



Spot Check: A Conversation between Rem Koolhaas and Sarah Whiting

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Spot Check



**A Conversation
between Rem Koolhaas
and Sarah Whiting**

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance and it becomes a part of the ceremony.

Franz Kafka, "Leopards in the Temple"

Once a clearly identifiable leopard — a journalist and filmmaker who broke into architecture — Rem Koolhaas now counts among his clients three corporations, holds a tenured position at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, and is a Pritzker Prize winner. While it would be easy to assume that his radicality has been assimilated, that he has become part of the ceremony, Koolhaas never proves to be that easy. His repeated transgressions have not been repetitious; that is, they are not calculable in advance. Each invasion has been almost-repetitious, almost-unique, forming a progressive loop-de-loop that multiplies, twists back on itself, and then extends outward again, never in quite the same direction.

These consecutive loop-de-loops have accumulated over the years, creating a series of layered, recombinant histories whose interwoven strata link writing, architecture, research, teaching, urbanism, and exhibitions. First, in 1978, *Delirious New York* gave Koolhaas a textual foundation. Then, the La Villette and Melun-Sénart competitions, 1982 and 1987 respectively, superimposed conjecture onto writing. The banded logics of these projects echoed the organizational logic that Koolhaas found in the Manhattan Grid: a systematic backdrop for unique programs, events, and actions. In 1986 The Hague City Hall project continued this research into the relationship between background and foreground, specificity and indeterminacy, but replaced urban focus with architectural primacy. The defined yet fluid scheme — a bar that is at once a series of towers — permits, even encourages future modifications and translations.

It was with three hallmark projects of 1989 — the Zeebrugge Ferry Terminal, the Bibliothèque de France in Paris, and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe — that the mantle of *Delirious New York* became less an influence than a strategy. Marking a release from the formal influence of Koolhaas's research into 1920s–40s corporate architecture in Man-

hattan (The Hague City Hall, for example, resembled a condensed vision of midtown), these projects added an explicitly formal research interest to the programmatic practice of "congestion." Until this point, the void, whose programmatic potential needed to be exploited within a culture of congestion, as Koolhaas explained in *Delirious New York*, had been relegated to a background role, a geometric *system* or framework: the grid, the band, the slab. But in the three projects of 1989, the void took on a figurative quality and began to compete directly with the congestion. In the Bibliothèque in particular, the bubbles of the spaces carved out from the information-solid were represented alternatively as figures and as voids. The tension resulting from this ambiguity was simultaneously cynical — a reflection of our ill-defined contemporary condition — and playful — a bubbly series of surprise spaces filled with optimistic potential. All three of these projects constituted singular, identifiable, commanding forms, all the while just barely enclosing a multiplicity of practices, circulations, and spatial networks. The built work that followed this period (Nexus World Housing, Fukuoka, 1991; Kunsthal, Rotterdam, 1994; Congrexpo and Euralille, Lille, 1994; Maison à Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 1998) has proven that Koolhaas is not simply a paper leopard. Even so, he remains difficult to pin down.

Koolhaas's work — whether written, hypothesized, or built — has exhibited a relentless appetite for reinventing the way that architecture might be stalked. At each turn, he has avoided becoming part of the ceremony by heeding two imperatives with equal acuity. First, there was always some other prey, some other source of nourishment that lay just beyond where he was at the moment. And second, he remained aware that success was always laced with a kind of imminent stasis, a sleepy paralysis that comes with a sated appetite. At face value, all of this makes perfect sense. Wasn't Koolhaas, after all, a protagonist in the antiestablishment theater of the 1960s and 1970s? How could he ever be comfortable with comfort?

Partly because of the simple construct of history — we now have enough of a career to view — and particularly because of recent events and preoccupations in his work, Koolhaas has become an even spottier leopard. The impetus for this extended conversation in *Assemblage* was his second book, *S,M,L,XL*, published in 1995

by Monacelli Press. At last Koolhaas had significant built work and now a “monograph.” This interview began as a microscopic examination of that crucial moment when public exposure threatens to eclipse its very subject. The initial exchange was an effort to dissect the effects and consequences of the seeming absorption of a revolutionary into the deepest folds of the institution. But the conversation quickly expanded and slowly turned back on itself, a loop-de-loop comprised of equal doses of exposure and introspection.

The critical feedback and originality that propel an architect into the limelight are difficult to sustain. Overexposure turns originality into a commodity — the leopard becomes predictable and, powerless, disappears in the limelight’s bright glare. Rather than falling prey to the genre’s anesthetizing logic of consumption, Koolhaas and Bruce Mau generated a monograph of incongruously ethereal density that defies facile appropriation (although notable efforts have been made). Like the *Bibliothèque*, it forms an assertively multifarious block of information intersected with various practices. More proactive than retrospective, the projects and texts contained within its hefty, almost platonic geometry proliferate rather than synthesize: writing, research, unbuilt work, and buildings coalesce into one multiscalar project.

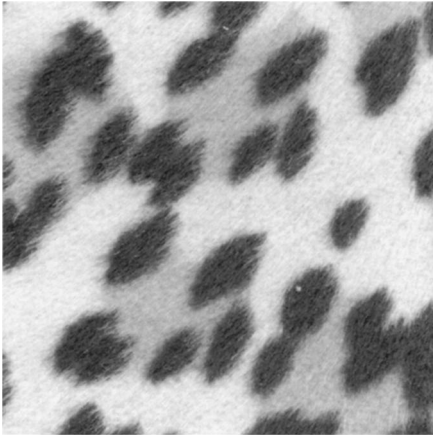
Buried under an avalanche of post-*S,M,L,XL* publicity — but little critical appraisal — Koolhaas has become a sort of ubiquitous recluse: he is everywhere and nowhere to be found. Right now, OMA is building more than it ever has. Recent projects have included speculative liaisons with European and American corporate culture, which have generated yet another form of research, highly charged by architecture’s changing relationship to the very institutions that were once the critical targets of the generation of May ’68. In addition to designing SchipolS, a study for Schipol airport in the Netherlands, Prada Epicenters in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles, and the Universal Headquarters in Los Angeles, OMA is building the Dutch embassy in Berlin, the international headquarters for the Anthroposophical Foundation (coincidentally located adjacent to the Berlin embassy project), and the McCormick Tribune Campus Center at IIT. Additionally, last December, OMA won two competitions: the Seattle Public Library and the Casa de Musica in Porto.

Further compounding his institutional affiliations and further risking becoming an institution himself (or at least a minor industry), in 1995 Koolhaas became a tenured faculty member at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Under the title Professor of Practice, he has launched a multiyear research program, the Harvard Project on the City, where a small group of thesis students research a topic selected by Koolhaas. Ranging from *The Pearl River Delta* to *The African City*, *Shopping to Rome*, each theme will result in a book.

Koolhaas’s spots, which before seemed to change with his ever-circling architectural incursions, are now rapidly accreting, creating a dense landscape for a research-based practice. The layers, previously separated into projects of research, writing, and architecture, are becoming more proximate, more simultaneously productive, and ultimately more thoroughly riven with opportunities as well as potential risks. Realizing that Koolhaas is innately resistant to closures or conclusions, the following exchange is a kind of archaeology of an OMA present, or perhaps its near future. A spot check of sorts, it reveals that Koolhaas cannot be pinned down as a writer, a researcher, or an architect, but that the three coalesce in continually changing, unpredictable, and leopardlike ways.

