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39 Steps to Surfing or The Trajectory of Rem Koolhaas

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39 steps to surfing

OR THE TRAJECTORY OF REM KOOLHAAS

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1 Birth Rem Koolhaas was born too early and too late: 1944. He missed the Second World War and couldn't catch up to the specialists in angst and ennui. His first words as he sat in his high chair at age one-and-a-half were: "What have I got in my life? I've got a rotten life." Ever since then he's had a wry, black humor. This almost connects him to the postwar existentialists, but he was too late to join the Sartre-Camus Club. His parents thought of sending him to a psychiatrist. Instead he went to Indonesia where he saw so many large rats eating the beams in the ceiling that he was cured of melancholia. After the rats his black humor was optimistic – manically so. Rem's too early/too late condition has continued to dog him as he has continuously finished second in competitions he ought to have won (against Bernard Tschumi and Richard Meier, etc.). In the 1960s he predicted his future humiliations – which have come true.

2 Ambition Koolhaas wants the moon – he has the biggest ambition in architecture since Le Corbusier. He would redesign La Défense on the edge of Paris by tearing down one-third of it (Le Corbusier took nine-tenths). He would like to design a whole city – perhaps a region. BIGNESS attracts him – he is fascinated by runaway growth in the suburbs, or outside Atlanta. Exurban, Edge City enralls him. He is a Bolshevik trying to ride and steer the express train of history.

3 History Daniel Burnham's well-known phrase, "Make no little plans," is a forerunner to Koolhaas's notion of the "Extra Large" (XL). Buckminster Fuller too, in his domed New York City proposal, played with the idea of the large. In discussing Singapore, La Défense, etc., Rem sometimes acknowledges the problems that XL brings, but he doesn't always deal with them. Rather, he surfs them.

4 Surfing There are three different ways to deal with the tidal wave of history. Like the young Amsterdammer, one can try to plug up the hole with one's finger – see Prince Charles, Leon Krier, ecologists, reactionaries, protesters of all persuasions. Or, like a critic who is selective, one can attempt to channel the good water to the left and the bad water to the right, thereby becoming a moral valve. Or like a modernist and futurist, one can try to ride the wave in the direction it is going to see how much enjoyment, profit, and art one can get out of it. This takes considerable skill. One crashes. There are no perfect buildings, mistakes are huge, rewards great, fame ensured, ignominy likely. That's why Rem was right to predict humiliations. Surfers are like Faust. They know the bargain with the devil brings regret, but they ask for compensations: creativity, skill in surfing. Being within the hollow of the wave as it pushes, breaks, and covers one in an arc of frothy sun is always described as a peak religious experience. Bystanders love to watch surfers excel, pray, and wipe out. Rem inspires the same feelings in his lectures.

5 Archaeology From his thesis at the Architectural Association – *The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* – to his analysis of the Berlin Wall and his La Défense investigations, he has been obsessed by the outré, the taboo, the despised, the horrible, the second-rate, the banal. He once spoke to me of his natural affinity for the "provincial item" – argyle socks. His love for the 1950s has a provincial ring to it, as does his penchant for Oscar Niemeyer, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and the "generic." In the late 1960s, when I first knew him, he was designing in the god-awful, naive boomerang style of the 1950s, those amoeboid Wally Harrison shapes that everybody hated. I didn't realize then that he liked to be "bad."

CHARLES JENCKS IS KNOWN for his books questioning modern architecture and defining its successors – late-, neo-, and post-modern architecture. He divides his time between lecturing, writing, and building in the United States and the United Kingdom.

6 Generic There is a 1930s communist youth in Rem, the true believer in the liberating potential of anonymity, mass production, Brave New World, and all that rubbish. He refuses to acknowledge that the “God that failed” has failed. At the same time he is a surrealist (that means a realist too) and he knows his dreams of bigness, mass-production, and anonymity are dangerous. There’s something very pure in market forces run amok: suburban Atlanta, Singapore, and big business with fascist overtones attract Rem. But he admits these are disasters over which he will surf. In accepting much that others would reject – totalitarianism, economic coercion, generic planning, tabula rasa, strip development – he tries to discover “what is left to be exploited.” He does not moralize, but like the classic avant-gardist tries to cut out new territory from this urban wilderness. He studies it like a pathfinder, an archaeologist of the future.

