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“HOPE HAS RETURNED’’: The Glorious Reception of OMA/Rem Koolhaas in the Dutch-Speaking World

Important texts about the work of OMA (and by Rem Koolhaas himself) have been written in English. In this article, the reception in the Dutch-speaking world is examined, from 1978 until 1990. As the writings of critics such as Geert Bekaert, Hans van Dijk, and Bart Lootsma show, the work of OMA—and, in particular, the designs for the Dutch Parliament (1978), the Netherlands Architecture Institute (1988), and the Sea Trade Center (1989)—was trumpeted because it expressed a polemical viewpoint towards commonplace convictions on historical cities, architecture culture, and the future of European society. In his home country, Koolhaas’ return—bringing everything he learned from Manhattan—was heralded as a liberation and as a new hopeful chance for architecture.

Introduction: Leaving Europe

It would strain credulity to insist that Rem Koolhaas (b. Rotterdam, 1944) became an architect because of his native country. Rather, an opposite of sorts seems true: Koolhaas turned to architecture in order to escape the Netherlands. The only biographical and architectural element that links him to the place and the area he was born in is the profession of his grandfather, Dirk Roosenburg (1887–1962)—a Dutch architect in whose office and studio Koolhaas, as a child, “played with erasers and soft pencils”, and whose work he would later admire because of its “weird mixture of conservatism and openness”.¹ And although it was in the inner city of the medieval Dutch town of Delft that young Koolhaas received his calling—“I was walking through Delft when I was suddenly and literally nailed to the ground. I knew in a flash that I would become an architect”²—the architectural project of Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) is not enthusiastically inspired by the “grand” architectural history of the Netherlands, and neither is it fuelled by specific features of (or intentions for) the spatial development of Western Europe.

To summarise what is mostly well-known: after a short career as a film-maker and journalist, Koolhaas studied at the Architectural Association in London (1968–1972) and then travelled to the United States to study at Cornell University with O. M. Ungers;³ he then became closely involved with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (at the time directed by Peter Eisenman) in Manhattan, founded OMA together with Elia Zenghelis in 1975, and published *Delirious New York* in 1978—a book containing his retroactive definition of a “culture of congestion”, of a

“paranoid-critical method”, and thus of an architectural program.

Not only is Koolhaas’ architecture theory—metropolitan, global, modern—international rather than “Dutch”, his early fame seems to have rested on the reception of his writings and of the designs of OMA in the English-speaking world. *Delirious New York* was written in English (and translated into French, but never Dutch—or only partially);⁴ most of the very early OMA projects were designed for London (“Exodus”) or New York (“Hotel Sphinx”); and—importantly—the work was exhibited, published, and received mostly outside of the Netherlands (in magazines such as *Casabella*, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, *Architectural Design*, *Lotus International*, *Progressive Architecture*, *Artforum*, and *A + U*, and in exhibitions at the Architectural Association and the Guggenheim in New York, among other venues). Moreover, Koolhaas made clear already during the 1980s that nothing was really happening in the Netherlands or in the Dutch-speaking world, and that none of his compatriots were of any importance, saying in a 1985 interview with the Belgian magazine, *Vlees & Beton*, for example: “Nothing has any effect. It’s one of the mysterious phenomena of the Dutch architecture culture. A great and absolute muteness. I have a much richer and more varied relationship with my American, English and French colleagues”.⁵

A Floating Swimming Pool Has Found a Home Port

Nevertheless, it is undeniably the case that Koolhaas and OMA started designing a number of projects for Dutch and European cities or sites at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, and that the Dutch-speaking world

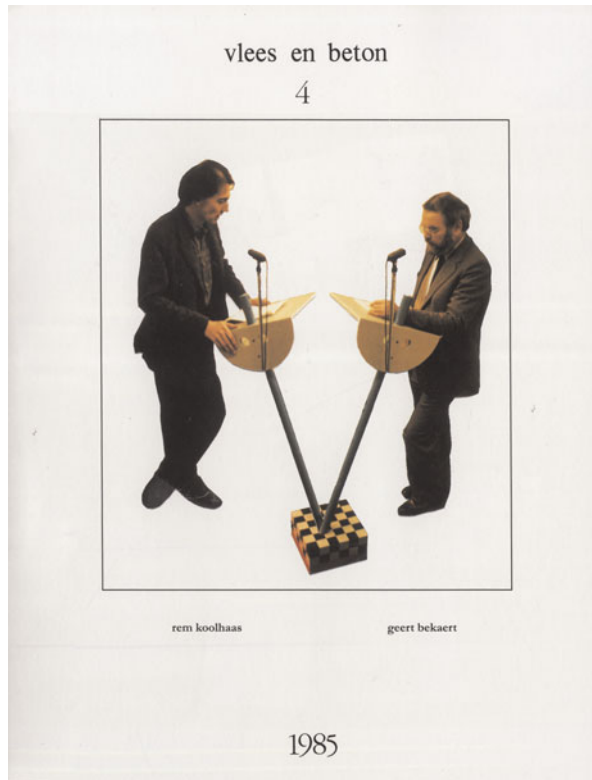


Figure 1. *Vlees & Beton*, no. 4 (October 1985) (cover image: Geert Bekeert and Rem Koolhaas, Academy of Architecture, Rotterdam, 29 January 1985).

quickly caught up with the critical reception of the work of OMA. What's more, the historical context of European cities such as Rotterdam and The Hague would provide an important testing ground for his metropolitan architecture, while the interpretation and evaluation of the work of OMA could have had no better incubator than the Dutch-speaking architecture culture and society of the time—with its own mixed bag of histories, frustrations, and hopes. Indeed, it was the state of the architecture of the Netherlands or (including Belgium) the Dutch-speaking architecture scene at that particular moment which proved to be ideally suited for the reception of the work of Koolhaas and OMA—and for its polemical

and critical nature. Sometimes, by contradicting the statements of the architect, Dutch-speaking critics during the 1980s received Koolhaas as someone who could illuminate, by means of architecture, the path his mother country (and continent) should follow.