Rem Koolhaas is an architect based in Rotterdam.
Sarah Whiting is review editor of *Assemblage*.

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May '68 to Corporate Culture

[10 February 1998] SW: *If your "origins" are indeed "rooted in May '68," as you stated at the IIT conference ["Beyond Mies," September 1997], how do you see yourself maintaining your soixante-huitard-ness vis-à-vis your increasingly institutional clients?*



1. Amsterdam, October 1966

[16 September 1998] RK: *A client is not someone who tells you "do me." Maybe the aura of stability that architecture traditionally bestowed was more a response to a craving than an expression of an actual*

condition. Today, an institutional client is far from a fixed entity. They grow, shrink, explode, merge, buy, sell, triumph, and die during the design process. All institutional clients we've worked for recently were undergoing reengineering. If the caricature of the soixante-huitard is someone who never craved stability and who looked beyond apparent certainties, then clearly, he or she is the par excellence diagnostician/imagineer of a universe in permanent reengineering, or permanent reformulation.

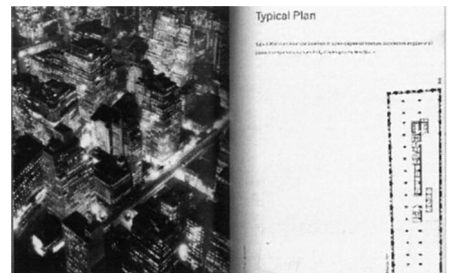


2. OMA, November 1999

[21 November 1998] SW: *In contrast to those who have remained within the sixties arena of critique that criticizes without positing, and also in contrast to those who have abandoned all efforts at levying a critical voice within architecture, you seem to tango between a soixante-huitard critique and putting forth models of architecture without one canceling out the other. I am less interested in your own ability to work within the institution — Harvard, for example — than I am in your speculations on the possibilities of operating critically or radically within institutions in general.*

[17 December 1999] SW: *I want to start with the corporate, because I'm still preoccupied by the umbrella topic of May '68 versus the institution. When you describe your take on contemporary corporate culture, it is almost as if you are describing a surrealist or situationist plotline rather than a late-twentieth-century capitalist model. Is it the corporate model itself that is changing or are you reading a radical possibility embedded within it?*

RK: *"Typical Plan" [1993; S,M,L,XL, 335–50] is an homage to a certain kind of latency within the corporate. You can also read *Delirious New York* already as a manifesto of the corporate.*



3. "Typical Plan," S,M,L,XL, 1993

In a way, there is nothing new about architects engaging the corporate environment — don't forget that in the fifties and sixties, the corporate environment and the corporate architecture that helped to invent it formed a kind of minimalist avant-garde; these architects helped to define a very potent abstract aesthetic that then clearly became the territory for a new culture. You sense that there is now a similar moment of potential.

SW: But Wallace Harrison was no *soixante-huitard* and you've built part of your career on articulating an affinity to May '68 and its impact.



4. Raymond Hood, Wallace Harrison, and Andrew Reinhard, 1930

RK: I believe that there is now an intersection of the corporate and the unstable. The instability we notice is not simply our (mis)reading; it is being uniformly enforced under globalization. You cannot read the business pages today without being struck by the incredible expectation, reality, and anticipation of drastic change. Companies now need to make decisions in a matter of hours that will completely change their fate or even their nature. A corresponding vocabulary accommodates and institutionalizes those changes. Look at the term *reengineering*, which is a key word in the corporate environment. On the one hand, it has a kind of scientific pretension — “we know what we’re doing.” At the same time, it is a verb that perfectly describes and legitimizes the corporate world’s permanent turmoil — it implies that nobody is sure of his or her position, and nobody ever will be anymore.

Maybe this situation is particularly visible to us because of an affinity with earlier models of the unstable.

SW: Instability and business have always been linked to a certain extent — look at Frank Norris’s 1903 novel, *The Pit*, which depicted the drama and tragedy of the Chicago Board of Trade. But what you are describing is different; it is an escalation of instability, as if the instability of the market has invaded every aspect of the corporation — its architecture, its products, as well as its behavior.



5. *New York Times*, April 2000

RK: Perhaps corporations were always part of a general process of modernization, partly by design, partly by default. But what is new is that they are now being modernized at incredible speeds. They don’t have the luxury to plan campaigns or plot long-term visions. If you look at the histories of Shell Unilever or Phillips, you see that these companies were able to set up decade-long strategies, embark on long-term visions, and mobilize forces and means for long-lasting ambitions. The irony is that where architecture was first enlisted to convey certainty, it is now enlisted to accommodate change and to be the vehicle through which change is both performed and expressed.



6. Shell Unilever, J. J. P. Oud, 1942

Regarding May '68, there were many sixties, not just one. I was involved as a critical observer. When I was first at the AA, I was completely repelled by what '68 represented in architecture; only in retrospect do I admit that I was imbued by its values. There’s an interesting article in *Hunch* written by Bart Lootsma, who has been, until now, one of the uncritical promoters of “new” Dutch architecture [see Bart Lootsma, “Now Switch Off the Sound and Reverse the Film,” *Hunch: The Berlage Report* 1 (December 1999): 153–73]. Lootsma went back to my writing as a journalist and documented newspaper interviews with Fellini, Constant, and *Provo*. In the photos, I am wearing a suit and tie — in '68. I was nineteen. Lootsma is quite obviously surprised by the critical tone of my interviews. But, for me, it could not be an uncritical embrace. '68 was a strange amalgamation of very reactionary, almost Luddite, tendencies: against civilization, against artificiality, and against the system. If you lived through it, it was not necessarily impressive. '68 was less a critique than a visceral movement that triggered all kinds of critical possibilities. I was not unambiguously “committed” to '68. It was the impact of '68 that made the difference. It

was a beginning point: you sensed that any structure was fragile.



7. *Hunch*, December 1999

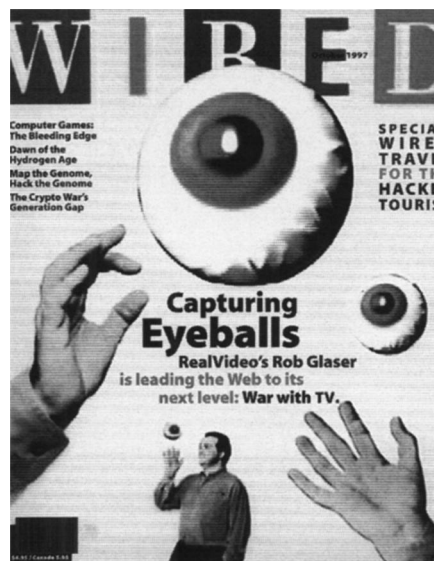
SW: As with your frequent reference to your childhood years in Indonesia, '68 is a theme to which you often refer. In fact, I've sometimes wondered if you deliberately flaunt it as a genetic lineage that most of your audience doesn't have access to — it provides you with a certain exoticism that you can mobilize at will. On the one hand, I think it's very interesting, on the other hand, I think it depresses all of the students out there in your audience — the students that grew up in middle-class homes in Middle America in the seventies or later. They're

left with a sense that you can never really do anything if you didn't come of age in '68.

