be recognized as a theoretical discourse – as a way of theorizing through selection and appropriation – and that the Coney Island postcards published in *Delirious New York* cannot be read as innocent images; rather, they are communicative attempts at re-creating architectural history. In this regard, the book is very similar to Boyarsky's *Chicago a la*

Carte, as it re-writes then current perceptions of history through selective publication of data and provocative juxtapositions and montages of popular images.

Like Boyarsky before him, Koolhaas was interested in contemporary conditions as well as the crisis of modern architecture. Unlike Boyarsky, he shifted away from social criticism and seemed more interested in the use value of buildings. An interesting pairing of postcards published in the book is that of Coney Island Luna Park (figure 5, from Koolhaas, 1994, page 40). The first postcard shows the amusement infrastructure of Luna Park in daylight. "A pathetic dimension, an aura of cheapness" observes Koolhaas. For him, Luna Park in daylight offered little excitement. The other postcard, published on the same page, represented Luna Park at night. Koolhaas writes:

For the price of one, Thompson has created two distinct cities, each with its own character, its own life, its own inhabitants. Now, the city itself, is to be lived in shifts; the electric city, phantom offspring of the "real" city, is an even more powerful instrument for the fulfillment of fantasy. (Koolhaas, 1994, page 42)

Like Boyarsky, Koolhaas used the pairing of images and opposing sights to build an argument, thus reinforcing the idea that an image and a collection acquire meaning through comparison with other objects. But unlike Boyarsky, who juxtaposed postcards to newspaper clips and photos of political riots, Koolhaas juxtaposed two postcards from similar cultural contexts, thus presenting the postcard as a socially unproblematic medium. In Koolhaas's work the postcards (and architecture) of Coney Island acquired meaning through the introduction of the effects of electricity and the phantasmagoric representation of the entertainment industry. Disinterested in social conflicts, he focused on the failure of architectural objects from a less critical point of view, recognizing instead a potential for architecture to be fed by the fantastic creations of the entertainment industry and ultimately global market phenomena of late capitalism. Like Boyarsky, his use of postcards was based on the revalorization of past and present through taking popular imagery and turning it into something valued as an historic evidence. Koolhaas's historical context was different to the one in which Boyarsky developed as a critic. A global shift from manufacturing technologies to information and entertainment industries was taking place, dominating architectural discourse of the eighties and nineties. Using similar historical evidence as Boyarsky, he created a very different subjective history of those industries, and a manifesto for his own architecture in the making. Koolhaas turned to the realities of capitalist production when he wrote:

If this infrastructure supports a largely cardboard reality, that is exactly the point. Luna Park is the first manifestation of a curse that is to haunt the architectural profession for the rest of its life, the formula: technology + cardboard

(or any other flimsy material) = reality. (Koolhaas R, 1994, page 42)

Koolhaas displayed his typical interest in the “dangerous” situations of the everyday leisure capitalism, influenced by his teacher Boyarsky (Koolhaas, 1996, page 85). In this way he continued the modern tradition of architectural tourism and its quest for new and shocking sites from which architects can appropriate new ideas. Like Giedion and Olmsted before him, Koolhaas was a selective tourist, motivated by his ideological agenda, though a different one than Boyarsky’s. Denying the beauty of the architectural object of high modernism, he searched for examples in everyday that could de-stabilize perceived notions of good architecture and high culture. But unlike early modernists, he did not look at (then and now) traditional industrial culture, but went further, to look for precedents in new technologies – mostly the entertainment, communication, and fashion industries. Although, in a way, the entertainment industry of Coney Island or a healthy exercise industry that he described could be seen as a contemporary equivalent of the nineteenth century meat packing industry and its fascination with industrially produced food, Koolhaas did not take up a critical political stance like Boyarsky.

