## XL in Asia: A Dialogue between Rem Koolhaas and Masao Miyoshi

Approaching near cult status in some circles, Rem Koolhaas is one of the most exciting architects and urban theorists in the world today. Author of two much discussed books, *Delirious New York* (1978; 1994) and *S,M,L,XL* (with designer Bruce Mao, 1996), Koolhaas thrives on paradoxes and contradictions. Both books sparked wide-ranging reactions—*Delirious New York* because of its sharp-edged analysis of New York's defining "culture of congestion," and *S,M,L,XL* for, among other things, its unabashed espousal of "bigness" and "tabula rasa" for the "generic" cities and landscapes of the future, now most typically seen in Asia. These bold ideas, which Koolhaas sometimes calls "fiction," are integrated into blueprints and put into practice. Headquartered in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam, Koolhaas has recently been building at an intensifying pace in Lille, Seoul, Utrecht, Rotterdam, the Hague, Fukuoka, Paris, Hollywood, and elsewhere, often receiving rave reviews. He also teaches at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Masao Miyoshi teaches literature at the University of California, San Diego. Author of *Off-Center* (1991) and other books, he has been increasingly concerned with transnational corporatism and its impact on culture, including architecture and the university. This dialogue was occasioned by Miyoshi's brief encounter with Koolhaas in Seoul and his response to the latter's books. The conversation took place in New York City in the fall of 1996 with Sunyoung Lee, associate editor of *MUÆ 2*, as its organizer and coparticipant.

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*MM:* I would like to start with the meaning of architecture. I read an amazing story in the current issue of *Any*. In Barcelona, there were four architects speaking—Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenmann, Norman Foster, and Jacques Herzog—and ten thousand students registered. Several thousand people couldn't get in and they almost started a riot. All of a sudden, architects are the stars and architecture is the dominant art, isn't that how it goes nowadays? That's not how it was ten years ago. So what does this mean?

*RK:* I don't believe at all that architecture is the dominant art, and I think such displays of public interest are maybe even inversely equal to the importance of architecture. If ten thousand students come, it is maybe a sign that architecture has become completely unimportant, and that it's on an almost desperate search for importance or the fabrication of importance. It is also a really paradoxical situation: those kinds of events cost the architect time, incredible amounts of time, to the point that he almost cannot do architecture anymore. So not only is there an inverse relationship between the importance of architecture and interest in architecture, but there is an equally inverse relationship between the interest in architecture and the quality of architecture.

*MM:* That's probably true, but interest is increasing incredibly. Even in Buenos Aires, I understand that architecture students are taught in three shifts over twenty-four hours.

*RK:* I think architecture is also big because of globalization. There are maybe twenty-five important architects, and because the world is so accessible, everyone on the globe wants to see them. So there is an effect of sheer numbers. That in itself is also very negative, because it used to be that every country had twenty-five important architects. Now they have disappeared and all attention is focused on these informational elites. And that's a very ambiguous condition.

*MM:* But that means that many architecture students or students as a whole aspire to be one of those twenty-five. Whereas, in literature and other arts that kind of aspiration no longer exists.

*RK:* Maybe. But while globalization has, on the one hand, created homogeneous connections and relations, it also seems to create very specific, almost Balkan-like fragmentation. I think the same is true of architecture. On the one hand, there is one universal language, but there are also, of course, a number of provincial and regional dialects.

*MM:* What happens then to the tendency toward homogenized urban landscapes stripped of identity?—what you refer to in *S,M,L,XL* as the "Generic City." Singapore is the model for this, isn't it? In the sense that it is a workable as well as working city that uses the idea of tabula rasa . . .

*RK:* Maybe I can explain how this idea came to be more than what it is. I was writing a book about individual cities, and at some point I wanted to talk about Tokyo as the major Asian city. I started seriously working on Tokyo in 1987, but I became aware that, after all, my interest in Tokyo and its chaotic, unplanned, random nature was very typically Western. That is, Tokyo seems very nice to us and it seems very exotic to us and it seems very charming, in a way, to us. I began to be aware that the true Asian condition is something much more artificial and more radical and more different from the Western, so I forced myself to deal with something that I found less charming and more dislikable but in a way more important. That is one part of what I did for *S,M,L,XL*. Then I also realized as I was focusing on specific locations that this left out an enormous domain of where every city resembles every other city. So it became a challenge to deal with the two things at the same time.

*SL:* Do you think this is a characteristic particular to Asian cities?