RK: That's not something that I want to convey, because to the extent that I was involved, I was also very aware of how absurd it was in many ways. But that is exactly the point of a movement: it always incorporates the two sides of any issue.

SW: Could the new economy, the digital revolution, be today's "May '68" or influential movement?

RK: Collectively, younger architects working for the dot.com economy are developing an emerging dot.com aesthetic. Because of the intensity of that work, the incredible and absurd speeds with which that architecture now has to be constructed, and the blatancy of the exploitation of architecture — both in terms of creating rapid but radical accommodations



8. *Wired*, October 1997

but also in terms of conveying the right kind of messages — it involves a breathlessness that makes it difficult to stand back from it, to articulate what it *is* exactly.

SW: What about the contemporary corporation's impact on the public realm? What is the commercial manifestation of this new corporatism and how is it affecting urbanism? Even Manhattan has exchanged some of the qualities that you document in *Delirious New York* for the genericity of the megamall: chains like Williams and Sonoma and Banana Republic now pepper Soho and K-Mart is on Thirty-fourth Street.



9. Commercial genericity

RK: The point of the *Harvard Guide to Shopping* [Monacelli Press, 2001] is to document and interpret shopping's definitive invasion of the city. Shopping has become the main ingredient of any new urban substance. The shift is colossal. The city used to be free; now you have to pay for it. We are witnessing the birth of the postpublic, the private city. It affects everything — program, architecture, events. What is stunning is the somnolence with

which we have watched this revolution, how casually we have tolerated our good intentions about city life to be perverted.



10. *Harvard Guide to Shopping*, 2001

SW: In *E-Topia*, William Mitchell suggests that the one response to the combined forces of this commercial genericity and the e-commerce economy will be a more specialized shopping economy, like customized chain stores. In an e-world, the only way to make noninternet shopping attractive will be to magnify contextualism. It will redefine critical regionalism in commercial terms; that is, architecture is called on to reinvok a hyperspecificity in terms of site. It's one more step toward the commercialization of the public realm, but it's far more insidious because the homogeneous blanket of chain stores will be camouflaged as a series of hyperspecific

boutiques. What hope does architecture have within this spectrum ranging from the generic to the hyperspecific when the two ends of the spectrum prove to be almost identical?

RK: That is what I wanted to explore in "The Generic City" [1994; *S,M,L,XL*, 1239–64]. There are so few features now that there is a tendency to exaggerate and to amplify whatever feature can be found in any given local condition, almost to the point of hyperidentity. "Critical regionalism" has turned into hyper-regionalism, a fabrication of regional difference after its erasure and disappearance.



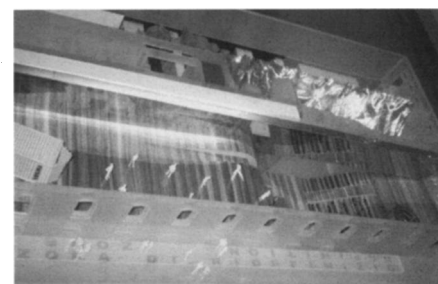
11. "Generic City," *S,M,L,XL*, 1994

[2 April 2000] RK: With Prada [Prada Epicenters in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles], we're tracing all these conundrums. As a consumer, I have been susceptible to the strange sense of relief in the repetition, the encounter with sameness that is offered by the light green cocoons of the typical Prada stores. They offer a kind of sedation within the turmoil of globalization. It may be related to the unusual amounts of travel that are becoming routine for those who Peter Sloterdijk has dubbed the "kinetic elite": at some



12. Prada, March 2000

point, more difference, more uniqueness, more features, becomes nauseating. Fashion stores are like little engines that can both conform to context and counteract it. They can be global and local. At first, we advised Prada not to change anything. Now we're thinking about offering particular forms of commercial generosity — stores



13. Prada Epicenter, OMA, November 1999

where you don't always have to buy — to de-escalate the pressure, to reintroduce elements of the public into the private.

SW: In other words, typically, you would counter the trend of hyper-regionalism, but at times it's better to go along with it, even exaggerate it further.

RK: Yes, but that is the same conclusion that we reached a while ago: that the situation is too turbulent, but also too pregnant with too many contradictory possibilities to define a single response strategy. For instance, we tried to formulate a hyper-regionalism in the SchipolS project [Schipol Island Study]. Faced with a number of tendencies that efface national borders and character, we thought that this could be an opportunity to reassert a new regional identity — reanimating the Netherland's struggle with the sea, for instance. This strategy also provides a way of offering access to successive waves of past and future immigrants who feel disenfranchised by the remnants of a real, historical "Dutchness."



14. SchipolS, OMA, November 1999

SW: But how do you operate *within* the system without being co-opted? I know of your interest in the modality of Amazon.com, of their ability to create a very personalized sales pitch within their system, but what about the insidiousness of that situation, of Amazon.com knowing my reading preferences; that is, the flip side of convenience? Do I *have* to read what the others who bought a particular title are reading? The consumer is given the semblance of hyperspecific shopping — custom-fitted mail-order jeans — but is still homogenized, is still wearing the same jeans as everyone else, just a slightly different size.



15. Amazon.com, April 2000

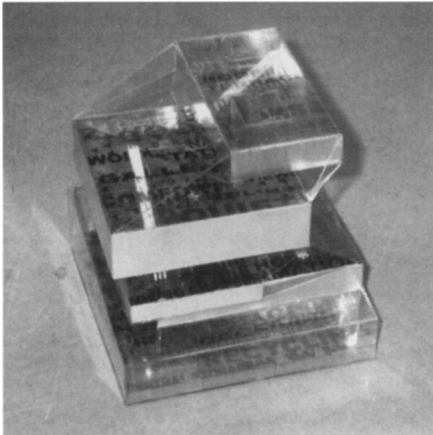
RK: This is an old May '68 discussion. '68 assumed a blanket revulsion against a number of implications of corporate culture without a project to abandon or replace it. That generated, on the one hand, an agenda of resistance and, on the other hand, an agenda of identifying critical issues, such as privacy, that were under

threat in terms of what the increasing commercialization of everything would imply. What is interesting is that we have become so complicit with our own exploitation, and that we benefit so much from it, that we can no longer sincerely protest it. But our greed to have access to everything has made privacy the great loser. The loss of privacy is the mirror image of our multiplying desires.



16. Paris, 1968

In the Seattle Public Library, this issue of privacy is becoming pertinent. We began this project with a research period to enable us to explore virtual identity and its role within the library system. We hope to work with Judith Donath from the MIT Media Lab. She's someone who's looking at how cyberspace can generate new communities. It's interesting in terms of what that implies, because you can create different communities based on reading patterns, and those communities can coexist in cyberspace, but they can also use the library as a point of actual human contact. So the potentials are enormous. The alarms are equally enormous because the library is not willing to give away who reads what or base its effectiveness on violating that confidence.