It is fair to say that this reception was almost unanimously positive, and often nothing less than glorious. To illustrate this, one might as well begin with the last sentence of one of the earliest essays on OMA/Rem Koolhaas, written by Belgian architecture critic and theorist Geert Bekeert and published in July 1982 in a theme issue on the work of OMA in *Wonen TABK* (a magazine that would later evolve into *Archis*

and, much later, be hijacked by Koolhaas' "think-tank" AMO, as *Volume*): "Hope has returned".⁶ The issue opened with a text by Dutch critic Hans van Dijk about the strategic use by Koolhaas and OMA of "rhetoric" as a means to convince and seduce; the article was followed by a presentation of 12 projects, a translation of "The Irony of Metropolis" (a text by Anthony Vidler, published only one month earlier in *Skyline*),⁷ and the text by Bekaert, in which Koolhaas—and "Exodus"—are compared with Le Corbusier (and "Le Plan Voisin"). What is striking about it is that it can be read explicitly as a homecoming address to Koolhaas. It plots the historical path to his designs and writings, contending that Koolhaas had gone abroad to Manhattan to learn from New York, to write *Delirious New York*, and to develop a new method to create late twentieth-century architecture. It is important to realise, Bekaert argued, that the method he developed there subsequently proved totally impotent in the metropolitan (and American) arena. A retroactive manifesto is useless in the location where the mechanisms it describes take place all by themselves and without the help of an author. What made this architecture work was thus something completely different—something against which this strategy could react and which could serve as a "polemical stimulus". "Koolhaas himself", Bekaert wrote, "went on to fill this gap. In the Nietzschean arena of the metropolis, he had already shot his last bolt. Supporters of his retroactive manifesto did not stand a chance as designers in New York. He was forced to retreat to less metropolitan, more provincial areas—such as the Netherlands". It is this argument, together with a nod to Koolhaas' "Story of the Pool", that returns in the last sentences of Bekaert's text: "A floating swimming pool built by Russian Constructivists was passing through Rotterdam on its odyssey

and found a home port [...]. Hope has returned".⁸

The question is: how and why was the return of Koolhaas identified with that of hope to the Dutch-speaking architecture scene? The answer is traceable to the polemical stance that three unbuilt competition designs by OMA were able to generate with regard to the history, the culture, and the future of the Netherlands and of the Old Continent in general. These were the Dutch Parliament Extension in The Hague (1978); the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam (1986); and the Sea Trade Center in Zeebrugge (Belgium, 1989). While it has become somewhat of a cliché to narrow Koolhaas' polemical position in the 1980s to his crusade against postmodernism,⁹ his position on (the architecture culture of) his home country, present in these designs, led to a very specific kind of reception, based on a much broader analysis. It was because he criticised and opposed almost everything architecture had come to represent in the Low Countries that Koolhaas was received as a bringer of hope. In turn, the reception shows how much (no matter how unconsciously or as a retroactive construct) Koolhaas' quest during the 1970s for a stable foundation for the architecture of OMA was undertaken with the home country in his rear-view mirror.

Dutch Parliament Extension (1978): Past

In 1978, an open competition was organised for the expansion of the Parliament Headquarters at the fortified Binnenhof Complex in The Hague. The design by OMA—today, the very first item in the project chronology on its website—had to compete with 110 other entries. The jury, led by the Dutch government

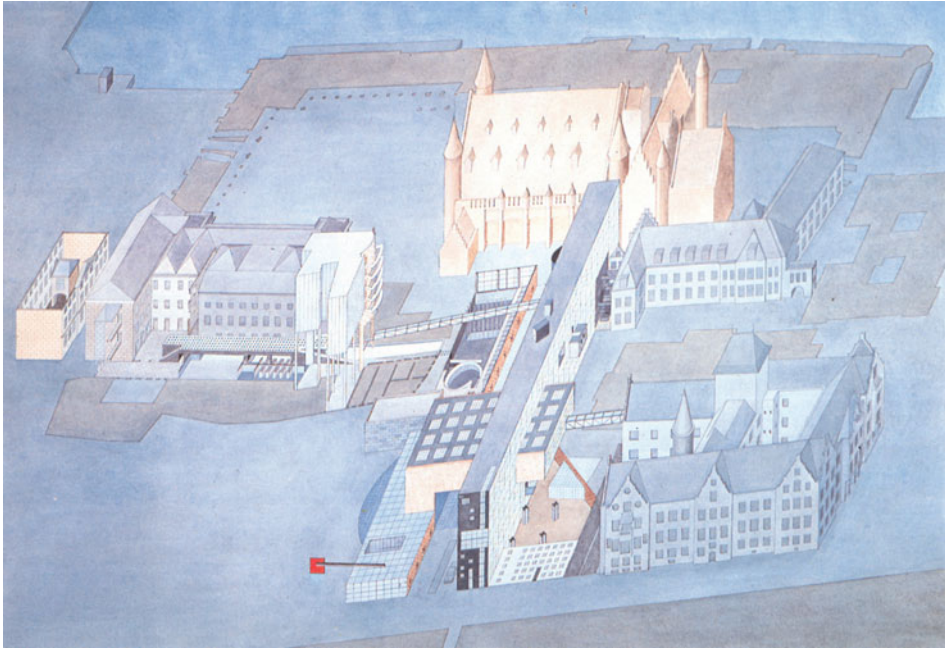


Figure 2. OMA/Rem Koolhaas, "Parliament in The Hague: Axonometric projection", *Lotus International*, no. 25 (1979), 28.