CONCLUSION

The two postcard collections discussed in this essay organize the history of the city in their own respective ways. In doing so, they use similar patterns of appropriation. First, industrial and everyday imagery is invested retroactively with new significance; it is revalorized and aestheticized. Second, in both collections postcards derive meaning from the discourse around them, not by the sole fact that they represent a certain sight with a universally accepted meaning. The appropriation of popular imagery offers multiple readings and re-readings, providing critics with the possibility to make conscious decisions about the use value of their collections. Third, the repetition of similar postcards, carefully selected, leads to transformation of sites into sights, thus turning a city into a museum based on a historical documentary structured around tours and sightseeing. Finally, the differences between the two collections are important: the presence of a social agenda in the case of Boyarsky and the shift away from that agenda in the case of Koolhaas must both be recognized. The transition from Boyarsky’s social activism to Koolhaas’ interest in the realities of consumer capitalism, speaks of a much larger shift – a process of intentional erasure and abstraction of labor processes in favor of products that conceal any evidence of their own making.

This transition is also evident in recent images associated with Koolhaas’s work, which acquire the characteristics of postcards, mainly through the form of e-cards, web sites, and sights. The opening ceremony for OMA’s McCormick Tribune Campus

Center is advertised on the Illinois Institute of Technology web site (figure 3). The images of the new building are complemented with photographs of Rem Koolhaas next to Mayor Richard Daley. Unlike the vintage postcard from the Boyarsky collection – full of blood, flesh and labor – this contemporary image is a slick representation of a clean-cut city full of beautiful architecture and inviting landscapes; a city based on a postindustrial economy and sights that can easily be read as an open-air museum.

The images of the Student Center, blended with beautified landscape of the Chicago South Side IIT campus, use the same views as the vintage postcards of the stockyards. In contrast to their historical predecessors, they show a politically and economically neutral landscape, made of buildings and trees (Figure 2). Without Boyarsky’s strategies of juxtaposition to shocking political imagery, this beautified image of the city hides all the complexity of the contemporary social and power structure – mainly the issues of labor, race and immigration that still dominate the South Side of Chicago. Koolhaas referred to Coney Island as a “cardboard reality” and here, surfing the IIT Campus Center web site, we cannot but wonder whether the entire contemporary city is transforming into a cardboard museum? If a museum is a site where history is the passive object of contemplation and mythical continuity, then Koolhaas’ Chicago and many other contemporary cities could easily fit into this category. The city-as-museum offers the hope that “great” architecture is still possible, despite and within the mass media context of a popular mass culture: furthermore, contemporary postcards and web sites display a need for the assurance and comfort, as well as the economic benefits of a city-as-museum – a city of great buildings, brand architects and high art – serving and served by the tourist and entertainment industry. The city-as-museum cannot recognize social tensions, other than perhaps as narrativized for contemplative consumption only. Activist social change at the very best belongs behind the scenes.

Although traditional postcards and more recent e-cards offer many possibilities for re-reading urban history, they also embody the crisis of our time – one that does not acknowledge the existence of social conflict, cultural violence, and unequal global access to power and resources. These images are marked not only by what they represent, but also by what is missed and concealed. Whether in popular picture postcards or on official websites, sights of contemporary labor are still present. at the same time they successfully obscure and conceal social conflicts and power structures in contemporary cities. Like the postcards of Coney Island that revolve around entertainment and use-value based on profit, Koolhaas’s e-cards revolve around advertisements of educational benefits of (and commodified urban tourism based on) famous buildings. It is a paradox that an image of architecture is used as a symbol of change: the McCormick Tribune Campus Center embodies an idea of a new urban campus, safe, beautiful and different. Although nothing

has really changed—neither in the terms of a University structure nor in the terms of the neighborhood in which it is situated—the image of a new building is seen as a representation of a new and “better” urban order.

Nevertheless, traditional postcards and more recently e-cards offer many possibilities for re-reading urban history. A critical reading of the city through postcards is still possible. Boyarsky’s strategy of juxtaposition and montage using postcards and other sources of imagery tells the history of and brings to visibility urban ghosts and shadows (Crang, 1996, page 447) — a history of social conflict that moves beyond the traditional vision of modernity based solely on economical and technological progress.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Postcard—The Chicago Stock Yards, Dexter Press 1964.