17. Seattle Public Library, OMA, November 1999

SW: But why would the library become that point of human contact? According to this logic, it could be sited anywhere in the public realm.

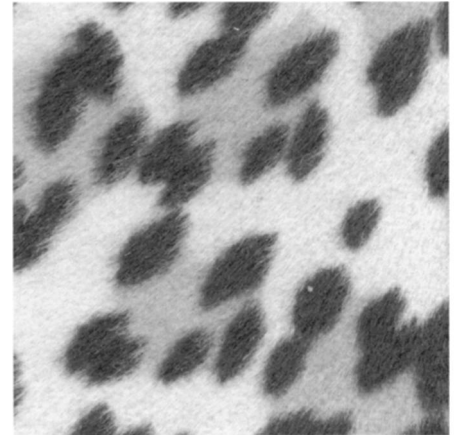
RK: It could be sited anywhere except that the library is one of the few uncontested sites of the public that survives. Its database could create a number of groups that are specifically triggered by their context, by the information they generate as readers. Such information now represents a commercial value.



18. Seattle Public Library, November 1999

SW: So it's not chat rooms that you belong to, but groups that could be as random as who checked out red books or who checked out green books.

RK: That would be one model, but it could also be, for example, a business community that needs to be presented with the latest publications or latest information. Certain magazines have become so expensive that certain businesses don't buy the magazine, but they would buy the right to consult the magazine in the library. Such a system creates a layering of virtual space where the ubiquity of information is still manipulated to create hierarchies, scarcities, authenticities — circles of access and nonaccess.



Form

[10 February 1998] SW: *I've always been struck by the memory of your coming into the original Congrexpo charrette room after the first day/night of work — you paused for a moment and said, very decisively, something along the lines of "I want it to be an egg." That project, as well as the 1989 projects, such as the Bibliothèque, ZKM, and Zeebrugge approached the limits of legible form in such a way that the imperatives of those forms, the directives that they would traditionally impose on their interiors or contents, were made very tentative without destroying their formal integrity. In other words, these projects walked a sort of formal/a-formal tightrope. Do you see that "period" as having come to a conclusion or is your current work a continuation/transformation of this investigation?*



19. Congrexpo, OMA, 1994

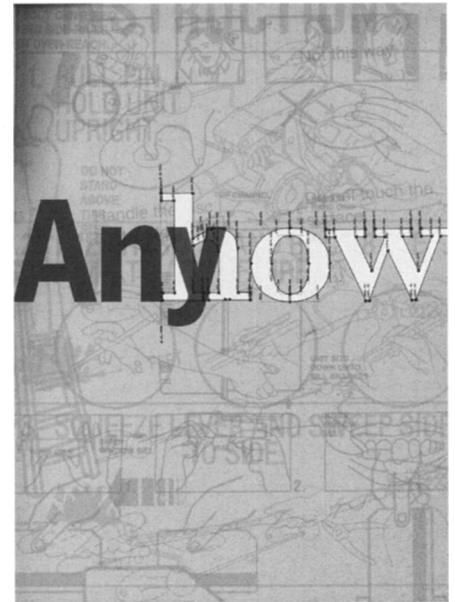
[16 September 1998] RK: *A period is not necessarily a choice; it is mostly defined by external agents.*

[22 November 1998] SW: *I'm actually less interested in the periodization of this body of work than in its formal investigation. Given that certain architects understand all architecture to be a manipulation of form, how would you characterize the role of form in your approach to research and to design?*

[17 December 1999] SW: The position of form seems at once elusive and extremely important to your practice — even though the projects are becoming looser formally, you have not — as far as I know — articulated a specific response to form or to the lineage of architecture's form makers. I remember you launching a challenge — I think that it was maybe at the ANY conference in Rotterdam [*Anyhow* (June 1997)]

— about computer-generated form work being too instrumentalized.

RK: I don't remember that. The discussion in Rotterdam represented an interesting moment. Sanford [Kwinter] launched the beginning of a manifesto that was then continued by Alejandro Zaera, Ben van Berkel, and Greg Lynn. Each subsequent speaker was to amplify a facet of it. It was a vulnerable moment for me. *S,M,L,XL* had just been completed, I was "finished" in the eyes of many, I guess, and just starting to strategize the "next" phase. They had fresh and new ambitions and postures — antisemantic, purely operational — represented in virtuoso computer (in)animation. I am fascinated by their work but somehow unable to believe in its generalizing ambitions. It was a legitimate challenge of what I was doing, so it was an important moment for me. It was more genuine than the kinds of political moves where one generation tries to outwit another. I remember being critical of their claim, then, that they had gone beyond form to sheer performance, and their claim that they had gone beyond the semantic into the purely instrumental and strictly operational. What I (still) find baffling is their hostility to the semantic. Semiotics is more triumphant than ever — as evidenced, for example, in the corporate world or in branding — and the semantic critique may be more useful than ever: the more artificialities, the more constructs; the more constructs, the more signs; the more signs, the more semiotics. For me, PhotoShop is ultimately as revolutionary as a new tool or as a morphing program that is supposedly sign-free. There is already evidence that the to-



20. *Anyhow*, June 1997

ological language is a sign. It seems a potential tragedy that, once again, architectural discourse is hostile to a phenomenon at the moment of its greatest use.

I'm not questioning the potential radicality of the computer's implications, but somehow, ironically, the three-dimensional representations that have been so far its greatest architectural impact are, for me, a limited interpretation of the virtual as an almost-real world or an as-real-as-possible world; in other words, there is an element of substitute. It is too securely architectural. So I had the same reservations that I've always felt regarding the generation of form in any medium for its own sake. It is only recently that our office has begun to formulate an idea of the virtual that could also assume other responsibilities beyond

form. The virtual is another world, another dimension. Its implications for architecture are more drastic, which we are just beginning to grasp.

SW: So you see it as a false or misdirected desire to maintain architectural autonomy?

RK: That was my argument. I saw a hidden claim to a kind of justification, mystification, and legitimization and for a kind of *strictly* architectural task that has proved the undoing of so much architectural thinking. Another kind of issue — and that was more Van Berkel than the others — was that he really claimed a kind of vast operational competence or effectiveness for the work. That, for me, is simply the return of a very rigid form-follows-function kind of reading: the opposite of operational. To be operational today, you have to abstain from large

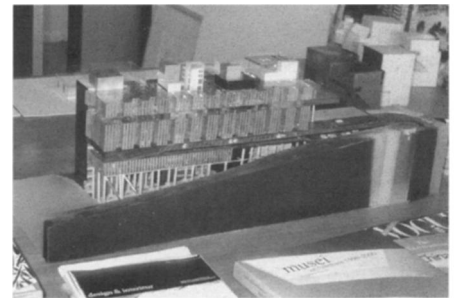


21. ZKM, OMA, 1989

claims, including being operational. But anyway, the *Anyhow* challenge was, for me, a crucial moment — the repercussions are still ricocheting in all our work.

