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Koolhaas and the Kunsthal: History Lesions

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Source: *ANY: Architecture New York*, No. 21, How the Critic Sees: SEVEN CRITICS ON SEVEN BUILDINGS (1997), pp. 36-41

Published by: Anyone Corporation

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856049>

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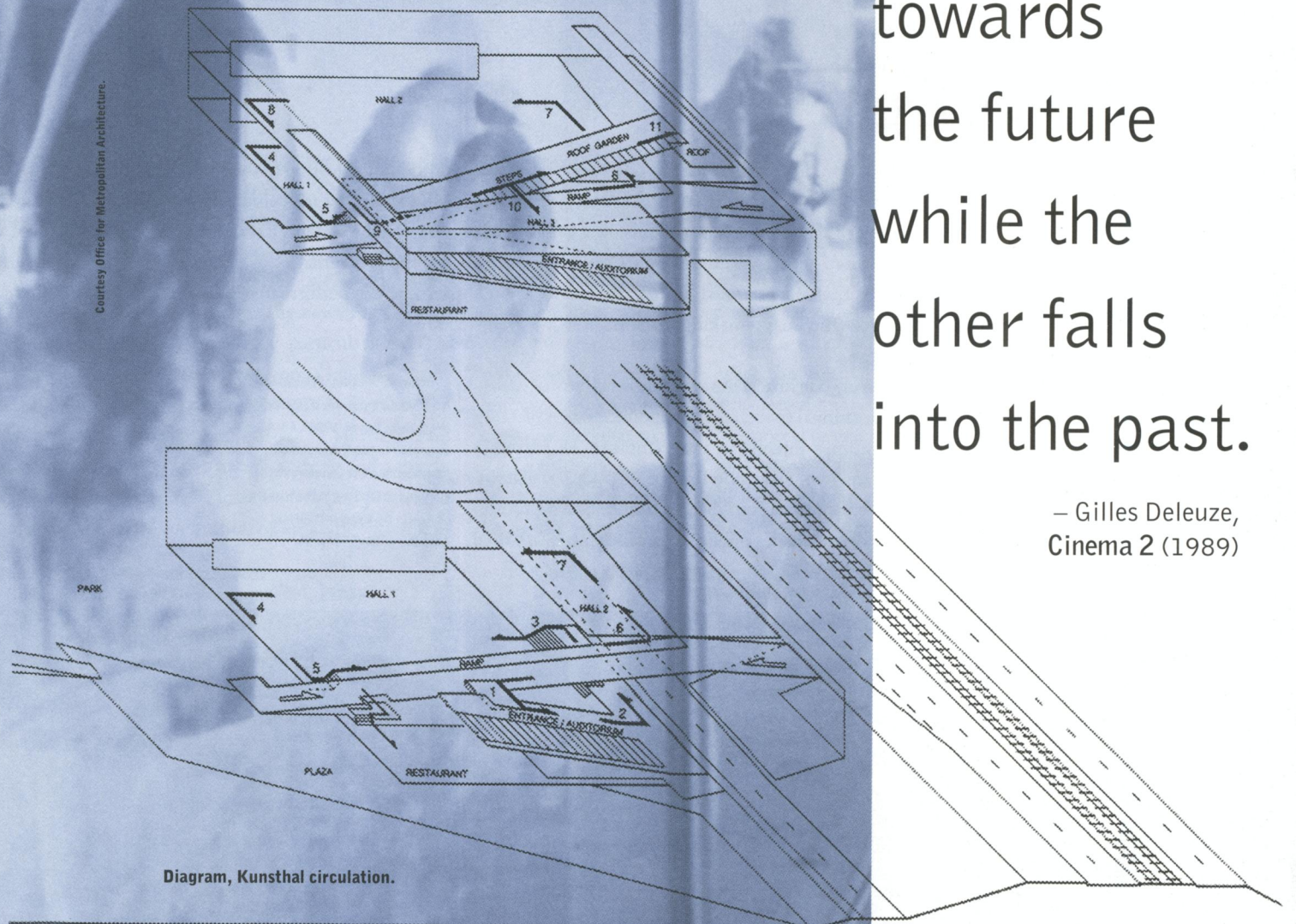
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Time has
to split
the present
in two
hetero-
geneous
directions,
one of
which
is launched
towards
the future
while the
other falls
into the past.

– Gilles Deleuze,
Cinema 2 (1989)

Courtesy Office for Metropolitan Architecture.



Diagram, Kunsthal circulation.



Koolhaas and the Kunsthall: History Lesions

Cynthia Davidson

Boldly bald, assertively banal, punctuated here and there with gimmicks, the Kunsthall in Rotterdam designed by Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) is a nod to the primitive and to the modern, to the custom-built and to the mass-produced. It is abrasive and suave, controlling yet tranquil, as if reacting to the schizophrenic qualities of its site: four-lane asphalt thoroughfare on one side, tree-filled park on the other.