Fig. 2. The IIT Campus with the McCormick Tribune Campus Center by OMA in the foreground. Photo by Richard Barnes http://webservices.iit.edu/iit_news/MTCC_gallery.asp

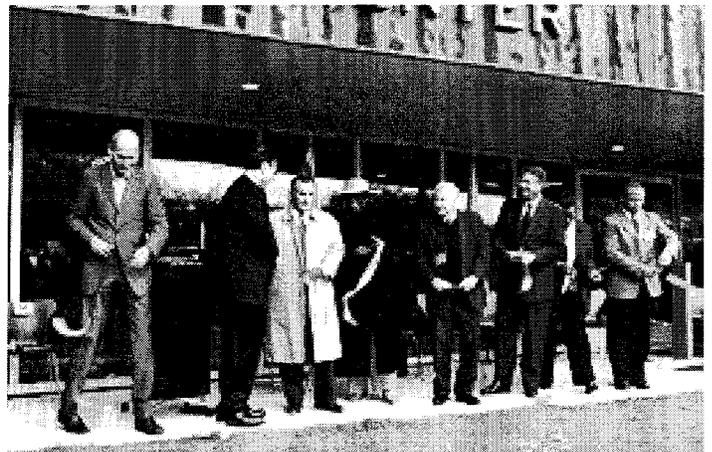
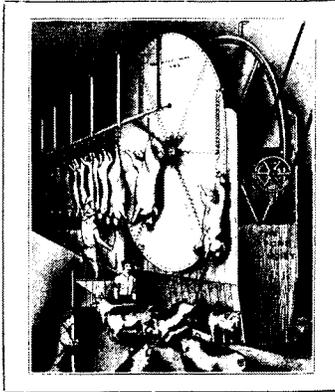
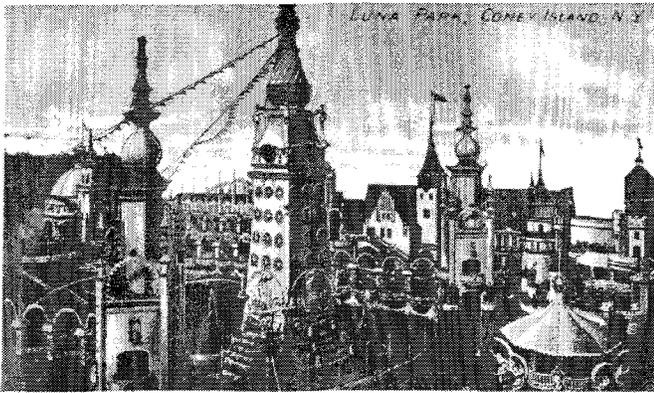


Fig. 3. The opening of the McCormick Tribune Campus Center: Rem Koolhaas (first from left) and Mayor Richard Daley (third from left).

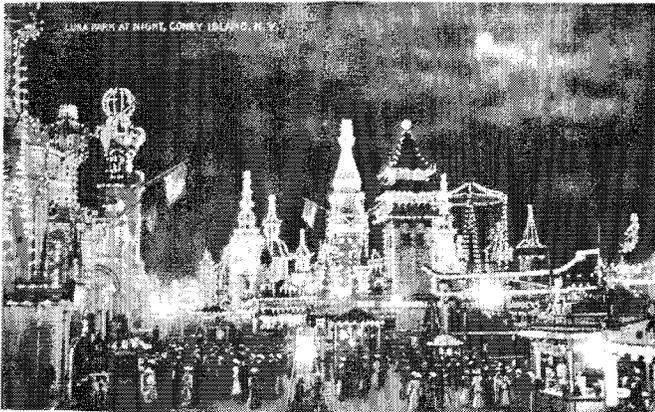


UNION STOCK YARDS
CHICAGO

Fig. 4. Postcard-Union Stock Yards, Chicago, Illinois.



Luna Park skyline by day ...



... and by night

Fig. 5. Luna Park Skyline by day and by night, from Koolhaas R. 1994 *Delirious New York* (The Monacelli Press, New York).