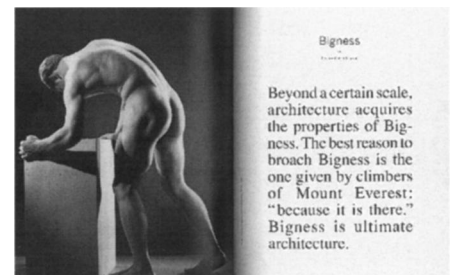
SW: Perhaps OMA's exploration and exploitation of the oscillating relationship between a building and its image is one way of avoiding these dangers because the autonomy of the form is thereby called into question. I wanted to talk about two different ways that OMA relates form and image. If you compare ZKM [the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie project design for Karlsruhe] and Universal [Headquarters in Los Angeles]: in the first, the building's form is one and the same as its image, whereas in the second, imagery is used to a very different end and the larger figure becomes much more enigmatic, much harder to discern. In ZKM, graphic media is used to create surfaces — elevations — from large images, so that the figure of the whole building is composed of imagery, even if these images change within one surface or change as you circulate around the cube: Warhol, the Marlborough Man, the section of the building. The cube remains the constant, even if the images on it change. In Universal, with the introduction of a very site-specific programmatic graphic information system, the imagery is brought down to the scale of the individual, whereas with ZKM it was at the scale of the building. Neither the form nor the image permits you to read the envelope of the building as a singular whole. Would it be correct to say that graphic design is now being used as part of the experience of the building, rather than

being used to construct a figural reading of the building as a whole?



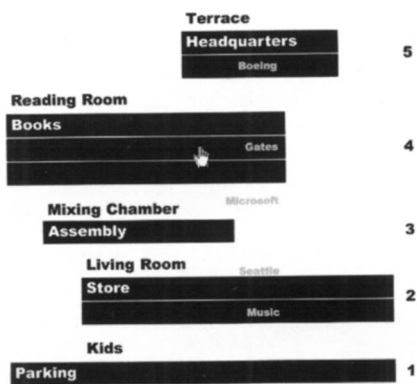
22. Universal Headquarters, OMA, November 1999

RK: It is also related to Bigness [1994; "Bigness or the Problem of the Large," *S,M,L,XL*, 495–516]. Given that the Universal building is probably four times as big as ZKM in terms of surface, its status becomes more urban than architectural. The graphic language that Bruce Mau developed therefore becomes an urban system of information dissemination rather than something uniquely designed for a particular configuration of spaces or to help define the identity of a single architectural object. ZKM was just on the edge of that.



23. "Bigness," *S,M,L,XL*, 1994

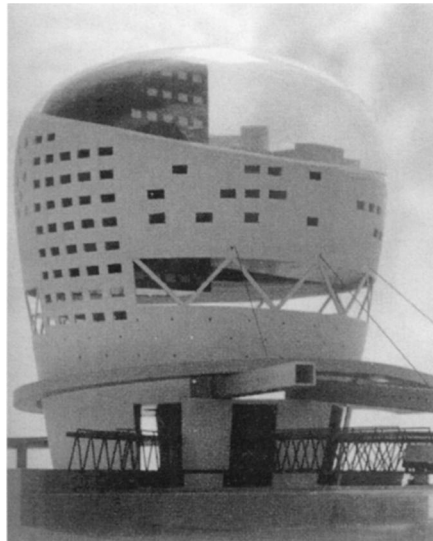
SW: The Seattle Public Library sits between ZKM and Universal, then. With Seattle, you don't really have a reading of the figure of the building, like you do with the helmet form of the Zeebrugge Sea Terminal project or the cubic forms of the Bibliothèque de France or ZKM. At Seattle, it's the logo of the section that you register, like a corporate logo that you remember for its graphic simplicity — IBM or the Nike Swoosh. In terms of size, Seattle seems more comparable to ZKM.



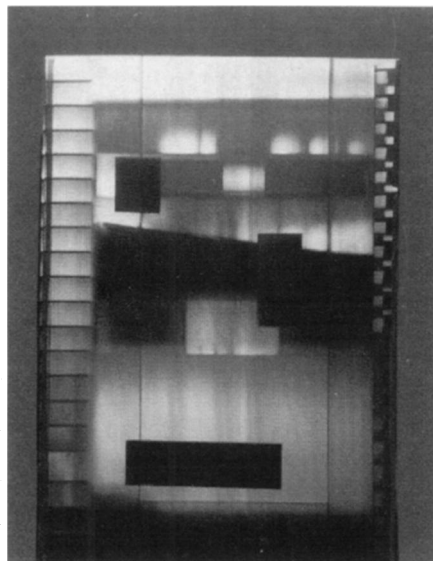
24. Seattle Public Library, November 1999

In general there seems to be a shift in the formal vocabulary in the office, from the singular figure with complex geometries happening on the inside, the sense of providing a fragile whole, positing a fragile instability —

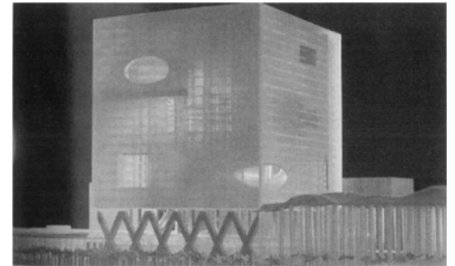
RK: — which is readable —



25. Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, OMA, 1989

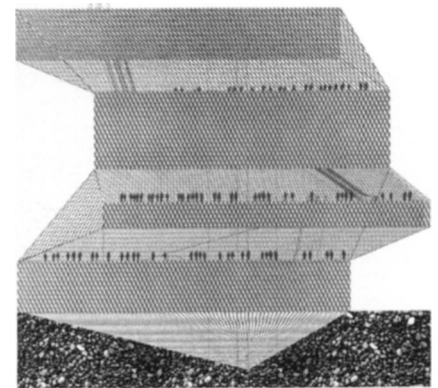


26. ZKM, 1989

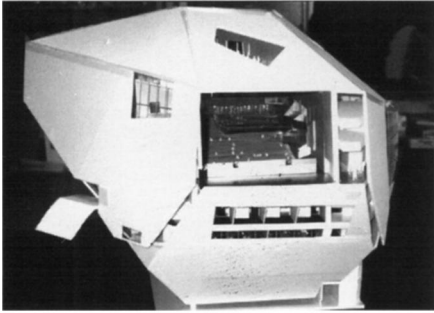


27. Bibliothèque de France, OMA, 1989

SW: — as a whole object or figure from the outside of the building. That's the strategy that seemed to unite the three big competition projects from 1989 (the Bibliothèque, Zeebrugge, and ZKM). In some of the current projects, the language of the architecture is becoming more unstable. The angles and the facets of Seattle and Porto [Casa de Musica]: these are strange objects that no longer have a unified identity. You could even say that the work looks far more decon now that it ever did when it was part of the 1988 Deconstructivist Architecture exhibit at MoMA.

