SKELETONS AND SLEDGEBATTERS

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 Kunsthall 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 Daalmeijer New York, his architectural manifest 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 (2004) 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’ book 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.

Rem Koolhaas IIAS annual lecture

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This is an argument that can already be found in Koolhaas’ early writings. Daalmeijer New York, his architectural manifest 1978, argues that the grid, the uniform block structure of 13 avenues and 136 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 architecture 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.

Japan and warchitecture

Kenzo Tange (1913-2005) was an architect and critic skeptical of the nostalgic use of traditions 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 technolog ies, 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 across Manhattan and other American cities by turning 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 new modernity, the current building boom in China has not led to a new ‘Chinese’ architecture. Anne-Marie Brasmeuleans’s study of construction for the Beijing Olympics indeed showed the participation of major architects from the West (Rem Koolhaas, Tange, 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.

...THE DAY AFTER

Zheng Shiling from Shanghai, King Ruan from Sydney and Anne-Marie Brasmeuleans from Quebec City were Koolhaas’ discussants following the lecture. To give our guests a chance to meet their Dutch hosts, an informal meeting was organized at the Netherlands Architectural Institute in Rotterdam the following day. Bearing the title (Performing Culture, Architecture and 1990s Chinese Metabolism) specialists on 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 discussions, entering territory left untouched or only hinted at the day before.

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 close to 300 million people, and will, in the near future, turn into one urban conglomerate of 30 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 Masoudia 65 years ago. Here, too, land is colonized, regardless of inhabitants. Nature is flattened with uneven rigor, railways 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 capital-ist experimentation is, moreover, a continuation of Maoist tradition. The only difference is that market capitalism has today brought party officials money they previously lacked, provid- ing the regime with the tools to radically restructure territory, in ways the hammer and sickle just weren’t capable of.
In S.M.L.K., Koolhaas explains ultimate architecture, what mobilizes architecture’s full intelligence. He conceptualizes it as ‘BIGNESS’. It began about a century ago, parallelizing 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 experimentated 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 pressumably static forms.

With Mies van der Rohe, Gropius and Lloyd Wright, architecture began a productive period of experimentation, a search that Koolhaas summertime five themes: a search for multiplicity, for elevation, for the facade, for a disseminagation 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 lectures cultural philosophy at the cultural

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 Sea-gam Building is a capitalist machine made of steel and glass because the building integrates spaces and times, within and within-out. How different are these com-plex early 20th century construc-tions from the high-rises now merely collecting bureaucrats and businesses in Pudung, the new Shanghai? One dimensional com-positions, created merely to impress, the Samuel-Oil-Tower of Pudung, 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 symbol 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 increas-ingly 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!

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 neo-lo-gisms. Koolhaas is not interested in clarifying, nor in framing history. He writes experiences, swapping 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, Kool- haas overwhelms us with questions from what he sees, hears and feels. Isn’t it strange that the city centre of Shenzen is a golf-course? What of our idea that skyscrapers form urban conglomerates, when, in China, a ten-storey building is as readily built in a ‘rural’ environment? And how come the government and pri-vate organizations have no qualms about the enormously expen-sive Wu Freeway (it hardly touches the ground) which leads to nowhere?

Koolhaas poses these questions not necessary to answer but to conceptualize them. The building of seemingly unnecessary infra-structure 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 atomical frag-ments pressed into one another like felt, ‘the generic city’. Only gravity makes it stick, an urban form that lacks urbanity, that neg-lects traditional differences between-city and countryside, that thickens the body of the earth with a plaque of urbarity and 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 Chi-nese cities erup. 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 with-in 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 archi-tecture. Or rather, it presupposes a radical unlearning of the laws of architecture which have made it such a cumbersome and leathargic 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 enor-mous 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 consistence. 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 is considered most eccentric, the preservation of cultural heritage in Beijing. Should traditional hutongs, square court-yards enclosed by houses now going way to modern high rises, be protected for future generations?

The problem with preservation, Koolhaas argues, is that it leads primarily to gen-erification, best intentions notwithstanding. It is unlikely that people who lived there will still live there. Preservation is most often thought of in terms of authen-ticity, the restoration of buildings. But what forms a particular site? Showing a pic-ture 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 build-ings, but keeping what cannot survive in modern environments: the life articulat-ed between the buildings and its inhabitants. Nor does it limit the architect to pre-serving buildings, or forbid new constructions. But it may also ask the architect not to take action... something which comes unnaturally to him, Koolhaas admit-ted.