

Terrible Beauty of the Twentieth Century

A Portrait of Rem Koolhaas

'Funnily enough I have the feeling that it's not our imagination which is punished in the Netherlands but – much more alarmingly – our logic. It's one thing for them to dismiss us as a bunch of dreamers, but I think what they really can't bear to contemplate is the forbidding logic in our work, the Dutchness that lies behind it.'

This is how Rem Koolhaas (1944-), the Netherlands' most celebrated and most articulate architect, describes his relationship to his native country. While his fame is widespread there – to the point where even TV satirists have poked fun at his celebrity – and his views have dominated debate in recent years, his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) has built little in the Netherlands. On more than one occasion OMA has failed to secure a prestigious commission, and each time its design has given rise to a good deal of talk and controversy, with large sections of the architectural press accusing the client of timidly favouring mediocrity; so that the invisible shadow of an OMA alternative lies over the new building for the Lower House of Parliament in The Hague by Pi de Bruijn, the town hall for the same city by Richard Meier, and the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam by Jo Coenen. Commissions such as the congress centre in Lille and, recently, the Jussieu university library in Paris suggest that the focus of OMA activities may be shifting to France, where Koolhaas has always been greatly admired.

Koolhaas has mixed feelings not only about his native country but also about his profession. Although architecture attracted great interest in the eighties, it became entangled in cosmetic debates where no real issues were at stake. 'Amid such an excess of good manners it is important not to go on being "cool", to become once more gauche, indigestible, impassioned.' With slightly pitying sympathy Koolhaas invokes the utopian architects of the past. We have lost the naïvety of that time, and with it their visionary élan: 'Great progress in sophistication, immense losses in commitment.' What Koolhaas would like to see is an architecture that is visionary without being naïve.

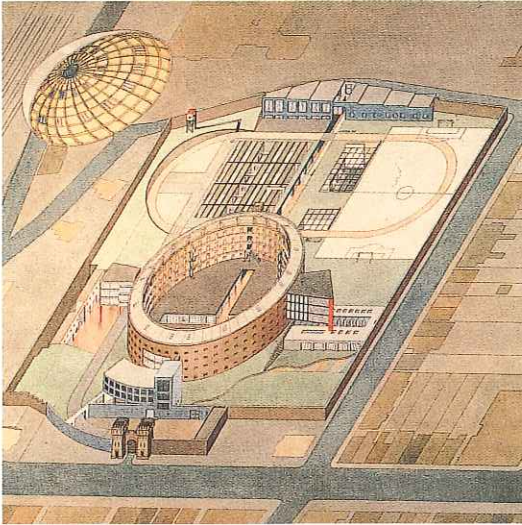
Metropolis

Koolhaas' passionate commitment is succinctly expressed in the name of his practice: Office for Metropolitan Architecture. The name is a statement of intentions. The concept of the metropolis brings together two elements, modernity and the city. The latter is a chaos of activities, the proximity of contrasts, density, conflict and congestion. The modern is what this age has that previous ages did not have: rapid traffic, telecommunications, endless masses of people. The modern is not a utopia with a superior, ideal order; the modern is what is unfinished, complex, uncontrollable.

The prevailing view at the end of the seventies was that modernity and the city were enemies, a view supported by the traumas inflicted on many historic town centres by the unrestrained pursuit of progress. But Koolhaas aims to overcome these traumas through a critical analysis of contemporary experience of the phenomenon of the city. He opposes a concept of the city which leaves no place for what is characteristic of modern life, for something as banal for example as a supermarket. By discussing Rotterdam, Berlin and Atlanta he questions the presumed universal validity of a historic, radial-concentric city plan. With compelling acuity he describes the Berlin Wall, the Les Halles shopping centre penetrating deep into the ground in Paris, the clustered tower blocks of La Défense constricted by urban motorways, the vast scale of the Bijlmer housing development on the edge of Amsterdam, the shapeless fringes of the urban territory: modern phenomena which have radically altered our perception of the city. Being characteristically provocative, he chooses precisely those examples which had been most reviled by the public at large: the beauty of the twentieth century is a 'terrible beauty'.

In 1978 Koolhaas published *Delirious New York*, a witty and lyrical ode to the modern city and to what he called 'the culture of congestion'. The book established his reputation but at the same time gave rise to the under-

OMA, *Panopticon Prison*, Arnhem (Axonometric drawing).