*RK:* No. I think it simply results from the fact that Asian cities are now building much more. In that sense, the Asian city is interesting only because it is where the most building occurs at this moment, and therefore it is the most typical of our present condition.

*SL:* And it's the most willing to go ahead with a tabula rasa, to build from the ground. Is that still happening?

*RK:* Yes, it's happening in Asia on an enormous scale. One of the research projects I'm supervising at Harvard is studying an urban condition in China called the Pearl River Delta, which is apparently the fastest-growing economic region in the world. It's unbelievable the amount of tabula rasa that is going to take place there—it seems almost like a sensual experience, like a sexual experience, just flattening areas even before there are any projects or plausible scenarios to develop. Literally exploding mountains . . .

*MM:* How do you explain this?

*RK:* I think it's just a fundamental instinct to make new beginnings, and also to assert, in a most primitive way, man's dominion over his environment.

*SL:* A tabula rasa seems like an architect's wet dream, the chance to make something out of nothingness.

*RK:* The idea that the tabula rasa is the precondition for architectural ego is one of those myths that has helped to discredit the whole idea of a new beginning. And actually, the entire depiction of the architect as a kind of monster is an incredibly bizarre myth, because architecture is not worse or better than any other profession. It used to be that architects were seen as articulating the shape of society—but that was much more a projection created by architects. Now that we are all completely confused about the shape of society, architects are equally confused. Rare would be the architect who, given a tabula rasa, would even know what to do with it.

*MM:* The East is supposedly very much stuck in deep tradition and history and all that, yet you're saying that they're willing to wipe out everything.

*RK:* Eager. They are happy to do it. But one interesting thing we are finding in our research on China is that communism itself is like a tabula rasa. The whole communist regime involved erasing complete cultures, complete civilizations, complete rules, then injecting onto this field some few, carefully chosen remnants which they call tradition but which actually only serve their own purposes.

*MM:* But isn't this also a function of the Second World War, caused by the Japanese or by the Allies? Everything was razed, so to start from scratch was very easy in Asia. In Europe, of course, destruction by the Germans was severe, but there were still historical monuments, and then the stories and narratives were there. So despite La Défense in Paris, they can't go and clear everything away. It can't be done, whereas in Asia, it's very easy to do, especially since so many places were already completely destroyed.

*RK:* But also I think Asia always embodied its whole values less in buildings than Western societies did.

*MM:* I don't know about that. I would rather put that together with globalization, actually. Now value is placed on globalization, and therefore they will start from scratch, but it's not really from scratch. There's already the West very much embedded in it. Tabula rasa is not just a return to the beginning. They will not raze and rebuild the Forbidden City over there.

*RK:* Yes, of course. But still what I find interesting is that in Japan, each city has a few extremely valuable monumental buildings. The rest are almost neutral. This kind of neutrality is less charged with either memory or mean-

ing, and therefore is seemingly easier to take out or replace with corporate buildings.

*MM:* How do you explain this? Take Rome, for example: there's the classic Rome, the Renaissance Rome, the nineteenth-century Rome, and the fascist Rome. There are layers and layers of history there, and the people continue to live in it. Whereas, as you say, in Asia—in Japan anyway . . .

*RK:* There are, of course, thousands of different aspects to this, but one of them is the climate. Let's say most of the well-known Asian cities are much warmer—they are flimsy. I grew up in Jakarta, and that was very clearly a city where there were some solid objects, but most of the city was bamboo.

*MM:* Isn't that very much like twenty-first-century buildings that don't require permanence, that are not built to last?

*RK:* It's very similar. I think so.

*MM:* What do you make of this trend toward buildings built not for permanence but just for a short time?

*RK:* I am very bad in trends. I understand almost nothing of the future, only of the present. I always resisted science fiction and found it deadly boring to read. But basically, I think that there will probably be a drastic separation between certain buildings that will become more permanent and others that are not going to be around for more than ten or fifteen or twenty years.

*MM:* Isn't that, again, part of the global economy business—that is, that buildings shouldn't last? Of course, the function of a building changes so fast . . .

*RK:* Twenty years of involvement in architecture has made me very cynical about that: any program can exist in any building. So if churches are no longer necessary, you can also house offices in churches.

*MM:* Has it happened?

*RK:* Yes, in Europe it happens all the time. They divide churches and create lofts. It also happens in New York. So that is another kind of paradoxical undermining of the argument in architecture that one floor can only support one program. It's complete garbage.

