

SKYSCRAPERS AND SLEDGEHAMMERS

The 10th IIAS annual lecture was delivered in Amsterdam on 17 November by world-famous Dutch architect and Harvard professor Rem Koolhaas. Co-founder and partner of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and initiator of AMO, its think-tank/mirror image, Koolhaas' projects include de Kunsthal in Rotterdam, Guggenheim Las Vegas, a Prada boutique in Soho, Casa da Musica in Porto and most spectacularly, the new CCTV headquarters in Beijing. His writings range from his *Delirious New York, a retroactive manifesto* (1978) to his massive 1,500 page *S,M,L,XL* (1995), several projects supervised at Harvard including *Great Leap Forward* (2002) and *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (2002) to his most recent volume between a book and a magazine, *Content* (2005). On these pages of the IIAS newsletter, itself a strange animal between an academic journal and newspaper, we explore why Koolhaas in his last book invites us to *Go East*; why he has a long-time fascination with the Asian city; why the Metabolists have always intrigued him; why OMA has developed an interest in preserving ancient Beijing; and, perhaps most importantly, why he thinks architecture is so closely connected to ideology.

WARCHITECTURE

Rick Dolphijn

Self-acclaimed amateur detective Rem Koolhaas began his talk by tracing the development of the Asian city from the 1930s to today. Analyzing macro-political structures and how they effectuated urban change, he discussed architecture under fascism, democracy, communism and the market economy, the four great ideologies that have dominated East Asia for the past 75 years. What emerged over the course of his lecture was that whatever the name of the political regime, it was authoritarianism – veiled or unveiled – which was the motor of East Asia's rise.

Through the study of strategic infrastructure, Koolhaas showed how Chinese and Japanese governments have reformed the Asian cityscape. Despite changes in name and appearance, their deeper ideas of political/architectural normalcy remained. Japanese fascism always implied Japanese democracy, Chinese capitalism always implied Chinese communism. Differently articulated, differently performed, but similar, emblematic of that urban idealism which considers the utility of the mountain its ability to fill a hole. Two political/architectonic regimes that had big consequences for the Asian city and its architecture. Big in every sense of the word.

Japan and warchitecture

Koolhaas began his talk with memories from early childhood. At eight, his family moved to post-war Jakarta, a conglomerate city of *kampongs*, the village structure found everywhere in Indonesia. In Jakarta, the *kampung* appeared in its most condensed form, making the city very different and much more modern than the ones he knew from Holland. Another thing he remembered from his Indonesian years was that Indonesians regarded the Japanese, at least at the start of their rule, as their liberators.

The Japanese invaded territories in search of *lebensraum*. Like the Germans with their *autobahns* (and the Italians with their innovations in Ethiopia), the Japanese radically restructured the new lands as extensions of their own territory; architectural troops began planning new roads and railways to connect the new land and cities to the old. We can see this as a crime, but it was definitely not the first time architecture and crime proved such a fruitful combination.

Japanese fascism was the second wave of architectural modernism after the European invasion. Every extension of the Japanese empire was – at least in theory – rigorously over-coded by modern planning, offering opportunities for great architects to rise. Here Koolhaas makes the key argument of his talk: war, painfully enough, is good for architecture. Architecture has little to expect from civil society. It is under autocratic, despotic or anti-humanist rule that architecture thrives, where the architect finds a colossal canvas on which to test his principles.

This is an argument that can already be found in Koolhaas' early writings. *Delirious New York*, his architectural manifesto of 1978, argues that the *grid*, the uniform block structure of 13 avenues and 156 streets, gives the tiny island its unique appearance. The production of the Manhattan Grid was 'the most courageous act of prediction in Western civilization...' (1978:18). But it was not an act of empathy. It was an autocratic act, which – not for the first time – was good for architecture.