architect, Wim Quist, decided that "none of the projects could be selected for a second round", declaring that "the complexity of the commission was not met with sufficient craftsmanship".¹⁰ The design by OMA was, however, rewarded with a shared first prize (together with that of the Dutch structuralist architect, Leo Heijdenrijk). Surprisingly, the Parliament decided in 1980 to ask three other architects—Arie Hagoort, Groep 5, and Pi De Bruijn—for a new design. It was the proposal of De Bruijn that was implemented, although the structure would not be finished until 1991. In this, the existing buildings were linked and joined by additions in a classical modernist style in such a manner as to give rise to a closed, almost massive building block.

Many architecture critics, however, had done what they could to call attention to the design

submitted by OMA. Umberto Barbieri and Cees Boekraad argued in the Dutch magazine, *Vrij Nederland*, that it "was the only proposal on an international level".¹¹ In the same weekly, and still in 1978, Koolhaas was given the opportunity (in an interview with Max Pam) to criticise the other proposals: "In all [the other] entries, the entire Binnenhof is filled with a gigantic concrete pudding, while in our plan the terrain seems empty, despite the fact that we occupy the same floor area. The plumping down of these puddings is always done in the name of the need to maintain a small scale, and always justified with the claim that one has designed out of respect for the historic core. But all these designs are completely filled in, and the core has become completely invisible".¹²

Compared to the other entries, the unique nature of the OMA design for The Hague is

indisputable; as the reception of the proposal shows, the contrast with prevailing notions of how to deal with the historical and multilayered architecture of the European city was enormous. The design by Koolhaas (then still collaborating with Elia Zenghelis and, for this design, with Zaha Hadid) is driven first and foremost by the desire to make the contrast between new additions and the existing fabric as clear as possible. Three buildings are assembled along two intersecting axes: a long low building with meeting rooms and public spaces (a slab made of glass brick); a long narrow building (parallel to the first) for the politicians; and an extra smaller building to meet the required floor area. The three different volumes are connected by means of visible ramps, elevators, staircases, and one large ambulatory. Of course, in order to be able to erect such clear-cut buildings, completely separate from the existing surrounds, some adjustments had to be made in the cramped site of the Binnenhof. Rather than demolition, OMA proposed—and this is the most polemical, if not bullying, gesture of the design—a “transplantation of one seventeenth century structure to a position in front of the complex, where it [...] restores some of the original definition of the Binnenhof. The breach created by this removal is then occupied by two slabs”.¹³ One existing building would have been moved in order to make space for the addition of new infrastructure.

The jury, though intrigued, spoke in its report about a “tough proposal”: “the designer has taken a stance, the environment is destroyed, the user is subordinate to the formal vision of the architect”.¹⁴ The OMA design was the only proposal that “survived”—at the time of the second competition in 1980 (when, as mentioned, three practices were asked to submit a new design), several critics (and other

architects or artists) renewed calls for the OMA proposal to be considered again. An open letter was written to the Parliament, in which the convoluted decision-making process was attributed to the fear among politicians of offending the public and especially The Hague residents. Curiously enough, this difficult political problem of the representation of the public in the parliamentary system was compared (in the open letter from “group Lens/Van Os/Voorberg”) to the design by OMA, which was assigned a political role in “making different forms of participation and mutual verbal communication” possible. “The fault has been”, they wrote in their letter, “that the jury did not have the courage to propose this self-conscious and contemporary design for implementation. [...] We urge the State as the commissioning party to invite architect Rem Koolhaas to elaborate his design, after consultation with stakeholders and the inhabitants of The Hague”.¹⁵

As already noted, this invitation was not extended to Koolhaas, although critical voices—for example, during the protracted public debate over the executed design by Pi De Bruijn—kept insisting that it had been a missed opportunity, even as late as 1982 (by Geert Bekaert in his aforementioned essay): “There could have been no better opportunity for Koolhaas to demonstrate his architectural ideology. [...] The proposal that he submitted is as clear as one could possibly wish and responsive to all groups. [...] It is deeply regrettable that the jury did not award the proposal the first prize and recommend that it be built. The Netherlands missed a unique opportunity to live up to its reputation as a forward-looking nation and uphold its tradition of modern institutional architecture. [...] That would have brought glory not solely to Koolhaas, but to the entire Dutch nation.

It would have been a milestone in architectural history. The very idea is fascinating”.¹⁶

The fascination of the OMA proposal for the political heart of The Hague lay, for those who so favourably and passionately embraced it, precisely in the radical position it presented towards the institution and the headquarters of power, and towards the historical city and the conservative instinct to protect it. The modern way to deal architecturally with the past and with the places of power encountered much more resistance than acceptance, and it did not lead to real results. But for quite a large group of critics, it was a wonderful vehicle for the expression of discontent with the current state of affairs on the one hand, and of hope for a better future on the other.