*SL:* So do you think the West is relearning some of its urbanisms from the East?

*RK:* Well, that is, of course, my particular interest right now, and that's also why I am doing this book. The notion of the new beginning has been totally taboo in the West. The reason why I'm describing it so carefully is, without necessarily saying so, to say that there are some lessons here that we would benefit from enormously.

*MM:* Let's go back for a moment to Tokyo, which I was also interested in writing a book about. Tokyo is one of the ugliest cities—depending on where you are, of course. But it's built on a principle of adding onto existing structures rather than razing and rebuilding. Which condition is more important, more typical, or "generic," of Asian cities?

*RK:* Addition works in Tokyo because it was already so enormous, but in a place like Seoul, which doubled and I think even tripled in size over the last twenty-five years, you cannot add. You have to start with new areas simply because the original site is small. Cities like Seoul or Shanghai have reached the point where what is new is inevitably proportionately more important than what was there. Tokyo still hasn't reached that point. The point where a real urban mutation is happening is where in sheer substance or volume the new far exceeds what existed before.

*MM:* To me, the idea of Tokyo is the incredibly unyielding nature of the landowners. Families really cling to their property, refusing to sell to outsiders for generations. As a result, Tokyo can't ever be reorganized. It would be almost impossible. Everybody simply builds on this small bit of land which becomes smaller and smaller from generation to generation. This is not a pattern that you see in other Asian cities.

*RK:* I think it's a pattern in certain cultures with a deep relationship between initial ground and what is owned that doesn't seem to change. Korea is one of these, and Taipei is another. But clearly in communist countries, or in regimes that are less respectful, to put it politely, about ownership, these situations are totally different.

*MM:* In South Korea, they do the same thing, don't they? They really did evict people when they built those new cities. That official process was a pretty brutal one.

*RK:* Yeah, maybe, but in Seoul, the original ownerships still largely dictate what is going on. Maybe they're bought out, but there is a very drastic difference from Chinese cities, where vast tracts are completely scraped to

the ground, and a place like Singapore. I think it is in direct proportion to the authoritarian nature of the regime.

*MM:* At the beginning of your discussion of Singapore in *S,M,L,XL*, you talk about the "unfree nature" of the dictatorship there, which raises the question of what does freedom mean? Singapore really has lost a great deal of civil rights and freedom. Many of the intellectuals are in jail, as, of course, you know, and then at the same time, the city is changing and building. I noticed that serious, but unacknowledged, ambivalence in your writing.

*RK:* There is that ambivalence. But I think that the initial Western response to it, which is to treat it blatantly as a dictatorship, is in a way naïve because they haven't really investigated where the loss is. It is not so simple that the loss is a loss about freedom: the loss is about certain expressions of freedom, while others are completely maintained. And that is the alarming thing about Singapore. As I write in the story, it is more of a deal between the population and the state, where the state guarantees endlessly improving living conditions, and where, in return, just a fraction of freedoms are taken away. But of course, they are taken away. Therefore it's a dictatorship only in certain areas, and the opposite of a dictatorship in other areas. I think that is a new form of . . .

*MM:* What areas are there in which it is not a dictatorship?

*RK:* Well, let's say in any economic sense, there is simply no dictatorship. There's no dictatorship in travel, no dictatorship in freedom of movement, minor dictatorship in terms of information exchange, so . . .

*MM:* Minor? Okay. But I think about postwar Japanese history. It was not a dictatorship—it really did give freedom and so on—but at the same time there was state control, economically and culturally, in a very powerful way. That is, it did not exercise political or legal dictatorship by force, yet it did erase fundamental opposition, protest, and disagreement. After about thirty-five years or so, resistance gradually disappears, and then intellectual life—intellectual vigor itself—begins to wane. And as you know, Japan has almost nothing exciting intellectually now. So in Singapore and other countries ruled through softer dictatorships, there may be some freedom left, but not the most important kind of freedom after all. I hope you don't think I'm a naïve capitalist liberal advocate—I don't think that's what I'm talking about here—but when this kind of free exchange and protest and opposition disappears, somehow so does intellectual life.

*RK:* No no, you don't have to convince me. I'm totally convinced that there is a sterility and also a kind of moroseness, and that it's only a partial creativity. It is very clear that some of the best people leave, and in that sense it is not a fully developed situation. But it's hard to predict in what direction it will go.

*MM:* Do you feel unsure, or uncertain, about the future of Singapore or Asian cities?