7 Modernism Rem’s “Learning from Las Vegas” is “Learning from Singapore.” He is both a post-modern modernist and a modern post-modernist. At the end of the day his modernism seems to remain the major classifier, but he is a pluralist. He seems basically within the modernist canon but at the same time he’s been infected not only by me but by a lot of other post-modern doctrines. Even though he dislikes post-modernism and many of its guises, he nevertheless has been liberated by its imagery, by its ability to combine references in a way that was unthinkable before it. For example, post-modernism allowed him to put wooden columns in the Rotterdam Kunsthal. On the other hand, his limitation to purism and abstraction, the Miesian camp, shows that he is still very much tightly confined within the modernist paradigm. His confusion is helpful because the mixed audience that is today’s constituency likes to project its own classification onto its object of desire.

8 Task The unfinished project of modernity (or post-modernity?) is his to continue (La Défense, Lille); on the other hand it’s also clear he’s continuing the project of post-modernity insofar as it comes out of surrealism. Rem is running two horse races. Audiences for both project their hopes and fantasies.

9 Cool Rem doesn’t really know where he fits, which is one of his attractions. He does know that he falls between the pigeonholes. In any case, surfers don’t tell, they’re supercool. How can you ride a wave if you’re thinking morally or categorically? (Surrealist surfers worry about immediate things: how to build the largest project in Europe – “Virtual Lille” – without crashing.)

10 War Buckminster Fuller was often commissioned for extreme situations – his domes were flown in by the U.S. Army; he built his ambitious inventions in *extremis*. At Rem’s “Virtual Lille” (Rem’s name for his virtual city of 30 million), necessity is the tank force of invention. Mayor, politicians, Mitterrand, Kohl, developers, traffic engineers, bankers, whole industries are geared up for the war effort of finishing on time with a victory; no one can stop D-Day. The Biggest Building Must Land, or everyone will die. This focuses minds and allows Rem a green light on many inventions. The prospective clients asked, “How would you resolve the knot between the proposed high-speed railroad and highway?” Rem replied, “By creating the largest underground parking in Europe – an underground podium on which would sit the greatest mass for the huge density of activities which we would save from swamping Old Lille. Old fortifications were available. We started the next day and flew forward without time for reflection.” Minds concentrated by total war. Everyone miraculously agrees to the most amazing proposals. Rem cannot believe it; they cannot afford not to. War planning – a good position to be in for a surrealist surfer.

11 Virtual Just because Lille is 50 minutes by TGV train from Paris, 70 minutes from London, and in the center of a population of some 40–70 million, is it a virtual city? Or is it a virtual city because no other organism defines the phenomenon defined by Lille? Do these millions of “inhabitants” ever talk to each other? Community is based on real communication – not speed. This is “virtual speak,” the kinds of things cybernerds say to each other, which then becomes the very stuff of politicians. One can hear the mayor of Lille speaking to the virtual voters of “Our great Virtual . . .” Crash. Is the surf up or down?

12 Bad In the late 1970s “bad painting” became current in many urban centers – Keith Haring, graffiti art, Post-Punk, and ugly cartoon-art were celebrated for their maladroitness. It reflects urban reality, which stinks. Frank Gehry made something of this, and appears to have liberated Rem’s proclivities. He admits to having loosened up after seeing Frank. One can see the shift in his work around 1986–88. It gets more powerful, ugly, risky – in a word (good) BAD. Orange plastic fencing and Astroturf as the culmination of the *promenade architecturale*. Roll over Corb.

13 Beauty Unexpected. Nasty. Lugubrious. Convulsive. Paroxysmal. Villa Dall’Ava shows the mad logic of his buildings and their “beauty.” The house is a collision of materials, industrial and natural – the definitions of surrealist beauty. The worse the better.

14 Corpse The Villa Dall’Ava is a living exquisite corpse constructed from Le Corbusier (ground floor) under Mies van der Rohe (rotated main floor), covered by Gehry materials and Tadao Ando sides. A cocktail-stick forest entry, bamboo sliding walls, frosted glass, and disgusting orange plastic fencing are parts borrowed from the vernacular and grafted onto the body.

15 Cosmic Since this flat rooftop with pool with a view of Paris is worthy of Homer (as Le Corbusier used to say), I suggested to Rem it might have a fitting culmination: a sculpture, telescope, cosmic object. Anything to acknowledge the route and culmination, which is equivalent to that of the Villa Savoye. But orange plastic fencing (the temporary kind, not even Gehry’s chain-link) may be there forever precisely because it is so inappropriate and awe-

full. Recall the surrealists' third definition of beauty.