Netherlands Architecture Institute 1988: Culture

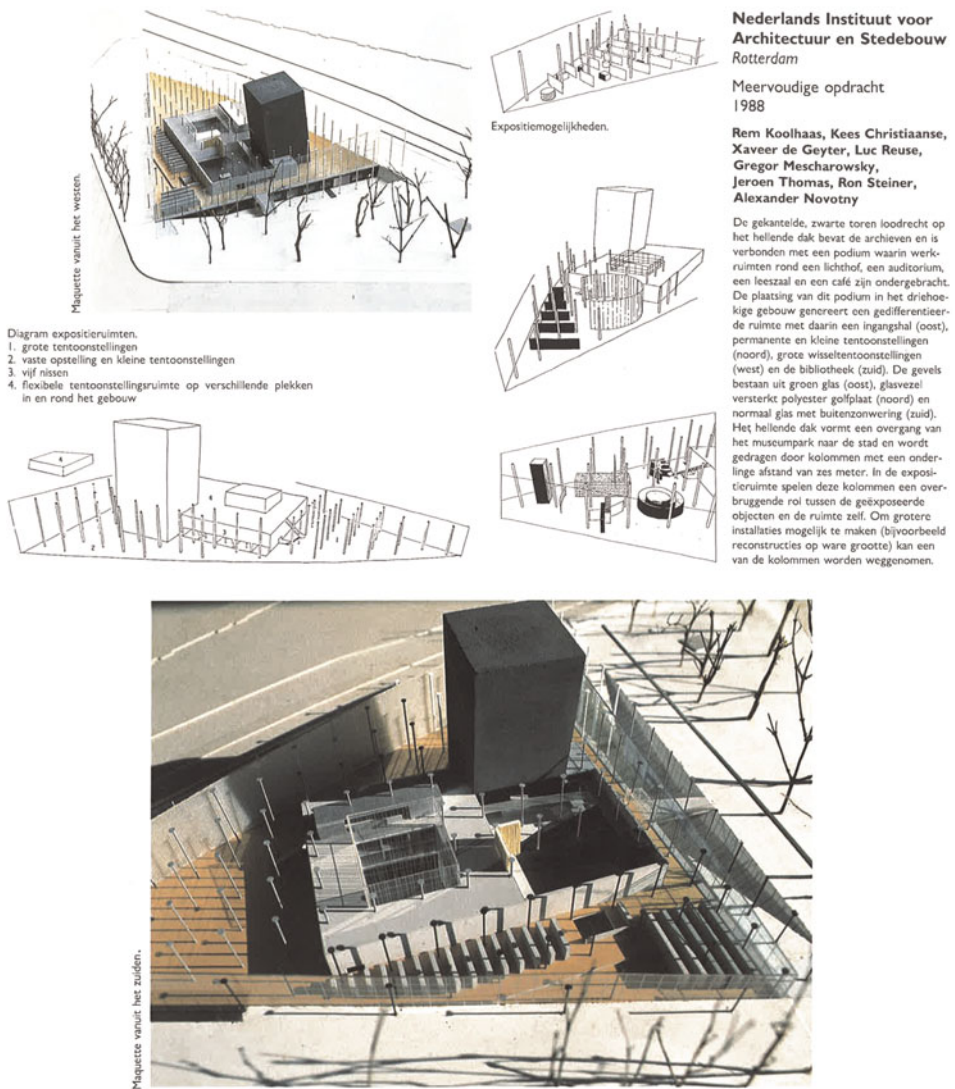
The same can be said—maybe even more dramatically—about the design competition for the headquarters of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, organised in 1988. At stake here was nothing less than the identity of Dutch architecture and the cultural role it could or should play in society.

The Netherlands Architecture Institute (the NAI) was a relatively young institution: it came into being during the 1980s as the result of a fusion between three other organisations (the national architecture archives, the architecture museum, and the foundation for housing development). The NAI building would contain a museum, a cafeteria, a library, a large archive space, offices, and a bookshop. As its location, a triangular square (the Hobokenplein) was chosen close to the city centre and in front of the oldest museum in Rotterdam (Museum

Boijmans Van Beuningen) and the new museum park, which was at the time still in development. Six architects were invited to prepare a design: five Dutchmen (Jo Coenen, Benthem/Crouwel, Hubert-Jan Henket, Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Wim Quist) and one Swiss architect from Ticino, Luigi Snozzi. (Originally, Ralph Erskine was also invited, but Henket replaced him.)

When the designs were made, an exhibition was organised in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen during the summer of 1988 and a catalogue was published. The heated debate around the new NAI would be almost completely monopolised by the project of OMA—and the catalogue clearly gave the first push in that direction. Small texts (according to the colophon written by architecture critics Ruud Brouwers and Bernard Colenbrander) introduced the six architects; the one on Koolhaas ends with the sentence, “The lack of a real metropolitan milieu in the Netherlands raises the risk that Koolhaas’ buildings will amount to nothing more than the empty, wasted gesture of a provincial prima donna”.¹⁷ This interpretation of OMA’s architectural project was diametrically opposed to that of Bekaert in his article from 1982, who had clearly stated that Koolhaas’ retroactive manifesto didn’t stand a chance in the USA and could only be meaningful, critical, and coherent on the mother continent.