*RK:* Well, first of all, I find it impossible to generalize, because I find that Asian cities are all different. For instance, I've recently been involved in Seoul, where an incredible creativity and turmoil and very divergent forces are at work. It's at a very interesting moment, where people are asserting rights to individuality against multinationals. Also, I think that you're really a bit negative about Japan; there's still intellectual life there.

*MM:* You know, yesterday I gave a talk at Amherst College, called "Japan Is Not Interesting."

*RK:* Yeah, I know what you mean, but it's still pretty sophisticated. What I try not to do is to prejudge these conditions as a kind of a priori rejection.

*MM:* What is most interesting or impressive about your work is that you want to deal with ugliness. You want to deal with the impossibility of the situation. That's kind of unique, I would imagine, among many intellectuals. Of course, there is always a danger as well, however . . .

*RK:* Of opportunism . . .

*MM:* That is, if you come very close to ugliness, you turn ugly too.

*RK:* Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's a neck and neck race.

*MM:* What do you do about this? How do you take care not to be absorbed into this ugliness?

*RK:* I don't have a method. Basically, it's about trying to define where the potential is in every new condition. Sometimes we have to become part of the ugliness, but not always.

*MM:* Globalization is always the context: transnational corporations are really what set the paradigm of our life. This is what I would call ugliness, and we can't completely reject it. But if we let that system absorb us, then there's not much left.

*RK:* No, then it's bad, yeah, no, I know.

*MM:* So, how do we negotiate this? That's the most important issue for me, in many ways.

*RK:* It's also the most important issue for me. That is why I also combined it with our work in *Delirious New York*—which I think in retrospect was a mistake, because this thing about the city is much stronger than our work was in 1978. But in *S,M,L,XL*, I thought it was important to show our work in the same context, because in my view it shows that nevertheless, in all these contexts, there are still possibilities for doing variant work—that it is a very dangerous condition and a very complex condition, and it threatens to overwhelm, but those who are really interested in it and who try to take it seriously as a new context can also work with it, in it. Carefully.

*MM:* Okay, since you mentioned it, I want to go back to *Delirious New York*. When you talk about Radio City Music Hall or Rockefeller Center, you say that it is not a result of compromises but rather of committee work, and the committee members are the residents of Manhattan. That's what you said, right? Now, how can you say that? Rockefeller Center was built with huge amounts of capital from the Rockefeller family. How can the masses be involved in this?

*RK:* First of all, you know that in order to do a book, you have to exclude an enormous amount of issues . . .

*MM:* Yes, you have excluded quite a bit in that book!

*RK:* . . . And when I wrote it, the economic analysis of Manhattan was so overwhelming . . .

*MM:* And yet economy is almost completely gone from your book—it's not there.

*RK:* Among intellectuals, the economy of capitalism was an absolute alibi to never take anything seriously that was produced under it. So in a way, that was a deliberate suspension. Because you know the books that Manfredo Tafuri was writing at the time . . .

*MM:* Sure, and you reject Tafuri because Tafuri rejects . . .

*RK:* I don't reject it, but it's a kind of parallel condition. I was, of course, not really naïve about the pervasiveness of capitalism and the economic motivation behind all of it, but, nevertheless, I found it also important to state

that in that system and within that system a number of culturally important events that were partly sponsored by that system were taking place. What was also interesting to me was that there was a similarity between the cultural statements produced under capitalism and those produced under communism. That is actually the hidden text of *Delirious New York*—that the phenomena and the breakthroughs and the inventions of New York were very similar to what the constructivist architects and movement tried to do in Russia.

*MM:* As I was reading your book, I was not totally ignorant of that. I simply wondered "where are the people?"—meaning the brownstones, and all these non-signature buildings in Manhattan. That's where most people live and experience everyday life, whereas you construct a whole New York out of those signature buildings and projects.

*RK:* But it's a manifesto. It's called a "retroactive manifesto for Manhattan," and actually the first sentence is how to write a manifesto in an age disgusted with them.

*MM:* Okay, fine. The thing is, you are inside of these buildings—Rockefeller Center and several others—whereas most people are outside them. And outside the buildings, people experience things differently. That is, for most people, skyscrapers don't mean a culture of congestion: as you walk through the streets, you look up because there's nothing else to see except maddening crowds and shop windows. I actually find that walking around New York is completely exhilarating because I continually look at the sky, which has infinitely varied shapes. However, until I read your book, I didn't know that Rockefeller Center had roof gardens. So when you write the book from inside these buildings, the result is quite different in many ways. That's why it's striking and new, original and so on, and then after about a week, you say, "wait a minute, this is quite different from what New York is really like." If it's a manifesto, okay, but . . .