16 Drawing

Bad artists, like Le Corbusier, do not mind showing their quick sketches and proclaiming them art. Since 95 percent of architects' presentation drawings are meticulous and uninventive – professional kitsch done to seduce someone – Rem has evolved his own language of working and presentation. It does not allow for refinements, shadings, nuances – the gamut of feelings evoked by the classical tradition. Look at his conceptual sketches for the Lille Congrexpo, or the perspective of what he calls the “Piranesian Space” (invoking the classical). But Piranesi did not draw like Keith Haring – none of this flat, maladroit, clumsy line. Nor did he have to build his runaway spaces in 15 minutes. Le Corbusier and Rem do. They think and sketch the same way – fast, with invention, logic, and wildness. “Zee passion of zee initial sketch must be preserved in zee building – it never takes me more than two minutes to design one – longer spoils zee passion of zee sketch.” That, or something very much like it, is the aesthetic manner and creative method enunciated by Phillippe Starck.

17 Wildness Rem allows his sketches to run away with him in a form of self-induced romantic wildness. It's very important that he keep that quality in his work. If he lost it he would lose his Remness.

18 Time

(real) Lived like this, design time is Real Time. There are no copies, only originals. Remember when Le Corbusier came to what he called “The Land of the Timid People” in 1935 and made his drawings for a city of five million people in front of 300 hungry-eyed Vassar girls? (“Six hundred eyes were fastened upon me as I hurtled across the stage impassioned by their hungry eyes, filling the sheets and papers with more and more drawings. Frantically, sexually, euphorically . . .”) The quote may not be right, but it never is in fast time; no one has time to look it up. “Originals only.”

19 European America is fertile territory for the European. Recall Tom Wolfe's theory of dazed bourgeois Americans “taking it like a man.” Rem's *Delirious New York* is a retrospective manifesto ghostwritten by Adolf Loos, Mies, Corb, New Amsterdammers, and, above all, Salvador Dalí. All Europeans.

20 Paranoid Twenty years ago Rem told me he was influenced by Dalí's paranoid-critical method of creation. Anyone who wants to understand where Rem is coming from should go to Dalí's book, look this “PC” method up, and then look at the great painting in *Delirious New York* of *The Captive Globe*. There it is, 2,028 identical New York City blocks, each with its own democratic/fascist mania. Every block is a Checkpoint Charlie excluding all those who don't have the same mania, the same paranoid conjecture.

21 Pluralism As long as it's modernist (approved by MoMA), you can have any pluralism you want. Rem has the intolerance of many modernist pluralists, left liberals.

Whereas Noam Chomsky and the real freedom-lover will allow the defense of positions they hate, the modernist pluralist allows only 1,000 shades of gray, white, black, and abstract. Rem shoehorns all this variety into modernist skyscrapers.

22 Compositional Method I No details, just juxtaposition of pure forms and materials. OMA's Byzantium Building – offices, shops, and apartments in Amsterdam, 1990 – is typical:

black grid juxtaposed to blue grid juxtaposed to angled gold canopy juxtaposed to skewed glazing and all of this smashed into by the Big Juxtaposition, the curved, cantilevered, cornered Gold Pillbox.

23 Compositional Method II Crazy logic. Again, like Le Corbusier (and James Stirling), Rem loves an upside-down logic, a crazy rationality which no one would think of except perhaps a mad Cartesian. This method fits surrealism to a T and is why I used to write about Rem as a Surrationalist. His Kunsthall in Rotterdam, sited half on the side of a road-bank and flat park area, inverts expectations. Any normal architect would have shown the drop in section on the elevation and would have had a clear route and entrance. Instead, Rem places a huge rectangular box over slope and plane, enters by the middle of the building on a ramp, hangs masonry above glass, changes the material – Juxtaposition! – at each corner, he uses orange I-beams for ornament (Mies as ornament, how very P-M), ramp as exhibition space (how very dizzy), and tree stumps as columns (how very surreal). It works much better than customary logic. I love the statue of the bedouin and camel that graces the orange Miesian cornice. It provides just the representation and small detail needed. Rem hates it.

24 Compositional Method III

Ramped Superposition was the new organizational idea reached in the library project for Jussieu in Paris. He had worked out part of this in previous ramped schemes for the private house, the Kunsthall, etc., and in his schemes for Karlsruhe. Ramp as floor, column grid as order, blob as incident . . . this is his most advanced point. Again the problem is the same: no top, no bottom, no representation, no scale – just a facade of glistening glass scales. It's enough to drive you crazy if you're trying to read the building in a conventional sense. But that's your fault, stupid, because such buildings are not meant to be understood at first, second, or third glance. These problems constitute The New Modern Aesthetic & Orthodoxy.