OMA, *Nederlands Dans Theater*, The Hague.



standable misconception that this proponent of metropolitan architecture wanted to transplant 'Manhattanism' to the Old World. That was not the case, however. For Koolhaas, the contemporary European metropolis was entirely different from Manhattan – less dense, less massive. In his view, in Europe today metropolitan potential is to be found less in the historic centres than in the peripheral areas. It is less a matter of the building volumes than of the empty gap. How to give that emptiness an urban significance? – that seems to him the most relevant town planning issue today.

Take for instance the Randstad conurbation in the Netherlands, where the so-called empty zones might as well be described as urbanised, encroached on as they are by haphazard and unplanned housing and industrial estates, expanses of glasshouses and shopping centres. The Randstad is in fact a carpet metropolis, as a former colleague of Koolhaas and kindred spirit, Willem-Jan Neutelings, puts it. Koolhaas himself says: *'If you add up the populations of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague you get 1.5 to 2 million people. The population of the Randstad as a whole is about 6 million. So there are 4.5 million people missing: they live "nowhere" and they represent a metropolitan potential that is only noticeable at present in the traffic jams and the tailbacks on the motorways (...). The Netherlands could achieve a different kind of metropolitanism, one which does not necessarily go with density of mass and as a result is pre-eminently modern.'*

As well as the theory, there is an impressive body of designs. Very often they break away from the expected and predictable. There is a strong emphasis on the conceptual. Existing elements are rearranged, new connections are made, all leading to an entirely new interpretation of the situation. The design for the renovation of a prison in Arnhem*, in which the panopticon principle was neutralised by a few slight changes, is a good example.

Koolhaas' interest in the conceptual is accompanied by a certain distrust of form. Though there are frequent unobtrusive reminders of various modern masters, from Russian Constructivists to Team Ten, he remains sceptical about the futile coercion of form. The way in which he tries to escape from this is one of the most fascinating aspects of his work.

The bus station in Rotterdam, the police building in Almere, and the houses, supermarket and school for the IJ square in Amsterdam – all projects with a modest budget – draw on the formal vocabulary of modern trivia. They seem on the one hand to aim at blending in with the banal surroundings, while on the other they regain their original strangeness through minimal, disturbing touches.

The Nederlands Dans Theater and Byzantium in Amsterdam are buildings with no clearly delineated form. They fit into the city not as objects but as a collage. They are perceived as a discontinuity in the city silhouette, as an intensification of the continuous flow of visual stimuli.

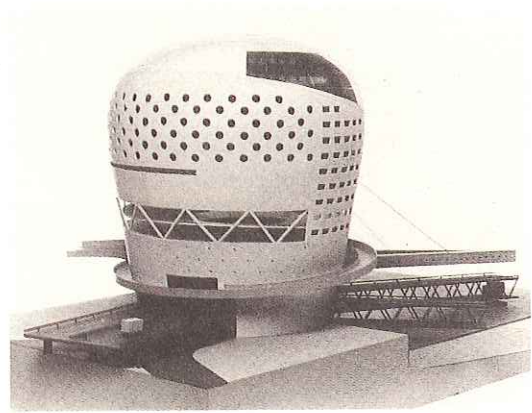
At the same time there are designs with an a- or anti-architectural vision, defying tectonic description: the Zeebrugge terminal*, the patio houses built in Fukuoka, Japan. Finally, there is a long series of designs in which the architecture evaporates until it is on the point of disappearing: the Netherlands Architecture Institute*, the Bibliothèque de France* and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe*. The fixed elements are kept to a minimum, walls are transparent, volumes disappear under the

Designs



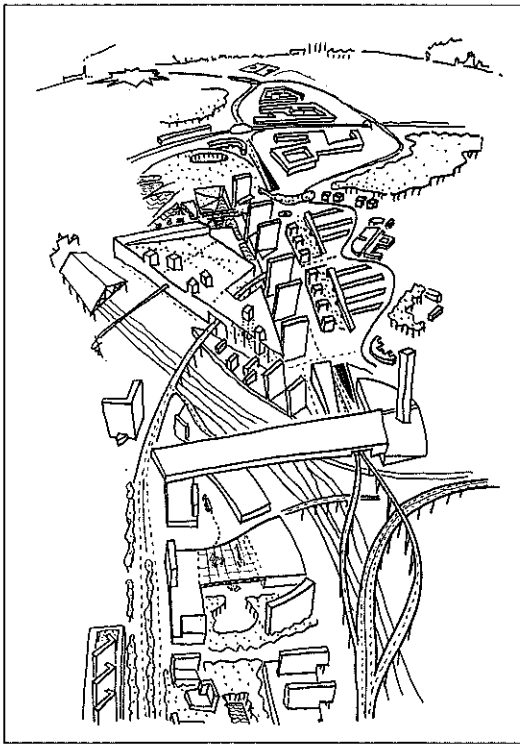
OMA, *Biozentrum*, Frankfurt
(Model, aerial view).