*RK:* Also, *Delirious New York* is not really about New York, anyway. It's about culture, and it's about the relationship between the culture of modernization and architecture. And behind that, it is basically an argument that modernization has kind of drastically changed the nature of architecture. Since modernization, architecture can never be about proportion or composition or all the classical definitions of architecture, because it has embarked into completely new territories. And that is really the only thing that interested

me, so that book is not about New York, it's definitely not about a real New York, it's not even a manifesto for New York.

*MM:* But you do talk about the specifics of New York City. How about the concept of grid, which you talk about in terms of New York's history? What role does this kind of geometry play?

*RK:* The grid is exactly one of those nonhierarchical, noncompositional methods, and in that sense, maybe the idea of methods is interesting. Modernization is automatically introducing much more mechanical and instrumental devices to organize what it believes it has to organize, and so, in that sense, it combines a number of technologies such as the grid.

*MM:* Are you talking about the grid in terms of how it was originally devised? Or are you talking about the use of the grid now?

*RK:* The use of the grid now, because, of course, it's an age-old phenomenon.

*MM:* Because I was thinking of Kyoto, which has a grid too. But there, it simply doesn't seem to be doing anything.

*RK:* Yeah, but Roman cities also have grids. So in that sense, it's not new. What I think is new is its combination with the modern age, in which the grid becomes a form of minimal control that enables a lot of otherwise very uncontrolled developments to take place.

*MM:* I wondered if you wouldn't put the 1916 zoning law together with that, because it does seem to be absolutely powerful in *Delirious New York*. And although it was set in 1916, it has never been changed or tampered with, which also promotes a surprising stability.

*RK:* It was, of course, surprising, because instead of trying to control through minimum, it was controlling by maximum, and with a volume so big that not even the most extreme capitalism could help to realize it.

*MM:* How can the zoning law remain so powerful? How come people don't want to change it if it mainly serves capitalism at their expense?

*RK:* They did tamper with it in the sixties. For instance, an area like Sixth Avenue came after the new zoning. This is a typical example of what happens if you try to address issues of modernization with the classical elements of architecture: urban designers thought that the public spaces of

Manhattan had to be improved, so they made initial proposals for buildings that would be set back from the streets to improve the civic quality of Manhattan. But the results were paradoxically the reverse: buildings were able to become more boring and utilitarian, and the public space more neglected.

*MM:* In what other cities are zoning laws as severe, strict, stable, as New York? Do you see anything like that in Asia? I would think that Asian cities are lacking entirely in zoning laws.

*RK:* There were some zoning laws in the Japanese regimes in Taipei and also in Seoul that were aimed at controlling the whole substance of the city by making sure that certain buildings would not be too tall. The Japanese exercised a very intricate form of control. Otherwise, I don't know that zoning plays that much of a role in Asia. Even here, zoning plays less of a role now. Basically, the lesson that Asian cities have learned from the precedent of the West, though it may not be articulated as such, is that zoning is hopeless anyway.

*SL:* In what sense?

*RK:* That you can no longer impose a visually coherent system with the kind of global operations that are taking place now. And that, in the final analysis, economic incentive and economic needs always sooner or later override attempts to control them.

*MM:* The omnipotence of economy is also apparent in the way that cities are moving out into the suburbs. Los Angeles, where you're doing some work, is a very good example of this. The inner cities are no longer being used. Occupancy rate is very low, money is going into the suburbs, and the centers of cities are either being emptied or turned into ghettos. You don't agree with this?

*RK:* Maybe this is becoming less systematic, because I think inner cities are also becoming very fashionable. There is a bigger danger that the inner cities are being turned into theme parks and gentrified ghettos.

*MM:* You mean, people go there to look at the poor people as animals?

*RK:* No, but if you see now the way that Times Square is being purged . . .

*MM:* But that's not inner city. By inner cities, I mean places like Harlem.

*RK:* Okay, Harlem. But you have to see that over the past twenty years, the inner cities that used to be here have all been almost completely laundered.

I think Harlem is the last section, and I have no doubt that in twenty years, it will also be completely gentrified.

*SL:* What about the outer boroughs? It doesn't seem as though the outer boroughs are susceptible to that kind of development. Brooklyn might be becoming more and more fashionable, but you hardly ever hear about gentrification in places like Queens or especially the Bronx.