25 Representation Like Stirling (as Colin Rowe said), Rem does not know how to “top” his buildings; he just ends them. Like most late- and new modernists, he does not know what to represent in terms of sculpture, ornament, civic life, permanence, shared value. This might be a grave disadvantage for Rem, except most architects suffer from it too. They are confused and emasculated by agnosticism. They don't know what to put in the central square, or on the top of their building. In this sense all of Rem's buildings are unfinished.



Rem Koolhaas whalewatching off Cape Cod, August 1994

26 Large Every architect worth his salt has restricted taste and can't do everything. This is a grave disadvantage in the modern and post-modern worlds which demand that the architect be everywhere and design everything yesterday. In my 35 years as a critic, I have known over 100 architects well, maybe 1,000 superficially, and 10,000 through the media. There is not one that is adequate to the job: be everywhere, do everything. I offer this truth to the architectural profession: there is no right method, single style, adequate sensibility for any job over 10,000 square feet. The profession has not thanked me. The rule is: break up bigger jobs into smaller chunks, dole them out to different architects; change sensibilities every 10,000 square feet. Rem, with his Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large philosophy, doesn't want to know. He has divided up Lille when it gets Extra Large, but not when it's Medium. He is still too much a Bolshevik at heart, and when I reprove him for this and tell him post-modernism was created to protest the "Too Big" he's not interested. Rem wants to be, like Kubitschek, Robert Moses, and Le Corbusier, "Too Big."

27 Small Rem's big schemes are much too small. Regional, multicultural, ecological, global, cosmic are the scales where the big thought and action occur today. This has not yet been assimilated by the architectural profession. It is still in the mind-set of the Athens Charter, city planning, late capitalism, corporate finance. Architects flock after global flight capital and land in swarms wherever it goes.

28 Boutique It's no use thinking that Boutique Architecture is the same as Extra Large building; they ought to have different names – "architecture" and "financetexture." Who does the latter well? Foster, Piano, Rogers, Pelli. But none of them have the creative madness and surrational logic of Rem. The juxtaposition of modernist corpses.

29 Bigness Rem has half-theorized this. He has not taken on "The Ivan Illich Law of Architecture" (coined by me in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*) which tells an architect what happens when it gets "Too Big": it usually gets more boring. Rem sometimes professes to like the boring; he likes Warhol movies and Warhol epigrams. On the other hand, his large buildings are a lot less boring than the other Too Big architects because of his method of combining disparate modernist images. The exquisite corpse saves him. Also he has discovered one truth of Bigness: new forms emerge, new organizational types.

30 Antecedent Surreal superposition, constructivists, Superstudio, Archizoom, Cedric Price. When I knew Rem in the late 1960s he complained that he always had a good idea two years too early, before the right time, when Hans Hollein or Superstudio cashed it in. Nevertheless, by staying with some ideas, Rem has found their time has come around again – this time for him. In a public lecture he once called the indomitable Cedric Price "a Prince Trying to Turn Into a Frog"; the jibe hit home, Price was mortified. Rem never forgot Price's *Potteries Thinkbelt* and *Funpalace*. They became the models for his amazing organizational wonder, Parc de la Villette. This has five layers of organization run on top of each other and through each other.

31 Harvard On the faculty here, Rem also represents the establishment. Everyone knows, since Tom Wolfe has been pointing it out for 30 years, that the American cultural circuit demands a deft mixture of avant-gardism, shock-of-the-new, radical-chic, and bourgeois grace. You must be revolutionary, but not really. It's the game of American culture and its rules have been fixed, at least since the 1960s. Bernard Tschumi, dean of the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia University, is the other example that proves the rule: if you want to climb to the top of the American establishment, get born in Europe. Peter Eisenman chose the wrong place.

32 Game In American culture all good things come from the East (with the exception of Frank). Of course Rem does not really want to play this game, which is perhaps why he is winning. He wants to be a New Yorker-Londoner-Parisian-Cantabridgean. He doesn't want to be Dutch, at the moment. They have not treated him as well as he thinks they might have done. After all, he is the only Dutchman who lives in London, commutes daily, speaks five languages, and used to look like Jean-Louis Barrault.