The rebuke in the catalogue did not go unnoticed. Koolhaas was still furious about it when he gave an interview at the beginning of January 1989 (again in the Belgian magazine, *Vlees & Beton*, this time in a theme issue entitled “OMA in Nederland”—“OMA in the Netherlands”). Mil De Kooning asked: “Isn’t it amazing that this quote [about the empty gesture] should come from the co-organisers of the



Nederlands Instituut voor Architectuur en Stedebouw Rotterdam

Meervoudige opdracht
1988

Rem Koolhaas, Kees Christiaanse, Xaveer de Geyter, Luc Reuse, Gregor Mescharowsky, Jeroen Thomas, Ron Steiner, Alexander Novotny

De gekantelde, zwarte toren loodrecht op het hellende dak bevat de archieven en is verbonden met een podium waarin werkruimten rond een lichthof, een auditorium, een leeszaal en een café zijn ondergebracht. De plaatsing van dit podium in het driehoekige gebouw genereert een gedifferentieerde ruimte met daarin een ingangshal (oost), permanente en kleine tentoonstellingen (noord), grote wisseltentoonstellingen (west) en de bibliotheek (zuid). De gevels bestaan uit groen glas (oost), glasvezel versterkt polyester golfplaat (noord) en normaal glas met buitenzonwering (zuid). Het hellende dak vormt een overgang van het museumpark naar de stad en wordt gedragen door kolommen met een onderlinge afstand van zes meter. In de expositieruimte spelen deze kolommen een overbruggende rol tussen de geëxposeerde objecten en de ruimte zelf. Om grotere installaties mogelijk te maken (bijvoorbeeld reconstructies op ware grootte) kan een van de kolommen worden weggenomen.

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Figure 3. *Archis*, no. 7 (July 1988), 9.

museum competition?" To which Koolhaas replied: "Shameless, unimaginable! The fact that, four months after the end of the competition, it is formulated in such a way in their own catalogue, is a provocative demonstration of how openly they had rejected the design. In a civilized country, one would go to

trial. [...] While critics and journalists as a collective have the power or at least the means to change something about the Dutch situation, they take a position that seems to suggest the situation—despite their efforts and presence—is invincible. . . . To my way of thinking, it all goes back to *Delirious New York*".¹⁸ Koolhaas even



Figure 4. *Vlees & Beton*, no. 12 (1989).

went so far as to blame that book for the view that OMA's approach cannot "work" in Europe—and he took pains to renounce it: "I have always said extremely explicitly that I didn't want to be the one who was going to prove the theses of *Delirious New York*".¹⁹ The entire interview (on the part of both interviewer and interviewee) can be read as one long lament on the negative reception of OMA in the Netherlands, and on the negative fate of their design proposals and competition entries.

Certainly in the case of the design for the NAI, this complaint seems somewhat overdone. Although it did not get built, it was met with almost unanimous praise. Geert Bekaert wrote an opinion piece in the Dutch newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*, at the end of August 1988

about the competition, stressing that the new building should not represent architecture as an institution, but rather should present it, openly and directly, to the rest of society: "There is only one design that captures everything in one masterful gesture: that of Rem Koolhaas of OMA".²⁰ The design by Koolhaas did indeed, maybe even more than for his other projects, present a machine for activities, meetings, and confrontations: a quadrangular heart housed the private functions (archives and offices), a larger triangular roof defined the public spaces around this core; the roof sloped in the direction of the city; and the entire building was surrounded by glass facades in different grades of opacity. In *Forum*, Herman Kerkdijk and Arthur Wortmann called it a kind of:

architecture which is open to the many possibilities that the program potentially contains. We only have to imagine the possibilities of the auditorium: when some architectural event has attracted too many people, the dividing curtain can be opened. The auditorium now becomes part of the hall.²¹

It is no coincidence that this article appeared in *Forum*, only one decade earlier the magazine of the Dutch structuralists and Team X. Their tendency to guide, accompany, or even ameliorate human activities by means of architecture was replaced in Koolhaas and OMA by a willingness to let activities define architecture.

In *Archis*, Hans van Dijk wrote that in Koolhaas' design, the program "was elastically taken up by a very strong spatial and visual concept, one that has no equal, not even in the earlier work of OMA".²² In *Architectuur/Bouwen*, Tom Maas wrote that "it is brilliant how, in all its simplicity, the building does have the presence of an important museum".²³ And although Riek Bakker, at the time director of the Rotterdam Department for City Development, was also in favour of the Koolhaas design, it was Jo Coenen who won the competition, with an imposing and almost monumental design featuring an elaborate (and useless) extra roof on top of the main building, and crowning the entire site with a curved but empty gallery. Still, the winning design makes clear what the jury wanted ("an explicitly expressive and differentiated representation of the institutional functions",²⁴ as its report stated)—a treatment that Koolhaas specifically did not offer. The idea that architecture, as a vital social function, should not be hidden behind a symbolic facade or a monumental presence was not accepted by those in power. That it should, on the other

hand, together with everything that architecture culture can engender, be unproblematically present inside and on top of a constantly changing platform in the midst of the city life of Rotterdam—this was an idea that many applauded, and some had indeed even discovered partly thanks to the design of OMA.

Zeebrugge Sea Trade Center 1989: Future

In 1987, one year before the competition for the NAI, OMA had already been working on a commission to develop a facility for temporary art exhibitions, the Kunsthal, located at the top of the Museum Park in Rotterdam. The fact that Coenen won the competition urged OMA to change this first version drastically, since it was developed as a more subdued counterpoint to their own design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute.²⁵ The second version for the Kunsthal was made in 1989, together with a design for the Museum Park—both were completed by 1992. Also in 1989, in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the retrospective exposition, *The First Decade*, was organised by OMA—and Koolhaas made his last great project (of the 1980s) for the Low Countries: the Sea Trade Center in Belgium. This competition was organised by the ferry company, located on the Belgian coast. With a tunnel and railway link soon to be realised, something drastic was needed to maintain the attraction of crossing the Channel from Europe to the UK by boat. Whereas the designs for The Hague and Rotterdam presented a new position on historical city centres, political institutions, and architecture culture, the project for Zeebrugge was nothing less than a glorification of the (commercial) possibilities of public transport. The stance it took towards progress and towards the project of architecture in general again elicited mostly exuberant



Figure 5. *Streven*, no. 1 (1990), cover.

responses from the Dutch-speaking critics and journalists.