*RK:* Not anymore, but I think eventually those places will also be gone. For instance, what could be interesting with the Bronx, which is now like a tabula rasa, is to actually make it a tabula rasa. That is, in a way, one of the paradoxes of the false consciousness in the West. Because you cannot start with the tabula rasa, you're always forced to reconstruct. We are only able to think about the Bronx as an area to redevelop. But you can also make an argument that it doesn't work anymore, that it's kind of a horrible thing. Then raze it and start some things there that are too big or too modern to put in the center of the city. So with a kind of slight change of emphasis, I'm sure it will also work.

*MM:* When you talk about the inner cities becoming theme parks or gentrified, where do poor people go? There will be poor people even in the twenty-first century. What happens to them?

*RK:* . . .

*MM:* And this is not a moral question . . .

*RK:* No, no, no it's a very important question. And it's very important that architects remain interested in spartan conditions, and even conditions of cheapness. One of the things that I find kind of alarming about this whole adulation for architecture is the way in which it tends to completely obliterate a previously very respectable form of architectural productivity, whether you call it social housing or locust housing or third world development. This is very serious work to come to terms with, but it somehow gets shifted from the agenda and replaced by so-called attractive or important architecture. And that is where the passiveness of architecture is actually much stronger than laypeople or people outside of architecture can ever imagine. I've been really interested in locust housing, but nobody has ever asked me to do it. I'm participating now in a competition for the renovation of a South African black township, and I'm not being paid for that.

*MM:* Are you serious?

*RK:* Yes, simply because I want to do it. So the tendency is these days, the more you become important—and that's why I'm saying the architectural system is really kind of sick—the less you will ever be able to deal with those kinds of crucial issues.

*SL:* Or, on the other hand, you could say that the more important you get, the more leisure you have to indulge in these other interests. It seems as though earlier in their careers, architects are basically trying to hustle for work and therefore have less opportunity to do other kinds of projects. You have to continue working and supporting your office.

*RK:* In that sense, the American tradition of architecture is very commercial, but the situation in Europe is different. Of course, we all have financial considerations, but I don't know a single major European architect who doesn't, in the first place, think about the architecture he's doing, and, as a secondary or tertiary condition, his income. I mean, our office almost went bankrupt two years ago.

*MM:* I wish architects would write more about their practice.

*RK:* Well, actually that's why I put those initial graphs that talk about the economy of our office in *S,M,L,XL*. Nobody ever does it. That is also one of those poisonous by-products of this admiration for architects. That is, you are so admired that at some point you cannot even make certain disclosures. You cannot, say, go bankrupt.

*SL:* What about the idea of the architect as a kind of agent of corporate egos? Architecture requires a huge amount of capital to even take place.

*RK:* In that sense, architects are basically passive people who are waiting for somebody to come to them. It's impossible to even want something in architecture without the impetus or the initial trigger that is provided by some other force. So instead of being megalomaniacs, they are pretty tentative, and there's a curious relationship between those two conditions.

*SL:* But it's ironic also because architects really do have a large impact on the ways that social or human relationships are formed. For example, in your study of Singapore, you mentioned how throwing up those concrete slabs of housing complexes resulted not just in a material disjunction—that is, suddenly you're living in this huge vertical tower—but also in a kind of disjunction of time—a fast-forward into the modern age—and of social relationships. Architects are very much complicit in this. They are the people

who come up with ideas of what to build and who plant certain ideas of what would be massive enough or monumental enough for a corporate ego to feel pleased enough with to invest that much money . . .

*RK:* The patterns in which corporations manifest themselves are endlessly fluid, and this is the genius of the whole system. They never assume one identity long enough for real resistance to be mobilized against it. So, in that sense, they go from one identity to another. For example, you said that a project has to be monumental, but nowadays, all corporations are talking about ecology, green buildings, and low-rises. Already, headquarters are covered in ferns. It's amazing how quickly everything keeps changing.

*SL:* But it's still about a totalization of environment that's slowly creeping throughout the world. That's an example of what you were talking about with the Disneyfication of 42nd Street as well, isn't it?

*MM:* And when corporations talk about ecology and the environment, aren't they talking about how far they can go, rather than how to protect the environment? Isn't that how it goes?