33 Hollywood Rem would have preferred not to be a movie star but to be a film director. He told me he worked for Russ Meyer, the great producer of urban pastoral pornography, and would meet him at London's Heathrow for wildly improbably sexual discussions. I don't believe any of this, even if it's true, because it sounds like a Dalian PC (Paranoid Conjecture, not Political Correctness). Rem, like Dalí, might make up "false interuterine memories" – if he had the time.

34 Scriptwriter Rem saw his work as providing narrative, as the architecture of snippets, as film clips. In working out the "culture of congestion" of New York, he saw a delirium, the congestion of 32 different films going on at the same time. He saw that his contribution was to introduce this concept of narrative architecture.

35 EC-Man Rem is the only European, the only EC-Man, I know. He commutes between three or four countries per day, speaking all the local dialects – German, French, Dutch, English, Other. I once was invited to dinner by Rem in Lille; it was seven-thirty in the evening and we were a country or two away, in Rotterdam – about 160 miles. We got in his rented car, averaged 140, and sped across borders flashing an EC identity card. Arrived at a multistar restaurant in Lille and sat down to eat amid a clientele dressed in black-tie: the local socialist power structure. EC-men. They change clothes four times a day, change accents six, and slither in

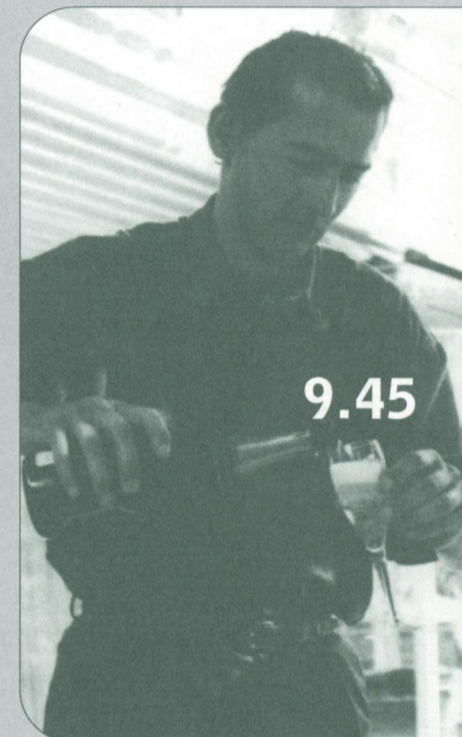
and out of conflicts.

36 Hedonism Rem is a puritanical hedonist. He captures the opposite qualities needed in this fast world of black-tie socialists. You have to combine the ruthless logic of large numbers, anonymity, functionalism – Rem’s “generic plans” – with the flare of the grand populist gesture, conviction politics. Richard Rogers has a similar oppositional sensibility. To succeed one must be abstract *and* personal, puritanical *and* hedonistic. That Rem is a puritan can be seen in his handling of materials: rough, like Gehry, often “cheapskate,” certainly industrial, often *demodé*, mostly impoverished, definitely ascetic, sometimes mean. Then there is the hedonist, the luxurious, redundant, natural, playful. In his Japanese housing, black concrete crazy-stone patterns (the traditional Edo Castle type) are glazed to make them seem edible – like peanut brittle, or black taffy.

37 Book S, M, L, XL is a manifesto with an unknown meaning. Rem deals with all possible scales at once; obviously it’s extremely important to operate at all of them. But he doesn’t show you how they interact or give value to them because he skates over the difficulties. It’s meant to dazzle and massage rather than argue rationally. On one level you have to check out your logical and sequential skepticisms before you get massaged by this monster. It’s also a post-modern novel in the sense that it is multimedia and falls between all possible genres. When I skimmed through it I found it lacked a beginning and end, like his buildings. It did not establish the context and limits of his work – presumably this will be supplied by the media. Sometimes Rem works like a Rorschach test – we project into his ellipses.

38 Martyr Like Le Corbusier, Rem is a martyr to architecture. Clients make impossible demands, building pressures crush him. (“What have I got in my life? I’ve got a rotten life.”) When Le Corbusier accepted the Gold Medal of the Royal Order of British Architects he referred to himself as an ass. His was the role of the misunderstood, what he calls “the role of the acrobat” – if he tells, he lies. Rem is a jogging Running Man who sometimes looks a bit frightened. There’s a self-imposed alienation. Like Corb.

39 Age Birth may be the least of it. He’s only 49. There have been three Rems, there will be more.



Rem Koolhaas at Villa Dall'Ava, Paris, May 1992