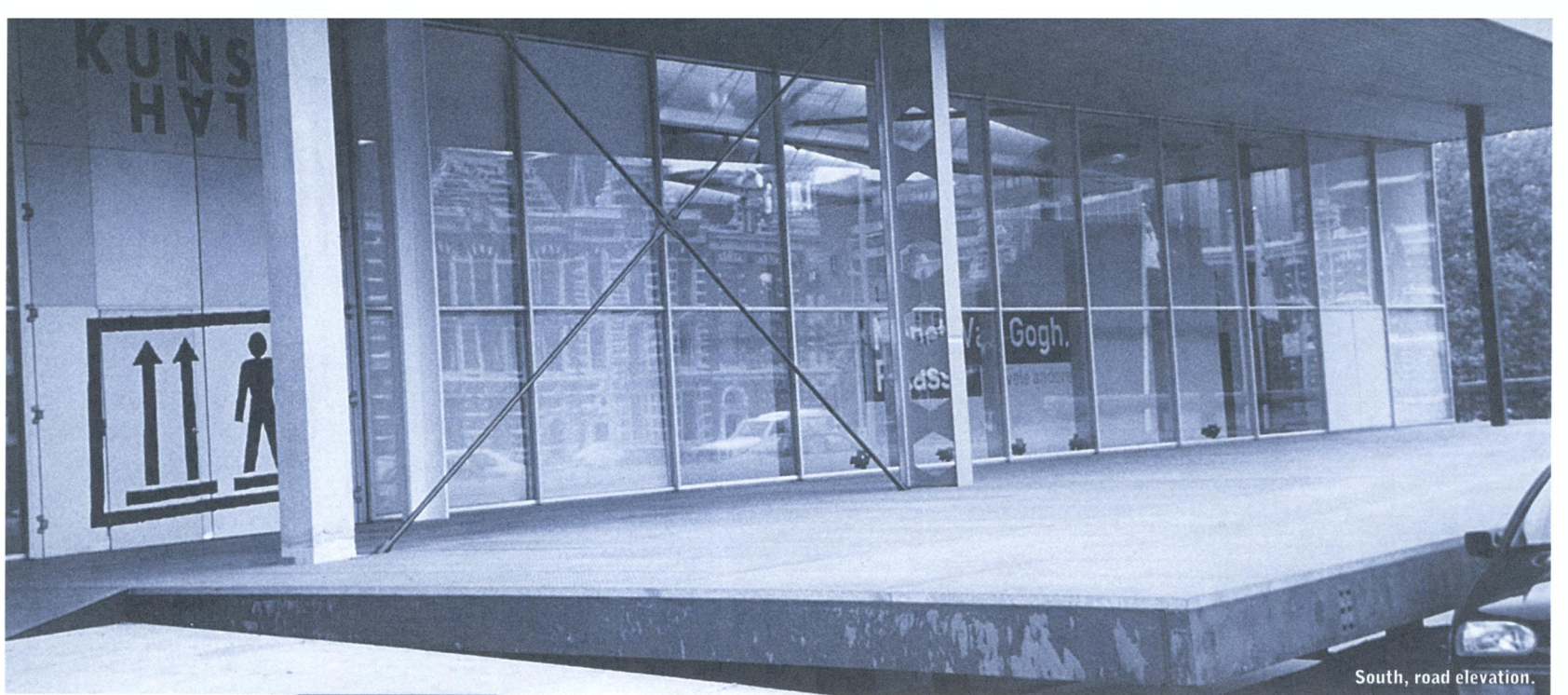
When looking at a building by Koolhaas it is not enough simply to analyze site or program, however. There is much more to consider, beginning with his books. *Delirious New York* and *S, M, L, XL* are clearly as important to Koolhaas's work as an architect as any building OMA has done or will do. Each book repropose urban and architectural histories that cause us to look anew at the accepted narratives, in the first instance of Raymond Hood, Wallace Harrison, and New York; in the second of Mies van der Rohe, John Portman, and cities as far flung as Atlanta and Singapore. Similarly the Kunsthall asks us to rethink the accepted narratives of the museum, its function, its space, and most importantly, its time. Koolhaas's buildings reengage time not as a nostalgia, as is often thought about his fascination with New York and with the 1950s, but as a memory of architectural history disengaged from the discourse that it represents. Out of this memory Koolhaas reinvents the time of his building as a condition of quotation and transformation of architecture – time as future perfect.

This play with time and history has traditionally been achieved through writing, through the invention of narrative. As if following in this tradition, Koolhaas writes a short story about the Kunsthall in *S, M, L, XL* titled "Life in the Box?" This could be a direct reference to the square shape of the Kunsthall or, perhaps, given Koolhaas's interest in things Japanese, Kobo Abe's *Box Man* and the new relationship of subject (man) and object (box) that the novel presents. Koolhaas writes, "We would keep the same square as a general envelope. The square would be crossed by two routes: one, the existing road running east-west; the other, a public ramp running north-south, the entrance to both the park and the Kunsthall. These crossings would divide the square into four parts. The question then became: How to imagine a spiral in four separate squares?"