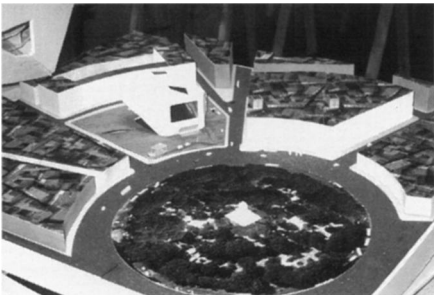


28. Seattle Public Library, November 1999



29. Casa de Musica, Porto, OMA
November 1999

RK: That's occurred to me, too — maybe that represents the cycle of the initial rejection and later appreciation that also characterized our relationship to, for example, sixties architecture — Archigram, etc. But, for me, the essence of deconstructivism was not its strangeness of form, but its dismantling or fragmentation of wholeness. Each of these new buildings insists on integration and assembly, on the construction of a (new) whole, which may be turbulent or unstable, but which remains a single entity.



30. Casa de Musica, November 1999

It is also a matter of context. Seattle stands in the middle of an utterly generic section of the American downtown. Porto is in

an utterly conventional section of intact, nineteenth-century urban tissue. I don't think the earlier anti-form — or, rather, form avoidance — would work there.

SW: To what extent is form now becoming narrative of this notion of instability or fluidity? Is form becoming more representational than it ever was in previous OMA work?

RK: It's not necessarily a question of the representation of instability. Given the size of both Porto and Seattle, you should not underestimate the extent to which they will still read as monolithic figures — there is still a relative independence between external appearance and internal incident. The key moment of difference, of potential newness, was when we represented the Universal Headquarters building in a number of entirely different ways: like a subway map, like an inert block of architecture, like a logo, like a kind of unstable accumulation of programs, like a corporate intention. So it is more that we are trying to multiply readings of the building, rather than destabilize or make them "about" instability.

SW: I think that that's how Seattle works: it's sort of a figure but it's sort of not — it's more elusive. It's more a logo than a figure. But I do think that there is a definite shift. Even if you can read Porto and Seattle as objects, the reading — the figure — is less singular than it was before. But I'm curious as to whether you're consciously now redefining the role of the figural (that is, a project's form and its image) — whether the shift from ZKM to Seattle is deliberate —



31. Seattle Public Library, November 1999

RK: — We never plot a building as a "next" step or as a consistent position. Our past is a mixture of tics, things we would like to realize, things we can't stand anymore, things that were vital and things for which it has become somehow too late. We are aware of the changing significance of image in that we now find it more interesting to have parallel readings. We are actually becoming very adamant about it by representing the building (Seattle and Universal, for example) in seemingly incompatible ways. The images do not tell the same story and hopefully the same would be true for the buildings.

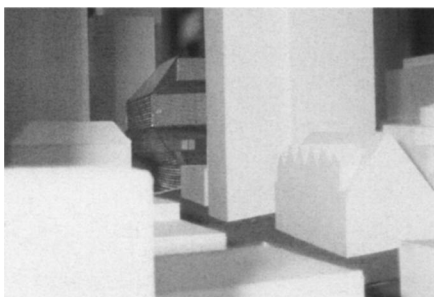
SW: But it still reads as the same because what remains consistent in all those representations is the logo of the slabs. Even if it's no longer presented as an object, the logo remains consistent. So the logo provides the dominant reading, whereas the form did that for the 1989 projects. What's confusing to me about this presentation, and I don't know if it's deliberate, is that in

the end, you don't have much sense of what the building will *look* like —



32. Prada Epicenter, November 1999

RK: — in the city. For Prada and Seattle, we are working, for the first time, also on the electronic presence and architecture, which is visually interpreted as an entirely separate identity. Here we aim for mutual reinforcement. Maybe the logo is the hinge between the two, which links the two identities without privileging the actual or the virtual.



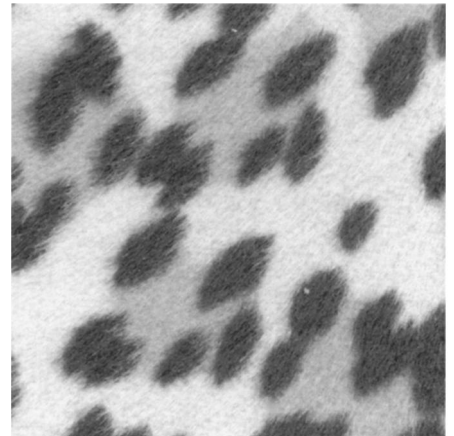
33. Seattle Public Library, November 1999

SW: The proposal is very graphic, very suggestive, but you're left with an image of the logo but not of the building. What's the skin? What are the materials?

RK: The building will be a logo, captured by an envelope. What is different from 1989 is that we are now also thinking of the building and its existence in virtual space, where it will be the *emblem* of the library headquarters. We're looking for a gestalt that is effective in actual and virtual space. But, in any case, we only started on 1 November [1999], so it's super fresh — hot off the press. We're working on the skin now. What is really exciting is that the skin carries everything — so the skin also is the structure. It will be a kind of lattice of beams, a weave of I-beams and tubular elements, forming diamonds that have about a ten-foot vertical dimension. We're thinking about how we can create a tissue — a weave — of steel, concrete, and glass.

SW: The skin will play a crucial role in whether it reads as a singular object or not.

RK: The skin performs almost every task that is not performed by the diagram. It gives the overall identity, structure, organizes earthquake resistance, performs as technical membrane — breathing in and out — and also creates the necessary lighting conditions.



Subjectivities

[10 February 1998] SW: *You seem to operate according to a curiously balanced credo of cynicism and optimism regarding the architect's ability to affect change in the contemporary city. What are the boundaries of your agency?*

[16 September 1998] RK: *I do not see myself, or my office, as a role model of any "architect's ability" (inability would be a more interesting domain). I have never thought of our activity as "affecting change." I'm involved with how "everything" changes in ways that are often radically at odds with the core values of architecture.*

In spite of its apparent success, I see "Architecture" as an endangered brand, and I'm trying to reposition it. To me, it is ironic that the — I would almost use the word innocent — core of our activity — to reinvent a plausible relationship between the formal and the social — is so invisible behind the assumption of our cynicism, my alleged lack of criticality, our apparently never-ending surrender. . . .

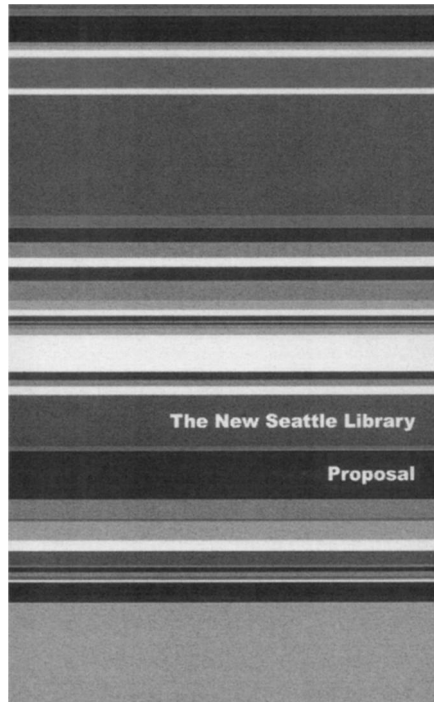
[22 November 1998] SW: *Who is the audience for the “endangered brand” of architecture? It seems to me that the subject for whom you design is not so much postmodernism’s collective mass, but rather, a collection of individuals, much like Poe or Simmel’s metropolitan subject. OMA’s attention to the sensuality of materials and the effects of formal surprise differ from postmodernism’s attention to the sign’s mass appeal. But while the experience of the built work seems intended for the individual, the graphic presentations of the projects are increasingly mass oriented. Can you link what you call the ideology of PhotoShopism to the question of audience?*