The competition was co-organised by Geert Bekaert, who—as is probably clear by now—played a major role in the reception of the work of OMA and Rem Koolhaas in the Netherlands and in Belgium. He was chairman of the jury (which would award the first prize to OMA) and author of the book in which the proposals were published. The merit of the design by Koolhaas, he argued in the jury

report, was that “traffic, bustle, cars, parking lots not only become part of the event, their own charm is granted a specific presence. The project offers a new way of looking at things, and specifically at the things of our era. [...] The architecture, no matter how intelligent, disappears and merges in the experience itself”.²⁶ In a lecture given at the Royal Academy in Brussels in 1990, Bekaert again explained the choice of the design by OMA by stating how it expressed “convincingly a belief in the future of our culture”.²⁷

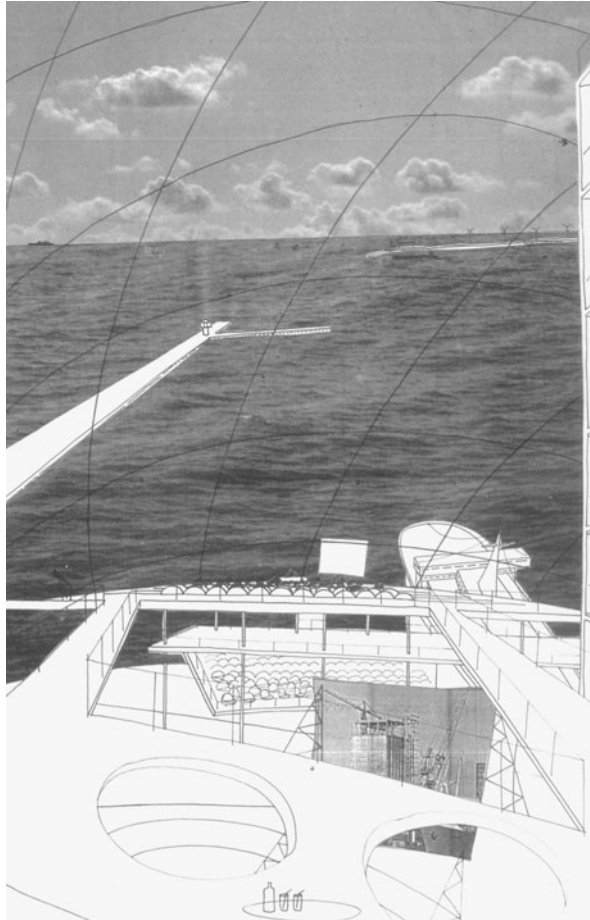


Figure 6. OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Sea Trade Center; interior view (Geert Bekaert, *Sea Trade Center Zeebrugge*, Antwerp: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1990, 37).

In the summer of 1989, OMA was involved in three large competitions at the same time—in addition to the one for Zeebrugge, the office also participated in the competitions for the Très Grande Bibliothèque in Paris and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe. In a lecture given at TUDelft in November 1989, Koolhaas himself admitted that the role OMA was playing during the development of these designs was probably modest in comparison to that of the clients. “There is something in the air. In these three

commissions there seems to be, at the same time, the enormously concrete need for some urgent provisions that have to be, in one way or another, mastered with the classical armoury of the architect. It is no longer the case that you walk around constantly projecting and imposing things on others against their will. [...] It’s a question of a typical European feeling of optimism, in which you willingly participate. [...] The ambition no longer comes from us, but from clients who take on visionary undertakings”.²⁸

In the case of Zeebrugge, OMA's design amplified these ambitions by entangling all the activities inside and outside of the building as intensely as possible. This European version of the culture of congestion resulted in an architecture that offered at every point at least three or four confrontations with different aspects of late-twentieth-century modernity. As a drawing from an interior view shows, in the Sea Trade Center, it would have been impossible to isolate oneself from all the different reasons for this building's existence: commerce, traffic, culture, nature (the North Sea), industry, sight-seeing, tourism, trade, and leisure—phenomena that were, at the time, optimistically linked with the future of the European continent. The most remarkable thing about the design by Koolhaas was that it did not have to anchor all these activities in one clear, unidimensional (and outdated) image, as the other proposals did. This becomes visible in the many associations the Terminal by OMA evoked: since 1989, it has been compared with a boulder smoothed by the sea water,²⁹ a bollard,³⁰ an oversized helmet from a spacesuit,³¹ an egg with a tower emerging from it (curiously reminiscent of the very first logo for OMA in 1975),³² the Globe Tower (designed by Samuel Friede for Coney Island in 1906 and present in *Delirious New York*),³³ the tower of Babel turned upside-down (a metaphor OMA prefers),³⁴ and a painting by Dominique Appia, used in 1978 as the poster image for the exhibition, *Le Temps des Gares*, at the Centre Pompidou (one which Bekaert suggested as late as 2004).³⁵ The difference with all the other designs is that they made use of imagery too—but without the images being “floating signifiers”: Aldo Rossi grouped all kinds of analogous tower buildings on a platform; Belgian architect Bob van Reeth referred to the barns, typical for this area; his compatriot, Charles Vandenhove, assembled

autonomous, almost pop-like fragments, and Fumihiko Maki designed the décor for a fairytale, with a Ferris wheel and a giant origami bird. The design by Koolhaas, as Bart Lootsma and Mariëtte Van Stralen wrote in *Archis*, “seduces mostly because of its ‘strangeness’, for the useless spectacle it offers in a form that evades every causality and every symbolic order”.³⁶ And exactly this character of the design was one of the few reasons why it was criticised, for example in the Belgian newspaper, *De Standaard*, in which the architecture critic, Francis Strauven, called the scale model by OMA “a static object, endlessly showing the same form”.³⁷