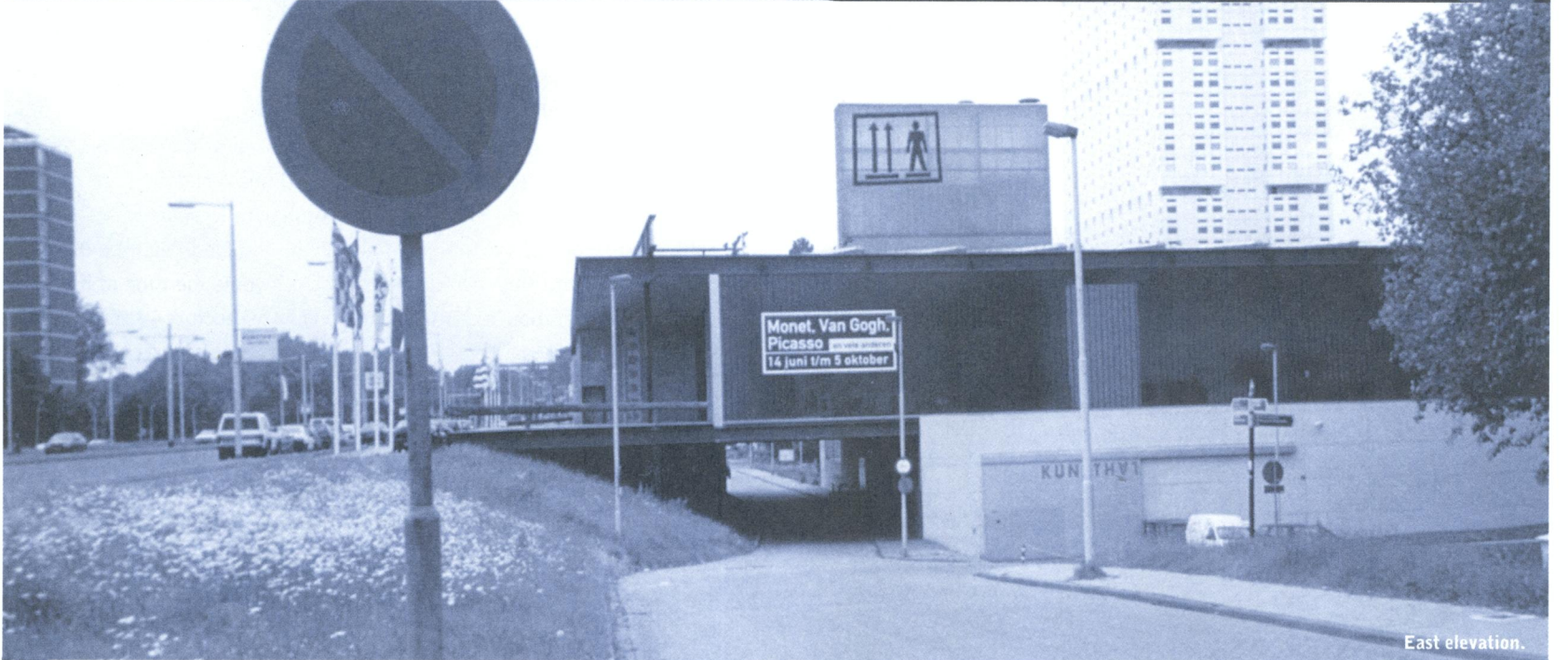
This question, situated in the architect's almost perfunctory description of the building, provides an initial clue to the experience of the building itself. A spiral in four separate squares can only be a fragmented spiral in four disjunctive times. This act too plays into Koolhaas's game with time. The test, it seems, is to retrace both the textual and material paths the architect has laid in order to break away from them and make one's own way.

I first visited the Kunsthall on a dull January day in 1997, when the orange girder that juts over one edge of the flat black roof glowed especially bright against the washed out Rotterdam sky. Koolhaas drove me up to the street side of the Kunsthall, steering his black Maserati over the curb to park on a muddy patch of grass. We were stopped on the Westzeedijk, one of Holland's many polders, the integrity of which cannot be disturbed by excavation for fear of weakening the barrier to the sea. The Kunsthall thus barely engages the dike, offering only the merest slab of a "levitating" platform, a kind of front porch, as an invitation to enter the building through its "front" doors. The real energy of the street front comes from the void just to the left of the platform that, yawning broadly, literally pulls visitors in. This "entrance" to the Kunsthall is a ramp that passes straight through the building, connecting the street to the park below. Koolhaas and I descended the ramp and halfway down turned left to enter the building in precisely the same way he leads a reader through it in *S, M, L, XL*:

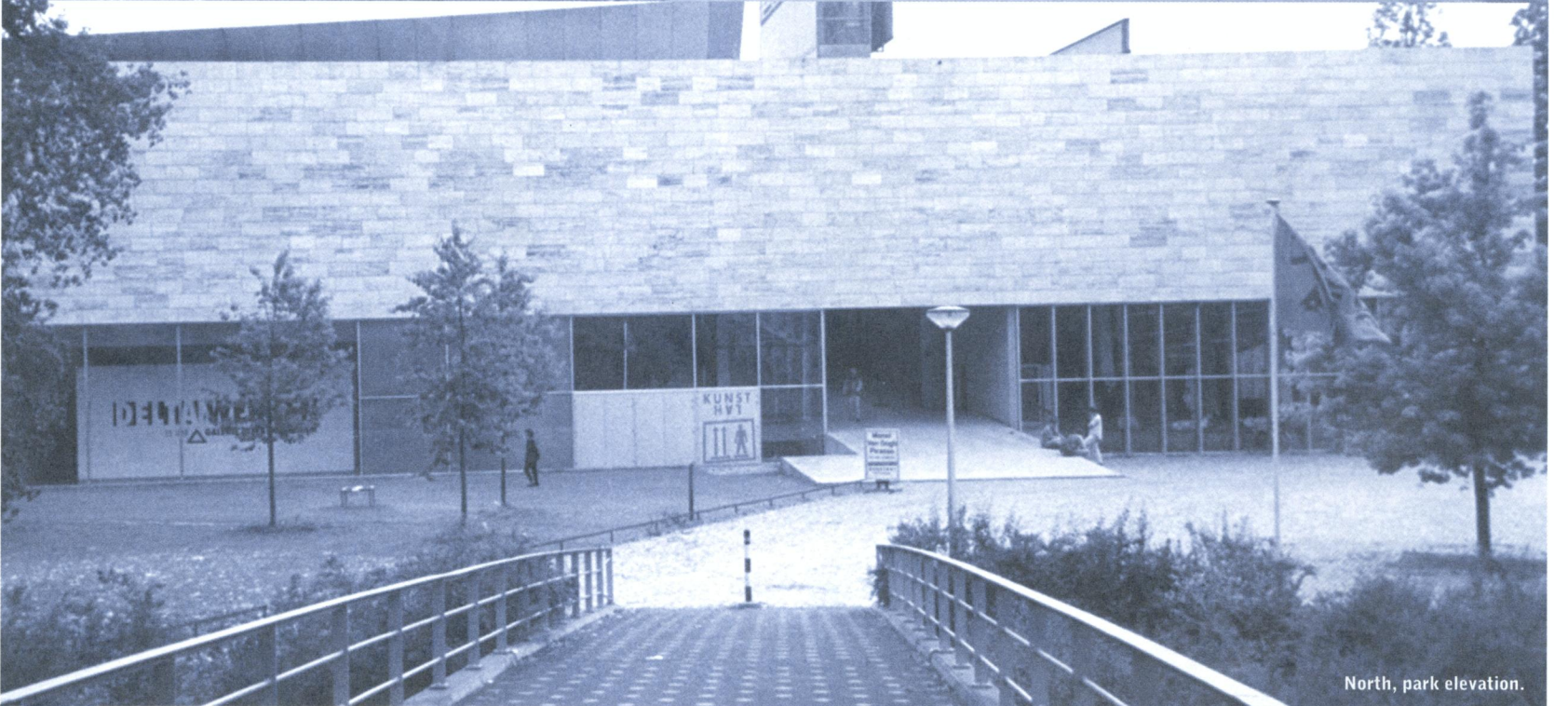
Approach the building from the boulevard. Enter the ramp from the dike. It slopes down toward the park. Halfway down, enter the auditorium. [Actually, enter a small ticket foyer.] It slopes in the opposite direction. A curtain is drawn, blocking out daylight. [Or not drawn, this day.] At the bottom, see a projection screen. [Or a window wall if the screen is up.] Walk down. Turn the corner. Enter the lower hall, facing the park. It



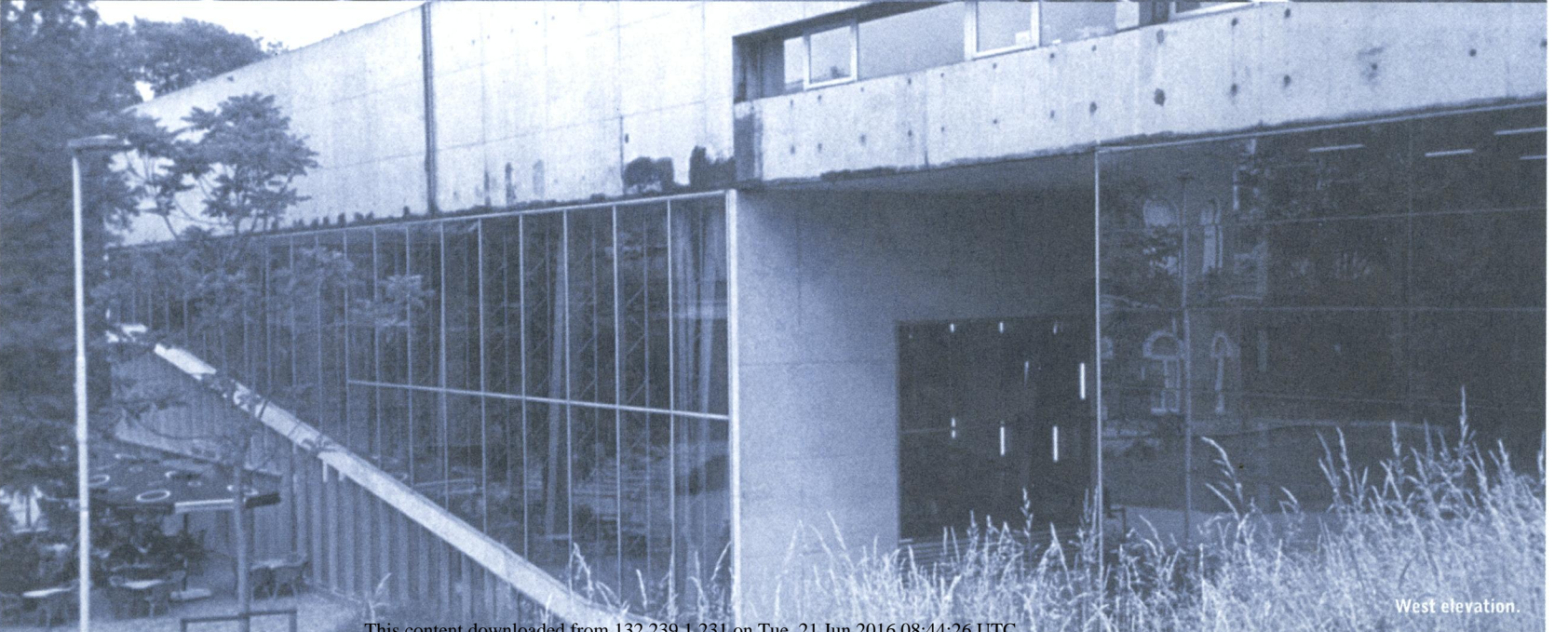
South, road elevation.