In his lecture Koolhaas gave another example discussed in *S,M,L,XL*: the city center of Rotterdam, which would never have become a national and international center for architec-

Fragment of an image of the OMA website (www.oma.nl)



...THE DAY AFTER

Zheng Shiling from Shanghai, Xing Ruan from Sydney and Anne-Marie Broudehoux from Quebec City were Koolhaas' discussants following the lecture. To give our guests a chance to meet their Dutch and Flemish brothers in arms, IIAS organized a meeting at the Netherlands Architectural Institute in Rotterdam the following day. Bearing the title *(Per)forming Culture; Architecture and Life in the Chinese Megalopolis*, specialists of contemporary Chinese urban change – including scholars of architectural theory, anthropology, sinology and philosophy as well as conservators, journalists and urban developers – engaged our international guests in discussion, entering territory left untouched or only hinted at the day before.

ture had Nazi Germany not bombarded it in May 1940. We cannot but conclude that imperialist, autocratic regimes are good for architecture. They give rise to the most daring architects and the most spectacular buildings.

Back to Japan's imperialist expansion. Here too we see a group of young architects benefiting from opened land. Among them, recent graduate Kenzo Tange, soon-to-be father of the Metabolist movement (see frame), child prodigy of the Japanese regime. In the postwar period, a democratic government that, as Koolhaas and his team found out, bought architectural competitions by corrupting juries. Tange was the true Manchurian Candidate, Koolhaas claims, as shadowy politics turned this veteran of the fascist order into the face of the new democratic architecture that placed Japan on the world map. Tange, backed by his administrative creator Shimokobe and talented ghost-writers, brought the Metabolists their worldwide fame at the 1960 World Design Conference. Their zenith was at the 1970 World Fair when Japan, thanks to technological giants such as Sony, represented true modernism. A modernism which in architecture was very much connected to Superstar Tange.

China and warchitecture

The newly installed Chinese communist regime began restructuring cities following Soviet ideology. Mao's Red Book contains pictures of villages with forests of chimneys, an image seen today in every corner of the country, homage to the architectural revolution that accompanied communist revolution. Despite rigorous and often brutal spatial reforms following the revolution, things really took off under Deng Xiaoping. 'To get rich is glorious', stated the paramount leader. And it shows, especially in town planning and in the ultra-fast composition of stacks of concrete that only vaguely remind us of the city as defined in the post-industrial West.

With his students, Koolhaas studied developments in the Pearl River Delta, five cities from Hong Kong to Macau, very different in character but linked in their growth. It is estimated that these five cities today house 20 million people, and will, in less than 20 years, turn into a single urban conglomerate of 36 to 40 million inhabitants. Of nightmarish proportions, the largest in the world.

What is happening today in the Pearl River Delta, Koolhaas notes, is not very different from what happened in Manchuria 65 years ago. Here, too, land is colonized, regardless of inhabitants. Nature is flattened with unusual rigor, railroads and highways laid down, territory straightened to the party's demands. The government's ruthless optimism and 'blackboard-urbanization' in these Special Economic Zones of unbridled capitalist experimentation is, moreover, a continuation of Maoist tradition. The only difference is that market capitalism has today brought party officials money they previously lacked, providing the regime with the tools to radically restructure territory, in ways the hammer and sickle just weren't capable of.

JAPANESE
MODERNITY:
METABOLISM

Kenzo Tange (1913-2005) was an architect and critic skeptical of the nostalgic use of tradition in Japanese architecture and in what he saw as dull international modernism. He sought something new. Together with brothers in arms Noriaki Kurokawa and Tadeo Ando, Tange combined symbolic forms from Japanese tradition with modern technology, giving rise to the futuristic and fluid forms that symbolizes Asia's new modernity. Tange's most famous project, the Tokyo Bay area, seems to show the Asian need to surpass every western accomplishment. Tange, too, organizes territory following a grid, but outran Manhattan and other American cities by taming the water. It was in Singapore (another early 'democratic' state under Lee Kuan Yew's iron rule) where the modern metabolists' vision was most nearly realized.