Rather than being evaluated as an object for aesthetic appreciation, the Sea Trade Center by OMA and Koolhaas—so the reception in the Dutch-language area proves—was heralded (and awarded) because of the positive future it seemed to present for the project of Europe: for the continent's unification by means of transport, for the economic prosperity flowing from maritime trade—and for the potential its citizens still enjoyed to be excited by architectural proposals, by symbolic spaces that accommodate the desire for collectivity, and by the activities they could house when executed. The Sea Trade Center by OMA did not represent Europe at the end of the twentieth century—it simply presented everything Europe could still stand for, not least by removing historical and symbolic residues. This floating signifier, however, was never built: in the course of 1990, the ferry company withdrew, realising that the battle against the train (and the airplane) could not be won.

Conclusion: Leaving Europe (Again)

Already in the spring of 1990, a symposium was organised at the Technical University in Delft on

the occasion of the departure of Rem Koolhaas as a full professor. The title of the symposium was "How Modern is Dutch Architecture?" Koolhaas again succeeded in offending some sacred cows of the modern Dutch tradition, for example by confessing that "with only a little bad will I can read the Schröder house [by Gerrit Rietveld, in Utrecht] as the most sublimated version of the gypsy caravan".³⁸ His call to Dutch colleagues at the symposium to "break free from the straitjacket of modesty by taking risks instead of building respectable buildings"³⁹ failed to bear fruit, as a review of the event in *Archis* showed: "the architects did not succeed in transcending themselves. [...] The outcome of listening to so many irrelevant lectures was despair".⁴⁰

From that year, Koolhaas' working field as an architect became completely global again, resulting in the publication of *S, M, L, XL* in 1995 and in a slow extinguishing of the embrace of his work in the Dutch-speaking area and his influence on the debates and major competitions in the Netherlands, Belgium, and in Europe in general. One could even go so far as to suggest that the ambitions of Koolhaas' Dutch and European projects went unfulfilled, not just because they (mostly) weren't built, but because exactly the glorious and hopeful reception they had received led to overly grand expectations, and to disappointment for Koolhaas as well as, in the end, for his critics. His role during the 1980s was, however, undeniable: by importing his interpretations of modern, metropolitan, and American viewpoints on architecture and the city, he succeeded in polemically dominating the Dutch-language conversation on architecture for more than a decade. When leaving Europe in the 1970s, Koolhaas could never have guessed how his "discoveries" in the new

continent would really make, a decade later and back home, all the difference. In an almost paradoxical manner, he was welcomed because he was able to show the various faults of the Dutch architecture (culture), by proving via his designs and his texts how easy and progressive architecture could be, and how neurotic and inhibited the thinking and working of all the other architects had been all along. Looking back on the "entrance" of Koolhaas in 2001, in an interview with Pier Vittorio Aureli, Geert Bekaert summarised: "Koolhaas' charm was that he gave the impression that there was no problem in architecture. Architecture was evident. This meant a liberation from theory and architectural culture".⁴¹

As usual, Koolhaas himself provided words to describe what happened—for example, when, in 1986, he received the Rotterdam Maaskant Prize, the Pritzker Prize of the Dutch-speaking area. On this occasion, Koolhaas talked about the design produced by OMA for the 1989 World Fair in Paris and about the reaction of President François Mitterrand:

To my surprise I saw, when I had explained my four photocopies, how the rather tight face of the president lit up, as a secret notification of something special, and he was kind enough to tell me: "You have understood our problems, and more than that, you have solved them." It was an epiphany, because it confirmed that the entire traditional, well-known terrain that is being talked about rather gaudily in contemporary architecture is not really relevant and that in the end it is all about breaking out of architecture, or rather about preventing a premature closure.⁴²

In charging him with the task of preventing the end of architecture, the Dutch-language reception of Koolhaas during the 1980s without a doubt granted him weak messianic powers. The question might be whether this

ascription could have been avoided. What else does a good architect do than *offer the possibility* (which is not to say to prove) that things could be different, and much better, than they are right now?