East elevation.



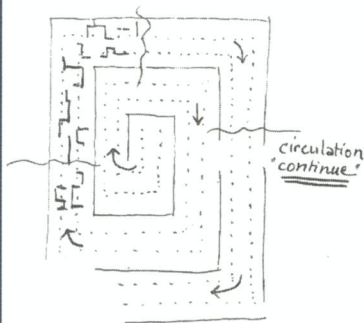
North, park elevation.



West elevation.

All photos this page by Cynthia Davidson.

is dark, with a forest of five columns. [Primitive tree trunks in a high-tech performance.] To the right, a slender aperture opens to a narrow gallery. Look up. [See the much photographed metal grate floor.] Rediscover the ramp you used to enter. Walk up. A glass wall separates the people outside. At the top . . . turn left. Enter the second hall. It is bright, with no columns. Look back. [The ceiling is all daylight from one direction, opaque from the other.] Exit under the balcony. See the auditorium but don't walk that far. Instead, turn and take a third ramp. Halfway up, grope through a small dark room and emerge on a balcony that penetrates the second hall. [A disconcerting diversion that causes you to double back.] Return to the ramp, run up, and emerge on the roof. Look down. Spiral back down to the beginning. Exit to the park. Pause. Turn the corner. Pass the restaurant underneath the auditorium. Keep going.



Circulation diagram for Le Corbusier's 1929 Mundaneum project.

"Keep going" refers to one's movement around the building but could just as well refer to the "spiral" framed in the new "box" of time, for the interior tour too replays itself endlessly. This way, that way, the building aggressively demands. Dutifully I come up the glassed-in ramp from the gallery below only to find myself at crosspaths with spiral breakers, people entering the front door. What happened? Where am I? Where, even, is the so-called spiral? To ask this question assumes that the spiral is continuous and spatial, like Le Corbusier's spiral at the Mundaneum. But it is not.

The second time I visited the Kunsthall, in June, I avoided the front door question and approached the building from the back, from the park, where it is different, other, separate from my first impression. The difference makes clear the need, in the critic Walter Benjamin's words, to experience a place "in as many dimensions as possible. You have to have approached a place from all four cardinal points if you want to take it in" (*Moscow Diary*, 25). Benjamin's words seem especially relevant in the fragmented time of post-modernism, the time of the Kunsthall. Sitting alone on the landscape, its four facades are each equally approachable and each completely different in material and sensibility from the others, almost as if they have been split apart from one another. Seeing each elevation is essential to knowing the building and to seeing it in relation to Koolhaas's view of time. This no longer seems like a static box but rather a series of pictures that play back in the mind. I am reminded of Jean-Luc Godard's filmic jump cut, where time between frames vanishes, no longer providing a continuous narrative sequence and momentarily dislocating the viewer with new visual information.

The park approach to the Kunsthall at first suggests the Victorian notion of the museum in the garden. Called "Museum Park" and also designed by OMA, it serves as an anchor, a unifying open space for three institutions, each inhabiting an edge of the garden: the existing, brown brick Boymans Museum; Jo Coenen's competition winning multi-piece Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI); and the Kunsthall. OMA too, already having received the Kunsthall commission, entered the 1988 competition for the NAI. Its first Kunsthall design was done in tandem with and in response to the firm's NAI proposal. When Coenen's scheme won, OMA, thanks to the arrival of a new Kunsthall director, was able to scrap the earlier Kunsthall proposal and design the building we see today. (Koolhaas tells this story too in *S, M, L, XL*.)

So on my second visit I approach the Kunsthall from the NAI, crossing the length of the park, coming upon a paved path punctuated decoratively with circles of glass, and then looking ahead at a serene glass and travertine facade. Except for the giant chimneylike signpost that projects from the roof there is no visual noise here, rather the mood is contemplative, the materials in harmony with the brick and limestone nature museum next door. The solid band of travertine seems to hover above the transparent

grade level that opens views into the building. From this park view the pedestrian ramp sends out a seductive concrete tongue, mysteriously providing the only entry into what already seems open and accessible. I walk in and up the ramp, enter the auditorium, and then break the prescribed route by zigzagging into the quirky bookshop, a kind of *poché* wedged alongside the auditorium that provides a view into the restaurant space below the slope of seats. Out again the way I entered, I continue up the ramp to the platform that hovers over the dike. Now details begin to appear, four different column types that, in their uniqueness, can only be read as quotations from a previous time. A cruciform column, two black square columns, a white square column paired with a flat, white, perforated one. These last two are cross-braced with metal rods that, when viewed from the street, seem to cancel, or X-out, entry through the "front" door, itself a painted graphic that is more signlike than doorlike.

To see the four cardinal points I "keep going," descending the access road to grade behind the dike. Here a wall is divided horizontally in half by the use of two materials: painted concrete below; seamed, semi-opaque glass above. This building looks like a banal warehouse, complete with service road and delivery docks. I walk under the building on the service road until I come to the opposite, east facade, this one raw concrete above and clear glass below. The elevation is literally a section diagram, the sloping auditorium floor drawing a long line across the glass wall and separating lecture hall above from restaurant below. Cumulatively, the four elevations read as the functions of the Kunsthall: administration; education and entertainment; exhibitions; art handling and storage.