In the meeting at the Netherlands Architectural Institute, Shanghai-based architect and theorist Zheng Shiling argued that whereas Japan had succeeded in giving form to a new Asian modernity, the current building boom in China has not led to a new 'Chinese' architecture. Anne-Marie Broudehoux's study of construction for the Beijing Olympics indeed showed the participation of major architects from the West (Norman Foster, PTW, Herzog & de Meuron). But no Chinese master builder is involved in any of these \$500m projects. It is difficult to say why. One could argue that Chinese architects have (out of necessity) specialized in quantity rather than quality. But it may be more plausible to conclude that Chinese officials are only interested in getting China on the world map. And world recognition means the participation of world-famous architects, Zheng sadly concluded.

CHINESE
MODERNITY:
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CCTV = BIGNESS = REMOLOGY

OMA's new CCTV headquarters is 230 meters high and has a floor area of 360,000 square meters. Its novelty lies in its incorporation of every aspect of TV-making (administration, news, broadcasting, studios and program production) in a sequence of inter-connected activities. The building is a monolith, a block with continuous loops of horizontal and vertical sections, an urban site rather than a finger pointing to the sky. The irregular grid on the building's facades is an expression of the forces traveling throughout its structure, western and Chinese and neither.

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Artistic impression of the CCTV complex in Beijing

In *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas explains ultimate architecture, what mobilizes architecture's full intelligence. He conceptualizes it as 'BIGNESS'. It began about a century ago, paralleling other modernist revolutions in the arts, a time when creative spirits like Picasso, Marinetti and Joyce radicalized their fields, united by a quest for what their particular artform or medium of expression was all about. Picasso experimented with painting as a two-dimensional play of colours and lines; Joyce worked the margins of literature by messing with language, signs and print; Marinetti, frontman of the Italian Futurists, revolutionized art by introducing speed and volatility into presumably static forms.

With Mies van der Rohe, Gropius and Lloyd Wright, architecture began a productive period of experimentation, a search that Koolhaas summarizes under five themes: a search for multiplicity, for elevation, for the facade, for a disintegration of the urban tissue and most important, for a new ethics, beyond good and evil, beyond the imaginable. These

themes give rise to Bigness. A true Nietzschean search for inhuman quantity: because architecture in the end can *only* achieve its goal by becoming ultrabig and fiercely inhuman. Can CCTV architecture therefore be bad, as Xing Ruan asked Rem after his lecture? No it cannot. It can never be. Architecture works with crime, with despotic regimes, because this is the way to its goal: to achieve bigness. CCTV is no doubt the biggest building Rem Koolhaas has made. It performs the ultimate REMOLOGY.

DOWN FALL OF THE SKYSCRAPER

The history of the skyscraper is of eastward travel. Starting in the 1920s in New York and Chicago, it arrived in Europe and Africa after the Second World War and then on to Asia. In the meantime its functions and meanings changed. The skyscraper has always been a capitalist tool, but there is no single way for capitalism to use it. Differences are easy to find. New York's Seagram Building is a capitalist machine made of steel and glass because the building integrates spaces and times, within and without. How different are these complex early 20th century constructions from the high-rises now merely collecting bureaucrats and businessmen in Pudong, the new Shanghai? One dimensional compositions, created merely to impress. Just look at the symbol of Pudong, the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. A building that hardly has an inside, a sign of potentiality, only to be admired from the other side of the Huangpu River, the new Bund/the old City. The skyscraper is the emblem of the market economy, of ultra-democracy, of VIAGRA-potency. Koolhaas claims he could realize his CCTV non-skyscraper only in Beijing, in the still communist heart of increasingly capitalist China. CCTV is a statement against the banality of the skyscraper, an exploration of the space of communism for architecture today. And thus Koolhaas, in *Content*, invites us to **KILL THE SKYSCRAPER!**

WELCOME TO PHOTOSHOPOLIS!