OMA, *Sea Trade Centre*,
Zeebrugge (Model).



ground or behind a film of reflections. The Biozentrum in Frankfurt* is completely buried in the landscape. All that is visible of the Sport Museum for Flevohof* is a high fence of wire mesh: a tenuous block of air resting on the polder.

At one end of the spectrum lie the modest, 'trivial' designs, while at the other are the plans 'where the assignment completely coincides with the ambition of our name'. The Zentrum in Karlsruhe, the Bibliothèque de France and the Sea Trade Centre in Zeebrugge, three competition entries of 1989, are plans of this kind. These are all exceptionally large buildings, with a complex and varied design, which are completely accessible to the public; in other words, buildings for which there are no precedents. 'In each case what the client had in mind was more experimental than what we could have devised ourselves.' In the Zeebrugge terminal, for example, intended for ferry services across the Channel, all the conventional rules of architectural composition are turned upside down. Standing at the end of the jetty, it resembles a retort bubbling with the euphoria of sailing. Through glass floors and yawning voids the waiting passengers see at the same time a spirally ascending car park, a hotel, offices, a casino, a panoramic film screen



OMA, *Euralille*, Lille
(Global drawing).

and a real panorama of the North Sea. The exterior is as enigmatically compact as the interior is confusingly open: a smooth, concrete shell constructed like a cooling tower and crowned by a huge plastic bubble. It looks like a monolith polished by the rough North Sea weather and lit by an internal glow.

A comparable *mise-en-scène* of compressed activity and transport euphoria can be found in the plan for Euralille, the business district now under construction in Lille next to the historic centre and around the station for the high speed train. OMA is involved in this scheme not as the architect but as the town planner. Although the notes to the plan stress the chaotic end result, the compactness of the design is undeniable. It brings together the traffic infrastructure – the high-speed rail link, the ring road, a car park – in a single linear element so that land is freed for urban use. This linear transport combination then forms the base for a line of office blocks, a spine linking the centre with the suburbs. This base itself is made transparent, so that the passage of the high-speed train is visible everywhere, right up to the 'Parvis de la Gare'. The train is embodied into the life of the city, becoming a source of collective pride and excitement. Euralille never imitates the historic city, but it has the qualities one wants from a city: an operational order, and at the same time a variety of impressions, a stimulatingly vital appearance.

The end of 1992 saw the completion of the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, a building for cultural events located in the Museumpark which Koolhaas also designed, in cooperation with the French landscape architect Yves Brunier. In this rich and complex work, his most important public building in the Netherlands, many of the themes discussed are to be found. But it also draws



attention to one aspect that is often neglected or undervalued: Koolhaas' unconventional use of materials. He uses steel sections next to debarked tree trunks, yellow travertine next to roughly worked concrete. All materials are of equal value to the artist, wrote Adolf Loos in 1898, adding that the cladding was more important than the construction which held it in place, and that textiles are the common origin of both architecture and clothing. A particularly clear illustration of this thesis is the Kunsthal's auditorium, which is separated from the surrounding space by a thick curtain. When the auditorium is not in use, the curtain is kept open; when it is rolled up the rising hem gives it the elegance of an evening gown. The architect noted for his conceptual rigour has here produced an especially tactile building. Outside, the walls and roofs are covered with semi-transparent corrugated sheets. They reveal what usually remains unseen: the skeleton of the wall, the movement of the lift – but they conceal the windows. In the evening when artificial light projects the windows onto the corrugated sheets, the effect is unearthly.

PAUL VERMEULEN

Translated by John Rudge.

The designs marked with an asterisk have not been built.

An exhibition of the work of OMA will be held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the end of 1994. On this occasion the book *Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large* (a survey of the history of OMA) will be presented.

FURTHER READING

Rem Koolhaas – Office for Metropolitan Architecture. In: *Architecture and Urbanism*, 217, October 1988.

DIJK, HANS VAN, *Rem Koolhaas, Architect* (text in Dutch and English). Rotterdam, 1992.