The Dutch, Koolhaas said during my first tour, think the Kunsthall is badly detailed. Compared with OMA's meticulous Villa d'Ava in Paris or housing complex in Fukuoka, Japan, the Kunsthall does appear hastily, even arbitrarily put together with an assortment of materials. Corrugated plastic and metal mesh mix with steel and travertine, exposed concrete meets wood. It gives the box a quality of having been snapped together, of pieces, perhaps, of walls being slid into place like the walls of a *de Stijl* diagram. This is particularly noticeable at the corners, where thin planes of plastic, concrete, travertine, and glass intersect without one material overwhelming another. Perhaps this thinness is the cause for criticism; it feels fleeting, almost ephemeral.

HISTORY LESIONS

At least three devices in the Kunsthall recall Le Corbusier: the ramp, or in Le Corbusier's terms, the *promenade architecturale*, the spiral, and the basic square plan. Koolhaas's debt to Le Corbusier, like that of many architects, is an acknowledged fact. For example, Kenneth Frampton, in a 1993 review of the Kunsthall published in *Domus*, suggested that the Kunsthall recalled Le Corbusier's congress hall for Strasbourg, designed in 1964. Indeed, a close examination reveals several similarities. In both, an auditorium (though on different floors) is pushed to the same corner of a square plan. At Strasbourg, a ramp for cars passes under and around the building to the roof. At the

Kunsthal, a series of ramps allows pedestrians to move from the street to the roof. Le Corbusier hangs exposed concrete over glass but leaves the supporting *pilotis* exposed. On two facades of the Kunsthal, Koolhaas pulls in the columns and pushes the glass at grade out flush with the travertine or concrete above. But where Le Corbusier's building is a unified whole, inside and out, Koolhaas's is fragmented. Rather than enfolding the building, Koolhaas's initial ramp is a void that allows one to pass directly through the building without entering it. In addition, the vehicular street at cross axis to the ramp cuts the building apart at grade. This tunneling through the square eats away at its formal geometry and begins to break up the ideal form of the square. Inside, the "spiral" that attempts to move through the fragmented square continuously breaks apart, sending the visitor into volumes of space before sucking him or her up again into another progression.

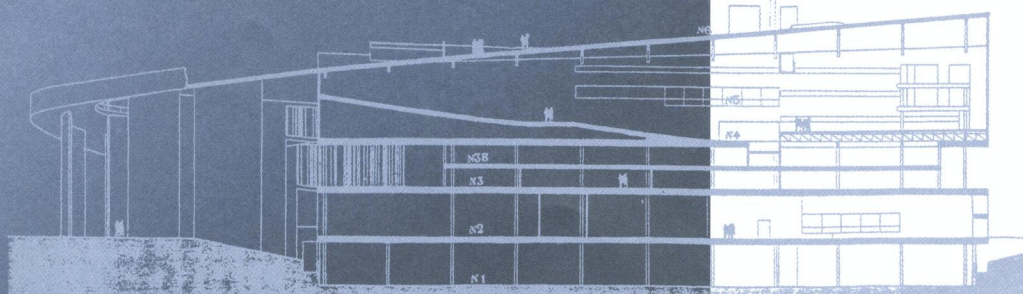
These fragments are the key to Koolhaas's idea of time. For Le Corbusier time is linear, narrative, the time of a unitary subject. In this sense Le Corbusier's object and subject occupy the same time. At the Kunsthal the time of the subject and the time of the object are disjunctive. Koolhaas's fragmented architectural object confuses our sense of time. This is another version of Godard's jump cut – a cut in space and time prompted by the difference in time of the viewer's movement and the movement of the object of viewing. The jump cut occurs throughout *S, M, L, XL* too. Smack in the middle of the Kunsthal story there suddenly appears a double-page photograph of cars strewn across an urban street. Is it Paris in '68? Prague? It doesn't matter. The disruption of the Kunsthal narrative, of continuity, matters.

In 1929 Le Corbusier designed a circulation spiral in the Mundaneum, a museum for Geneva, and called his plan diagram for it "continuous circulation." As the spiral turned in on itself, the building rose in height, taking the form of the spiral itself. Koolhaas diagrams the spiral of the Kunsthal in such a way that the building too is the result of its circulation, although that process produces no recognizable form. Here, movement and form are discontinuous. The box contains the spiral, compressing and deforming it while also being fragmented by it. The spiral's ramps become thematic of the building's conflict with its confining static envelope, its form. This is also a confrontation of two different times, the static and the mobile. Koolhaas attempts to erase this dialectic because the subjective time of the experience of the viewer, which was formerly synchronic with the space and form, i.e., the time of the object, is disjointed from the subject. The spiraling ramps of the Kunsthal move away from Le Corbusier's circulation systems as form-making to symbolize instead the movement of architecture from figure to flow and from an actual spiral to a spiraling affect. Now the object, like the time of Godard's jump cut, separates from our experience of it. Time is no longer, as Deleuze says, a matter of degree but a difference in kind from the space of the subject.