34. Kunsthal, Rotterdam, OMA, 1992

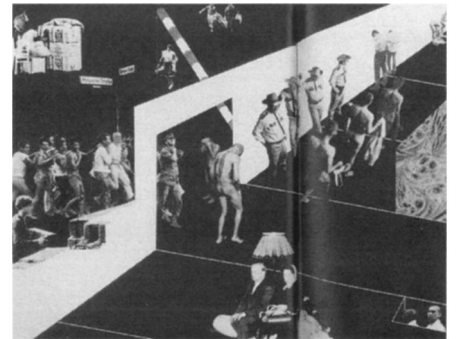
[17 December 1999]: RK: The presentation book for Seattle [which can be found at the Seattle Public Library website: <http://www.spl.org/lfa/central/oma/OMAbook1299/page2.htm>] was part of an

elaborate and intricate public presentation process. It was actually really scary to produce the book at such an early point. At the same time, it was good in terms of accelerating our production.



35. Seattle booklet, OMA, November 1999

SW: One presentation strategy that has remained consistent for OMA is collage. They’re certainly beautiful and they’re effective as a deliberately naïve or playful form of representation, but as the office becomes more and more digital, is the continued use of collage a deliberate strategy? The digital collages seem to imitate the older, patterned-paper, OMA collages, rather than fashion a new kind of collage.



36. Exodus, Koolhaas, 1972

RK: Collage has become a loaded word, suggesting an inability to invent. But, in fact, I would claim that at this moment, OMA is very inventive, that what we did for Seattle is simply illustration. Some of the Seattle images are better than others. We needed to convey how certain spaces could amalgamate a number of usually separate programs — like the mixing chamber — so it is logical that we would take images from different prototypes and put them in a single frame. This one is successful [p. 54]: it’s not really collage, but an embrace of PhotoShop. I think that this one is very strong, but I wouldn’t really even call that one [p. 52] collage. I now have a kind of re-



37. Seattle booklet, p. 54

vulsion against collage and PhotoShop is a way out of that, it is illustration minus overt ideology. I think that that image [p. 52] is regressive, whereas this one [p. 54] is ingenious because it illustrates an idea.



38. Seattle booklet, p. 52

SW: I actually had a question about the particular collage you pointed out as regressive. It brings up the topic of the not so latent eroticism that goes through the presentations of many of your projects, including *S,M,L,XL* (which I consider to be a project). This relates to the question about your audience or architectural subject. The imagery presents a very one-directional eroticism — that is, an eroticism seemingly aimed at one specific audience.

Why is that something that you maintain in the work or see as valuable in the work?

RK: Which audience?



39. "Strategy of the Void," *S,M,L,XL*, 1989

SW: It's pretty clearly a heterosexual male one. There's a certain gulf at a certain moment for other audiences. And because you're so hyperaware of so many things, I can't help but wonder if —

RK: — you find it primitive.

SW: No, not that; I just wonder about why you deliberately maintain this —

RK: — threshold —

SW: — yes.

RK: There is, first of all, the issue of exposure. To counteract continuous biographical snooping, *S,M,L,XL* skirted autobiography; it played with it, both honestly and insincerely. Not everything in the book is "true," in terms of the words or the

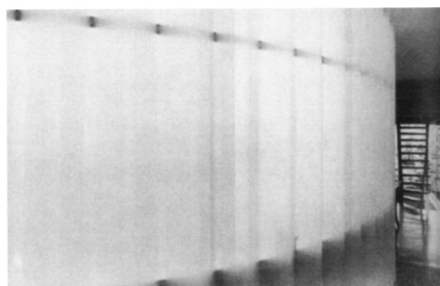
images. Of course, there is a whole series of things that, for reasons of lack of depth, economy, lack of editing, enters into a project's bloodstream. It's not so much that I want to emphasize a kind of male gaze. It's really more about revealing inspirations. I never believe in the "good" or the "bad" but the combination is irresistible.



40. *Exodus*, 1972

I am always shocked at the extent to which sex is edited out of the entire architectural discourse. Architecture is dead from the neck down. In that sense, it is a strategy to maintain a level of obscenity simply as a disclaimer that we are different from the rest of the world. We want to belong to a democracy of inspiration —

SW: —Why “obscenity” instead of “sensuality,” which has fewer implications of dominance, prioritized male gaze, etc.? So many of the projects are quite sensual in their materials and their effects.

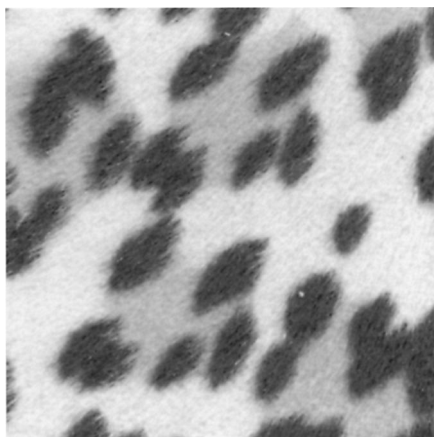


41. Villa Dall'Ava, OMA, 1991



42. Congrexpo, 1994

RK: Maybe it's a deliberately misleading sign. And in any case, does anyone know, really know, how different the receptivity of the two sexes is? I don't feel excluded by, let's say, Jennifer Bloomer's imagery and discourse — on the contrary. Maybe obscenity, for me, is kind of beauty that is not presented in an aesthetic way — a sign to others that I am susceptible to all those languages.



Practice

[10 February 1998] SW: *Your current position has shifted from that of the outsider to that of the insider, standing at the pinnacle of success. For many architects this position has turned into a cloning laboratory: cloning by protégés, by others, and even by oneself. Do you have any qualms at being “institutionalized,” and how do you avoid cloning, avoid becoming Dolly-Rem?*

[16 September 1998] RK: *Almost every clone has extracted from a hyperspecific condition recognizable aspects of a model/method or prototype — yet they are (almost) useless outside their specific circumstances. The notion of type has disqualified so much architecture. Does our work consist of inapplicable typologies? Singular prototypes? It is bizarre to see some of our concepts and formulations reused by architects who have no scruples about the specific.*

[22 November 1998] SW: *Your office continues to operate as The Office for Metro-*

politan Architecture rather than Rem Koolhaas, Architect. The collaboration that underlies this title extends to the organization of the office as well — the association with a Dutch engineering firm several years ago, the establishment of satellite offices for on-site work, the Harvard research work, etc. At the same time, your increased fame has put the spotlight on you as an individual. Are the collaborations underlying OMA ideological, expedient, or necessary?

[17 December 1999] SW: When we were in Rotterdam last month, I was struck by how certain moves that used to be quintessentially OMA are now essentially normalized within Dutch architecture: the quirky cantilever, the ramp, certain colors, and the playfulness. To what extent have these strategies become simple clichés, reduced? And can OMA still use these strategies?