If there is one thing Koolhaas tries to grasp in his writings, it is how cities of today perform a different logic than cities of the past. A logic he continuously conceptualizes in neologisms. Koolhaas is not interested in clarifying, nor in framing history. He writes experiences, swamping us with images and signs of the unknown, the unheard of, urging us to think the social, cultural, political and architectural consequences of these new forms of life.

So what makes the Chinese contemporary cityscape? Looking at the urbanization of the Pearl River Delta, of the Three Gorges region, of the deconstructed cities of Shanghai and Beijing, Koolhaas overwhelms us with questions from what he sees, hears and feels. Isn't it strange that the city centre of Shenzhen is a golf-course? What of our idea that skyscrapers form urban conglomerates, when, in China, a ten-story building is as readily built in a 'rural' environment? And how come the government and private organizations have no qualms about the enormously expensive Wu Freeway (it hardly touches the ground) which leads to nowhere?

Koolhaas poses these questions not necessarily to answer but to conceptualize them. The building of seemingly unnecessary infrastructure and even complete towns, he captures in words like 'POTEMKIN CORRIDORS(c)' or 'POTEMKIN CITIES(c)'. The urban landscape no longer grows in harmonic concentric layers, separated by time, united by space, but consists of atonal fragments pressed into one another like felt, 'the generic city'. Only gravity makes it stick, an urban form that lacks urbanity, that neglects traditional differences between city and countryside, that thickens the body of the earth with a plaque of urbanity more and more organized by time, less and less by space. And what about Zhouhai, a non-city without public spaces or people, that exists on the horizon but evaporates as soon as you near it? Isn't this merely an 'Announcement of the City'?

In his lecture, Koolhaas stressed the sheer speed by which Chinese cities erupt. Shenzhen, not yet a teenager, already claims several million inhabitants. Everywhere in China, building occurs at great speed, often the product of a simple apple computer in

the kitchen of the parental home. Skyscrapers are designed within weeks. Koolhaas states that the Chinese architect is the most important in the world – the way his product is conceived requires a deep and thorough understanding of the laws of architecture. Or rather, it presupposes a radical unlearning of the laws of architecture which have made it such a cumbersome and lethargic practice.

Such rapid designing cannot happen with pencil and ruler, the standard equipment of architects not long ago. One needs AUTOCAD, or better, PHOTOSHOP, the tool that combines everything possible in one frame. To cut and paste 200 meters of skyscraper in 20 days. This new way of designing has enormous consequences for the kind of city that results. For cutting and pasting does not lead to cities where different styles and forms of building achieve melodic coexistence. The city produced by PHOTOSHOP is the city of frantic coexistence. It is the true 'City of Exacerbated Difference(c)'.

IS OMA GETTING OLD?

Rem closed his lecture by admitting that his bureau has begun doing things he wouldn't have dreamt of ten years ago. A project he considers most eccentric: the preservation of cultural heritage in Beijing. Should traditional *hutongs*, square courtyards enclosed by houses now giving way to modern high rises, be protected for future generations?

The problem with preservation, Koolhaas argues, is that it leads primarily to gentrification, best intentions notwithstanding. It is unlikely that people who lived there will still live there. Preservation is most often thought of in terms of authenticity, the restoration of buildings. But what forms a particular site? Showing a picture of daily life in a Beijing *hutong*, Koolhaas argued that what should be kept was its *atmosphere*, for it is here that these miniature social units differ most from their modern high-rise counterparts. This way, preservation is not about stones or buildings, but keeping what cannot survive in modern environments: the life articulated *between* the buildings and its inhabitants. Nor does it limit the architect to preserving buildings, or forbid new constructions. But it may also ask the architect *not* to take action ... something which comes unnaturally to him, Koolhaas admitted.

Rick Dolphijn lectures cultural philosophy at the cultural studies department at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Currently he is also an IIAS-fellow researching The TIME-city, the Asian Megalopolis and its Production of Life. www.rickdolphijn.com