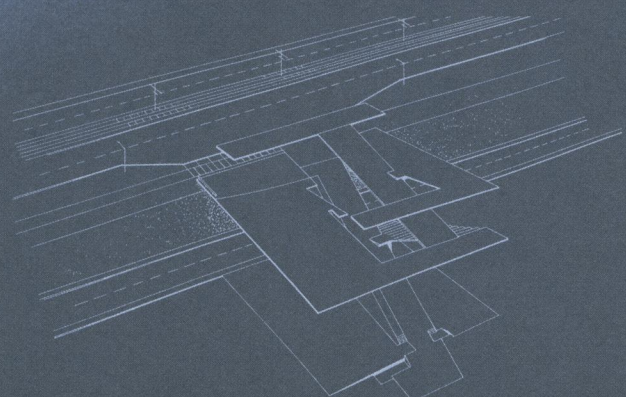
In Abe's *Box Man*, a man takes up life in a large cardboard box that he both wears as a kind of costume and inhabits as a house. It is a strange choice, one that alters his view not only of himself but also of the world without. Time inside the box both stops and is endless. Only by writing on the interior walls of the box, a way of both marking time and transforming the object, can he chart the time of his experience.

In an extensive essay on the work of OMA published in *EI Croquis* in 1996, Jeffrey Kipnis compares the Kunsthal to Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in Berlin, a building that one could conceivably think of as a large glass box. There are gestures at the Kunsthal – quotations – to remind one of the National Gallery, such as the black steel-edged overhang along the street elevation of the Kunsthal, but conceptually it is different. For Mies, space is always homogeneous; it is understood, metaphorically, as a giant roof canopy; for Koolhaas, space is always fragmented, broken by the ramps and the stuttering spiral. Where Mies allows space to flow endlessly around the subject, Koolhaas inscribes space, inscribes his box, to fragment that space and mark its time.

While walking through the Kunsthal I was reminded of Richard Wagner's opera, *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*), if only because Koolhaas's bravado suggests high flying. Senta, a ship captain's daughter, falls in love with a mysterious Dutchman who has unexpectedly sailed into the harbor and promises to leave with him the next day. In the third act we learn that his ship is but a ghostly coffin that only comes into port once every seven years. The entire narrative of *The Flying Dutchman* is based on this disruption in time, which alters the course of events. As the music spirals to a crescendo, Senta discovers her fate and then plunges to her death. Indeed there is the faint smell of death in Koolhaas's work. Is it a premonition of the possible death of form in the fragmentation of his architecture, toward its own disappearance in the flow of time?



Section of Le Corbusier's 1965 Congress Hall in Strasbourg.

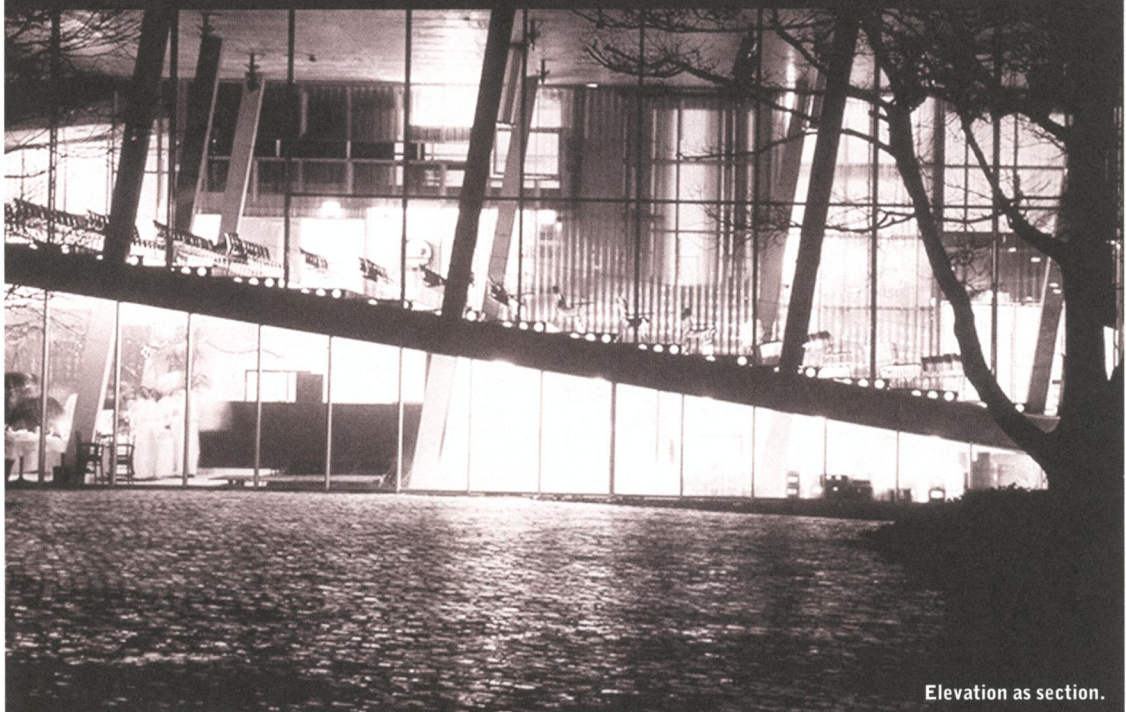


Diagram, Kunsthal circulation.