RK: This trail of debris is revolting, torture. Can you have influence without following? I haven't seen anyone who has been able to produce work that once it is received with interest resists cloning. For us, we have been obliged to eliminate from our repertoire whatever component was the victim of dissemination. (Maybe the interest in obscenity is also an interest in remaining indigestible.)

You know you will never succeed in out-running cloning. It makes us more self-critical. We have systematically questioned the use of color, humor, quotation, modernism. At the same time, maybe we now have the courage to reclone or clone back, if we need to.

SW: That was noticeable with the unrealized house project that became the Porto project. The willingness to reclone with such a different program suggests that maybe with all your interest in program, form is not so tied to program, in the end.



43. Casa de Musica, November 1999

RK: I've never thought that. It shows that certain concepts, diagrams — almost like machines — can work in different circumstances. I think that we are more and more producers of concepts, not executors of program.

SW: Of course, your office also forms its own sort of cloning machine, what with young people coming in, giving it their all for a couple of years and then moving on. And teaching, too: pedagogy forms a sort of a cloning mechanism — just look at Mies at IIT. Is that why at Harvard you chose to separate research from studio? Can you elaborate on your model of teaching: how you situate it within the conventional curriculum and how it affects your practice?

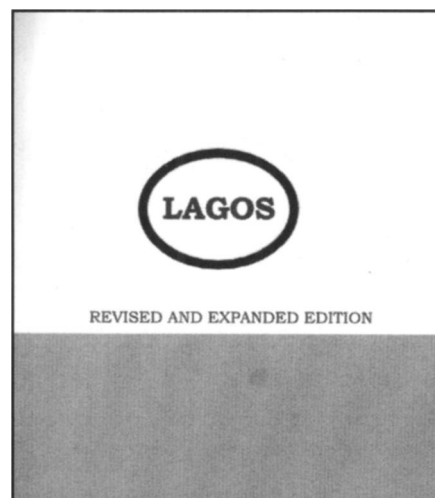
RK: The Academy is dominated by a huge critical sophistication that is based on reading, on intellectual tracts, perhaps new insights, but little new knowledge, or raw

material. The notion of fieldwork introduced into that condition has the potential to inject new issues, facts, and discussions. Our project is directly based on my ignorance about conditions we want to know about but don't, and never will within the confines of a "normal" architectural practice. I see my activity at Harvard as a test of various hypotheses and intuitions. Its most crucial aspect is to learn, disconnect — provisionally — the connection between research and application. Somehow, when they are bonded, both seem to suffer. Design is sometimes an almost bestial engagement; research reveals ideas being captured.

SW: But you could also say —

RK: — that now research has become a clone.

SW: Exactly.



44. *Lagos*, GSD, January 2000

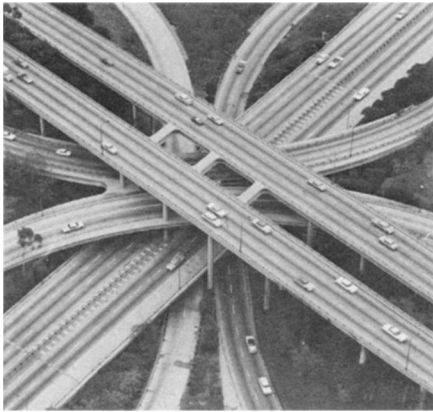
RK: That is a dilemma: whether The Project on the City is a kind of personal necessity projected on the scale of a general strategy. [The five-year Harvard Project on the City is now in its third year. Each year, Koolhaas selects a topic to be researched by eight to fourteen GSD thesis students from all three of the school's disciplines. In the first semester, Koolhaas and the students collectively travel and research; in the second, the students work independently to flesh out their individual inquiries.] To be honest, I don't care. I have maintained a relative degree of freedom and indifference vis-à-vis my role as a model. I am not a role model; I have never aspired to it. Everybody knows that the current shift toward research in many schools still has as its advantage that it might generate a more critical background against which design has to be measured, and it has introduced a degree of relativity vis-à-vis the criticality of design.

The instrumentality of the research is not recorded in design, but in the renewal of a vocabulary that is able to talk about what happens. For me, if the Project on the City introduces two hundred new words, terminologies, it has been a success.

The teaching and our work are, in the end, one research: how can architecture survive and how does it need to be reconfigured to be effective or even plausible? I mean that's really the only thing in whatever form that connects every episode.

SW: It seems that the research, writing, and building threads that have marked different stages of your career are becoming

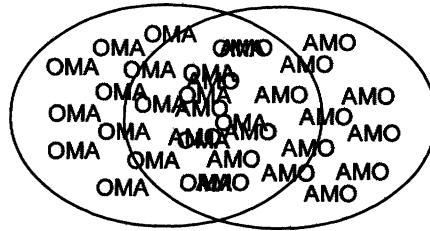
more and more intertwined. The urban research that you've organized at Harvard, the *Cercle de Qualité* collaboration for the Euralille project, the research book for Seattle: they're all very productive models of collaborative research. At the same time, it seems that you deliberately separate different researches as well as research from practice, and you are the only one who overlaps every component. Would you characterize the office as a collaborative research practice or is the research more Rem and the practice more OMA?



45. Highway diagram

RK: No, in fact, we are working on a seamless mini-highway that connects all the practices (also in terms of staff and collaboration). The intention is a kind of Ven diagram of an actual office, OMA, and a conceptual office, AMO. Basically, what it means is a system of interconnecting spheres where intelligence is very flexible and fluid and engagements and mobilizations can be instantaneous. So anyone from the two offices, the university, or the

outside can slide in and out and stay when necessary or move on. Since more and more projects/clients come with demands that imply work in more and more categories. Much of it implies "architectural" thinking without necessarily the need to build. It's about organization, strategies, identity. This Ven diagram is a vehicle for this kind of multiple work. *Documenta* and *S,M,L,XL* gave us access to many new intellectual territories and networks beyond architecture. We are coming closer to being an office that can intervene anywhere in contemporary culture; to do that, we have to engage ever-expanding circles of collaboration and assume multiple identities. Part of this critical field has been established by Bruce Mau, Sanford Kwinter, Cecil Balmond, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Wassef Harouh, ex Microsoft. We're also working with Mark Leonard of Britain™.



46. Ven diagram

We have discovered that there are a number of clients who want architectural thinking but not necessarily building. These clients are either dealing with very long-term strategies that may eventually lead to something built, or they may be including issues of identity — of which building is only a major or even a minor part — or

they may be looking at organizational models that can crystallize, or they are in such a rush that there is no time for the full unfolding, the laboriousness of architecture. So it was really an instinct and an awareness that architecture basically offers an entity that can struggle with mud, and these were all kinds of intelligences that had nothing to do with mud. That moment became, for me, the exciting definition of the virtual: that it is basically for everything that is purely conceptual, intellectual, or organizational, independent of construction. It also allows us to abandon the passive stance of the architect. For some ideas, we don't have to hunt for a client.

It would be too sad that at the moment that everybody is using the metaphor of "architecture," architects alone would be excluded from participation, only through the antediluvian quality of their traditions and their values.



47. OMA, November 1999