Notes

1. Dorine van Hoogstraten, "Intense gebouwen. Gesprek met Rem Koolhaas over zijn grootvader", in Dorine van Hoogstraten (ed.), *Dirk Roosenburg: 1887–1962*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005, 69–70. (All Dutch quotations are translated by the author.)
2. Max Pam, "Rem Koolhaas: 'In feite is de Bijlmer een uitgestelde polemieek tegen New York'", *Vrij Nederland*, no. 10 (10 March 1979), 18.
3. On the collaboration between Koolhaas and Ungers, see Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot, "Ghostwriting. Rem Koolhaas in Conversation", in Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot (eds), *The City in the City. Berlin: A Green Archipelago. A Manifesto (1977) by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska*, Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013, 131–143. See also, Lara Schrijver, "OMA as Tribute to OMU: Exploring Resonances in the Work of Koolhaas and Ungers", *The Journal of Architecture*, no. 3 (July 2008), 235–261.
4. Rem Koolhaas, "Radio City Music Hall: The Fun Never Sets", *Wonen TABK*, no. 11 (June 1978), 21–24.
5. Mil De Kooning, "De economie van de verbeelding. Rem Koolhaas in gesprek", *Vlees & Beton*, no. 4 (October 1985), n.p.
6. Geert Bekaert, "De odyssee van een verlicht ondernemer", *Wonen TABK*, nos. 13–14 (July 1982), 57; for an English translation ("The Odyssey of an Enlightened Entrepreneur: Rem Koolhaas"). See Geert Bekaert, *Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture*, Ghent, WZV, 2011, 278–297.
7. Anthony Vidler, "The Office for Metropolitan Architecture", *Skyline* (May 1982), 18–21.
8. Bekaert, "The Odyssey of an Enlightened Entrepreneur", 295.
9. See, for example, Roberto Gargiani, "New Sobriety vs. Post-Modern and Contextualism", in Roberto Gargiani (ed.), *Rem Koolhaas/OMA:0. The Construction of Merveilles*, London: Routledge, 2008, 76–141.
10. Ruud Brouwers, "Prijsvraag uitbreiding tweede kamer stopt—111 inzendingen bieden jury geen vertrouwen", *Wonen TABK*, no. 12 (June 1978), 2. For a reconstruction of the debate and the competition(s), see also Ruud Brouwers, *Een bouwspel van woorden: de geschiedenis van de meervoudige opdracht voor de uitbreiding en verbouwing van de Tweede Kamer*, Den Haag: Ministerie van VRO, 1981.
11. Umberto Barbieri and Cees Boekraad, "Uitbreiding Tweede Kamer", *Vrij Nederland*, 14 (October 1978), 15.
12. Pam, "Rem Koolhaas", 18.
13. <http://oma.eu/projects/1978/dutch-parliament-extension> (accessed 15 January 2014).
14. Collection National Archive, Archive Arnold Tilanus, 2.21.183.82: 32 "ontwerpen 1–39". Quoted in Remy Maessen, "De inrichting van een parlementair huis. Debatten en discussies rondom de inrichting van een nieuw Tweede Kamergebouw (1970–1981)", unpublished Master's thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen, 2011.
15. Jan H. B. Voorberg, "Tweede Kamerprijsvraag: pleidooi voor Koolhaas", *Wonen TABK*, no. 13 (July 1980), 2–3. Jan Voorberg was, until his untimely death in 1983, an early collaborator of OMA.
16. Bekaert, "The Odyssey of an Enlightened Entrepreneur", 288–289.
17. Ruud Brouwers and Bernard Colenbrander, "Rem Koolhaas/OMA", in Ruud Brouwers and Bernard Colenbrander (eds), *Zes ontwerpen*

- voor het Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, Rotterdam: NAI, 1988, n.p.
18. Mil De Kooning, "OMA. Rem Koolhaas in gesprek", *Vlees & Beton*, no. 12 (1989), n.p.
 19. De Kooning, "OMA", n.p.
 20. Geert Bekaert, "Een toetssteen voor de bouwkunst. Het lijkt alsof architectuur door haar instituut in quarantaine is geplaatst", *NRC Handelsblad*, 18, (26 August 1988), 7.
 21. Herman Kerkdijk and Arthur Wortmann, "The Diary of an Architect", *Forum*, no. 4 (October 1988), 40.
 22. Hans van Dijk, "Zes architecturen op zoek naar een opdrachtgever. De ontwerpen voor het Nederlands Architectuurinstituut", *Archis*, no. 7 (July 1988), 9.
 23. Tom Maas, "Nederlands Architectuurinstituut", *Architectuur/Bouwen*, no. 4 (July 1988), 7.
 24. http://www.nai.nl/over_het_nai/het_gebouw/item/_pid/kolom2-1/_rp_kolom2-1_elementId/I_10295 (accessed 15 January 2014).
 25. De Kooning, "OMA", n.p.
 26. Geert Bekaert, "Rem Koolhaas", in Geert Bekaert (ed.), *Sea Trade Center Zeebrugge*, Antwerp: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1990, 32.
 27. Geert Bekaert, "Project Zeebrugge", *Streven*, no. 1 (October 1990), 29.
 28. Quoted in Bart Lootsma and Mariëtte Van Stralen, "De opdrachtgever als visionair. Koolhaas blaast de klassieke rol van de architect nieuw leven in", *Archis*, no. 5 (May 1990), 39.
 29. Bekaert, "Rem Koolhaas", 31.
 30. Marc Dubois, "Een meerpaal of een stad", *SIAM*, no. 3 (1989), 15.
 31. Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, 243.
 32. Gargiani, *Rem Koolhaas/OMA: The Construction of Merveilles*, 165.
 33. Lootsma and Van Stralen, "De opdrachtgever als visionair", 36.
 34. <http://oma.eu/projects/1989/zeebrugge-sea-terminal> (accessed 15 January 2014).
 35. Bekaert, *Rooted in the Real*, 492.
 36. Lootsma and Van Stralen, "De opdrachtgever als visionair", 38.
 37. Francis Strauven, "Welke terminal voor Zeebrugge", *De Standaard*, 29 March 1990, 8.
 38. Rem Koolhaas, "How Modern is Dutch Architecture?", in Crimson with Michael Speaks and Gerald Hadders (eds), *Mart Stam's Trousers: Stories from Behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism*, Rotterdam: 010Publishers, 1999, 165.
 39. Koolhaas, "How Modern is Dutch architecture?", 159.
 40. Arthur Wortmann, "Afscheid Koolhaas in teken van moed en wanhoop", *Archis*, no. 6 (June 1990), 6–7.
 41. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Saskia Kloosterboer, "No History as History, No Theory as Theory. Conversation with Geert Bekaert", *Hunch*, no. 4 (2001), 44.
 42. Rem Koolhaas, "De wereld is rijp voor de architect als visionair", *Archis*, no. 8 (August 1986), 47.