*RK:* I think it's both. Let's say my position is so modest that I don't think there is any "us" or "them," in a way. I think we're all part of the same hypocrisy. I don't feel myself to be better. Also, it's not entirely hypocrisy, because you can see how these kinds of behavior are dictated.

*MM:* But when you say modest, that modesty can be taken as more or less abandoning responsibility. Because you are not just an architect. You really are, as the *New York Times* called you, a "visionary," or whatever it is. You are talking about the rise of things, about the future. So you can't speak as an architect alone.

*RK:* I'm a writer, also.

*SL:* But there's also a cult of personality, in a sense, that is springing up around you because of the work you generate, the media attention you receive, and the status that you command in the architectural world. How can you say you're so modest when you actually have this larger impact?

*RK:* It's been a very complicated issue to negotiate, as you can imagine. Some of the most tragic examples of architects' careers nose-diving basically began at the moment when those architects started to seriously believe their own myths. So in that sense, I'm a very deeply libertarian person—certainly for myself—and I totally resist the notion that because there's

a lot of media attention and because I have achieved a certain status, I am forced to only do or say important things. I demand for myself the right to be when I want stupid, when I want irresponsible. Because I don't really believe in this kind of charge that is put on my shoulders by other forces. I think it's very important to retain your own direction, and not to deviate because of these external forces.

*SL:* Do you think it's possible to maintain a certain ideology of architecture? For example, is it possible to characterize what you're trying to do with your work in Asia? I'm sure that it differs from place to place, but is there some kind of driving concern, or at least question that you're trying to answer?

*RK:* I became involved with Harvard on the condition that I not teach design, only research, and the first five years of my tenure are supposedly intended to study the Asian situation. The attraction for me in this is that it allows me to be involved in Asia without having a commercial motive, and therefore without having to be at the mercy of either political or commercial operations—which is a kind of typically private response to the general economic situation, of course. Nevertheless, as an architect, I'm doing a number of operations in Asia that are carefully chosen so that they are not just some kind of developer's architecture. I did housing in Fukuoka, for example, which dealt with Japan in a very careful way. What we're doing in Seoul now is also not on an enormous scale but still manages to address certain conditions in the city in, I would say, a very responsible way.

*SL:* What kind of conditions?

*RK:* What is interesting in Seoul now is that there is a whole system of regulations that date from earlier regimes. There is also a new Korean culture with new ambitions, and somehow these ambitions drastically exceed those regulations. One of the paradoxical situations of a project we're doing in Seoul is that enormous amounts of the architecture have to go underground—not only on the level of subways but levels and levels and levels underneath. You have a sense that on the surface, there are autonomous projects, but if you look lower, there's an enormous underground region that is connected, riddled by parking. So it's also, in that sense, a kind of exploration of the typical urban condition, where the depression of modernization exceeds the legal framework to accommodate it. And what that means and what you can do within that.

*SL:* Critics of globalization have described how the term *development* has been appropriated from biology to suggest a kind of organicism to economic

development that is actually the result of external influence. Which is interesting to me, because I have an architect friend in Seoul who talks about the complete lack of—or, rather, hunger for—design there that is manifested in the importation of architects such as yourself or the desire to have conferences like Anywise. How much is that impulse just another attempt at grafting on Western models of architecture?

*RK:* That's what I'm saying. I'm totally unimpressed by what architecture has to say now. If anything, it's purely ornamental and has nothing to do with any instrumentality. Maybe in certain cases, a conference can improve understanding, and it's true that some conferences are actually stimulating and important. They can be useful, first of all, because they have enabled me many times to come to terms with conditions I didn't know. Also, some of the discussions that happen there are really kind of fascinating. But this is what is so incredibly painful in a way: that you know architecture is in general only a very limited instrument to improve conditions. Certainly if you are coming from an outside situation, you are severely handicapped in making the correct judgments. But on the other hand, it is, of course, equally pathetic to see how a city like Seoul, for instance, wrestles with enormous persistent problems like traffic and seems almost constitutionally unable to make a plan for itself or draw itself out of its morass. So in that sense, I'm not only an architect but also a planner to cities, and I think that is an area where you can make fascinating contributions to cities like Seoul, and where you will not be forced to contribute on only a trivial level. Of course, then the scope of the work increases astronomically, because then you are not talking about millions but about trillions of dollars, and it becomes increasingly unlikely that you would be involved. But my fingers are itching to think of Seoul on the level of a whole entity. I don't know whether you've seen it, but we also made an interesting project for a new city at the airport in Seoul as part of a competition: they're building a new airport in the sea near a number of islands, and they built an enormous infrastructure to get from Seoul to it. The logic is that this infrastructure can also be used to create a new city on the site of the airport, which would make redundant a lot of traffic. So—and this is the irony—on the level of really major operations, I'm much less pessimistic that there is something genuinely believable to contribute than on the level of architecture. But at the same time, because they're more logistically complex, and involve much more money and therefore more politics, they're the ones that are the least likely.