Courtesy Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

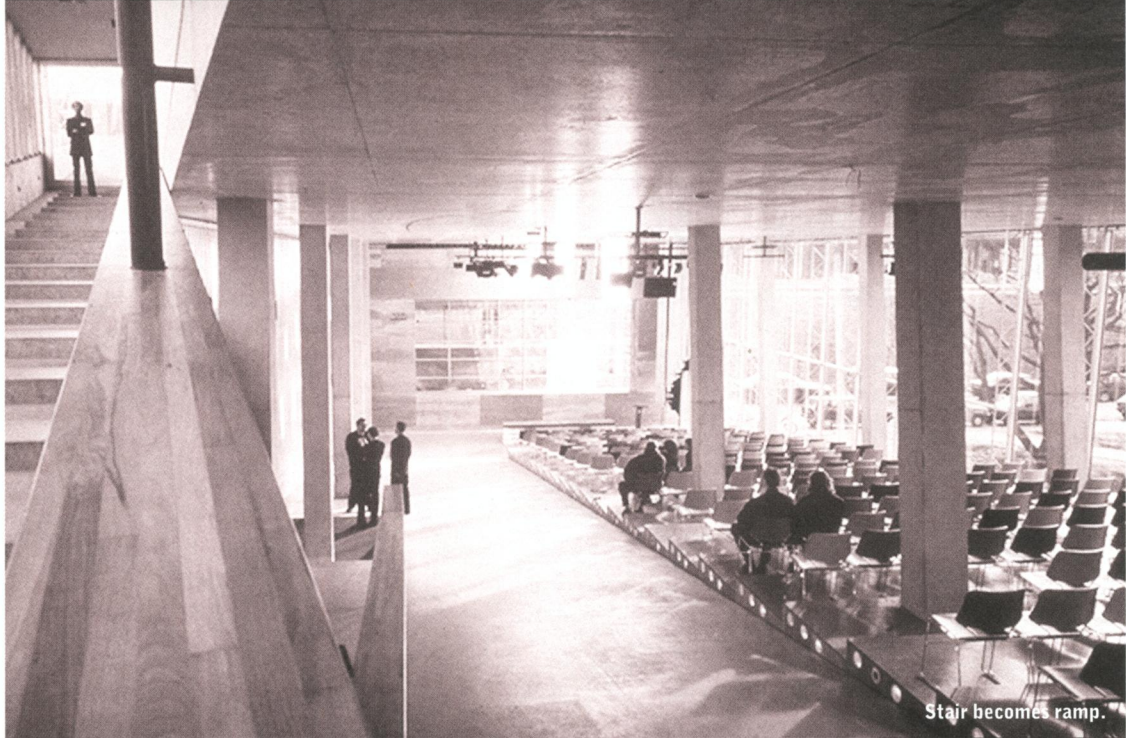


Fragmented whole.

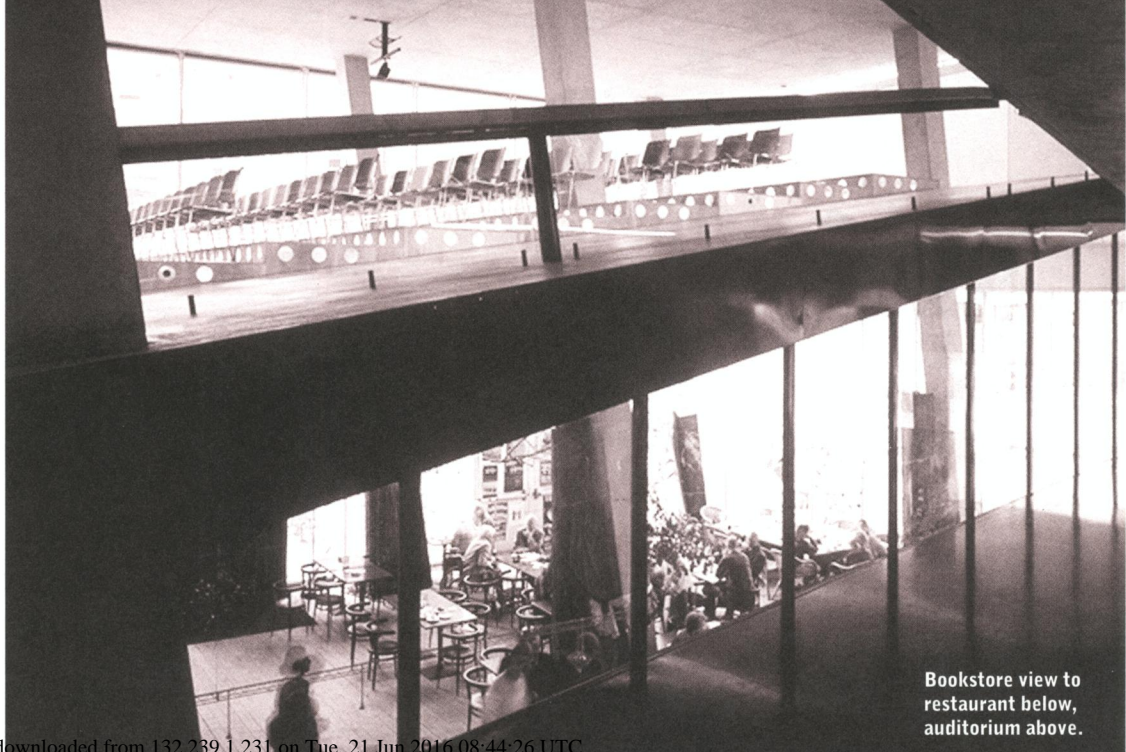


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Elevation as section.



Stair becomes ramp.



Bookstore view to restaurant below, auditorium above.

Photos: Hans Werlemann