*MM:* You know, this Asia business has reminded me about colonial history. That is, in every city—Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, Seoul, of course, Taipei, and so on—what they do with those colonial buildings built by occupying colonialists is a very important question. In Seoul, they want to raze [the building] . . .

*RK:* In Seoul, they are razing it.

*MM:* I don't know what the situation is like in Jakarta, but in India, for example, there's no way they can possibly wipe out British colonialism.

*RK:* In Jakarta, the colonial structures have mostly been razed, but I would say not for ideological reasons, because I think that the hatred never took the same form. What is interesting is that in Singapore, they are doubling the colonial architecture. The Raffles Hotel is status and class, so instead of razing it, they've doubled it in size by creating a completely artificial copy. So that's why, as I was saying, there is no Asian condition for me. It's a series of very different moments. As for India, I've never been there, so that is why I'm also modest about making proclamations about India.

*MM:* One final question for me is about history. You say history is a drag, *but* what you write in the New York book, for example, or what you write about Singapore, is really history. It could, of course, be called "fiction" in the same way that it is also a "manifesto," as you said. Still, they present a coherent historical narrative. On the other hand, you dismiss history in no uncertain terms.

*RK:* I think that's a quote from "Generic City," and "Generic City" was, again, a manifesto, an interpretation: what are the drives and the driving forces of that kind of development . . .

*MM:* That's your technique, though. You say it's a manifesto, it's a novel, it's a poem, it's history, and you glide around. So you're an architect, you're a visionary, you're a writer. Again, you're gliding around. That's where your brilliance is allowed to come in. So how to read your book is a very difficult question. Are you supposed to be taken as a funny writer or what? What is it? Finally, the text is your buildings rather than your books, is that what it is?

*RK:* I'm actually kind of proud that in spite of all the pressure to conform to expected behavior and to an expected identity, I've been able to show a lot of loose ends. And I think loose ends is an important category, because it means that you're not saying that this is compatible with this, with this, with

this, and that everything fits. I'm saying that nothing fits, and I'm showing also that there are different aspects that refuse to unify into a single overall identity.

*MM:* That is a dream, though, that one can remain as free as that. One is always cornered somewhere, to say "*a* is *a*, *b* is *b*." There's no other way.

*RK:* Well, for instance, I felt that this near bankruptcy was the closest that I came to being cornered, because it confronted me with a kind of short circuit—on the one hand, the manifestation of a certain kind of architecture, but on the other, its complete lack of economic success, and therefore its threatened disappearance. So those moments happen frequently.

*SL:* To go back to something Professor Miyoshi brought up at the very beginning of this conversation, it does seem as though people are looking to architects for certain kinds of answers now, and that is something you can see in the way that architecture has become such a huge phenomenon. So, for example, in one of your lectures at Rice University, you said that the isolated towers of Houston are some of the purest and most ideological expressions you had seen. How does a skyline express an ideology? Because people are really looking for that kind of reading of cities, that kind of understanding.

*RK:* What I was talking about there was how Houston shows the curvature of capitalist exploitation. The center is a cluster or clump of skyscrapers, around which is an area of nothing where ghettos that somehow got too close used to be, so they kind of razed everything. Then there's a ring of black neighborhoods that are really almost shacks. I wasn't necessarily saying it was a beautiful spectacle, but it's readable for anyone who has eyes to situate that single frame. But I think the direct question is about my own responsibility. So rather than being a visionary, I would say that I am someone who deciphers certain things and who reports about certain things—and that's why I call myself a writer. That's maybe the public part of my activity. The private part is how I try to define for myself a plausible world for an architect and architectural projects. But I really want to prevent—because I think that has been the greatest fiasco of modern art, even—that instinct to make enormous moral proclamations and moral edicts in this turbulent avalanche that we are all involved in, whether we want to be or not, which for me is modernization. I think that on a private level, you can abstain, you cannot do certain things, you can do certain things, you can make a selection, et cetera, et cetera, but I simply do not believe that I can make any kind of moral statement that makes the world a better world.